

BIGFOOT

by Tom Leveen

“Those are certainly big feet,” Jessica said, squatting down beside her partner, Dr. Steven Moody. She cast him a serious glance. “Is this for real?”

Steven frowned as he measured the fresh footprint in the black Oregon soil. “Off hand, yes,” he said. “But the forgeries get more and more clever each year. Get the plaster from the truck, would you, Jess?”

Jess nodded and paced quickly through the lush ferns, dodging giant pines until she reached the back of the old Chevy holding their gear. She stopped short and gasped as three men faded into view at the truck’s front bumper.

“Oh!” she said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see . . . hello.”

“Hiya,” the man in the center said, offering a surprised smile of his own. His eyes traveled up and down her slender body, still tan from a summer in California.

Jess tugged at her T-shirt, realizing it was much tighter than she’d remembered. She cleared her throat. “Can I help you?” she asked.

The man shook his head, eyes still fixated on her torso. “I don’t suppose so,” he said, and hitched his jeans. “I was gonna ask you the same question. Truck break down?”

“No,” Jess answered shortly. “I’m here with *Doctor* Steven Moody?”

“Ahhhh,” the three men echoed simultaneously in varying degrees of understanding and dismay.

“The Bigfoot Hunter,” the center man said, nodding. “We’ve heard of him.”

“We’ve just found a print,” Jess offered, then wondered if she should have.

“Yep, not surprised,” the man said.

Jess was mildly pleased to see that none of them had moved any nearer the truck. Or her. The big grey Chevy still blocked them from approaching her directly; if they had nefarious plans, she’d have time to sprint back into the forest and alert Steve. Not that he’d be much help, she thought. Dr. Moody was damn near as thin as his measuring tape; if he turned sideways, he’d disappear. Still. Two on three wasn’t bad odds if these characters meant any harm.

Plus, Jess realized as she glanced at each man in turn, all three strangers sported handsome guts over their jeans, and Jess imagined she could smell beer coming from their mouths. They weren’t drunk, not in any apparent way; but quite suddenly, she wasn’t as put off by their appearance here in the woods as she had been a minute ago.

“You’re not surprised he’s here?” Jess asked. “You’ve heard of him?”

Many people hadn’t.

“Oh, yeah,” the man in the middle said. “Hell, three-quarters of the town’s business is based on old Sasquatch. We meet just about every big hunter and scientist who comes through, or hear about them from others.”

“We was on Discov’ry,” the man on the left said, grinning happily.

Jess forced a smile back; his teeth were practically rotted through, and there was something idiotic in his gaze and voice. She wasn’t sure whether to be comforted by or afraid of the fact.

“That’s right,” their spokesman said calmly. “The Discovery Channel has been through a few times over the years. Great for business. Tourists, you know.”

“Oh, sure,” Jess said vaguely, remembering then that she still needed to get the plaster gear back to Steve. “Well, it was nice to meet you, Mister . . . ?”

“Klingler,” he said, smiling again in a nice, neighborly way. “That’s with two L’s. Kling-ler. Hard to say sometimes.”

“Mister Klingler,” Jess said correctly. “Got it. Is there . . . anything else I can do for you?”

Klingler shook his head dismissively. “Nah,” he said. “We were just gathering some firewood for our campsite, saw the truck coming up the road, thought we’d say hello. That’s all. You say you found a footprint, eh?”

“Yes,” Jess said, wondering now if she should’ve kept quiet about the find. “I was just getting some of our plaster to take a cast. You—wouldn’t like to see it, would you?”

She seasoned the question with enough ill ease to make clear she didn’t want them to come with her.

“Nah,” Klingler repeated. “Seen plenty myself. Now you find me a body, or some droppings, or a real live Sassie, well then you’d have yourself a deal.”

“Sassie?”

“Sasquatch is a bit of a mouthful,” he said. “Kind of like Klingler.” He laughed.

Jess smiled in return. “Fair enough. Well, I’ll just be heading back then. Nice meeting you.”

Jess turned to go and made it as far as the tree line surrounding the clearing when Klingler’s voice stopped her.

“Didn’t catch your name,” he called.

She paused. “Jessica.”

“Nice to meet you, Jessica.”

“Likewise. Bye, now.”

“Jessica?”

She stopped again. “Yes?”

“You forgot your plaster. For the cast?”

Damn, Jess thought. “Right,” she said, and turned back toward the truck.

They’d silently surrounded the vehicle.

Klingler was now next to the driver’s side door. The idiot was on the opposite side of the truck, near the tailgate. The third, who’d watched the exchange impassively, stood quite near the tailgate and pile of plaster supplies in the bed.

Damn, shit, Jess thought.

Steeling herself, Jess approached the truck, waiting for any sign that the men were going to move to invade her space. Her self-defense training in L.A. had prepared her as much as she

thought was possible—but with a spindly Ph.D., her own wits, and not so much as cell phone reception to protect her, her training seemed sorely lacking in the face of three townies.

“Ever seen one?” Jess asked as she moved closer, trying to keep them occupied. “Sasqu . . . I mean, Sassie?”

“Once,” Klingler said, leaning casually against the door, hands in his pockets.

He’s either harmless, or trying to distract me by looking harmless while these two jump, Jess thought. *Watch them. He can’t get to you from there.*

She continued moving toward the tailgate.

“Yeah?” she said. “What happened?”

“Was out camping,” Klingler said, looking away from her for the first time and into the forest. “Son of a bitch came barreling right toward me. I was alone. I damn near sh—that is, had a little accident, if you know what I mean, I was so scared. He came and stamped out the fire and took off into the dark. Had a rifle with me, but the whole thing happened too fast, couldn’t even get a shot off.”

Jess was at the tailgate now, keeping a wary eye on the silent man and the idiot.

“That’s sounds terrifying,” she said, reaching for the gate handle.

“Jessica.”

Despite herself, Jess paused. Knew it was a mistake as soon as she did it.

“You’ll want to be careful out here,” Klingler said. He hadn’t moved. “People get lost. Did you know this whole area has the highest rate of missing persons outside of the big cities?”

“No,” Jess said, and forced herself to pick up the big white bucket with the plaster supplies.

If anyone moves, I’ll scream, she thought. *Just scream, then go for the cash and prizes: Balls, throat, eyes. Balls, throat, eyes. Balls, throat—*

She pulled the bucket out and took a step back away from the silent man, who hadn’t moved, only watched her.

“Yes ma’am,” Klingler said, still at the door. “People go missing all the time. Most we never find. Hell, I’m on a search team once, twice a month. Right boys?”

The other two nodded seriously.

Jess backed up two more steps, too far for the man to reach.

“That’s crazy,” she said.

“We did find . . . have you all heard about the, uh . . . bodies?”

Safe enough now, five or six yards from any of them, Jess stopped. “Bodies?”

“The ones we did find.”

“Yes,” she said. Which was true. It was one of the reasons this area had appealed to Steven in the first place. Around the small town over the past ten or so years, several bodies had been discovered either by organized search parties or unfortunate campers.

In each case, the victims had been dismembered. Pre-mortem.

“You say you’ve seen one?” Jess asked Klingler, fighting a sudden urge to puke.

“Once, yeah,” Klingler said, and shook his head. “It wasn’t pretty. Arms torn off, legs pulled off. Sassie did a number on them.”

“If he exists,” Jess couldn’t resist saying.

For the first time, Klingler shot her a truly upsetting look. “What’s that?”

“I said, if he or she exists,” Jess said. “Bigfoot.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I’m not sure,” Jess said. “I’m a grad student. I’m still collecting data. I think it’s possible, but unlikely.”

Klingler grinned at her with a pitying look. “Oh, I see,” he said. “You’re not one of those true believers out to prove what the rest of us already know. You’re a, what—skeptic. Right?”

She shrugged.

“Trying to prove Sassie doesn’t exist, huh?”

“Like I said, Mr. Klingler, I don’t know yet. We have this footprint, and plenty of evidence to go over from previous expeditions. But you do know the Patterson tape was finally shown to be a forgery, right?”

“Yep,” Klingler said, laughing slightly. “Any idiot knew that the day it came out.”

Her curiosity piqued. “Why do you say that?”

Klingler returned her shrug. The other two hadn’t moved. “That thing on the tape,” he said. “It wasn’t *big* enough. No way.”

“But at first the size seemed consistent with the footprints on file.”

“No,” Klingler said. “Not nearly. You want to know something? A little inside information? Just because you’re a pretty girl?”

The last bit stung and made her blush at the same time. She fidgeted with the bucket, trying to suss out the best way to respond.

“Okay,” she said cautiously, narrowing her eyes. Make eye contact, her instructor had said in L.A. So *they* know that *you* know you’ve got them pegged.

The advice made sense on the mean streets of Los Angeles. In forests of Oregon, it didn’t seem to make much difference.

“Truth is,” Klingler said, leaning off the truck door now, but keeping his hands buried in the pockets of his jacket, “about ninety, even ninety-five percent of those footprints are faked. Hell, people up here and in California’ll fake them just to keep the tourists and monster hunters coming.”

“But you wouldn’t do that,” she risked.

Klingler laughed. “Me? Hell, no. No reason. Plenty of other fakers running around. Now, I’ll admit, if we lost the business in town, that would be a big problem. But no, nobody I know’s ever faked a print. Some kids in town maybe. No, Jessica, I have to tell you . . . folks around here know a lot more than we say.”

Her arms were getting tired, holding the bucket. She set it down and shook her arms.

Damn and shit again, she thought. Now you look weak.

“We know that Sassie’s out there, and she’s a mean old cuss,” Klingler said. “Big and mean. Best keep that in mind as you, uh—pursue your studies.”

“Will do,” Jess said, tiring of the conversation. “Nice to meet you.”

Klingler nodded. He did not, Jess noticed, move away from the truck.

She gave the other two men a short wave, picked up the bucket, and began walking through the woods back toward Steven.

Stupid, she thought. They could still be dangerous. They could disable the truck.

And if they did, what could you do about it? she argued back silently.

She opted to shake the encounter from her mind. If they were up to anything, they would’ve made a move. If they were going to disable the truck, they would, and she and Steven would hike out of the woods if necessary.

“Steven?” she called as she walked, navigating the dips and branches that threatened to topple her. “Dr. Moody?”

No response. He was still too far away, she reasoned, or perhaps too engrossed with the footprint. Or better still, maybe he’d found another, or some other revolutionary bit of evidence.

When on the hunt, Dr. Moody had a tendency to white out, to not hear a single word spoken to him. *A caricature scientist*, she thought, and smiled.

“Steven?” she called again. “I’ve got the plaster. Steven?”

No answer.

Jess stopped. *Did I get turned around?* she wondered. *Am I going the right way? Good God, I don’t want to ask those thumb suckers back there for directions.*

Movement, perhaps fifty yards ahead, caught her eye. She released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

Cheered by the thought of being again in the doctor’s proximity, Jess set off through the trees, growing mystified at the scent of burning wood teasing her nose.

“Steve?” she said, as she entered the area where they’d found the footprint.

Steve was nowhere to be seen. Jess walked to the area where they’d spotted the footprint; it was still there, fresh and new in the moist soil.

So was Steve’s measuring tape.

Jess scanned the woods. “Dr. Moody?” she called, expecting he’d gone to relieve himself in the bushes during her absence.

No response. But the smell of a campfire was steadily growing.

Or . . . what if it’s not a campfire? she thought nervously. *What if it’s the start of a forest fire, and we’re right here in the middle of it . . . ?*

Dropping the bucket of plaster, Jess ran further into the forest, following her nose. The fire was nearby, she was certain of it.

“Steve!” she called, shoving aside branches and brambles. “Steven?”

There!

In a small clearing, another fifty yards away, she saw flames dancing. Jess saw at once that it was in fact a campfire, well tended and safely away from any trees or scrub brush.

Two figures stood on either side of the fire, erecting what appeared to be a spit. Hunters, she thought. Like the townies back at the truck.

“Hello?” she called as she drew nearer. “Excuse me?”

The two hunters turned toward her voice. One raised a gloved hand.

“Hi,” Jess said, somewhat breathlessly after her jaunt through the trees. “I’m looking for—”
I’ll be damned, she thought, and narrowed her eyes at the two men.

In a cluster nearby one of them lay a pair of shoes. But not hiking boots, not tennis shoes, not running sneakers.

The shoes were enormous. The sole seemed just about the length—no, the *exact* length, Jess realized—of the footprint they'd found.

And designed in no uncertain terms to look like a giant bare foot. Both of them.

Fakers.

“You want to explain those?” Jess snapped, pointing to the shoes.

The two men looked at the shoes, then back at her.

“Makin' tracks,” one of them said carelessly.

“God dammit!” Jess roared at them. “How could you?”

The man who'd spoken shrugged. “Works every time,” he said.

“Works to do what, exactly?” Jess demanded. “To fool the monster hunters? Huh? Damn it, do you realize how much time and energy we just wasted getting ready to make a cast of one of your little jokes?”

She thought immediately of Mr. Klingler's admission that certain townspeople took it as a matter of self interest to keep the myth of the Sasquatch alive. Jess didn't blame them, necessarily. Still. She felt like a fool to have believed in the monster, even for a moment.

“I should take a picture of both of you and confiscate those fake feet right now,” she threatened, knowing she could accomplish neither goal if they didn't want her to.

The faker shrugged again. “You could do that,” he said. “Billy, gimme a hand with the meat?”

Billy nodded. They reached down, and either man took one end of a long steel pole, the middle of which had been neatly hidden by the height and breadth of the fire.

They lifted the pole up and set each end down in the brackets of the spit.

Jess swooned.

Dr. Steven Moody had been run clear through. His arms and legs hung limp. The spit had gone in somewhere in his backside while the other end protruded from his mouth, forcing his jaws open, as if his lifeless body was trying to take a bite of the steel rod. His clothes had been removed.

Both men turned to her.

“You could do that,” the first repeated. “But it won’t get you very far. Ain’t that right, Harley?”

“That’s true,” Jess heard Mr. Klingler say behind her.

She whirled, seeing that Klingler and the other two men had already surrounded her.

How quietly they moved, she thought helplessly. *How quiet.*

“There’s no Sassie,” Klingler told her, almost gently. “Not that we ever seen. But a couple of prints here and there keep the meat coming. Sorry to keep you so busy at the truck talking all that nonsense, but we needed some time. Hope you don’t mind.”

At last her tongue loosed and Jessica screamed, inhaling the acrid odor of woodsmoke and Steve Moody’s slowly roasting flesh.

They fell upon her.

THE END