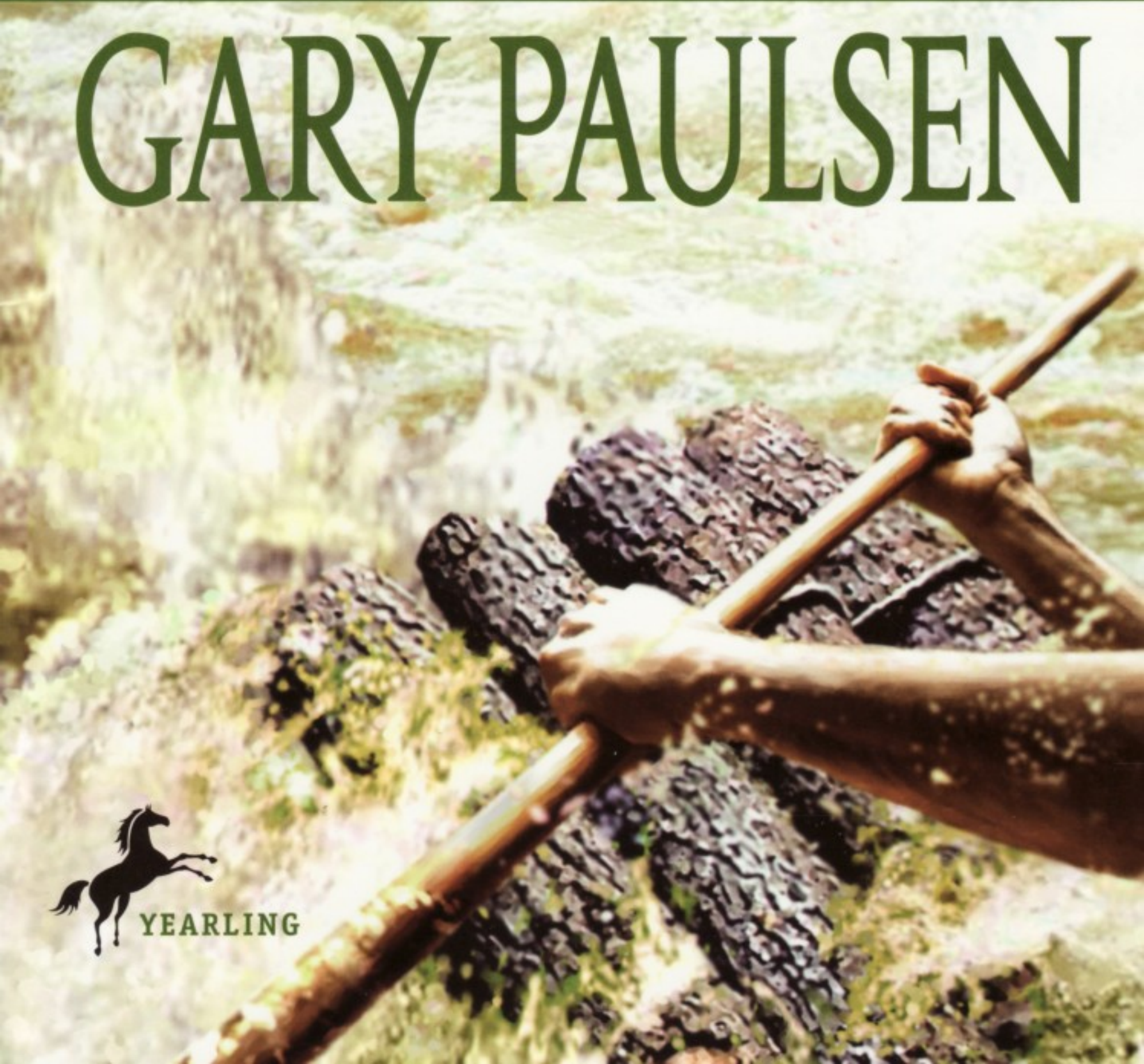




T H E R I V E R

GARY PAULSEN



Brian opened the door and stood back. There were three men, all in dark suits, standing on the front porch. They were large but not fat, well built, with bodies in decent shape. One of them was slightly thinner than the other two.

"Brian Robeson?"

Brian nodded. "Yes."

The thin man smiled and stepped forward and held out his hand. "I'm Derek Holtzer. These other two are Bill Mannerly and Erik Ballard. Can we come in?"

Brian held the door open to let them come in. "Mother isn't home right now. . . ."

"It's you we want to see." Derek stopped just in the entryway and the other two did the same. "Of course, we'll wish to speak to your mother and father as well, but we came to see you. Didn't you get a call about us?"

Brian shook his head. "I don't think so. I mean, I know I

didn't, but I don't think Mother did either. She would have said something."

"How about your father?"

"He . . . doesn't live here. My parents are divorced."

"Oh. Sorry." Derek truly looked embarrassed. "I didn't know."

"It happens." Brian shrugged, but it was still new enough, just over a year and a half, to feel painful. He mentally pushed it away and had a sudden thought of his own foolishness. Three men he did not know were in the house. They did not look threatening, but you never knew.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, if you don't know anything about any of this, maybe we should wait for your mother to come home. We can come back."

Brian nodded. "Whatever you want . . . but you could tell me what it's about, if you wanted to."

"Maybe I'd better check on you first. Are you the Brian Robeson who survived alone in the Canadian woods for two months?"

"Fifty-four days," Brian said. "Not quite two months. Yes—that's me."

"Good."

"Are you from the press?" For months after his return home, Brian had been followed by the press. Even after the television special—a camera crew went back with him to the lake and he showed them how he'd lived—they stayed after him. Newspapers, television, book publishers—they called him at home, followed him to school. It was hard to get away from them. One man even offered him money to put his face on a T-shirt, and a jeans company wanted to come out with a line of Brian Robeson Survival Jeans.

His mother had handled them all, with the help—through the mail—of his father, and he had some money in an ac-

count for college. Actually, enough to complete college. But it had finally slowed down and he didn't miss it.

At first it had been exciting, but soon the thrill had worn off. He was famous, and that wasn't too bad, but when they started following him with cameras and wanting to make movies of him and his life it got a little crazy.

He met a girl in school, Deborah McKenzie. They hit it off and went on a few dates, and pretty soon the press was bugging *her* as well and that was too much. He started going out the back door, wearing sunglasses, meeting Deborah in out-of-the-way places, and sliding down the hallways in school. He was only too glad when people stopped noticing him.

And here they were again. "I mean, are you with television or anything?"

Derek shook his head. "Nope—not even close. We're with a government survival school."

"Instructors?"

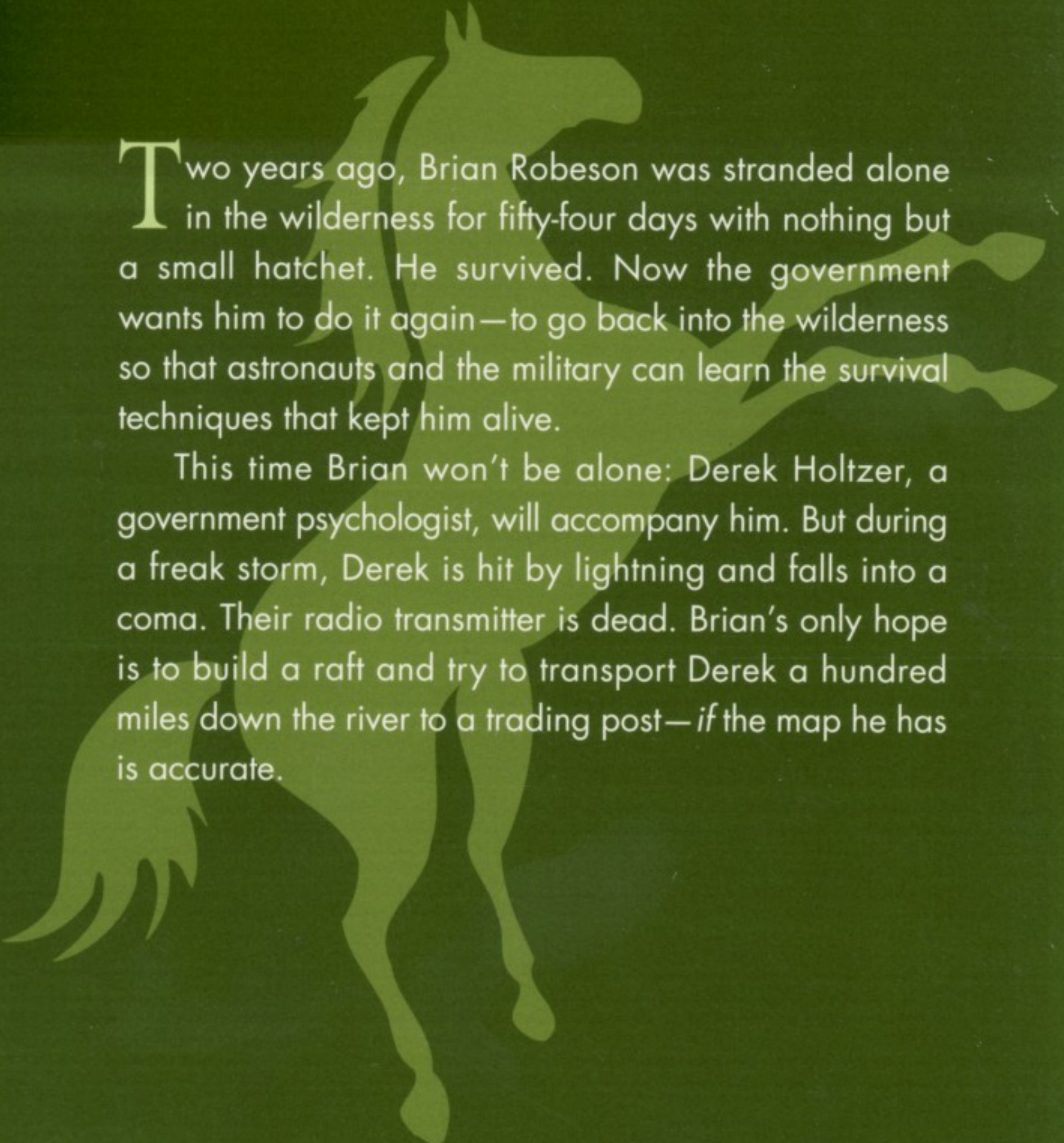
Derek shook his head. "Not exactly. Bill and Erik are instructors, but I'm a psychologist. We work with people who may need to survive in bad situations—you know, like downed pilots, astronauts, soldiers. How to live off the land and get out safely."

"What do you want with me?"

Derek smiled. "You can probably guess. . . ."

Brian shook his head.

"Well, to make it short, we want you to do it again."



Two years ago, Brian Robeson was stranded alone in the wilderness for fifty-four days with nothing but a small hatchet. He survived. Now the government wants him to do it again—to go back into the wilderness so that astronauts and the military can learn the survival techniques that kept him alive.

This time Brian won't be alone: Derek Holtzer, a government psychologist, will accompany him. But during a freak storm, Derek is hit by lightning and falls into a coma. Their radio transmitter is dead. Brian's only hope is to build a raft and try to transport Derek a hundred miles down the river to a trading post—*if* the map he has is accurate.

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