



# ALABAMA MOON

WATT KEY

Who says a ten-year-old can't survive on his own?

Just before Pap died, he told me that I'd be fine as long as I never depended on anybody but myself. He said I might feel lonely for a while, but that would go away. I was ten years old and he'd taught me everything I needed to know about living out in the forest. I could trap my own food and make my own clothes. I could find my way by the stars and make fire in the rain. Pap said he even figured I could whip somebody three times my size. He wasn't worried about me.

It took me most of a morning to get him into the wheelbarrow and haul him to the cedar grove on the bluff. I buried him next to Momma where you could see the Noxubee River flowing coffee-colored down below. It was mid-January and the wind pulled at my hair and gray clouds slid through the trees and left the forest dripping. I felt the loneliness he'd told me about crawling up from my stomach and into my throat.

I didn't put a cross on the grave. I never knew Pap to believe in things like that. The only way you could make out Momma's grave was the ground that was sunk in over her and 1972 scratched on a limestone rock nearby. I don't remember her face, but I remember somebody else in the bed at night, keeping me warm from the other side. Pap said she reminded him of a yellow finch, which is how she stays in my mind.

I found a rock for Pap and scratched 1980 on it with a nail. After placing it beside the dirt mound, I put the shovel in the wheelbarrow and started back for the shelter. The cedar grove trail was the only one we used enough to wear our tracks into it. It was worn like a cow path from years of walking it with Pap. Not only did he like to come see Momma up on the bluff, but we used it as a main trail to check the northeast trap lines. It had been almost a week since I'd run any of them because I hadn't wanted to leave Pap's side. I was sure the traps were tangled in the creeks, and it only made the sickness in my stomach worse to think that whatever was in them was most likely dead.

Pap had tried to explain death to me, but I couldn't make sense of it. Pap said you passed on and came back as something else. It could be a squirrel or a coon. It could be a fish or an Eskimo. There was no way to tell. The most confusing part of what he told me was that even though he would come back as something else, there would still be a part of the old him that floated around like smoke. This part of him would watch out for me. I couldn't talk to this thing or touch it, but I could write to it. I could make my letters and then burn them, and the smoke would carry my message to him.

When I got back to the shelter, I put the wheelbarrow and the shovel away and went inside. I took off my deerskin jacket and hat, lay down on the pile of hides that we hadn't been able to sell, and stared at the roots in the ceiling. There was always a lot of work to do and no time to rest. But now Pap was dead and things were not the same.

I thought about death again. Most things he told me made sense real quick. You boil steel traps to get the scent off. You

overlap palmetto roofing so the rain slides down it. You soak a deerskin for two days and it comes out with two days of softness to it. I could understand these things. But what he said about dying and the smoky messages and his hate for government—they were the hardest ideas for me to understand.

He'd said the government was after us ever since I could remember. The shelter we lived in was set miles into a forest owned by a paper company and was a place no person besides us had any cause to be. Even had someone come by, he would have to just about run into our shelter before he noticed anything unusual. It was one small room built halfway into the ground with low ceilings so that Pap had to stoop to walk inside. The roof was covered with dirt, and bushes and trees grew from the top. Over time tree roots had come down into the shelter and twisted through the logs and made their way into the ground at the edges. Everything that showed above ground was from nature. Even the stovepipe sticking up through the ceiling was encased in limestone.

We practiced with our rifles three times a week. Our windows were narrow slits for shooting through and the trees that you saw out of these windows were pocked and chipped from years of Pap and me practicing a stage-one defense. In stage two we moved into the hole at the back side of the shelter where a muddy tunnel led to the box. The box was about a quarter the size of our shelter and made of steel sheets that Pap took from an old barn. An air pipe went up through the ground and was hidden inside a tree stump. Pap said if we ever moved to stage two, we'd cave the tunnel in behind us. We had dried food and water in the box that would last for a



I lay back down on the bed and pulled the blanket up to my chin. "People keep tryin' to catch me all the time and I haven't done anything. Before my pap died, he told me to head to Alaska. Said there were more people like us up there."

"More squirrely people with long hair?"

"Nossir. More people that hate the government."

"How you gonna get to Alaska?"

"Walk, I guess."

**F**or as long as ten-year-old Moon can remember, he has lived out in the forest in a shelter with his father. They keep to themselves, their only contact with other human beings an occasional trip to the nearest general store. When Moon's father dies, Moon follows his father's last instructions: to travel to Alaska to find others like themselves. But Moon is soon caught and entangled in a world he doesn't know or understand; he's become property of the government he has been avoiding all his life. As the spirited and resourceful Moon encounters constables, jails, institutions, lawyers, true friends, and true enemies, he adapts his wilderness skills and learns to survive in the outside world, and even, perhaps, make his home there.

"For boys who dream of unfettered life in the great outdoors . . . Moon's a bona fide hero."

—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

"A winningly fresh look at life and culture almost never seen in children's books."

—*The Horn Book Magazine*

"Key writes honestly about hunting, trapping, and the hardships of survival in this rather unusual coming-of-age story."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Well written with a flowing style, plenty of dialogue, and lots of action."

—*School Library Journal*

## Go Fish

Look inside for an interview with Watt Key.

Cover design by Kathleen Breitenfeld



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