

***More Golden Than Day***  
***By William Woodall***

***Chapter One***

The first time I ever saw Jolie was at the Four States Fair, the year I turned sixteen.

It didn't seem like one of those days when your whole life changes, and if you'd told me I was about to get dragged into the most dangerous and amazing experience of my entire life, I never would have believed it.

Or maybe I would have, come to think of it. I've been through a few tight spots in my life, and if I've learned anything, it's that you should always expect the unexpected.

I remember it was about nine o'clock or so, and me and Cameron were just getting ready to grab a bite to eat before we headed home for the night.

That's when I saw her, standing by the ticket booth and sipping on a can of Cherry Coke. I wouldn't usually have paid much attention, but she was so pretty I couldn't help giving her a second glance. She had long red hair with blonde streaks that glinted in the carnival lights, and she reminded me of a basketball player or maybe Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*. Very athletic.

She must have noticed me looking, because she turned in my direction and smiled at me with a little wave. I smiled back and then walked over to say hi to her, since she caught me looking. Cam was too busy playing a game to notice.

"Hey, I'm Zach. Have we ever met before? You look so familiar for some reason," I told her when I got close enough. That was sort of a half-truth; she didn't really look familiar, but then again she kinda did. I couldn't decide for sure.

"No, I'm new around here, I'm afraid. I don't know much of anybody," she said.

"Really? Where are you from?" I asked.

"Natchitoches, Louisiana. Nowhere you ever heard of, I'm sure," she laughed.

"No, I guess not," I admitted.

"I didn't think so. Nobody ever has. My name's Jolie, by the way," she said. There was a pause, and I tried to think of something else to say.

"So what brings you up this way?" I finally asked.

“Oh, I just came to stay with my aunt for a few days. She lives up here all by herself, and she needs some help now and then,” she said.

“Well, hey, me and my brother are fixing to go get somethin’ to eat. You want to come with us?” I offered.

“Sure, why not?” she said.

She grabbed my arm as we left the ticket booth and I was kinda surprised at that. Most girls are not that flirty with somebody they just met, you know. I also noticed she was wearing what looked like a guy’s high school ring on her left middle finger, and that made me wonder if she might have a boyfriend somewhere. If she did, then it was even stranger that she was being so touchy-feely.

I can’t help noticing things like that, you know. Eileen always tells me I’ll make a great scientist or a detective someday because I pay attention to little details that everybody else overlooks. Maybe so.

Cameron was done with his game by then, and when he saw us walking together he smiled.

“Hey, who’s your friend?” he asked.

“Uh, this is Jolie. I asked her if she wanted to come eat with us,” I said, and he turned to look at her.

“Hey, I’m Cameron. Don’t believe anything Zach tells you about me,” he told her.

“Oh, I’ll try not to,” she laughed.

She hooked one arm around mine and the other one around his, and the three of us walked together that way until we came to the food stands.

Me and Cam ordered some chili cheese fries, and Jolie got a basket of tater logs with nothing but salt on them, not even any ketchup. Maybe she didn’t want to get anything drippy on her clothes; they looked kind of expensive, even though it was only jeans and a sweater.

The picnic tables were crowded that night and we had to squeeze close together to find a place for all three of us, but nobody minded that. We all laughed and joked and talked like we were old friends, and I remember thinking what a cool person she was.

Cam must have thought so too, because he snapped a picture of the three of us with his phone, like he always does when he’s having a good time.

After a while Jolie put her arm around me and leaned over close like she was about to lay her head on my shoulder. I’m not sure

what I would have done if she had, but as it turned out that's not what she had in mind.

"They're watching us," she whispered in my ear instead. She was so close I could feel her breath tickle the hair on my neck.

I have to confess I wasn't at my sharpest right then, and for a second I drew a total blank.

"Huh?" I said stupidly.

"Hush and don't look surprised. It's dangerous if they think this is anything but me having a good time at the fair. I don't know for sure if they can see us right this second, but I know they've been following me all day. Werewolves. Now kiss me and make it look good, like that's all we're thinking about," she said.

And that's exactly what she did.

I have to say, that was probably the last thing on God's green earth I was expecting. It felt more like a scene from *Mission: Impossible* than anything else. Go ahead and laugh if you want to, but I swear that's exactly what popped into my head, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

Nevertheless, I managed to keep a cool head and kiss her back. Sort of.

She quickly slipped a piece of paper into my hand, and then she got up and looked at her watch like she just realized what time it was.

"Sorry, boys. Got somewhere I have to be in a little bit. See y'all later," she said, and then turned and walked away.

I watched till she was out of sight, still too astonished to comment, and then I looked down at the slip of paper she gave me. It said *Call me tomorrow!* and below that was a phone number. Cameron saw it too, and he just sat there looking at me with an annoying grin on his face.

"Oh, you got it bad, Zach," he finally said with a laugh.

"No I don't," I said. It was definitely one of the weirdest experiences of my life, and I didn't have a clue what to make of it yet, but I definitely didn't want Cameron thinking I was all swoony and calf-eyed over a girl I barely met. That was just too cheesy by half.

"Yeah, whatever. She's pretty awesome, though," he said.

"You think so?" I asked.

"Yeah, I do. You should give her a call tomorrow," he said.

"I don't know; maybe I will," I said.

"You'd be dumb if you didn't," he told me.

“Well, anyway, let’s get out of here,” I said, changing the subject.

It took forever to get out of the fairgrounds because of all the traffic, and I let Cameron drive. My mind was much too full to pay attention to the road right then. I’ve been told before that sometimes I think too much, but this was one time when I had a good reason for it.

Being kissed by beautiful and mysterious strangers who pop up out of nowhere isn’t something that normally happens in my life, believe it or not. That by itself was enough to knock me back for a week, whether I admitted it to Cam or not.

But it was kinda scary, too, the more I got to thinking about it. Who *was* this girl, and how did she know about the wolves? And why did she think they were watching us on the midway tonight?

There was something else, too. She must have already had that slip of paper written out before I ever went up to talk to her at the ticket booth, because I would have noticed if she’d done it while we were sitting together at the picnic table. That meant she must have planned the whole thing ahead of time, before we even met.

Justin likes to say that things are not always what they seem to be, and in this case I was definitely willing to go along with *that*. On the surface, it looked like a boy and a girl ran into each other by chance at the fair, and then shared some food and a quick kiss before they went home. Nothing very unusual about that, especially if she made it look like we already knew each other. I wondered now if that’s what all the arm-holding and sitting close together and all that jazz was supposed to be for. . . so the kiss wouldn’t seem out of place, if anybody was watching us.

But why would anybody go to that much trouble? It didn’t seem worth it, if all she wanted was to warn me about the wolves and slip that phone number in my hand. It seemed like it would have been a lot easier just to call me or send me a letter, instead of going for all that cloak and dagger stuff.

I looked at the crumpled slip of paper in my hand and thought about how utterly insane it all was, but one thing was for certain.

I had to see her again.

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We got home maybe an hour later, and slipped indoors without a peep. Justin and Eileen were already in bed by then and we didn’t

want to wake them up. They were having a baby in December, and Eileen always seemed tired nowadays and couldn't sleep very well.

Cameron knew all that as well as I did, but I guess he couldn't resist teasing me, even if it did make some noise.

"So when are you bringing your girlfriend home to meet Justin and Eileen?" he asked in a hushed voice, like it was something I might not want them to overhear.

"She's not my girlfriend," I said tiredly.

"Really? It sure looked that way when y'all were smooching all over each other tonight," he laughed.

"Oh, shut up, Cam. You don't know anything about it," I said, half embarrassed and half irritated. I love Cameron to death and we're as close as two brothers could ever be, but I have to admit he can also be the most aggravating person you ever imagined.

"Sure thing, bubba. I'll shut up and let you daydream about her in peace," he said.

I groaned and rolled my eyes. He was impossible sometimes.

"Look, there's more to it than you think," I said carefully, when we got to our room and shut the door.

"I knew it! So when are you getting married, then?" he joked.

"Cameron, I'm serious. Stop it with the stupid jokes and listen to me," I said. That sobered him up a little bit.

"Okay, then. What's up, Zach?" he asked, without even a smile.

"She only kissed me so she could get close enough to whisper in my ear," I said.

That was the wrong thing to say, because Cam started to smile again and I knew he was getting ready to hit me with another zinger about my so-called girlfriend. Then he saw the look on my face, and the smile faded.

"I'm guessing she said something besides how much she loves her sweet little Zach, huh?" he said.

"Yeah, you could say that," I said dryly.

"So what was it?" he asked.

"I don't understand what she said. She told me there was somebody watching us at the fair tonight and she thought it was a werewolf," I told him.

"Huh?" he said, and the look of surprise on his face was almost enough to make me laugh, if things hadn't been so serious.

"Yeah, that's what I said, too," I agreed.

“But why would they be watching *her*? Or even us for that matter? Who is she?” he demanded.

“I don’t know, Cam. I only know what she told me, and now you know as much about it as I do,” I reminded him.

“That’s all she said?” he asked.

“Yeah, pretty much. She said it was dangerous and to make it look good when I kissed her, so nobody would think it was a serious discussion if they saw us talking,” I said.

“Dangerous how? And for who, you or her?” he asked.

“She didn’t say. But if she went to that much trouble to make it look like I was just a boy she was flirting with at the fair, then it’s probably nothin’ to laugh at,” I pointed out.

“That’s crazy,” he said.

“May be. I’m clueless,” I told him, and he furrowed his brows and thought for a minute.

“Well, I can’t think of any good reason why the wolves would care about you and me anymore. We’re done with all that. So even if they *are* watching us for some unknown reason, they’ll surely get tired of it after a while when they find out there’s nothing to see. It’ll never amount to anything, Zach,” he finally said, hopefully.

I tried to tell myself he was right and there was nothing to worry about, but deep down I wasn’t so sure. People don’t do things for no reason, and I didn’t think it was very wise to just blow it off that way.

But Cameron very clearly didn’t want to hear that, and I can’t say I blamed him; not after everything that happened last time we tangled with the wolves. He was happy with his life, for probably the first time he could ever remember, and he didn’t want anything to mess that up. I understood him better than he thought I did, sometimes.

I wasn’t real anxious to open up a whole new can of worms either, for that matter, but I had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that there might be trouble coming, and I knew it wouldn’t go away just because I wished it would. I don’t think I worry for nothing, but I don’t shut my eyes to things I don’t like, either.

I decided it wasn’t the time to argue about it, though. It was late, and both of us were too sleepy to care about much of anything except going to bed at that point. I could wait and see what Jolie had to say when I called her tomorrow, and then if it seemed important enough I could sit down and try to make Cameron listen.

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re right,” I finally said.

“Sure I am. Don’t worry about it,” he agreed, and that was all we said about it that night.

I was antsy all day long at school the next day. I kept playing with that slip of paper with Jolie’s phone number on it and thinking about what to say when I called her. I couldn’t focus on my work or pay attention to anything else; I thought three o’clock would never come.

Me and Cameron both had baseball practice after school that day, but I decided it probably wouldn’t hurt me to miss it for once, much as I hated to.

The city was offering a fall baseball league that year, like they sometimes do, and that’s why we were having off-season practice like that. Me and Cam and James Bray and Levi Langston always used to sit around at school and talk about playing for the Texas Rangers someday, believe it or not, and all four of us signed up for Fall Ball because we knew we needed all the practice we could get. Maybe it sounds like a wild and crazy dream that’ll never happen, but hey, you never know. I won an All-Star trophy last summer during the regular season, and I don’t think I’ve ever been prouder of anything in my life. So. . . we’ll see.

But in spite of all that, what I really wanted more than anything right then was to call Jolie and get some answers. Practice could wait. I had Cameron drop me off at home before he drove to the ball field, and as soon as he was out of sight, I pulled out my phone.

She answered on the first ring.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hey, it’s. . .” I started, but she cut me off before I could get another word in.

“Meet me at the soccer field at Spring Lake Park in half an hour,” she said quickly, and hung up on me.

I looked at the phone for a second. How did she think I was supposed to get to the soccer field? Flap my wings and fly? That was all the way across town, and Cam had the truck.

I muttered something under my breath about rude girls who expected too much, and then I called a taxi to take me down there. It was the only thing I could think of on such short notice, even though it cost me twenty bucks that I couldn’t really spare. I might have been more annoyed, if I hadn’t still been dying of curiosity.

Anyway, it took longer than thirty minutes for me to get to the soccer field; more like forty-five, to tell the truth. Some little kids were

playing a game on the field itself when I got there, and Jolie was nowhere to be seen.

I finally found her sitting on a bench under an oak tree, watching the kids play. I almost didn't recognize her at first because she was wearing a green scarf that covered her hair and some big black sunglasses that made it hard to see her face very well. But when I got close enough, I knew it was her.

I sat down on the bench beside her without saying anything, and she took off the sunglasses and turned to look at me.

"You're kinda late, boy," she said mildly. That aggravated the tar out of me, but I bit my tongue and didn't say so.

"I got here as soon as I could," I told her.

"Well, I don't guess it matters. We're both here now," she agreed.

"Don't you think you should tell me what's going on now?" I told her.

"Yeah, but not here. I don't think anybody's trailing me today, but you can never be totally sure. Come on," she said, standing up.

I got up too, and she headed for the parking lot at a brisk walk. I had to trot to keep up with her.

She led me to a brand new banana yellow Volkswagen Beetle and unlocked the doors. The windows were tinted so dark they looked like black mirrors, and she had a Louisiana license plate that said "SMOKIN".

That made me want to laugh, and when I thought about it for little while, I decided maybe that was the whole idea behind it. She was poking fun at herself in a subtle kind of way, like she knew she was pretty but didn't take herself too seriously because of it. I kinda liked her for that.

I got in the passenger seat without saying anything, though, and she drove out of the park.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Nowhere, really. We're just driving so we can talk without anybody hearing what I have to tell you," she said.

"You couldn't tell me on the phone?" I pointed out.

"Nope. Anybody can pick up cell phone calls. Not secure enough," she said.

I wondered why anybody would care enough to try, but I shook my head and let it go.

"Okay, so tell me. I'm all ears," I said.

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“All right, Zach, I’ll get right to the point. I know what you and Cameron did with the Trewick pod two years ago, and there are some things I’d like to ask you about that,” she began.

“Pod?” I asked.

“Yeah. You know, a flock of birds, a herd of cows. . . a pod of werewolves,” she said, and I wanted to laugh again.

“That’s silly,” I told her.

“Maybe so, but that’s the word. Better not think they’re silly, though,” she said. That reminded me of what happened in Tennessee at my mom and dad’s place, and I didn’t feel like laughing anymore after that.

“Yeah, you’re right about that,” I admitted.

“Anyway, it was good work. I’m impressed,” she told me.

“Uh, thanks, I guess,” I said, wondering all over again who she was and how she knew so much.

“You’re welcome. But like I said, there are some things I’d like to ask you,” she repeated.

“Yeah, there are some things I’d like to know, too,” I told her.

“All right, then. I tell you what; you tell me something I want to know, and then I’ll tell you something you want to know. We’ll take turns. Deal?” she asked.

“Fair enough,” I agreed.

“Okay, then. First question: How did you destroy those wolf stones?” she asked.

“We had some help. There used to be a spring of holy water not far from here, and if you sprinkled some of it on one of the stones and prayed over it, then it broke the curse,” I explained.

“There *used* to be?” she asked.

“Yeah, the wolves found it not long after we did, and they blew it up with dynamite. We barely had enough to finish,” I told her.

“I see,” she said, half to herself.

“Okay, my turn to ask a question. Who are you, really, and what have you got to do with all this?” I asked.

“Well, you already know my name. That’s who I really am. And as for what I’ve got to do with all this. . . I’m a professional werewolf hunter,” she said, without a trace of a smile.

“Does that pay pretty well?” I asked her dryly.

“A lot better than flipping burgers after school,” she said, equally dryly.

I had to laugh.

“How do you get involved with something like that?” I asked. I couldn’t help wondering, you know. It’s not like they could put an ad in the paper.

“Oh, it’s the family business, you might say. We’ve been doing it for centuries. We fight the wolves wherever we find them, however we can, but there are always more pods popping up out there,” she explained.

“*More pods?*” I asked, not liking what I was hearing.

“Surely you didn’t think there was just one pod in the whole world, did you?” she asked. I remembered wondering about that very thing a few times, now that she mentioned it, but it never seemed very important before. Not till now.

“How many pods are there?” I asked grimly.

“I’m not sure, total. I know of at least ten right this minute. There’s one in New Mexico, and another one in Wisconsin, and a third one in Ohio. I know of others in England and France and Australia and . . .”

“Okay, I get it,” I interrupted, a little bit sourly this time. She was making me feel like I hadn’t accomplished anything at all by stamping out just one pod.

“No need to be tetchy,” she scolded.

“Sorry,” I said.

“In any case, my turn now. I know you grew up in a pod, so how come you decided not to join them?” she said. That was a harder question than the first one, and I had to think about it for a minute to give her a good answer.

“Well. . . I was only twelve when I ran away, you know. At the time I wasn’t even totally sure why, except I knew I didn’t want to be a monster. I think. . . I could always tell they didn’t really want me, you know, and maybe that’s why I started to look somewhere else,” I said.

“What made you think they didn’t want you?” she asked.

“Because there was an old tradition they had, about how the seventh-generation boy with blue eyes was supposed to be the Curse Breaker and destroy all the *loup-garous*. I fit the description, so I guess they didn’t like that very much. Cam did too, and they never could make up their minds which one of us it was,” I explained.

“Interesting. So where did that tradition come from? Any idea?” she asked.

“Yeah, Cam knows more about it than I do because he was with them longer, but he told me it was something Daniel Trewick said; the one who started our pod,” I told her.

“That makes sense. . . pod leaders are kinda special that way. Sometimes they know things nobody else knows,” she agreed, nodding.

“All right, my turn now. Where do those wolf-stones come from in the first place? Why is it only certain ones that work?” I asked. That was one of the things Daniel Trewick never mentioned in his journal, and the five stones for that pod had been scattered out in such weird and far-flung places, I couldn’t help being curious.

“Oh, that’s no big secret. Whenever somebody wants to form a new pod, they take some dust from Mont Mouchet in France, and they sprinkle it on a piece of sandstone somewhere in the right sort of place, curse it with certain ceremonies, and then they’re in business. It’s not very hard, actually, if you know how.” she told me.

“Okay, but why choose places so far apart? My pod had five stones, scattered out everywhere from Tennessee to Texas. Why just those and no others?” I asked, and Jolie shrugged.

“There’s no telling about that part. Your pod leader picked them for some reason. Maybe he traveled a lot and decided to curse every stone he came across that looked like the right kind, or maybe he just found several old ones that other pods didn’t use anymore. That happens sometimes, too,” she said.

“So what’s the right kind of stone?” I asked.

“I don’t remember *all* the rules; I know it has to do with the rock formations in the area, and it can’t be cracked, and there are a couple of other things, I think,” she said.

“But if somebody does find the right kind, all they have to do is sprinkle it with that dust from Mount Moosejaw or wherever it is, and that’s it?” I asked.

“Mont Mouchet,” she corrected, “and yes, that’s pretty much it. That and speak the curse. That’s how most new pods are formed, although like I said, now and then you get one where somebody finds an old stone from another pod and figures out how to use it. That’s kinda rare, though,” she said.

“So what if somebody destroyed that mountain?” I asked.

“Nice idea, but it’s a *mountain*, Zach. You can’t destroy a whole mountain,” she said.

“Well. . . no, maybe not,” I admitted.

“All right. My turn, and last question,” she said solemnly.

“Go for it,” I said.

“How would you like to be a werewolf hunter?” she asked. I have to admit, that one caught me totally flat-footed.

“Huh?” I asked, not sure I heard her right.

“You heard me. We always need some good recruits,” she said.

“I thought you said it was just a family business,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, it is, but we do make exceptions now and then, for the right person,” she told me.

I felt a thrill of excitement at the thought; I won’t deny that, and I wanted to say yes like I’d never wanted anything else in my life before. There are certain things that touch your heart instantly and make you thirst after them like water on a hot day, you know. That’s what it felt like.

But then on the other hand, I remembered how Cam almost died, last time we got involved with something like that. The danger to people I loved was very real, and this time there wouldn’t be any sweet water to save them if anything went wrong.

“I’d have to think about that for a while,” I finally said, reluctantly.

“Yeah, I thought you probably would. Here’s my card, whenever you make up your mind,” she said.

And believe it or not, she handed me a hot pink business card with shiny red letters that said *Jolie Doucet, Werewolf Hunter*, with her cell phone number down at the bottom. It was surreal. I guessed she was a Cajun, with a French last name like that, although you wouldn’t have guessed it by looking at her. Most Cajuns have dark hair.

I stuck the card in my pocket without thinking too much about it.

“I’ll have to let you off somewhere downtown, if that’s okay. Like I said, I don’t think anybody was trailing me today, but you can never be totally sure. It might not be safe for you if one of the wolves saw us together, especially not close to your house; some of them are mean customers,” she said.

“Why are they following you all the time, anyway?” I asked.

“There’s such a thing as revenge, Zach,” she said cryptically, with a sad sort of smile.

That shut me up from asking any more questions for a while; I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answers.

She pulled in at the south end of the mall and parked the car, then turned to look at me.

“Think about it for a while before you make up your mind, Zach. We could do a lot together, you and me,” she said.

There was a long pause, and then she did something I wasn't expecting. She lifted her hand to my cheek, and trailed her fingers across the bit of golden stubble I was just starting to grow. It tickled, and the way she did it was almost shy. . . like she wasn't sure what I might think.

“Call me sometime anyway, Blue-Eyes, if you want to,” she said, and all I could do was nod. I'm not usually that tongue-tied, but for once I seemed to have forgotten how to speak.

I stood there in the parking lot and watched her drive away until she disappeared amongst the traffic on Richmond Road, and then I slowly raised one hand to my face. I swear my skin still tingled where her fingers had touched.

My thoughts were too confused at that moment to even begin to write them all down, so I won't try. But one thing was certain: she'd given me an *awful* lot to chew on.

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was only four-thirty, so that meant I was stuck downtown for at least an hour before anybody could come get me. Cam would still be at baseball practice for another thirty minutes, and Justin and Eileen wouldn't be off work till then, either. There was nobody else I could call for a ride, and I didn't have enough money for another taxi.

I didn't mind so much, though. I walked over to Books-A-Million and browsed the shelves for a while, just to see if there was anything new and interesting. I love that place. There's always something I haven't seen before, and they don't mind if you pull up a chair and read for a while. It's like a huge library with books about anything you could imagine, and if you like something especially well you can always buy it. What could be better?

I went to the section that has books about werewolves and such things, and found one that was called *Hunters of the Night: Real-Life Tales of Monster Slayers*. It sounded cheesy, but Jolie had me interested in the subject and I had nothing better to do at the moment.

I didn't really study it all that close, just flipped through the pages and read whatever caught my eye for a second. But there was nothing about Mont Mouchet, or *loup-garous*, or even Cajun werewolf hunters with flaming red hair.

I still wasn't sure what to think about what she said. . . *either* part of it. The idea of becoming a werewolf hunter myself was a huge

thing to think about, but even that was *nothing* compared to the thought that she might really like me.

Yeah, yeah, I know; roll your eyes and laugh at me if you want to, but what can I say? She was beautiful and interesting and even funny sometimes, and it's not every day that you meet somebody like that, you know. I'm no more immune to a pretty face than anybody else is.

I couldn't help wondering *why* she liked me so much, though. Jolie was beautiful enough to take her pick of almost any boy she wanted. I've been told a few times that I'm cute, it's true, but I don't measure up to *that* level and I knew it as well as anybody.

We hadn't talked long enough for her to be all that impressed with my warm and loving heart, either. So if it wasn't my insides and it wasn't my outsides, then what could it be?

It always makes me uneasy when things don't add up, you know. It means there's something missing from the way I'm trying to understand the world. It crossed my mind that Jolie was smart enough to *pretend* she liked me for her own purposes without meaning it; that's what she did at the fair that night, after all.

But nevertheless, I won't lie about it. . . . I kinda hoped she really meant it this time and that we could talk and get to know each other better, regardless of what happened with the werewolf hunting thing.

It was after five o'clock by then, so I called Justin to pick me up on his way home from work. He did, and by the time I got home Cam was there too.

"I thought you stayed home today," he said when I saw him.

"Yeah, I decided to go to the bookstore for a while, that's all," I said.

I was kinda shy about telling him what happened with Jolie that afternoon. I knew he wouldn't like the werewolf part, and I could just imagine what he'd say if I told him about her touching my cheek; I'd never hear the end of it if he ever sunk his teeth into *that* juicy little tidbit.

But he didn't ask about her, surprisingly enough.

"So how was practice today?" I asked, mostly to turn the conversation to something else.

"Oh, it was okay. Jake hit a ball all the way over the back fence and we lost it in the ravine," he told me.

"Seriously? Jake never hits anything," I said, mildly curious. Jake was what you might call the team mascot, more than anything

else. He was the kind of kid who'd trip over his own feet if they weren't attached to his legs. Sometimes even then, actually.

"Yeah, he really did. I saw him do it," Cameron said.

"I almost wish I'd been there, now. That's the kind of thing you don't see every day," I said.

"For sure," Cam agreed.

I didn't think any more about it right then. At the time, Jake's home run just seemed like a passing curiosity, here today and forgotten tomorrow. Before long I'd have good reason to think a lot about it and what it meant. But for the time being I was still blissfully unaware.

## Chapter Two

I thought a lot about everything for the next few days; in fact, I think it's safe to say I hardly thought about anything else. I was so distracted at baseball practice on Thursday afternoon that I got bonked on the head with a fly ball, and I'm *never* like that. I remember even James asked me what was on my mind, and he's not exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer when it comes to noticing that kind of thing.

It was several things. . . I kept remembering that kiss at the fair, and the way Jolie touched my face and asked me to call her, and even that silly SMOKIN license plate that made me laugh; I chewed endlessly over what it all meant and whether she really liked me or whether she had some other plan up her sleeve. It was driving me crazy.

But it wasn't only that. I was starting to worry about the whole werewolf hunting thing, too. Yeah, at first it thrilled me like nothing I ever felt before, but after a while I figured out why that was. Jolie had just finished telling me about all these pods that still existed, which meant the Curse was still very much alive, and then right in the middle of my disappointment she handed me what seemed like a second chance to break the thing. That was a powerful lure, you know. Especially for me, the one who was supposed to be the Curse-Breaker. *That's* why it touched such a deep place in my heart and set me on fire the way it did. When God gives you work to do, it's not something you can forget about so easily.

But the more I thought about it, the less certain I was that Jolie was offering me anything even remotely like that. She wanted help fighting wolves, and that wasn't quite the same thing. In fact, I

couldn't help but wonder what it was that a werewolf hunter *did*, exactly.

Did it mean she carried a box of silver bullets in her pocket and a pistol in her purse, and that she hunted werewolves the same way some people hunt deer? That's kinda what it *sounded* like it meant, and that was an awfully dark and gruesome thought, you know. There was no way I wanted to get involved with something like *that*. I wasn't even sure I wanted to talk to somebody who was, no matter how beautiful and interesting she might be.

Maybe I was tying myself up in knots over nothing, and I guess the smartest thing to do would have been to call her up and just ask her about all that stuff, of course. But that's where the whole does-she-like-me thing came back into play again. . . I was afraid to say the wrong thing and make her mad at me, or even worse, laugh at me. Girls who are that pretty can be hard to talk to even at the best of times, believe it or not, and this was light years from the best and easiest of times.

So I dithered and dawdled and put off calling her while I tried to sort it all out inside.

Saturday morning I went out to Red Lick like I usually do, to mow Miss Edith's grass and do whatever else she might need done around the house. She was almost a hundred years old and she wasn't up to that kind of thing anymore.

I liked my visits out there. She always made me tea and cookies, or "sweet biscuits" as she sometimes called them, and usually we sat and talked for a while on the verandah after I was done with everything.

That particular Saturday started out pretty much like usual. I got to her house about nine o'clock and weeded the front flower beds, then repainted the trim on the garage with dark green paint.

I got done with all that about three o'clock, and then I sat down on the verandah to cool off a bit before I headed home. Miss Edith brought out the tea in a glass pitcher full of ice, and some sugar cookies on a lace platter cover.

You shouldn't think that was anything unusual, though. She always used to tell me it was the little things that mattered most, and you should always make your guests feel like royalty, no matter who they might be. She was one of those gracious old Southern ladies, and that's just the way she did things. I loved her to death, but there was always a certain level of good manners you had to maintain at her house, too.

So I sat there in my white wicker chair and I was careful to eat politely and not just wolf down my food like I might do at home.

“Zachary, you seem a little bit distracted today. Is there something on your mind?” she asked me that afternoon. She always used my full name like that for some reason, but I was used to it by then.

“No, Miss Edith, but I met this girl at the fair a few days ago and I guess I’ve been thinking about her a lot,” I admitted. She smiled.

“Oh, I see. Well tell me all about her!” she said.

“Her name is Jolie, and she’s got red hair and she’s from somewhere down in Louisiana. Nackadish or something like that,” I said.

“Do you mean Natchitoches?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s it,” I agreed.

“I take it you like her, then?” she asked.

I couldn’t help thinking again about the whole werewolf hunting thing, and maybe I hesitated just a bit too long before I answered.

“Yes, ma’am, I really do. She’s a lot of fun to be around,” I finally said.

“Hmm. . . You don’t seem too sure of yourself when you say that, Zachary. Is there something about her that bothers you?” she asked. Miss Edith is a wonderful person to talk to about most anything, and I decided it couldn’t hurt to see what she thought.

“It’s not exactly that. It’s just that she does some things I’m not sure I like, that’s all,” I said.

“Care to tell me about it?” she asked.

“Well. . . she says the world is full of other werewolves besides just that one group me and Cameron had to deal with, and she says she’s a werewolf hunter,” I said.

“Which means?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I guess it means she kills them. I didn’t think to ask her about that part,” I admitted.

“It seems strange that such a person would meet you by accident at the fair, don’t you think?” she pointed out.

“Oh, no, it wasn’t an accident. She came looking for me because she wanted to ask me some questions and offer me a job as a werewolf hunter, too,” I explained.

“And what did you tell her?” she asked.

“I told her I’d have to think about it for a while,” I said.

“But you wanted to say yes?” she prodded.

“Maybe if I knew for sure it wasn’t anything bad. But even then I’m not sure. I want to break the Curse, not fight wolves forever. Besides that, I know Cam wouldn’t be happy about getting wrapped up in something like that again. I’m not even sure Justin and Eileen would be very pleased right now, not with the baby coming so soon. I know it puts them all in danger, at least a little bit. It’s just that I feel like we didn’t finish the job we were supposed to do, if there are still all these pods out there. So if I had a chance to finish it now, then don’t you think I ought to try?” I asked her.

Miss Edith didn’t answer at first, just took off her gold-rimmed spectacles and polished them on the hem of her dress.

“You’re a good boy, Zachary. You already know the answer to that question without me needing to tell you, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am, I guess I probably do, and maybe working with Jolie is a good way to get started. It just bothers me the way her family is going about it, if they’re really killing folks. What the wolves are doing is evil, but that doesn’t mean it’s right to go after them with silver bullets, either. They’re still people, aren’t they?” I asked, hesitantly. It was hard to put into words exactly what I felt.

Miss Edith smiled again.

“Oh, indeed they are. I’m glad to see you can still remember that, and think of them that way,” she said.

“Love the sinner, hate the sin,” I said weakly. I meant it as a joke, but Miss Edith took me seriously.

“Exactly!” she cried, “Always remember that, and you’ll never become a hard and cruel man.”

“I try,” I said, half to myself. Miss Edith looked at me long and searchingly for a minute, and then she seemed to reach some kind of decision.

“Come with me, Zachary. There’s something I want to show you,” she went on.

I got up from my seat and followed her inside. She walked slowly, so it wasn’t hard to keep up with her. She crossed the dining room and took a key from under a white ceramic cat on a shelf, then used it to unlock the cellar door. I’d never been down there before, so I was a little bit curious about what it was she wanted to show me.

She took her time going down the stairs, holding on to the railing carefully to keep from falling. When we got to the bottom she pulled a string to switch on a single dusty light bulb that didn’t do much at all to light up the place.

It turned out to be a wine cellar. There were three of those wooden shelves that hold wine bottles, all of them stacked full, and that was about it.

I was disappointed, to tell the truth. I'd been expecting something a little more interesting than that. Miss Edith went slowly to the closest shelf, pulled out a dusty green bottle, and then handed it to me.

I dusted cobwebs off the label, which was something French and dated for 1965. I don't know much about wine, but I did remember that older is supposed to be better. 1965 was pretty old, so I guessed it was a fairly valuable bottle, if it came to that.

"Taste of it," Miss Edith said.

"Huh?" I said, totally forgetting my manners for a second in shock. Miss Edith was not at all the kind of person I would have expected to offer me alcohol.

"Don't grunt, Zachary; you're not a pig," she scolded me, "Now do as I say, and taste of it."

I glanced at Miss Edith out of the corner of my eye, just to see if she was really serious. She certainly looked that way, and I figured one sip of wine wouldn't kill me, after all. I popped the cork out and lifted the bottle to my lips, and then I took a small drink.

It wasn't wine.

It was water, with a faint taste of honeysuckle blossoms.

My eyes widened, and I looked at Miss Edith again. She was watching me, with a smile on her face.

"Always plan ahead, Zachary. I filled up these bottles for years, whenever I went out to the spring. Now it's gone, but these are still here. There are about two hundred bottles full, more or less. I've never told anyone else on earth about this place, except you," she said.

"So why are you telling *me*?" I asked, too stunned to think of anything else to say.

"I have good reason, Zachary. I've been wanting to tell you for a long time, but I needed to see what kind of boy you'd turn out to be, first. But I've known you for two years now, and we've talked about all kinds of things, and I believe you're the one I should leave it to," she said.

"Leave it to?" I repeated.

"I'm ninety-nine years old, Zachary. I won't be here much longer. But I couldn't trust all this to a stranger. It matters too much. I hoped and prayed that God would send me someone who could take it up, before I had to lay it down. I believe that's you. So I'm giving it to

you, child, to do with as you see fit. All I can tell you is to use it wisely, and never tell anyone you have it. Not even your best friends," she said.

"Miss Edith, I. . . " I began, but she laid a finger on my lips to shush me.

"Hush, Zachary. My grandfather told me the secret and left me this place when he died in 1932, and I've kept it faithfully all these years. Now I'm asking you to do the same thing. There's no spring to guard anymore, but that only makes this place all the more precious. Use it wisely and use it well," she repeated.

I went home that afternoon lost in thought, and for a while I even managed to forget about Jolie, believe it or not. I was thrilled to find out there was a secret stash of sweet water somewhere when I'd thought it was all used or destroyed, and that cast a whole new light on the question of what I should do about the wolves.

I took it as a sign, for one thing. I don't believe in accidents, you know; not when it comes to things like that. I knew the water was a miracle, meant to be used to break the Curse. So if the Curse was still around, then it didn't surprise me that God made sure there was enough water left to finish the job He meant it for. No werewolf could frustrate that plan, not even with dynamite, and maybe at the same time He was encouraging me to remember that I was still the Curse-Breaker and my work wasn't done yet.

That was all fine and well, as far as it went. But at the same time, there had to be some other purpose for the water than just breaking wolf-stones like I did before. I could never finish all of them that way, not even with two hundred bottles full; not as long as people could keep going to Mont Mouchet and forming new ones. There had to be something else it was meant for than just that. . . if I could only figure out what it was.

It changed the way I looked at the werewolf hunting issue, too. In fact I was tempted to call Jolie right then and tell her I'd decided to take her up on the offer, as long as I didn't have to kill anybody. It seemed to have come along at exactly the right time, and I didn't think that was an accident, either. *She* might not think of the job as a stepping stone to breaking the Curse, but that didn't mean I couldn't use it that way.

I still had to wonder about the personal stuff, of course. . . whether she really liked me or not, and what I thought about it even if she did. That mattered, too, but I figured if we were working together we could sort out all that when there was time.

“How was Miss Edith today?” Eileen asked me when I walked in the door.

“Oh, she was fine,” I said, still lost in thought.

“Something came in the mail for you this morning, Zach,” she said.

“Really? What is it?” I asked her, mildly curious. I don’t often get any mail, so whenever I did it was always interesting.

“Here it is,” she said, handing me a pale pink envelope. It was addressed to me, sure enough, but there was no return address on it at all. The postmark was from Natchitoches, Louisiana, three days ago. When I saw that, I knew it had to be from Jolie; she was the only person I knew from down there.

I moseyed out to the barn and sat down on the bench beside Buster’s stall to read it, just to have some privacy. I like to go out there sometimes when I want to be alone, or if I want to talk to somebody without worrying what they might think. Horses are good listeners, you know. They just turn their ears around in your direction and take in whatever you’re saying, and they hardly ever talk back.

Nobody else was out there, so I opened my letter and started to read. The paper was pink, too, and it smelled like wild cherries.

*Hey Blue-Eyes,*

*I hope everything is okay with you. I forgot to tell you I’ll be back at my Aunt Angie’s house this weekend, and I thought we might get together and have lunch sometime or maybe go see a movie if you want to. Here’s her number, just in case. See you soon!*

*Jolie Doucet*

She ended the letter with a bunch of x’s and o’s, and I smiled a little when I saw that.

Eileen told me once that those are supposed to mean “hugs and kisses”, which I never would have guessed if she hadn’t told me. I always used to think they were just some meaningless doodly thing that girls like to put on letters for some reason, the same way they draw hearts and butterflies and flowers on everything they can get their hands on.

I still didn’t think it meant *that* much, honestly, but nevertheless it made me feel warm right down to my toenails, cheesy as

that sounds. It's amazing how a little slip of cherry-scented paper can do that, isn't it?

Anyway, I decided it was an excellent time to go ahead and call her. She ought to be at her aunt's house already, if the letter was right, and I had more than half a mind to ask her if she wanted to go have some ice cream and see a movie. It was still plenty early enough. We could talk, and she could explain exactly what it meant to be a werewolf hunter, and then if all went well I was ready to tell her I'd take the job. Everything else could wait till later.

I saved her aunt's number in my phone so I wouldn't lose it, and then I pushed the call button.

It didn't go through. Instead, all I got was a recorded message telling me the number was out of order. I tried it again just to make sure I hadn't made a mistake, and when it still didn't work I tried the number on the business card she gave me. That one went straight to her voicemail.

I furrowed my brow in disappointment and kinda wondered if maybe something was wrong. Surely she wouldn't ask me twice to call her and then not answer the phone, would she? She had to know it was me; she'd have caller ID on her cell phone even if her aunt didn't have it at home.

Maybe any other time I would have just shrugged it off and tried again in a day or two, and that's what I almost did even now. But I couldn't help remembering all that stuff she said about the wolves following her around and wanting revenge, you know. That put a little bit different twist on things, so I sat there and chewed my bottom lip for a while, trying to make up my mind what to do.

I finally decided it was worthwhile to drive over to her aunt's house for a minute, just to make sure everything was all right. So I called information and got the address that went with the number: 933 Ash Street. I knew vaguely where that was; somewhere downtown near the post office, if I remembered right.

Justin gave me and Cam his old Dodge Ram 4x4 when he bought a new one last year, and most of the time we don't fight much about who gets to drive it and when and where. It's our pet project, and it spends about as much time parked under the hickory tree behind the house as it does anywhere else. We bought some chrome wheels and bed rails for it, and a glass pack muffler that makes it just loud enough to sound mean when you step on the gas.

We had plans to get a cold-air intake and some other stuff like that, when we had the money. Justin says neither one of us can have a

job except on Saturdays or during the summer, so it's hard to rake up the cash for those kinds of things. Especially for me, since I was always at Red Lick on Saturdays, doing stuff for Miss Edith.

Anyway, the keys were hanging on the wall next to the front door, so I went in there intending to take them and go.

"Going somewhere?" Cam asked. He was sitting on the couch watching a movie and looked up when I opened the door.

"Yeah, just downtown for a minute. I'll be right back," I said.

"Mind if I come along?" he asked.

That put me in an awkward position, because of course I really didn't want *anybody* to come with me, but it was hard for me to say so.

"Sure, I guess," I said grudgingly. If I had to, I could come up with some excuse for stopping at the house on Ash Street. Cam probably wouldn't quiz me too much.

So we hopped in the truck and drove down there, and I went to the post office first, since I had to come up with another reason for going downtown than just to check on Jolie.

"Eileen already checked the mail this morning," Cameron said when we got there.

"Did she?" I asked.

"You know she did, Zach. You got that pink letter today," he reminded me.

I hadn't known he knew about that, but then of course you can't keep secrets very well when you live with somebody. He must have seen it on the kitchen table earlier.

"Yeah, I guess I forgot about that," I lied, and Cam laughed at me.

"No you didn't, Zach. I saw you go out to the barn with that letter in your hand and then as soon as you came back in, you wanted to come down here. That's why I wanted to come, so I could see what was up. So whatever it is, you might as well spill it," he said.

I sighed.

"All right. But if I tell you then no laughing about it, Cam," I told him.

"Okay, that's fine," he agreed.

"I wanted to stop by Jolie's aunt's house and check on her, just to make sure she's all right," I said.

"Really? Why wouldn't she be, and why do you care, and what do you think you could do about it anyway?" he asked.

All tough questions.

“Well. . . that pink letter was from her. She said she’d be in town this weekend and she asked me to call her so we could maybe go do something together; that’s all.” I said.

“And?” he asked.

“So I called her and I keep getting a message that says the number is out of order. It’s probably nothing, but I just want to go check it out since it’s not that far anyway,” I explained.

“So you *do* like her. I knew it all along,” he smiled.

“Cam, you promised. No laughing,” I reminded him.

“Oh, all right; I won’t. I just think it’s sweet, that’s all,” he said. I wasn’t exactly sure what *that* was supposed to mean, but I knew better than to ask him about it. If I did, that would just keep the whole topic alive for that much longer. So I didn’t take the bait.

“Okay, let’s go down to the old lady’s house and see what’s up,” he said after a while.

Ash Street was only a couple of blocks from the post office, just like I thought, and as soon as we found it we drove slowly north, counting house numbers.

Before long we came to a black mailbox with 933 on it, and that’s when we got a nasty surprise. The house was a burned-out wreck. All the windows were busted out and the front door was gone, and there was black soot and smoke stains everywhere. There was nothing left but a gutted ruin.

No doubt that was why the phone number didn’t work. It looked awfully recent, too; the place was even still smoking a little bit, here and there. Besides that, Jolie wouldn’t have been talking about staying here for the weekend, if she knew it was burned down. That meant it couldn’t have happened more than three days ago at the most.

“Are you sure this is the place, Zach?” Cam asked me.

“Yeah, it has to be. This is the right address, and there are no other houses close to this one. Let’s take a closer look and make sure, though,” I said.

We got out of the truck and slowly picked our way up the concrete walkway and onto the steps.

“Look, here’s the 933,” I said when we got closer, pointing to the metal numbers that were still attached next to the missing front door. I wondered what had happened.

Oh, I know it was a house fire, of course; I’m not stupid. What I meant was, I wondered if maybe it was more than just an accident. Maybe one of the wolves had spotted Jolie while she was there and then torched the place on purpose.

There was a string of that yellow plastic “*Do Not Cross*” tape wrapped around the house to keep people from going inside, but I ignored that and ducked underneath it.

“What are you doing, Zach? You want to get arrested?” Cameron hissed at me.

“I just want to look, that’s all. Go wait for me in the truck if you want to, or else come in here yourself and then nobody can see us,” I told him.

He must have decided he couldn’t change my mind, because he followed me inside without saying anything else about it.

There wasn’t much to be seen in there, at first glance. Just burned and scorched furniture, covered in black soot and still soaking wet from the fire hoses. It stank like you wouldn’t believe.

But there *was* a half-melted computer sitting on a desk against the wall, and I decided that was worth looking at first. I couldn’t possibly do any more damage to it than there already was, so I tore the cover off the tower part and rooted around inside until I found the hard drive. It didn’t seem to be damaged, but after going through that much heat you could never tell for sure. I disconnected it from what was left of the CPU and slipped it in my pocket.

“What’s that for?” Cam asked.

“Just curious. Might find out something, if it still works,” I said.

We took a quick look around the rest of the house and didn’t find anything else worth mentioning. Fire is really good at destroying things, you know.

I was uneasy about spending too much time in the house because, like Cameron pointed out, they put up that yellow tape for a reason, and you can get in trouble for crossing it when you’re not supposed to. And besides that, burnt-out houses are dangerous places to be. You never know when the floor might cave in or the ceiling might collapse on your head, and there’s broken glass and rusty nails everywhere.

As soon as we glanced at everything, we got out of there. We were both smudged with greasy black soot and stank to high heaven just from the short time we’d been inside.

“Do you really want to get in the truck like this? It’ll stink for a week,” Cam pointed out.

“No, but I think it’ll be okay if we throw somethin’ over the seat,” I said. I looked in the bed to see if there was a tarp or a blanket

or anything like that. There usually would have been, but apparently not today.

“Never mind. We’ll just have to clean it out real good,” I said.

As soon as we got back home, that’s exactly what we did while we still had some daylight left. We wiped down the seats and sprayed them with Febreze and put a can of Eileen’s French Vanilla air freshener in there. Neither one of us especially likes that flavor; it smells like stale birthday cake to me. But it was all we could find, and it was way better than smoke and water smell.

“I guess that will have to do,” I said.

“Yeah, it will. So what are you doing with that hard drive?” Cam asked.

“Watch and see,” I told him.

As soon as we got back inside, I took the cover off my computer and then plugged the hard drive from the burnt computer into one of the empty slots reserved for extra internal hard drives.

You might have noticed that I really like computers. Most people don’t know much about them except how to use whatever software they like, but they’re amazing things and they can do wonderful stuff if you know how to play with them the right way.

Anyway, I put the cover back in place without screwing it down, and then turned everything back on. It started up as usual, and as soon as it was ready I clicked my way through to the screen where all the drives were listed. Sure enough, there was a new one there.

“Bingo,” I said to myself.

I clicked on the new drive to look at the files, and of course there were tons of them. I expected that. But I didn’t care about the operating system files or solitaire or any of that crud. I wanted documents or spreadsheets or databases; anything that might have useful information in it.

I soon discovered that the hard drive had been damaged pretty badly by the fire. Heat does funny things to magnetic memory, which is why they always tell you not to let your computer get too hot. That drive was chock full of corrupt files that couldn’t be opened anymore, or if they could then they didn’t show anything but gibberish. I’d be willing to bet that way more than half the memory was either erased or ruined.

But not all of it.

I found one file that contained what seemed to be locations of *loup-garou* pods and basic information about them. There were a lot more of them than I expected, and I was discouraged all over again

about how little me and Cameron had actually done. One pod was just a drop in the bucket, it seemed.

There was also an entire folder full of in-depth case files on each pod from the list, but most of those were unreadable and the rest of them were badly damaged.

There was another file that looked like an amateur family tree and history of the Doucet family since 1767, which was apparently when they first got into werewolf hunting. That one was mostly just a list of names and dates and who was related to whom and some of the notable things they did, but in places Angie had expanded it to read like a storybook. The tail end of that one was corrupted, too, so I could only read the first few pages of it.

I guess I was so absorbed in looking at files that I forgot Cameron didn't already know about all the werewolf hunting stuff. But he's not stupid. He was looking over my shoulder when I opened that file with all the pod locations, and he knew what it meant as soon as he saw the word *loup-garou*.

"What do these people have to do with the wolves, Zach?" he asked me quietly.

There was no way to keep it a secret anymore after that, so I told him.

"Jolie and her family are werewolf hunters. She came to find us because she heard about how we destroyed all those wolf-stones, and she hoped I could help them fight some other pods," I said.

"Pods?" he asked.

"Yeah, she said that's what you call a group of werewolves. I never knew that before," I admitted.

"And what did you tell her?" he asked.

"I told her I'd have to think about it for a while; that's all," I admitted, not wanting to look him in the eye.

"I see. Well, it sure looks to me like you're doing a whole lot more than just *thinking* about it," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and starting to scowl.

"I just want to make sure she's all right, Cam. You saw that house today," I reminded him.

"Yeah, all I saw was a burnt-out house, and that could happen to anybody. She doesn't even live there," he pointed out.

"No, but it seems awfully fishy, anyway. She stays there a lot, and she kept talking about the wolves following her around and wanting to get revenge, remember?" I asked him.

Cameron thought about that for a few seconds, but if it softened his mood at all he sure didn't let it show on his face.

"I guess she didn't bother to tell you which *pod* it might be that hated her so much, did she?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, she didn't. But I'm sure a lot of them probably have grudges and scores to settle against her family. They *are* werewolf hunters, after all," I said, and Cameron shook his head sadly.

"You're getting dragged into another fight, Zach, and this one's not even yours," he said.

"I'm trying not to, Cam, but I can't let anything happen to her," I said.

"Bubba, this is not just about her and you know that as well as I do," he told me.

That was the heart of it all, right there, and we both knew it. Cameron knew I could never turn my back on breaking the Curse till it was finished. I might say I was just thinking about it, or just helping a pretty girl, but he knew me better than that. He knew my heart's desire was to crush the Curse forever, and I was a fool if I pretended not to know it myself. I was trying to help Jolie, true, but that wasn't the whole story by a long shot.

I sighed. It never feels good when somebody yanks the warm rug of make-believe out from under your feet, but it's usually better when they do. I wasn't being completely honest with Cameron about my plans and purposes, and he was right to call me down for that. People will risk their lives for the truth sometimes, but never for anything less.

"Cam. . . do you remember, a long time ago, when you told me about the prophecy of the Curse-Breaker and then we all fought the wolves together?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I remember. What about it?" he said.

"Well. . . I saw the way you acted, back then. You used to think it mattered to break the Curse; I know you did, even though you never talked about it much. That day when you went down to the deer camp all by yourself, I thought that was the bravest thing I ever saw anybody do in my whole life. So, if there are still all these pods out there, and especially if they're hurting people, then don't you think we ought to finish what we started, or at least try?" I asked him. That was stark truth, straight as an arrow, and all I could do was pray that he'd listen.

He didn't answer me right away, though. He just looked out the window where the sun was setting across Coca Cola Lake, and

played with the bullet on a string that he still wore around his neck sometimes. When he spoke again, he sounded moody.

“I never wanted to fight wolves all my life, Zach. I want to go skating, and play ball after school, and cruise State Line and whistle at pretty girls, and hang out at the mall, and all that stuff normal people do. I want. . . oh, I don’t know. I want to get a good job someday and fall in love and have three or four kids and go to church every Sunday and live happily ever after. That’s *all* I want, Zach. I’m not like you. I don’t want to be a crusader or a dragon-slayer or whatever you want to call it. That’s not who I am,” he said after a while.

It’s not like Cameron to be that serious, or even to talk about stuff like that at all, and I knew I must have hit a deep nerve.

“I know that, Cam, and I don’t want to do it for always, either. I want to end it this time for good and all, if we can find a way. But I need your help, bubba; I can’t do it by myself,” I said.

He looked at me for a long time with that same scowl on his face, and I could almost watch him struggling inside between how much he loved me and how much he hated crusading.

“You know I’ll help if I can,” he finally said, although he still didn’t sound very happy about it.

“Yeah, I know,” I told him heavily. Maybe he knew he was making me feel bad, because he wiped the scowl off his face with an effort and gave me a crooked smile.

“All right, then, where do we start?” he asked.

### ***Chapter Three***

We started by transferring all the usable files from the scorched hard drive over to mine while we still could. You never could tell when some or all of the others might go bad. Then as soon as that was done, we started digging. The first thing I wanted to do was to make sure Jolie and her aunt were safe, and when that was done then we could start trying to figure out what to do about breaking the Curse.

Angie Doucet must have been a werewolf hunter for a long time, because she had files on dozens of pods and probably hundreds of individual people. Like I said before, almost all of them were damaged in spots, some worse than others, and it makes for tiresome reading when you can’t finish anything you start on. The case files were the worst, and I didn’t even *try* to read those yet. They could wait for later when we had more time.

I found other things, of course. There was a map of southern France with Mont Mouchet marked on it, and some photos of people I didn't know, and a list of books Angie had swiped from every library within a thousand miles. That one mystified me since it never explained the purpose behind it. People don't normally drive that far just to steal a book.

"I thought you wanted to find out what happened to Jolie," Cameron asked after a while.

"I do," I agreed.

"Well. . . I really don't think she was kidnapped by a mad librarian in Oskaloosa, Kansas," he pointed out dryly, and he was right, as usual.

"No, I guess not," I sighed, and closed the screen. I was tired of reading, anyway. The files were interesting, but not very helpful at the moment.

"Any other ideas, then?" he asked.

"The only thing I can think of is to drive down to Natchitoches and see if she's at home. I already tried calling her phone," I said.

"You really think that's necessary?" he asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, I'd feel a lot better if we did, just to make sure. If we've got the gas for it, anyway," I said. The tank was about half full, and I still had maybe fifteen dollars or so. I wasn't sure how far it was to Natchitoches, but I was pretty sure that was cutting it awfully close.

"Well. . . I still have a hundred bucks left over from that hay baling job I did last week while you were out in Red Lick, if we need it," Cam offered.

"Aw, I couldn't take your money, Cam. You need that for other stuff," I said, embarrassed. In fact I already knew what he wanted it for; he was saving up for an almost-new four-wheeler he wanted to buy from Levi Langston's uncle. He already had most of what he needed, and if I took that hundred bucks I knew it would set him back at least a couple weeks.

He held up a hand and shook his head.

"Look, I said I'd help if I could. I don't mind paying for gas, but if I give you the money then I need you not to make me feel weird about it, okay?" he said.

"Well. . . I guess you have a point. Thanks, though," I said.

"No problem. When do you think we should go?" he asked.

“It’s probably too late to make it down there today and still have time to do anything. We’ll have to go tomorrow afternoon,” I said.

“Sounds good to me, but what about Justin and Eileen?” he asked.

“We’ll tell them tonight, before we go to bed,” I said.

So that’s what we did.

They were pretty calm about the whole thing, I have to say, but then of course they usually are.

“I think y’all are biting off a pretty big piece of trouble,” Justin said soberly, after we explained everything.

“What do you think we should do?” I asked him.

“It sounds to me like you should do exactly what you just said. Go down to Natchitoches and see what you can find out, and then try to help this girl if it turns out she needs it. I’m proud of you for wanting to, and I wish I could come with you,” he said. I was pretty sure that’s what he’d say, but it still felt good to hear it.

“I know you can’t go this time. We’ll be okay though,” I promised him.

“Just be careful and don’t do anything stupid, boys. You know what I mean. Don’t start thinkin’ you’re in a monster movie and you can just throw popcorn and switch the channel if somebody gets hurt,” he said.

“We know,” I said.

“Well, then, all I can say is be as careful as you can, and trust God, and be brave boys. I love you both,” he said. Then he pulled out his billfold and handed me a hundred dollars.

“Here, you might need that, just in case somethin’ happens,” he added. I took it with murmured thanks and stuck it in my pocket.

Cameron grabbed the .22 and a box of silver bullets from the gun case, also just in case, and stuck it down behind the truck seat where nobody could see. You never knew when you might need it.

Before we left the next day I drove out to Red Lick to see Miss Edith one more time, too. I wanted to take a bottle of sweet water with us, *also* just in case.

She wasn’t home when I got there, and I figured she was probably still at church. But that was okay, because I knew where the extra key was. She always kept it under a pot of red geraniums next to the front door. She wouldn’t mind if I went inside without her there, but I meant to leave her a note anyway, just so she’d know it was me.

The cats swarmed me when I stepped inside, just like they always did, but they scattered again when they found out I didn't have anything to feed them. I went downstairs to grab a bottle off the wine rack, then came back up and left my note on the dining room table beside the silver serving tray. I made sure to lock both doors before I left, and that was that.

The wine bottle was glass, of course, so I carefully wrapped it in one of my old t-shirts before I stuck it down behind the seat next to the gun, wedging it in so it wouldn't roll around and break.

"What's that for?" Cameron asked me.

"Just something we might need," I said lightly. As far as he knew it was only a bottle wrapped in an old t-shirt, and I wanted to keep it that way. It's not that I cared for him knowing, but Miss Edith had told me to keep the water a secret and I was trying to do what she asked.

He didn't comment, and we left Red Lick without saying anything else about it. If he wondered about the bottle at all, he kept his guesses to himself.

As it turned out, the trip wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. There wasn't much to look at except pine trees and cotton fields, and if I'd been by myself it probably would have been pretty dull. But since I had Cam with me it wasn't so bad. We always had stuff to talk about.

So we talked about the Fall Ball Classic that was coming up in a few weeks, and old man Webbers' hay baler that was always breaking down, and the new mud tires we wanted to get for the truck, and things like that. We never mentioned wolves at all, even though I'm sure we were both thinking about them. I know I was, deep down. But sometimes when you're worried about something, it helps to put it out of your mind and talk about other stuff, you know. We both knew we might be walking into a pretty nasty situation before long, but neither one of us wanted to think about that until we had to.

We got to Natchitoches around three o'clock, more or less. That didn't leave a whole lot of time for nosing around before it got dark, but I hoped it would be enough.

We found a phone book and soon discovered there was no shortage of Doucets in town. That complicated things, since we didn't have any way of knowing which was the right one. Jolie had never given me her address or even her parents' names.

I pulled out her business card again to make double sure there was no address on it, but it only had her cell phone number. Probably

sensible, if you don't want uninvited guests, but it didn't make it any easier for us to find her.

"There's no way we'll have time to go visit all these people in the phone book," I said disappointedly.

"Well, we could always go to the mall and show her picture around. I've still got that picture on my phone that I took at the fair last week," Cam suggested.

"Yeah, that might work. Let's give it a try," I agreed.

So we went to a UPS store first and got them to print a couple of those pictures from Cameron's phone so we'd both have one, and then we went to the mall and started roaming around showing the pictures to anybody who looked like they might be in high school.

We talked to several people who thought they'd seen Jolie before, but nobody seemed to know where she lived or who her parents were. After a couple of hours we were just about ready to give up the ghost.

"This ain't workin' too well, bubba," I said, pointing out the obvious.

"No, it's not," Cameron agreed, "but I can't think of anything better to do, unless you want to go visit every Doucet in town."

"No. . . Let's just keep trying for a little while, I guess," I said.

We tried asking some of the shop owners in the mall, and that's when we got our first good lead.

"Oh, yeah, I've seen her. That's Jolie something-or-other. I can't remember her last name. She comes in here all the time with her mom, though," the clerk at the Upscale Retail Boutique told me.

"Really? Do you remember her mom's name?" I asked.

"Umm. . . Sonya, or Sheila, or something like that," she said, like she wasn't too sure. It sounded like a pretty slim clue, but I thanked the girl and left.

There was a pay phone next to the restrooms, and I looked in the phone book again to see if there were any Doucets with a name like that. There were two possibilities, in fact. John and Sarah Doucet lived on Hickory Street, and Robert and Celine Doucet lived on La Salle Circle.

We adjourned to the truck and drove to John and Sarah's house first, mostly because that was the closest one. We still had enough daylight to check both places, and if they both turned out to be wrong then we'd just have to sit down and think of something else.

That house on Hickory Street was pretty impressive, I've got to admit. It was a three-story red brick thing, with a wrought iron fence

and a tall hedge and two huge magnolia trees on each side of the front walkway.

That whole street was a no-parking zone, so we had to drive a few blocks down to find a place to leave the truck. There was a parking lot at an old Piggly Wiggly grocery store that wasn't open any more, and that's where I pulled in. It was no more than a ten minute walk back to the house.

"Go on," Cameron told me, when I didn't get out.

"What do you mean, go on? You're not coming with me?" I asked.

"No, I'll sit here and guard the truck," he said with a grin.

"But—" I started.

"Seriously, Zach, it's probably better if only one of us goes up to the door, don't you think? They're more likely to talk," he pointed out.

"Well. . . yeah, I guess that's true," I admitted, even though I didn't like it much.

I got out and walked back down the street to that big wrought-iron gate, then took a deep breath before I went inside. I pushed the door bell, and heard chimes ringing faintly somewhere deep inside the house.

After a long time, a tall lady in a gingham dress opened the door. She looked about forty, maybe, but she was in really good shape for her age. I also noticed she was wearing a silver ring almost exactly like the one Jolie had been wearing at the fair, and on the same finger, too.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Excuse me, ma'am, are you Sarah Doucet?" I asked her.

"Yes. Can I help you?" she asked.

"I hope so. Do you know a Jolie Doucet?" I asked her.

"I have a niece by that name," she said, frowning a bit.

"Can you tell me where she lives or how I can get in touch with her? It's very important," I said, trying to act like it wasn't. If you get upset then people are less likely to do anything for you.

"I'm afraid I can't do that without asking Jolie first, young man. If she wants to see you then she can give you that information herself," she said, disapprovingly, and started to shut the door.

"Listen, I hate to bother you, but I'm afraid she might be in trouble and I don't know who else to tell. Will you at least check on her?" I asked. She stopped shutting the door and looked at me for a long time before she answered.

“All right, child. I’ll tell you this much, since you seem to be a friend of hers. Jolie’s been missing since Thursday night. But there’s nothing you can do about that except pray she comes home safe, which I’m sure she will. Now, good night,” she finally said.

“Just one other thing, please,” I asked. The woman looked impatient.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I know about the *loup-garous*. I need to know which pod took Jolie,” I said. That was kind of a gamble, since I didn’t really know for sure if that’s what happened or not, but I figured I had nothing to lose by asking.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the lady said, in a tone that meant the discussion was over.

Somehow I knew she was lying; sometimes you can see it in people’s eyes, you know. But I could tell she wasn’t going to help me, so I didn’t waste any more time on her.

“I’m sorry I bothered you, ma’am. Good night,” I said, and walked away. She watched me until I shut the iron gate and went out of sight behind the hedge.

“That’s Jolie’s aunt, but she wouldn’t tell me anything except that Jolie’s been missing since Thursday,” I told Cam as soon as I got back to the truck.

“So we go to the other house, then?” he asked.

“Sure, why not?” I said sourly. Talking to Sarah Doucet had put me in a bad mood.

It was almost dark by the time we made it to the other place. That one was at the end of a little cul-de-sac, way back from any other houses. It was a nice neighborhood, just like the other one, but this time instead of a brick mansion we found nothing but another gutted ruin, even worse than the house in Texarkana had been.

“Uh-oh. That doesn’t look good, bubba,” Cameron said, and I had to agree. When I saw that, I *knew* there was trouble. One house fire might be an accident, but not two of them.

“Let’s go check it out,” I said.

So we got out and dug through the debris for a while, till it got too dark to see. I don’t know what I expected to find. Maybe another computer drive I could look at or something else that might give us a clue what happened or another place to go look. But there was nothing like that.

I did find what had to be Jolie’s room, though. It was painted a dark pink color that would have looked funky most places, but it

seemed to suit her. That part of the house had survived the worst of the fire, so there wasn't as much damage as there was elsewhere.

She had a dresser by her bed with a big mirror above it, and almost the entire mirror was covered in photos she'd taped to the glass. There were pictures of her standing with other people I didn't recognize, and showing off a trophy from a beauty pageant, and holding up a rainbow trout she'd caught, and some other things like that.

I noticed there was an empty spot on the glass where she'd pulled off a picture and not replaced it, and when I poked around the room a bit more, I found the missing snapshot lying on her pillow. It had to be the same one, because one of the corners was torn off, like somebody had ripped it loose in a hurry from where it was taped to something.

It didn't seem to be anything special, when I picked it up; just a picture of her standing in front of a tree, and I was curious why she pulled that particular one off the mirror and then left it there like that. I flipped it over to look at the back, and as soon as I did, I saw something written there in purple ink.

*Love you, Blue-Eyes.*

That was all it said, but I knew as soon as I saw it that she meant for *me* to find that picture. I was the only one who'd know what "Blue-Eyes" meant. Maybe she had to be cryptic so nobody else would guess what she was trying to say or who she was trying to say it to. The only problem was, *I* wasn't even sure what she was trying to tell me.

I turned the picture back over and studied it again, more closely this time. Like I said before, it didn't look too unusual. It was just a snapshot of Jolie in a red t-shirt and blue jeans, standing in front of a big pine tree. There wasn't anything in the background except more trees, and she wasn't holding anything or standing next to anybody.

There was something written on her t-shirt, but she was standing too far away from the camera for me to be able to tell what it said. I might possibly scan it into my computer and blow up the picture and be able to read it that way, but it didn't seem likely to mean much.

On the other hand, she had to mean *something* by wanting me to see that picture, if I could only figure out what it was.

I took it with me, just in case.

There was nothing else in the bedroom that seemed worth messing with, and it was almost dark by then, so we gave it up after that.

“Come on, Cam, let’s go home,” I said, discouraged.

We didn’t talk as much on the way back home as we did going down there. I guess both of us were too wrapped up in our own thoughts, or maybe it’s just that the mood was darker than it was going down there.

We pulled into the driveway a little past eleven, and since it was a school night we both went straight to bed. I could deal with the picture tomorrow.

School seemed to drag by slower than cold pancake syrup the next day. I was already looking at the clock by nine thirty, and it only got worse from then on. I was seriously tempted to go home at lunchtime, and I almost never do that. I played football with James and Levi instead, and that was intense enough to distract me for a while, at least until lunch was over and I had to sit through history class for an hour.

Anyway, three o’clock finally got there, and since there was no baseball practice on Mondays I was able to go directly home after that.

When I got to my room, I took out Jolie’s picture and scanned it into my computer. Then I blew it up four times as big as it used to be, to see if I could read what was on her t-shirt.

It was a picture of a hairy Bigfoot-looking thing, with a caption that read “The Boggy Creek Monster.” Which, needless to say, didn’t seem to shed much light on the subject of where she might be or who took her. At least not at first.

The Boggy Creek Monster was vaguely familiar for some reason; I could have sworn I’d heard that name before, but I couldn’t remember when or where. So I did the obvious thing and looked it up. As soon as I saw the first entry, I remembered where I’d seen it.

There’s a little town called Fouke, maybe ten or fifteen miles from Texarkana, and there’s a Boggy Creek not far from there. I guess they call it that because it’s swampy down there. But anyway, it’s sort of a local legend that there’s a hairy monster that lives in the woods around Boggy Creek, and they sell trinkets and t-shirts and things like that about it.

I’d never paid much attention to it, honestly, but you can’t live around here without at least hearing about it. So the next question was, what did it mean?

It might not mean anything at all, of course. Jolie could have bought the t-shirt while she was visiting Angie and it might not even have anything to do with what she was trying to tell me. It's easy to think you've got it all figured out sometimes, when you're really just seeing the reflection of your own silly face.

On the other hand, maybe there was a werewolf pod down in Fouke, and they were the ones who had the grudge against the Doucets at the moment. It would have been easy for them to come burn down Angie's house, and even Natchitoches wasn't that far, if they wanted to sneak down there and attack the others too. It seemed like a wire-drawn train of thought to wring all that out of the picture on one old t-shirt, but right then it was all I had to go on.

I combed through Angie's list of werewolf pods and I did indeed find one in Fouke, but it was marked as destroyed in 1999.

I went to the case file for that pod, and it turned out to be one of the more intact ones, thankfully. It still had a lot of damage in places, but not so much that I couldn't read it.

It was pretty grim stuff, I have to say. Angie never actually said she killed anybody; but she kept saying she "collected" thus and such a person, whatever *that* was supposed to mean. I couldn't help wondering if it was some obscure code word for whacking people and she just didn't want to come right out and say so.

Anyway, after she "collected" them she apparently robbed the house, because she listed a bunch of stuff she took from the place: two thousand dollars in cash, a 1994 Ford Taurus, a diamond wedding set, a Mossberg hunting rifle, and a few other odds and ends. As soon as that was done, she set the place on fire.

There was a lot more, but that's all I could read. The text trailed off into a bunch of undecipherable gibberish that went on for five or six pages.

I wondered if that was how the Doucets got so rich, by looting whatever they could from the werewolves they hunted. I was willing to lay pretty good odds that was at least part of it.

In fact, after reading all that I started to think maybe being a werewolf hunter might be almost as bad as being a werewolf, when it came right down to it. No wonder the wolves hated them so much and wanted revenge, if that's the way they acted.

Justin told me once that it's very easy to start out doing something good and then gradually let it get twisted into something even worse than the problem you were fighting to begin with. It's the most dangerous and deadly of all snares, and you take the first step

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down a very dark road when you start thinking that the ends justify the means. I've always believed that you never did wrong by doing right, but the opposite saying is true, too. You never do right by doing wrong.

Justin never let us make that mistake, when we were fighting the Trewick pod. We took away their ability to lead more people into evil, but we didn't hurt them or steal from them or anything like that. I don't doubt they hated us for that, but there are all different levels of hate, you know. The Trewicks hated us enough to want nothing to do with us and maybe even enough to shoot us if we came around them anymore, but not quite enough to come after us later on.

The Doucets were a lot more radical, though. They "collected" people and robbed them and burned their houses down if they could, and surely that was the kind of thing that might make any survivors hate them enough to want to do the same thing if they ever got the chance.

If somebody came to our house one day and killed my family and stole everything they wanted before they set the place on fire and destroyed everything else, I'm not sure I could keep from hating them for that. Oh, I'd know I wasn't supposed to, and I'd try, but I'm honestly not sure if I could do it or not. The wolves wouldn't even have the benefit of knowing better.

I was getting dangerously close to thinking maybe the Doucets deserved whatever they got, and that was a really bad attitude for me to have. Start thinking that way and you'll soon forget how much grace you've been given in your own life, and then you'll turn into a harsh and prideful person. I didn't dare be judgmental, not even to the werewolf hunters.

Nevertheless, I started to seriously rethink my impulse to become a werewolf hunter myself. There are certain things which are so bad you just have to turn your back on them, you know. . . no matter how useful they might be as stepping stones. There's such a thing as honor.

I guess what bothered me even worse than that about the whole thing was how Jolie felt about it all. She hadn't *seemed* like a cruel and hateful person, but after reading all that, what else could I think? If she had any heart at all, then how could she be involved in something like that? I wasn't sure I wanted to risk my neck for a thief and a killer, you know, if it turned out that's what she was.

I was full of thoughts like that when Cameron walked in.  
"What's up, bubba? Why the long face?" he asked.

“Nothin’; just thinking about some stuff,” I said.

“Oh, okay. Did you look at that t-shirt like you said you would?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s got a picture of the Boggy Creek Monster on it; you know, that thing they have down in Fouke,” I told him.

“Really? So she might be in Fouke, then?” he asked, hopefully.

“I don’t know. Maybe. They wiped out a pod down there in 1999, so maybe they missed one or somethin’. There’s no telling; it might not even have anything to do with it,” I said.

“But it might, though,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess it might,” I shrugged.

“You don’t seem too enthusiastic about it,” he said.

“I don’t know. I was just looking at those files again. Angie Doucet seems like an awfully cruel person, that’s all,” I said.

“So now you’re wondering if Jolie is the same way,” he said. It wasn’t quite a question, but I treated it like one.

“Yeah, maybe,” I admitted.

“I knew that was it,” he said.

“She didn’t *seem* like that kind of person,” I said, half to myself.

“So maybe she’s not. You don’t really know her well enough to say,” he pointed out.

“That’s true,” I agreed, and I couldn’t help feeling a little better after that.

“So do you still want to try to help her?” he asked.

“Yeah, I do,” I finally said. As long as I didn’t know for sure, I could still believe she was different; stupid as that might be. Sometimes things look worse on paper than they truly are, and it’s always possible there’s a good explanation for things. You never know unless you ask. I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, at least for now.

I don’t know why I cared so much anyway, about somebody I barely knew and had every reason to think was a thief or even worse, but for some reason I did. Maybe it was the way she touched my cheek that day in the car, or the way she said she loved me on the back of the picture. Or maybe it was something else completely. Nobody understands himself all the time.

“Okay then, where do we start? Go down to Fouke and show her picture around, like we did in Natchitoches?” he asked.

I have to give Cameron credit; I knew he didn't want to be involved in all this, but he promised me he'd help if he could, and he really was trying to. He's nothing if not loyal.

"No, if we do that and she *is* there, then they might just move her somewhere else. They'd hear about us showing her picture around, probably a long time before *we* heard anything," I said.

"What should we do, then?" he asked.

"I don't know. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack," I said.

"We could ask Jake; he's from down there, I think," he suggested.

"And what would *he* know about it?" I asked.

"Well. . . probably nothing, but you never know; it's not that big of a town. If nothing else, he could keep his ears open and let us know if he hears anything. He's the only person I can think of that we know from down there, and we'll see him at baseball practice tomorrow anyway. I could ask him then," he offered.

"I guess it couldn't hurt," I said. I thought it was a waste of time, to tell the truth, but Cam was trying to be helpful and I didn't want to discourage him.

"I wish there was a way to find out more about that old pod in Fouke. These files are so damaged and corrupted, it's hard to tell much," I complained.

"Well, what *do* you know about them?" Cam asked.

"Um. . . not much, actually. They lived in Fouke, there were three of them, and they got collected and their house burned down on November 28, 1999. That's about all I can tell from this," I said.

"No names, no address, nothing like that?" he asked.

"No, everybody has a number. 243-A, B, and C, whatever that means. That's how I knew there were three of them," I said.

"I bet you could go to the library and look through the old newspapers and find something. They usually report house fires and things like that, don't they?" he suggested.

"Well, yeah, sometimes I guess they do," I agreed. I was thinking to myself how tedious and dull that would be, leafing through microfilmed newspapers from all those years ago. They don't always index those articles, you know, so the only way you can find what you want is to read the whole dadgummed paper.

Not to mention the library closed at five o'clock and that meant I'd have to skip baseball practice again. I could just imagine what

coach would have to say about *that* next time I saw him, but I didn't see any other choice.

I sighed.

"I'll go do it tomorrow," I finally said.

### ***Chapter Four***

I drove to the library after school the next day, and sure enough, the *Texarkana Gazette* wasn't indexed for that long ago. I ended up having to look at microfilms until I was ready to pull my hair out; ten year old news is about the most utterly boring thing you can possibly imagine. Justin and Eileen taught me a lot about how to do research, but that doesn't mean I'm patient enough to enjoy it. Maybe when I'm older I might, but not yet.

Anyway, I did eventually find a teensy weensy little blurb about a house fire in Fouke on November 28, 1999, in the December 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the *Gazette*, way back on page 18 wedged in between an article about the Union Pacific Railroad laying off some people and another one about what to do if your cat starts scratching the furniture. Fascinating stuff.

The blurb only said that apparently nobody was home at the time of the fire and that the residence was a total loss and that it belonged to some people named Jason and Charla Golden. It also gave an address on County Road 211 and said that foul play wasn't suspected. That made me want to laugh, in a sad kind of way. I couldn't help wondering how Angie managed to get away with something like that so slick. Lots of practice, no doubt.

There was nothing else in the article worth mentioning, but at least now I had names for the people and an address for where they used to live.

That was the only helpful thing I found after almost two hours of searching. About 4:45 one of the librarians came by and told me I had to shut off the microfilm machine because the library would be closing in a few minutes, so I gave up on finding anything else that day.

There were still maybe two hours of daylight left when I got done at the library, and I decided it was worthwhile to go ahead down to Fouke to see if I could find the place itself, or whatever was left of it after all this time. There might be more clues.

Fouke is not a very big place. But even so, I still had to stop at a gas station to pick up a Miller County road map before I could tell where to start looking. I had no idea where County Road 211 might be.

It turned out to be close to Boggy Creek, believe it or not, and that made me think maybe I was on the right track, after all.

That monster t-shirt had been an awfully subtle and oblique hint, and I couldn't help thinking Jolie was putting an awful lot of faith in my ability to notice things and figure out what they meant. I was sorta flattered, in spite of the fact that I didn't know for sure yet if that's what she even meant by it.

Anyway, I found the road without too much trouble, and finding the house itself wasn't too difficult either, once I knew where to look. I just cruised down the road and counted mailbox numbers until I came to the right place.

At first I was afraid the mailbox would be gone after all this time, but as it turned out I was worrying for nothing. It was still there, kinda rusty and faded, but you could still read the numbers if you squinted a little.

It looked like the Golden's had lived in a mobile home, because even though the whole place was incredibly grown up with sumac bushes and Johnson grass and little pine and sweet gum saplings, you could still make out where the driveway used to be and you could still see the remains of the trailer itself. It was totally burned up at one end and the roof had caved in on about half of it, but the other end was still more or less intact.

I parked the truck in the old driveway and glanced around to make sure there was nobody in sight. There didn't seem to be, and I decided to risk a little exploring before it got too dark.

I picked my way through saw briars and Johnson grass higher than my head to reach the front steps, and I was covered in cockleburrs and beggar lice by the time I got there. I looked down at my jeans ruefully; Eileen was going to kill me if I carried all that into the house when I got home.

The front door was partly melted when I got close enough to see, and it looked like somebody had kicked it in at some point. I had to duck down and crawl under it to get inside.

As soon as I got through I found myself in the remains of the living room, and I nosed around in there for a while just to see what I could find. The fire had been pretty bad in that section of the trailer, but I still found an old gas bill addressed to Jason and Charla Golden. That proved I had the right house.

You wouldn't think something like that would survive a house fire, but paper is a lot tougher than you might imagine. I found the bill in a corner where the heat must not have been bad enough to burn it up.

I read somewhere once that it has to get to 451 degrees before paper will burn, and that's pretty hot, you know.

There was also a June 1999 issue of *Bassmaster* magazine lying crumpled up next to the gas bill, partly scorched but still readable in places. The little address sticker was gone, but I found one of those auto-renewal notices inside the back cover with Jason Golden's name already pre-printed on it. There was an interesting article in there about using grubs for summer smallmouths, and I decided to take it with me to read later.

The kitchen and everything on that end of the trailer was totally destroyed, so I headed down the hall toward the master bedroom instead. It was on the other end of the house and that area wasn't burned too bad.

The first thing I found back there was a calendar from 1999, open to November and stained brown with smoke. I flipped through it just out of curiosity, and among the notes about when the water bill got paid and such things, I found a note on June 24<sup>th</sup> with a lot of little hearts and stars and the name "Jacob" in a girl's handwriting. I guessed it was somebody's birthday, although I couldn't be totally sure of course. I took the calendar with me, and it left a clean spot on the wall behind it when I took it down.

The closet was still full of stuff, and while I was rummaging around in there I came across an old shoebox full of snapshots. They'd gotten wet at least once and most of them were stuck together in a big sticky wad, but I was able to pull a few of them apart. There were several pictures of a young couple that I guessed were Jason and Charla, and in one of them they were holding a little kid between them. There was a date on the back that said *Jason, Charla, and Jacob, September 22, 1999*.

I guessed that was probably the same Jacob whose name was on the calendar; he looked like he was maybe five or six years old in that picture. They all looked happy, and even though I knew they were werewolves and therefore who could guess what kind of evil they'd done, I couldn't help feeling sorry for them.

I took the box of pictures too, just in case I needed them later. I didn't find anything else worth mentioning, just some moldy clothes and rotted furniture and stuff like that, most of it badly burned or smoke-damaged, and I wondered again what really happened to these people. They obviously never came home again after that day, that's for sure.

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That's another thing you wouldn't think I'd care about very much, would you? After all, whatever it was that happened, it was a long time ago and there was nothing I could do about it now. But I did care, for some reason.

It's easy to talk about wiping out pods when they're just numbers in a list, but it's a lot harder to do that when you can see a little kid's smiling face in a picture, or read a girl's loopy handwriting on a calendar for her baby's birthday like Charla did, or when you know that a young man likes to read *Bassmaster* or wear camouflage jackets like Jason did. It makes them a lot more real.

And yet I learned all those things about them just from a quick walk through their house over ten years after they disappeared. Angie had to have seen those kinds of things too, when she came there to take what she wanted and do whatever she did to them.

Maybe I still didn't want to believe that anybody could be so heartless and cruel as to wipe out a whole family like that. It was hard to swallow, you know. I struggled with it and couldn't decide how I felt.

Justin always taught me that there's no such thing as evil; there's only spoiled goodness. He says no matter how wicked and rotten something seems, there had to be something good there first before it could get twisted and spoiled. And if that's so, then the real key to undoing evil and pouring light into the darkness lies in finding out what that original good thing was, and trying to restore it. He says I shouldn't treat bad people with hate or fear; I should remember what Jesus said about the people who crucified him. . . that they didn't know what they were doing.

And so he would say, if you want to deal with a wicked person, search their heart and try to find whatever that original seed of goodness was before it went sour, and then teach them a better and truer way to fulfill the deepest desires of their heart, if you can.

Maybe that's true. I guess Justin would know. But I have to wonder sometimes if there might be people who are too far gone into evil to save like that, who have learned to love the darkness too well and don't care about finding any other way, better or not. In fact I'm sure there are such people, rebels to the bitter end, or else there'd be no one in hell.

But then again, you never can tell who might listen and who might not, so I guess Justin is right after all. . . treat them all the same. I don't know. It's hard, and I'm not wise enough to figure it out yet. Sometimes I wonder if I ever will be.

I say all that because I started to wonder if maybe the real purpose God led me to get involved with the werewolf hunters was because I was supposed to try to search *their* hearts and teach them a truer and better way to do things. It was a staggering thought, and a terrifying one, too. They seemed wickeder than anybody I'd ever seen or imagined, even though I was pretty sure they were at least *trying* to do something good. One thing was certain; I could never be one of them myself, unless they somehow found that better way. It might not matter to them right now whether or not they lifted everything up to God, but it made an awful big difference to me. So I was taught, and so I've always believed, ever since I was old enough to understand what it meant to be the light of the world.

I walked out to the truck thinking hard, and slipped the calendar and the pictures and the magazine behind the seat where nobody would see them. I was just about to leave when an old man came walking out of the trees on the far side of the road. He didn't look pleased to see me.

"Can I help you, son?" he asked, in a tone of voice that didn't sound like he wanted to help me much at all. He had on one of those blue shirts they use as uniforms at tire shops and places like that, and the name on his pocket said "Bobby".

"No sir, I, ah, I just had to use the bathroom, that's all. I was just leaving," I explained quickly. It sounded stupid even to me, but it was all I could think of on the spot like that. Bobby-the-old-guy looked disgusted, but I guess he had no reason not to at least halfway believe me.

"Well this is private property and nobody's allowed out here. There's broken glass and sharp metal and all kinds of things that could get a kid hurt. Get gone, and next time I catch you out here I'm callin' the law," he said.

"Yes, *sir*," I said, and I didn't waste any more time taking his advice. Going to jail was *not* my idea of a fun evening, and he seemed like the kind of guy who might really do it. He stood there in the front yard and watched until I disappeared around a curve in the road, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the last of him. I wondered who he was and why he thought he had the right to come out there and yell at me for poking around in that dumpy old trailer, because he sure acted like he had a right to.

I stopped at the gas station in Fouke for a few minutes, to get me a cold Dr. Pepper and put some gas in the truck. I'd been doing a lot of running around lately and the tank was almost empty again. I

also took the time to pick the cockleburrs and beggar lice off my clothes and off the truck seats, so I wouldn't get in trouble with Eileen.

Nobody was home when I walked in the front door, so I went to my room and sat down at the desk. Justin and Eileen had to work late now and then at the oil company, so that was nothing very unusual, but I might have thought it was strange that Cameron wasn't home yet, if I'd stopped to think about it. It was after six o'clock and baseball practice had been over for almost an hour already.

But I was still wrapped up in thinking about the Golden's, and it didn't cross my mind at the time to wonder where everybody else might be.

I was curious about Bobby whats-his-name, so I fired up my computer and did a search for anybody with that name on that particular road in Fouke. I soon discovered there was a Bobby and Sandra Lee just down the road from the burnt-out trailer. It had to be the same dude, because I hadn't seen the one at the trailer drive up in anything. He had to have come from somewhere close enough to walk.

After that, I went to the county website to look up the property records for that area, and I soon found out that Bobby Lee also owned the trailer itself, and that he'd had it since 1988.

I put two and two together and decided he must have owned the place when Jason and Charla lived there, and therefore he must have known them, some way or other.

I guess I could have done the obvious thing and gone to see the man to figure out what he knew and how much he was willing to tell me, but I decided that probably wasn't such a great idea. He hadn't seemed very friendly, for one thing, and we hadn't exactly gotten off to a good start, either.

But the fact that he owned that place while the Golden's lived there and the fact that he was an old dude made me wonder if maybe he might be some relative of theirs, maybe even Charla's dad.

That was something else which was possibly checkable, so I started out by searching the county marriage licenses for that time period. Sure enough, Charla Lee married Jason Golden on October 10, 1993, when she was 19 and he was 22. I still couldn't tell if Bobby was Charla's dad or her uncle or what exactly he might be to her, but something he surely was. I couldn't prove it yet, but I was willing to lay pretty good odds he was her dad.

I did a quick name search for Charla Lee on Google and came up with nothing useful, but that didn't really surprise me. Just for kicks I tried all the others' names, too. I finally got a hit on Jacob Golden's

name, but it was just a birth announcement that somebody had posted on a message board way back in 1994.

I was amazed it was still there after all this time, but sometimes you get lucky that way. I could have found the same thing in the newspaper, most likely, but I would have had to wait till tomorrow to do that, because I would have had to go back to the library to use the microfilm machines again.

It was definitely the right Jacob because it mentioned his parents' names, and then a little later on it said that he was the grandson of Robert and Sandra Lee of Fouke. Good enough. That meant Bobby had to be Charla's father.

"Dang straight," I murmured to myself.

I felt pretty smug about figuring all that out, but on the other hand, I wasn't sure it was really all that useful. It still didn't get me any closer to figuring out where Jolie was, or how I could help her. The only person who might know something was Bobby Lee, and I was willing to bet a dime to a doughnut that *he* wasn't talking. If he even knew anything to tell.

It's frustrating to get all these tantalizing tidbits of information and then not be able to figure out how they fit together, or if they even mean anything in the first place. The whole thing might be a wild goose chase, for all I knew. Jolie might not even be in Fouke at all. I had nothing but a bunch of guesswork to go on, and that's a pretty flimsy foundation.

I put my face down in my hands and rubbed my eyes. I was tired of thinking for a while.

I wanted to talk to Cameron about it, or Justin, or Eileen, or *somebody*. Sometimes when your brain is worn out, it helps to bounce ideas off another person and see what they think.

Cameron still wasn't home by then, and I finally started to wonder where he'd gotten off to. I tried calling him and got no answer, but that by itself wasn't so unusual. Cell phones are not the most reliable things in the world.

I knew it was unlikely he'd still be at the park, but I decided to drive down there just in case. He might have had to stay late today for some reason.

I didn't see him anywhere along the main route, and when I got to the park there was nobody out on the ball field and no lights on. Everything was dark and empty.

I started to worry just a little bit, to be honest. Cameron isn't the type of kid who goes off somewhere on a whim and never tells

anybody where he's at or when he thinks he'll be home. I'm worse about that than he is.

Of course, his phone might be dead or something minor like that, or he might have called Justin or Eileen to let them know where he was instead of talking to me. I would have thought he'd call me today to ask if I found out anything at the library, but then again maybe not.

I decided to call Justin.

"Hey, Justin, do you know where Cam is?" I asked him when he answered.

"No, I woulda thought he'd be home by now," he said.

"Yeah, me too. That's why I wondered if he called you or not. But there's nobody at the practice field and I didn't see him on the road between here and there," I said.

"That's kinda strange. I know he didn't call Eileen because we're both in the lab today. If he'd called her then she woulda told me," he said.

"What should I do?" I asked.

"Well, don't get your knickers in a knot. It's not even seven o'clock yet, so he might still show up any time now. Maybe he went out to eat with some of the other guys after practice today or somethin' like that," he said.

"But wouldn't he call somebody, if that's what it was?" I asked, and Justin didn't quite answer me.

"If he's not home by the time me and Eileen get there, then we'll go look for him. We won't be here much longer. In the meantime, go home and stay there in case he shows up," he told me instead. That's how I knew he was worried; Justin almost always gives a straight answer to a straight question, and if he doesn't then something's wrong.

I told myself it was a good plan, though, and I drove home hoping I was worried for nothing. When I got there, I sat down on the couch and tried to watch a rerun of *Star Trek* on TV for a while. Justin and Eileen would probably get off work in less than an hour, and all I had to do was wait till then.

That's harder than you might think, though. I'm an action kind of guy and I don't like just sitting and twiddling my thumbs when something's going on.

Cam never did show up, and by the time Justin and Eileen got home I was *seriously* worried. It wasn't like him at all to just disappear like that.

"I called Mrs. Robinson at the school and she said Cameron left from there with James Bray as soon as class was out. She didn't know where they went," Eileen said as soon as she walked in the door.

"James is on the baseball team. He probably just gave him a ride down to the park, since I had the truck today," I said.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. I called the coach and he said Cam was there for practice this afternoon and that he left when everybody else did, but he didn't know where he went after that or who he was with," she said.

"He's still not answering his phone, either," I told them.

"Yeah, we know. I tried calling him twice," Justin agreed.

"I think it's safe to say something's wrong. Cam wouldn't stay out this late without telling somebody," Eileen said.

"What do you think could have happened to him?" I asked.

"I don't know, Zach. Did he say anything yesterday or this morning that might give us some idea where to look for him? Was there anything he might have done today that was unusual?" she asked.

"I can't think of anything. He was supposed to talk to Jake about helping us look for Jolie down in Fouke, but that's the only thing I know of," I said.

"Who's Jake?" Justin asked.

"He's a big, clumsy kid from Fouke. I don't know him that well but he plays on the baseball team with us," I said.

"Do you know his number, who his parents are, his last name, anything like that?" Justin asked.

"No. . . Like I said, I barely know the boy," I admitted.

"We need to find out; he might have been the last person who talked to Cam today, so he might know something. We need to call the other boys too, because he might have gotten a ride with one of them after practice. He wouldn't have tried to walk this far. If we call everybody then one of them has got to know something. Babe, do you know where we put that contact sheet they gave us last month when the boys signed up for Fall Ball? It ought to still be here somewhere," he said, turning to look at Eileen.

"Sure, it's in the kitchen in the mail holder," she said. I wasn't surprised she knew where it was without having to hunt for it; Eileen never loses anything. The contact sheet had the name, address, phone number, and parents' names of everybody on the baseball team, so we could get in touch with them if we needed to. I was glad Justin thought of it.

He got up and went to fetch the contact sheet, and after leafing through papers for a while he found it and came back into the living room.

“Okay, here it is. It looks like there’s only one Jake on the list. Jacob Golden, County Road 211, Fouke, parents Bobby and Sandra Lee. Let’s call them and see if they know anything,” he said.

I’m not dumb. As soon as I heard those names, my mind leaped ahead and I knew instantly what happened to Cameron. Like I said, I don’t believe in coincidences like that. Bobby and Sandra weren’t Jake’s parents, they were his grandparents, and he had to be the same Jacob from the Golden pod. Never mind what he was doing living with his grandparents or how he survived being “collected” by Angie Doucet or any of that stuff. He had to be the same one.

And if he was, then he of all people had reason to have a grudge against the Doucets in general and against Angie Doucet in particular, and if somebody was so full of hate that he’d set two houses on fire, then who knew what else he might do. Especially if somebody came up to him and started asking inconvenient questions.

I remembered something else, too. Jake had always been a clumsy, goofy kind of kid, and Cameron had said something about him hitting a home run a few days ago. The old Jake could never have done anything like that, but if he’d found his parents’ old wolf-stone and if he knew anything about how to use it, then he could have become a *loup-garou* and then he’d be strong and swift enough to hit all the home runs he wanted. It was the right time of year for it, too; the Hunter’s Moon had been a little over a month ago.

It explained so many things I hadn’t understood till then. . . even that silly Boggy Creek Monster t-shirt that Jolie had been wearing. She must have known who Jake was and hoped I’d figure out it was him, if she gave me the right hint. It was a pitiful poor clue, to be sure, but in the end it had turned out to be enough.

It only took an instant for all that to run through my mind, and I’m willing to admit there were still some pretty big holes in it. But when it came down to the basic outline, I knew I was right just as sure as taxes.

“Stop. Don’t call them,” I said out loud.

“Why not?” Justin asked, looking at me curiously.

“Because that’s where Cameron is, and Jolie too. I think Jake is a *loup-garou* and I think he’s got them both,” I said.

“That requires a little bit of explanation, Zach, don’t you think?” Eileen said.

So I laid it all out for them, and they listened, and when it was all said and done they agreed with me.

“We need to go down there right now,” Justin said.

“You don’t think it might be better to wait till in the morning when everybody will be gone? I know Jake will be in school, and the old guy Bobby still works somewhere. I know that from the shirt he was wearing when I saw him. I don’t know about the lady, but it’s a good bet she’ll leave at some point during the day,” I suggested.

“No, that’s not a good idea. If we knew Cam was safe, then I’d say yes. But we don’t know what might happen to him or Jolie between now and then. We don’t dare wait that long,” Justin said, and then he turned to Eileen.

“Babe, you stay here, and me and Zach will go see what we can do. Keep your phone turned on and be ready to do whatever you need to do if we call,” he told her.

Eileen doesn’t rattle very easily, but this was one time when I could tell she was scared, whether she admitted it or not. She was never like that during the whole time we fought the Trewick pod, not even when they were shooting at us in the rock quarry. But we were all together then, and she wasn’t having to watch us go off into danger and leave her behind. That’s hard to do. But there was the baby to think about, and she knew what she had to do.

“Be safe, both of you,” was all she said, but the way she kissed Justin before we left said more than any words ever could.

Justin was quieter than usual on the way down there. He’s never much of a talker while he drives, but he does sing to himself or listen to the radio sometimes. Not tonight, though, and his mood rubbed off on me too. I told him which way to go when we got to Fouke, and the rest of the time I kept my mouth shut. He slowed down a bit when we came to the burnt-out trailer.

“I don’t think we should just go up and knock on their front door; not yet. If they’ve got Cam and Jolie then they wouldn’t tell us anyway, and it would just tip them off. Might even get us nabbed,” he said.

“So what do you think we should do, then?” I asked.

“I think we should park a little bit down the road and scout the place to see what’s up first. I wish we knew if they had dogs or not,” he fretted.

I knew what he meant without asking; dogs bark, and that would attract attention and maybe even cause somebody to come outside and see what was up. We had to avoid that at all costs.

“All we can do is hope,” I said.

Justin parked in that same driveway where I had my run-in with Bobby Lee, and then killed the lights and the engine.

We got out and shut the doors as quiet as we could, and then stealthily started walking down the gravel road. It would have been shorter to cut straight through the woods, but Justin said it was too easy to get lost out there in the dark. Besides that, people might possibly believe it if you said you had car trouble or some such thing if you were walking along the road at night. It’s a lot harder to convince them you’re not up to no good if they catch you sneaking through the woods behind their house.

So we stuck to the road for the time being, our shoes crunching softly on the gravel. It was so quiet we could hear every footstep.

Maybe my imagination was running away with me, but it felt just like the calm before a terrible storm hits. Sometimes my mind is entirely too good at feeding me images like that, especially when I least want to think about them. I hadn’t had to fight a *loup-garou* since that last time in Caddo Gap two years ago, and I wasn’t anxious to do it again.