

Finding Valerie

Hey, my name is Lucas Crowley and I was just a normal boy. I played soccer, listened to music, was occasionally irresponsible, made messes, and hung out with my friends. I was a normal boy. You hear that? Was. Isn't it crazy how quickly your life can turn from *Is* to *Was*. You never really expect something unplanned or crazy to happen. I didn't think that I would ever do anything like this. Maybe it was fate, I wonder every once in a while what would've happened if my dad didn't go on that business trip or if I just threw away that newspaper. *Is* to *Was*, so quickly, almost in the blink of an eye, and all because of the girl on the front page.

I remember the day like it was yesterday rather than many, many years ago.

The date was March 23, 2005. It was a Thursday morning and the house was empty. My father was on another one of his business trips which he went on quite often ever since my mom left. He had to put money in the bank, food on the table, and clothes in my closet somehow. It was just weird. Usually I would have one parent there, but one was gone for now and the other gone for good. I guess I was quite privileged for 12 years of my life at least. I popped some waffles in the toaster and let them cook as I went to go get the mail. The subdued sunlight was calming as I reached the back of the mailbox. A fashion catalog which belonged to my mother was there. I guess she forgot to re-address her subscription. There were envelopes with bills, an unpaid ticket notice, and finally a newspaper. I glared at the number on the bill which was far more than I expected, and the parking ticket was far overdue as I walked back to the house. How could things be this bad, the number wasn't even that high it just wasn't something we could afford right now, not even with all of my dad's extra business trips.

When I got back to the house it was eerily silent. A cold chill of loneliness hung in the air, sending goosebumps straight up my back. I got my waffles and began to eat in silence. Normally my dad would humor me with funny talks about the people at work or an article he read that morning or the night before while I slept, but now it was quiet. There was nothing else for me to do so I picked up the newspaper and began reading. There was an article on the front page that had to do with politics or something and I was about to flip the page to read a cartoon or something more interesting. As I was turning it, I saw a picture on the back of the front page and figured no harm could be done by skimming over it.

At the top in tall, bold letters was "**MISSING CHILD REPORT**" I never saw any articles like these when my dad read the newspaper, I guess he just skipped over that part, thought it was too intense for a person of my age to handle. Whatever the backstory was behind it, the words shocked me. My eyes dropped to the picture below. There was a girl there, but not just any girl, the most beautiful girl in the world. Her hair was long and dark, flowing down to her waist in

wavy tresses. Her eyes were light, with long and curly eyelashes, and eyebrows that were perfect in a slightly unruly way. One was slightly raised. Her eyes were saying something to me, to everyone who was looking at this. They were bright and shiny, wide and pretty, saying *"I know you're looking at me. Do you like what you see?"* Her nose was demure and button-like, surrounded by plump and rosy cheeks. The only blemish across her smooth skin was a pattern of freckles across the right side of her face following the curve and shape of it. Her lips were plump and pursed in a smirk that wasn't cocky but confident, it was clear she believed in herself.

Underneath was a description of her and her capture. Valarie Cahalen. She was 13 in the taking of the picture and her birthday had passed about 2 months ago on January 15th. Imagine how horrible, she had been missing for 4 months, imagine spending your 14th birthday trapped in a cold, dirty room, wanting to escape but not being able to. Chestnut brown hair, blue eyes, quite petite at only 4'11 and 97 pounds. She looked beautiful like the popular mean girl in the movies, but I could tell just by looking at her that she was not that girl. She was like the quirky, insecure main character's confident and mage like best friend. She was wearing a pale blue dress when she was last seen.

Something powerful surged through me like a drug injected into my veins. For some reason I wanted to find her. I regretted the thought immediately. She had been gone for 4 whole months, plus I was only a middle schooler, I hadn't even made it to high school yet. There was no way I could do what the police do, especially if they couldn't do it themselves. It was still on my mind though, like a cold you just couldn't shake. So I let it remain.

I grabbed my key and walked out the door, but stuffed the newspaper in my backpack before I left. I don't know why, I just did.

On my bicycle ride to school I let my music blast from my mp3 player in my ears, while I thought about what she would be doing right now if she was free. She looked like an artist and that she was wealthy of some sort seeing as she had professional pictures taken. I imagine she would be at home with her own art studio room because her parents wanted her to pursue her dreams. She would probably have her hair tied up in a loose ponytail, painting a beautiful picture on a white canvas. Maybe she'd be like me riding on a bike except hers would be a sparkly blue unlike my electric green. She would be listening to a calm song with no thumping base, no electronic rhythm, just a simple melody for a simple girl. Maybe she'd be sitting in her kitchen, early morning sunlight hitting her face as she ate fresh strawberries.

Dark thoughts soon entered my mind, though. I could imagine her not if she was here but if she was in her actual situation. She would probably be wanting to scream but her voice was too tired and hoarse from days before, so instead she was choked up, hot tears running down her face one after the other. Or maybe her kidnappers would be beating her senseless,

knocking her upside the head as she so desperately tried to fight back. I didn't even want to think of the other options. I finally snapped out of my trance as I finally rode up to the parking lot of the building. I locked my bike in the rack and walked inside, and I enjoyed imagining that she was walking right next to me.

I was greeted by my best friend Andrew Avery. I knew him since we were kids back when everyone called him Battery because his name was Double A. We weren't all that clever back then. He was the complete opposite of me. If we were in a movie I would be the quiet, smart, adventurous type, and he's a total jock and he's still about as clever as he was 8 years ago when we came up with that stupid nickname. "Hey Crowley, how is it that you are the one 8th grader with a parentless house, and there is no party being planned? What's up dude, you scared no one's gonna' come, I got you." I laughed and shook my head. It was kind of our inside joke at this point because I wasn't about to throw a party no matter how often my house was empty of all authority figures, and secondly no amount of hooking up could make me any less invisible to the people outside of our circle. The girl was brought back to mind suddenly.

"Hey, Andrew, let's say you saw this girl right. She was beautiful like super hot," I started before he interrupted me. "Like as hot as Claire and her cronies, because man..." he trailed off because right on cue Claire and her aforementioned cronies walked by. Claire was tall with long legs, tan skin, and blonde hair. She wore makeup and short skirts and was always wearing sunglasses and on her rhinestone studded flip phone even indoors. Her cronies were all pretty but none truly beautiful. Instead I dumbed it down for the sake of my friend and said, "No, hotter." "Don't buy it, do you have a picture?" "No," I lied. "Anyways, let's say this chick was in some pretty bad trouble that no one could save her from, but there was just something about her. Would you try?" He looked around for a moment, possibly trying to break down all the parts of what I said, so I gave him a moment. "Yeah, I guess, if the chick is that special and that hot. But don't do anything stupid," he said. We walked into class and sat down.

Immediately after the homeroom teacher starting taking attendance I was already bored with her riddle of the day. I turned away from my backpack sitting on my desk for only a moment. She shot down my ask and told me to wait until break but then as I turned back I noticed that the big lump of dark blue fabric, almost bursting with books was gone. I searched around the room until I saw Andrew, Chris, and Luther with it, and they had a piece of paper. I walked over only to make it halfway and be accosted by them. "She's hot alright, Valerie, but really, you're hunting down a missing person that even the police haven't found in 4 months." "Yeah, Crowley, I thought you were supposed to be the smart one of the group." Luther said, shaking his head in a mocking disappointment. "I changed my mind. Don't chase it," Andrew said walking away laughing. They tossed my newspaper back at me and I caught it, kind of wishing that I hadn't said anything.

The day was more upbeat from there as I took the advice of my friends and just forgot about it. It was silly anyways, and I did, I forgot about it. The newspaper sat on the top of my dresser and was flipped away from Valerie's picture. I didn't think about her for 2 more days until my dad showed back up and they both were now on my mind.

My dad came back with a fresh shiny paycheck, and I told him everything that had happened while he was gone. When I told him about the serious numbers written on the bill and the ticket he just shrugged his shoulders and acted like it wasn't a problem. I guess he had enough money to pay them off. The only thing I didn't tell him about was Valerie. I figured he wouldn't understand. The truth has to come out at some point, as you know, and as fate would have it he found out about it. I guess he saw the newspaper on my desk or it was displayed somewhere else, but he was surprisingly taken with my unrealistic project.

Isn't it crazy. One person can just ignite a fire within you that'll push you to pursue your dreams. I wonder if before she was taken Valerie was pursuing her dreams. He wondered a lot about Valerie's life which surprisingly just made me want to find her. There was no way she could give me my answers if she was lost and not found. I was just finally glad I had an outlet to share my thoughts too, because if we are being completely honest I felt trapped just keeping them inside. My biggest fear for weeks on end was that I would never find her or worse if she just...left. Let's say left, because at the time my real thought was too terrifying to think about.

Me and my dad soon realized that just simply dreaming about an end result and waiting for it to happen, we had to take some initiative. We built a neighborhood lookout that would look every Wednesday. We went up to the police station every Saturday morning before the heat kicked up to ask about new information. Even though there was no new information on the capture of Valerie more people were hearing about our search and we even got a page in the news and were able to go live on the local news channel. It all felt like it was for no good reason because we still ended up empty handed each and every time. Before we knew it the April flowers began blooming and there were rain clouds slowly building up in the air like a bridge from April to May. The time was passing us by and we began pulling out our last stops, gathering whatever spare change we could and sent it to the printing press. We got new stacks of flyers each week coming in groups of 75. All we could do was hang them up around town and wait.

Finally the first week of May came around as well as the last group of flyers. My dad had a big 8 hour business trip to go to so I was forced to hang up the last set of flyers on the dirty side of town. I'm not even sure if he realized he was sending me into the area of scoundrels and bars, but I did it none the less for Valerie. I didn't find her bit I did find something equally as shocking and life-altering.

I was stapling these flyers with her gorgeous face on it to wooden posts outside of the bar when I heard what sounded like my father's voice. I was sure it was nothing, so I ignored it. I was probably just hearing things but then I heard it again. I began scanning all around me

looking for where his voice was coming from, he was supposed to be in a meeting about an hour away, so he shouldn't have been there, but I saw him. He was standing on the other end of the bar, shaking a canister and holding friendly conversation with patrons. So he wasn't a businessman, but his job did start with "B". Bartender.

I wasn't mad because he was working a low-class job instead of the middle class one he claimed to work, it still put food on the table, clothes on my back, and made sure the water ran. His efforts were even more impressive being that he was sacrificing so much of his own happiness for me probably. I came to the realization that he didn't just like those same 5 suits, he probably only had them. I wasn't mad about the job itself, I was mad that he lied.

I marched into the bar. When the door opened everyone looked back, perched eyebrows as if to say, "Kid, what are you doing in here? You lost or something?" One of the people sitting at the bar, a big glass of beer as his companion finally slurred, "Kid, you can't be in here." My dad finally turned around to see if anyone wanted anything, and he saw me. "Wait a minute Lonnie, that's my kid." The burly and wasted man simply shrugged his shoulders and turned back around to finish his drink. My dad began to walk towards me and I couldn't contain my anger. "What in the world, Dad. This isn't a business meeting, this is barely a business!" he looked shocked and opened his mouth to say something, but I didn't let him get the word out. I shook his large hands off of my shoulders and began running.

I didn't go home though. I went somewhere else.

Every once and awhile, when it was after school and I had spare time or had been having a rough day I would go to a small hut I built on what could've easily been the edge of the world. I remember, it was the day my mother and father starting arguing, I didn't know what they were arguing about, maybe money, but I needed to get out of there. I was riding my bike on the trail before I lost control and veered off into the forest. There was a clearing there, surrounded by trees and flowers. My imagination began running wild when I was in the clearing and I decided to begin working on it. I saved up every penny of my allowance, didn't buy as much candy at the stand outside of school, anything I could so I could get wood, and nails, and paint. I borrowed my dad's tool box and went out there everyday of the spring and summer until it was finished. It became my fortress, my sanctuary. I went there when my mother left, when I found out she was getting married, when I was struggling in class, when Troy and his goonies went after me, and when nobody understood. That's where I went every time I needed an escape, and that's where I went today.

I found the clearing in the forest where my hut stood the name Crowley's Cave painted in red paint on the front. I walked inside and crashed against the wall, it felt like I couldn't breathe. I didn't understand why I was so angry. There were a thousand justifiable reasons why I should be upset. I thought he was a businessman, he never specifically stated what he did in the office, all I knew was that he worked long hours and went on business trips. I just assumed

that he spent his time crunching numbers or taking calls. I didn't think he was pouring drinks and taking orders. What did he do on those "business trips" if he was only a bartender. He would leave for 3 to 5 days at a time almost every month or two, was he getting drunk, or just wanting to get away? I had felt a bit of hatred for my mom lately and her new special life. I didn't hate her, just that she left. I only saw her once or twice a year, and I missed her, but she moved on quick. It had only been a year and a half before she got remarried, I bet they were planning on giving me a step-sibling too. I didn't get why she left, and I thought she was in the wrong, but maybe she was right. Did he not try to get a job, was he just not dedicated, did he not care about our well-being. If I were my mom, I would have probably left him too, is all I was thinking.

My eyes were tearing up with tears of sadness, my head was swirling with thoughts of confusion, my cheeks were red with frustration. Through my bleary eyes and my unclear head I saw something though. In the corner there was a lot of blood. At first I mistook it for red paint, but the stain hadn't been there until now. I walked over to it cautiously and found short strands of chestnut brown hair over there too. The first thing that came to my mind was her. That was the chestnut color of her hair. There was blood there too. Had she been in Crowley Cave? Is that where her captures were hiding her? I walked outside cautiously, making sure that no one was out there. There, unfortunately, my suspicions were proved wrong.

On the side of the hut, slapped against the wood was another blot of blood on the bottom there and another collection of longer strands of brown hair. I began to pull out my phone and snap pictures for evidence, checking on all sides, but that's where I found what really happened. Some forest dweller killed a poor chestnut brown rabbit. I could vividly imagine what happened. Some hunter or wolf killed the rabbit inside of the hut and slammed it against the wall, then dragged it outside without letting it touch the ground and probably got weak and slammed it against the wall outside, more hair dropping from it. Maybe it didn't really want the rabbit, maybe it was dirty, maybe whatever attacked it was alarmed by something, got scared, and ran away. Anyways, I hit a wall, a dead end, and was now disgusted and kind of ready to go home and talk to my dad now but he didn't show up. The rest of the day and even through the night he was gone.

All night I was up stressing out. Where was he? Did he leave me? Would he really leave me? I hopped in the shower letting the hot water stream down my face and my hair relaxing me from a stressful day, and it also opened my eyes. I was being selfish, at least he was trying. He loved my mom so much and I decided to try and give him the benefit of the doubt, but I just wanted him to come back. What if he wasn't safe? I layed down in my bed staring up at my ceiling illuminated by the light of the television. I couldn't help but wonder where he was, what he was doing, why he wasn't home. The thoughts were spinning in my head making me dizzy and restless. Every once in a while the thoughts would get dark. What if the kidnappers who got Valerie thought we were getting too close to finding them and killed him? What if he got lost and couldn't find his way home? What if he had enough with me and decided to leave the same

as my mother did? The tears wouldn't stop trying to flood out of my eyes and everytime they did I stared into the light and tried to have hope and be strong. My thoughts finally stopped spinning and I finally was able to close my eyes and fall asleep, so I slept.

When I woke up it wasn't on my own merit though. I woke up to the sunlight shining through my window. I flipped open my phone and the time read 12:40. Not long after I got up and splashed my face with cold water there was a booming pattern of knocks on my front door. I paused and was frozen for a moment. Bang Bang. Bang. Bang. The booming noise rang out again. I ran to my room and grabbed my bat out of my closet. I swung it backwards at the ready just in case I would need to swing at somebody. I crept down the stairs slowly, bat at the ready, and opened the front door. Then, my bat dropped.

My dad and my stepdad were standing there. My father's eyes were halfway closed with dark circles underneath. His hair was messy, his body looked limp and weak, and my stepfather was basically carrying him. I dropped my bat, ran, and gave my father a big hug. All thoughts of anger disappeared from my mind. I was just glad he was safe. They walked inside as I shut the door behind them. My dad sunk into his chair in the living room. My step dad walked in and said "Hey, Little Man." I looked at him because he knew I didn't like him and that I was fourteen. When the silence got too awkward he finally said, "I found him in our yard last night clearly drunk. He was going on and on about how he was a disappointment and his son hated him. He's a little more sober now but he still needs some water and some medicine." I nodded my head and told him that I would get some. He left and I gave my dad another big hug. "Lukey," he said in a slurred voice. "Hey, dad, I'll be right back, I'm gonna get you some medicine. Stay here." I walked out the door and hopped on my green bike. Little did I know that I would be getting something, but it wasn't medicine.

I was riding my bike down the same trail that I usually went down to get to Crowley's Cave seeing as it was the same route to the pharmacy but then I heard something quite strange. I heard screaming and wailing. I rolled to a slow halt and listened once more for the noise. I began walking towards it cautiously thinking that it was nothing more than a wounded animal. That didn't mean I couldn't save it. But I didn't want to be hurt by whatever wounded it either. The closer I got the more humane the noises sounded. I knew it was a human and I knew they were in pain simply because of the horrible screams. I walked towards it slowly until I realized that it was only that one person who was there, and they were in Crowley's Cave. I began running towards it and looked through the window. Big blue eyes filled with tears, bruised skin with dried blood, a demure nose, hallowed out, rosy cheeks, plump lips, and a splatter or freckles each dotted with blood along the right side of her face. She looked scared and rough, but still beautiful. I knew exactly who she was. She was the girl who I had been working to look for 2 months. I found Valerie.

I walked into the hut and reached out to touch her face. She retracted back scaredly, so I dropped my hand. "Valerie?" I asked quietly. "Y-Y-Yes," she stuttered in a weakened and exhausted voice. "Where are they?" "They left like they always do, they've gone hunting, please hurry."

I never thought that I could possibly move as fast as I did to save her. I untied the rope ties around her wrists and ankles that were strapped to the chair. Once the rope was removed I could see just the damage it had done. Her skin was pale and that's because it had been cutting off her circulation. There were deep red lines that caused her to wince in pain whenever they were touched. I tried to get her to walk but she fell down immediately, collapsing onto the floor, tears streaming down her face. She got up and tried to walk but the pain was too great. I scooped her up in my arms and carried her. She wasn't heavy at all, in fact she didn't feel like she weighed 97 pounds, they must've not been feeding her much at all.

The police office was half an hour away but I jogged as fast as I could that whole time. Eventually Valerie fell asleep in my arms, snoring softly. She had been through a rough time. The circles under her eyes were almost black, there was dried up blood across her face, her kidnappers must've poked her freckles in some sick fetish like manner. I couldn't imagine what she had been to. Soon, faster than I thought, we were at the police station. I walked inside and every single person turned my way. A cop ran over to me and said "Sir, I need to speak with you."

I began talking a mile a minute telling him that I found her like that, where I found her, who she was, about the search we put out for her, and he was nodding and taking notes the entire time. He didn't say anything, he just took my hand and shook it. They woke Valerie up and took her to get a check up and food and something to drink. She came back out looking so much better. Her hair was much shorter than it was in the picture but was now cut evenly, only reaching her shoulders. There were a few gray strands sprinkled amongst it, most likely from stress. Imagine how crazy and stressed anyone would become being held in such a horrible situation for months but still forcing themselves to persevere. Her eyes were still scared but more calm and tired. The dried up blood was wiped off her face, scars bandaged, and she looked healthier. Still hollow but less helpless.

Her parents eventually came teary eyed, crying tears of relief and joy. They gave her big, but careful hugs as if they were afraid to break her. They walked over to me and stood there for a moment and then gave me a big hug as if they knew me. "Thank you so much, thank you for finding our Valerie."

Everything about Valerie's capture would soon come out though. She used to visit this park a lot and get ice cream from ice cream trucks. Everytime she ordered a new thing with her parents or her friends. Little did she know that the two men who worked in there sometimes were watching her. They had soon become obsessed with her. When she was in the room after

they kidnapped her they often talked about the way she walked, or how she looked, or how she laughed. She didn't know that any of this was happening and the only thing that stopped her from being kidnapped before was the fact that she was always with someone else. She was just riding her bike to the park one day and had stopped for just a moment because she thought she heard something. That's when they rolled up, put a bag over her head and scooped her up. They took her to the forest and they often moved around to different parts, until they eventually set up shop in Crowley Cave. They kept her stuck in there while they went hunting. They killed rabbit and forced her to cook it and they only fed her what they didn't want. Sometimes for days on end, they wouldn't even bother with feeding her. She didn't just stay dormant she tried to escape at first but they caught her and that's when they started beating her. It became a habit and they beat her often. Everytime she tried to talk, or fight back, or took to long to do something. She wasn't allowed to sleep and eventually she gave up trying. She thought she was going to die, until we started looking for her. That gave her hope, so she tried. She tried and tried until I found her.

I became her friend, her guide back into the world and I was always there for her. We stopped talking every once in a while, she hated me sometimes, and sometimes I hated her too, but I was always there for her. She had to go to therapy learning how to overcome her PTSD and anxiety and depression. She had to go on a specific diet to get to a healthy weight. She had to learn how to walk and do certain things again. She spoke at conventions and even wrote a book about her time.

At first she didn't like me in that way. At first she didn't even know how to like someone. I didn't like her that much anymore either. She was nothing like I had expected. She wasn't an artist but a dancer and she was legitimately rich. They even contributed to my dad's business which is what he was saving up for through his bartending. She was mean, trying to avoid being hurt again, and her confidence was shaken now. She was just as beautiful but she sometimes she felt like the stranger she was. So we stayed friends for another decade. I watched my dad start opening his own hotel and get remarried to a woman named Jillian. I hung out with my step-sister Cheryl Rye. I got many girlfriends and even fell in love with one of them. It took a while before we really got to know each other but when we were 25 we finally realized that we were in love with each other. We had known each other and had went through the good and bad together so we didn't hesitate to get married 2 years later because both of us knew how short life was. I watched both me and Val become successful because of our story and then when that faded out we became successful in our own ways. I became a police officer and she became a public speaker and ran a dance studio. We had 2 kids, Elaine and Dayna and watched them grow up. Elaine became an astronaut working for Nasa and Dayna became a singer. We watched them get married and have kids of their own. Elaine had Chris, Spencer, and Lucille, and Dayna had Selena and Alex.

We grew old together, but as things go, good can't stay forever. Valerie was diagnosed with early onset alzheimers and began fading away at 61 and was completely gone by 65. She

wanted to remember so I read to her everyday. She passed away about 2 years ago. I miss her so much. This is for Valerie Cahalen, the girl on the front page.