



**R**aithfield Manor looked exactly like a rotting skull. The cement steps leading up to the porch fell at the edges—a mouth twisting into a grimace, with its front teeth missing. Plants covered the mansion’s roof, like moss growing over bones, and below it, vines snaked through the empty frame of the top right window. The blackened hole in the mansion’s face glared at Barret Eloise.

“I’ll give you a hundred bucks to go in there,” Cody, her brother, said from the driver’s seat of their family’s beat-up Camry. He’d gotten his license three months earlier, and now it was his job to chauffeur her to and from school. As soon as he’d learned how much the manor

creeped her out, he'd started badgering her about it.

"No way. It looks like a skeleton." Barret Eloise tried her best to stare down the mansion as they wound toward it on the long mountain highway to their home.

Cody brushed his shaggy brown hair out of his face. It was the same color as rumped, decomposing leaves in fall, and the same color as hers. He snort-laughed. "Sure, and spaghetti looks like worms."

"It *does!*" So what if her brain sometimes decided to imagine food as creepy, crawly insects?

The car chugged over the potholes on the road that led to both Raithfield Manor *and* to their home. This street was known as the Road to Nowhere because it led to exactly . . . nowhere. The government had made it with the intention of winding it all the way around the reservoir in town, but they'd stopped construction only three miles in. Now, it was a scenic roadway that overlooked a charming lake that hid beneath it an old, drowned town.

"A hundred bucks, take it or leave it," Cody said, insistent.

"No," said Barret Eloise, voice flat and not joking, the sort of voice Mom used when she told Dad not to buy yogurt especially made for their cats.

"What about fifty bucks to stand on the porch?"

Barret Eloise folded her arms across her body, almost as if she were protecting herself. She'd been doing it ever since the *incident* in history class that afternoon.

Cody drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Okay, okay How about twenty bucks to open the front gate?"

"No, Cody. *No!*" All the pain she'd shoved inside her throughout the school day boiled up.

When Mr. Pinnard had announced groups for their history paper—a project where they were supposed to experience history for themselves by researching a local landmark in town—she'd been excited. It was hard to talk with everyone in a whole class, but in a small group, maybe she could get to know some of the other kids. Maybe she'd finally have people to sit with at lunch and maybe she'd find a partner for the frog dissection coming up in science class. She didn't want to have to do another dissection alone like she'd had to with the cow's eye last month.

She'd watched the other kids in class celebrate as, one by one, they were grouped together until there were four students left: Helena, who was the sole person in school who actually seemed to notice her, but only because she was still upset about something that'd happened in elementary school; Wayne, the

computer mastermind who turned her stomach into a habitat for butterflies; and Ridge Bellows, who was a star at pretty much every sport ever; and . . . her.

Finally Mr. Pinnard had called their names, but when he'd called *her* name, Ridge Bellows hadn't celebrated. He hadn't even sighed. Instead he'd done something much worse.

"Who?" he'd asked.

Mr. Pinnard had pointed out Barret Eloise. Ridge had turned, a half-chewed pencil dangling from his mouth; then he'd shouted, "Oh! The smart one! I GET THE SMART ONE!"

They'd been in the same classes for the last *six years*. *The smart one*. How was it possible that people knew she got good grades, but they didn't know her name? "Terrible" didn't begin to describe how she'd felt.

"So?" her brother said. They'd passed Raithfield Manor by now, but not by much. "You doing it or what?"

"NO!" Barret Eloise's hurt felt like lava inside her mouth. "No, I'm not going into Raithfield Manor. No, I'm not going to willingly walk up to a hundred-year-old mansion that would probably fall around my ears the instant I set foot inside it. No, I'm not going to get nabbed by the Raithfield ghost! *No*, I'm not going to do any of that, because I'm *not stupid!*"

“Yikes.” Cody reached over awkwardly and patted her on the head, his arm sticking up in the air. They’d both inherited their dad’s lanky height, all elbows and knees. Most of the time she thought they looked like not-fully evolved humans, *Homo habilis*, with their joints all out of proportion. “Somebody had a rough day.”

Most days were rough, but today had been *painfully dreadful*.

Cody took a right, leaving the Road to Nowhere behind, and they cut up the mountainside on a thin, gravel road. As a crow flew, Raithfield Manor was only about a mile away from their house, but crow flight wasn’t a helpful measurement of distance in the mountains. Drive time was about fifteen minutes. It would take centuries if she were to try to walk. Barret Eloise glanced back at the manor, knowing she’d get one last glimpse of it before they reached home. She wanted to stick her tongue out at it, since she hadn’t been able to stick her tongue out at Ridge Bellows, who hadn’t known her name. Instead, her eyes popped open.

Before when she’d looked, the large right window had been an empty, black hole. Now, a figure stood there, outlined in a white glow, as if a floodlight shone against their back. Goose bumps crawled up her neck and into her scalp, and air wheezed through her mouth.

“You don’t have to hiss at me,” Cody said.

“No, I—I saw someone in Raithfield’s window.”

“Sure thing, Spaghetti-worms. Your imagination’s running wild.”

She twisted in her seat, trying to get a better view, and this time, she was too distracted to respond, because now, the window was empty, no hint of the person she’d seen. Who would be in the manor? Why would *anyone* go in there? It was dangerous! She kept watching, even when the mountains swallowed the skeleton house whole.

Once home, Cody flung himself inside, leaving Barret Eloise behind in their driveway. In about an hour their parents would get home and make dinner, but for now she had a four-way video call with her history group. She climbed up the porch steps. It didn’t sag like Raithfield Manor, but was instead draped in an assortment of pumpkins and squash, along with a fake garland of maple leaves. Her mom called it faux-fall greenery, not that any of it was actually green.

She double-checked that her phone was hooked up to their Wi-Fi (cell service this far up in the mountains wasn’t good enough to hold a video call), then propped it against the porch railing and pressed the link that would take her to the call with her group. She

used the image of herself on the screen to comb her fingers through her hair and straighten the wrinkles from her shirt.

*First impressions are important*, she thought to herself, even if this was more like the one million and eighty-second impression than anything else. She'd known everyone for years, but apparently, her knowing people didn't mean they knew her back. She wasn't sure what she was hoping for out of the call: To not be awkward for once? To be friends? Or at least be friend *ly*? Or maybe she just wanted to make sure people knew her name.

*Barret Eloise. My name is Barret Eloise*, she thought of saying as soon as she got on the call. Her phone connected.

"Why do teachers always have to give boring homework?" Ridge sat at his kitchen table, his rusty-red hair mussed and sticking up, framing his pale, freckled face.

One half of a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich was clutched in each hand. "Is that what they learn how to do at teacher school? *Let's see who can brainstorm the most terrible homework idea*," he said in a falsetto voice.

Everyone kept on talking as if Barret Eloise hadn't appeared on their screen. She froze in her seat, not knowing what to do.

“Researching local history isn’t that horrible of a project,” said Wayne. He wore his thick-rimmed glasses and ate Cheetos out of a bag using a pair of chopsticks. His gaze was on the laptop to his right, the edge of which showed on the screen. “I mean, we’ve definitely had *worse* projects.”

“No way,” said Ridge. “And why are you eating Cheetos like that?”

“I think what you’re trying to say is, *Why are you such a genius?*” Wayne twiddled his clean fingers and then typed on his laptop, not getting orange dust anywhere.

Barret Eloise knew she needed to say something to make it clear she was there, but *Hello, hi, what’s up?* didn’t seem quite right. Hollow emptiness opened inside her—how was she supposed to feel anything but lonely when no one ever seemed to notice her?

“I agree with Wayne,” Helena said. Her face was so close to the phone that her whole right eye took up the screen. The deep amber of her iris was shot through with streaks of gold, and her soft-looking brown skin looked like it glowed.

“That I’m a genius? Why thank you.” Wayne clicked his chopsticks together.

Helena laughed, then said, “No, about having worse projects. Remember last year when we had to do that



project listing all the types of pasta sauces that were available at the Piggly Wiggly?”

“What sort of project would you find more interesting?” asked Wayne, seeming to be genuinely curious, even though he still hadn’t looked at the screen. He was too focused on whatever it was he’d pulled up on his laptop.

“I know!” interrupted Ridge. “Makeup!” He burst into laughter.

Helena blinked. “I don’t wear makeup.”

“Can we focus and get this figured out?” said Wayne. “I don’t want to be on this call all evening.”

“Where’s the smart one? Isn’t she supposed to be here?” Ridge asked.

*Her.* Ridge was talking about her. She steeled her spine and forced herself to speak, settling on a simple, “Hello.”

Wayne jerked, head popping up and dropping his snack bag. “I didn’t know you were here yet.”

“You *finally* arrived!” Ridge tossed his arms up. “The smart one has arrived to save us with an interesting idea!”

“I’m not the smart one,” Barret Eloise managed to say. “My name is Barret Eloi—”

Ridge set down his sandwich and slapped his

hands on his kitchen table, rattling his plate. “You are too, smart, and your name’s too long. Why is your name so long? Has anyone ever told you that before? I know Southerners need to give girls multiple names for some reason, like Betty Sue and Ava Grace and Virginia-Savannah-Horace-Bernard-Lilly-Mae-Grace or whatever, but Barret Eloise has too many syllables. *Bear-et El-oh-eeze.*” He counted them out. “Five! Five syllables! Has anyone ever called you Bear? I’m going to call you Bear.”

Barret Eloise *didn’t* want to be called Bear. She wasn’t a bear. She wasn’t even close to a bear. She was more like a tabby kitten or a hibernating turtle or a mouse who liked to read and drink hot cocoa and never have to talk to real people, because talking to real people was confusing.

“Bear, what’s your smart idea for our project topic?” Ridge asked.

She swallowed, her brain struggling to keep up with the speed at which Ridge talked. She’d come prepared with a pretty good idea, though, so she forced herself to say, “We could research Fontana Lake.”

Ridge’s face fell. “No. Nope. That sounds boring. Lakes are what you swim in, not what you research.”

*But there’s a drowned town beneath it, she thought.*

She had to think the words, though, because her mouth no longer worked. It was too dry, and it'd forgotten how to talk.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're annoying, Ridge?" Wayne's laptop had disappeared from view. He was focused entirely on the call now.

"Yes. Often," said Ridge. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a nerd?"

"Nerds rule the world," said Wayne. "What idea do *you* have? I don't suppose you have anything decent."

"He's not here to do any work." Helena tipped her head to the side, as if she were lying down. Now both her eyes showed vertical on the screen. A strand of her brown, spiraled hair fell over her cheek. "Ridge is only here to take credit for the work we do, not actually *do* any himself."

Ridge grinned and took a big bite of his sandwich.

"This is going well. We make a *really* great team. At this rate we're going to have to go to conflict resolution in the counselor's office." Wayne reached under his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his Cheeto-dustless fingers. "Seriously, we need an idea. *Any* idea. It doesn't matter what it is, just so long as we *have* one."

Barret Eloise hadn't come prepared with a second topic for their project. She'd liked her idea of the lake,

and Ridge had squashed it flat without a second thought. She scrambled, trying to come up with a new one.

“What about the cemeteries on the other side of the lake? You know, the ones the Road to Nowhere was supposed to connect to, that now, nobody can reach,” Helena said.

“If nobody has access to the cemeteries, how are we supposed to research them?” Wayne asked. “Read newspapers?”

“I’m not reading a newspaper,” said Ridge.

“You’re totally unwilling to do any work,” Wayne accused.

“I’m not going to do something if it’s a bad idea!”

Both boys exploded into conversation, complaining about each other’s work ethic . . . or lack thereof. Helena sat by, expressionless, while they argued. Barret Eloise’s mind drifted back to the remains of the tumbledown mansion on the mountaintop—to the way its green, rotting roof stood out from the cheerful, confetti-like trees that surrounded it, to the paint that flaked from its sides, and to the **for sale** sign that had been posted out front for as long as she could remember . . .

“—and I’m definitely *not* going to go talk to old people,” said Ridge. “Old people have skin that looks like it might fall off their faces—”

She thought, too, of the strange person in Raithfield's uppermost right window. They'd been outlined in white, almost as if mist were ghosting off their shoulders . . . .

"—and they speak slow too," Ridge said. "Why do people speak so slow when they get old?"

Fear ribboned through her as she thought about Raithfield Manor. She didn't want anything to do with it, but maybe it would be the exact right idea. Ridge *couldn't* think it was a boring topic, and it was kind of related to Helena's cemetery suggestion. Maybe it was so perfect, it would make her group like her.

Hope sputtered inside her chest, and when she spoke, her voice blared out of her, too brash and too rumbly. "Raithfield Manor!"

The phone went quiet. She covered her cheeks and the blush that she knew raced across them. What was wrong with her? Either she could hardly talk or she talked too loud or she sounded like Ridge's bear.

"What'd you say, Barret Eloise?" Wayne asked.

"Nothing." She didn't want to be accused of having an awful idea again.

"You definitely said something." Helena tapped her screen, as if she were tapping Barret Eloise on the forehead.

"Every idea is a good idea," said Wayne.

“That’s not true,” said Ridge.

Barret Eloise’s blush intensified, crawling down her neck and over her chest. Her whole body felt like it was a hundred degrees, and she knew her pale white skin probably looked like it’d been sunburned. She reminded herself that she always got good grades for a reason, then forced herself to say, “Raithfield Manor. We could research Raithfield Manor.”

Again, nobody spoke.

Her stomach roiled as she waited for a reaction. Ridge didn’t give a reason why it would be too difficult or boring to research. Wayne didn’t say anything sarcastic about how their group needed to go to the counselor’s office together. Helena didn’t tell her that looking into a house riddled with awful rumors was a bad idea. It was so quiet and still, that for a moment she thought her connection had frozen.

But then Ridge let out a low whistle and said, “So, Smart Bear *does* have good ideas after all.”

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