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#28

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#28 Curse of the
Connecticut Coyotes

BY JONATHAN RAND

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1

“Hey, Mom,” I called out from my bedroom. “Have you seen my hairbrush?”

I’d looked all over for it. Usually, it’s on my dresser, but once in a while, I misplace it.

Like tonight.

“No, Erica, I haven’t,” Mom replied from the kitchen. “Did you check the bathroom?”

“Not yet,” I said. Barefoot, I strode out of my bedroom, down the hall, and into the bathroom. I turned on the light and glanced around, but I didn’t see any sign of my brush.

Where could it be? I wondered. I usually don’t

take it out of my bedroom.

Odd.

I turned off the light, left the bathroom, and walked to the kitchen where Mom was busy pulling out pots and pans from a cabinet beneath the counter.

“It’s not in the bathroom, either,” I said.

“I don’t know where it is,” Mom replied. “Maybe gremlins stole it.”

I rolled my eyes. Whenever something is missing in our house, Mom blames it on gremlins. Usually, it’s Dad who loses things, and usually, it’s his car keys or his wallet. He gets really frustrated and turns the house upside down trying to find whatever he’s misplaced. And, of course, he usually finds the item right where he left it.

Things are always found in the last place you look, Mom always says.

Which makes a lot of sense. After all: once you find whatever it is you’re looking for, you don’t have to keep looking, because you’ve already found it . . . in the last place you look.

But I still had no clue where my hairbrush was, and I wanted to find it before I went to bed.

I stood in the kitchen, thinking, while Mom

scurried about. She was experimenting with some kind of new cake recipe. Pots and pans were stacked on the counter, and there were plastic bowls and utensils in the sink. She might have been making a cake, but she was also making a mess. She's a great cook, but she destroys the kitchen when she makes meals.

I looked out the kitchen window. The sun was setting, and the sky was orange and purple. It would be dark soon. My little brother, Cole, was playing in the yard. My mom always somehow managed to juggle pots and pans and keep an eye on him.

I watched Cole run past our picnic table and vanish. Cole is only three, and he's always getting into some sort of trouble, always making some kind of mischief. I'm eleven, so I'm a lot older . . . and I always seem to be bailing him out of trouble.

And he can be a pest, too.

Like now.

In the gloomy dusk, I saw something I recognized sitting on the picnic table.

My hairbrush.

"There it is!" I said to Mom as I pointed. "My brush is outside! What's it doing out there?"

"Maybe the gremlins left it there, Erica," Mom

replied, without looking up from the mixing bowl in front of her.

Yeah, right, I thought. Gremlins, nothing. Cole took my brush. He took my brush and left it outside.

I stormed across the kitchen and slid the glass door open.

“Cole!?!?” I shouted. My voice echoed through the neighborhood. “Where are you?!?!?”

He didn’t answer, but I could hear him at the far end of our backyard, where the grass ended and the forest began. With nightfall approaching, it was hard to see him. But he was talking to himself, which he does a lot.

I strode across the grass to the picnic table. The blades were cold and wet against my bare feet. I could smell the thick scent of a wood fire, and I figured someone on our block was having a cookout. That’s just what it’s like in Fairfield, Connecticut. Lots of people have cookouts, barbecues, games, get-togethers . . . especially in our neighborhood. All the neighbors know each other, and we have a lot of fun. I have a lot of friends on our block, and we never run out of things to do.

I was just about to pick up my hairbrush from

the picnic table when Cole's words in the darkness caught my attention.

"Nice doggie," he said. "Pretty, pretty doggie."

Alarmed, I stopped and turned, straining to see in the gloom.

"Cole?" I called out. "Is there a dog with you?"

I was worried. Cole was too young to know that it was dangerous to pet unfamiliar dogs, too young to know that he should stay away from dogs running loose.

"Cole?" I said again, and I started walking toward his voice. "Is there a dog in the yard?"

As I drew closer, I could make out his white shirt, but it was still too dark to see anything else. He was only a ghostly form against a black curtain of night.

"Nice doggie," Cole said again. "Good doggie."

"Cole," I said, "You shouldn't—"

Suddenly, I saw the animal that Cole was speaking to, and I stopped calling to him.

I froze.

My blood chilled.

Oh, no! I thought. *That's not a dog! That's MUCH worse!*

2

It was a SKUNK!

I could see the white stripe on her back, and I could make out the shadowy form of her body. She wasn't very big, really—probably about the size of a normal cat—but that didn't matter. My little brother thought it was a dog!

“Cole Allen Falkner,” I said sternly, “come here *right now*.” Whenever I *really* need to get my little brother's attention, I use his full name. My mom does the same thing to me when she wants my attention.

“I wanna play with the doggie,” Cole said.

“Cole, that’s not a dog,” I said, drawing in a nervous breath. “That’s a *skunk*. And if you don’t come here this very minute, she’s going to spray you, and you’re going to stink like a skunk.”

“Huh-uh,” Cole said. “I wanna play with the nice doggie.”

I knew I had only a few seconds. It was just a matter of moments before the skunk would turn, raise her tail, and spray Cole. He’d stink for weeks! Not only that, he’d make our house stink. Everything in our home would smell like skunk . . . including *me*.

I decided to take a different approach. Instead of trying to make him come to me, I decided to be nice.

“Cole,” I said sweetly, “if you come to the house right now, I’ll get you a big bowl of chocolate ice cream. I’ll even put a scoop of peanut butter on it, just how you like.”

Cole paused. Then: “Really?” he asked.

“Really,” I replied. “But you have to come here right now.”

It worked. Cole turned and walked toward me, and the skunk waddled off into the darkness.

I let out a sigh of relief. Cole had no idea how close he'd come to being sprayed. I've often called my brother a 'little stinker,' but I only meant it as a joke. If that skunk would have sprayed him, he would have been a *real* little stinker!

"I love ice cream!" Cole said.

"I know you do," I replied. I took him by the hand, and we walked to the house together. "I'll get a big bowl, just for you."

"I can't find Teddy," Cole said.

"You lost your teddy bear?" I asked. Cole has a brown and white stuffed bear that he takes everywhere.

"Uh-huh," he replied.

"He'll turn up," I said. "Like Mom says: things are always found in the last place you look."

Inside our house, the mess in the kitchen had grown to monstrous proportions. There was flour and dough and cake mix all over the cupboards, the counter, and even on the floor. Mom, covered in flour herself, was busy looking at a recipe. She had a confused look on her face, like she was trying to figure something out. Like I said: Mom's a good cook, but when she makes something, she *destroys* the kitchen.

“Go get your pajamas on,” I said to Cole, “and I’ll get your ice cream.”

“Goody!” Cole squealed, and he ran to his bedroom.

While he was gone, I explained to Mom about the skunk in the backyard and how close Cole had come to being sprayed.

“Your father said he saw a skunk last week,” Mom said. “That’s probably the same one. That was very good thinking on your part to keep your brother from getting sprayed.”

I took the ice cream from the freezer, scooped out a blob, and put it in a bowl. Then, I got the peanut butter from the cupboard and plopped a big wad of it on top of the ice cream. Cole would be in heaven. It was his favorite treat in the whole world.

Then, I remembered my hairbrush. I’d left it on the picnic table.

“Be right back,” I said to Mom. “I left my brush outside.”

“Things are always found in the last place you look,” Mom said.

I rolled my eyes, pulled the sliding glass door open, and slipped outside.

The sun had set, and there was only a faint, orange glow in the west, like lava in the sky, seeping away. The smell of wood smoke had faded, and the cool night air tickled my nostrils. The grass beneath my bare feet was cold, and my skin broke out in goose bumps. It wouldn't be long before winter came, and I would have to wear shoes or boots when I went outside.

I reached the picnic table, picked up my hairbrush, and was about to return to the house.

That's when I heard a noise.

It was just a rustling of leaves, very soft and quiet. The skunk was still around, I was sure, and I was once again glad that Cole hadn't been sprayed.

I peered into the dark backyard, looking for the creature, but it was too dark.

No matter. It was just a skunk. No big deal. You've seen one skunk, you've seen them all. I just didn't want to get too close to it.

The noise came again, louder this time. I heard a growl.

Weird, I thought. Skunks don't growl.

And then, I *did* see something.

Not a skunk.

Not even the shape of a skunk.

In fact, I had no idea exactly what I saw—not at the moment, anyway.

At the back of our yard, in the dark of the new night, were two glowing red sparks.

Eyes, burning like hot coins.

Staring.

At *me*.

*Something horrible was in our backyard,
watching me at that very moment!*

3

Gripped by fear, I could only stare at the two sinister red eyes glaring back at me in the dark. I wanted to shout, to scream for help, but it felt like iron claws had wrapped themselves around my body, squeezing the air from my lungs. I couldn't even breathe.

What is that thing? I wondered. And why are his eyes glowing?

I'd never seen anything like it before. I was sure it was an animal of some sort . . . but what kind? It was too big to be a skunk, as the eyes were too large

and too far off the ground. I wondered if it might be a dog, but I'd never seen a dog with glowing red eyes before.

Somehow, I found the courage to move. I took a step backward, then another, and another. At the far end of the yard, the red eyes remained where they were, motionless, boring into me like laser beams.

When I reached the sliding glass door, I pulled it open, darted inside, and slammed it closed. I let out a huge sigh of relief.

The noise from the slamming door caught Mom by surprise, and she looked up from her mess in the kitchen. There were several flour smears on her face and chin.

"Erica," she said sternly. "I've told you a thousand times not to slam the sliding glass door."

She must have noticed the terrified expression on my face, because her stern look vanished and was replaced with alarmed curiosity.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"There's something freaky out there!" I replied. "Something with red eyes! I saw it! It's in the backyard, by the trees!"

Mom put down the mixing bowl she was

holding and hurried toward me. She flipped on the outside porch light and peered out the sliding glass window.

“I don’t see anything,” she said.

The porch light lit up the backyard, giving it a cool, lemony glow. The shadow cast by the picnic table looked like a hungry monster, stretching out over the grass to become one with the darkness.

But there was no sign of the glowing red eyes.

“I’m telling you,” I insisted, “I *saw* something. There was *something* out there. I don’t know what it was, but it had red eyes. It was watching me.”

We stood at the sliding glass door, peering outside. We saw no glowing red eyes or any animals. Nothing moved.

“I’m sure it was probably just a dog,” Mom said. “I hope he doesn’t tangle with that skunk.”

Mom was probably right. It probably *was* a dog. Still, we don’t see many stray dogs around our neighborhood. Some of the people on our block have dogs, but they keep them in their own yards, and they don’t run loose.

No matter. I was safe inside. Whatever I saw, it was *out there*. It couldn’t get me. I had no reason to be

afraid.

Not *yet*, anyway.

But soon.

Soon, I would find that I had good reason to be afraid . . . and it all started later that night, when I was awakened by something very, very strange

4

Later that night:

I awoke in bed with a book folded open on my chest. I'd fallen asleep reading. It was a book about a kid that was a wimp, and it was really good and very funny.

The light beside my bed was still on. I put the book on my nightstand, clicked off the light, and pulled the covers up to my chin. I closed my eyes and, after a few minutes, began to drift back to sleep.

A noise outside jolted me awake.

A squealing, laughing sound.

A howl.

I sat up in bed. The howl came again, and I knew what it was.

A coyote. Maybe a couple of them.

We hear them once in a while, usually late at night. Sometimes, we see them. Not very often, though. For the most part, coyotes hunt for food after dark, so it's not very often that we see them during the day.

The howl came again, closer this time. In fact, it sounded like it might be coming from our front yard or in the street.

I scrambled from my bed and tiptoed to the window. Outside, the streetlight gave off a salty blue glow, illuminating our yard and part of the neighborhood. I could see our neighbor's homes and cars parked in driveways. Dark shadows were splayed everywhere, frozen and motionless like jagged, black icebergs.

Something moved.

Just a small shadow, near a tree in our neighbor's yard. I watched for a moment, until it moved again.

Then, the animal strode out into the light. I was right! It *was* a coyote! It was about two feet tall, skinny, and long. I couldn't tell what color he was, because it was too dark, even in the glow of the streetlight. But most of the coyotes I see are a dirty, dark gray or brown.

While I watched, the animal sauntered across our front yard. He didn't appear to be in any hurry either, and I was sure that he wasn't afraid of anything. After all: he was a creature of the night. At night, this was his territory. While other animals slept, he was out hunting for food. Coyotes have a keen sense of smell, hearing, and vision that make them superior night hunters.

Suddenly, the animal stopped. He turned his head and looked directly at me. I hadn't made a move or done anything to draw his attention . . . but he saw me, I was sure. He was watching me. Just like—

And that's when his eyes began to glow red, just like the animal I'd seen in the backyard!

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