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Voyageur



CHAPTER ONE

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“BRIAN!” MY MOTHER yelled at me from the front seat of the car.

I pulled off my earphones. “Yeah?”

“Just checking to see if you were still with us,” she said.

“Didn’t know I had much choice, since we’re all in the same car,” I said.

“It’s just that you haven’t said more than two words in the last two hours.”

“Not that anyone’s complaining,” my little sister chimed in, sticking out her tongue at me.

“Jennie . . .,” my mother warned her, keeping her eyes on the road ahead. Then, “What do you think of the scenery?” she asked us. I guess it was

a pretty safe bet we couldn't get into an argument about that.

"Trees, rocks, and water, followed by more trees, rocks, and water," I muttered, slumped in the back seat. I was fifteen—I was supposed to care about scenery?

"But isn't it beautiful?"

"Yeah, *right*," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I think it's beautiful," my sister said. She was such a little suck.

I started to slip the headphones back over my ears.

"Brian, do you think you could put away your CD player for a while?" my mother asked. "How about if you come sit up front with me? I could really use your help with the map again."

I let out a big sigh. "I guess."

My mother slowed the car down and pulled over to the side of the road—if you could call it a road. It was more like a patch of dirt gashed out of the woods.

"I need to stretch before we go any farther," my mother said. "My back is killing me."

We all climbed out of the SUV, and our mother

circled around to brace her arms against the back and stretch her muscles.

“That feels good,” she said as she worked out. “This is a long drive.”

“How much longer is it going to take?” Jennie asked.

My mother looked at her watch. “We’ve been on the road for about ten hours . . . so, I’m hoping only two or three more.”

“Two or three hours!” Jennie exclaimed. “I don’t know if I can hold it that long.”

“You’ve got a bladder the size of a walnut,” I said, disgustedly.

“Can we stop at the next gas station?” Jennie asked.

My mother laughed. “I don’t know if there’s going to be a next gas station. That’s why I filled up at the last one.”

“They should put more gas stations up here,” Jennie said.

“Why?” I asked. “It’s not like there’s a big demand. How long has it been since we’ve even seen another car?”

“We passed that pickup truck about thirty minutes ago,” Mom said.

"It's strange ... being so ... so alone," Jennie said.

"Who says we're alone?" I asked, mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" Jennie looked around, slowly and anxiously.

"Who knows what's lurking behind those trees and rocks? Bears, wolves, badgers, cougars ... could be *anything!*"

My sister pressed in closer to the car. Honestly, freaking her out was like shooting fish in a barrel.

"Brian, stop trying to scare your sister."

"I'm not *trying* to scare her," I said. "Are you telling me there *aren't* bears around here?"

"I'm sure there aren't any bears."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You're saying that in the entire wilderness of Canada there are *no* bears?"

"Well, of course there are *some* bears," she said.

"And cougars and wolves and badgers. They all live here, right?"

"I know they all live in Canada. I just don't think there are any around *here*," she said.

"Why not? We're in the middle of the wilderness, surrounded by trees, rocks, and water, *hundreds* of miles away from civilization. Where

else are they going to be?" I asked, gesturing around.

"Jennie," my mother said as she wrapped an arm around her, "your brother was just joking, there's nothing to be scared of ... you don't have to cry."

Cry? I looked closer. Unbelievable. She *was* in tears!

"I'm not scared!" she said defiantly.

"Then why are you crying?" my mother asked.

"I was just thinking about ... about that *poor deer*."

"Jeeze!" I snapped. "This is getting ridiculous."

"Please, Brian," my mother said sternly. "Your sister can't help feeling a little sensitive."

"It was three hours ago, and it was just a deer!" We'd passed a dead deer on the side of the road a long way back, and Jennie had seen it and started bawling like a baby. My mother had finally had to pull the car over to console her.

"I know to you it was just an animal, Brian, but it was still a precious living thing," my mother said.

"Well, maybe it *used to be* a living—"

My mother shot me a dirty look and I shut up.

“We don’t even know for sure that it was dead,” she said to Jennie.

“What?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing now.

“Maybe it was just . . . taking a rest,” she went on.

“On the side of the road, Mom?” I asked.

“Why *not* on the side of the road?” she demanded.

“Because that’s just stupid!”

“Brian, please watch your language.”

“But it was lying on its back with its head twisted around and—”

“The thing is, you really couldn’t tell at the speed we were travelling,” she said to Jennie, cutting me off. “It isn’t like we stopped to check. Maybe it was just asleep.”

“Yeah, right! I’m sure! And all it needs is a kiss from a fairy prince to wake it up and then it’s going to join Bambi and the other deer *prancing* in the forest!”

“Do you *always* have to be so sarcastic?” my mother snapped.

“Better sarcastic than unrealistic.”

She looked angry and hurt. Angry didn’t bother me.

“Fine,” I said. “Whatever you say.”

Jennie brushed away tears with the back of her hand. Did my mother really think she was going to believe any of this? She was nine, not stupid.

“Can we get going now?” Jennie asked as she anxiously opened the back door.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” my mother said, reassuringly.

“I’m not scared. I just want to go.”

“One minute,” I said, and started to walk away. “I’ve got to use *the facilities*. You see, some of us don’t need to wait for a gas station. Some of us can pee standing up.”

“Gross!” said Jennie.

I skittered off the gravel road and tried to push my way between the branches of two pine trees. They were so thick and close together that they wouldn’t give way. I skipped over to the side and found an easier route. I had to turn sideways, though, and duck down to get under the branches of another tree. The branches were so dense that it was almost dark in there, and the ground was rough and rocky. I stumbled forward another half-dozen steps, past another clump of trees, and turned around to see if I had enough privacy.

Privacy was right. My mother and sister were completely blocked from view, and, actually, the car and road were blotted out as well. I knew they were just beyond those trees, but they could have been miles away—*hundreds* of miles away.

I looked around—nothing but a wall of trees. I wondered how far I could travel in any direction before I met another person ... probably forever, because the wilderness would just swallow me whole. What a thought. There'd been more than one or two times over the last few months when I'd wanted to get away from everything, but this was a little extreme.

"I won't be long!" I yelled out.

There was no answer.

"I won't be long!" I screamed again, at the top of my lungs.

"That's okay," my mother called back.

It was good to hear her voice. Of course I knew she wasn't going to take off without me, but still, it was reassuring to know that she hadn't disappeared too.

I pulled down my zipper and started to relieve myself, but I suddenly felt incredibly vulnerable. There *could* be anything behind those bushes,

behind those trees. What a way to go, mauled by a bear as I was going to the— There was a noise in the bushes to my right and I practically jumped into the air. I spun around toward the sound. Nothing. I zipped up again, trying my best not to snag anything, and rushed in a panic toward the car, looking over my shoulder the whole time. A branch slapped against my face, but I kept moving, ignoring the stinging, and stumbled out onto the road.

Jennie was still standing beside the car. She had a rock in her hand, and I watched her pitch it into the trees. Was that what I'd heard? Was that what had startled me, my stupid sister throwing rocks? I mean, one minute she was all teary-eyed over a cute animal and the next she was throwing rocks at me? No, really, that was typical, though. No big surprise. She cried a lot these days, and most of the time it was about nothing really big. And then she'd stop as quickly as she'd started. My mother was always after me to be "more sympathetic" and "more understanding" because she'd "gone through a lot." Well, we'd all gone through a lot, but you didn't see me bawling my eyes out over some stupid deer. Some stupid *dead* deer. Oh,

wait, that's right, it wasn't dead—it was just sleeping, having a little nap, resting up before it went to the big deer pen in the sky.

“Could you help me check the ropes?” Mom asked.

“Yeah, sure.” That I could do.

Our two canoes were tied to the roof of the SUV. I was going to paddle one, with most of our supplies, and my mother and sister would be in the other. We'd rented them before crossing the border ... like there wouldn't be any canoes in Canada.

“I tied them on good,” I said, defensively. Didn't she trust me? I figured I deserved a medal at least for tying two canoes on safely.

“I know you did. I'm just afraid that these roads are so rough they might have loosened the knots.”

She had a point. The bumps and holes we'd been driving over were enough to rattle the fillings right out of your teeth. I checked all the ropes, starting at the back. The first rope was still snug—it twanged when I pulled it. I examined the knots, one by one, and then moved on to the second rope. It was a little bit loose. I

undid the knots, pulled the lines tighter, and retied everything. I pulled on the rope again, and this time it was good and tight. I kept checking and retying until I was convinced that those canoes wouldn't budge if we drove through a hurricane ... Now *there* was a thought I could have lived without.

"Thanks for taking care of that," my mother said.

"No problem." I just hoped I hadn't missed anything, because if the canoes fell off the car, it would all be my fault and she'd never let me forget it.

"Normally that's the sort of thing your father would have done," she said.

As if I hadn't thought of that already.

"Dad would have liked this sort of trip, wouldn't he?" Jennie said.

"He would have loved it."

"Then why didn't we ever go on canoeing trips before?" Jennie asked.

"Well, I guess at first he was waiting for you two to get older. And then business just took over, and there was never time for him to get away for long ... especially away from cellphones

and pagers and computers. Wall Street stops for nobody.”

My father had been a broker on Wall Street. I couldn't remember him ever taking more than three days off in a row, and even then he'd have his cellphone and laptop close at hand.

“I just wish he was here now,” Jennie said, and I could hear the catch in her voice. I braced myself for the waterworks.

“We all do,” Mom said. “But I guess he *is* with us ... at least in spirit.” She reached out and wrapped an arm around Jennie.

I looked into our SUV through the back window. I couldn't see it underneath all our luggage and sleeping bags, but I knew he *was* with us ... in more than just spirit.

“I still don't know why we had to lug these canoes all the way from the States,” I said as I gave a rope a final tug. “Didn't you think they'd have canoes in Canada?”

“I just wanted to make sure.”

I knew what she *wasn't* saying—that she really needed to make sure this trip would happen. This was not a vacation for her. It was more like a mission.

We climbed back into the car, and this time I sat in the front passenger seat. Mom turned the key and the engine roared to life. We started back onto the road, and as we picked up speed, the wind rolled in through the windows.

“Isn’t the air incredible!” Mom exclaimed. She took a deep breath. “Just smell it!”

“It doesn’t smell like anything,” I said.

“That’s what I mean. It doesn’t smell like cars or trucks or pollution, or food fumes from some restaurant or—”

“A restaurant would be good,” Jennie said. “I’m hungry.”

“Me too,” I agreed.

“There are baby carrots and sandwiches and apples,” Mom said. There was a big cooler on the back seat beside Jennie.

“I was hoping for *real* food,” I said. “Maybe a Big Mac or some KFC, or even a Whopper with cheese.”

“I’m afraid we passed the last fast-food place when we left the pavement behind. You’ll have to make do with what we’ve got until we get to Waswanipi.”

“Will they have a McDonald’s there?” Jennie asked.

"I doubt it. It's going to be pretty small. A gas station, a general store, and maybe a couple of dozen houses."

"In the whole town?" Jennie asked.

"I doubt there will be more than two hundred people in the whole community. There probably aren't a thousand people within fifty miles of here in all directions."

"That's so bizarre," I said.

"That's probably what they'd say about where we live," Mom said.

"What's so bizarre about living in New York City?" I asked defensively. "It's the greatest city in the greatest country in the whole world!"

"It is pretty special. But think about it—within fifty miles of where we live, there are probably fifteen *million* people."

"Maybe even more," I said.

"You're right, maybe more. Don't you find that at least a little bit strange? All those people crowded into little boxes, side by side and stacked on top of each other, with no room between them? Do you really think people were meant to live like that?"

I shrugged. "I guess we were, since so many of

us *do* live like that. Everybody comes to New York because it's such a great place to live."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"What's not to be sure of?"

"Researchers have done experiments with rats. They get all crazy when they get crowded together like that."

"Yeah, but here's the thing—we're not rats."

"People get crazy, too."

Mom slowed the car as we came to a fork in the road. Then she came to a complete stop. Normally, where we live, that would have been an invitation to another car to crash into us from behind, or for somebody to blare their horn. Here, nothing happened, nothing at all. We had about the same chance of being hit by a meteorite as we did of having another driver come along and hassling us.

"Left or right?" my mother asked.

"Isn't there a sign?" Jennie asked.

"You'd think there would be," I answered, "but if there is, I don't see it."

"Look at the map," Mom suggested.

I pulled it down from the sun visor. It was folded to our section. We had been travelling

along a little brown line. I traced my finger along the line until it came to another one—a dotted brown line—leading off to the left. According to the legend, dotted brown meant that the road was seasonal, open only part of the year, during the summer. Waswanipi was at the end of the little brown dotted line. That was the road we wanted.

“We go to the left,” I said.

“Are you sure?” my mother asked.

“I’m sure.”

“It’s just that if we go the wrong way we’ll lose a lot of time and—”

“Do *you* want to look at the map?” I asked, offering it to her.

“Not me. You know my sense of direction isn’t the best in the world. We never would have made it as far as the Canadian border without you navigating.”

“That’s for sure,” I agreed. She’d spun us around at least twice and had us heading in the wrong direction as we were driving through Vermont. “So, trust me. Go to the left.”

She cranked the wheel and we headed down the road.

It soon became clear what the dotted line really meant—the road was only partially there. The last road had been bad. This one was worse.

“I’m going to have to drive slower,” Mom said.

“This is awful,” Jennie said. “I have to go to the washroom—*bad*—and if we hit one more pothole, I don’t think I’ll be able to hold it.”

“There’s lots of bushes out there, each one offering absolute privacy, believe me. Do you want Mom to pull over?” I asked.

“I’d rather go in my pants,” she moaned.

“You’d better get used to using the bushes ... unless you’re planning on not going to the washroom for the next four days.”

“It won’t really be four days, will it, Mom?” Jennie asked.

“Not four full days. I figure less than two days down, travelling with the current, and a full two days on the way back.”

“Oh, that’s better, just under four days before you can go to the washroom,” I said. “I’m sure you can keep your legs crossed that long.”

“He’s right, Jennie. You are going to have to go sometime.”

“I’ll do what I have to do when I have no choice. Now I have a choice,” she said. “I’ll wait until we get to Was ... Waswapity.”

“Waswanipi, in the province of Quebec. In Cree, *Waswanipi* means ‘Light over the water,’” Mom explained.

“Please could we *not* mention water?” Jennie asked.

“Okay, enough’s enough. I think the time has come,” Mom said. She slowed the car down and brought it to a stop slightly off to the side of the dirt track. “We’re *both* going to use *the facilities*.”

Jennie looked as if she was about to complain, but I was sure her bladder was now bigger than her fears. She and Mom climbed out of the car.

“Be back in a minute,” Mom said.

I watched them through the rear window as they walked back down the road, searching for a good place to go. They hesitated, and then disappeared through a gap in the trees.

Bored, I clicked on the radio. There was nothing but static. I pushed button after button. Still nothing but static. I hit the search button and it raced along the dial, trying desperately to find a signal. Nothing but more static. I clicked it off

again. Even radio signals didn't want to come this far. If this wasn't the end of the world, it had to be very, very close to it.

I kept wishing they'd hurry up. I didn't like sitting by myself. I especially didn't like the silence. I really liked having fifteen million people around me. Even if I didn't know them, even if some of them were dangerous, they were still people. People who could help, or at least lend you a phone so that you could get somebody else to help. Here there was nobody. I just stared out the window, watching the place where my mother and sister had disappeared, willing them to return. What would happen if they didn't? Now that was just plain stupid. People didn't just disappear ... not usually ... not like my father.

For as long as I could remember, my dad would be on his way to work before I even woke up, and he wouldn't come home until after I was in bed, asleep. Weekdays *and* weekends. Business. It was just that way, and we had come to accept it, think of it as normal. When there was a big deal brewing, his presence was more a rumour than a fact. There'd be days without even what my sister and I called a "confirmed sighting."

Then one day he went to work and didn't come home. The police told us it was a single-car collision. His car hit a light post on the expressway. There were no skid marks. They said he probably fell asleep at the wheel. And then he never woke up again.

We went to the funeral. It was a closed casket service because of the injuries. We had to just *believe* that he was in that box. We never even saw him again. It was like he just disappeared.

I couldn't afford to have anybody else disappear. Anxiously, I climbed out of the car and started back down the road toward where my sister and mother had gone out of sight. At last I heard a rustling, and they reappeared magically from out of the trees. My anxiety disappeared. My mother waved, and I waved back, with a big smile on my face, in spite of myself.