

CHAPTER ONE

Twelve-year-old Finn Harper busied himself enjoying the best part of the day, in his opinion. It was 3:45 on a beautiful Tuesday afternoon in September. With school over for the day, he did not have to be home until 6:00 PM. The walk took twenty minutes from the bank of Rock Creek to his home in Talihina, Oklahoma. He could enjoy two full hours looking for fish and crayfish in the creek and the real treasure he hoped to find, arrowheads. He had found a beautiful one on his first trip down to the creek back in August. Finn found himself in an uncomfortable position as a newcomer to Talihina, having recently moved there with his mother and stepfather from Tulsa.

His stepfather Darren Holt worked as a supervisor with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation. Moving to Talihina, nestled in a valley surrounded by mountains, was a dream come true for his stepfather. Now he lived close to wonderful hunting and fishing and everything else the great outdoors had to offer. The transfer also brought a much-needed promotion and raise in income. Finn's mother, Sandra, also seemed thrilled about the move. Concerned with the crime rate in Tulsa, the move gave her security. Plus, she, too, loved the mountain scenery and sharing the outdoors with her new husband.

On the other hand, Finn didn't share in the joy of the move his parents did. It forced him away from his only friend, still living in Tulsa. Finn did not make friends easily.

Slight of build and shorter than most of the boys his age, Finn did not like sports. His concern about his size made him dreadfully shy and not very assertive. He would rather read a book and explore creeks and woods than try to hit a ball with a

bat, shoot hoops, or put on heavy football equipment just to get beaten to a pulp in practice by the bigger boys. He tried football in a Tulsa's peewee league the previous year at his stepfather's insistence. Darren thought the exercise and physical contact might toughen Finn up a bit and give him some much-needed confidence.

The experiment ended in disaster as far as Finn was concerned. He rarely got into the game, and when he did take the field, each play usually ended with him lying flat on his back. His one great claim to fame during the football experiment happened when he recovered a fumble. However, the only reason it happened was that a player from the opposing team knocked him down, and he just happened to land on the loose football.

He remembered returning to the sidelines after his big play only to hear his coach tell him, "Well, Harper, I guess even a tackling dummy will make a decent play once in a while." Finn never forgot the way the other boys laughed at the coach's remarks. He knew he would not be allowed to quit, but he also knew he would never play football again once he got through the season. Now, in his element, he explored the creek and woods near his home. It was one activity his parents approved of.

His stepfather had even spoken of possibly purchasing Finn his own youth shotgun, so he could take Finn along when he went hunting. Finn's mother balked at the idea, much to Finn's relief. He loved the outdoors, but the thought of shooting birds or any other animal turned his stomach. He didn't want to kill anything. Even the crayfish, the occasional snake, and small fish he caught, he returned to the creek after admiring them for a few moments.

Finn loved to learn, and he didn't feel he could learn anything from killing wildlife. He'd much rather see animal life up close and study it without causing harm. The afternoon sun

warmed his shoulders, and the sound of the creek rippling over rocks added to his contentment. It had rained heavily a couple of days before, and the creek's water was now receding to its normal level.

Still, the creek's current seemed a little swifter as the water poured into it from the Winding Stair Mountains just north of town. He'd heard that conditions like these were perfect for occasionally finding an arrowhead that had been washed up on the bank after heavy rainfall.

Finn's attention was focused on the edge of the creek bank; he walked slowly alongside it, his eyes scanning intently. "Hey, nerd boy!" Came a voice from Finn's left. Being so engrossed in his hunt for arrowheads, Finn failed to notice the two older boys walking toward him. Finn had encountered both boys the week before at school. He hoped never to reencounter them after they knocked him down, sending his books flying as he was leaving the gym from PE class. It wasn't enough that they knocked him down. They kicked his books across the hallway, and it looked as if things would get worse until the door from the gym opened, and an even larger boy stopped to survey the activity. The new arrival looked down at Finn, who was lying in the middle of the hallway with his books and school supplies.

The boy seemed huge, which he was for a seventh-grader. He wore a black Talihina Junior High football jersey with a gold number 87. He scowled at the two boys that had knocked Finn down. "I'd give anything if you two would come to football practice where I could show you how that feels," he said to Finn's attackers, who both beat a hasty retreat down the hallway.

The large imposing-looking boy then surprised Finn by offering his hand. Grabbing the boy's hand, Finn was pulled to his feet with little effort by his rescuer. "I see you met Cliff Towns and Bret Morris. You'd better steer clear of them or learn

to fight, new kid," the boy said as he bent over to help Finn pick up his books and supplies.

Feeling like this was his chance to make a friend, Finn introduced himself, "I'm Finn Harper."

The boy looked at him the way Finn would look at a crayfish he'd caught in the creek, studying him with curiosity, before returning him to this wilderness that was the Talihina Junior High School hallway. "Fin, like Fish Fin?" the boy asked.

"No, Finn with two N's," Finn replied.

The large boy didn't seem impressed or unimpressed. He had a calm, detached way about him. He handed Finn the books he had picked up, gave him one more quizzical look, and said. "Well, Finn with two Ns, like I said, you better steer clear of those guys or learn to fight." Then he turned and walked down the hallway.

"I didn't catch your name," Finn said.

"I didn't throw it," the boy said over his shoulder, then calmly turned and walked away.

Now, a week later, Finn knew he was in trouble. Nobody would come to his rescue this time. He stood frozen as the two boys approached. Naturally, there was no way he could have learned to fight in the short time since he last talked to the larger boy in the hallway. Yet he knew he had made a mistake not heeding the warning about the two bullies. *I should have been paying attention*, he thought to himself.

"What do you think you're doing at my creek?" Cliff Towns asked in a mocking tone as he approached Finn and brushed the bangs of his red hair out of his eyes. Finn could only stare at the boy's red hair and freckled complexion as he moved closer, cutting off any escape for Finn. The red hair and freckles gave Cliff Towns an even more menacing appearance.

The other boy, Bret Morris, also approached, walking shoulder to shoulder with Cliff. Bret was slightly taller than Cliff but not as muscular. He had dark hair and eyes. Finn had

a feeling Bret, clearly not the leader, might have some decency and be less dangerous than Cliff.

"I asked you a question, nerd boy. What are you doing at my creek?" Cliff repeated.

"It's not your creek," Finn replied nervously, then suddenly, he doubled over in pain as Bret Morris punched him in the stomach.

"I'm not going to ask you again, nerd boy. Now, for the last time, what are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for arrowheads," Finn replied through clenched teeth as he fought the heavy ache in his stomach.

"Arrowheads?" Bret said, "Who told you, that you could look for arrowheads here?"

"I didn't think I needed to ask anybody," Finn replied, beginning to catch his breath.

"You need our permission, nerd. You see, Cliff here owns the creek, and my grandfather is Choctaw, and I don't want you stealing any of the arrowheads he made."

"The stone arrowheads found around here are from the Caddo tribe. They're hundreds of years old. I doubt your grandfather made any of them," Finn said, finally able to stand up straight, which was just in time for an open hand slap from Bret Morris that knocked Finn to the ground. His face burned like fire, and tears formed in his eyes as he looked up at his tormentors.

"What's the matter, nerd boy? Run out of smart things to say?" Cliff said, then turning to Bret, he said, "I'll bet he has some of your grandfather's arrowheads in his backpack... Check it out."

Finn was nearly lifted off the ground as Bret ripped at his backpack. Once he had the backpack free, Bret viciously kicked Finn over, nearly sending him face-first into the creek. Even through his pain and fear, Finn's brain never completely left its drive for discovery. A huge, almost human-shaped footprint

was in the mud just out of the water. It seemed twice as large as the footprint would be for a large, full-grown man.

That's a Sasquatch print. I can't let them see this, no matter what. Finn had the presence of mind to think. He pulled himself as close to the footprint as possible, then rolled over to face the two boys standing above him. Cliff rifled through his backpack, pulling out two textbooks and some papers.

He said, "I like you, nerd boy, so I'm going to do you a favor." He threw the books and papers into the creek. "There ya go, no homework for you tonight."

Finn tried to lunge to catch any of his schoolwork he could, but Bret put his foot into Finn's chest, forcing him down onto his back. Finn caught himself with his elbows, hoping not to disturb the footprint behind him.

"What have we got here?" Cliff said, pulling a can of soda out of the backpack. He dropped the backpack and gave it a kick toward the creek and studied the soda can.

"Thank you, nerd boy; I was getting thirsty," he said, popping the tab to open the can before bringing it to his lips. Cliff took a long pull before lowering the can and spitting the soda in his mouth all over Finn. "It's hot, and it's orange. I hate orange."

His anger overcoming his fear, Finn replied, "Do you hate it because it reminds you of your hair?"

Cliff's eyes went cold, "You're some kind of a funny nerd, huh? Now you're going to drink this, and I'm going to make you eat the can."

By this point, Finn was sure he had a beating coming and wanted to get it over with. "I'll bet your girlfriend would like some," he said, nodding toward Bret, who rewarded him with a vicious kick to the face, causing Finn to see stars for a moment.

"Now I know you could use a nice drink to make you feel better," Cliff said, lifting the can above Finn and tilting it to empty its contents on his head. Finn looked up defiantly.

Finn watched the can tilt toward him and waited for the sticky liquid to be poured over his head, adding to his embarrassment. Something smacked the side of the can, knocking it out of Cliff's hand. Finn saw nothing more than a blur, but the can flew violently through the air, landing some ten feet away. Whatever hit the can nearly folded it in half. Cliff held his hand in pain. Looking to his left, he said, "You're going to pay for this, Wren."

Finn looked in the direction, and there was a girl he recognized from school standing defiantly with a Wrist-Rocket slingshot in her left hand. Bret Morris started advancing toward the girl.

"I wouldn't come any closer, dufus. I just shot a can out of Cliff's hand. I can put a marble right in the middle of your forehead and it's lights out." Bret stopped in his tracks and looked confused back at Cliff.

"Come on, Cliff, let's go," he said.

Still holding his hand, Cliff agreed, and the two boys started walking away from the creek and Finn. Their eyes never left the girl, who held her slingshot at the ready.

The boys put some distance between themselves and the girl; Cliff turned and said, "This isn't over. It isn't over by a longshot."

As he turned back to the direction of his retreat, Finn was shocked when the girl let another marble fly from her wrist rocket, striking Cliff in the buttocks. A yelp of pain was all Cliff could reply with.

"How's that for a longshot Towns?" The girl said.

Both boys broke into a run, anxious to get out of slingshot range of the girl. She approached Finn, who was still sitting at the creek bank with his mouth hanging open.

"I'm Allie Wren, you're Finn Harper, right?" Finn just sat there staring with his mouth agape.

"You know, I help Miss Archer, our English teacher. I've seen your grades. I took you to be smarter than somebody who would sit in the mud with their mouth hanging open."

The smile on her face was the first friendly gesture Finn had had from any kid since he had arrived in Talihina. He rose quickly from the mud and said, "I'm Finn Harper."

Allie let a small chuckle out and said, "I know. I just told you your name."

Finn had to chuckle, "Yes, you did. I'm sorry. I'm not having the best of afternoons," he said, looking around to see what he could salvage from the carnage brought on by Cliff and Bret.

"Don't feel too bad. You're not the only kid they torment. They love to go after the smaller kids, especially those who are usually alone."

"Well, this was my second time to run into them. I hope there's not going to be a third," Finn said, wading into the creek to retrieve his schoolwork and textbooks.

"Oh, there's going to be another meeting, you're going to have to find a way to either get them to lose interest in you or else fight back."

Bending over to pick up his book from the creek, Finn replied, "Well, as you can see, I'm not much of a fighter."

Getting no reply, Finn turned to see Allie was staring at the footprint he had hidden from Cliff and Bret. "Is that what I think it is?" Allie asked.

"That depends on what you think it is," Finn replied.

"Well, I think it's a Sasquatch footprint. What do you think?" she said.

"I think you're right," Finn replied. "I tried to keep it hidden from those two jerks. I didn't want them to see it."

Allie looked at Finn with some admiration after he admitted he was hiding the print. "So that's why you didn't fight back?" she asked.

"No, that's why I didn't run," Finn admitted with a smile on his face. Allie laughed; her laugh was music to Finn's ears.

"What do you want to do with it?" Allie asked.

"I was thinking of making a plaster cast, but I don't have any plaster. Allie took her phone out of her back pocket and looked at it.

"It's nearly 5:00. Football practice will be over soon. After taking a couple of photos, she said, "Come on, I have a friend on the football team who is into this stuff. I'm sure he has plaster."

Finn thought about it for a moment and said, "Football players and I don't get along well."

Allie gave him a smile and said, "Don't worry. Even though this guy is on the football team, he doesn't mix well with football players either."

"He doesn't?" Finn asked.

"No, he doesn't mix well with anybody. Come on Finn, it will be okay."

Finn wasn't really sure if any of this was a good idea, he didn't know Allie, and he'd never met a football player that would give him the time of day; most just wanted to treat him the way Cliff and Bret had.

Finally, he decided the footprint was worth the chance. "Okay, you're going to have your slingshot in case he comes after me, right?"

Allie just laughed and said, "Come on, goofball."