

*Behind Blue Eyes*  
*By William Woodall*

*Chapter One*

They caught me on a night when the moon was full, just like I always knew they would.

It was late September, and if you took a deep breath you could catch the first taste of fall in the air. I love that time of year, and that's why I went down to the lake that night to toss pebbles in the water and watch the ripples wash the shore. Justin and Eileen were at a conference in Houston, so I had the whole place to myself for the weekend.

Maybe I should have known better than to go traipsing down there alone on a full moon night, but it had been a long time since I ran away from home, almost two years in fact, and I guess I was starting to get careless. Besides that, I wasn't expecting anything to happen right there in my own back yard.

Not till the dude grabbed me, anyway.

Without a snarl or a growl, or even so much as a crunch of dead leaves under his feet to give me any warning, somebody snatched me from behind and slapped his hairy paw across my mouth to keep me from yelling.

Oh, I fought like a tiger on crack, but it didn't do me any good. I had one arm free and I used it to yank loose the silver cross I always wore around my neck for just such an emergency. It was made with a sharp point at each end, and as soon as I got hold of it I swung my hand up and nailed the dude right on the forearm. You might not think it sounds like much of a weapon, but for me a sharp piece of silver was better than all the guns and knives in the world.

The man cursed, and I think he almost let go of me for a second. I felt his hold loosen up just a little bit, but not quite enough for me to break free. Instead I felt a sharp little prickle in my side where his other arm was wrapped around me, right under my ribs. At first I thought it was a knife, but then I found out later it was a shot of horse tranquilizer.

I had time to be surprised that the silver hadn't done anything to the man, and I remember wondering what went wrong. Then everything went black.

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I woke up with a pounding headache inside a dark stuffy place that smelled like wet dirt. I wasn't thinking too clearly yet, and the first thing that crossed my mind was that I was inside a coffin. That was such a horrible idea that I screamed, or at least I tried to. That's when I found out my mouth was covered with duct tape.

My hands and feet were taped up, too, and that's an awfully scary way to wake up, if you've never tried it. For a little while, terror threatened to drown out everything.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down, though. I might be packed like a sardine in a can, but I was still alive and I didn't seem to be hurt except for the headache. My hands were taped together at the wrists, but I could still move my arms. I reached up and felt the ceiling, which was no more than a foot above my face. It felt like cardboard, and there was enough give that I could tell it wasn't a coffin at least. Not that I've ever actually been inside a coffin before, you know. . . but I was willing to bet they didn't make them out of cardboard. Nobody is *that* cheap and tacky.

That did wonders for my nerves, and I started to explore the situation a little better. The first step to getting yourself out of a pinch is to find out exactly what you're up against.

Whoever taped me up must have been in a hurry, because they were awfully careless about it. If they'd thought to tape my arms down to my sides then I probably would have been out of luck, but as it was I had some wiggle room. I brought my hands up to my face and pulled the tape off my mouth first, and then I started gnawing on the strip around my wrists.

Duct tape glue is really nasty, just in case you ever wondered. I wouldn't advise chewing on it unless you absolutely have to. It gets stuck in between your teeth and I think they must flavor it with dirty motor oil, the way it tastes. I felt like gagging.

It took me a good long time to chew my hands free. The tape tore hair off my wrists when I pulled it loose and I gritted my teeth from the pain. I didn't dare make noise, though, so I had to pull slowly even though it made it hurt more.

As soon as I could, I felt in my right jeans pocket where my cell phone should be. It was still there, so I flipped it open and used the backlight from the screen to look around. I was definitely inside a cardboard box, just like I thought; one that was barely big enough to hold me. There was some half-dried red clay mud on the walls down close to my feet, which must have been where the wet dirt smell had been coming from.

I tried to call Justin or Eileen, but all I got was a “call failed” message. Wherever I was, there was no cell service. I didn’t waste time crying over it, though; I just closed the phone and slipped it back in my pocket. I didn’t want to run the battery down when I might need it later.

As it turned out, I still had my pocketknife and my billfold and all my other stuff, too. The only thing missing was the silver cross from around my neck, and I might have dropped that on the ground when the man knocked me out. I felt almost naked without it.

I strained my ears to hear the slightest noise, but it was quieter than a cave in there. No engine or traffic sounds, no machinery, no voices, nothing.

I finally decided it was stupid to wait around for the man with the hairy hands to come back and find me. I had to get out of that box.

I pushed up with my palms, but the lid would only move a little bit before it stopped firmly. It was probably taped shut on the outside or some such thing, but I was ready for that.

I opened the little blade on my knife and stuck it into the side of the box way up high, and then sliced down in one smooth cut. You should never let your knife get dull, you know. You can never be sure when you might need it. You might never get trapped inside a cardboard box, but then again you never know. Just a few hours ago I never would have seen it coming myself. I always sharpened both blades at least once a week, and right then I was glad I did. I made two more quick cuts and then knocked out a piece of cardboard about twelve inches square.

The first thing I saw when I got the hole open was a spare tire lying flat on some dirty gray carpet, and the back of a leather car seat. I couldn’t see much more than that because of the angle.

There was darned little room to move around inside that box, and I had to struggle a while and nearly scraped an ear off on the edge of the hole, but eventually I was able to push my head out to get a better look around. I was in the back cargo hold of a Bronco or a Blazer or something like that. The box I was in was tied up with plastic cords, just like I thought. Good enough.

I quickly sliced another cut in the box to make the hole bigger, and then wormed the rest of my body out.

The windows were tinted really dark, but it was daylight outside and I could see well enough. There wasn’t much out there except a dirt road lined with thick pine trees behind me, and in front there was what looked like a deer camp. There were five or six cinder

block buildings of pretty good size, and two other cars parked not far away. I was close enough to the nearest building to see dew still glistening and steaming on the metal roof, so it couldn't be very late yet. There was nobody in sight, but I knew better than to hang around. Somebody might show up any second.

I checked real quick to make sure there were no keys in the car. I knew that was probably too much to expect, but you never know. People are careless sometimes.

Oh, I don't really have my license yet, by the way, but I do know how to drive when I need to. Justin lets me drive the truck now and then on back roads where there's no traffic. I'd never tried to drive anything alone yet, but I figured this was an emergency and nobody would blame me for doing whatever I had to do.

No keys, though, so I gave up on the idea of driving away. Instead, I eased open the back hatch of the Blazer just enough to slither out, and then shut it again as quiet as a whisper. If I had to walk then that's what I'd do.

I was barefooted and that complicated things, but I knew I couldn't stay on the road. That was the first place they'd look when they found me gone. I wasn't thrilled with the idea of walking through the briars and rocks with no shoes on, but it looked like I didn't have much choice. So I took a deep breath and trotted off into the woods as fast as my feet could take me.

I didn't think anybody had seen me, but of course I couldn't be sure. For the next hour or so I didn't slow down for a second, even though I never heard anybody coming after me. I knew enough to head straight toward the sun so I wouldn't start walking in circles. I didn't want to run around all day and then end up right back at the camp again. Following the sun would keep me going in a straight line, at least. But as for where in the world I was, that was a whole 'nother question.

I checked now and then to see if my phone had service yet, but it never did.

The land was really steep and rocky in places, and that slowed me down. You can't climb as fast as you can walk, and the rocks were hard on my bare feet, just like I knew they would be.

After a while I came to a rocky stream, and I stopped to wash my sweaty face and take a drink. It looked like it was going to be another bull-roaster kind of day. September is like that now and then. . . it can still be hotter than a hen in a wool sweater, some days. I couldn't help wishing this hadn't been one of those times, but there was

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nothing I could do about it. In the meantime the creek was clear and cold, and the water tasted delicious to a boy who was almost dying of thirst by then. I splashed some of it on the back of my neck and my arms, and then I sat down on a big gray boulder and dangled my sore feet in the current. It felt so good I didn't want to get up.

But I knew I wasn't out of danger yet, and I didn't dare just sit and wait for Hairy Paws to come scoop me up. If he was a good enough tracker or if he had dogs then he could probably still follow my trail through the woods and catch me. I wasn't sure about that, and when you don't know then you don't take chances.

The little creek flowed somewhere off to the south, and I decided to follow it for a while. If you're lost in the woods, that's almost always a good idea. A flowing stream will usually lead you to people sooner or later. It also keeps you from getting lost and gives you water to drink, and you don't leave any trail or any scent to follow.

Daddy taught me all those things, back when we still used to talk about stuff sometimes, and for just a second I was grateful to him for that. Then I remembered he probably only did it to make me a better werewolf someday, and that wrecked the whole thing and left a sour taste in my mouth and for a while I almost hated him.

Justin would have told me to let it go and love him for whatever good there was in him, but that's hard, you know. It's easy to get bitter when somebody does you so much wrong, and every time I thought I was over it, little things like that kept reminding me at the weirdest times.

I decided not to think about it right then.

I slogged down the creek for several hours, and watched it get gradually bigger. The land was awfully mountainous, and I'm not sure how I could ever have made my way through if I hadn't had the stream. There were lots of little waterfalls about three or four feet high, but I could jump over those if I was careful. It was hot work doing all that hiking, and those occasional dunks kept me cool. I was hungry enough to gnaw the bark off the trees, but there was nothing I could do about that.

After a while, I came to a bridge.

Well, sort of. It was just a little foot bridge that crossed over the creek, and there were some picnic tables and a sidewalk on the left bank. It looked like a little park or some such thing, but there wasn't a soul to be seen.

Somebody had mowed the grass around the picnic tables not more than two or three days ago, and there was a Styrofoam cup still

sitting on one of them, still half full of somebody's old coffee. When I nosed around a bit more I found a parking area, and then a dirt road that led away from it.

For a while I couldn't make up my mind whether to take a chance on the road or to keep following the creek a little farther downstream. The coffee cup and the mowed grass made me think this was a place where people visited fairly often, so after a lot of thinking I decided maybe the road would be a better choice.

Before I left the campground or park or whatever it was, I scrounged an empty plastic Coke bottle from the trash can and rinsed it out several times before filling it up at the creek. I knew I'd get thirsty and there was no telling the next time I'd come across any water.

It wasn't all that long before the road came to a T-junction, and there was a sign posted. The left arrow said Hwy 8 - 5 miles, and the right arrow said something about a lake. I don't remember exactly, because as soon as I saw that highway sign I didn't care what might be in the other direction. I turned left.

The sign forgot to mention that the road ran steeply uphill most of the way, but I can promise you I noticed. It took me about three or four hours, but eventually I did make it to the highway with no particular trouble, except for my feet. They were killing me by then from walking barefoot on those gravel roads. They eat up your skin like sandpaper.

When I got to the highway there was no sign to tell me which way to go, so I shrugged and went east. It kept the sun out of my face, and I figured that was as good a reason as any.

I felt pretty good about things at that point. It seemed like the worst was behind me. I was tired and hungry and uncomfortable in other ways, but that was okay. I could probably thumb a ride to the nearest town, and then I could call Justin and have him come get me. And in the meantime while I waited for him to get there, I still had nineteen dollars in my pocket. I was looking forward to a nice juicy cheeseburger. It's amazing how delicious food is when you haven't eaten in a while.

So I stuck out my thumb whenever I heard a car coming, and waited for somebody to pick me up. Hitchhiking is kind of a chancy business, you know. You can never be sure who might stop, and there are some very strange people in the world to say the least. But right then I was ready to make friends with just about anybody.

That highway might have been built on the moon for all the cars I saw, but no matter how far out in the woods it is, every road has

at least a little traffic. Two or three cars blew right past me without stopping, which is about what I expected. But after a while, a green Mustang with Alabama plates pulled over not far in front of me.

I hobbled up as fast as I could on my sore feet, and opened the door and sat down. The air conditioner was running, and the cold air inside felt wonderful. It was a girl driving, which sort of surprised me. Girls don't usually stop for anybody, but maybe she thought I was young enough to be harmless.

"You look like you could use a ride," she said with a smile.

"Yeah, I just need to get to the nearest store," I told her.

"Sure thing," she agreed. She had long blonde hair and she couldn't possibly have been more than twenty. I laid my head back on the seat and pretended to close my eyes since I didn't really want to talk, but she was so pretty I couldn't help watching her out of the slit of my left eye. She reminded me of someone I might have seen before, but I couldn't think who or where. It niggled at my mind like a gnat, till I finally decided it wasn't important.

A few miles down the road we went around a sharp curve, and she put both hands on the steering wheel to turn it. That's when I noticed what long, beautiful fingernails she had. Long, beautiful, *sharp* fingernails, perfectly manicured. Almost like claws, in fact. That's when I knew her for what she was.

My heart almost stopped, and I'm sure it came right up in my throat. I swear I could feel it sitting there on the back of my tongue. I don't think I could have said a word if my life depended on it.

I didn't let on. I kept pretending to rest while I thought desperately of how to get myself out of the hole I'd stepped into.

It was just barely possible that she didn't know who I was or have anything to do with me, of course. I knew how unlikely that was even while I was thinking it, but hope will make you grasp at straws and make a fool out of you if you're not careful. I knew I'd be crazy to believe she had nothing to do with me. That was way too much of a coincidence.

On the other hand, I was fairly sure she didn't realize (yet) that I knew she was a werewolf, and that gave me one slim advantage. She wouldn't be on her guard quite so much.

On the third hand, if she was specifically looking for me, there was no way she'd really take me to a store and drop me off, or even let me out of the car. Not unless I did some really smooth talking between now and then. I got a firm handle on my voice (I hoped) and opened my eyes with a fake yawn.

“So what’s a pretty girl like you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?” I asked her with a smile. Eileen always tells me what a cute boy I am and what beautiful blue eyes I have, and I always used to laugh it off when she said such things, but if there was any chance it could help me then I was willing to give it a shot. Girls like all that flirty stuff for some reason, and I was betting this one was no different. She laughed a little.

“Oh, I’m just here with my family on vacation. Mom sent me to the store to get some ice and things,” she said. It sounded reasonable, even though I didn’t believe it for a second.

“You’re from Alabama?” I asked.

“Yeah, Huntsville. Guess you saw my tags, huh?” she asked.

“Yeah, I did. Uh, so you’re just going to the nearest store, then?” I asked, like I didn’t care much.

“Yeah, but that’s in Glenwood. The store in Norman doesn’t have Cherry Dr. Pepper, and Mom won’t drink anything else,” she said glibly. I pounced on that.

“Would you mind very much if I rode to Glenwood with you? I know it’s a lot to ask, but I’d really appreciate it,” I said. I had to play things real carefully so I didn’t make her suspicious. I wanted her to think she had me fooled. She probably wouldn’t attack me as long as I wasn’t putting up a struggle. It was a lot easier for her if I went along willingly as long as possible. The gloves would only come off when I tried to get away from her.

“Sure, I guess,” she shrugged, “it’s only a few extra miles.”

“Thanks a lot. It’s not every day you run into a girl as awesome as you,” I told her, and smiled my best smile again. I was in danger of overdoing it, but all I can say is that I wasn’t at my best at the time. Sitting next to somebody who could rip you to shreds with her bare hands makes it hard to think straight, believe it or not. The girl didn’t seem to notice, though. She just laughed again.

“Yeah, that’s what my boyfriend tells me all the time,” she said. That’s what I was expecting her to say, so I had that one covered.

“Well, dang. Lucky guy,” I said, snapping my fingers. She smiled.

“Thanks anyway, honey. It was a sweet thing to say,” she told me. I was pretty sure I had her fooled at that point, so I didn’t push it any more.

Not long after that, we started passing a few houses and things, and it didn’t look quite so deserted as it did before. We came to a junction and turned right, and I saw a gas station up ahead a few

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blocks. That's what I'd been waiting for, and it was time to make it or break it. I crossed my fingers and prayed for it to work.

### *Chapter Two*

"Hey, could we make a pit stop at that gas station for just a second? I'm starving," I asked her. She didn't look really happy with that idea, but as long as we were still playing the game it was hard for her to say no. She tried, though.

"Do you think it could wait till we get to Glenwood?" she asked reluctantly.

"Well, see. . . if I don't eat then I get car sick really bad. I promise it won't take but a minute," I squeaked, doing my best to look as sick as possible. That almost always works, and this girl was no exception. Her eyes opened wide and she pulled over in front of the gas station right away. Nobody likes to get vomit in their car.

I opened the car door and walked into the station, which had a hole in the wall convenience store on one side. As soon as I was sure the girl couldn't see me, I took out my cell phone and tried to call Justin again, only to find that I still didn't have any service. I texted him instead just on the off chance that he might get it later.

I bought a Coke and some Cool Ranch Doritos since I really *was* dying of hunger, and when I paid for them I brought up the subject with the clerk.

"Uh, can I use the phone, ma'am? It's really important," I asked her.

"Is it a local call?" she asked. I knew that was coming.

"No, but I'm willing to pay for it. I'll give you five bucks," I said, pulling out the cash. The sight of money has a wonderful way of motivating people sometimes.

"Well, you can use mine if you want to, but keep it short if you can," she told me, handing me her cell phone. I noticed she used a different company than mine, but that was okay. That was probably why she had service and I didn't. I called Justin as fast as I could push the buttons.

All I got was his voicemail, but that didn't surprise me much. He was still at that dadgummed conference, and he'd probably be in and out of seminars where he couldn't get to his phone all day long. I left him a message saying I was at a gas station in Norman, Arkansas, and asked him to come get me. I couldn't say much more than that, not with the clerk standing right there in front of me. She'd think I was

loony. I figured Justin was smart enough to fill in the blanks well enough, anyway. He'd know if I asked him to come all the way from Houston to pick me up, there'd have to be a really good reason for it. I told him to hurry as fast as he could and I'd call him back later when I had a chance to. Then I gave the girl back her phone and the five dollars.

I got one other thing while I was there, too. They had a rack of souvenir items against the wall, and amongst the postcards and shot glasses and assorted trinkets, I found something better than I dared hope for: a set of red heart-shaped ear rings with a ceramic bass in the center. I guess they were supposed to mean "*I love bass fishing*" or something like that. They were perfect!

No, I do *not* wear them, but the reason I wanted them was because they had sterling silver posts. It said so, right there on the label. They were \$8.95 and that just about cleaned me out, but it was well worth it. Now I had a powerful weapon to use.

There was a garage attached to the store where they changed tires and things like that, so I went that way and walked out the back of the building so the girl in the car wouldn't see me leave. I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to use the back door, but nobody said anything.

As soon as I got outside I hurried away, being sure to keep the gas station between me and the Mustang for as long as I could. While I walked I tore the ear rings open and dropped the extra one in my pocket while I held the other one in my hand. I wanted to be ready to defend myself if I had to.

I quickly found out there aren't too many places to hide in Norman, and I started to get a little scared again. I didn't dare stay out in the open for too long. Before very much longer Blondie would figure out I'd slipped the noose, and then she'd be after me. She'd probably be furious, too, and there'd be no fooling her next time if she caught me again.

I spied a bridge over a little river and made a beeline for that, walking as fast as I could without running. If you start to run then people get curious, and I didn't want anybody to remember seeing me.

I made it to the bridge in double quick time, and ducked underneath it after glancing around to make sure nobody was watching. There were a lot of big gray rocks under there and a little bit of sandy beach down next to the water, so it wasn't too bad of a place to hole up for a while. I climbed way up near the top where it was harder for anybody to see me, and there I sat.

I tore into the chips and the coke while I had time, and I don't think anything ever tasted so good.

Hiding under a bridge like a troll in a fairy tale was not the best plan in the world, I have to admit, but it was the only thing I could think of right then.

Now and then I heard cars passing by on the bridge over my head. They made the whole bridge shake and rattle around me like it was about to fall apart any second, but none of them stopped. The girl in the green car must have figured out I'd flown the coop by then, and I was willing to bet she was hot on my heels. Others too, most likely. Back up on the roads was the last place on earth I needed to be.

I moved downhill a little bit so the bridge didn't make so much noise when cars went by, and then I sat there tossing pebbles into the water for a while and thinking about what I should do. The river was clear and blue, gurgling and splashing over gravel bars and rocks, but it was no more than about waist deep. It was hot even in the shade, and the water looked inviting to say the least. I wished it was just an ordinary day and I could jump in for a swim.

I noticed an old river tube caught in the debris under the bridge stanchions, and that gave me an idea. There was *one* way I could get far away without being seen on the roads, if I could make it work.

I picked my way down to the bank, then waded out there to look at the tube a little closer. Sure enough, it had a hole in it about the size of a pencil, but it seemed otherwise okay. A holey tube won't do you much good for long, but it might work just long enough to save my bacon, if I played my cards right.

I stuck my left thumb in the hole to plug it, then started to blow up the tube with my mouth. I left it a little bit loose and flabby on purpose so there would be less chance of leaking, and waited a minute to see whether it held air. It seemed to be holding steady for the moment at least, and I decided to risk it. If it blew out on me later, I could always swim if I had to.

The water was shallow enough that I could climb into the tube without too much trouble, so I clumsily got into the seat while trying to leave my thumb plugging the hole. It wasn't easy to twist myself around and find a comfortable spot, but I finally managed it. Then I paddled out into the current as best I could with one hand. Before long the stream grabbed me, and away I went at a pretty good clip.

Floating a river is fun, if you've never tried it. I'd done it lots of times with Justin and Eileen. Not usually in a leaky tube, to be sure, but as long as it held air I was okay with it. The late afternoon sun

sparkled off the water, which was just a tad bit chilly but not too cold to handle. If it had been very much later in the year I wouldn't have been able to stand it, but as it was I didn't mind so much.

I wrapped up my phone in the empty Doritos bag from the gas station, rolling it up as tight as I could to keep it from getting wet. I could brush the chip crumbs off later, but phones don't handle water too well.

I thought I knew where I was, now. I'd been to Norman once before to go digging for quartz crystals and to float this very river for a few miles. At least I thought it was the same river. It had been a year or so ago, but the more I thought about it the more certain I was. I was maybe a hundred miles or so from home. I just needed to head south, and that's the way the river would take me anyway for now.

The Caddo River doesn't really have what you'd call whitewater, exactly. Just a few little riffles and such, not enough to even pay attention to. I remembered that much. I'd been in a canoe the last time I was here, but it shouldn't make much difference. I had to keep an eye out for logs and rocks and willow strainers, and that's about it. With a bit of luck, it would carry me all the way to Glenwood.

I'd have to get out of the water there and start watching my back again. The river didn't go much farther before it fed into Lake Degray, and then there wouldn't be any current to carry me anymore. So, Glenwood it would have to be.

Blondie probably didn't have a clue where I was right that minute, but she might very well guess where I was headed, especially since it was the only close town. She surely knew where I lived, and she probably also knew there was no other way for me to get there except by going through Glenwood. Not without going forty or fifty miles out of the way, and I didn't have time or money for that. There were mountains all around, and the river and the highway followed the one and only gap through them. She'd be watching that place like a hawk on a mouse-hole.

But for the meantime I was safe from prying eyes, so I relaxed and laid my head back on the tube and closed my eyes. I knew better than to go to sleep, but I wanted to think.

Who were these people that seemed so bent on catching me, and what did they want? I knew the girl was a werewolf; her fingernails gave that away, and it was hard for me to believe she wasn't connected with the people at the deer camp. But on the other hand, why hadn't my silver cross done anything to the man who caught me in my own back yard? That made me wonder if maybe he *wasn't* one.

But if not, then why was he helping them? And again, what did they want with me?

That's the one thing I kept coming back to. Why me? And why now? I had wolves in my family, sure, but I hadn't seen or talked to them in two years. No one had ever bothered Justin just because his sister was a *loup-garou*, so why should it matter if my parents were? What did they want?

Try as I might, there was no way I could figure that one out. Not unless I found out more, and I didn't know any way of doing that right now.

The river gurgled and whispered to itself, and the quiet and the solitude were starting to make me sleepy. I raised my head to shake loose the cobwebs; it would never do to fall asleep in the tube and then hit a log or a rock and get dumped in the river with no warning a split second after waking up. That was a good way to lose my tube in the current or even drown.

The rest of the afternoon passed without too much to say about it. The banks glided by smoothly and swiftly, and the occasional riffle was no trouble. Every now and then I had to blow some more air into the tube when it got too flabby. I almost got tangled up in a willow strainer once, at a place where the current passed close to the bank and tried to pull me right under a thicket of low-hanging branches. I had to paddle hard with my right hand to keep from getting sucked in there.

After a few hours I passed a place where the bank had been turned into a parking lot, and I felt the water turn suddenly warm around me right through there, which startled me. I guess there was a hot spring under the water or some such thing. It felt nice, but after I passed through it and got back into the ordinary water it only reminded me how cold I was. I thought again about how it was really too late in the year to be floating like this.

There were some people lounging around on the tailgate of a red pickup truck in the parking lot, and they seemed to think it was way too cold to be out there on the river, too.

"You're gonna freeze your butt off, boy!" they called out cheerfully. They meant well, so I didn't take offense.

"Nah, I'm all good!" I yelled back, just as cheerfully. They laughed and waved me off. I didn't mind the conversation so much, but what did make me uneasy was that I could see the highway the whole time I was in that little area. Anybody driving by could have seen me on the river just by turning their head.

That didn't happen, though, and it wasn't more than a few minutes till I floated under another bridge and back into the woods again. It only seemed like a week.

By that time I was getting really tired of riding on that dadgummed tube, and dusk was coming on pretty fast, too. It wouldn't be more than thirty minutes till the stars came out. Any other time I wouldn't have even thought about staying out on the river after dark, and certainly not without at least the moon. It was way too dangerous.

But as it was, I was probably safer on the water than I was on the road. The moon would be up in an hour or so, and as long as I kept my eyes peeled and my ears pricked and paid attention to what was around me, it would probably be okay.

I hoped.

And so it was. I won't say I enjoyed it much, but I've gone through worse things. After a long time I saw another big highway bridge up ahead and a bunch of yellow and red canoes down below it on the left bank. There was a shallow gravel bar where I ran aground on purpose, and then I clambered my way out of the river like a waterlogged rat. I was shivering by then and being wet didn't help, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

I climbed up the bank and came to the highway, then scooted across an old football field till I got to a Wright's grocery store. I couldn't go inside soaking wet and with no shoes on, unfortunately. They kinda frown on that, even in Arkansas.

Instead, I went behind the store beside the trash dumpster and took off my shirt and wrung as much water out of it as I could, and then I did the same thing with my shorts. It felt weird getting buck naked in a public place like that, I have to say. It was fairly dark behind the store, but still. If anybody had come waltzing around the corner right then I think I would have died three times before I could hit the concrete.

I was still damp after I finished, but at least I was dry enough not to drip river water all over the place. There was nothing I could do about my bare feet, so I decided I'd just have to brazen it out. Maybe they wouldn't say anything to me about it if I didn't draw attention to myself.

So I breezed inside like I owned the place and got me a turkey and cheese sandwich and paid for it with almost the last of my change. That one bag of chips hadn't done much for me, and even that was hours and hours ago. Nobody said anything about my feet.

I went back outside and ate my food, and that's when I found out my cell phone was soaked. The water must have got in at some point, in spite of the Doritos bag. I shouldn't have been surprised, I don't guess. I sighed and wiped it as dry as I could on my shirt tail. There was a chance it might work again after it dried out. Sometimes they do.

There was a pay phone in front of the grocery store, and I still had fifty cents left in my pocket. I walked over there and tried to call Justin one more time. All I got was his voicemail again, but I let him know I was in Glenwood at the grocery store and he needed to come get me as soon as he could. I told him everything this time, since there was nobody around to hear what I was saying.

That's when I got careless. Instead of finding somewhere to hole up and hide for a while, like I should have done, I went back and sat down on the bench in front of the grocery store. I don't know what I was thinking, looking back. Maybe somewhere in the back of my mind I had the notion that Justin might try to call the payphone back or something like that. I don't know what I thought, honestly. But I was bone tired, and I felt safe at that point, and so I stupidly sat there in a public place in full view of the highway. I could kick myself for it, but there you go.

After a while, a dark blue Blazer pulled into the parking lot, and I paid no attention even when it circled slowly around the lot and came near the front of the store. Sometimes people do that, you know, when they're looking for a parking spot close to the doors. I think they probably waste more time circling the lot than they would if they just walked all the way.

Anyway it was late and so this one found a spot pretty close to the front, and three or four people got out. It was too dark for me to see them very well or I might have thought one of them looked awfully familiar, but as it was I didn't notice.

One of them pulled something out of her purse, and a second later I felt a sharp sting when something hit me in the chest. I just barely had time to look down and see a dart sticking out of my shirt, and after that everything went dark.

### *Chapter Three*

I guess they carried me all the way back to the deer camp after they knocked me out, because when I woke up that's where I was again. Only this time I wasn't taped up in a cardboard box that I could

cut my way out of. I was lying on a creaky old metal hospital bed, with my left wrist handcuffed to the bed frame.

“That’s right; you won’t get away so easy this time, you slippery little fish,” the blonde girl from the car told me. She was standing at the foot of my bed, and there wasn’t a trace of a smile on her lips now. She was probably right about that, I thought to myself, but I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of seeing that I was afraid.

“Where am I?” I demanded, giving her the nastiest scowl I could manage. She did smile then, and it wasn’t a very nice smile either.

“I don’t see why I should tell you anything, Zach,” she said. Somehow I wasn’t surprised she knew my name, but I let it pass. She was trying to score points, and I wasn’t going to play that silly little game with her.

“Fine, then. Don’t tell me anything,” I said calmly. I knew they wanted something from me, and that meant they’d have to tell me what it was sooner or later. All I had to do was wait, and she’d have to spill the beans whether she wanted to or not.

I could tell my answer annoyed her, but that was good. People will sometimes say things they didn’t mean to say if you can get them riled up.

“The question you ought to be asking is *why* you’re here, and there’s no secret about that one. You’re here to join us, and this time there won’t be any last minute escapes,” she said sweetly. I didn’t have to ask her what she meant by that. I knew only too well.

That news rattled me a bit in spite of myself, and I couldn’t resist asking her a question.

“But why? I already told everybody I didn’t want anything to do with that stuff. I won’t make trouble for anybody, I just want to be left alone,” I told her.

“Fraid it doesn’t work that way, honey. Not for *you*, anyway,” she added as an afterthought. That made me want to ask her what was so dadgummed special about *me*, but I saved that for later. When you’re talking to an enemy you should never let them know what you’re really interested in. It gives them the upper hand. I learned that from reading *The Prince* last year in English class. All that political intrigue and stuff bored me to tears at the time, but right now my tongue was the only weapon I had, so I figured I better make it count.

“You can’t make me if I don’t want to; I know how it works,” I said, changing the subject.

“Maybe not, but if you ever want to leave here and go home then you’ll agree. Otherwise. . .” she shrugged.

“You can’t keep me here forever,” I said.

“We can keep you as long as we need to, honey, and that’s all that matters,” she said, with another one of those hateful smiles.

Deep down, I was seriously afraid she might be right about that. Out in the middle of nowhere like this, who would there be to help me? Nobody, that’s who. Justin thought I was in Glenwood, and what would he do when he got there and I was gone? I was sure he’d look for me, but it was the longest of long shots that he’d ever find me in a place like this. He wouldn’t even be able to call the police to help. All they’d do would be to call my parents. Fat lot of good *that* would do me.

I thought about all that in the space of a few seconds, and I soon decided the only thing I could do right then was pretend to go along with it for a while. They wouldn’t trust me, of course, but they might let their guard down enough to give me a chance to escape again. If I was sullen and resentful then that would never happen.

I changed my tack.

“So you’re telling me if I agree to this, then you’ll leave me alone and let me go home?” I asked.

“Sure, if that’s what you want. But you won’t, Zach. Not after you become one of us. I can promise you that,” she told me confidently.

Now came the difficult part, so I picked my words carefully.

“Well. . . I *might* do it if it means I never have to deal with yall’s ugly faces anymore, but there’s something I want first,” I finally told her. She frowned a little bit.

“You don’t have a lot of room to ask for much, Zach,” she said. Then she seemed to think better of it.

“But if it will get you to do this willingly, and if it’s not too unreasonable, then we might be able to make a deal. What do you want?” she asked me.

That was just the opportunity I’d been waiting for. I didn’t really want anything from them, of course; I was just playing for time. But I couldn’t ask for something stupid or that would blow the whole thing. It had to be something they could believe I might really want, and hopefully something only they could give me. It couldn’t be anything too easy or it wouldn’t gain me any time, and it couldn’t be too hard or they’d refuse. That sounds like a tall order, I know, but I thought I had the perfect thing in mind.

“I want to see my sister first,” I told her. I could tell that wasn’t something Blondie was expecting to hear, but she was good at hiding her surprise.

“I see,” she finally said, half to herself. She thought about it for a while longer, seeming to chew it over in her mind.

Then she looked at me for a long time, like she was trying to decide if I was for real or not. Maybe it helped that in my heart of hearts I really did want to see Lola; I don’t know. Whatever the reason, Blondie seemed like she made up her mind to go along with it, at least for the time being.

“I’ll have to see about that before I give you an answer,” she finally said. That was about what I thought she’d say, so I just nodded.

“In the meantime I’ll let you loose for a little bit, but you better not try anything. There’s no way out of this room except through the door, and you certainly won’t get out that way. I suggest you be good this time. If we’re going to start trusting each other then it needs to go both ways,” she told me.

I tried to look very solemn and serious at that, but inside I was overjoyed. I didn’t even crack a smile, though. If I did then she might not turn me loose.

She pulled a key from her pocket and unlatched the handcuffs that held me to the bed, then slipped them in her pocket along with the key. I sat up, rubbing my wrist where the metal had chafed it.

“See, we can be nice to each other instead of having to do things the hard way, can’t we?” she asked.

I think I liked her less and less the more she talked, so I didn’t say anything to that. I can’t stand people who look down their noses at everybody and think they’re so high and mighty, and Blondie seemed like exactly that kind of person.

She didn’t wait for an answer, thankfully; just knocked on the door to have somebody on the other side let her out. I heard the snick of a heavy-duty lock when the door shut behind her.

As soon as her footsteps faded away down the hall, I jumped up and started to explore the room to see if there was any way out. I had no intention of waiting to see what her answer was about Lola. If I found a way to bust out of there, I meant to take it. I knew what they wanted now, and the worst they could do was catch me and lock me up again. I wouldn’t be much worse off than I already was.

It didn’t take me very long to eyeball the whole place, and I have to say things didn’t look too good. The walls were plain cinder block, painted over with three or four layers of off-white paint, and the

only windows were some narrow slits too high up on the walls to even see out of. I think a cat would have had a hard time squeezing through one of them. There was a rusty steel door that led into a bathroom, which had the same cinderblock walls and slitted windows as the main room.

For furniture there was nothing but the old metal hospital bed that looked like it came from a salvage yard. There were no sheets on the mattress, no pillow, and just a plain wool blanket to cover up with. The rest of the room was totally empty.

The floors were concrete, partly covered by some brown and white tiles that had come loose in places. The door that led outside into the hall was a big monster of a thing, metal except for a diamond-shaped window about the size of my palm. Just big enough for them to be able to look in and see what I was doing whenever they felt like it. There was no keyhole on my side of the door.

I sat down on the bed again and thought about it a while. I wasn't ready to give up just yet, but I was blessed if I could think of a way to get out of there.

Sometimes when you go stale on a problem, it helps to think about something else for a while. I might not be able to figure a way out of there just yet, but I could still chew on some other things I didn't have the answers to. Like why the wolves wanted me so bad, for one thing. There was something about me in particular that had their knickers in a knot, something which didn't apply to Justin or anybody else. Blondie had admitted that much. But what could it be?

Try as I might, I couldn't figure out anything all that special about me. It couldn't be because I might tell somebody about them. Nobody would believe me anyway, and besides that, Justin had known about them for years and nobody had ever kidnapped him or caused him any problems just because he knew too much.

So if it wasn't that, then what was it? That part still baffled me.

I laid back on the mattress and laced my fingers together behind my head, staring up at the ceiling while I thought. It was one of those ceilings with blown plaster all over it with little sparkly things embedded, and they glittered in the light from the windows.

After a while that ceiling gave me an idea. Plaster is tough, but it's nowhere near as tough as concrete blocks. I might be able to knock a hole in it, if I could find something to do it with and a place where nobody could see me.

I knew the main room would never do, because of that danged window in the door. Anybody might walk by and see what I was doing, at any time. Even if I took my shirt off and used it to cover up the window, I figured that would be a surefire way to make the wolves suspicious enough to open the door and come in there, and if they did then it would wreck everything.

There was still the bathroom, though. I got up and moseyed in there and shut the rusty door behind me. That took care of not being seen. Sure enough, it had the same kind of ceiling as the other room, and I glanced around to see if there was anything I could use to dig a hole in it.

That bathroom was about as bare as a picked bone, I have to say. There was absolutely nothing in it except the commode, a sink, the bathtub, and a metal medicine cabinet which turned out to be completely empty. Nothing sharp or useful at all.

I thought about breaking the mirror on the medicine cabinet or smashing the lid of the toilet tank against the floor to get a sharp piece I could use, but I didn't waste half a second giving up on those ideas. Smashing things would make way too much noise, and I didn't dare attract attention. I thought longingly of my pocket knife, or one of the ten million screwdrivers Justin had in his workshop. I think I would even have settled for a paperclip at that point.

My pockets were stripped empty this time, though. The wolves had taken everything I had except for a few pieces of lint.

I wasn't ready to give up yet, though. I took the lid off the toilet tank and looked inside there. Toilets have a couple of moving parts, and sometimes a few of them are metal.

Just as I thought, there was a thin metal rod that connected the floater thingy to the water valve. I stuck my hand down inside the tank and found that I could unscrew the whole thing from the valve if I twisted hard enough. It was slimy and nasty and hard to keep hold of, but after a few minutes I had the metal rod loose, with the floater still attached to one end of it. The floater was supposed to unscrew from the rod the same way, but it had been on there so long it wouldn't come free.

I finally gave up trying to get it off. I had one sharp end, and that's all I needed.

I put the lid back where it came from and then gingerly climbed up on top of the tank itself. It was none too sturdy, and I had to be careful not to move too much because every time I did, the tank swayed and wobbled and acted like it was about to dump me on the

floor. I used one hand to steady myself against the medicine cabinet till I was sure I wasn't going to fall.

When I was sure, I took the floater rod and started scratching at the ceiling right above me. It's hard to dig a hole in gypsum board, but if you're determined and if you've got something halfway sharp, you can do it.

Plaster dust kept sifting down on my face and making me want to sneeze, but at last the rod poked clean through to the other side. I went after it with doubled energy after that, till I made a hole big enough to stick my thumb through. I hooked a finger around the back of the plaster and pulled down. It wouldn't break and I was afraid to put my weight into it. I didn't want to go crashing to the floor if it broke loose all of a sudden.

I attacked it with the rod again, working all around the edges till I could get my three middle fingers inside. Then I pulled with all my strength, and just when I thought I was about to give myself a hernia, a palm-sized piece of plaster broke loose in my hand.

"Awesome," I said to myself, whispering so nobody could hear me.

I set the piece of plaster on top of the medicine cabinet and started breaking off more pieces. After that it didn't take long at all before I had a hole in the ceiling big enough for me to stick my head through, and finally it was big enough for my whole body.

I stopped my demolition work and reached up to grab hold of two rafters with my hands, and then I pulled myself up till I could sit on one of them. The whole thing only took maybe thirty minutes.

I found myself in a crawl space not much more than five feet high. It was awfully dark up there, and blistering hot, too. I could see rafters stretching off for a long way in both directions, and there was a metal roof right above me that was giving off heat like a demon. I was already sweating.

There was no use trying to hide the hole in the ceiling, so I didn't bother. If anybody came in the bathroom then my goose was cooked, plain and simple. And I knew sooner or later somebody *would* come, if only to check on me. That's why I didn't have a second to waste.

I stood up as best I could and started stepping carefully from rafter to rafter. That was ticklish business, because I knew if I stepped in the wrong place I'd end up crashing down through the plaster into the room below me.

That didn't happen though, because every so often there were ventilation grates that opened into the rooms below. They let in just enough light so I could sort of see where I was going, after my eyes adjusted.

They let noises come up into the attic, too, and when I heard Blondie's voice I froze for a second. She was talking to somebody in the room right under me, in that same prissy, superior tone I hated so much.

At first I was tempted to ignore her and go on my way, but then I heard my name.

"You might as well go ahead and tell me, honey. Zach already decided to help us," I heard her say. Maybe I'm too curious for my own good, but I couldn't help wondering what it was I was supposed to be helping them with. It was certainly news to *me*.

I forgot all about trying to get out of the attic, at least for the moment, and crept a little closer to the vent and leaned down close where I could hear better. It was a long shot, but there was always the chance I might learn something useful.

I could see into the room a little bit, but not enough to catch a glimpse of the girl or who she was talking to. All I could see was the edge of the sink in the bathroom and a slice of the open door.

"Laura, you're such a liar. If Zach already told you where it is then you wouldn't still be asking *me*. But you're wasting your time, because I already told you fifty million times I don't know anything," I heard someone else say. It was a boy's voice, and he sounded a little bit younger than me. That was all I could tell.

Right after that, I heard the sharp smack of a hand against bare skin. There was no way of mistaking what it was. There's nothing quite like that sound.

"You're so stupid, Cameron. You could save yourself so much pain and trouble if you'd just cooperate. You know we'll find it anyway sooner or later," she told him.

"I told you I don't know where it is," he said, in a voice that maybe shook a little bit but still sounded very sure. I could imagine the girl gritting her teeth, and then she slapped him again for good measure.

"That's a taste for later," she hissed. He didn't answer, and after a few seconds I heard her walking across the tile floor away from me.

"I'll leave you to think about that for a while. I'll be back later to see if you've changed your mind," she told him. I heard the door

open and then slam shut behind her, and then the room below me was quiet.

I wondered why she'd been so nice to me earlier, if this was the way she treated her other prisoners. Maybe she was just waiting to see if I could be talked into doing what she wanted, and she'd only get nasty when she decided being nice wasn't going to work.

I don't like it when I see people getting mistreated. It makes me mad, and I want to do something about it if I can.

I made a quick decision.

"Hey kid. . . Cameron," I called out, torn between wanting him to hear me and not wanting my voice to carry too far. I don't think he heard me, so I called again, a little louder. That time I heard the bed creak.

"Who's there?" he said out loud.

"Don't say anything. Just come in the bathroom," I told him. He must have wondered what was up, but he didn't argue about it. After a few seconds I saw a boy in bare feet and a ratty white t-shirt come into the bathroom. There was a red hand print on his left cheek where Laura had slapped him twice. He had blond hair and he wasn't as young as I thought he was. He looked about the same age as me, more or less.

"Look up here. At the vent," I told him. He didn't act surprised. Just shut the bathroom door behind him and looked up at me. He had bright blue eyes almost exactly the same color as mine, and I remember thinking it was unusual at the time. I doubted he could see me in the dark attic, so I stuck my hand down close to the grate and waved at him. He'd be able to see motion at least.

"Who are you, and what are you doing up there?" he asked, getting right to the point.

"I'm here to help you get out of this place if you want to," I told him.

"Yeah? How?" he wanted to know.

"I'll break the ceiling plaster and you can climb up here in the attic with me. Just make sure it doesn't make any noise when it falls," I warned him.

It didn't take him long to make up his mind.

"Sure, I'm game," he said.

He quickly climbed up on the tank lid just like I had, and stood there ready to catch any pieces that might fall. I put one foot on the plaster right about where I judged his head was, and then gradually put more and more of my weight on it till I felt it start to crack. I was

careful to keep my other foot on a rafter and hold on with both hands to the roof struts so I wouldn't fall through the ceiling when it broke.

Which it finally did. My foot punched through and I almost kicked Cameron in the face, if he hadn't ducked just in time. No big pieces fell, just a few little globs that didn't make enough noise to matter. Cameron grabbed the edges of the hole and pulled down several big chunks of plaster, and as soon as that was done, I gave him a hand and hauled him up into the attic with me.

"Come on, let's find a way out of here," I said. Introductions and chit-chat could wait till later. The wolves might discover one of us missing at any time. Cameron nodded without saying a word, and I went back to feeling my way through the dark.

It wasn't long before we came to the end of the building. There was a wooden louvered window there to let air circulate into the attic, but it also gave us a chance to see outside without anybody being able to tell we were there.

I peered through the cracks and saw a few other buildings and a couple of cars, but no people moving around. None of the buildings seemed to have windows except for those same little slits like I'd seen in my room. Maybe that's because it was a deer camp and they wanted to keep people from breaking in through the windows during off-season. . . I really don't know for sure. Whatever the reason was, it was a good thing for me and Cameron. Even if there were people inside those other buildings, they wouldn't be able to see us even after we got outside. We needed every piece of luck we could get.

But in the meantime, there was no way to get out through those dadgummed louvers. They were nailed together tight, and unless we had a hammer they were going to stay that way.

"Are we getting out this way?" Cameron whispered.

"I don't think we can, without a hammer or somethin'. Come on and let's look for the door instead. There's got to be one here somewhere," I whispered back.

I knew there had to be an access panel or a trap door or some such thing, if we could just find it. People had to come up there for maintenance and stuff now and then, didn't they?

We were both sweating so much by then it was running down and getting into our eyes and making them sting, and my whole t-shirt was soaked. I couldn't see Cameron well enough to tell whether he was as bad off as I was, but I'd be willing to bet on it. It was so hot it was hard to breathe, and I knew neither one of us could handle that for

very long. We'd pass out from heat exhaustion if we didn't find a way out soon.

By and by we stumbled across an area where the floor was finished out with plywood, and there were some boxes and things stacked up. There was a trap door off to one side which I guess led down to the main floor of the building, but when Cameron tried to open it we soon found out it wouldn't move an inch. Locked, I'm sure.

"This thing's not coming open, dude. It won't even budge," he told me.

We felt around the edges of the door to see if there was a key or a latch or anything else that might let us open the trap and get out, but there wasn't anything. I bet it was probably locked with a hasp and a padlock down below, because when you got to thinking about it, why would anybody ever need to unlock the door from the top side?

At that point I was frustrated and starting to get a little scared that we wouldn't be able to find a way out, after all. I even seriously started to think about breaking down through the ceiling somewhere into one of the other rooms and trying to sneak out through the front door.

That's when I found the pipe.

It was just a stick of galvanized metal water pipe, old and rusty and no particular use to anybody, I don't guess. You know how attics always collect junk like that which nobody really gives a hoot about but nobody ever wants to throw away. The pipe was about three feet long, and the only reason I found it at all in the pitch dark was because I stepped on it and nearly brained myself on the rafters when it rolled out from under my foot.

Luckily I caught my balance before I killed myself, and when I groped around on the floor to see what it was I'd stepped on, I felt the pipe. I grabbed it in my hand and picked it up.

At first the only thing I had in mind was to use it for a weapon to defend myself if I had to. A piece of steel pipe can make a mighty fine club, in a pinch. It took me a few minutes before I realized it could make a mighty fine pry bar, too.

#### *Chapter Four*

"Come on, Cameron, I've got an idea," I told him.

We picked our way back to the louvered window and I stuck the metal pipe in between the slats, real close to one edge where the nails were. Then I pulled.

The nails made a horribly loud squealing noise when they pulled out of the wood, and I stopped, my heart pounding. It was so loud I was sure somebody down below would hear it and come find us.

“What’s wrong? Why’d you stop?” Cameron asked.

“It’s too loud. Somebody’s bound to hear the noise,” I whispered.

“Well pull slower then, but we have to get that window open, dude. There’s no other way out and we got no time to look for one,” he pointed out.

I know good sense when I hear it, so I bit my tongue and yanked hard on the bar. The nails came squealing out of the window frame, and before long I had one end of the board free. Cameron grabbed it and twisted it loose on the other side, and then he set it down carefully. The nails were making enough racket without dropping pieces of wood on the floor.

We yanked off six more louvers as fast as the walrus opened oysters, and then we had a space plenty big enough for us to fit through. I gave it one more wary look to make sure there was nobody around outside before I tore the screen loose. I didn’t care about fixing it later; I just punched a hole in it with the metal pipe and then ripped it the rest of the way open the best I could.

It was maybe ten feet to the ground, but that couldn’t be helped. I put my feet through first and then my body, till I was standing on the outside of the windowsill.

It looked a lot farther down than it really was. Maybe that’s just because I don’t like heights very much, but this time I didn’t have any choice. I took a deep breath and jumped.

With my eyes shut.

It kinda hurt when I landed, but I was ready for that. I dropped and rolled to take some of the force off my feet, so that helped. As long as I didn’t twist an ankle I was good to go.

The first thing I did when I got outside was to slick myself right up against the wall of the building and look around to see if anybody had noticed me jumping out of the window.

I didn’t see or hear anything unusual, so I relaxed just a tiny bit. To tell the truth, it felt so good to be out in the cool air after nearly roasting to death in that attic, it was hard to think of anything else. I took deep breaths and just gloried in it for a whole ten seconds before I remembered we weren’t out of the woods just yet.

I waved to Cameron to come on down, which he did. He didn’t land quite as well as I did and ended up tearing a hole in the knee of his

jeans and skinning his left palm. I knew it had to hurt, but he joined me against the wall without saying anything about it.

“You okay, bud?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just stings a little, that’s all,” he said. He took his shirt tail and pressed it against his palm so it would quit bleeding.

The dark blue Blazer was parked maybe twenty feet away at the corner of the building we were next to, and that gave me an idea.

We slid along the wall as smooth as a melted Mars bar, till we got up close beside the car. Then I stealthily reached up and grabbed the door handle, and when I tried it I found that it was unlocked.

I motioned for Cameron to get in, and then I slipped into the driver’s seat behind him and shut the door without slamming it. Those dark-tinted windows helped a lot now, since it meant nobody could see us inside unless they came really close.

There was an insurance card clipped on the dashboard that said the Blazer belonged to somebody named Janelle Parker from West Memphis. I’d never heard of her, but you never could tell when it might turn out to be a useful little tidbit of information.

It was more than I’d dared to hope for, but this time the keys were sitting in the cup holder on the console. Whoever drove the Blazer last time wasn’t as careful as he should have been. Maybe he didn’t think there was any reason to be careful about leaving the keys lying around, not this far back in the woods and with me and Cameron locked up tight.

Good enough. I picked them up, a little nervous. Every vehicle handles a little bit different, and I’d never tried to drive anything this big and bulky before. So yeah, honestly I was more than a little nervous. Cameron looked at me skeptically.

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” he finally asked.

“Sure, I can drive just fine,” I promised. He didn’t look like he was totally convinced, but he didn’t say anything else about it. We were both barefooted, and I’m sure he didn’t want to try to run off through the woods like that. I know I didn’t. I remembered what it felt like the last time.

I stuck the key in the ignition and started the engine. It was a quiet one, thankfully, so I was pretty sure nobody could hear it. I pulled the door shut real slow till I felt the lock click, and then I put the Blazer in reverse and backed up till I had enough room to clear the corner of the building. The brakes were touchier than I was used to and

I skidded on gravel when I tried to stop too fast. Stupid greenhorn trick, that was, and I glanced at Cameron to see if he noticed.

He didn't seem to be paying any attention, so I put the Blazer in drive and headed out of there. I didn't drive too fast and I was careful not to do anything else to attract attention. The whole place looked emptier than a bum's billfold, but I still had that creepy feeling of being watched. You know how you can always tell when somebody's eyes are on you. It felt like that.

Maybe I was imagining things.

But then again, maybe not. We got to the gate where the camp ended and the dirt road began, and Cameron had to get out and open it. It was one of those big aluminum cattle gates and it wasn't locked, just held shut with a twist of yellow nylon rope to keep it from blowing open in the wind.

But anyway, *somebody* must have been watching us, because while Cameron was fumbling with the gate I heard a shout somewhere behind us. The game was up!

Cameron heard it too, and he didn't waste any more time trying to be quiet. He hauled off and kicked the gate open the rest of the way, then ran for the passenger side door.

He jumped in, and I spun gravel and sideswiped the gate on the way out. It hadn't finished opening all the way and I didn't have time to keep from hitting it. I heard metal screeching, and it left two or three long ugly scratches along the side of the Blazer.

"Go! Go!" Cameron yelled.

"I'm going!" I yelled right back.

To tell you the truth, I was terrified. Driving Justin's truck on back roads was slow and easy and he was always there to help me if I needed it. This was nothing like that. In fact, this was a nightmare. The pine trees were crowded close on both sides of the road, and there were deep ditches I was pretty sure I couldn't get out of if I slid into one. So I gripped the steering wheel tight in both hands and kept my eyes glued to the road, trying to keep from killing both of us.

Cameron didn't seem like he was worried about my driving, though. He had his window down and was looking behind us.

"Uh-oh. Here they come," he said. That was the last thing I wanted to hear, but there was nothing I could do about it right then except keep driving. I thought I was getting the hang of the Blazer by then, but learning how to drive while you're flying down a dirt road in the mountains with a pack of wolves hot on your tailpipe is not the

easiest thing in the world to do. Try it yourself sometime if you don't believe me.

I had no idea where I was going, but the road snaked on through the woods with no turns or forks in sight, so I didn't have much chance to get lost. There were sometimes side roads that branched off, but they were all weedy and overgrown and I knew better than to turn off onto any of them. That wouldn't do anything but get us caught when we hit a dead end or a fallen log or a wash-out or anything else that blocked the way. If a road looks like nobody ever uses it, then that probably means it doesn't lead anywhere. I was also afraid of getting lost and driving in circles. The smartest thing to do was to keep on straight ahead.

I hoped.

The roads were dry as dust, and the Blazer kicked up so much dirt behind us that I guess it was choking the wolves to death. They dropped back a pretty good distance, so much that we even lost sight of them for a few minutes now and then around curves and over hills. That was good, sort of, even though I knew we'd never lose them that way. The dust cloud would always show them which way we went.

After a while we crested a little ridge and came to a T in the road that looked an awful lot like the one I saw yesterday when I was on foot. In fact I was ninety-nine percent sure it was the same one. If it was, then I needed to turn left to get to the highway.

I didn't have much time to think about it, but for some reason I turned right this time instead. I'm not sure why. The wolves were out of sight behind us, so maybe I was hoping they'd take the wrong fork when they came to that place. They had to know where the highway was, and they had to be pretty sure I knew. They'd probably guess that's where I was headed. The new road also had more gravel and less dirt than the one we just came from, so we wouldn't kick up near as much of a dust cloud as we had been. It was a slim hope, but it was better than none at all.

I turned too fast and the Blazer fishtailed on the gravel and I almost lost control and hit the ditch. I had to slam on the brakes and almost stop before I dared go on.

Cameron's eyes were big as dinner plates and my hands were shaking from the close call, but there was nothing we could do except to keep going.

I drove slower for a while, partly so we'd kick up less dust and partly to settle my nerves after that almost-wreck. The wolves never

did catch up with us again after that, and I almost dared to hope we'd lost them by turning this way.

After what seemed like a long time we started passing houses once in a while. Then all of a sudden the road turned to pavement, and that was even better. No more dust trail or tire tracks to give us away to anybody who might be following us, and we could go faster, too.

Several miles later we came to a bridge, and just upstream I recognized the little beach where the people in the pickup truck had been parked yesterday afternoon when I floated by in that leaky tube. It seemed like a month ago.

I knew where I was, then. This was the Caddo River again, and all I needed to do was head south on the highway that ran beside it. So that's what I did, and within another ten minutes we were back in Glenwood.

At first it was hard for me to believe it had been that easy, but I wasn't dumb enough to think it was over yet. I was sure the wolves wouldn't give up that soon. They had to have another trick or two up their nasty little sleeves, and that's what worried me. Not knowing what might happen is always the hardest part of any bad situation, you know.

But the Blazer was running low on gas, and I didn't really have a driver's license anyway, and all we had was three bucks in change that Cameron found in the ashtray. That wouldn't be anywhere near enough to get back home, that's for sure. Not to mention the fact that we were driving a stolen car, sort of. I hoped it might get us another ten or twenty miles down the road so we'd be harder to find, but after that I didn't know what we'd do.

"We've got to ditch this car, dude," Cameron said.

"What, you mean like right now? How come? I think we lost them back there on the dirt road, at least for a while," I told him. He was already shaking his head before I even finished.

"Not for long we didn't. This is my mom's car. It's got OnStar and she'll find out exactly where we are as soon as she gets a chance to call them. She doesn't have cell service up in the mountains but she will as soon as she gets closer to town," he said.

I sighed. I knew it had been too easy. No wonder they hadn't followed us harder.

Cameron popped open the glove box and rooted around a few seconds until he pulled out a red mp3 player and a set of ear buds, then slipped them in his pocket.

“Might as well take this, you know. It’s mine anyway,” he said.

Just then the engine died. I guess Cameron’s mom must have reached a place where her cell phone worked, and she called OnStar and had them kill the motor. It also meant she knew exactly where we were, and the wolves would be right on top of us in a matter of minutes.

The Blazer was still rolling, so I turned the wheel and managed to pull into a parking slot in front of the Diamond Bank. It was closed and we were the only car in the parking lot. Nobody could possibly overlook us if they drove by on the highway. I wished we could have found a place where we didn’t stick out like a bug on a plate, but oh well. I tested the engine again just to make sure, and it was deader than road kill.

We were in a pretty tight spot, but in spite of everything I actually felt pretty cocky for pulling off my third great escape in two days. I remembered Laura calling me a slippery little fish back at the deer camp, and I wished I could have been there to see the look on her face when she found my room empty. I smiled a little, just imagining it. They didn’t know who they were dealing with!

Yeah, I was really thinking stuff like that at the time, much as it embarrasses me to admit it now. I hope I’m not that full of myself all the time.

But busting out was one thing, and staying that way was a whole ‘nother matter. So far I hadn’t done too well at that half of the problem. That was enough to knock me back down to reality, when I thought about it.

We jumped out of the car, but instead of hightailing it away from there, Cameron yanked open the back door and started digging through the trash in the back seat.

“What are you doing, boy? We’ve got to get away from here!” I said.

“We’ve got to find the journal and the maps first. I know they’re in here somewhere. I almost forgot about it, but we can’t leave without them,” he said.

He might as well have been speaking Greek for all I knew, but there was no time to ask questions or fight about it.

Sometimes you have to just trust people, you know. It’s not always easy and you can’t always have a reason for it. Cameron knew the danger as well as I did, so if there was something in the back seat so important that he was willing to risk getting caught just to find it, then I

had to believe it was worth it, too. I opened the door on my side and started digging.

The Blazer was full of junk, and most of it was just trash. Nobody saves McDonald's bags for any good reason that I can think of. I wasn't sure exactly what I was supposed to be looking for, but I was pretty sure it wasn't burger wrappers.

I couldn't pay attention like I should have, because I kept wanting to look at the highway to see if anybody was slowing down. Nobody did, but I was antsy anyway. We probably had at least five minutes or so before the wolves could possibly get there, but you never knew for sure. I wanted to get gone.

I don't like piggy people who fill up their cars like trash cans. It makes it stink inside and it's just nasty. The Blazer was like that, and more than once I wanted to hold my nose while I dug through there. Somebody had left half a cheeseburger on the seat, and it had been there so long it was dried out like a piece of wood. I almost hurled when I came across that little jewel.

It seemed like it took forever, but really it couldn't have been more than a minute or so before I found a US Geological Survey section map for southern Montgomery County with several spots marked on it in red ink and others in pencil. It looked like the red ones had been pencil to start with, and then marked over with a red pen later on. I couldn't make hide nor hair of what it was supposed to mean or why those particular spots were marked. They all looked like they were out in the middle of nowhere to me.

There were two other section maps rolled up with the first one, and they were marked with those same pencil scribbles in various places, but no red marks. I didn't take the time to look any closer.

I know how to read section maps because Justin uses them a lot when he has to go out and do field work. Oil wells don't always have nice neat addresses on streets, and sometimes you have to use topographical maps to find them instead. He used to take me with him now and then and he taught me how to read his maps so I could give him directions. I never really thought much about it before, but now I was glad I learned.

"Hey Cameron, is this what you're looking for?" I asked him, holding up the first section map.

"Yeah, that's it! We have to find the journal too, though," he said.

I folded up the maps and stuck them in my front pocket. They made a big bulky wad of paper, but it was still better than carrying them.

Right under the maps there was a school notebook with some writing in it that I didn't have time to read, but I grabbed that too without even asking Cameron if it was important.

Then I found what had to be the journal. It was a very old-looking book with crumbly pages which was shoved down there next to the rotten cheeseburger in the middle of the seat. It was bound in cracked brown leather, and it was partly burnt on one of the bottom corners. Cameron saw it at the same time I did and snatched it up.

Then he brushed aside some trash on the floorboard and grabbed a skateboard out from underneath it.

"Have you got anything *else* in there you want to take?" I asked, with just a touch of irritation.

"Nah, that's all, dude. It's just this was expensive and I didn't want to leave it. But let's get out of here," he said, slamming the back door.

I made sure to lock the doors before we left, and then I threw the keys into some thick azalea bushes in front of the bank. A storm drain would have been even better, but I didn't see one handy. The more time they wasted dealing with the Blazer, the better.

"Come *on*, dude. We don't have time for all that," Cameron said, looking out at the highway behind us. It couldn't have been more than five minutes since we parked the Blazer, but he was acting scared and I can't say I blamed him.

"All right, let's go," I agreed.

We took off at a fast run, getting behind the bank first and then crossing through some trees until we came to another street. I still didn't feel safe, so we kept going for quite a while, even ducking through back yards and alleys when we had to, to help stay out of sight. We got barked at by several dogs, but that was about it.

"Dang, this thing gets heavy after a while," Cameron said, setting his skateboard down on the pavement. We were walking down a narrow alley between two buildings where nobody was likely to see us, and it seemed like a good place to stop and rest. He was a little out of breath from running, but then so was I.

"Yeah, let's take a break for a few minutes. I think we're safe here," I said. He sat down on his board, and I found an old plastic milk crate to sit on. The alley was full of crud like that, so it wasn't hard to find something.

“So what now?” Cameron asked after a while.

“We need to find a phone so I can call my uncle. He’ll come get us and then we can figure out what to do once we’re safe away from here,” I told him.

“You’re sure he’d come?” Cameron asked.

“Yeah, I live with him. He wouldn’t let me down,” I said confidently.

“You must be Zach, then,” he said. That’s when I suddenly remembered I’d never actually told him who I was. There hadn’t been time.

“Uh, yeah. That’s me. How’d you know?” I asked.

“Aw, I’ve been around awhile. I hear things. I’m Cameron Parker, by the way,” he said, sticking his hand out. I shook it because it would have been rude not to, but I couldn’t help wondering about him anyway, now that I had time to think about it. His mother was the one who owned the Blazer, which meant she was either a *loup-garou* herself or else she was in cahoots with them some kind of way. So what did that mean about Cameron, then?

I think I would have had a hard time trusting him, except for one thing. I knew he’d been locked up at the deer camp, the same way I was. I’d seen the way Laura slapped him and I’d heard the way she talked to him. After all that, it was hard for me to believe he was just a mole-rat. And like I said, sometimes you just have to trust people, even when it’s hard.

Still, I couldn’t help glancing at his fingernails just to make sure. He noticed, and held them up so I could see better. They were normal, just like mine.

“Nope, they never changed me yet,” he said, half smiling. I was embarrassed that he caught me looking, but at least he seemed to think it was funny instead of getting mad at me.

“You seem like you know a lot of things,” I finally said, lamely. I wasn’t sure what else to say. Cameron just shrugged.

“I know what I know, that’s all,” he said. It was a cryptic thing to say, and I didn’t feel like leaving it at that. In spite of what I said about trusting him, I had to know more.

“Then tell me what this is all about, if you can,” I asked.

“That would be a long story, dude,” he said.

“I’ve got nothing better to do than listen,” I pointed out.

“Well. . . true ‘nuff. I’m your third cousin, to start with. That’s why I know some of the things I know. My grandpa and yours were brothers,” he said matter-of-factly.

There didn't seem to be a lot I could say about that right then, but you can bet I tucked it away in the back of my mind to think about later.

"All right. I guess that explains how you got hooked up with the wolves and why you know some stuff about me. But why'd they have you locked up, and what do they want with *me*?" I asked. Those were the things I really wanted to hear about.

"Oh, I know what they want *you* for. They think you know where the Sweet Spring is," he said. That didn't do anything but confuse me even more.

"Laura said it was because they wanted me to become a *loup-garou* after all," I said.

"Well. . . maybe that too, but that's not the main reason. She was probably just telling you something she thought you'd believe until she decided how much to trust you. Laura's really good at messing with your head, you know. You can't trust anything she says," he said.

None of that surprised me. I already knew better than to believe anything Laura said. But I didn't care about that; I wanted to hear more about the Sweet Spring, whatever *that* was.

"Okay, so what's the Sweet Spring?" I asked, getting right to the point.

Cameron looked at me curiously for a few seconds.

"You really don't know, do you?" he finally said, shaking his head.

"Nope, I'm afraid not," I told him.

"Hmm. . . Well, I guess it *would* be hard to swallow all at once, if you didn't know anything," he said, half to himself, "But never mind. They've been trying to find that spring for years and years. I don't know exactly what it does, but it's important because there's a prophecy or something about it. They say one of the boys in the seventh generation is supposed to use it to break the curse. That's either me or you, and-" he said.

"Whoa, slow down a minute. Seventh generation of *what*? And *who* says all that?" I asked. I felt like the ground had opened up at my feet and left me standing on the edge of a deep ocean of weirdness.

"You don't even know about *that*?" he asked, like he couldn't believe it. It made me feel stupid, and I hate feeling that way.

"No, I guess I don't. Tell me," I said, trying to be polite. Cameron shrugged again in that way he does.

"All right, Zach. There's not really that much more to tell anyway. A long time ago, a man named Daniel Trewick figured out

how to become the first *loup-garou*, or at least the first one in our family. I'm not real sure about that part. But *he* always said one of his great-great-great-great grandsons would either break the curse or renew it, whatever that means. That's seven generations. He also said the Curse-Breaker would have a mark on him so they'd know which boy it was," he said.

"What was the mark?" I whispered.

"Bright blue eyes, just like yours and mine," he said, with a laugh that didn't sound like he thought it was very funny.

"But that's stupid. Anybody could have blue eyes," I objected.

"*You* try telling them that. They won't listen, I promise you," he said.

"Anyway, there are only two of us who fit the bill, just me and you," he went on.

"How do you know all this?" I asked him for the second time. I'd never heard anything remotely like it in my life. I used to think my parents never told me anything when I was younger, but I never imagined how *much* they didn't tell me.

"Well, if you hadn't run away then you'd know at least that much yourself. That's something everybody in the family has to learn. You can read more about it in the journal sometime if you really want to," he said.

"Okay then, go on," I said.

"Anyway, they never could make up their minds which one of us it was. Everybody was already real suspicious of you and why you didn't want to be like everybody else, and then when you ran away that clinched it. They were all sure you must be the Curse-Breaker. It took the heat off me a little bit, and for a while they forgot about everything else except trying to find you and stop you from wrecking things. That's why they wouldn't give up till they had you. You did an awful good job of hiding, I have to say. We like to have never found you," he said.

"You helped them?" I accused.

"Well, yeah, I kinda had to, you know. They would have started looking at *me* funny again if I hadn't. Just because they were sure you were the one didn't mean they forgot I was a suspect, too," he pointed out.

"Well, yeah, I can see that. So what happened next?" I asked.

"Oh, I got careless, said some things I shouldn't have, did some things I was stupid to have done. Made them wonder. And then they finally did catch you and found out you didn't seem to have a clue what

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was up, so then they started getting all narrow-eyed and suspicious about *me* again. They couldn't decide which one of us it was, so they locked us both up just to make sure. They don't take chances about stuff like that, Zach," he said quietly.

I chewed on all that for a while. Cameron didn't seem like he wanted to add anything else to what he'd already said, but there was one more thing I had to know.

"So why'd you help me then?" I finally asked, just as quietly.

"Well . . . why'd you help *me*, when you didn't know who I was or why I was there? You took a chance on getting caught and maybe worse, just for me. I've had to live my whole life being looked at like I was a stray dog that might turn and bite somebody any minute, 'cause they all wondered if I was the Curse-Breaker. Even my mom looks at me that way. She thinks I don't see it, but I do. I'm tired of it, Zach. I just want to be normal for a while, if I can be, and you're the first person I can remember who ever treated me that way," he said.

I didn't know what to say to that. I knew exactly what he was talking about and how he felt. He felt rejected. He knew more about the reasons behind it than I ever did, but I guess that doesn't make it hurt any less. There's no reason good enough to excuse it, and nothing anybody can say to fill up that empty spot. I knew it all too well.

But I thought I understood him now.

So I didn't say anything, just clapped him on the right shoulder and left it at that. Sometimes you say the most when you say the least.