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GARY PAULSEN

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GARY PAULSEN is a three-time Newbery Honor winner.

9 780440 227502
ISBN 0-440-22750-X
50599
US \$5.99 / \$8.99 CAN



That first night Brian decided he was insane to have come back, insane to have agreed to do it, and insane for sending the plane away with all that wonderful equipment.

Brian had allowed them to have almost no survival gear. He decided that not all people put in this position would have a hatchet, so even that old friend was left at home.

He and Derek each had a knife, the kind that folds like a pocketknife but is bigger and is worn on the belt in a leather case.

Other than that they had what was in their pockets.

Some change, a few dollars in paper money. Derek had a large nail clipper and some credit cards, Brian had pictures of his mother and Deborah in his wallet.

"That's it?" Derek had said early in the evening, while the sun was still on them but low in the west, past the tops of the trees at the edge of the clearing.

"That's it." Brian had nodded.

"It's not much, is it?"

Brian had said nothing. The truth was, it *wasn't* much—especially for two people. They would need twice as much of everything. Twice as much food, a larger shelter—it changed things.

All Brian had needed to worry about before, during the Time, was himself. And that had been bad enough.

The thought of the second person, especially one as green as Derek, had not somehow hit him until just then, in late afternoon.

And then it didn't matter.

The plane was gone.

THE RIVER

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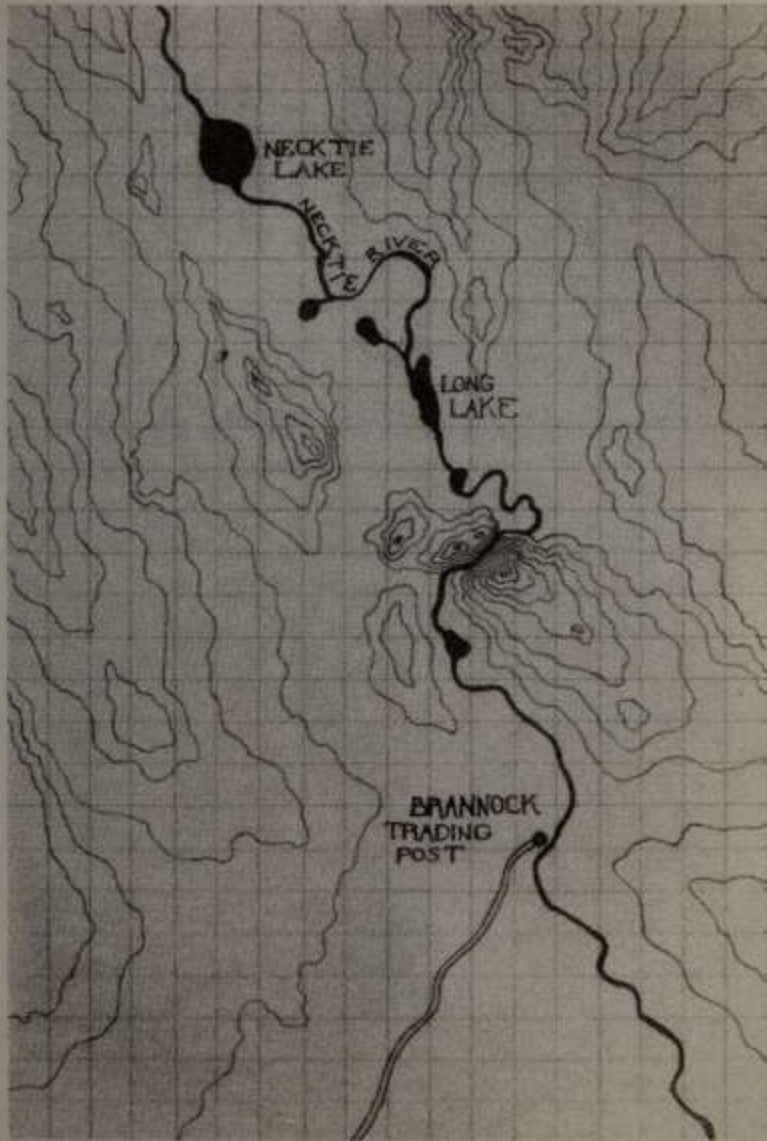
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THE RIVER

GARY PAULSEN



Published by
Dell Laurel-Leaf
an imprint of
Random House Children's Books
a division of Random House, Inc.
New York

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ISBN: 0-440-22750-X

RL: 5.9

Reprinted by arrangement with Delacorte Press

Printed in the United States of America

First Laurel-Leaf Edition February 1998

18 20 19 17

OPM

To my daughter, Lynn, with love

Chapter

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 account 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,