



Wolverine Island

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BY

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Salinger

The wolverine stood motionless in the shadow of a juniper tree straining for a glimpse of the distant mainland. Behind him in the shelter of the craggy den, seven adult members of his little colony eyed him expectantly while four mewling kits milled blindly about their mothers.

The island was all-too-familiar to the wolverine. Every tree, rock and shrub had been seared into his memory . . . even the forbidden area beyond the fence.

The wolverine could feel the rage rising within him. He had been a mere kit when he and his mate had been trapped and brought to this island - and now they were at the precarious mercy of this man for their very food. But no more . . . No more would he be dependent on the man's handouts. From now on he would feed only on the animals that the man kept - nothing else until he escaped.

Escape.

It was all that kept him going, yet as the days passed one into another the situation seemed to grow more and more impossible. Again he looked out over the tangles of barbed wire which wound through the trees and disappeared into the distance.

It was not the fence guarding the man's livestock which kept them trapped on the island, but the swift current of the river. Yet the wolverine knew that they must escape, and escape soon, for he sensed that the time was short and his days were numbered.

Chapter 1

Letter to Uncle Charlie

Caleb Rupert had known for some time that his upbringing was a little out of the ordinary. Despite the fact that he wouldn't turn twelve until the fall, he and his mother had already moved five-and-a-half times during the past two years - a routine which now ran almost like clockwork. They would move, live somewhere for a few months then quietly pack their things in the middle of the night and slip quietly out of town . . . to another faceless city . . . another waitressing job for his mother . . . and another school for Caleb.

Not many people would have suspected anything out of the ordinary just by looking at him, though. For starters he was an alright-looking guy – curly, brown hair and greenish eyes . . . maybe a bit too quiet – at least according to his new best friend, George Kershane. Most of the kids at school thought he was alright. He even suspected that Karen-lee Rogers, the prettiest girl in sixth grade, liked him.

Now that his grandmother had passed on though, his mom was the only family Caleb had left. His dad wasn't around much anymore. In fact, for the last couple of years his dad had been the cause of most of his mother's problems. The guy was in jail most of the time, and had developed a disturbing obsession about having Caleb live with him – something Caleb and his mother wanted no part of.

He, Granny Atchison and his mother had often reminisced about what a great guy his dad had been - that is until three years ago when he'd been in a bad car accident.

"Head went clear through the front windshield," Granny reminded him. "Shoulda buckled up . . ."

It was the second-last day of June. School was barely over and Caleb was already dreading the changes the coming weeks would bring, for he knew that summer was usually the time his mother pulled up stakes – and lately he'd seen the signs. This move, however, would be his most difficult ever, for George Kershane was the best friend he'd ever had.

These were the thoughts that were tumbling around in Caleb's mind when he joined his mom for supper in the kitchen of their tiny apartment.

"How was your first day of freedom, Sunshine?" she asked, placing a large bowl of

spaghetti on the table.

“Not bad.” Caleb spooned a generous portion onto his plate. “George and I spent most of the afternoon at the pool.”

His mother sat there for a moment – a frozen-kind-of-smile on her face, she then reached into the pocket of her waitress uniform and pulled out a long, white envelope. “Read this, Caleb!” she said, handing it to him.

“Can't it wait until after supper?” he asked.

“It's okay,” she said. “It's not that bad.”

Caleb pulled the letter from the envelope and took a deep breath.

Dear Uncle Charlie,

More than a year ago you received a letter from your sister, Mary Atchison, describing a serious situation we were afraid might develop regarding my son, Caleb. In your return letter you promised that if things ever got too bad you would let Caleb come and live with you for awhile. Unfortunately it has now reached that point, so I am sending Caleb to stay with you for the next few weeks. I will be back in contact with you before the end of the summer with instructions. Thank you so much for your timely assistance.

Your niece,

Letitia Rupert

Caleb looked up. “Who is Uncle Charlie?” he asked. “I've never heard you mention him before.”

“That's Charlie Giller – Granny Atchison's brother. Except for your dad, he's the only living relative either of us have - so we can be thankful for small mercies.”

“You can't be serious, Mom,” Caleb said, glancing back down at the letter. “You can't expect me to go and live with some old man I've never even met.”

Caleb's mother just sat there for a moment, playing with the tissue in her hand. “I've

learned that your father is in town, Caleb,” she finally said. "He must know we're living here."

“Dad's here in the city?” Caleb stammered.

She nodded. “Apparently he’s staying in some run-down motel on the other side of town. I also learned that he has purchased two airplane tickets to Mexico City.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Caleb said. “That means he’s leaving town.”

“Two tickets, Caleb,” his mother said. “One for him, one for you.”

“For me?”

“Your dad told us that as soon as he was out of jail, he’d come for you. Remember?”

“But our lawyer said . . .”

“He’s come for you, Caleb,” she said simply. "He's planning on taking you with him to Mexico."

“That’s why you wrote the letter to Uncle Charlie then,” Caleb finally said.

His mother nodded.

“Why don’t we just leave together like we always do?”

"It may be different this time," she said. "I've been talking to a neurosurgeon at the local hospital. I gave her all of your dad's medical records and she feels that a simple medical procedure may be all your dad needs. His x-rays indicate that of piece of his skull is pressing against his brain - a part of the brain that often influences behaviour."

Caleb's eyes widened. "You mean to say that this doctor thinks an operation might bring Dad back to the way he was before the accident?"

"She's hopeful, Caleb. But first we have to convince your dad to get that operation. That's going to be the hard part - his injuries have made him so paranoid."

Caleb stared open-mouthed at his mother, his mind spinning. "But how can we do that? We both know what he's like now. It's impossible to reason with him."

His mother edged closer to him, her eyes suddenly alive with excitement. "I know, Caleb, but it may not be as hopeless as it seems. I've also been meeting with a lawyer who has had experience with this sort of thing - and he's actually agreed to take our case at no charge - *pro bono*, they call it."

"That's really good of him," Caleb said. "Big-time lawyers are usually expensive."

"This lawyer thinks that with your dad's medical history and his record with the police,

we may be able to force him to undergo intensive therapy - and from there, he'll hopefully agree to the surgery."

"That's a lot of *ifs*," Caleb said doubtfully.

"Yes," His mother agreed. "But it's more hope than we've had in a long time, isn't it?"

Caleb nodded. "So why are you shipping me off to Uncle Charlie's then? Why now?"

"If you're not around it will remove one major obsession for your dad. This lawyer is going to come right out and tell him that you are living in a place where he'll never find you in a million years, and if he ever wants to see you again, he'd better start cooperating with us. It's just about the only weapon we have in our arsenal."

"But if Uncle Charlie is our only living relative, won't that be the first place Dad looks?"

"He doesn't know Charlie exists," she said simply. "I didn't even know that Granny Atchison had a brother until a couple of years ago, and we never mentioned him to your dad. Uncle Charlie has turned out to be our ace-up-the-sleeve. It's the one place on earth you'll be safe . . . and even if your dad found out about Uncle Charlie, the old man lives so far off in the bush it's unlikely your dad would get anywhere near an experienced woodsman like that."

Caleb's heart sank. He knew it was pointless to argue with his mother when her mind was made up. He heaved a heavy sigh, folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. "So where exactly does Uncle Charlie live?"

"A town called Roaring Creek – it's more than 500 miles straight north of here, and the only way you can get there is by train."

The idea of traveling to some far-off place to stay with an old man he'd never even met before made Caleb's head swim. "Why can't the police just arrest Dad?"

"He hasn't done anything wrong yet," she said simply. "And even if they did arrest him, he'd just pop up again – and who knows, the next time we might not have any warning." She reached over and patted Caleb's arm. "Just imagine what a great adventure this will be for you, Caleb – living in the Canadian wilderness. You'll learn so much - and don't worry, it's just for the summer."

Caleb peered doubtfully down at the address on the envelope. "Are you mailing this letter, Mom?"

"No, Caleb. You're going to deliver it to Uncle Charlie yourself. You'll leave first thing in

the morning. And you can't tell anyone where you're going – not even George.”

“I'll just be staying with Uncle Charlie for the summer, right?”

“Of course. By then your father will be on the road to recovery and we can start a new life together - all three of us - just like in the old days.”

Caleb looked back down at the letter, folded it in half and stuffed it into his pocket. "We hope," he said doubtfully.

Chapter 2

The Getaway

Caleb woke up with a start, his bedroom pitch-black. He turned his head and glanced at the luminous, green numbers of his alarm clock: 4:20 A.M. He held his breath. Everything was eerily quiet, yet he knew instinctively that something had awakened him.

Silently, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, pulled on his pants and shirt and slipped into his sneakers. He made his way over to his bedroom door, eased it open and stood in the darkness for a moment, listening for the sounds of his mother in the bedroom next to his. All was quiet, yet still something was not quite right.

But what could it be? Their apartment was on the third floor, and a security door barred entrance to anyone but the building's tenants.

He edged slowly out into the hall, his hands groping the air before him as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Suddenly he felt himself being yanked backward, a rough hand clamped hard over his mouth. The powerful arms dragged him back toward his bedroom, the grip tightening. He could feel his heart beating frantically as he was spun around, the hand somehow remaining clamped over his mouth.

"Shhh!"

It was his father, his eyes narrow and threatening. "We don't want to wake up your mother," he whispered.

Caleb could taste the sweat and grime pressing into his mouth, and he could feel his father's other hand gripping a handful of hair on the back of his head.

"Come on," his father whispered hoarsely, pushing him back down the hallway toward the main door. "We gotta get out of here. If your mother wakes up I'll have to shut her up - so not a sound!" He stopped suddenly. "Where's your passport? We'll need your passport." He removed his hand slowly from Caleb's mouth, leaving it hovering inches away.

"Don't think about waking your mother. I don't want to have to hurt her - but I will!"

Caleb nodded dumbly. "My passport's in my dresser," he whispered.

The older man gave him a shove back towards his bedroom. "Get it."

Caleb slipped back into the darkened bedroom and felt his way over to his dresser. He

slid the second drawer open and fumbled blindly for a moment until his hand finally brushed against his passport.

As his heart rate settled down his mind seemed to clear at the same time. He knew he couldn't do anything to get away as long as they were in the apartment, but once they were outside, he'd make a break for it. His father's silhouette reappeared out of the darkness.

"I got it," Caleb whispered, rejoining his father in the hallway.

"Good." The older man grabbed Caleb by the arm and propelled him toward the exit. "Let's get a move on." The words had barely left his mouth when a shadow brushed by Caleb in the darkness. Almost at the same instant there was the sound of a fierce struggle behind him. He turned to see the darkened shadow of his mother hurl herself headfirst into the midsection of his father. Even in the darkness he could see his father stagger backward, crashing into an open broom closet across from his mother's bedroom. In the same instant his mother quickly slammed the heavy closet door and Caleb heard the distinct *clicking* sound of the old fashioned lock.

The hallway light flashed on and his mother was standing beside him - her hair dishevelled, his eyes wide. Caleb was surprised to see that she was already fully dressed.

"Get your suitcase," she said. "The one we packed last night. Hurry!"

Caleb could now hear the sounds of his dad struggling around inside the broom closet.

"Hurry!" his mother repeated.

Caleb raced back into his bedroom, scooped up the suitcase that he'd packed only a few hours earlier and rejoined his mother by the front door of the apartment. Car keys in hand she flung open the door and the two of them burst into the corridor.

"Stairs!" his mother said. "That closet door can't hold for long." Together they tore down the two flights to the lobby then out into the parking lot.

Caleb could feel his heart sink as they approached their car - ten-years-old and as temperamental as a spoiled house cat.

"I just hope it starts," he muttered as he threw his suitcase into the back and climbed into the front passenger seat.

"Lock the doors!" his mother said, fumbling with the keys.

Caleb pushed the locks down on all four doors while his mother turned the ignition and the car's motor began slowly rolling over.

"Come on," she muttered under her breath. "Come on . . . "

Caleb glanced out the window into the shadows of the small parking garage. A few feet away a dark figure emerged from the stairwell. It paused for an instant, looking wildly about, then slowly began moving toward them, drawn to the sound of the car's starter.

"Come on," Caleb said. "Start!"

He watched transfixed as his dad moved quickly to the driver's door. He yanked up on the handle, but the lock held.

"Open up!" his dad yelled. "You'd better open up if you know what's good for you." He paused for an instant, looking around. Something in a corner of the garage caught his eye. He lurched toward it, bent over and scooped the object up. It was a tire iron.

"Hurry, Mom," Caleb cried out. He'd no sooner got the words out than the engine caught and the car roared to life.

His mother rammed the car into reverse - the same instant his dad took a savage swing with the tire iron, bringing it smashing down on the window beside Caleb's mother. There was a terrific crash - pieces of glass flying all over the inside of the car.

The car lurched backward, coming to an abrupt stop, then Caleb's mom slammed the car into *Drive*, and tramped the gas pedal. With a terrific squeal of tires the car jumped forward, throwing Caleb against the side window. It hurdled around a corner toward the exit - barely missing Caleb's dad who gave an off-balance swing at the front windshield as they passed.

In another second the car was out of the parking garage and careening down the street in front of the apartment building. Caleb's mother ignored the stop sign at the end of the block, taking the corner so sharply that for an instant Caleb thought that the car was going to roll.

For the next ten minutes they tore through the city - ignoring traffic lights . . . stop signs. Caleb was turned toward the back window, looking for any sign of pursuit.

"He's not coming, Mom," Caleb finally said.

His mother nodded weakly.

"We should go by the police station," Caleb suggested.

"Not now," she said. "I'll stop by there later this morning and let them know what happened. Right now we've got to get you on that train to Uncle Charlie's."

Caleb searched his mother's face. *Uncle Charlie's?* It seemed like a million years ago that

they'd made their plans.

"It's more important than ever that we get you up north where your father can't find you . . ." She glanced over at Caleb. "One good thing should result from this little episode. It should force your father into therapy."

Caleb turned back to the dimly lit streets before him and leaned back against the head rest. "If not, we'd better hope that crazy man is never able to find me."

Chapter 3

Pete and Ike

The train conductor peered down at the ticket stub and shook his head. “I know you’ve got a ticket to Roaring Creek, young fella, but this here is as far north as we go. Fortune Head is the end of the line.” He handed the stub back to Caleb. “Go see the station master. Roaring Creek can’t be too far off.”

Caleb picked up his suitcase and made his way down the platform toward the station house. He couldn’t remember ever being so tired . . . He’d been stuck on the train most of yesterday and all of last night, and for the past several hours all he’d been able to see in the moon’s dim outline were trees, trees, and more trees. Finally . . . after more than 24 hours on a hard, cramped seat in an unbelievably ancient passenger car, they had pulled, hissing and clanking into the last stop on the rail line – Fortune Head.

The sight of the town filled Caleb with a renewed sense of despair. Fortune Head was little more than a few dozen ramshackled buildings scattered about the train station. Surely Roaring Creek, his uncle’s village, would be a lot nicer than this.

Caleb entered the station house to find a wrinkled, old man wearing a tattered engineer’s cap sitting behind the counter. He gave a low grunt when Caleb handed him the ticket stub.

“Roaring Creek,” he muttered. “Nobody’s had a ticket for that place since George Washington wore knee pants - fact is, the railway don’t go in there no more. They tore the tracks out when the last mine closed.” He scratched his thinning white hair and studied the exhausted boy. “You’re pretty young to be travelling all this way by yourself.”

“I’ve come up here to stay with my uncle, Charles Giller.”

“Well,” the station master said with a long sigh. “I suppose since you bought a ticket to Roaring Creek, the railway oughta make sure you get there in one piece.” He gave the boy a beckoning wave. “Come along. I have an idea”

The old man led Caleb out of the station house and down the street to a dilapidated house set well back from the gravel road. The front yard was the most dishevelled mess that Caleb had ever seen, with bits of every conceivable piece of junk littering the long unkept grass. Perhaps it was only an optical illusion, but it seemed, too, that the house leaned decidedly to the left . . .

The stationmaster marched up onto the small porch and pounded loudly on the door. From inside Caleb could hear a faint shuffling noise, and an instant later the door was yanked open. Two unsmiling boys – both about Caleb’s age – stepped out onto the porch. They were heavy-set and scowling, their hair shaved right down to their scalps.

“Pete . . . Ike, is your dad home?” the station master asked.

“He ain’t,” the larger of the two boys answered.

The station master paused for a moment. “Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“Nope.”

The station master lifted his railway cap and ran his gnarled fingers through his thinning hair, his eyes going from one boy to the other, a perplexed look on his face.

“This here boy needs a ride out to Roaring Creek,” he finally said. “I was hoping your dad could take him.”

“How much if *we* take him?” the one boy asked.

The stationmaster thought for a long moment. “You know that old speeder out behind the station? The one we once used to run up and down the tracks?”

“The one with the busted axle?”

“That’s right. You take this here boy up to Roaring Creek and it’s yours – provided you keep it off the tracks Tuesday and Friday mornings when the train’s due.”

Caleb stirred uneasily. He wasn’t at all sure he even wanted to put his life into the hands of these two thugs. In fact he was quite sure he wanted nothing to do with them. “How far is it?” he asked. “Maybe I could just walk.”

The two boys laughed. “It ain’t that simple, Greenhorn,” the one said. “It’d take you all day - that is if you weren’t eaten by a bear along the way.”

“Well,” the stationmaster said impatiently. “What’s it gonna be? I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Alright,” one of the boys said. “We’ll take him.”

“Just make sure he gets there.” The old man warned. “I’ll be checking.” With that he turned on his heels and headed back down the street to the station.

Caleb stood awkwardly on the porch as the two boys sized him up. “I’m Caleb,” he said, extending his hand.

“Where you from, anyway?” One of them asked, ignoring Caleb’s hand.

“Five hundred miles south of here.”

“So, why are you going to Roaring Creek? You some kind of a tourist?”

“Maybe he’s a prospector,” the other boy said with a grin. “Gonna reopen the old Chesterville Mine.”

“He don’t look like no prospector,” his brother said, squeezing Caleb’s bicep. “Way too scrawny.”

“What did you say your name was?” the other boy asked.

“Caleb. What’s yours?”

“Pete,” the stockier of the two boys replied. “Pistol Pete to my friends. This here’s my simple-minded brother, Ike.”

“I ain’t simple-minded.”

“Well, maybe not compared to most *city* boys,” Pete agreed, and both boys laughed.

“So how are you getting me to Roaring Creek? If we’re walking, we’d better get going.”

Pete smirked. “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t walk all the way to Roaring Creek. It ain’t safe. Besides, it’d take too long. Come on.” The two boys led the way off the porch and around the corner of the house to the back yard.

Caleb took one step into a large fenced-in area and froze. Four huge, disgruntled-looking husky dogs stood a few feet away looking menacingly in his direction. Caleb quickly retreated back out of the yard.

“Get back in here,” Pete ordered. “They’re only dangerous when they smell fear on somebody – so you’d better start acting tough, City Boy.”

Pete and Ike ducked into a shed and returned a moment later with their arms full of leather leashes.

In no time they had attached all four huskies to the leashes, then led the dogs across the yard to the gate. Caleb retreated a couple of steps as the huskies began sniffing and gazing threateningly up at him with their disturbingly opaque eyes.

Leaving their guest to fend for himself, Pete and Ike disappeared once more into the shed, then reappeared almost immediately, dragging behind them a long, narrow wagon.

“What on earth is that?” Caleb asked.

“It’s what we use in the summer instead of a sled,” Pete replied simply. “It’s perfect for the bush trails around here – as you’ll soon find out. There’s a gravel road into Roaring Creek, but the bush trail we’ll be taking is way shorter.”

The peculiar contraption looked a bit like a go-cart Caleb’s dad had once built for him, only this one sported four tiny automobile tires, like the ones from a Mini Cooper. It also had two smallish bucket seats set one behind the other, and a narrow platform on the back.

In a jiffy the boys had hitched the four huskies to the vehicle, then plunked themselves down into the two seats – the reins firmly in Pete’s hands. “Hop on,” Ike said, indicating the platform behind his seat. Caleb stepped onto the wagon and slipped his suitcase between himself and the seat in front of him. He leaned forward, gripping the back of Ike’s seat.

“Do I have to stand the whole way?”

All four huskies were now turned expectantly to their masters.

“Let’s go, dogs!” Pete yelled.

The huskies leapt out of the yard, the wagon careening precariously as they shot out onto the dusty main street of town with Caleb holding on for dear life.

In only a few seconds they left Fortune Head’s one sorry street and were charging like a runaway express train down a narrow pathway into the woods. Almost instantly the dense forest closed-in over them.

Chapter 4

Catfish

Up and down hills, through shallow streams and muddy swamps they bounced and banged - negotiating a trail so narrow that Caleb was forever ducking the branches of trees that slapped at his face. Further and further into the forest the huskies mushed, never tiring . . . only slowing now and then for impossibly sharp bends and the occasional rocky outcropping. As they ploughed deeper and deeper into the forest, Caleb felt a growing sense of unease creeping over him. *Where did his uncle live anyway?*

Finally, just when he was sure his fingers would fall off from gripping the back of Ike's seat and his legs give out from exhaustion, they crested a small hill. Pete hauled back on the leashes, and they rolled to a stop.

Caleb stepped from the platform and gazed down the trail before them. There, in a small clearing stood a motley collection of run-down buildings, and beyond the settlement was what appeared to be a large lake – its flat surface sparkling in the late morning sun.

“This is Roaring Creek?” Caleb asked incredulously.

“Not sure why they call it Roaring Creek,” Ike stated matter-of-factly. “That’s actually a river down there.”

“The creek runs into the river over yonder,” Pete offered, pointing into the trees beyond the settlement. “Anyway, this is as far as we take you.”

“I guess my uncle must live in one of those buildings,” Caleb said, picking up his suitcase.

Pete climbed from the wagon and walked up to Caleb, his arms folded across his chest.

He pushed his face right up to Caleb’s. “That’ll be five bucks, City Boy,” he said. “Call it protection from the bears and timber wolves.”

“I don’t have any money,” Caleb said. “My mom only gave me enough for supper on the train last night.”

Pete paused. “Well, maybe you got something we’d be interested in.” Pete snatched the suitcase from Caleb’s hand, undid the two silver snaps and dumped the contents out on the path. A jumble of clothing tumbled into the dirt at their feet.

Caleb was too surprised to do more than stand there with his mouth open as Pete kicked at the clothing to see if there was anything of interest.

“I don’t have anything!” Caleb protested.

“Let’s see your wallet,” Ike demanded, cracking his knuckles in Caleb’s face.

Caleb was about to reply when a sudden voice sounded from the forest behind him.

“You boys got yourself a death wish?”

All three boys whirled in the direction of the unexpected voice. Leaning casually against a tall birch tree, stood a girl no older than Caleb. She had long, scraggly brown hair and was wearing a faded t-shirt and baggy green army pants.

“This is private property,” she said in a low voice. “So what are you doing here?”

“This ain’t private property, Catfish,” Pete said with a scowl. “It’s a public path – so back off.”

“You back off, you lice-laden nitwit!” The girl took a step closer, and as she did, she pulled a large, home-made slingshot from her back pocket. Quickly she notched a stone in the pouch and aimed it straight at Pete’s head.

“Take it easy, you dumb yokel,” Pete protested.

He’d no sooner got the words out than a rock the size of a large marble sang past his head, missing him by only a whisper. In one quick motion the girl had reloaded the slingshot and turned it on Ike.

“We’re just dropping off this city boy,” Pete shouted, his voice rising several octaves. “That’s all. Now put that thing away before you take someone’s eye out.”

“Hit the road, Dog Breath.” She took another step toward them, stretching the taunt pieces of rubber even further.

“Take a hike, Catfish,” Ike protested. “It’s a free country.”

“We’ll see about that,” the girl said, letting go with another rock - this one just missing Ike’s head and smacking into a tree beside the pathway.

Both Pete and Ike scrambled behind the wagon, crouching down to provide themselves a bit of protection.

Catfish stepped in between the wagon and the four husky dogs, who, oblivious to the drama unfolding around them, lay panting on the pathway, their great, pink tongues lolling

almost onto the ground beneath them.

Suddenly Catfish dropped to her knees and yanked the harness free of the wagon. She then whipped the traces up over her head and raced alongside the dogs to the front of the team, releasing all four dogs in one swift motion.

“Git – git – go on home you mangy mutts,” she yelled, placing a well-aimed kick at the rear end of the last husky.

Immediately all four dogs sprang to their feet, turned and tore off down the trail the way they had come - quickly disappearing from sight.

Pete and Ike jumped up and lunged toward Catfish. “Why you, dirty little . . .” Pete shouted. His tirade was cut short, for Catfish once again had the slingshot aimed straight at his head.

“Get yourselves and that contraption out of here or I’ll bounce this rock off your thick skull,” she said.

“But it’s gonna take forever to pull our wagon all the way back to town,” Ike protested.

“Then you’d better get started,” Catfish said unsympathetically. “It’ll be dark before you know it.”

“We’re gonna get you for this, Catfish,” Pete said in a low voice. “You wait and see.” He bent over and picked up the traces. “A person can’t even do a good deed anymore without getting waylaid.”

“You’d better save your energy,” Catfish suggested. “You wouldn’t want to be out in these woods after dark.”

“Let’s just go, Pete,” Ike said.

“We’ll be back,” Pete said as they started back down the pathway, dragging the wagon behind them. “Then we’ll see how big you talk, Catfish.”

“Sure. Come on back anytime, fellas, but make sure to bring your brains next time.”

Catfish turned to Caleb, scowling darkly. “Ain’t you with those two lunkheads?”

“I’ve come to stay with my uncle,” Caleb said, picking up the clothing that Pete and Ike had strewn all over the path. “You must know him. His name is Charles Giller.”

Catfish grunted. “Then who might you be?”

“Caleb Rupert. And you’re Catfish?”

The girl nodded absently as she looked Caleb up and down. “You come to live with your uncle?” she asked. “Now ain’t that the livin’ end?”

“Why?” Caleb asked. “He still lives here, doesn’t he?”

“Well, he don’t actually live in Roaring Creek.” A trace of a grin crossed her face as she turned and gazed out over the wide river stretching into the distance.

“See that island over yonder,” she said. “Way out in the middle of the river?”

Caleb squinted his eyes. “Yes.”

”Well that’s where you’re dimwitted old uncle lives.”

Caleb frowned. “He lives on an island?” he said. “But how do I get over there?”

“Same way you got yourself here, I guess,” she said. “Pay someone to take you.”

“Maybe my uncle can pick me up.”

Catfish laughed. “Good idea. Why don’t you send him a text message? Tell him to get on over here – you’ve come for a visit.”

“A text message?” Caleb said. “But I ...”

“Never mind,” she interrupted. “Believe it or not, getting you over to that island will be more of a chore than it might look. The current in that river is stronger than a bull moose.”

Caleb finished cramming the last of his clothes into the suitcase and followed Catfish down the trail toward the settlement. “What’s the river called, anyway?” he asked.

“The Sourdough.”

“And my uncle’s island – does it have a name?”

Catfish turned and looked back at him over her shoulder. “Islands up here don’t usually have official names,” she said. “But for some reason that crazy old uncle of yours has taken to calling it Wolverine Island.”

Chapter 5

Roaring Creek

Caleb followed Catfish down the hill and in amongst the buildings sprawled along the shore of The Sourdough. It was the strangest-looking settlement that Caleb had ever seen – even more so than Fortune Head.

A tall, odd-shaped structure on the edge of the village caught his attention. It was about the same height as some of the farm silos Caleb had seen in pictures, only this building was rectangular with a slanted, peaked roof. “What kind of building is that?” he asked Catfish as they passed in front of it.

“It’s the headframe of the old Chesterville Mine,” Catfish said. “You’d never guess it, but once there was more than a half-dozen gold-producing mines around here. Everyone says there’s still lots of gold in these here parts.”

An old woman with long white hair and wearing a baggy grey dress stepped from a nearby building. “What you got there, Cat?” she asked, making room for two smaller children who squeezed past her.

“This here’s Caleb. He’s come to live with old Charlie Giller.”

“Do tell,” the old woman said, eyeing Caleb thoughtfully.

“This is my granny, Auntie Mona,” Catfish said. “And these two brats are my cousins, Hopie and Ella.

Caleb nodded at Catfish’s little family. “Pleased to meet you,” he said, curious why Catfish would call her grandmother, *Auntie Mona*.

“My real name is Brandon Manitoba,” Catfish said. “But folks call me Catfish.”

Caleb was unsure what to think of that. *Brandon Manitoba* seemed like it should be the name of a place, not a person. Perhaps Catfish was pulling his leg.

“So how come you’re gonna live with old Charlie?” Auntie Mona asked.

Caleb shuffled his feet awkwardly. “My mom’s busy for a few weeks, so Uncle Charlie said I could come for a visit.”

The old woman stepped out of the doorway, the two small children following her into the yard. “So you is Charlie Giller’s nephew,” she said. “You seem a might young for that.”

Caleb smiled. "Well, he's actually my mother's uncle."

"How on earth did a city boy like you end up here?" Catfish asked.

"I came by train. It took me a day and a night to get here."

"That's really something for a young lad," Auntie Mona said agreeably.

Caleb looked out across the water to the distant island. "So how do I get over to Uncle Charlie's?"

"Oh, I reckon Catfish here will take you," Auntie Mona replied. "Your uncle don't get over to the mainland much. He's a tad high-falutin'."

"He's a cantankerous old bog sucker," Catfish said with a scowl.

"Now, now, Cat," Auntie Mona objected. "I think you're being a way to hard on the old man, after all, he does let you and the girls swim over on his beach."

An awkward silence followed Auntie Mona's words.

"So this was once a bustling mining camp?" Caleb finally remarked, anxious to change the subject.

"That's true," Auntie Mona said. "At one time more than a hundred hard-rock miners worked the Chesterville. Now all that's left is the four of us, plus old Charlie and Pappa Zeke."

"Pappa Zeke?"

"Pappa Zeke's my brother," Auntie Mona informed him. "He's out cutting lines."

Caleb turned to Catfish. "Do you have a boat I can borrow," he asked. "One that will take me over to Uncle Charlie's?"

Catfish's eyes narrowed. "What's in it for me?"

"Like I told Pete and Ike, I don't have any money." "You got anything worth having?"

He thought for a moment then flipped open his suitcase and pulled a small plastic container of soap bubbles from the side pouch. Gingerly he removed the lid and dipped a ring-shaped gizmo into the soapy water. He then lifted it to his mouth and blew gently into the ring. As he did, several brightly coloured soap bubbles appeared in the air before them.

"Deal!" Catfish snatched the container and blower from his hand. As she did, Hopie and Ella crowded in beside her, stretching out their pudgy hands, trying to capture the bubbles as she blew several more into the air above them. Catfish finally clapped the lid back on and tucked it into one of the pockets of her green army pants. "You kids can play with this later if you mind

your p's and q's." Without another word she set off toward the river.

Suitcase in hand, Caleb followed Catfish in the direction of a tall poplar tree growing beside the shoreline. As they approached it, Caleb noticed that a steel cable was attached to the tree - and it stretched out across the water, all the way to the island – several hundred yards distant. And there, pulled up on the shore beneath the poplar, was a raft.

The raft appeared to be about the size of Caleb's bedroom floor back home. It was made from about two dozen logs, each the diameter of a person's leg, and roped together in three places. Standing waist-high in the middle of the strange-looking craft was some kind of mechanical device through which the steel cable passed. A large metal crank protruded from its side.

"This is how we're getting over to Uncle Charlie's?" Caleb asked as he followed Catfish aboard.

"How else?" Catfish pushed them out from shore and took her place by the hand crank. "Like I told you before, the current is so strong the only way to get over to that island is on a boat with a powerful motor - like the one your uncle owns - or by winching ourselves along using this crank. As you can see, the cable is attached to that there poplar tree, and runs all the way to the island where it's looped around another tree." As she turned the handle, the raft moved slowly out from shore. Catfish gave Auntie Mona and her two cousins a wave. "I'll be back in awhile," she called. "If you hear gunshots, send Pappa Zeke over to collect our bodies."

Caleb frowned.

"Great leapin' salamanders," Catfish said, her face breaking into a grin. "Can't you take a joke? Besides, how would Pappa Zeke get over to the island? We've got the only raft."

Chapter 6

Wolverine Island

The waters of The Sourdough were unbelievably clear. Caleb knew that the river had to be deep, yet the old logs, rocks and clamshells strewn along the bottom were as clear as if he was looking into a shallow creek. Here and there small schools of fish darted frantically out of their path as Caleb and Catfish swept slowly by.

Caleb could tell that the pull of the current was unbelievably strong, bowing the steel cable in a great arc as it attempted to draw the raft from its course. He was also impressed at the strength and endurance of Catfish, who *cranked* the raft steadily through the water.

“What kind of a house does Uncle Charlie have on the island?” Caleb asked.

“Nothing fancy,” Catfish said. “Just a log cabin.”

Caleb looked at her quizzically. “You said he owns a motor boat?”

“He’s got a big pontoon boat,” Catfish said. “Years ago he built this here raft and strung the cable, but two summers ago he bought the pontoon boat, so now I’m the only one who still uses the raft.”

“Why did you call him a *bog sucker* a few minutes ago?”

Catfish grinned. “A bog sucker is a big, boney, uneatable fish. It mopes about in the swamps and is no good for nothin’ - sort of like your uncle.”

Caleb bristled at Catfish’s harsh words. “Is he that hard to get along with?”

Catfish paused, taking a break from turning the crank. “I guess not,” she said. “Auntie Mona says that old Charlie’s mellowed quite a bit the last few years. But he likes to keep to himself – always working on some hair-brained scheme.”

“What do you mean?” Caleb asked.

“Oh, like two summers ago he decided to build a hydro electric dam over at the falls. He brought in all these bags of cement, and collected hundreds of rocks...”

“There’s a waterfalls around here?” Caleb interrupted.

“Sure.” Catfish pointed off in the distance, just down the shoreline from Roaring Creek. “Over where the river narrows and then turns north – that’s Catchewana Falls.” She paused, her eyes smiling. “Now, should this here raft come loose from that cable, you’d get a real close-up

look at them falls in an awful hurry.”

Caleb felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “Do you mean to say we’d be swept over the falls if this cable should break?”

Catfish nodded. “Don’t worry. That cable won’t be breaking anytime soon. It’s made of high-grade steel.”

“Are the falls very big?”

“I reckon they’re higher than some of them trees yonder.”

Caleb thought for a moment. “So my uncle does get off the island from time to time. Does he ever go into town for supplies – and the mail?”

“Now and then, but he really don’t need much store-bought stuff. He’s got a small farm - and he hunts and fishes and traps. Of course there’s things everybody needs at the Hudson Bay Company store - ammunition, sugar, salt, flour . . . books.”

“Books?” Caleb echoed. “Uncle Charlie likes to read?”

“No. But I do!”

Caleb eyed Catfish with renewed interest. “Do you go to school in town?” he asked.

Catfish grinned. “Nah. I’m what you call, home-schooled.”

“Home-schooled? Who teaches you?”

“Auntie Mona.” She paused. “But she really ain’t much help, seeing as she don’t know how to read. Mostly I teach myself - and Hopie and Ella.”

“How did you get to know Pete and Ike?”

“Oh they come out here now and then to fish and hunt. And I see them sometimes when we go into town.”

“Do you walk all the way into town?”

“Not likely. We take Auntie Mona’s ATV.”

“ATV?”

Catfish snorted. “You sure are ignorant,” she said disdainfully. “Why that’s an all-terrain vehicle – like a motorcycle with four wheels.”

What a strange place, Caleb thought, suddenly feeling an almost-panicky sensation ripple through him. *What kind of a man was his uncle, anyway? What was his mother thinking to send him up here to live with some bog-sucking odd character in the middle of absolutely nowhere. In*

fact . . .

“This island is bigger than it looks,” Catfish said, interrupting his thoughts.

The raft was now entering a small cove with a long stretch of sandy beach. Caleb could see an enormous pontoon boat with two outboard motors on its stern pulled up on the shore.

“What a great spot!” Caleb said.

“I bring Hopie and Ella over here to swim now and then,” Catfish agreed. “It’s one of the few spots on the river that’s sheltered from the current and Old Charlie don’t seem to mind.” Catfish hopped into the clear shallow water. “Come on,” she said. “This raft ain’t going nowhere.”

Caleb picked up the suitcase and stepped ashore. “Where’s his cabin?” he asked, looking up at the thick wall of trees beyond the beach.

“Through there,” Catfish said, pointing toward a barely-visible gap in the trees. “There’s a trail leading up to your uncle’s place. Come on. I’m mighty curious to see what old Charlie’s up to, anyhow.”

She led the way across the beach and into the woods. Like a dark canopy the trees closed in over Caleb, and once more the same unsettling feeling came over him as it had earlier in the day with Pete and Ike.

At first it seemed that the forest, too, was holding its breath, but then Caleb slowly became aware of a multitude of sounds ... mysterious *squeaks* and *titters*, *chirps* and *peeps*.

“Are there any dangerous animals in these parts?” he asked.

“Bears and such,” Catfish offered. “But they mostly mind their own business.”

“Any timber wolves?”

“Must be, ‘cause you can hear them howling from beyond them hills over there. But I ain’t never seen one.”

Catfish stopped at the crest of a gentle rise. Through a gap in the trees Caleb could see a large cleared area and several buildings.

“This has got to be Uncle Charlie’s place,” Caleb said, setting down his suitcase and surveying the scene before them.

In the middle of the clearing stood a rustic log cabin, and just beyond it, a large weather-beaten barn. Caleb could also see several sheep and pigs rousting about in a fenced-in area, and

beyond the barn stretched a great, wide-open field, reaching all the way to the distant waters of the river.

“Pigs, sheep, couple of horses and a dog,” Catfish said scornfully. “Probably some chickens – not exactly the Ponderosa.”

“He’s got a dog?”

“If you can call that old hound a dog. Probably fifteen years old and about as useful as a one-armed fiddle player at a barn dance.” She took a deep breath. “Well, let’s get you settled in. Hopefully he won’t use us for target practice.”

Thrusting her narrow shoulders back, she led the way down the little knoll and into the clearing. Caleb could feel his heart accelerate. *What would his uncle be like? Surely he wasn’t as peculiar as Catfish let on – after all, he was Granny Atchison’s brother.*

They had almost reached the barn when the big double doors suddenly banged open and through them stepped a large man with bushy white hair and a massive walrus moustache. The man stopped in his tracks, a startled look on his face – he then quickly stepped back into the barn and returned with the meanest, ugliest-looking twelve-gauge shotgun that Caleb had ever seen, and pointed it straight at them.

Chapter 7

Uncle Charlie and the Loft

Despite the fact that Caleb was staring into the business end of a twelve gauge shotgun, the surprised look on Uncle Charlie's face almost made him smile.

At last! After two days of hard travel and a half-dozen of the oddest characters he'd ever met, he was finally face-to-face with his mysterious uncle! Caleb squinched his eyes and studied the grimacing old man standing before them.

Uncle Charlie was quite tall - sturdy-looking with broad-shoulders. His long, white hair extended down past the collar of his bush shirt, and his thick moustache covered not only his upper lip, but his entire mouth and part of his chin as well.

Caleb drew in a deep breath and was just about to introduce himself when out from the barn emerged a great, red dog. The big-eared, big-boned hound ambled good-naturedly past his shotgun-toting master, then across the yard where he began running his nose up and down the pant legs of both Caleb and Catfish - his mournful eyes occasionally glancing up at the two strangers.

"That there is Gunner Boy," Uncle Charlie said, taking a few cautious steps toward them. "What are you kids doing on this here island?" He tucked the shotgun back into the crook of his arm, the barrel now pointing at the ground. "Didn't you see my *No Trespassing* signs?"

Catfish scowled. "There ain't no signs back there," she said. "I doubt you can even read."

The old man's eyes narrowed threateningly. "Oh, I can read alright. Unlike some people in these parts I actually went to school when I was a young 'un."

Caleb reached into his pocket and fished out his mother's letter. "I think you ought to read this letter, Sir," he said.

The old man's brow furrowed as he took the envelope. Carefully he removed the letter and held it up to within a few inches of his face. Then before he had a chance to read it, he quickly brought it back down.

"Did you tell me already who you was?" he asked.

"I'm Caleb Rupert. Your sister, Mary Atchison, was my grandmother," Caleb informed him. "It's all explained in that letter."

The hound had moved from sniffing Caleb's pantlegs up to his shirt and face.

The old man returned to the letter, nodding once or twice, then looked over at the boy with renewed interest. "So, you're gonna be staying with me for a few weeks," he said. "I'd almost forgot about that letter your grandma sent me awhile back."

"We sure appreciate your help, Uncle Charlie," Caleb said.

"I was saddened to hear of your grandma's passing," he replied. "But this place really ain't nowhere for a kid to live . . ." he looked about himself helplessly.

He'd no sooner gotten the words out than Catfish stepped right up to the old man, her chin tilted defiantly, her eyes blazing. "What's he gonna do if you don't put him up? Sleep out there in the bush?" she almost shouted. "What kind of a low-life would turn his back on his own kin?"

Caleb gaped in astonishment at Catfish. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Uncle Charlie retreat a step.

"Go soak your head, girl," his uncle bellowed. "You got a bite worse than a deerfly."

"I'm Mona Manitoba's granddaughter," Catfish said proudly. "So don't think you can push me around."

Some of the air seemed to go out of Uncle Charlie. "I know who she is alright," he said with a grimace. "She took a shot at me last spring."

"I should hope you know who she is," Catfish agreed. "You've lived across the river from her for about 150 years. Anyways, the way I heard it, you was poaching beaver up on Sandpiper Creek."

"Hmmp," the old man snorted. "I got a trapping license for that area - not that Mona would care." He turned back to the letter.

"Well, as much as it pains me to admit it, this loud-mouthed girl does have a point . . . I did promise your grandmother I'd help out if need be, so I reckon you'd better stay - besides, it's only for a few weeks. What can possibly happen in a few short weeks?" He turned toward the log cabin. "Come along."

Caleb looked over at Catfish. "Thanks for the lift."

"I'll come by tomorrow," Catfish said. "When you hear me whistle, stick your head out." With that she turned and sprinted back down the trail.

Caleb followed his uncle up to the front door of the cabin.

“You don’t have to take your shoes off,” Uncle Charlie advised, “I used to be pretty fussy about that sort of thing when I first built this place, but it’s hardly worth it anymore.” He pushed open the crude plank door and led the way inside.

The darkness seemed to swallow Caleb as he stepped into the cabin, the thick log walls sucking the light out of whatever the room’s two tiny windows allowed. He could see that the cabin was comprised of one large, rather messy-looking room. Several pieces of furniture were scattered about, the most imposing piece being a large old-fashioned wood stove. Caleb’s heart sank. Judging from the kerosene lantern sitting on the table, Uncle Charlie’s place didn’t even have electricity.

The old man made his way over to the wood stove. “You know, your mama took a chance sending you up here to live with me. I ain’t never even met her before. I could be an axe-murderer or as nutty as a fruitcake for all she knows.”

“You’re pretty much our only living relative,” Caleb reminded him, continuing to take in his peculiar surroundings. Against the one wall was a bed, covered with several grey army blankets. A saggy, old couch took up most of the wall by the door. “Where will I stay?” he asked.

The old man turned, his brow wrinkling. “How old are you anyway?”

“Twelve.”

Uncle Charlie turned back to the stove. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I ain’t much good with people. But old Gunner Boy seems to think I’m tolerable.” He nodded toward the big hound who had flopped down on a scatter rug by the door.

“I’m kind of like that too,” Caleb said. “My best friend, George Kershane, says I’m too quiet when I’m with a bunch of people. I wish I was more like Catfish – the girl who brought me here from the mainland.”

Uncle Charlie grunted. “Well, I’ll bet she wishes she was more like you in some ways too. That’s generally the way these things shake down.” He waved his arm around the crowded cabin. “As you can see, there ain’t room for you to be livin’ here in the ranch house with me - it’s way too cramped for two people and a dog.” He thought for a moment. “You know – I could probably put you up in the barn.” He picked up a pail of water that had been sitting beside the

stove and clomped back across the room and out the door. Caleb quickly followed the old man out into the afternoon sunshine.

Uncle Charlie's barn looked just like the ones Caleb had seen in pictures - huge and grey, with large front doors and piles of hay stacked along the outside wall. Great fields surrounded the building on all sides and nearby he could see a few sheep grazing peacefully.

"Wow," Caleb said. "This is really some farm."

"Ranch!" Uncle Charlie corrected, leading the way into the barn. "The way I understand it, if an outfit raises beef cattle, then it's a ranch - not a farm." A row of stalls stretched down the one wall, and leaning out over two of them were the heads of the most enormous horses Caleb had ever seen.

"You raise beef cattle?" Caleb asked.

His uncle shrugged. "Not no more. But I did at one time." He set the pail of water down inside one of the stalls, nodding at the brown-coloured horse inside. "This here's Queenie," he said. The mare gave her head a solemn shake as she peered down at the newcomer. Caleb ran his hand down Queenie's nose.

"The grey's called Pearl," Uncle Charlie informed him, indicating the horse in the adjacent stall. "They're as docile as two old milk cows."

"What other animals do you have?"

"A few sheep, three pigs and a bunch of chickens. They're all outside right now. I used to keep cows but I got no use for milk and cheese and such, besides, it's a chore getting them over here - even on my pontoon boat."

Next to the stalls was a long, spindly ladder stretching up into an overhead loft. "I used to stay up there when I was building my house - but now my rheumatism's too bad for climbing ladders. There oughta be a cot and dresser up there for you to use. Go on up and take a look."

Gripping his suitcase with one hand, Caleb hoisted himself up the flimsy ladder. As he neared the open trap door he was sure he could hear the faint sounds of scratching, and the flutter of wings. *Birds?* He pulled himself up the last couple of rungs and stepped into the loft. "Good grief!"

"What's the matter, boy?" Uncle Charlie shouted up to him.

"The place is full of partridge!"

The loft was spacious and bright - the afternoon sun streaming in through a large, open window at the far end. Strutting nonchalantly about the room were a dozen or more of the brown, chicken-sized birds.

“Ruffed grouse,” his uncle corrected from the bottom of the ladder. “I tried raising them for awhile.”

“You did?”

“Tried to, at least. Tasty dark meat. But it got so they took to hiding up there when they realized Gunner Boy and me couldn’t make the climb no more. You might want to shoo them out the window and then cover it up with something.”

“What do they eat?” Caleb asked in a loud voice.

“They come out now and then.”

Despite the distraction of having a dozen wild game birds clustered down at the far end of his bedroom, Caleb was pleasantly surprised at how comfortable-looking his new home was - however starkly furnished. The walls and floor were bare, but the large window at the loft’s far end allowed an abundance of light, giving the room a bright, cheery feel. A small cot, dresser and kerosene lantern were the room’s only pieces of furniture.

Jimmy tossed his few meagre belongings into the drawers of the old dresser and cast an appraising eye around the loft. The cot was a simple piece of canvas stretched over a metal frame and perched on four rickety legs. Two old quilts and a musty, thread-bare pillow were piled at one end. He tossed his empty suitcase into a corner, then made his way back down the ladder, anxious to explore his new surroundings.

He found his uncle still puttering around the horse stalls. “It’s a nice room, Uncle. I sure appreciate you putting me up.”

The old man drew a deep breath. “Well, it’s not like you had a whole lot of say in the matter, so let’s just make the best of this here predicament. What do you say?” The hint of a grin seemed to appear somewhere beneath the huge walrus moustache. “You can eat your meals with me, and I’ll expect some help with the chores. I ain’t as young as I used to be, that’s a fact.”

Caleb nodded once again.

“I’ll call you for a bite to eat in awhile. Meantime you can get the feel of the place. After lunch I’ll be catching myself forty winks. Since I turned 70 I ain’t got the same get-up-and-go I

once did. If I don't have a power nap after lunch, I'm no good for nothing for the rest of the day." Without further formalities the old man turned and clomped back out through the big double doors of the barn.

A few feet to Caleb's right, the brown mare gave a loud snort and shook her head several times. Caleb ran his hand down Queenie's nose and took a deep breath. Being on this remote island with his strange, gruff uncle made him feel safer than he'd felt for some time. His thoughts turned to his mother, his friends back home . . . to George Kershane . . . and his dad . . . a million miles and several worlds away.

Intruder

The scent of dog drifted toward the wolverine on the summer breeze and despite the great wire fence which stood between them, Salinger slipped behind a thick shrub where he melded with the leaves and shadows of early evening.

He stiffened at the approaching sounds of the dog - the sniffing and snorting and heavy tread. The wolverine's saliva glands began working as the animal drew closer. For most of his entire life Salinger and his family had depended on the man for food – there just weren't enough small animals on the island on which to survive.

He watched the dog step into the glade on the other side of the fence. Its nose was to the ground, sniffing and snuffing its way through the forest. Always on the trail of something but never catching it . . . a creature old beyond usefulness, but one that still prospered because of the man - the same one who had brought them here, and kept them here, while this useless dog had the run of things.

A few feet away the old hound raised its head and peered myopically through the fence with its clouded eyes.

The wolverine knew the dog didn't see well - didn't even scent things out like it once could . . . One day . . . One day he and the dog would meet without a fence between them – one day he would meet the man when the man did not expect it . . . Salinger moved out from behind the shrub so the dog could see him – the wolverine's small, dark eyes boring into those of the dog – only a few meters away.

Chapter 8

Wolverines

Roaring Creek and Wolverine Island were the most peculiar places that Caleb had ever seen . . . and the people were even stranger . . . first Pete and Ike, then Catfish and Auntie Mona, and now, Uncle Charlie. When Caleb had boarded the train for Roaring Creek, he hadn't known what to expect. And although he knew it would be much different than what he was used to, nothing could have prepared him for these past few hours.

Caleb made his way out of the barn and into the bright afternoon sunshine, the warmth and brightness lightening his spirits. Several chickens scrambled madly out of his way, clucking irritably. On the other side of a wooden fence three pigs rooted noisily about in a muddy hollow.

Caleb inhaled a lungful of fresh farm smells as he walked across the yard toward Uncle Charlie's cabin. The older man was by the front steps, splitting firewood.

"Are you settled in?" his uncle asked, looking up.

"I am," Caleb replied.

"Good!" Uncle Charlie drove the blade of the axe into the chopping block, pulled a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it across his sweaty forehead. "I've got some pork and beans on the stove. I hope you're hungry?"

"I haven't eaten since supper yesterday," Caleb admitted.

"You know what," his uncle said. "The beans need to simmer for a few more minutes, so why don't I give you a quick tour of the ranch? You oughta know what you're gettin' yourself into."

"I think I've seen just about everything already," Caleb said.

Uncle Charlie grunted. "What have you seen?"

Caleb paused and looked up into the old man's grey, hooded eyes. "Horses, chickens, pigs . . . Gunner Boy, the barn, this house, the big field out back . . . the woods . . ."

"That's what I'd call the shotgun approach, Boy. If you don't learn to look for the small, important things your observations will never help you get out of a jam when times is desperate." The old man's gaze did a slow meticulous sweep of his surroundings. "When you're adjusting to a new place the first thing you oughta do is get a proper lay of the land . . . figure out your

directions . . . distances. The time may come when it might mean the difference between surviving and not surviving.”

Caleb looked up at the old man curiously. “Desperate times?” he said. “What kind of desperate times might we expect a way up here, Uncle Charlie?”

The old man’s eyes narrowed disapprovingly. “I’ve seen plenty of desperate times in my day,” he said fiercely. “Wild animals, forest fires, blizzards . . .” He turned to the log cabin. “Let’s start with this here ranch house, for instance. It may not look like much, but a sturdy house is the most important thing there is up here in the north.” He put both hands firmly on his hips and gazed admiringly at the building.

“It’s nice, Uncle. Very snug-looking,” Caleb agreed.

“When the cold north wind sweeps across that river and winter sets in, you’ll appreciate how cozy this building is,” the old man stated emphatically. “Between November and March everything around here freezes solid as a rock - except that cursed river, of course - but when I’ve got a good fire goin’ in the wood stove, this little chalet is as warm and snug as one of your citified apartment buildings.”

Caleb wasn’t at all concerned about the challenges of surviving a winter with his uncle. Come September, he knew he’d be long gone – hopefully as far as possible from the winters Uncle Charlie was talking about.

“The next thing – and something you didn’t even mention – is the pontoon boat back in the lagoon. You must have walked right past it with that mealy-mouthed girl. That’s our only means of escape should we need to get away in a hurry. That pontoon boat is powerful enough to take us across to the mainland or even upriver if need be. I always leave the key in the ignition – in case of an emergency.”

Uncle Charlie bent over the woodpile, rummaged around through the assortment of firewood, then pulled out two sticks shaped very much like short baseball bats. He handed his nephew the smaller of the two.

Caleb looked at it questioningly.

“Lesson Number Three,” Charlie said, slapping the club against the palm of his hand a couple of times. Then, with a grim look on his craggy face, he led the way around the cabin and down a pathway into the forest.

The woods that Uncle Charlie led him into were on the opposite side of the island from the ones through which he'd passed earlier in the day with Catfish. If anything, though, this forest of trees was even more beautiful - no underbrush cluttered the area, just a myriad of stately pine, spruce and birch trees.

"This reminds me of a park back home, Uncle Charlie," Caleb said.

"I cleaned the undergrowth out myself," his uncle said. "It's a smart idea to keep the perimeter of one's place cleared - that way you can see if anything's sneaking up on you."

Caleb eyed his uncle warily as they penetrated deeper into the forest.

"Aren't you ever afraid of getting lost, Uncle Charlie?" Caleb asked.

"Oh, I still get lost from time to time," his uncle admitted. "A bad snowstorm can turn anybody around . . . but you just gotta keep your head and use the clues that God gave us! That's the key! For instance, which direction are we heading right now?"

"No idea," Caleb admitted.

"West," Charlie said. "Due west from the ranch." He pointed up to the sun which was visible through the trees to their left. "If you don't stay on your toes when you're in the bush, you'll get yourself turned around faster than a bobcat chasin' its tail - then you may never find your way back to civilization. Of course you'd have to be dumber than a post to get lost on an island this size." He grinned, stopping to rest by a scrubby jack pine. "Even the greenest greenhorn in the country knows that the sun rises in the east, right? Well, my ranch house is east of here, so if you walk toward the rising sun you're heading toward home."

Caleb nodded. Even he knew that much. "I think I'll be able to find my way around this island, Uncle Charlie."

The old man gave him a scowl. "What if you're over on the mainland running one of my traplines and you get turned around? What then? What if a big blizzard comes up - or a thick fog - so bad you can't see your hand in front of your face? Are you gonna go walkin' in circles until a pack of wolves track you down, drags you into the bush and feeds on your scrawny carcass?" He paused, then pushed himself away from the jack pine.

"Well, enough talking. Lemme show you something else about this island you ain't seen yet." He led the way through a narrow gap in the trees and into a large open area. A tall wire fence on the fringe of the clearing barred their way. Almost as high as Uncle Charlie was tall,

the fence was a tangle of barbed wire stretching off into the distance in both directions.

“What a messy-looking fence,” Caleb said. “What’s it doing away out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I built it a few years ago,” Uncle Charlie said, leading the way over to a locked gate. “I used to keep emus in here, but they was way too much trouble. I’d prefer a more standard fence, but I got the barbed wire for nothing when the mines closed.” He unlocked the gate, pushed it open, then waited while Gunner Boy and Caleb stepped inside.

“No more talking,” he whispered, easing the gate shut. He led the way into a grassy field where he promptly took a seat on an old stump a few meters from the gate.

Caleb sat down in the short grass beside his uncle and leaned forward on the club the old man had given him. Gunner Boy, with a soft whimper and nervous glance at his master, slumped to the ground on the other side of Uncle Charlie. The treeless meadow was as peaceful a place as Caleb had ever seen . . . bright wildflowers . . . waving field of grass.

“McGuinty’s Swamp is on the other side of this here field,” Uncle Charlie whispered, nodding toward the stubby stand of cedars beyond the pasture. “Now stay as quiet as you can.”

Caleb sat as still as stone, hands on his homemade club, gazing around the silent glade.

“What are we waiting for, Uncle?” he whispered.

“Hush, boy!” Uncle Charlie’s flinty gaze caught Caleb out the corner of his eye. He dipped a hand into his pocket and slipped Caleb a piece of moose jerky.

Caleb took a chew on the salty meat - his jaw moving up and down, ever so slightly – his stomach growling hungrily. Once more he scanned the field of flowers.

As the stillness closed in around him, Caleb’s eyes and ears gradually opened to the myriad of sights and sounds that the island offered. The faint twitter of birds high above them was the first thing he noticed - *tweets* and *chirps* that gradually transformed into something much more varied and interesting. *Cheeps and trills and chicka-a-dees* . . . Caleb tilted his head and scanned the treetops beyond the fence, searching in vain for a glimpse of the furtive little creatures. Then, from far across the open field he heard the low croaking sounds of a thousand frogs from McGuinty’s Swamp. It was then he also noted a faint, yet distinct rustling among the flowers - little waves of activity - flower petals moving and swaying in the sunlight. At first he thought the dancing petals were simply the result of a summer breeze, then he realized that there

was no wind, and the movements seemed to be scattered randomly among the wildflowers.

He was about to take another bite of the jerky when something happened that made his mouth drop open in surprise. Directly in front of them, no further than two car lengths, a small brown head suddenly popped out of the tall grass. The appearance was so abrupt that Caleb wasn't even sure it was real. Then another head appeared - and just as quickly disappeared. Then another!

Caleb felt his uncle stiffen beside him.

"Don't move," his uncle whispered as the small brown heads continued to appear and disappear

"What are they?" Caleb whispered. "Groudhogs?"

"Wolverines," his uncle replied hoarsely.

Wolverines? Caleb could scarcely believe his uncle's words. He'd read about wolverines . . . and even the word sent a chill through him. Then he remembered what Catfish had called this island. Of course - *Wolverine Island*. He'd never stopped to consider why it had such an odd name.

His uncle turned toward him, his grey eyes lighting up. "The wolverine is by far the most ferocious animal in these parts," he said in his raspy whispery voice. "Pound for pound it's the most savage, blood-thirsty, nastiest critter God ever put together. It ain't much bigger than a polecat, but it'll back down from absolutely nothin' - it'll even take on a bear when cornered - and sometimes even when it ain't cornered."

"How many of them are in here?" Caleb whispered, as the flowers continued their mysterious dance.

"Eight."

"Eight!" Caleb echoed softly.

"Maybe more," his uncle added. "I think a couple may have had babies."

"That's a lot of wolverines!" Caleb could feel his heart racing at the thought of eight wolverines being so close to him.

"I've had 'em penned up in here for the past two or three years."

"They can't get out?"

"I should hope not! The fast current of the river keeps them here. If they tried to swim to

the mainland they'd be swept over the falls, sure as shootin'."

"It's a good thing you have a fence to keep them in," Caleb said.

"Keeps them from getting at my farm critters," Uncle Charlie agreed. "That's all."

"And us." Caleb took a deep breath, keeping an eye out for the slippery creatures.

"How'd the wolverines get onto the island, Uncle Charlie?"

"I accidentally trapped two half-growed wolverines in an old lobster trap over by the Grassy River," Uncle Charlie said. "I reared them, fed them, watched over them. Turns out they breed like rabbits . . . now I have eight."

"Why on earth would you breed wolverines!" Caleb whispered incredulously.

The old man looked down at him, his eyes smiling. "Well it's a might tricky all right, but their pelts is worth a small fortune – there's a fella in Fortune Head that'll pay me close to five hundred bucks each. You see, wolverine fur is completely waterproof. There ain't no other pelt like it!"

The long grass in front of them was now still. No wolverines had appeared for the last couple of minutes.

"If you raised them since they were babies, why aren't they tame?" Caleb asked.

"Well, I got the first two half-tamed, but I'm not breeding them to be pets," Uncle Charlie said scornfully. "Besides, they're way too mean to raise like an old collie dog." Uncle Charlie lowered his voice even further. "In fact, I'm figuring on doing a little harvesting shortly."

"Harvesting?" Caleb echoed.

"I hear-tell a wolverine's pelt reaches it peak in early summer, so I plan on skinning the lot of them in the next few days."

A small shudder ran through Caleb as he pictured his uncle butchering and skinning the small brown animals. "They seem awfully shy," he said.

"They're trying to sneak up on us."

This time Caleb turned completely toward his uncle. "Sneak up on us!" he whispered - a little more loudly than he'd intended.

He could hear his uncle grunt good-naturedly. "Don't worry." He lifted his club and shook it. "They always try to sneak up on Gunner Boy and me when we come in here. But I beat them off when they get too frisky."

“They’ll attack?”

“They tend to enjoy the sport, although Gunner Boy does discourage that sort of thing.” He ruffled the big hound’s ears. The dog seemed oblivious to the savage-looking animals that were almost under his nose.

At that very moment one of the wolverines stepped out into the open and began inching its way toward the two humans.

Caleb studied the animal more carefully. Uncle Charlie was right. It didn’t seem to be much bigger than pictures he’d seen of skunks and groundhogs, but it had enormous paws and savage-looking claws. A patch of white star-shaped fur stood out in the middle of this one’s forehead. As the lone wolverine crept slowly toward them it slowly bared its teeth, its beady black eyes never leaving Uncle Charlie’s face. Gunner Boy climbed stiffly to his feet and growled menacingly.

“That particular wolverine’s the worst of the lot,” Uncle Charlie explained. “He was one of the two that I trapped and partly-tamed. I call him Salinger, ‘cause he reminds me of a prospecting partner I once had that tried to skin me.” The old man suddenly jumped to his feet and took a couple of quick steps toward the wolverine, brandishing his club. The animal snarled, then disappeared into the long grass.

“How come it didn’t attack?” Caleb asked, getting to his feet.

“They pick their spots.”

“They seem really dangerous.”

“They are dangerous,” Uncle Charlie agreed. “No way I want you coming back in here by yourself, understand?”

“You don’t have to worry about that, Uncle Charlie.”

“Good. Now let’s stop pressing our luck and get on out of here.”

Chapter 9

Trouble with Queenie

Early the next morning Caleb was jarred awake by an earth-shattering racket. He leaped from his cot, heart in his mouth, his eyes darting frantically around the loft. He could see right away that it was light and already the partridges at the far end of the loft were astir - ruffling their feathers and making soft *chucking* sounds deep in their throats. But he knew it wasn't the birds that had woken him so suddenly - it was the ear-splitting noise coming from down on the main floor of the barn. He threw on his clothes and scrambled down the ladder, arriving just as Uncle Charlie burst through the door.

Caleb immediately saw that it was Queenie who had woken him. She was thrashing about in her stall, kicking the wall with her hooves, her head reared, her eyes enormous and rolling.

Uncle Charlie grabbed the bridle of the frightened animal. "Whoa there, girl," he said in a loud voice. "What's the trouble?"

The horse snorted loudly once or twice more, then gave her head an emphatic shake, her whole body quivering.

"What's the matter with her?" Caleb asked as the old man continued to soothe the terrified horse

"Dunno," he admitted. "Appears something spooked her." He unlatched the stall door and led Queenie out - the frightened mare still lunging this way and that. Then to make matters worse, Pearl began to stomp and bang about in her stall.

"We'd better get Queenie out of here before she and Pearl kick the barn down," Uncle Charlie suggested.

Keeping his distance, Caleb followed his uncle and the skittish mare outside and into the pasture behind the building. "You're making everyone nervous, Queenie Girl," the old man soothed, leading her in a circle inside the enclosure. Gradually the big horse began to quiet.

Charlie turned to his nephew. "Here, boy!" He handed Caleb the reins and retreated a step, keeping one cautious hand on the bridle.

"Hold her like you mean it, Nephew," Charlie ordered. "That's the trick. If a hoss thinks you're nervous or that you don't know what you're doing, it'll take advantage. Understand?"

Caleb nodded, eying the huge horse as she dropped her head down toward him. Caleb reached up and ran a hand down the mare's nose.

"Good girl," he said encouragingly.

Queenie gave her head a couple of vigorous nods.

"You got her now?" Uncle Charlie asked.

"I think so."

As the old man eased his hand from the horse's bridle, Queenie gave her head a violent jerk, almost yanking Caleb off his feet. Somehow, though, he managed to stay upright, hanging on to the reigns for dear life.

"It's okay. I got her," Caleb assured his uncle.

"Good! Now, don't let Queenie hurt herself. I'll go back and get Pearl." With that he turned and disappeared back into the barn.

"*Hurt herself!* She almost wrenched my arm from its socket!" Caleb muttered under his breath, gripping the reigns tightly with both hands. Finally he felt the horse relax, the big mare slowly lowering her head until she was almost touching Caleb's face. Then, without warning, Queenie gave her head a violent shake while at the same time blowing a huge, wet snort through her nostrils. The disgusting spray saturated Caleb's face, momentarily blinding him. He staggered backward, eyes tightly sealed in the wake of the unexpected shower - only just managing to hold onto the horse's reigns.

"Ach. Queenie! That's disgusting!" He wiped his mucous-covered face with the sleeve of his shirt. The mare gave another vigorous tug on the reigns, and out the corner of Caleb's eye, he saw Queenie's huge head move to within kissing-distance of his already damp face. Again the mare blew a great spray of watery mucous all over him. Caleb danced out of the way - a second too late.

"Stop that!"

Queenie peered innocently down at him.

Just then Uncle Charlie stepped back out of the barn leading Pearl. "Looks like you won't be needin' a shower today," he said with a chuckle. "Queenie should be alright now. We'll leave them out here in the pasture."

Caleb let go of the reigns and wiped the last of Queenie from his face. "What do you

think scared her?" he asked.

Uncle Charlie gave a big shrug. "Don't know. I checked the barn but couldn't find anything unusual. Horses can be mighty particular - a little thing like a shadow or a gust of wind can sometimes set them off."

"Could it have been a wolverine?" Caleb asked cautiously.

"I didn't see any wolverine signs in there," Uncle Charlie answered, "But it probably wouldn't hurt to take a ride over to the enclosure and check things out." He looked at Caleb, his face brightening. "You know that's something you can do for me. Why don't you head on over there after breakfast and look that fence over. See if there's any holes that need fixin'. In the meantime I've got some pork and beans heatin' up on the stove. Are you hungry?"

Caleb managed a thin smile. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

Chapter 10

Responsibilities

The tantalizing aroma of Uncle Charlie's kitchen reminded Caleb of his mom's cooking back home - only even better. He stood in the cabin doorway breathing in the mouth-watering odours that drifted up from the pots and pans sitting on the wood stove.

Uncle Charlie wrapped a dish towel around his hand and yanked open the oven door. "This bread oughta be done by now."

"Everything smells really good," Caleb said.

"Come and sit down for a bite, boy." Uncle Charlie transferred the homemade bread to a warming compartment above the stove, then ladled out two large helpings.

The pork and beans weren't quite as good as their aroma had promised, but his uncle's homemade bread more than made up for it. Caleb had never tasted bread so absolutely mouth-watering delicious. It tasted nothing like the bread his mother bought from the corner store back home.

Caleb was barely half-way through his meal when he looked up to see that his uncle was already sopping up the last of the beans with a thick slice of bread. With a loud belch, the old man pushed back from the table.

"Well, boy, I reckon you'll be wanting to earn your keep, so let's get the show on the road." He looked down at Caleb's half-finished meal and scowled. "The first thing you're gonna have to learn is the importance of eating a hearty breakfast!" He climbed to his feet. "Well, come on, then. There's plenty of work to be done and only two pairs of hands to do it!"

Caleb took one last hurried spoonful of his breakfast, then followed his uncle outside.

He was surprised and more than a little pleased to find Catfish standing in the yard - her hands thrust defiantly into the pockets of her baggy army pants.

Uncle Charlie eyed her suspiciously. "Was it you that disturbed my horses this morning?"

"Course not," she said. "I just got here!"

"How come you're back?" the old man asked, the irritation showing in his voice.

"I come to see if you'd murdered your nephew yet."

The old man grunted disdainfully. "I'm not one of them people that takes pot shots at innocent folk that're just mindin' their own business."

Caleb gave Catfish a half-hearted grin. "I didn't expect to see you so early," he said as they followed Uncle Charlie out to the pasture.

"Auntie Mona thought I should head on over here to see how old Charlie was treating you. She told me that if he was being too ornery, you could come and stay with us."

Caleb smiled at her. "It hasn't been bad, actually," he said in a low voice.

Uncle Charlie was holding Pearl's reigns, while he ran his hand down the back of the big grey mare. "One of your jobs will be to tend the horses," he said to Caleb. "I named Pearl here after an aunt of mine. She's a sleepy old girl, but she can still pull a load when asked to."

Pearl peered down at them. She didn't even seem to notice when Caleb reached up and stroked her long grey nose. "What do you use the horses for, Uncle Charlie?" he asked.

"Hauling, mostly. Now and then I take them over to the mainland on my pontoon boat and ride them into Fortune Head."

"They don't mind riding on the pontoon boat?" Caleb said.

"Nah. They're both a couple of sailors at heart."

"Pearl seems really gentle," Caleb remarked.

"Both my horses are good-natured," Charlie agreed. "But you gotta watch that you don't get in behind them or sneak up on them - they'll sometimes kick out when they're startled."

"Probably just being sensible," Catfish said innocently.

"How do I look after them?" Caleb asked.

Uncle Charlie led the two young people back into the barn and over to a feed bag in the corner. "In the summer each horse takes a half pail each day," he said, dipping out a full pail of oats. "And every morning you need to fill their water trough. Soon as you get up, you feed and water them . . . then after breakfast you lead them out to the pasture. Got that?"

Caleb nodded.

When they emerged from the barn, Uncle Charlie led them over to the chicken coop. "Your next job is to feed the chickens and gather the eggs."

He led the way over to a wooden barrel setting against the side of the barn, lifted the lid and scooped out a dipper of grain. He then walked amongst the chickens, scattering the seed.

The chickens immediately set to work pecking up as much as they could in as short a time as possible.

“The eggs is in the hen house,” Uncle Charlie continued, pointing to the dilapidated shack across from them. “Just go through there every morning and collect all you can find. There’ll usually be about a half-dozen or so. Make sure you check every nook and cranny. Them birds is pretty clever about laying eggs in the least sensible places.”

He paused, eyeing Catfish uneasily. “There’s some other jobs we’ll go over later, but for now there’s just one more thing I’m gonna show you how to do. First you’ve got to promise you’ll follow my instructions to a tee.”

Caleb shuffled his shoulders into place. “Of course I will, Uncle Charlie.”

The old man looked over at Catfish. “And you, girl, you can give my nephew a hand, but you gotta do as I say.”

Catfish scowled in response.

“Come on then.” Uncle Charlie led the way across the pasture and into the woods beyond the cabin, following the same path they’d taken to the wolverine pen the previous day.

When they were almost there Caleb pulled Catfish back a few steps from his uncle.

“Uncle Charlie keeps wolverines in a pen back here,” Caleb whispered.

The girl looked at him incredulously. “He keeps wolverines in a pen!” Her eyes widened. “So that’s why they call this place *Wolverine Island*? I thought it was because he’d cornered one in his chicken coop or something. Why’s that crazy old man keeping wolverines?”

At that moment the fence appeared through the curtain of trees, so they both hurried to catch up to Uncle Charlie.

The old man paused by the gate and turned toward them. “You both gotta be sure to do exactly what I say,” he reminded them.

“Do you know how crazy it is to keep wolverines in a pen?” Catfish asked.

“This ain’t no pen,” Uncle Charlie replied testily. “They’ve got the run of almost half the island. Besides, I know how risky a business this is. Wolverines is about the most dangerous animal there is. You kids gotta stay right clear of them. Understand?”

Caleb nodded. “Of course,” he said, turning to Catfish. “You should see the size of their claws.”

“That’s a fact, Boy!” Uncle Charlie agreed. “Those claws would rip the hide right off you if you got too close.” He moved off the trail and over to a small tumble-down shed that was almost hidden amongst a cluster of tamarack trees. Uncle Charlie opened the door, and began scrounging around inside. “This is where I keep the feed,” he explained over his shoulder. “Them critters forage a bit for themselves - catching varmits and such, but I like to keep them sleek and fat . . .”

Caleb scanned the meadow on the other side of the fence. He noted the familiar yellow and white flowers gently waving in the morning breeze . . . or was it a breeze? He glanced knowingly at Catfish. He could tell that she, too, had seen the moving flowers.

Uncle Charlie emerged from the shed with a large gunny sack. As he drew closer, the stench almost took Caleb’s breath away!

“What’s that horrible smell?” Catfish asked, holding her nose.

The old man opened the neck of the sack so she and Caleb could peer inside.

“Wolverines love this stuff.” Uncle Charlie dipped his hand inside and pulled out a fistful of rancid meat and fish guts.

“How could anything possibly eat that?” Catfish asked.

Uncle Charlie stepped over to the fence, and with a mighty heave, flung the meat over the wire and into the field on the opposite side. Instantly, a brown streak shot out from the flowers and hurled itself into the pile of meat. Within seconds several other animals joined the melee - snarling and fighting. Caleb instinctively stepped back.

“You sure they ain’t starved?” Catfish asked. “Maybe you oughta feed them more.”

Caleb counted seven adult wolverines baring their teeth and snapping at each other. An eighth, however, stood apart from the others, ignoring the meat and the commotion. He simply stood there, looking back through the fence at the three humans.

“There’s Salinger,” Uncle Charlie said, pointing to the lone wolverine. “Now that there wolverine has the most peculiar, ornery disposition! He not only acts different than the others, he even looks a bit different. See the jagged white markings on his head? It goes all the way to the end of his nose – he’s the one I half-tamed so he’s a bit different than the others. He’s also their chief – and the others know it.”

“How come he ain’t mixing it up with the others?” Catfish asked.

“He sets himself apart like that,” Uncle Charlie explained. “And he always seems to be thinking.”

Uncle Charlie turned to Caleb. “I want you to come by here every morning and toss a couple big handfuls over the fence, but don’t ever get too close. One of them would just love to take a chunk out of you through the wire if it could.”

As Caleb watched Salinger, he couldn’t help but be drawn to the strange, savage animal – there was something mysterious . . . and almost majestic about him. He shuddered and turned away, grateful for the thin strands of barbed wire that separated them. There was also something about the solitary wolverine which gave him the absolute willies.

Chapter 11

George and the Swimming Pool

Caleb lay on his rickety cot, staring up at the darkening rafters high above him. Through the open window at the far end of the loft, a full moon cast dark, unsettling shadows all around him. It was a cool night and he was glad for the thick quilt that Uncle Charlie had provided, despite its ancient mustiness.

Caleb thought once again of his mother, and wondered where she was . . . whether she was safe . . .

A gentle scratching from high in the rafters brought him back to reality. Mice! A barely-discernable brown shadow scurried across the two-by-six above him. It paused for an instant to peer down at Caleb, then disappeared from sight.

It seemed that several hours had passed since his uncle had ordered him to bed for the night. *Everyone on my ranch turns in with the birds*, his uncle said, but Caleb discovered that the ruffed grouse living in his loft did not share this conviction, for they still flitted and strutted about long after he and his uncle had turned in.

The peace and stillness of the barn, though, were strangely comforting. Below him he could hear the horses moving about in their stalls, and out in the yard the occasional *baaa* of one of the sheep drifted up to him. Stealthfully, the shades of night inched across the room as the moon slipped behind a cloud.

How did his mother plan on getting in touch with him before school started, anyway? She hadn't discussed that, and he hadn't had thought to ask. Did Uncle Charlie ever check at the post office in Fortune Head to see if he got any mail?

He thought of his dad and his mother's plans . . . He lay there, trying desperately to remember the father he knew from the old days - the way he was before that terrible accident - the car crash that had turned their lives so completely upside down. The one thing that he did remember most clearly was his father's huge smile - one that seemed to stretch from ear-to-ear and light up his whole face. That was the father he wanted to remember - not the crazy madman that swung tire irons at cars and tried to kidnap people in the middle of the night. That was his real father.

Above him, the little mouse inched its way back along the rafter - now almost entirely cloaked in darkness. Caleb could only imagine the tiny head and beady eyes looking down at him. *What went through the mind of a creature so tiny? What went through the mind of a wolverine for that matter. . .*

Still, sleep did not come. He tossed and turned for what seemed like several more hours before finally beginning to drift in and out of consciousness.

Finally, just before sleep came, his thoughts turned to his best friend, George Kershane. George was, without doubt, the liveliest kid Caleb had ever known. He wasn't the biggest boy in the class, or the smartest, or the most athletic – not by a long shot, yet there was just no stopping him! He was forever coming up with the most harebrained schemes to earn a couple of bucks . . . a lot like Uncle Charlie in fact. And like Uncle Charlie, George was someone who made people sit up and take notice – and not just because of his unruly dark hair, and his wild ideas and non-stop chatter . . . When George got excited, for instance, his whole face seemed to light up like a 500 watt bulb - and Caleb had never, ever seen George back down from anything - no matter what he was up against. He knew, too, that his friend would find Wolverine Island unbelievably fascinating and he couldn't wait to tell him about this place . . . about Uncle Charlie, about Catfish . . . and the wolverines.

Finally, sleep came . . . and with it came the strangest dream Caleb had ever had - the kind of dream you have when you're overtired or you're sleeping somewhere for the first time. In his dream he and George and a bunch of kids from their apartment building were swimming down at the Y.

They were right in the middle of a game of tag when George suddenly gave Caleb an enormous wink, swam over to the edge of the pool and climbed out. With one eye on the lifeguard, George ambled casually over to the ladder leading up to the high diving board. Caleb could feel his heart begin to accelerate as he watched his friend scamper up the ladder. No one was allowed on the diving board during public swim, nevertheless, George climbed right to the top and sauntered nonchalantly down its length, waving to a bunch of girls who were splashing about in the deep end.

In his dream, the diving board was incredibly high - at least fifty feet above the water . . . a way higher than any diving board Caleb had ever seen. George paused at the end of the board,

bounced once or twice, then dove headfirst into the water far below. For a long moment George didn't resurface and Caleb was afraid his friend had hit his head on the bottom of the pool. Quickly Caleb swam to the pool's edge and hauled himself out of the water, a sense of panic sweeping through him.

But when he turned back to look at the pool, there was George, bobbing about in the deep end, laughing and clowning around . . . It was then that Caleb noticed something else in the pool - a dark shadow-like creature swimming through the water - straight toward his friend. The sight almost made Caleb's heart stop. He took a closer look and realized that his worst nightmare was coming true. The sinister form slithering silently across the pool toward George was Salinger!

Heart in his mouth, Caleb raced the length of the pool, his eyes never leaving the wolverine.

"Look out, George!" he screamed. But the shout never left his mouth. His voice seemed to be stuck - stuck somewhere inside his head. He watched the wolverine swim closer and closer to George. Finally, Caleb managed a croaking, rasping call - no louder than if he had a severe case of laryngitis. Still, his friend continued splashing about, laughing and teasing a couple of girls. Caleb jumped up and down, waving his arms over his head. Finally George looked up. Caleb pointed frantically to the wolverine - now only an arm's length away. . . George turned. For an instant he just stared at the savage-looking animal - his eyes practically bugging out of his head! The girls who were with him screamed at the top of their voices, splashing in panicked flight away from the approaching animal - then, just as George turned to escape, the wolverine lunged!

Caleb woke! He woke sitting bolt upright on his narrow cot, the sweat pouring from his face and his heart pounding like a wild express train. The dream had been so real - so vivid and terrifying that it still filled him with a feeling of panic even though he was wide awake.

High above him in the darkness he heard the scratching feet of the tiny mouse. He sat there, rigid with fear, the face of the vicious wolverine burned into his consciousness. And in that same instant a deadly calm washed over him, and with the calm came the sure knowledge that at that very moment the wolverine, Salinger, was with him - right there in the barn!

Night Visit

The pungent aroma of horse and dog - of chickens and pigs and sheep almost overwhelmed the wolverine.

To his left, the grey-coloured horse danced backward in its stall, neighing softly in terror.

The wolverine turned and eyed the flimsy ladder reaching into the loft above him. He knew there was a human up there - the distinct scent was very strong.

He was famished and the temptation to kill one of the farm animals was overwhelming.

He moved stealthfully back out into the yard, into the light of a full July moon. There he hesitated and took a deep breath of the cool night air.

The taste of freedom was exhilarating, yet he knew it was only temporary. Slipping under the fence was one thing, escaping from this island was something else entirely.

Despite the feeling of frustration, instinct told him that he mustn't act hastily or rashly, for the same peculiar feeling told him that the situation on the island was somehow in a state of flux. Why and how, he wasn't sure - his instincts just told him it was so.

The wolverine's thoughts returned to the scent of the human in the barn. It was new to him - much milder than the offensive, dangerous smell of the old man. Perhaps this was what his instincts pointed to as a sign of change.

The wolverine crossed the farmyard with its restless, terrified animals - in the direction of the chicken coop. Tonight's meal would be provided courtesy of the old man - and this time Salinger would relish every mouthful.

Chapter 12

Patrolling the Fence

Caleb awoke the next morning filled with a dull, lonely ache. He lay on his cot with his eyes closed, thinking of home . . . of George and his other friends. His dream had left him with a troubled, unsettled feeling, and for the first time since his arrival, he wished with all his heart he'd never come to this strange place with its even stranger people.

He opened his eyes. The early morning sunlight was already streaming in through the large window at the far end of the loft. Downstairs he could hear his uncle moving about with Queenie and Pearl.

Caleb reluctantly moved aside the quilt, got up and started dressing. Everything about the northland was so different – yet it had only been a couple of days – perhaps in time he would get used to it all. An uneasy, disturbing thought crept over him. Surely his mother wouldn't make him stay here beyond the summer . . . that distinct possibility filled him with an even deeper sense of despair.

Uncle Charlie, carrying a raggedy, old blanket, met him at the bottom of the ladder. “Do you feel like takin' Queenie for a ride?” he asked, handing Caleb the blanket.

Caleb nodded. “Sure.”

“I don't have no fancy saddle, but this blanket oughta do. Queenie knows what it means when you yank on her reins.”

Caleb spread the blanket across the mare's back, and as he did Queenie peered back over her shoulder, eyeing the boy suspiciously. “How do I get up there, Uncle Charlie?” Caleb asked.

“Climb up on a stump or something. And don't be afraid to use her mane to pull yourself up. Queenie won't mind. Just don't fall off and hit your head.” He chuckled silently. “If you do, I'm afraid that smart-mouthed girl from the mainland will have me locked away for sure.” He gave Queenie's reins a tug. “First we'd better get some breakfast. I've got some scrambled eggs cooking.” With that he led Queenie out of the barn and over to his cabin, hitching the mare to a post by the front door.

Caleb followed the old man inside and took a seat at the table while his uncle dished out their breakfast.

“I seen some signs around the chicken coop this morning that raised my hackles,” Uncle Charlie informed him. “I’m not sure, but I think I may be missing one of my hens. After breakfast, why don’t you and Queenie head over to the wolverine fence and check things over.”

“What do I look for?” Caleb asked.

Uncle Charlie dropped into his chair. “If one of them wolverines got loose they’d probably have dug a hole under that fence, so I want you to ride down its length from one end to the other and see if you find anything unusual. Can you do that for me?”

Caleb nodded. “I sure can . . .”

"Good boy," he said, digging heartily into his eggs.

Caleb hesitated. “I had a bad dream last night,” he finally said.

His uncle looked up at him real sudden-like. “Do tell!” He said. “So did I. What was yours about?”

“It was about that wolverine, Salinger,” Caleb said.

“I always dream about them critters.” the old man said, pausing thoughtfully. “I reckon when they start disturbing our sleep it’s time to get rid of them.” He forked the last of his eggs into his mouth and pushed back from the table. “Well, let’s get a going.”

Caleb gulped down a final mouthful, then followed his uncle out into the yard. He was learning to eat quickly if he wanted to finish his meals.

Catfish was sitting on the porch carving a whistle out of a piece of poplar. “You fellas always have breakfast so late in the day?” she asked.

“Look who’s here,” Uncle Charlie said. “If it ain’t the holy terror herself.”

Catfish climbed to her feet and stuck the whistle and jackknife into her pocket. “How come you got this old horse ready to go?” She asked, nodding toward Queenie. “You gonna go round up the cattle and take them to the railhead?”

“I’ve got to check something out for Uncle Charlie,” Caleb said with a grin. He looked at the old man, hesitating. “Can Catfish come with me?”

Uncle Charlie shrugged. “She better not fall off. If she does, that grandmother of hers is liable to come over here and shoot me.” He untied the mare from the post. “Did you say you’ve ridden before?”

Caleb nodded. "Every summer at the Canadian National Exhibition."

"Well, I suppose that's better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick," he muttered doubtfully, manoeuvring Queenie around until she was sideways in front of Caleb.

Still standing on the porch, Caleb grabbed hold of Queenie's mane and launched himself up onto the horse's back. Queenie gave a little jump forward, but Caleb held on with both hands.

"Good start, Nephew. You looked just like Gary Cooper. We might make a cowboy out of you yet."

With the reins in one hand, Caleb reached down and pulled Catfish up behind him.

"Now head on over to the fence," Uncle Charlie said, "Make sure you check it all the way to the river. See if there's any breaks in the wire or holes under it. Understand?"

Catfish scowled down at Uncle Charlie. "If the wolverines did escape, hadn't you better set a guard on them sheep over yonder?"

Uncle Charlie handed Catfish a short-handled spade. "If you see any holes under the fence, take this shovel and fill them in. And don't worry about Queenie. Except for blowing the odd goober in your face, she won't give you no trouble. She's as docile as an old cow."

With a gentle flick of the reigns, Caleb guided the mare away from the cabin and down the trail into the forest.

"How come your uncle thinks them wolverines is loose?" Catfish asked.

"Uncle Charlie thinks he saw some wolverine signs around the chicken coop this morning."

"That crazy old man! He's liable to lose all his livestock to them things."

"Do you think they'd attack a person?"

"I never heard of one doing that, but you never can tell. And filling a hole under a fence ain't gonna do no good, they'll just dig it back out . . . then again, they may be long-gone by now anyway."

Despite the ominous task ahead of them, Caleb found the ride to the wolverine compound exhilarating. The woods were beautiful. The sun was shining and a gentle breeze played on his face and ruffled his hair. He noticed again the great variety of trees growing on the island - pine, spruce, tamarack, birch, cedar . . . His science teacher, Mr. Marsh, would be impressed by the number he was able to identify. The red pine was the most magnificent, with its long slender

needles and bushy, branches . . . High above them the faint twitter of a chickadee lifted his spirits even further.

Catfish's voice startled him. "How did your uncle ever manage to catch a wolverine anyway?" she asked. "They're practically invisible."

"He caught two of them in a lobster trap when they were babies."

"A lobster trap? What was he trying to catch in a lobster trap? There ain't no lobsters around here! Where does he think he is, Nova Scotia?"

As they approached the fence, Caleb drew back on the reins, bringing Queenie to a halt.

"That is quite the fence, ain't it?" Catfish said admiringly, studying the strands of barbwire.

"It is well made," Caleb agreed. "The wire even goes below the ground a ways so they can't tunnel out."

"Good thinking," Catfish agreed. "Auntie Mona says that a wolverine is slicker than a pomade salesman at a Fuller Brush convention."

Caleb grinned. "Uncle Charlie was telling me that he ran the fence from one side of the island to the other. Apparently it divides the island in half. He even ran it out into the river a piece so they can't get around it that way." Caleb noticed that Queenie was now tugging on the reigns. "We'd better get a move on. The mare's a bit skittish."

Despite Queenie's friskiness, Caleb still found it relatively easy to guide her along the path that ran the length of the fence. For the most part, Uncle Charlie's masterpiece drove straight-as-an-arrow through the forest, veering occasionally to skirt a swampy section or rock outcropping.

When they finally came face to face with the broad sparkling waters of the river, it almost took Caleb by surprise. He and Catfish sat for a moment, watching the morning sunlight glinting off the surface of the river.

"Oh, oh!"

Caleb turned to find Catfish pointing to a spot under the fence next to a rotten old stump. He prodded Queenie forward for a better look.

"Looks like a hole's been dug there," Caleb said. He dismounted and took the short-handled shovel from Catfish.

“Do you think they all escaped?” Catfish asked, climbing down from Queenie.

“I don’t know,” Caleb answered, the very thought causing a feeling of dread to ripple through him.

“Fill that hole quick and let’s get out of here,” Catfish said. “If they did escape, they might be hiding in those bushes right now, thinking about what a tasty breakfast we’d make.”

Chapter 13

Playing With TNT

Caleb was surprised at how easily Uncle Charlie agreed to letting him go over to Roaring Creek with Catfish. Even after his uncle had returned from the wolverine pen where he'd found his captives all accounted for, Caleb was still glad to get away from the island for the afternoon.

"Take Gunner Boy with you," Uncle Charlie had said. "A change of scenery will do him good."

So before the morning was over, Caleb found himself being *cranked* back across the river on the raft with Catfish and Gunner Boy. It was another beautiful summer day - the sun glinting off the surface of the river and a light breeze keeping the temperature from getting too warm. Gunner Boy sat in the middle of the raft, his long tongue lolling out, while Catfish moved them steadily through the fast-flowing waters. It was still disconcerting for Caleb to know that just beyond the trees to his right lay Catchewana Falls.

"What are we going to do in Roaring Creek?" Caleb asked.

"Ever been inside an old mine?" Catfish asked.

Caleb hesitated. "I've been inside a cave."

"Same thing," Catfish said. "There's an old gold mine near my home that I'm working."

"Sounds like fun," Caleb said, eyeing Catfish. "Do you want me to take over that crank for awhile?"

Catfish shook her head. "No. We're almost there."

"Don't you find that a trip always seems shorter after the first time?" Caleb asked as they neared the shoreline.

"This is about the only trip I've ever made, other than going into town." Catfish stepped into the shallow water and dragged the raft up onto the shore. "Come on," she said. "I'll show you that old mine."

Skirting the town, Catfish led them back down the main trail toward Fortune Head, then after a couple of minutes turned off onto an old, over-grown skid road.

"It's right in here," Catfish said, leading them through a tangle of brush and tag alders to the face of a craggy boulder-strewn hill. Caleb was within arm's-length of a perpendicular wall

of rock before he noticed what looked to be a doorway, hidden behind a pile of brush.

“Wow,” he said. “It looks just like a cave.”

“It ain’t,” Catfish said emphatically. “We got no real caves in these parts. This here’s the mine I was telling you about. There’s quite a few of these two-bit mines around here. None of them amounted to much.”

Catfish pushed aside some of the branches and picked up a flashlight lying just inside the entranceway.

“Follow me,” she said, clicking on the flashlight.

“How deep is it?” Caleb asked.

“Not much deeper than a good-sized house.”

Catfish led them down a narrow tunnel, barely higher than their heads and almost as wide as a single-laned highway. Scattered about them were several ancient timbers and a few empty wooden crates.

“Right over here,” Catfish said, the flashlight beam leading them down an even narrower tunnel to an open area about the size of Caleb’s kitchen back home in the city.

“This is as far as it goes,” Catfish said. She stepped up to the wall of rock at the far end and shone her light on the wet surface. “Take a look.” She pointed to a spot in front of her.

Caleb got as close as he could, scrunching up his eyes for a better look. “What am I looking for?” he finally asked.

“Right here,” Catfish said, moving her flashlight closer. “Notice the faint yellow streaks? Auntie Mona calls that VG – visible gold.”

“That’s gold?” Caleb said, struggling for a better look.

“Appears to be a whole vein of it. The other day I was chipping away at a loose piece of rock with my pick, when a big slab broke away. This was underneath.”

Catfish suddenly grabbed Caleb by the shoulder and yanked him around so he faced her. “You keep this to yourself. Understand?”

Caleb shrugged, feeling offended at Catfish’s distrust. “Who would I tell?”

“That senile old uncle of yours, that’s who,” Catfish said. “He’s spent half his life prospecting these parts.”

“How come he’s never rooted around in here like you did?”

“Auntie Mona staked this claim years ago. No trespassers allowed!”

“How do you know it’s really worth anything, though?” Caleb asked. “Maybe it’s just fool’s gold.”

“I’m gonna take some samples... Get them assayed in town.”

“You’re going to do that yourself?”

”Why not? It ain’t all that complicated.”

Suddenly, Gunner Boy, who had just been standing closer to the entrance, growled, the hairs on his neck standing up.”

They both turned to face the big hound. “What is it boy?” Caleb asked.

“Somebody must be coming,” Catfish said. “We can’t let them find this place. Let’s get out of here – and be quiet about it.”

Crouching, she led the way out of the mine and back through the brush. As they approached the pathway to town, two figures emerged.

“Pete and Ike,” Caleb whispered.

“Remember – not a word about the mine,” Catfish said under her breath.

With a final threatening glance at Caleb, she rose from the bushes – her hands planted firmly on her hips. “Picking blueberries, fellas?” she said in a loud voice.

The two brothers froze for an instant, then Pete’s customary grin returned. “Well, if it ain’t the little bushwacker herself – and her new boyfriend, no less. Fancy meeting the two of you way out here.” Both Pete and Ike carried fishing rods and tackle boxes, and Pete had a packsack slung over his shoulders.

“You boys ain’t goin’ fishing, are you?” Catfish asked.

“You’re smarter than you look, Catfish,” Pete replied. “Thought we’d try our luck down by the falls.”

“Where’s your slingshot, Catfish?” Ike asked with a smirk.

“In my pocket,” Catfish replied. “Where’s your dogs?”

“We brought our bikes this time,” Pete said. “But we left them back a piece – somewhere where you won’t find them.” He hesitated. “By the way. We didn’t have to walk all the way back to town the other day. The dogs stopped to tree a squirrel a little ways from here – so the joke’s on you.”

Catfish gave them a disdainful look. “You won’t catch anything down by the falls at this time of the year,” she said. “Don’t you know nothing?”

Pete and Ike grinned at each other. “We’ll see how much you know, Catfish,” Ike said, giving his brother a nudge in the ribs with his elbow.

Catfish looked curiously from one boy to the next. “What are you birdbrains up to?”

Pete’s expression grew serious, his gaze moving from Catfish and Caleb and then back again. “You can think what you like, Catfish, but I guarantee we’ll be catching a mess of bass down by the falls today.”

Catfish shrugged. “Go ahead,” she said. “But about all that’ll be biting will be a few wormy perch. It’s too warm. You shoulda come first thing in the morning.”

Pete smirked at Catfish, then turned and continued off down the path. “We don’t want no company either,” he said over his shoulder. “We ain’t sharing our fishing secrets with the likes of you two.”

Catfish laughed. “I already forgot more about fishing than you two will ever know.” She tugged on Caleb’s arm, leading him back toward Roaring Creek.

“When we’re done,” Ike hollered after them, “We’ll stop by and show you our catch.”

Caleb reluctantly followed Catfish in the opposite direction, watching Pete and Ike disappear down the trail toward the river. “I wouldn’t mind seeing the falls,” he said.

“Oh, you will,” Catfish said. “We’ll just give those two jokers a few minutes to settle in. They’ve got something cooking in their little peabrains.”

“You think so?”

“They practically dared us to see what they were up to.”

Catfish led them in a wide circle, once again skirting the town while heading toward the sound of the waterfall.

“Can we trust that mangy mutt to be quiet?” Catfish whispered as they started down a rather steep hill.

“I think so,” Caleb said. “He doesn’t see or hear all that well anymore.”

“Hard to believe how loud those falls are, ain’t it?” Catfish said.

Caleb nodded. “They sound like Niagara Falls.”

”You been to Niagara Falls?”

“Last summer. It’s not all that far from where we live . . . lived.”

“Well, from the pictures I’ve seen, this ain’t no Niagara Falls, but it’s the biggest waterfall in these parts.”

They crept up behind the bushy branches of a large jack pine. Caleb drew in his breath. Catchewana Falls towered high above them - about as tall as a four story building. A huge torrent of water crashed down over a slew of large jagged boulders at the bottom.

“Man,” Caleb whispered, “If we went over that on your raft we’d be killed for sure.”

Catfish sidled past the tree, leading them even closer, until they could see Pete and Ike standing over on the rocky shoreline. The river at the bottom of the falls was so narrow that Caleb could have pitched a stone from one side to the other. He put his hand on Gunner Boy’s haunches and pushed him to a sitting position, but the dog didn’t appear to be interested in going further anyway.

“Those goofballs won’t be catching anything worthwhile,” Catfish whispered. “Not at this time of the day. I don’t care what kind of bait they’re using.”

They watched Pete set his fishing rod down on the ground and begin rummaging around in his pack. A minute later he pulled out a thin cylindrical object and held it up for his brother to see.

“What’s he got?” Catfish whispered.

Caleb leaned forward, squinting her eyes. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Maybe one of those fishing rods that collapses into a little tube...”

“Looks like a stick of dynamite to me,” Catfish said.

“Dynamite!” Caleb looked at Catfish, his eyes large. “What would they be doing with dynamite?”

“Fishing,” Catfish said matter-of-factly.

“How can you fish with dynamite?”

“You light a stick of dynamite and then chuck it into the water,” Catfish explained. “When it goes off it kills every living thing in that spot. It’s a lazy man’s way to fish – and crazy dangerous.”

“Where would they get dynamite?”

“Their old man’s a prospector, and seeing as he’s even stupider than his two boys, he’s

probably got a stick or two laying around their house.”

“Maybe we should go and tell Auntie Mona,” Caleb suggested. “They could blow themselves up.”

“It’s too late now,” Catfish said. “Looks like they’re getting ready to light it!”

Sure enough, even as she spoke Pete struck a match on a nearby rock and set it to the long fuse hanging from the brown cylinder. He then stood there calmly, watching as the fuse hissed and burned its way about three-quarters of the way to the object in his hand. His next actions caught Caleb and Catfish by such surprise, that all they could do was watch in horror as Pete turned and heaved the stick of dynamite right into the bush where they were hiding.

Caleb jumped to his feet, tripping over both Catfish and Gunner Boy as the stick of dynamite landed directly behind them. Somehow he caught his balance and dove behind a mound of earth.

In was then – in the very midst of his blind panic that he heard the sound of laughter. Caleb glanced out from behind his shelter.

“What happened?” Pete yelled. “You guys bump into a big black bear or something?”

“Maybe they sat down on a hornet’s nest,” Ike suggested.

Both Pete and Ike were laughing so hard that tears were running down their faces.

“It’s only a dud, you morons,” Pete hollered. “We saw you coming a mile away. We knew you'd be too nosey for your own good.”

Caleb emerged from behind the mound of dirt and brushed off his shirt and pants.

A second later Catfish stepped out from behind a large boulder, her face red with anger. “You stupid idiots,” she shouted, walking back to the bush where Pete had tossed the dud. She picked it up, grimacing with disgust. Caleb could now see that it was just a piece of tree limb with the bark removed. A wick had been stuck into a drilled hole in one of the ends.

Pete and Ike were still doubled over laughing as Catfish approached – then before they had a chance to prepare themselves, Catfish sprinted the last few steps and shoved both boys backward into the fast-flowing waters of the river.

Pete and Ike both disappeared beneath the surface and almost immediately emerged, sputtering and blowing water from their mouths and noses. For a moment they just stood there, chest-deep in the river, water dripping from their hair and clothing. “You dumb moron!” Pete

finally shouted.

Now it was Catfish who was laughing, and even Caleb was grinning from ear to ear.

Pete climbed from the river and lunged in Catfish's direction, but she had already pulled the slingshot from her back pocket and had the weapon pointed at Pete's forehead.

"Catfish, you ignorant hillbilly," Pete shouted.

"Pretty bold talk for a couple of guys who let a girl push them around," Catfish interrupted.

Pete wiped the last of the water from his face and looked from Catfish to Caleb, then down at Gunner Boy. "We'll get you for this," he said in a low voice.

Chapter 14

Night Visitor

When Caleb first awoke he wasn't sure where he was. He only knew that it was pitch black and eerily silent. For the longest time he lay on his cot holding his breath - the quilt pulled up around his chin. A strange fear gripped him. He knew from the inky blackness and strange quiet that it must be the dead of night - when even the creatures of the dark take to their beds. There was no sound . . . no crickets, frogs or owls, not even the flutter of bat wings, or the scamper of mice feet. *The witching hour!*

Caleb scanned his surroundings as his eyes slowly grew accustomed to the blackness. Starlight twinkled through the window at the far end, dimly outlining the shapes of several roosting partridges.

What had wakened him? He lay there not moving a muscle as his ears strained for the faintest of sounds and the fear seemed to penetrate every pore of his body.

For some reason he thought of the short prayer that Uncle Charlie had said before their meals - especially the part where he prayed for their safe-keeping and that of his mother - and the thought brought him a strange peace.

Was God watching over him? Did God care about his safety? Uncle Charlie sure seemed to think so.

Caleb slid out from under the quilt. Hands extended blindly in front of him, he fumbled his way over to the dresser, where he'd left the kerosene lantern and a pack of matches.

He'd just reached the dresser when the moon suddenly emerged from behind a cloud, lighting up the interior of the loft. From the main floor of the barn he heard one of the horses move about restlessly in its stall. Outside in the pasture a sheep bleated softly.

A chill rippled up Caleb's spine as he struck a match and lit the lantern. A voice deep inside him, was telling him that something about the night was seriously amiss . . . Again a cold fear crowded all other thoughts from his mind. He slipped into his clothes and made his way over to the ladder, one hand gripping the hissing lantern. Slowly he climbed to the main floor, relieved to see in the lantern's glow, the two mares peering back at him from their stalls. Queenie rolled her great brown eyes and retreated a step or two, disappearing into the shadows.

He swung the lantern in a wide arc about him, searching his surroundings for anything out of the ordinary – yet nothing seemed out of place . . . Even so, Caleb felt his nerves stretched even further. Perhaps the source of the disturbance was out in the yard. He stepped outside - into the cool night air, casting the lantern’s light about him – but the yard was completely still in the moonlight.

Caleb retreated back into the barn, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him, and was about to head back up the ladder when he heard a faint, almost imperceptible sound from the darkest corner of the stable. Caleb’s heart leaped within him. He swung the lantern around, holding it now like a shield – while at the same time lighting up that entire area of the barn.

Out the corner of his eye he noticed Pearl disappear into the shadows of her stall, neighing softly.

Then Caleb saw it – and as he did, the lantern almost slipped from his grasp in surprise. Crouched in the far corner of the barn was the dark form of a wolverine - shoulders hunched, its gaze fixed on the boy. Caleb retreated a step, then two . . . his eyes taking in the massive, clawed paws of the animal . . . the powerful shoulders. He looked quickly around for a weapon - an axe or shovel . . . But the wolverine remained where it was, its dark eyes never leaving those of the terrified boy.

Caleb knew he mustn’t panic. He had to think clearly. If he ran – would the wolverine attack? Should he call out to his uncle? The wolverine’s presence could mean only one thing - it had come for one of the farm animals. Caleb watched helplessly as the wolverine took a deliberate step toward him, its eyes still locked on the boy’s . . . then, for the first time, Caleb saw something in the dark, expressive eyes of the wolverine that he’d never expected . . . a strange, pleading kind of look.

“Salinger. . .” the word came out almost as a whisper, for he suddenly recognized the animal as the one his uncle had pointed out to him.

And then, just when Caleb least expected it, the wolverine turned and started for the door. From their stalls, Queenie and Pearl neighed softly.

Was he really leaving? Caleb felt his heart rate ease slightly. *What had the wolverine been doing here?* When Salinger reached the doorway he paused, then very deliberately, turned

once again to Caleb. For several long seconds Salinger stood in the doorway looking up at Caleb. It was almost as if the animal was trying to tell him something! Finally – almost reluctantly - Salinger turned and stepped out into the night.

For a long moment Caleb stood rooted to the same spot. It was almost impossible for him to believe what had just happened. Perhaps it was a dream – like the one he'd had about George. Yet there was also something very undream-like about seeing Salinger at such close range – and most disturbing - something within him was telling him to go outside and find out what the wolverine was doing here. *Impossible! Yet . . .*

With the lantern cautiously held out before him, Caleb slowly made his way to the door and ever-so cautiously stepped outside. It was all so absolutely crazy, yet it seemed that Salinger actually wanted to be followed – kind of like Pete and Ike did over at the falls. But why? Perhaps if he followed Salinger for a little ways he might find out what he was up to.

Maintaining a safe distance, Caleb kept the wolverine in sight as he followed him across the barnyard toward the wooded area. And what was even stranger, every now and then Salinger would pause, glance back over his shoulder at Caleb, then resume his journey.

Heart racing like a runaway express train, Caleb reluctantly trailed the wolverine into the forest, and as he did, the sudden darkness reached out and all but smothered him – swallowing even the lantern light, casting the hissing flame into wavering, living shadows that swayed and danced eerily about him. The silence of the forest was so deep and suffocating that it pushed its way into Caleb's head, clutching at his breath . . . his breathing now coming in raspy gasps.

And oblivious to it all, the wolverine continued its solitary trek through the trees, barely within the range of the lantern's light. Every now and then it would pause and glance back over its shoulder, almost as if checking to make sure that Caleb was still coming.

Could it be a trap? Caleb's hands were damp with perspiration, his legs felt weaker with each step. He knew it was absolutely crazy to follow a dangerous animal into the forest – alone, in the middle of the night – yet there was something in him which urged him on . . . *Run! Get away before it's too late!* But if he ran . . . he imagined Salinger chasing him . . . leaping onto his back . . . his teeth sinking into him!

It was then that Caleb realized the wolverine had stopped on the trail ahead of him. Salinger was standing in the middle of the path, his head turned once again in Caleb's direction.

The boy stopped, watching as the wolverine deliberately stepped from the trail and vanished into the darkness. Caleb started with surprise, then slowly edged his way to the spot where Salinger had disappeared. He stood for a moment, steeling his nerves, then stepped ever-so-cautiously into the trees until finally catching a glimpse of the wolverine, waiting by a large, rotten stump.

All was still. Only the hissing of the kerosene lantern and the faint movement of the night breeze disturbed the stillness. Caleb paused, barely breathing – the blackness of the forest closing in around him. And in the darkness he suddenly became aware of a faint sound - a barely-discernable *mewing* - almost like the sound a kitten would make.

He edged closer to Salinger, while at the same time following the beam of lantern light past the stump and down into the hollow. And there at the bottom of the shallow hole was another adult wolverine, and just barely visible at its side was a small kit, so young that its eyes were still closed - groping about helplessly at its mother's side.

Chapter 15

The Hollow by the Stump

Caleb couldn't believe what he was seeing. Instinctively he stepped back from the hollow, almost tripping over an old tree root. He knew it was incredibly dangerous to be so close to such a savage animal with her young – but at the same time, he also sensed that there was something terribly wrong with the scene before him – for he was convinced more than ever that Salinger had led him there for a reason.

With the hissing kerosene lantern held out before him, he moved closer – and as he did, he noticed for the first time a thick metal chain, almost hidden beneath the female wolverine. One end of the chain appeared to be looped around the nearby stump, and the other end was attached to a cold, steel animal trap - a trap which was clamped to the back leg of the wolverine.

Lying on her side, the stricken animal peered up into the hissing pool of light, the pain showing in her eyes. Caleb tilted the lantern for a better look at the trapped paw, and as he did, the female bared her teeth, emitting a low growl.

A soft rumble emanated from Salinger. With his gaze still fixed on Caleb, the wolverine slipped down into the hollow, crowding in beside his mate. Slowly, the trapped female relaxed.

Caleb eyed the pair uneasily. He knew that if the female wolverine wasn't freed from the trap she would die, yet his instincts told him that if he got any closer, the trapped animal would turn on him. He angled himself for a better look at the situation. At least the trap didn't look all that big - not like those mammoth grizzly bear traps he'd seen in pictures. *Even so . . .*

Uncle Charlie! His uncle might be able to help . . .

Almost as quickly as the idea came to him, he dismissed it. After all, his uncle had been the one who had set the trap in the first place!

Caleb stood in the darkness for several long minutes, turning over different possibilities in his mind, watching as the female tugged futilely on the thick chain, whimpering softly.

He had to free the animal, that was all there was to it! And to do that he would need to get closer. If one of the wolverines lunged at him, well . . . he didn't let his mind go any further in that direction. Slowly, he eased his right foot down into the hollow, ready to jump back at the slightest movement from either animal. As he inched nearer, he cautiously swung the kerosene

lantern between himself and the wolverines so that it acted as a shield. Worst-case scenario - the lantern might give him an extra second or two to scramble out of reach. Maybe he could even use it as a weapon ...

“Take it easy, now,” he said quietly. “I’m here to help.”

He crouched behind the female, studying the trap. He was relieved to see that its jaws did not have the sharp jagged teeth that bit right down to the bone of the victim. He remembered reading about how captives of such leg-hold traps would sometimes gnaw right through their own limbs to escape - and he knew that of all animals, a wolverine would certainly be up to that grisly task.

Well, here goes. He set the lantern down on the ground and eased himself forward, wishing he was wearing a thick pair of gloves – and maybe a catcher’s mask. Suddenly, a chilling thought came to him. What if he managed to free the wolverine . . . and then they both attacked him?

He hovered there for another instant, then in the pool of yellow light, the sounds of the baby wolverine reached his ears. He looked down at the tiny kit as it groped helplessly at the side of its mother.

Just steel your mind and do it! That’s all there is to it. Get it done and get out fast!

With one eye on Salinger, he reached a hand ever-so-slowly toward the trap. His fingers fumbled briefly as they fought the grip of cold steel. The female wolverine growled softly. Caleb then leaned downward, pressing with all his strength on the spring-loaded mechanism. The jaws of the trap immediately dropped open, and as they did, the wolverine jerked her leg free. In one quick motion, Caleb released the trap, snatched up the lantern, and leaped back out of the hollow, frantically holding the light out in front of himself.

He stood there for a moment, his heart racing like a jack hammer, his breath coming in short ragged gasps.

The female struggled slowly to her feet, holding her injured leg up off the ground. She turned and with her teeth plucked up the kit by the scruff of the neck and climbed gingerly from the hollow.

Caleb moved the lantern, capturing the retreating wolverines one last time. In its pale glow he saw Salinger pause and look back at him over his shoulder. For several long seconds the wolverine just stood there looking at Caleb, then turned and disappeared into the forest.

Chapter 16

Escape!

When Caleb joined Uncle Charlie at breakfast the next morning, the old man was as chipper as Caleb had ever seen him.

“I thought you were gonna sleep all day,” Uncle Charlie said. “I’ve already been down to the wolverine compound and found another hole them critters dug. But I done a head count when I fed ‘em, and it appears they’re all there.”

Caleb breathed a sigh of relief. At least Salinger and his family made it back okay. His late night adventures had left him exhausted! After his return from the woods he had found it impossible to sleep . . . and now - he was even too tired to eat.

"You go ahead and eat," his uncle told him. "I said the grace already."

Uncle Charlie sat across the table from him, turning the knobs of a battery-powered short wave radio.

Caleb glanced at his uncle while picking away at another plate of pork and beans. "What do you use the radio for?" he asked.

"Not much," the old man replied. "Now and then I like to get a long-range weather forecast, although the older I get, the better my arthritis gets at predicting the weather.

After a few minutes Uncle Charlie sat back in his chair and shook his head. “Can’t understand why the reception’s so poor today. That usually means a storm’s coming.” The radio crackled noisily as he twisted the dial around and around. Finally he clicked off the radio and pushed back from the table. “Well,” he said with a grunt of finality. “If it’s gonna rain I’d better start harvesting them wolverines this afternoon.” He pulled out his pocket watch and stared at it for a minute. “I reckon I’ll finish off the morning chores, grab a bite to eat . . . have a nap ... then get to it. I may not be able to clean them all out today, but at least I’ll get a start.”

Caleb was suddenly awake. “You’re going to harvest the wolverines today?” He asked.

“They’re getting way too rambunctious for their own good – always digging holes under that fence. And I’m pretty sure another one of my chickens is missing. Hard to keep track of them, though . . . and I did see a chicken hawk casing the place the other day.” He paused. “It won’t be no picnic harvesting them, though. They’re nastier and slipperier than an emu, that’s for

sure. In fact, they're just about the hardest thing there is to trap - and in all my years in the northland, I've never heard of one being shot. But since we've got them all penned up, and Gunner Boy's here to lend a hand - we should manage. We just got to be careful not to ruin their pelts when we take 'em down."

"Are you going to shoot them then?" Caleb asked.

"I'm gonna try using General Paton first," he said, nodding to the pistol sitting on the nearby shelf. "A .22 calibre hand gun shouldn't put too big a hole in a wolverine pelt," he said with a wink. "And if we can't shoot 'em, then I'll have to set a few traps inside their pen. No animal can resist a free chunk of meat."

Caleb sank back onto the hard kitchen chair. He shuddered at the thought of Salinger and the other wolverines being shot and skinned. It was strange how the events of one dark evening could change one's way of looking at things.

Uncle Charlie replaced the shortwave radio on a shelf by the stove and began stoking the wood fire.

What could he do, though? Then . . . an idea began to form. Caleb slid back from the table, suddenly anxious not to arouse the old man's suspicions.

"Good breakfast, Uncle Charlie."

"Don't forget to feed Queenie and Pearl," his uncle reminded him, taking the pearl-handled .22 revolver down from the shelf and patting it lovingly. He checked the chambers, then placed the pistol back on the shelf.

"Would it be alright if I took Queenie out for a ride?" Caleb asked innocently.

The old man grunted his approval. "Don't you wear that old hoss out. She ain't as young as she once was."

Caleb dashed out of the cabin and sprinted across the yard to the barn. Queenie and Pearl were both in their stalls, and sitting impatiently on a stack of feed bags, was Catfish.

"So what kept you?" she said with her familiar scowl. "I already fed your horses for you. They was starved."

"You wouldn't believe what happened last night . . ." Catfish sat open-mouthed as Caleb recounted his late night adventures with Salinger.

"How crazy is that!" Catfish sputtered. "Do you have any idea what a wolverine could

do to you? They can rip a moose to shreds . . .”

“I know, I know,” Caleb interrupted. “But last night it seemed that Salinger was actually leading me out there so I could free that other wolverine. Uncle Charlie partially tamed him, don't forget.” Caleb hesitated. “We've got to do something to save them. Uncle Charlie's going to start harvesting them this afternoon.”

“Save them! That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard!” Catfish said in a low voice. “We're on an island, remember? Even if you could get them out of the compound, what would you do then?”

“I don't know yet.” Caleb led Queenie from the stall, then tossed the old blanket up onto her back. “All I know is that we've only got a few hours before Uncle Charlie goes to work hunting them down. If we don't get busy, Salinger and his family's pelts will be hanging from the barn wall by suppertime.”

“There ain't no way of getting them off this island right in front of your uncle's nose,” Catfish said.

As Caleb led Queenie out into the yard the big mare was obviously delighted at the prospect of another outing. She stepped excitedly from one foot to the next, rearing her head and neighing contentedly as Caleb climbed up onto her back.

“Coming?” Caleb extended a hand down to Catfish.

“I guess.” She reached out and pulled herself up behind Caleb.

Being on Queenie's back again was exhilarating, and Caleb was surprised at how pleased it felt to have Catfish along for the ride. With a confident tug of the reigns, he guided the horse toward the woods on the other side of the sheep pasture.

“So have you cooked up any ideas yet on how you're gonna save them wolverines,” Catfish asked.

“Not yet,” Caleb admitted. “My friend, George, would have come up with three or four ideas by now, but unfortunately he's 500 miles south of here!”

“Well, if you let them out of the pen, you're asking for trouble! And even if you do manage to save their mangy hides, your uncle will probably skin you alive!”

Caleb grimaced at Catfish's warning. *What if he did get caught? His uncle could very well send him back to the city. But where would he live? He had no idea how to get in touch with*

his mother . . .

At the gate to the wolverine pen Caleb drew back on Queenie's reigns and scanned the sea of yellow and white flowers beyond the wire enclosure.

"I should've brought Auntie Mona's twelve gauge shotgun," Catfish muttered under her breath.

"We're here to save the wolverines," Caleb reminded her, "Not blow their brains out."

"Yah, well what now, Einstein?" Catfish asked sarcastically. "Do you feel a brainwave coming? Maybe we could just let them climb all over Queenie's back – then you and me could hold onto her tail and she could pull us over to the mainland. Queenie'd probably love it."

"We'd better check and see if there's any holes under the fence," Caleb suggested, giving the mare's reigns a flick. "It seems pretty quiet. Maybe they've already escaped."

"What if they have escaped?" Catfish asked as they started down the wire fence. "Catching wolverines in the wild would be like catching a ghost."

"I don't have any idea how to go about rounding them up, even if they're still in the pen!"

"If we could get them over to my raft," Catfish suggested. "Maybe we could cart them over to the mainland on it."

Caleb glanced back over his shoulder at his friend, mulling over her words.

"We have to find them first, then get them out of the enclosure without being eaten alive," Caleb said. "Then we would have to lead them right across the island to where you left the raft - all without being noticed by Uncle Charlie and Gunner Boy. It seems impossible."

"You got a better idea?"

Caleb shrugged. "Unfortunately not." He slowed Queenie while she manoeuvred between the fence and a large outcropping of rock. "Your idea may be all we have, Catfish, but how do we even get things started?"

"That's a good question," Catfish agreed.

"What would Auntie Mona and Pappa Zeke say if they knew you were involved in something like this?"

There was a long pause behind him. So long, in fact, that Caleb finally turned and looked at Catfish.

"Don't tell nobody, but there ain't no Pappa Zeke. We tell folks about him so they'll

think there's a man about the place. Auntie Mona figures it's safer that way."

Caleb eyed his friend to see if she was serious, then turned back to the trail in front of them. "I guess we both have secrets," he said. "My mom sent me up here to hide out from my dad. They're separated and he's determined to take me to live with him – even if it means kidnapping me and taking me to Mexico City."

Catfish gave a low whistle between her teeth. "If that don't beat all," she said. "He must be a real piece of work."

"He used to be really nice," Caleb said. "But then he got into an accident and it really changed him. My mom wants him to have an operation this summer, and if he does, he might be like his old self again."

Queenie trotted happily along the perimeter of the fence, tossing her head every so often in the warm July sunshine. When they were almost at the riverbank, she suddenly gave a startled snort and sidestepped off the trail, plowing right into a thick clump of bushes. Caleb grabbed hold of Queenie's mane with one hand and hauled back on the reigns with the other.

"Settle down, girl! Settle!" He threw his leg over her back and jumped to the ground.

Catfish slid off the same side, glancing nervously around them. "Wolverines?"

"We'd better check things out." Caleb looped the reigns around the branch of a nearby tree, then took a few tentative steps toward the fence, scanning the thick grassy field on the other side. As he did, the faintest of shadows flitted before them. Cautiously, he edged closer to the wire barrier. Catfish bumped up against his elbow.

"Did you see that?" he asked. "Something moved over there."

He'd no sooner got the words out when straight across from them, on the other side of the wire, a brown, dog-sized animal with a white splotch of fur between its eyes emerged from the long grass. *Salinger! No wonder Queenie had been so nervous.* Slowly and deliberately the wolverine stepped up to the fence, its eyes fixed on Caleb.

"Look at that," Catfish whispered. "There's a hole under the fence."

A second wolverine appeared just then, edged past Salinger and climbed down into the hole that Catfish had pointed out. The wolverine's huge claws immediately began scratching at the soft, brown dirt - deepening a hole that already extended most of its way under the barrier.

"The one with the white patch between its eyes is the same wolverine I saw last night," Caleb

whispered. “Uncle Charlie calls him Salinger.” As they stood watching, several more wolverines appeared.

“That wolverine’s staring at you,” Catfish hissed, pointing at Salinger.

“I noticed.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Catfish said.

But instead, Caleb moved even closer to the barrier - close enough to see that the hole had already breached the bottom of the fence, but he noticed too, that the wolverine was having trouble getting under the last couple of wires that Uncle Charlie had buried beneath the ground. “I think its claws are getting snagged in the wires,” Caleb suggested.

The wolverine tossed several more pawfuls of dirt aside, then hauled itself from the hole, eyeing Salinger. The lead wolverine looked through the fence to Caleb, its eyes taking on the same curious expression they wore last night. Caleb studied the semicircle of wolverines now gathered about the hole.

“Mean-lookin’ critters, ain’t they?” Catfish observed. “Look at them claws! They’re massive.”

Caleb nodded uneasily. “Looks like there’s a couple of wires buried under the ground that they can’t get by,” he said.

Every instinct of self-preservation was now screaming in Caleb’s head. *Get away! Run as fast as you can! Get out of here.* Yet he moved even closer to the hole. Slowly, with one eye on Salinger, he cautiously knelt, then fastening his fingers under the bottom wire, he pulled upward with all his might.

He heard Catfish suck in her breath. “What are you doing?”

The wire slowly slipped from its moorings, easing upward until there was a gaping hole beneath the tangled strands of barbed wire. Salinger uttered a low sound in his throat as Caleb got back to his feet and retreated to where Catfish was standing. Immediately four of the wolverines disappeared into the deep grass - then quickly reappeared with small bundles of fur dangling from their mouths - little baby wolverines just like the one Caleb had seen with Salinger and his mate last night.

“Let’s get out of here!” Catfish whispered.

“Wait,” Caleb said. “Why don’t we see if we can get them over to your raft?”

Catfish looked at him incredulously.

“You can’t be serious!”

They watched as one by one, the wolverines stepped down into the hole with their tiny bundles, then slipped beneath the wire and out the other side - eight adults and four babies.

Caleb and Catfish retreated a few steps.

“Well,” Catfish said, retreating still another step. “Your little friends have decided to make a break for it, so what do we do now?”

Chapter 17

The Shoreline

Caleb gazed down at the eight pairs of eyes looking up at him. He watched as Salinger's mate limped over to the leader, a kit gripped between her teeth.

"We'd better get going," Catfish said, tugging at Caleb's arm. "Your uncle's probably on his way over here right now and when he finds the wolverines gone, he'll set that old hound on their trail, sure as shootin'."

"There's no way we'll have enough time to get them across the island to the raft and then over to the mainland without being seen by Uncle Charlie," Caleb said, the discouragement showing in his voice.

"It's not likely they'll make very good time lugging along their babies either," Catfish said looking down at the little group.

"Then we've got to buy some time," Caleb suggested. "If we don't, Gunner Boy will track us down long before we make it over to where you left the raft."

He thought for a moment. "Can you bring the raft over here?"

"No way! It's attached to the cable – remember?"

"What can we do, then?" Caleb asked, a feeling of panic surging through him. "If we cross the river while it's light, Uncle Charlie will see us." He thought for a minute. "Is there anyway we can hide the wolverines until dark?"

"Are you crazy? Where on earth could we do that? That mangy hound would find them in a minute. At least if we get them on the raft, they'll have a chance!"

"There has to be some way of throwing Gunner Boy off our trail."

"How in the dickens can you throw a hound dog off the scent of a dozen wolverines?" Catfish asked.

Caleb racked his brain. *Surely one of the wilderness books he'd read described a situation like this . . . or maybe one of those movies his mother had taken him to - like the one about escaping prisoners.* Then he remembered!

He turned to Catfish, his eyes large with excitement. "Water will throw tracking dogs off a scent," he said.

Catfish's face lit up. "That's right."

Caleb unhitched Queenie's reigns from the tree, then pulled the reluctant mare back onto the path. In spite of himself, he grinned. The sight of the little band gathered nearby, with the tiny bundles of fur hanging from their mouths was just too much! He felt like a sheep dog.

Queenie rolled her eyes and pulled desperately on the reigns.

"What are you gonna do with that old nag?" Catfish asked. "She's more skittish than a chicken at a weasel convention. You should send her back home."

"If I do, Uncle Charlie will think I took a tumble and come looking for me."

"What are we going to do we then?" Catfish asked, her exasperation showing.

"I've got it!" Caleb said excitedly. "Uncle Charlie always takes a nap right after lunch. Maybe we could cross over to the mainland then."

"That's a couple of hours from now," Catfish replied. "What do we do with them 'till then?"

"I'm not sure yet," Caleb admitted.

"Why don't we just take them over on the raft right now, while your Uncle's away from his farm," Catfish suggested. "I can even fix your uncle's outboard motors so he can't follow us."

"We don't have enough time. If my uncle ever finds out that I helped the wolverines escape, he may not let me stay with him anymore. I just can't take that chance."

He manoeuvred the reluctant horse past the wolverines and down the trail toward the river. When he looked back he was relieved to see the wolverines slowly following them down the trail toward the river.

"I can't believe how peaceful they're being," Catfish said, shaking her head.

"I wonder what's going on in their heads," Caleb said. "Are they really counting on us to get them off the island? Are they smart enough to think like that?"

When they reached the riverbank, Caleb took a deep breath. "Now all we have to do is get the wolverines to wade out into the water."

Catfish shook her head. "How in the name of my Tall Aunt Sadie are we gonna get them to do that?"

"We've got to," Caleb replied, leading Queenie out into the shallow water. "If we don't

throw Gunner Boy off their scent . . . then the game's up."

"The whole thing's nothing but plumb idiocy and foolishness," Catfish sputtered, splashing along after Caleb and the mare.

When the fast-flowing water reached halfway to his knees, Caleb looked back at the shore. Salinger and his family were still standing on the bank, looking curiously out at him.

"You've got to come out here," Caleb said, beckoning them forward. Still, the wolverines did not move.

Catfish scowled. Hands planted firmly on her hips, she glared at Salinger and his followers. "You ignorant, smelly, blood-sucking numbskulls," she shouted. "If you don't get your mangy derrieres out here right now you'll be mincemeat pie by suppertime."

Salinger retreated a half-step at the unexpected tirade, paused, took a deep breath, then stepped into the clear shallow waters.

"Glory be," Catfish said with a laugh. "Would you look at that."

Even as she spoke, the rest of Salinger's little band waded slowly into the river, following their leader out to where the two young people waited.

"Way to go, Salinger," Caleb said, smiling broadly.

"He knows who's boss," Catfish agreed.

"Now," Caleb said. "Let's follow the shoreline for a ways." Gripping Queenie's reigns, he led his odd little party through the shallow water, keeping as close as possible to the meandering shoreline.

"So what are we going to do with them for the next couple of hours?" Catfish asked. "I don't think they'll like wading along the shoreline for that long."

"I haven't worked that out yet."

Catfish stopped, reached out and grabbed Caleb by the arm. "I know!" she said. "Let's do the one thing that the old man would never expect. Let's hide them in the barn!"

Caleb looked over at his companion. "The barn?"

"What do you have to lose? There ain't no farm animals in there during the day, and Old Charlie would never suspect a bunch of wolverines to be hiding right under his nose."

"Uncle Charlie goes into the barn all the time," Caleb said. "He'd find them for sure!"

"Not if they're up in the loft! Didn't you say your uncle never goes up there 'cause of his

rheumatis?”

Caleb laughed. “You know, your idea is so absolutely crazy it might just work.” Caleb slowed his steps, his mind working. “We can hide them there until he goes down for his nap, then make a break for it.”

“I think we’re forgetting about one thing,” Catfish said, frowning. “Gunner Boy! That hound may be as old as the hills, but even he’s bound to pick up the scent of a dozen wolverines.”

“I have an idea,” Caleb replied. “It may not work, but it’s worth a try.”

Onward they splashed. Every couple of minutes Caleb would check to see how the wolverines were doing. Salinger’s mate was his main concern. After only a few minutes she was already lagging behind the others, her limp becoming more and more pronounced.

Finally they reached the path leading up from the river to his uncle’s farm. In the distance, Caleb could see the barn and cabin silhouetted in the late morning sun.

“At last,” Catfish muttered, splashing up onto the narrow sandy beach. “We’d better let them rest for a minute.”

The eight adult wolverines needed no further urgings, quickly coming ashore behind Catfish, Caleb and the mare.

“I sure wish I knew if Uncle Charlie had already left for the compound,” Caleb said, tying Queenie to a nearby tree.

“Well, I reckon we’ll find out soon enough,” Catfish said. “If that old hound’s still around, things are gonna get real interesting!”

“That one wolverine looks done-in already,” Caleb said, pointing to Salinger’s mate. The female had just come ashore and was now sprawled on her side in the grass.

“She sure does,” Catfish agreed. “I just hope she has enough gas left in the tank to make it to the barn.”

“When we get them up to the farm – what if they decide they’re hungry and need a snack?” Caleb asked.

Catfish broke into a big grin. “This really is a crazy idea, isn’t it? Imagine - sticking a pack of hungry wolverines in with a bunch of farm animals. They’ll think they’ve been invited to a buffet dinner at a fancy restaurant.”

Caleb's thoughts turned to his uncle's chickens . . . the pigs, sheep and horses! What was he doing, bringing Salinger and his band of carnivores into their peaceful little world? He heaved a huge sigh. "Well, let's get this over with." With a sinking heart he led the way up the riverbank and across the field toward his uncle's barn.

Chapter 18

Hiding Out

The journey from the river to the barn seemed to take forever and it was everything Caleb could do to keep Queenie in check. The mare strained on her reigns and pranced this way and that, until they were finally able to turn her loose in the pasture.

“That creaky old hound doesn’t seem to be around,” Catfish said, looking about them. “Hopefully he and your uncle are still over at the wolverine pen.”

“It is pretty quiet,” Caleb said, pausing by the barn doors.

The wolverines, with Salinger’s mate bringing up the rear, straggled across the barnyard, eyes fixed on the farm animals they were passing.

Catfish pushed by Caleb and stepped inside the barn. “Let’s see if we can get them up into the loft before they take the notion to make themselves a mutton sandwich.”

Caleb followed her to the foot of the ladder leading up to the loft. “How do we get them up there?”

Catfish shrugged. “If they don’t follow us, maybe you could carry them. Are you game?”

Caleb grinned. “Let’s try Option A first.” He pulled himself up the first few rungs, then glanced over his shoulder. The wolverines were now gathered in a circle at the bottom of the ladder, looking up at him.

“Come on you guys,” Caleb said, encouragingly. “Pretend you’re climbing an old tree. Surely you’ve done that hundreds of times.”

“Maybe wolverines ain’t tree climbers” Catfish said. “Dogs ain’t.”

“Yes, but look at their claws,” Caleb said. “Climbing a tree or a ladder should be as easy as pie.”

He scampered up the last few rungs, then leaned back down over his charges. “You show them, Catfish. Maybe they’ll follow you.”

Catfish stepped gingerly through the little crowd of wolverines and scampered up the ladder. She then dropped to her knees and leaned back over the wolverines. “Come on you yellow-hearted, liver-lilied bunch of sissies, you ignorant, sorry pack of wusses - don’t tell me you’re scared of heights?”

Salinger turned his head away from Catfish, almost as if he was embarrassed, then lifted a great paw and grasped the first rung. Slowly and methodically the big wolverine pulled himself up the ladder one ponderous rung at a time. His family quickly fell into line behind him.

Within a few short minutes, all eight adult wolverines and four tiny babies were up in the loft, gazing around curiously. By the far window, the partridges were standing shock-eyed still, studying their visitors warily.

“Wait here,” Caleb ordered. “We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“And for goodness sakes keep quiet,” Catfish added.

Caleb made his way back down the ladder with Catfish right behind him. They were exiting the barn when Caleb noticed Salinger descending the ladder. “You stay up there, Salinger,” he said. “You’ve got to keep everyone from leaving. We won’t be long.”

“You think he can actually understand you?” Catfish asked watching Salinger’s head-first descent.

“He seems to understand you,” Caleb said.

“Well, he sure ain’t listening now!”

“At least the others don’t seem to be following him.” “I guess he’s gonna make sure we don’t desert them,” Catfish said, sticking her head out the barn door and looking around. “I think the coast is clear. No crazy old man. No mangy hound. What’s next?”

“Come with me.” Caleb led the way over to the front door of Uncle Charlie’s cabin. Salinger followed several paces behind.

“What’re you doin’?” Catfish asked.

“I’ve got to get something.” Caleb slipped into the cabin, pausing for a moment while his eyes grew accustomed to the dim interior. He then made his way over to the shelf by the stove and began searching among the assorted bags and boxes until finally emerging with a large package of black pepper. “Okay, let’s go.”

Catfish stopped him at the door. “Pepper! You came in here for a box of pepper?”

“You’ll see,” Caleb said mysteriously. With that he sprinted from the cabin and back across the yard, past the barn and onto the trail leading to the river.

Caleb found it surprising how little notice the farm animals took of Salinger, trotting imposingly along behind the two humans. None of the sheep or pigs gave him more than a

passing glance.

At the spot where the wolverines had come ashore, Caleb broke a large branch from a nearby spruce tree, and began swishing it back and forth across the tracks of the wolverines.

“Whatcha’ doing now?” Catfish asked.

“Covering the evidence,” he said, “I saw it in a movie my mother took me to.” He looked up at Catfish. “Have you ever been to a movie?”

“Course I have,” she said, looking wounded. “The Grand Palladium in Fortune Head – they have a movie every other Friday night.”

Caleb continued obliterating the tracks as he backed down the path from the river.

Catfish shook her head, “You’re wasting your time - dogs don’t need to see the tracks to trail something. Even that blind old hound’s probably got a pretty good sniffer.”

“This is for Uncle Charlie’s sake,” Caleb explained. “I’ll fix the Gunner Boy problem in a minute. When he’d completely erased all of the wolverine tracks near the shoreline, he tossed the spruce bough into the bushes, then popped open the pepper box. Very carefully he sprinkled a liberal dose all the way back to where the grass started.

“Well now. Ain’t you the clever one,” Catfish said with a laugh. “You learn that from the movies too?”

“It’s worth a try. We’ve got to get Gunner Boy off the trail somehow.” He froze as a sudden thought came to him. “The barn! The dog will scent the wolverines in the barn, right?”

“I dunno,” Catfish said. “Does the dog ever go into the barn?”

Caleb thought for a moment. “Now and then - so I’d better save some of this pepper.”

Behind him Salinger gave a violent sneeze.

Chapter 19

Complications

Caleb sprinkled the last of the pepper around the barn door and the bottom of the ladder leading to the loft.

“You’d better hope that works,” Catfish warned, “If not, you’ll really be up the creek without a paddle.”

Caleb took a deep breath. “Well, I guess we should go see if we still have any guests upstairs.” He scrambled back up the rickety ladder, pausing at the entrance. He noticed right away that all the wolverines were gathered together down at the far end of the loft.

“Well,” Catfish said, as she took in the scene before them. “Looks like you won’t have to worry about providing them with any lunch.”

Scattered about the far end of the room were the feathers and grisly remains of several of Caleb’s former roommates - the ruffed grouse.

Caleb made his way to the other end of the loft, taking in the unsettling scene before him - then sat down on the window ledge.

“At least it was only a few partridge,” Catfish said, sitting down beside him. “Your uncle will never miss them.”

At the mention of his uncle’s name, Caleb turned and looked out the loft window. Far in the distance, the blue waters of the river danced and sparkled in the noonday sun. Then, his heart suddenly skipped a beat. Half-way between the river and barn Uncle Charlie and Gunner Boy were walking back toward the farm, eyes on the ground.

“Here they come,” Catfish said.

Caleb turned back to the wolverines just in time to see the last of the partridges disappear down one of their gullets.

“They sure made short work of them grouse, didn’t they?” Catfish said, an amused look on her face. “I wonder how many of them they managed to catch.”

Salinger crossed the room to where a couple of partridge feathers lay, his long claws grating eerily on the floor. He sniffed at the remains, then looked up at Caleb and Catfish.

“Listen, Mutt,” Catfish said, scowling darkly. “You and these lice-infested nose-pickers

gotta stay up here for the next while. If you behave yourselves, we'll get you off this island - but only when that old man and the hound are off in Sleepytown - understand?"

"No more complications," Caleb pleaded.

Catfish looked over at Caleb. "We'd better get down out of here before your uncle and the dog get back," she suggested.

"Thanks for your help, Catfish," Caleb said, leading the way to the ladder. "Who knows how this may end up, but I sure appreciate your help, anyway."

Catfish gave him one of her mysterious half-smiles as she followed him down the ladder.

When they had climbed down to the main floor, Caleb looked back up the ladder and smiled. "Well, we must have tuckered old Salinger out," he said. "He isn't following us."

Caleb stepped through the big double doors just in time to see Uncle Charlie stomp across the yard toward them, Gunner Boy at his heels.

"Did you find anything unusual over at the fence, boy?"

Caleb shrugged. "Nothing too out of the ordinary," he said vaguely.

"Well, you missed quite a bit! All eight wolverines have gone and busted out. There ain't none left. I don't know how you could've missed the hole in the fence - it was so big Queenie could have crawled under, with you on her back. We trailed them to the river and then followed the shoreline trying to pick up their tracks, but it weren't no use. Maybe they took it in their heads to swim over to the mainland." He poked a thumb in Gunner Boy's direction. "And would you look at that sorry hound." The dog was standing over by the chicken coop, sneezing loudly.

"What's wrong with Gunner Boy?" Caleb asked innocently.

Uncle Charlie grunted. "Appears he's come down with allergies or a bad cold! He's been sneezing his head off for the last few minutes." The old man paused for a moment, obviously deep in thought. "I've got a job for you to do, Nephew."

"Sure. What is it?"

"Take Queenie down over yonder to the shoreline and go right around this here island. If Gunner Boy feels up to it, take him with you. Who knows, them wolverines may still be around - if so, the dog might be able to pick up their trail and flush them out. If you find 'em, come a runnin'. Old Queenie will probably have a fit if you get anywhere near them anyway."

“Will do, Uncle Charlie.”

“If you see anything at all suspicious - get right back here and let me know. If them blood-thirsty weasels are runnin’ loose, they’re liable to start killing everything in sight just to get even with me.”

Caleb glanced at Catfish, thinking about the remains of the grouse they’d just left up in the loft. Hopefully that would be all Salinger and the others snacked on while they were gone. Uncle Charlie gave an impatient wave. “I’m going back to the ranch house to get General Patton, then I’m heading over to the wolverine pen and grab a sack full of their grub. Maybe I can use that for bait. I’ll meet you here when you’re done.” With that he turned and headed across the yard toward the log cabin.

Queenie snorted happily and gave her head a toss as Caleb led her out of the pasture. To Caleb’s surprise, he and Catfish had no sooner mounted the mare than Gunner Boy loped up behind them.

“Good boy, Gunner,” Caleb called.

“At least he won’t be nosing around the barn while we’re gone,” Catfish said.

“I sure hope the wolverines behave themselves while we’re gone,” he said to Catfish over his shoulder.

“No kidding,” Catfish agreed. “If they decide to make themselves a chicken soufflé . . . you might as well pack your bags.”

Caleb glanced down at his watch. It was now a shade past noon - no wonder he was hungry. The light breeze against his face and the warmth of the July sun lifted his spirits as they approached the glistening blue waters of the river. Not far out from shore a fish jumped.

“Better make this quick,” Catfish suggested as Queenie stepped down off embankment and into the shallows.

Caleb put his heels to Queenie as the sudden image of wolverines marauding through the chicken coop flashed through his mind. *Catfish was right - he had to get this job done as quickly as possible. He’d follow the shoreline around the island as fast as he dared, then hurry back to the barn.* Splashing along beside them, Gunner Boy had no trouble keeping pace with the mare - his mournful eyes glancing occasionally up at the two riders. After several minutes they rounded a craggy point, and there before them was the familiar beach where Catfish had left the raft - and

just beyond it was Uncle Charlie's pontoon boat.

"This is far enough," Caleb announced. "I'm heading back." He yanked hard on the mare's reigns, guiding her out of the water and up onto the narrow pathway leading to the farm. He then put Queenie into a full gallop down the narrow trail through the woods. The feeling of dread was now so overwhelming that he was almost desperate to get back to check on the wolverines.

When they rode into the farmyard a moment or two later, everything looked normal enough. A smattering of chickens and pigs scrounged in the penned-up areas as they always did. . . The half-dozen sheep grazed contentedly over in their pasture.

"Your Uncle Charlie must still be over at the wolverine pen," Catfish said as they watched Gunner Boy wander over to the cabin, then drop into an exhausted heap by the steps.

Caleb rode the mare back to the pasture where Pearl was waiting. He was dying to check on the wolverines, praying they were still up in the loft and not out somewhere creating havoc. A sickening feeling now filled him. Something was just not right!

Caleb dashed into the barn and scrambled up the ladder – Catfish right behind him. When he poked his head up through the trap door and looked around, everything appeared to be in order - the wolverines were all hunkered down quietly at the far end by the window . . . Then Caleb saw it! A few feet inside the loft window lay the carcass of a half-eaten pig, and near it, the unmistakable remains of at least one chicken. Caleb could hear Catfish gasp as she took in the scene before them. Slowly he crossed the room, his stomach rebelling as he approached the gruesome remains of the poor pig. A couple of the wolverines were gnawing on what looked like the pig's back leg. Suddenly, an overpowering fear gripped him. *Where was Salinger?* Caleb stepped back and looked around. Two or three of the wolverines were looking up at him - their dark eyes glued to his every move. Caleb began counting frantically . . . *were they all still here?*

Then he saw the lead wolverine, standing over by the cot chewing on a couple of the pig's ribs.

"What did you do?" Caleb sputtered. "Can't we leave you alone for a few minutes?"

The wolverines continued looking up at him curiously. Only Salinger refused to look his way. Caleb's head was spinning. *What would he do with this disgusting, half-eaten pig carcass in the middle of his bedroom?*

Suddenly from down in the main part of the barn he heard his uncle's voice.

"Boy! Are you up there? Nephew?"

Caleb froze.

"You'd better get down here. Something's gotten into the pigs and I'm missing my yearling. Get down here, Boy. It appears like them wolverines didn't hightail it for the mainland after all. Now we've got to get them before they clean us out!"

Chapter 20

Cannibals

“Them wolverines must have snuck into my pig sty while you was out checking the shoreline,” Uncle Charlie said. “Appears they grabbed the young ‘un and drug her off.”

Uncle Charlie, with Caleb and Catfish in tow, followed the muddy wolverine tracks out of the sty and up into a grassy area near the log cabin. “Looks like they drug the pig over here,” Uncle Charlie observed. “They probably then hightailed it into the woods.” He stopped and bent down for a closer look. “My eyesight ain’t what it used to be,” he said, straightening up. “Where’s that dog, anyway?”

“He’s over by the cabin having a nap,” Catfish said.

“No more Mr. Nice Guy,” Uncle Charlie said, heading toward the cabin. “I don’t care about them pelts no more. If they want to start killing my livestock, it’s gonna be a fight to the death! I’m gonna blast every last one of ‘em to kingdom come, let me tell you!” The old man stormed up onto the porch and through the front door with Caleb and Catfish scrambling to keep up with them.

Once inside, Uncle Charlie headed straight for the shelf by the stove and lifted down his long, double-barrelled twelve-gauge shotgun and a box of shells. He cracked open the chambers, dropped in two shells and snapped the barrels shut. “Let’s do some trackin’!” he said. “Let’s run them varmints down once and for all. Forget about the cost of their pelts.”

Back out the front door he barged, whistling for the hound. Almost immediately Gunner Boy came trotting around the corner of the cabin, tongue lolling from his mouth.

“It’s time you earned your keep, dog!” Uncle Charlie said, snapping a short leash onto the hound’s collar. He then almost dragged Gunner Boy over to the pig sty where the sharp-clawed tracks of the wolverines were still evident in the muddy soil. “Okay dog, take a sniff.”

“I sure wish I’d sprinkled some pepper here,” Caleb whispered to Catfish.

Gunner Boy put his nose to the ground and began sniffing around the muddy home of the two remaining pigs - slowly moving up to the grassy area between the barn and the cabin.

Caleb’s heart began to accelerate.

Uncle Charlie yanked back on the leash. “Now come on, dog. Them critters ain’t in the

barn. I was just there!” Gunner Boy gave the old man only a fleeting glance, then dropped his nose back to the ground, almost dragging his master the remainder of the way to the big double doors.

“You cotton-pickin’ stupid hound!” The old man hollered, as the two of them barged into the barn. “You ain’t supposed to be trackin’ Queenie – or these here kids - you’re supposed to be after them wolverines!” He looked around in exasperation. “You was always a pretty fair trackin’ dog – I don’t know what’s gotten into you. Did somebody leave a pork chop in here?”

Gunner Boy thrust his nose back down to the plank floor of the barn, ignoring the complaints of the old man.

Caleb’s mind was racing as he watched his uncle being dragged over to the foot of the ladder leading up to the loft. He had to think of something quick . . . or the jig would be up – he couldn’t even begin to imagine what would happen if Uncle Charlie and Gunner Boy came face-to-face with Salinger and the other wolverines - especially right here in the barn!

Suddenly Gunner Boy straightened up - a startled look appearing on his sad, wrinkled face. With his head pointed up toward the ceiling, he exploded into a series of the loudest sneezes Caleb had ever heard. *Ah-choo! Ah-choo!* Then another - and another. At least a dozen in rapid succession.

“There you go again!” Uncle Charlie said, pulling the hound back toward the door. “That allergy of yours is right outta control.”

“Maybe he’s catching a cold,” Caleb suggested, grateful he’d sprinkled so much pepper at the foot of the ladder.

“Can dogs catch colds?” Uncle Charlie asked.

“When they’re as old and creaky as this one,” Catfish said.

Uncle Charlie undid the leash and watched curiously as Gunner Boy staggered off around a corner of the barn, blinking his eyes and sneezing periodically.

Uncle Charlie’s shoulders slumped defeatedly. He cracked open the shotgun, removed the two shells and dropped them into his shirt pocket. “So much for that,” he said. “The only place them wolverines could have gone is into them woods.” He indicated the forest just north of the ranch house. “We oughta go have a quick look-see.”

“Good idea.” Caleb breathed a sigh of relief as he and Catfish followed the old man

towards the woods.

“There’s nothin’ more dangerous than a cornered animal, and them wolverines is cornered,” the old man advised as he scoured the ground for signs. “They got nowhere’s to go on this here island, so it’s just a matter of time before we track ‘em down.” He straightened up and looked at the boy suddenly, tilting his head to one side as if an idea had just come to him.

“Something just occurred to me,” he said, “Now that them wolverines have taken to killing my livestock, I’d hate for someone to get between them and their next meal – especially my own nephew.” He paused. “Until we’ve rounded up every last one of them critters, you’d better stay with me in the ranch house. You can curl up on the couch by the stove at night.”

He turned back to the trail. “Well, I’m running out of gas, but before we stop for a break, let’s turn these woods inside out and see if we find any signs of them slippery pig-killers.”

Caleb groaned. He wanted to be back at the barn keeping an eye on Salinger. He had to get the wolverines off this island this afternoon before Uncle Charlie’s entire livestock was cleaned out!

Chapter 21

Gone

For more than an hour Caleb and Catfish followed Uncle Charlie and Gunner Boy through the woods, checking every nook and cranny where the wolverines could possibly have hidden – with no luck.

“That’s it!” Uncle Charlie said, the exasperation showing in his voice. “We’d better get ourselves back to the ranch and make sure no more livestock have disappeared. In fact, I’m gonna put the sheep and pigs in the barn for the time being.”

“Great idea,” Catfish muttered when they were out of earshot. “Now Salinger and the others will just have to go downstairs for their little snacks.”

When they arrived back at the farm, Caleb and Catfish helped Uncle Charlie round up Queenie and Pearl as well as the pigs and sheep and herded them all into the barn. The racket was almost deafening! Pigs, sheep, horses - all crowded together - oinking, bleating, neighing, stamping around in one confused hub-bub. To make extra sure that the animals were secure, Uncle Charlie snapped huge padlocks on both barn doors and dropped the keys into his trouser pocket.

"Now I can appreciate a little of what old Noah went through," Uncle Charlie said with a grin.

“Why are you lockin’ the doors?” Catfish asked. “Do you figure them wolverines can turn the latch and let themselves in?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” Uncle Charlie said. “Come on. Let’s grab a bite to eat.” He led them back to the cabin where he immediately plopped down on the sofa by the woodstove. Gunner Boy flopped onto the floor beside him, groaning softly.

“After I rest up a bit, we’ll scour this here island from stem to stern,” Uncle Charlie advised, putting his feet up on a block of wood. “We’ll put the run on them nasty, vermin, you see if we don’t. This island may be fairly big, but there’s only so many places to hide, and there ain’t no way for them to get over to the mainland – not in one piece, at least.” He got to his feet and even though the cabin was already quite warm, dropped another log into the stove, his eyes squinting thoughtfully. “I wonder if a fire would work.”

Caleb's head jerked up.

"You kids ever hear-tell of a *controlled burn*?" Uncle Charlie asked.

Caleb shook his head.

"The early pioneers out on the prairies used controlled burns all the time. When the wind was blowing in from the right direction they'd set fire to the grass and bush. It was an easy way to clear their fields – and the great thing about it, the wind would blow the fire right along until it burned itself out. If them wolverines are out there hiding in the fields and not the woods, a controlled burn would be the perfect way to scare them out into the open and right into my gun sights."

Caleb looked at him aghast. "But you could burn down the cabin . . . and the barn . . ."

"Course not. The wind would push the fire right up against the river. We'll just burn the scrubby stuff over yonder - where the wolverines may be hidin'." The old man wrinkled his brow and stared off into space, as if mesmerized by his latest idea. "And even if it don't burn them out into the open, at least it would get rid of all the grass and small brush – give us a clear field of vision."

"Sounds loony to me," Catfish said. "Good thing you're on this island or you'd probably have burned down Roaring Creek by now."

Uncle Charlie paused for a moment, looking from Caleb to Catfish, then back at his nephew. "Well, I can appreciate your concerns, I suppose . . ."

"But you could burn up the horses and all the animals," Caleb persisted. "If it got away from you, you could burn down the whole island."

"Aw, go peddle your papers, boy," Uncle Charlie said, settling himself comfortably on the sofa. "We can't keep them animals locked up in the barn forever, and pretty soon them wolverines'll be hungry again . . ." He looked over at his nephew. "We've got to do something soon, don't ya see? They're getting bolder and bolder!" He closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. "Well, I'm not as young as I once was, so I'm gonna grab a bit of shut-eye. You two quit your gabbin' and wake me up in an hour or so. Get yourselves something to eat and then head outside . . . but keep your eyes and ears open this time."

Caleb and Catfish waited until the old man was snoring, then slipped from the cabin, shutting Gunner Boy inside. They stood together on the porch for a long minute, looking across

the yard at the locked barn doors.

“How are we gonna get them wolverines out now?” Catfish asked. “Your crazy old uncle has the keys in his pants pocket.”

“Do you think we can get the keys without waking him?” Caleb asked. “He seems to sleep pretty soundly.”

Catfish thought for a moment. “Even if we had the keys,” she said. “How are we gonna get them wolverines out of the loft with the barn full of animals. Those pigs and sheep will make enough racket to raise the dead.”

Catfish stepped down from the porch and looked over at the barn. “And I sure ain’t stickin’ around when that crazy old man starts settin’ fires.”

“I’ve got it,” Caleb said, his eyes suddenly lighting up. “I know how we can get the wolverines down out of the loft.” Without another word he took off across the field in the direction of the chicken coop – Catfish at his heels. When he reached the coop he ran around to the back, and there lying on the ground, was a long, ancient wooden ladder.

“I noticed it here yesterday,” Caleb said. “We can carry it over to the barn and prop it up against the window at the back of the loft. The wolverines will be able to climb down without ever having to go down to the main part of the barn.”

“Not a bad idea, City Boy,” Catfish said.

They each grabbed an end and carried the ladder across the yard to the back of the barn where they propped it against the wall.

“How on earth are we going to get the wolverines to follow us down this rickety thing?” Catfish asked.

“We’ve got to,” Caleb said. “That’s all there is to it.” Holding his breath, he climbed up to the large window and poked his head inside, dreading the possibility of what he might see.

Every eye in the room was turned his way as he stepped into the loft, the floorboards creaking beneath him. Caleb noted that very little remained of the poor pig that had been killed earlier in the day.

Catfish joined him by the window, surveying the pack of wolverines. “What a sorry bunch,” she said, scowling. “Why anyone would go to all this trouble for such a woeful pack of lice-laden hole-diggers is beyond me.”

“At least they haven’t eaten any more of the livestock.”

“You hope not, anyway. Goodness knows what we might find downstairs.”

Salinger ambled slowly to the front of the others, his long claws scratching the wooden planks.

“We’ve got to get going!” Caleb said, pointing toward the loft window.

Salinger glanced over at the ladder, blinking his beady little eyes.

“And we’ve got to be very quiet,” Caleb reminded them. “We’re taking you over to the mainland on Catfish’s raft.”

“That’s right,” Catfish added. “But if the old man or that mangy hound catches wind of you - we’re all in a heap of trouble - ‘specially you guys!”

Caleb returned to the window, glancing over his shoulder to see if Salinger was following . . . and remarkably, he was - and so were the other seven adults - little bundles of fur already dangling from the mouths of several of them.

One by one the wolverines followed Caleb and Catfish out the window and cautiously made their head-first descent to the ground. When all eight adults, plus four kits were gathered at the bottom. Caleb took a minute to let his heart rate settle.

From within the barn one of the horses stomped noisily around in its stall, but all the other animals were surprisingly quiet.

“Absolutely no noise crossing the yard,” Caleb warned. The wolverines looked up at him curiously.

“You think their dumb monkey brains can understand what you’re saying?” Catfish asked disgustedly.

Caleb shrugged. “Let’s go.” He led the way around the barn and across the yard. All was quiet. Caleb glanced over at his uncle’s cabin, almost expecting to see the old man standing in the doorway, shotgun in hand.

“How far is it to the raft?” Caleb asked as they entered the woods.

“Ten minutes or so. They won’t make very good time carrying them babies.”

Caleb’s mind began working again, turning to the escape itself. *How long would it take them to cross over to the mainland anyway? Then he would have to get back here before his uncle missed him! That might be tricky. What if Uncle Charlie woke up and found him gone!*

Once more a panicky feeling crept into his thoughts. It seemed to take an hour to reach the raft, but when Caleb checked his watch he was relieved to see that barely ten minutes passed.

The wolverines had collected themselves into a little group by the water's edge, their four tiny bundles of fur all mewling plaintively.

"Well, this is it, fellas," Caleb said, "the only way you're going to survive is by getting on the raft. Do you understand?"

"I'll explain it to them," Catfish said. She stepped up to Salinger and the others and leaned over them threateningly. "You disgusting cockroaches better get on this here raft, and I mean pronto. If you don't - that old man back there will be turning your mangy hides into winter jackets - which probably ain't a bad idea!" With that she hopped aboard the beached raft. Caleb followed her onto the gently bobbing craft, carefully moving to the farthest corner.

"Climb aboard, you black-hearted mongrels," Catfish ordered.

Without the slightest hesitation, Salinger splashed into the water and climbed aboard. Immediately the other wolverines followed suit, shuffling one at a time over to the same corner that Caleb occupied.

"Let's get the show on the road," Catfish said, stepping down into the shallow water and pushing them out from the shoreline. Caleb stood stock-still in the far corner of the raft - all eight adults clustered tightly about his feet.

Catfish then knelt by the mechanical apparatus and began cranking them out into the powerful current of the river.

Although Caleb was greatly relieved to finally be on the raft with the wolverines, he found his gaze returning time and again to the island, expecting that at any time Uncle Charlie might appear on the shoreline.

It was Catfish who suddenly jarred him back to reality. "Oh no!"

Caleb spun around. Catfish had stopped cranking and was looking toward the mainland, now only a hundred yards away.

"What are those two rejects doing there?" She asked.

Caleb's mouth dropped open in surprise. Standing on the shoreline - larger than life, were Pete and Ike.

"Hey you two," Pete hollered. "What you got there on the raft with you?"

“Eight wolverines,” Catfish yelled back, now pulling on the crank with renewed energy. “And when we get ashore we’re going to sic them on you. See how you like that.”

“Wolverines!” Pete and Ike looked at each other.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have said that, Catfish,” Caleb said.

Pete began digging around inside his packsack. “I hope you gave them swimming lessons, Catfish,” he yelled. A second later he pulled something out and waved it over his head. It was a hatchet!

“What’s he going to do with that?” Caleb asked.

He'd had no sooner got the words out of his mouth than Pete turned and swung the hatchet at the tree to which the raft’s cable was attached.

“That idiot’s going to cut down the tree!” Catfish said with a sharp gasp. “If he does, the cable will come loose.

“Stop that, you stupid half-wit!” she yelled. “If you cut down that tree we’ll go over the falls!”

Pete paused and looked over at them – a large grin plastered across his face. “Them wolverines ain’t coming anywhere near me,” he hollered, then returned to his chopping.

“We’ll be swept over the falls for sure,” Catfish said in disbelief, then began turning the crank with a frantic urgency. But now the raft hardly seemed to be moving.

“We’ve got to get ashore before he cuts it,” Caleb said, the panic rising in his voice. “We’ll drown.”

Pete’s sharp little hatchet, meanwhile, was making short work of the poplar tree. They were still more than fifty yards from shore when Pete leaped back from the tree and it snapped cleanly in two.

In less than a heartbeat the cable catapulted out from the tree, landing halfway between the raft and shore – an instant later the cable running through the cranking mechanism jumped from its mooring and danced across the surface of the raft.

Catfish leaped to her feet and dove for the cable, but it had already slipped from the raft and disappeared beneath the surface of the river. Immediately they could feel the pull of the river’s fierce current.

“This is it!” Catfish said, the fear sounding in her voice. “We’re heading for the falls!”

Chapter 22

Swept Away

The raft was caught so suddenly in the swirling current that Caleb was almost yanked right off his feet. It was only by grabbing hold of the cranking mechanism that he was kept from being pitched into the turbulent waters. He looked over to the group of wolverines, huddled together at the far end of the raft. Salinger seemed mesmerized by the swift waters rushing by them, while the eyes of the other wolverines were fixed on Caleb. In the distance Caleb heard for the first time the thunder of Cachewana Falls.

Catfish stood next to him, scanning the banks of the river. The houses of Roaring Creek were only a stone's throw away, but they might as well have been on the moon. "Should we swim for it?" Caleb asked.

"No. We better stick with the raft."

Pete and Ike were now racing along the shoreline, managing somehow to keep pace with them.

Catfish cupped her hands to her mouth. "Get Auntie Mona," she shouted.

At that very moment Auntie Mona stepped through the front door of her house and stood transfixed at the sight before her. Quickly she disappeared back inside and an instant later returned, clutching something in her hand. She then took off running after Pete and Ike.

Caleb felt the raft lurch suddenly as it was swept around a rocky point and into a seething cauldron of white caps and jagged rocks. The edge of Catchewana Falls loomed only a few short meters away!

"This is it!" Catfish dropped flat on her stomach and grabbed onto the raft's edge. "Take hold of something," she shouted. "We're going over!"

Caleb wrapped his arms around the cranking device and held on for dear life. He looked once more at the wolverines, who were now standing perfectly still, seemingly paralyzed by the sight of the approaching falls and the deafening roar that filled the air.

Only a few short seconds stood between them and being launched over the deadly precipice, when the raft suddenly bumped into something, knocking Caleb onto the seat of his pants. He turned to see what had happened.

The raft had collided with the first of several large rocks which formed a partial barrier at the very lip of the falls. Caleb held his breath as the raft spun dizzily sideways, bumping into two more rocks before coming to such an abrupt stop that Catfish was almost tossed over the side. Somehow, the raft had wedged itself snugly between two large boulders not more than ten yards from shore and at the very edge of the falls.

Catfish got to her feet and took in their situation.

“How can we get ashore?” Caleb asked, the spray from the tumultuous waters drenching him.

Catfish scanned the shoreline. “Auntie Mona should be here shortly,” she said.

Sure enough - a moment later Auntie Mona, with Pete and Ike leading the way, burst through the trees. Caleb could now see what Auntie Mona had in her hand – a coil of rope.

“Thanks goodness you’re safe,” Auntie Mona called out to them. “Just stay there. We’ll throw the rope out to you.”

Gripping the one end tightly in her hand, she heaved the other end out toward them, but it fell about halfway to the raft.

“Let me try,” Pete said as Auntie Mona reeled it in.

Auntie Mona handed the rope to Pete and watched as he swung it over his head like a cowboy.

“Make sure you hold on to the end, you moron,” Catfish shouted.

The rope sailed across the waters, the coiled portion landing with a thump on the raft. Caleb and Catfish both lunged for it just before it was swept off by the waves.

“Okay,” Auntie Mona shouted. “Now tie your end to the steel ring at the front of the raft.”

Catfish bent over the raft and secured the rope, while Auntie Mona tied her end to a tall birch tree leaning over the waters.

“What do we do now?” Caleb asked.

“Come across on the rope,” Auntie Mona shouted. “It ain’t that far. It’s your only chance.”

Caleb looked off to his right – to the foaming waters – roaring over the edge of the falls in a roll of thunder. “Why don’t we tie the rope around our waists and have them pull us ashore?” he asked Catfish.

“We’re too close to the falls.”

“What about the wolverines?” Caleb asked.

“We’ll worry about them when we get ashore,” Catfish replied. “Come on. Auntie Mona’s right. It ain’t that hard.” She spat on her hands, bent over and gripped the rope. Slowly she lowered herself into the fast-moving current and, hand over hand, pulled herself through the water towards shore. Auntie Mona, in the meantime, had waded out as far from shore as she dared. When Catfish was within arm’s reach, Auntie Mona grabbed her around the waist and hauled her to safety.

Catfish struggled up onto the shoreline, standing for a moment, with her hands on her knees, her head hanging in exhaustion. Finally she turned back toward Caleb.

“Come on, City Boy,” she called. “It ain’t so hard. Why even these two brain-dead boneheads could probably make it.” She glared at the two boys standing nearby.

Caleb was now sitting on the edge of the raft, the rope clutched with both hands. Slowly he lowered himself into the current, the icy cold water sending shock waves through him as the fierce current tugged him savagely toward the precipice. For an instant he was certain that it would pull the rope from his hands and launch him over the falls, but it didn’t - and he started the agonizing, hand-over-hand journey to shore – centimetres at a time, all the while fighting to keep his grip on the slippery rope. He could see Catfish and the others on the shoreline, Pete and Ike both yelling their encouragement. And in the water, waist-deep in her wet, baggy dress stood Auntie Mona, hand outstretched toward him.

Finally, just when it seemed that he couldn’t go any further – when he thought his arms would be pulled right out of their sockets, Auntie Mona’s strong hands grabbed a hold of his shirt and he was being dragged ashore.

He lay there on the riverbank, his arms screaming with pain, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps . . . until finally he felt his strength and breath return and he struggled back to his feet.

Catfish slapped him on the back. “I told you it was a piece of cake.” She then turned toward Pete and Ike, fists balled at her side. “Now we’ll tend to you two,” she said, taking a couple of steps in their direction.

“Hey, we’re sorry, Catfish,” Pete said, retreating up the riverbank. “We didn’t know

you'd end up here. How were we to know?"

"I keep forgetting," Catfish said in a low voice. "You're both idiots."

"Never mind that right now," Auntie Mona said, straining her eyes at the stricken vessel. "What on earth are those critters out there on that raft? Gophers?"

Caleb and Catfish paused and looked at each other.

"They're actually wolverines," Caleb finally admitted. "Uncle Charlie was raising them on the island. He was planning on harvesting their pelts today, so we were helping them escape."

"What will that crazy old man think of next?" Auntie Mona said.

"Why would anybody raise wolverines?" Ike asked. "They're supposed to be really nasty, ain't they?"

Caleb looked out at Salinger, who was standing on the edge of the raft, sniffing at the rope. "They are – kinda," he said.

"Isn't there some way of getting them off?" Catfish asked.

The five of them stood for a moment in silence, watching the little group of animals.

"It hardly seems fair that we got off but are leaving them to drown," Caleb said.

"We could chop down one of these trees," Pete suggested. "If we could drop it right onto the raft, then the wolverines could just walk across."

"You're always looking for an excuse to use that hatchet," Catfish said with a scowl.

"It's worth a try," Pete insisted, removing the hatchet from his backpack.

"It might actually work," Auntie Mona said. She looked up at several trees lining the bank of the river, then pointed to a tall poplar tree. "Okay boys. Why don't you see what you can do with that one?"

Pete scampered over to the poplar and immediately set to work.

"Make sure you drop it on the raft," Catfish reminded him. "It may be our only chance."

"What if it hits the wolverines?" Caleb said. "They could get hurt... or killed."

"Well, the way things stand now, they're gonna get killed for sure, anyway" Catfish said. "So we can't make things any worse than they already are."

In only a few minutes of hard chopping the stricken tree emitted a loud crack and began tilting toward the river. Caleb and Catfish quickly raced to the far side of the poplar and together with Pete and Ike pushed it toward the river. The tree seemed to hesitate for a second and then all

at once crashed downward, the far end landing perfectly in the middle of the raft.

Caleb could see the wolverines scatter to either side of the toppled tree, and when the dust and branches finally settled, all eight adult wolverines with their four kits seemed to be accounted for with none the worse for wear.

There was an awkward pause as Caleb looked over at Catfish and Auntie Mona. Caleb gazed out across the narrow stretch of water, his brow furrowing. What if Salinger and the others weren't quite as "tame" as he had led the others to believe? What if they decided to get some revenge for being kept captive on that island all these years? Instead of being grateful, what if they suddenly turned on their rescuers?

Caleb could tell by the expression on Catfish's face that she was thinking the exact same thing. Even Auntie Mona was now looking anxiously out over the water, licking her lips nervously as she watched Salinger sniffing around the branches of the fallen tree.

"They didn't attack us when we were all on the raft together," Caleb said hopefully. Nevertheless he couldn't help but back up a few steps, climbing to the top of the river bank. He watched as Pete and Ike retreated behind a large sumac bush.

Finally Catfish turned away from Caleb and the others, fixing her gaze out on the wolverines who were now milling helplessly around the fallen tree. As the moments ticked slowly by her eyes narrowed to thin angry slits. Finally she pulled back her shoulders and shook her bony fist in their direction.

"Come on now," she yelled in frustration. "You smelly river rats. Get on over here. We gave you a first class bridge. It's a lot better than having to haul yourself ashore on that rope."

Salinger turned his gaze on the unexpected voice, his eyes narrowing and his lips curling back in an ugly snarl. This time even Catfish retreated a step or two up the river bank. But a moment later the wolverine stepped up onto the poplar and slowly began picking his way through the tangle of broken branches toward shore. One-by-one the others followed their leader up onto the tree – seemingly oblivious to the roaring water beneath them – wending their way across their peculiar bridge until all were safely ashore.

Pete brandished his hatchet. "You'd better keep them away from me, Catfish," he said, fear tingeing his voice. "I ain't afraid to use this."

Salinger was now standing by the fallen poplar tree, checking out each member of his

little family. Then, with a deliberate turn of his head he looked up at Caleb. The snarl was gone and Caleb smiled.

“You take good care of this bunch,” Caleb said. “And stay clear of Uncle Charlie. You’re going to have to work for your own meals from now on.”

Chapter 23

Burn

Caleb felt a twinge of sadness pass through him as he watched Salinger lead his little troop up the riverbank and into the forest.

“Well,” Catfish said. “Hopefully that’s the last we see of them.”

“I know it sounds weird,” Caleb said. “But I’m almost sorry to see them go.”

He noticed Auntie Mona looking out at the raft, still wedged between the two rocks.

“You know,” Auntie Mona said thoughtfully, “I think I know how we can save that raft.”

They all looked over at her curiously.

“We’ve already got a rope tied to it,” she explained. “And that’s more than half the battle. Why can’t we just pull it ashore?”

“Pull it ashore,” Pete echoed. “The current’s too strong. We’d never be able to do it.”

“No *we* wouldn’t,” Auntie Mona agreed. “But I’ll bet my ATV could do the trick.”

Caleb could see Catfish’s eyes light up. “Of course,” she said. “That way we could save the raft.”

“First, we’ll get you two into some dry clothes,” Auntie Mona said, looking at Caleb. “Then we’ll drag that raft back to where it belongs. We sure don’t want to have to build another one if we don’t have to.”

“What about the cable over to the island?” Catfish asked. “Can it be reattached?”

“That shouldn’t be too much of a problem,” Auntie Mona said. “After all, it’s still connected to the island.”

Pete cleared his throat awkwardly. “We’d better be heading for home,” he said. “Sorry for the little misunderstanding.”

“Little misunderstanding!” Catfish sputtered. “Remember,” she warned, looking threateningly at the two brothers. “Don’t tell Charlie about them wolverines being on the raft.”

Pete’s eyes suddenly widened. “I almost forgot,” he said, reaching into his backpack. “Mrs. Clark at the post office asked us to drop this letter off for old Charlie.” He handed it to Caleb. “Can you give it to him?”

When Caleb turned the envelope over in his hand he immediately recognized his

mother's handwriting. "Thanks," he said, stuffing the letter into the pocket of his wet jeans. He could feel his heart racing at the thought of hearing from his mother.

Without another word, Pete and Ike turned and disappeared down the trail into the forest.

Auntie Mona, Catfish and Caleb walked the remainder of the way to Roaring Creek in silence. *How on earth would he get back over to the island without the raft?* They were just approaching Catfish's house when something out on the water caught Caleb's attention. He turned, and as he did his heart leapt into his mouth.

"What on earth!" he said.

Auntie Mona followed his gaze. "It looks like your uncle's island is on fire," she said.

Sure enough - great billows of smoke rolled out over the trees on the distant island.

"Uncle Charlie was talking about doing a controlled burn," Caleb said. "He was sure it would flush the wolverines out of hiding . . ."

"Looks like the fire got out of control on him," Catfish said.

"It sure does," Auntie Mona agreed. "Look! Isn't that old Charlie's pontoon boat heading this way?"

Sure enough, Caleb could now see Uncle Charlie's big boat, churning through the waters toward the mainland.

"Now that's a mighty peculiar-looking sight," Catfish said. "It appears that he's got a bunch of his animals with him."

As the boat neared shore, Caleb could see that it was indeed crowded with Charlie's two horses, Gunner Boy, and several sheep, chickens and pigs. "He seems to have gotten them all out of there, anyway" Caleb said with relief. "I wonder how he managed that."

"Well, they were all together in the barn," Catfish said.

Caleb, Catfish and Auntie Mona made their way to the shoreline as the barge slowly churned across the water toward them. When it finally bumped ashore, Catfish leaped into the shallow waters and helped moor the boat to a nearby jack pine. Most of the livestock waited only long enough for the craft to settle before leaping off and quickly foraging about the shoreline for something to eat.

"What happened, Uncle Charlie?" Caleb asked as the old man stepped ashore.

Uncle Charlie shook his head. His clothes were sooty and he smelled strongly of smoke.

“Well, I lit this patch of dry grass down by the river when that darn east wind shifted on me at the worst possible moment. Things got out of control in a real hurry, if you get my drift. I reckon it’s gonna burn down everything quicker than two shakes of a wolverine’s tail. But I did get all the livestock out okay.”

“A controlled burn,” Auntie Mona said, shaking her head. “Mighty daring thing to do, Charlie.”

“So it was,” Charlie said looking back at his island. “Oh well, at least the fire will toast them pesky wolverines – that’s one good thing – too bad about their pelts, though.” He gazed curiously at his nephew’s wet clothing. “Appears we’re gonna have to pick you up a bathing suit next time we’re in town,” he said.

"We had a little accident with the raft," Caleb explained vaguely.

The old man drew in a deep breath and looked over at his nephew. “Well boy,” he said. “I’m glad you’re safe. When I got up from my nap and saw you and the raft was gone, I figured you’d come over here for a spell . . .” he paused. “I guess you and me is both without a home now.”

“That’s okay, Uncle Charlie," Caleb said. "At least you’re safe.”

“So what are you going to do now, Charlie?” Auntie Mona asked.

“Oh, I expect I’ll rebuild once I’ve had a chance to catch my breath,” he said. “I’ve lived here too long to let a little setback like this get the best of me.”

“Do you have enough money to rebuild your place?” Catfish asked bluntly. “It won’t be cheap hauling in all those building supplies.”

“Of course,” Uncle Charlie said. “I got a pile of greenbacks in that bank in Fortune Head. Who do you think sold the original claims to the old Chesterville Mine?”

“You did that?” Catfish said.

“Course I did,” Uncle Charlie said.

Auntie Mona nodded. “What’s your plan, Charlie?”

“Why in a week or two I should have a full head of steam and a brain full of plans... like I told you – I’ve got enough money salted away to hire people this time – have them come in and build me a new place.

“In the meantime you can stay in one of the empty mine houses here in Roaring Creek,”

Auntie Mona offered. "And we can help look after the livestock for you. We've got lots of sheds and such."

"That would be kindly." The old man said, turning to his nephew. "You okay with that, boy?"

Caleb felt his heart accelerate. "A letter came for you, Uncle Charlie," he said, handing him the damp envelope. "It's from my mother."

Uncle Charlie took the letter, his thick eyebrows raised curiously.

"From your mother already?" he said, ripping open the envelope.

Caleb leaned over the old man's shoulder as Uncle Charlie began to read.

Dear Uncle Charlie and Caleb,

Thank you, Uncle Charlie, for looking after Caleb for me. Our plans have gone better than we expected. Caleb's father had successful brain surgery just before noon yesterday. The doctors are very optimistic that he will make a complete recovery. If everything turns out as we hope, we will be coming up north to get Caleb and bring him home in a few weeks. Of course we plan on staying long enough to get to know one of our last remaining family members - if that's all right with you, Uncle Charlie. I'll write in the next few days with more details.

Love,

Letita Rupert.

Caleb turned to Catfish, a big smile on his face.

"They'll be coming up here?" Catfish echoed.

Caleb nodded.

"Well," Auntie Mona said, chuckling softly. "Ain't that special news. But in the meantime you're both going to need a place to stay - so let's get one of them empty mine houses cleaned up so you can move in. How's that sound?"

"That's mighty considerate, Mona," Uncle Charlie said sheepishly.

Catfish gave Caleb a faint grin. "So your parents will be coming up to get you ... " she said.

"Not for awhile, by the sound of it," Caleb said, smiling broadly. "And who knows,

maybe they'll like it so much up here they'll want to stay."

Uncle Charlie gave Caleb a peculiar look, squinching his eyes up tight and tilting his head to one side. "What did you say your dad did for a living before his accident?" he asked.

"He was a contractor," Caleb answered. "He built houses and such."

"Well, ain't that right handy," Uncle Charlie said, his face brightening. "And who needs a new house built around here and has good money to see that it's done proper?"

"That's right," Catfish agreed. "Maybe your dad will stick around - at least long enough for Charlie's house to get built."

Caleb nodded thoughtfully. "That's true. It might be a good way for my dad to get back on his feet . . ."

"Well," Auntie Mona said, eyeing Caleb's wet clothing. "Let's save that for later," she said. "I think we may have some of Pappy Zeke's clothes which should fit you okay. What do you say we get you changed and settled in?"

"As long as you think Pappy Zeke wouldn't mind," Caleb said, giving Catfish a wink.

Caleb followed the others up the pathway toward Auntie Mona's house. He couldn't believe it. His mom and dad would be here before he knew it. Too bad they couldn't have seen his wolverines . . . gotten to know Salinger a little . . . In fact he wished he could have gotten to know Salinger a little better himself. He paused, surprised that the thought of not having Salinger around anymore filled him with a strange sense of loneliness.

Reflections

The lone wolverine stood in the shadow of a tall, black spruce. It was almost dark. The dusky blanket of night slowly drifted down over the northern wilderness and settled on everything like a thick, woolen curtain. Stretching far into the distance before him was the surface of the large body of water that the wolverine knew so well. A solitary loon, slipped silently across its surface, its eerie mournful cry disturbing the stillness of early evening.

The wolverine drank in his surroundings as if seeing it for the first time, a strange look of yearning briefly crossing his face. Behind him, a faint mewing sound finally drew him back from his reverie. A tiny bundle of life nudged softly against his side. He turned and saw his mate gently nosing the kit toward him.

Salinger inhaled a deep lungful of fresh air, grateful that the smoke from the distant fire had finally dissipated. He glanced around the little clearing by the water - at the other members of his family.

He knew it was time - time to move on. To go where food was plentiful and safety was assured - far from humans and fences and all that had held them for so long.

With a final look out over the water, he turned and led his little family into the forest - away from the memories of the great river, and away from the presence of human kind forever.