



**SPEAK
NO
EVIL**

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Sixteen is a pivotal age, stranded in the badlands somewhere between the dreams of childhood and the realities of adulthood. At sixteen, the proclaimed worst moment of your life might be superficial, like not being asked to the prom by the right person, or something much darker, which causes your soul to scream in anguish. Your emotions range from ecstasy to despair, hitting every note in between along the way.

At sixteen, some still wear the mask of innocence, while others toss off the mask to glare at the world through experience-weary eyes.

- Melody Fisher, Valedictorian, Laurel High

CHAPTER ONE



December 22, 2014 – Melody, age 15

The door swung open and a broad-shouldered officer pulled a skinny woman toward the front desk by her bony elbow. The officer jerked his thumb toward Melody. “Why isn’t she in a holding cell?”

The cop behind the desk looked up from the document he’d been flipping through. “Her social worker is on the way and said she’d raise holy hell if we put her in a holding cell with adults since she’s a minor.”

The uniformed cop’s belt creaked as he shifted his weight. “She stabbed Troy Alexander, for chrissake. Doesn’t stabbing a classmate make her a danger to society?”

As if on command, the TV in the lobby switched to breaking news. The reporter stood outside Mercy Hospital.

“Turn it up, I wanna hear this.” The officer smoothed the sides of his nearly shaved head. “My little brother played a year or two with Troy, and he said he was one of the best players he’s ever known.”

The reporter stared at the camera with a subdued expression. “We have received the following update on good authority. Troy Alexander will be released from the hospital shortly. And your best local news team is on the spot ready to bring you up-to-the-minute

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information.”

The TV cut away to a commercial. The woman at the counter cracked her gum. “Really? Some kid getting released from the hospital is breaking news?”

The officer squared his shoulders. “That shows how much you know.” He sneered at her. “Troy Alexander is the hottest prospect coming out of Asheville in years. All the college coaches across the nation are drooling over the chance to get him to play for them.”

She shrugged. “It’s just a game.”

The cop’s face turned red. “Just a game! I’ll have you know...” He pointed a stubby finger at Melody. “... if she’d hurt him any worse, we’d have to put on extra officers, and take her into protective custody because there’d be a lynch mob forming outside the station.”

The news came back on and Troy exited through the double doors. “The doc says I should rehab for a week, but I’ll be ready to play in the big game two weeks from now.”

Melody turned away and her body shook. She plugged her ears and rocked.

The uniformed officer put his hand on the wall behind Melody and lowered his face to hers. “You’re lucky, kid. If his football career had been ruined, the folks around here would want your head on a platter. No amount of whining about being an orphan and the hard life you’ve had would matter for spit.”

The doors swung open again.

“Officer, I believe you should take a step or two back.” Miss Prescott hauled her purse to her shoulder. “You wouldn’t want to deal with a misconduct charge for intimidation of a minor.”

She went straight up to the desk. “You have a room where I can speak with Melody in private?”

The desk cop pulled out a set of keys. “Marv, can you please

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take them to room six? Although, I don't know what good it'll do. She hasn't made a sound since we brought her in."

Miss Prescott ignored him. "Melody, come on. We have some things to discuss."

Melody followed Miss Prescott and the uniformed cop down the hallway. He opened a door to a small room containing nothing but a table and a couple of chairs inside.

Miss Prescott put her oversized purse on the table with a thunk. She arched a brow over her hazel eyes. "You can close the door on your way out, Officer." She pulled back a chair and sat.

She patted the table. "Come on, Melody. Take a seat. We have a few things to cover." Brushing her red hair out of her eyes with one hand, she rummaged in her purse and pulled out a file folder with the other.

Melody sat and buried her face in her hands.

Miss Prescott reached across the table, touched Melody's arm, and her voice softened. "Don't worry, honey. I've known you for nearly half your life at this point. And I know you would have had a good reason for what you did."

Melody raised her eyes to stare into Miss Prescott's.

"I'm telling you the truth. With all you've gone through in your life with the stoicism of a rock, it breaks my heart to know you had to go through something so awful, you snapped." She opened the folder and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get here, but I had to get as much done as I could during business hours." She flipped through the top few pages. "It took some fast talking, but I convinced the judge juvenile hall or a jail cell would be the worst place for you."

Melody straightened.

"He wouldn't agree to your continuing in the public school system, so you'll have to be homeschooled." She blew a pesky

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strand of hair out of the way. It floated up and settled back in the same place. “The next hurdle was your current foster placement. As soon as they heard the news, they contacted me to say they would no longer have you stay under their roof.”

Melody stared past Miss Prescott’s shoulder at the patch on the wall where the paint had peeled. The paint had faded so much, the missing strip barely showed.

“Because they refused to have you come back to their home, I picked up your things. I have them in the car.” Her face flushed. “I am very sorry to say several people I contacted had heard the news and flat out refused to take you in. But I did find a temporary placement for you.”

Melody rolled her eyes.

Miss Prescott held up her hand. “I know, I know. I’ve said those words too many times to you. I’m not going to lie ... this time the temporary placement may be long-term. At least until we get this situation straightened out.”

She reached across the table again and held Melody’s hand. “You haven’t said a word for almost two years. Not even in therapy.”

Melody’s hand trembled.

“Honey, if ever there was a time to talk, now is it.”

Melody pulled her hand back from Miss Prescott’s grasp and tucked it under her arm to hide the shakes she couldn’t control.

“Oh, sweetie.” A tear rolled down Miss Prescott’s cheek. “We’re going to get this taken care of, and I’ll be here the whole way for you.”

CHAPTER TWO



February 23, 2008 – Melody, age 9

Daddy stopped and raised his hand in the air as the sun crested the peak on Grandfather Mountain. The signal for me to follow silently at a distance. He stepped forward through the frosted brush underfoot, making no noise, while I shivered in the early morning chill. My breath made puffy clouds as I exhaled.

A small creek lay ahead on the Nuwati Trail. Daddy said the Nuwati was our best bet because the piles of rocks and fallen tree limbs off the trail were used for shelter. Before he got too far in front of me, I took a step. Dead leaves crunched under my boot.

Daddy's head snapped in my direction and he raised a forefinger to his lips.

My shoulders slumped. I had forgotten to look for leaves. I'd never be able to walk as quietly as he could, no matter how hard I tried. 'Specially in boots.

My first hunt and already I'd messed up. I'd begged him to take me and had to promise to be quiet when we got close.

For one scary moment, I'd thought Mama wasn't gonna let me go. She hadn't been sure she wanted her *little* girl to go out on a hunt. I'd reminded her I wasn't little. At nine, I was nearly in

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double digits. But she insisted I'd always be her little Melody.

I concentrated on walking silently, following the steps Daddy had taught me.

Crouch.

Check for leaves.

Sweep any twigs to the side.

Heel first then roll to the toe.

Shift weight forward and repeat.

Looking up, I had to bite my tongue to keep from calling out. I couldn't move fast and quiet at the same time. In a few steps, the brush would swallow Daddy and I wouldn't know where he'd gone.

Wait, Daddy. I'm not with you.

How could he move so fast and so quietly at the same time, especially carrying the heavy diesel tank on his back? I had an empty can and I made a lot more noise.

Fortunately, before he disappeared, he stopped and checked over his shoulder. He waited for me to catch up and I remembered to keep my pace slow so I wouldn't make noise. When I got to within ten paces of him, he moved forward again.

As Daddy rounded a curve, he stopped and held out his hand, palm facing me. The signal for me to stop and wait. I placed the empty can on the ground and gently lowered the handle so it didn't clank against the side. The breeze blew a loose strand of black hair across my cheek. I tucked it behind my ear as I straightened.

Inhaling the musty scent of the fallen leaves, I wanted to remember everything about this day. The way the sunlight shone through naked branches and remaining leaves on the trees. The toasty feeling of huddling inside my coat with a beanie keeping my head and ears warm. Even my frozen fingers and nose.

Daddy reached behind his back for the wand and pointed it

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toward a black hole in the rocks. He flipped the switch on the tank and pulled the trigger. The liquid sprayed all over the ground and rocks before Daddy stuck the nozzle into the hole. Diesel fumes smothered the woody scent in the air.

Snake after snake slithered out of the opening. My eyes opened wide. I'd never seen so many in one place. Some snakes were a grayish-brown with black jagged bands—canebrake rattlers. Others were tan or orangish with pinkish-tan bands edged in dark brown—copperheads. One copperhead, so big it filled the entire opening, stopped halfway out and tested the air with its tongue. The canebrakes were longer, but the copperhead dwarfed them. Once outside, the snakes weren't sure where to go. Their heads swiveled from one side to the other and their tongues licked the diesel-filled air.

“Melody!”

I took off for the creek as Daddy had made me promise. Twigs snapped and cracked as I raced toward the water's edge. Dead leaves rustled and rattles sounded behind me. Panting, I reached the bank and turned to look.

Less confused, the snakes were slithering away from Daddy. He had a big canebrake caught in the snake-stick.

“Get in the water.”

I shook my head. “But they don't scare me.”

“Melody.” Daddy's tone told me not to argue. He put the snake in the can I had carried.

A canebrake and a copperhead reached the bank as I backed into the water. The grayish-brown canebrake rattler on the left curled and rose into striking position. It swayed with its head almost as high as my chin. I stared into its yellow eyes. Was I in striking distance?

Before the sliver of fear could grow, I opened my mouth and sang.

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*Rattlesnake, rattlesnake, I fear you none
Crawling beneath, the moon and sun
Show me no harm, under the sky
I will show no fear, though afraid to die*

The rattle vibrated against the ground. Staying as still as possible, I sang the words as they came from my heart.

*On your belly, slither on by
Rattlesnake don't bite, don't make me cry
The hills are full, in the green green grass
Please leave me be, let me pass*

The copperhead slowed its approach then stopped at the water's edge. The snake poised to strike, swayed with the music and lowered to the ground. Its rattle stilled as I sang on.

Snakes slithering away from Daddy changed course and came toward the two in front of me. I wanted to laugh. I'd never given a concert to snakes before. They kept coming until the entire nest curled together in front of me.

*Rattlesnake, rattlesnake, I fear you none
Crawling beneath, the moon and sun
Show me no harm, under the sky
I will show no fear, though afraid to die*

Daddy walked silently behind the snakes. "Be still, baby. I'll get them as quickly as I can."

I didn't want him to hurt them. And they wouldn't do anything as long as I sang to them. So I sang to Daddy. "*I'm fine. They're not going to hurt me. They like my song.*"

He nodded then circled past the large nest of pit vipers in front of me and entered the stream.

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*The ground is yours, you own the dirt
Your poison, your venom, I know would hurt
So with you in mind, at night I pray
Rattlesnake grant me, another day*

“Keep singing and wait for me to come behind you.” Daddy’s words were soft but clipped, like when he got upset.

I didn’t know why. It’s not like I hadn’t been around snakes from the time I was a baby. He and Mama handled them every week at church.

As I repeated the chorus, he glided through the creek toward me. Slowly. He might spook the snakes if he moved too fast. But they had all calmed down. They wouldn’t hurt me.

From behind, he lifted me straight out of the water and strode down the center of the creek.

After moving ten feet from where we had been, I twisted toward him and he hugged me tight.

“Stop singing or they might follow.” His breath caught in his throat and he squished me tighter. “I’ve never seen anything like that in my life.”

“Daddy, I can’t breathe.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” His grip loosened and he gave a weak chuckle. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

I put my hands on his cheeks and gazed into his dark eyes. “I was always safe, Daddy. They wouldn’t hurt me. They came for the concert.”

He made a sound between a cough and a laugh. “Well, my crooner, I think it’s best to keep the snake concert between you and me, or your mother won’t allow you to come on a hunt ever again.” He hugged me tighter. “Where did you learn the song?”

“I didn’t learn it, I just sang it.” I nestled my cheek against his.

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“I remembered the story you told me about when Chief Yellow Snake died and the words came out.”

Daddy carried me out of the creek, set me down, and took my hand.

I kicked my boot through the leaves. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, honey. You can always ask me anything.”

How should I ask so he wouldn’t get upset? “Why does Mama not want me to touch snakes when she handles them every time we go to church?”

Daddy’s cheeks puffed out as he exhaled. “That’s quite a question, Melody. And it’s not an easy one to answer.”

Great. *Not easy to answer* meant I wouldn’t be getting one. I scuffed the toe of my boot in the dirt and waited for him to tell me he’d answer it when I was older. The way he usually did when I asked a hard question.

He took off his hat and ran a hand through his shoulder-length black hair before settling the hat on his head again. “But my little girl is growing up and you’re getting old enough to need some answers.”

My heart stilled for a moment. Would he tell me the truth? Or would he tell me a Cherokee fable instead?

“Your mama has a strong faith in God.”

I nodded. “It’s why we go to church every Sunday and Wednesday night.”

He took my hand again with a smile. “Your mama and Uncle Harlan were raised to believe they have to do certain things to show God they believe in Him.” He nodded toward the nest we had chased the snakes from. “Let’s go get our catch, then we’ll head back on the trail.”

Thank goodness we didn’t have to be quiet anymore. My

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boots crunched across the twigs and fallen leaves.

“And while your mama will pick up snakes to confirm her faith in God, she’s frightened of them.”

Why would she be afraid of snakes? The snakes wouldn’t hurt anyone unless they had reason to. I struggled to keep my tongue still. With Daddy, it was sometimes best to keep my questions to myself and let him tell me in his own way.

Daddy looked to the sky for a few moments before continuing. “When she was about your age, at church one Sunday, the preacher picked out a big canebrake rattler during his sermon and he held it above his head and swung it around for everyone in the congregation to see.”

Pastor Wolfson showed the congregation snakes all the time.

“And it twisted and bit him in the face.”

Ugh. I’d never forget the time Sister Wolfson, Pastor Wolfson’s wife, had been bit. She had come to the front to handle the snakes and started doing this weird dance. Most folks who handled danced with the snakes, but this was different. Instead of dancing to the music, she’d stared down the snake, holding it with one hand. She used her other arm like a serpent, wiggling it all around the snake’s head. And she shouted words, but not in a language I had ever heard before.

The snake had watched her for a few moments, as if in a trance, but when she’d made a striking motion, it had struck back getting her hand. The blood seeped out of the puncture wound and it trickled down her arm. She’d raised the snake over her head and screamed she had been blessed by the Lord. He would show the congregation His strength by healing her.

Afterward, Pastor Wolfson said she had been filled with the spirit of the Lord and had been speaking in tongues.

I wasn’t afraid of the snake as much as I was afraid of Sister

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Wolfson.

“The preacher dropped the snake as he fell to the ground and it slithered to the front row and rose to a striking stance. Well, your mama sat front row center with a snake staring her in the face, ready to strike again.”

Kinda like the one by the bank. Except I hadn't seen someone bitten in the face. I shivered as the wind whipped through. “Oh my gosh. What happened?”

Daddy frowned at me.

Whoops. “I meant, oh my goodness ...”

If Mama had heard me, I'd be in trouble. Kids at school said *gosh* all the time and nobody said a thing.

He raised one eyebrow and grunted. “One of the elders grabbed it and put it in the serpent cage before it lashed out. But your mama had nightmares about the snake biting the preacher and staring her down for years.”

Kree-eee-ar.

The cry startled me. Tilting my head back, I scanned the sky until I spotted the red-tailed hawk gliding in front of the clouds.

“And Harlan used to tease her with them. He'd chase her around with a milk snake trying to get it to snap at her.”

How mean. Uncle Harlan, always so straight-laced and strict, it was hard to picture him as a boy pulling nasty pranks. But my cousins, Jeb and Samuel, were always nasty to me, so maybe they took after their dad.

We reached the can and Daddy grabbed it. The rattle vibrated against the metal.

Daddy cleared his throat. “The preacher didn't survive the bite which made it worse for your mama.”

He died? No wonder Mama didn't like snakes.

“And she loves you so much. She doesn't want you to ever be

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hurt. She wants you to share her faith in God, but doesn't want to see you handle." He rested his hand on my head. "And before you start objecting about how you're getting older and are big enough, I know you are good with animals. And have always been good with snakes. But you're our only daughter, and you're not going to overcome your mother's fears easily."

Mama was too overprotective. But it's not like I wanted to jump around in church with a snake in my hands anyway. I didn't want to hurt them, and I didn't think they'd find all the bouncing much fun. If some giant came along and held me in his hand and jumped around, I think my stomach would hurt.

But I didn't understand. "If Mama is so afraid, then why do we keep the snakes? And why do you go hunting for them?"

He peered at the sky, tracking the flight of the hawk. "The Cherokee believe rattlesnakes are sacred and are not to be killed unless absolutely necessary. And the snakes used in the church services get sick. So I told your mama I'd go to church with her, as long as I could do my part to keep the snakes healthy."

Would the snakes die if Daddy didn't take care of them?

"When I notice a snake getting sick, it's time to find a replacement. Then we nurse it back to health and release it back to the wild." He patted my shoulder. "It's the right thing to do. The snake should not die as a declaration of faith to God. The same god we worship created all the earth's creatures, and we must show our respect for the gifts God has given us."

He dropped to one knee next to me and pointed at the hawk. "Watch."

The red-tailed hawk tilted its wings and zoomed downward. My heart pounded as it plummeted. Was it going to crash?

It skimmed the ground, then pulled up and soared into the blue sky, something dangling from its claws.

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“Nature is raw and violent. Don’t ever forget, Melody. The hawk is a hunter—it sets its sights on its prey, waits for its opportunity, then strikes. All animals act according to their nature. Some are the hunter and others are the hunted.”

He hugged me and whispered, “People put on masks to hide their nature, so you must learn how to look behind the mask for your own protection. You have many gifts. Follow your passion and soar like the hawk.”