



JUST LEFT 
OF LUCKY 

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CHAPTER ONE

THE WHITE FREIGHTLINER pulled in close enough to shake our Chevy Impala. Aunt Junie jerked her head from the driver's window with a fitful jump, but ten seconds later she was sawing logs again. I didn't understand how anyone could sleep through the racket of a semi-truck idling ten feet away. I prodded her shoulder. "Aunt Junie, wake up."

The little plastic clock taped to the dash read 5:18, and the wonderful, greasy scents wafting over from the deli were driving me crazy. I prodded again. "Aunt Junie, c'mon. Can we please go for dinner?"

We still had Gatorade, potato chips and Cheerios in the plastic bin in the trunk, plus some granola bars and peanut butter. But I craved something hot and not just a snack. I flipped open the glove box. There were two five dollar bills and a bunch of quarters. I nibbled my lip, undecided. The last thing I wanted was to give Aunt Junie another reason

to resent me, but tequila always made her sleep longer, and I was afraid I might starve to death by the time she woke up. I grabbed a five and crumpled it in my fist.

Boone witnessed my criminal activity from his perch in the back window, looking spring-loaded as always, his little ears peaked and his tongue sticking out a quarter inch. I winked at him. “You stay here and be a good boy, okay? Be right back.”

I shoved open the Impala’s heavy door and scrambled out before Boone could follow. The strong scent of diesel burned my nose and reminded me of the stink around old Mrs. Zilinsky’s—our neighbor back in Idaho—who thought it perfectly fine to change her cats’ litter box once a month. I couldn’t see the truck driver through the glare of his lights, but hopefully he’d head out soon. If not, we’d have to move to the overnight parking lot before we suffocated. This was our fifth night at the Flying J, and I still didn’t understand why truckers left their rigs running for hours at a time.

Still, the Flying J was way better than the Safeway parking lot which offered no bathroom overnight and had scary people roaming around. And it was a hundred times better than Wal-Mart, which did have twenty four hour access to a restroom for Aunt Junie and me, but not for Boone. The manager was so insulted over one little pile of poop on his pavement he threatened to call the police if we didn’t leave. The sorry jerk wasn’t smart enough to

realize the loss was really his, because I would never spend even one penny of my money at any Wal-Mart ever again.

At least here at the Flying J we had a convenience store with a deli and sub shop, a fairly clean restroom with twelve stalls and even a shower if you paid \$2.50 for a token. Even better, there was an empty lot full of nothing but gravel and weeds where Boone could do his business without anybody caring.

I zigzagged between the maze of rumbling trucks, across the blacktop fueling area, and over to the travel plaza. I hung around the glass doors for a few seconds to make sure nobody inside looked familiar. Aunt Junie said not to worry if the employees recognized us. As long as we bought stuff and didn't cause trouble, we could camp out as long as we wanted. But truck stops were for truckers who needed a rest or a meal, or for travelers who needed gas or coffee or a bathroom break. It was not a place to *camp out*. That's what the woods were for.

I made a beeline for the deli, glad the girl behind the counter was different than the one we'd bought hot cocoa from earlier. This one was a red head with a lip piercing and French manicured nails. The nails were cool—electric blue with white tips. But the lip ring reminded me of all the gross pictures of piercings gone wrong I'd seen on the Mayo Clinic's website.

I blended in with the people milling around the deli display case and tried not to drool over all the delicious looking

food behind the glass. I wanted one of everything—golden chicken breasts, fried potato wedges, macaroni salad, glistening hot sausages. But it was the steaming vat of cheesy broccoli soup on a nearby counter that made my mouth water and brought a lump to my throat.

Cheesy broccoli had been Mom's very favorite soup. I'd made it by the Crock-Pot full when she was sick and Aunt Junie was too busy taking care of her to cook. Mom's recipe was amazingly creamy, cheesy and rich, and even though I knew the Flying J's version probably wasn't half as good, I wanted it anyway. I studied the waxed serving cups, trying to decide if I should buy one big cup for Aunt Junie and me to share or two smaller ones.

A little boy bumped the back of my legs as he raced to his mom with a root beer clutched in his hands. She gave a firm shake of her head and his smile dissolved into a furious scowl that made me giggle. I grabbed two of the small cups from the stack. Aunt Junie and I could each have our own, and Boone could lick them out afterwards without getting as much mess on his face.

The girl behind the counter snapped her gum at the lady with the little boy. "What can I get you, ma'am?"

"Half a pound of potato salad, please and ..." she paused to scoop up the little boy as he started crying, "... a hot dog. Just plain."

I lifted the silver lid from the soup and carefully ladled a scoop, while the lady toted the little kid over to the cold

case and pointed out different kinds of fruit drinks. I felt a pinch of jealousy at the way he put his arm around his mom's neck. Sometimes I wished I could go back to being a little kid, when I had Mom to take care of me, and my biggest worry was whether or not *Dragon Tales* would be on that day.

I snapped the lid on the first cup and began to fill the second. The cashier popped her gum again and I wondered if it ever snagged on her lip ring. "What can I get you?" she asked the next customer.

"Two chicken breasts and a bean burrito please."

My arm jerked, and I nearly dropped the ladle.

I knew that voice!

The hair on the back of my neck stiffened just like Boone's when he saw another dog, and all kinds of crazy advice ran through my mind. *Run for your life if it's a brown bear, play dead if it's a grizzly.* Then I remembered where I was and decided just to freeze. It might have worked if not for the fat glob of cheesy broccoli that oozed over the side of the cup and burned my thumb. I licked it off fast and then turned my head just enough to glimpse the man's short cinnamon hair, the crisp blue uniform, the gun. I couldn't see his face, but I didn't need to. The deep, unhurried voice told me everything. It was Officer Murphy—our resource officer at Logan Elementary. How in the world could I have missed him?

It wasn't that I didn't like Officer Murphy. He patrolled the halls with a smile, and sometimes he'd even play

kickball or tether ball during recess. But I'd also seen him put kids in handcuffs. And rumor had it he kept a jumbo box of tissues on his desk... and they weren't for him. I definitely didn't want to see him now, not when I had a bunch of unexcused absences.

Only a few yards separated us. He would turn any second. I considered a grab and dash with the soup, but the deli girl yelling, "Thief, thief!" would no doubt draw attention.

"Want any barbecue sauce?" she asked.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'll take sour cream if you've got that."

The red neon restroom light suddenly caught my eye, flashing like a rescue beacon. I edged toward it, one step, then two more.

"Shannon."

Pins and needles exploded across my scalp. I'd only made it three lousy steps. I did my best to look surprised as I wheeled around. "Oh... Officer Murphy, hi."

He broke into a smile. "Hey, there. Where've you been? Haven't seen you around school this week."

I patted my chest. "Oh, had a bad cold is all. Lots of congestion, you know." I was pleased with how normal my voice sounded. It was usually good to me that way. I could be pudding inside but my voice held solid.

"Yeah? Feeling better now?"

"Definitely." I bobbed my head harder than necessary.

“Good. I left a couple messages for your aunt Junie, but I never heard back.”

I was already off kilter, but hearing him use Aunt Junie’s name nearly pushed me clean off the scale. The two of them had talked when I registered for school, but still . . . the guy must have an amazing memory. “Oh, well, sometimes she forgets to check her messages.”

“Ahh, gotcha.” He glanced around. “Where is she anyway?”

“Out in the car.” At least that much was true. I gestured at the soup. “I think I gave her my cold. She sent me in to grab dinner.”

“Looks healthier than what I bought,” he said. “Go ahead and pay for your stuff. I’ll walk you out.”

“Walk me out?” I echoed stupidly. “Um, like I said, I gave her my cold, so you might not wanna get too close.”

He cocked an eyebrow, looking like he might laugh, and I felt like a complete dork. The guy got paid to keep order at an overcrowded school, to settle fights and deal with problems. He’d probably heard the very best stories from the very best liars, and I wasn’t even close to being in that league. “Thanks for the warning,” he said, “but I think I can hold my own.”

An odd vibration started in the pit of my stomach, a lot like the soft clicking of the crickets back home. “Okay.” I fumbled to snap the lid on the second soup cup and then crept to the counter.

“Is this gonna do it for you?” The cashier asked. “Need anything else?”

Yes, please, I wanted to beg. I need you to find a way to keep this guy from following me out to the car, from finding out our secret. But my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth and the best I could do was shake my head.

“All righty then, that’ll be four twenty-six.”

I could feel Officer Murphy’s eyes on the back of my head. Aunt Junie was still in a stupor no doubt. She didn’t know I’d taken the money or even left, and there’d be no chance to warn her. I stared at the cashier’s lip ring, like maybe it would provide some kind of plan if only I studied it hard enough. But she handed me my change a few seconds later and I was out of time.