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“Well, that looks like it’s the last of it. Are you all packed, Kevin?”

Dad stood next to our car, hands on his hips, gazing into the open trunk. He looked up at the duffle bags strapped on the roof.

“You bet!” I answered excitedly. “Let’s go! I’ve been waiting for this all summer!”

The morning sky was blue and clear. A perfect day to begin our vacation. I could see some of my friends in their yards, looking wishfully toward us. They all knew what we were doing; they all wished that they could go. Even David Skinner, my best friend, said that he would give me his new football if he could go. I asked Dad, but he said no. He likes David, but he said that this was a family trip. Maybe some other time.

Dad closed the trunk and hopped into the car.
We were on our way.

Camping. Not only camping, but camping up north. St. Ignace, Michigan, to be exact. St. Ignace is the first city you come to on the other side of the Mackinac Bridge. It's one of the oldest cities in Michigan. One of the first people to live there was Father Jaques Marquette. He lived there from 1666 till the time he died in 1675.

But even before that, there were other people there.

Indians.

The forest was very special to them, and there is a lot of Indian history all around St. Ignace. Camping there sure was going to be a lot of fun.

I've never been camping before. Neither has my sister, Erin, or Bobby, my younger brother.

Well, okay – we've camped in our back yard a few times. It's kind of fun. We pitch a tent and roast marshmallows, and Dad tells scary stories. Once he told us a story that was so scary, Bobby started to cry! He wouldn't spend the night in the tent with us, and wound up staying in his bed in the house that night. What a baby.

But this camping trip would be different. We would be camping in the forest – in the wild, with

trees and birds and animals. I hear that there are bears in northern Michigan. I hoped I would see one!

What I didn't know was that we would see a bear all right . . . and a lot of other things that I wouldn't have believed myself . . . except the things happened to *me*, so I know they were real. Let me just say this: If you're going to spend any time in the forest, you'd better know what you're doing.

But I was prepared. I had a brand-new pocketknife, and an outdoor survival handbook. Which, at the moment, was in the hands of my sister.

"Can I *please* have my book back?" I pleaded. She'd been reading it since breakfast. I thought I was being nice by letting her borrow it, but she'd had it for an hour.

"Fine," she said, slapping the book closed and tossing it into my lap. She shook her head and rolled her eyes.

That's just like my sister. We get along well enough, but she can be pretty snappy sometimes. She's 13 . . . a year older than I am . . . so she thinks that she's the boss.

Right.

"Can I see it?" Bobby asked from his seat in

the car.

“Yeah, when I’m through,” I said. “I just got it and I haven’t even been able to read it myself yet.” I shot a glare at Erin, and she ignored me like she usually does.

I opened the book in my lap. It’s very cool. There are different sections that tell you what kinds of trees and plants and animals you’ll find in the woods. It has a section on how to survive on edible plants, and how to cook them. And it shows you which plants to stay away from. There are a lot of plants in the woods that, if eaten, are very poisonous. You really have to know what you’re doing if you’re going to eat wild plants and berries and things. You just can’t wander into the woods and start eating the first green leaf you find!

There is a lot more in the book as well. It shows you how to start a fire without any matches, how to build a lean-to, how to catch fish . . . all kinds of things. When we got to our camp site, I was going to see if I could do some of the things that were in the book.

I shoved my hand in my pocket and pulled out my knife. I had saved for it and bought it at the sporting goods store. It was a good knife, too. The handle was made of wood and had a deer carved

into it. It had four different folding blades, each one a different length. The knife had taken every penny that I'd saved, but I thought it was worth it.

Of course, at the time, I didn't know just how valuable that knife was going to be . . . because soon, that pocket knife was going to save our lives.

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The drive to St. Ignace took us about six hours. Six *boring* hours, I might add. Bobby fell asleep the minute we left the driveway, and he slept most of the way. Dad, Mom and Erin and I played some games. We made up a different name for different kinds of cars, and then when we saw one, we would call out its name. The object, of course, was to be the first to spot a car. You got a point for each one you saw, and I was doing great. I usually win at this game.

At about the half-way point, Erin and I got into a huge fight. She saw a giant semi-truck carrying six vans . . . and she counted them all as points. I was sure it had to be illegal . . . but we didn't have any rule book, so Dad said that she could count the points.

That put her four points ahead of me, and we fought about it all the way till we reached the Mackinac Bridge. Dad got so mad at Erin and I that he threatened to turn the car around and go home.

Bobby woke up just as we started across the Mackinac Bridge. Let me tell you, if you've never crossed it before, it's really something to see. It's five miles long, and hundreds of feet in the air. Boats in the water below look like tiny bugs. We even saw a big freighter passing right below us. It was cool.

But it was the other side of Mackinac Bridge that I was excited about. Because right on the other side of the bridge was St. Ignace.

We were going camping.

As we made our way across the bridge, I shoved my hand into my pocket again just to make sure my knife was still there. Then I fumbled through my outdoor survival book again, looking at the pictures and drawings. I couldn't wait.

We wouldn't be camping at a campground, either. Dad knows a man who has a lot of property not far from town. Dad says that it's nothing but forest and swamp land for miles and miles. No homes, no roads, no people—just forest. Trees and swamps. And animals and bugs and birds.

It was time for dinner, so we ate at a restaurant in St. Ignace. From where I sat, I could see ferry boats taking people across Lake Huron to Mackinac Island. Summertime sure is a busy place in St. Ignace.

After dinner, we got back in the car and started to drive. Soon, Dad turned off the highway onto a small dirt road. After a few bumpy miles, the dirt road turned into a beaten two-track. It was obvious that there hadn't been anyone back here in a long, long time.

Erin had fallen asleep, and I couldn't resist giving her a bumblebee. That's when you stick your finger right near someone's ear when they're sleeping. As you just barely touch their ear, you make a buzzing sound. Because they're sleeping, the person thinks that there's a bee in their ear.

"Bzzzzzzzz"

Well, Erin freaked out. *Totally*. It was great! She snapped awake and slapped the side of her head to smack the 'bee' that had been 'buzzing' by her ear. It was all I could do to keep myself from laughing. When she saw the silly grin on my face, she was *hot*.

"Knock it off, Kevin!" she screamed at me. "Mom! Dad! Tell Kevin to knock it off!"

I quickly flipped open my outdoor survival handbook and pretended that I had been reading.

“What?” I said innocently, looking up from the book. “I’ve been reading. What’s your problem?”

“You’re going to get it,” she hissed, slugging me in the shoulder. Bobby started giggling. “You too,” Erin said, turning to glare at him. “You’re going to get it if you don’t wipe that little smirk off your face.”

The car came to a sudden stop, and Mom and Dad opened the doors. I hopped out and looked around.

Trees. All around us was nothing but trees. The two-track road that we’d been traveling on was hardly even noticeable. It was all grown over with long green grass and small shrubs.

The sounds of the forest filled the air. There were birds and crickets, and a light *shussshhh* of wind as it crept through the trees. There were no car horns, no airplanes. No tires on pavement, no yelling on the street corner. All we could hear were the sounds of the forest.

“Okay gang,” Dad said as he began lowering duffle bags from the roof of the car. “Let’s get these bags unpacked.”

It was total confusion for a little while. I think Dad wanted us to believe that he's a good camper, but he sure wasn't having much luck with one of the tents. The poles kept coming apart and the tent would fall down. Dad was frustrated and saying things under his breath. Mom stood by trying to help, but Dad said that he'd done this a thousand times and he could do it himself.

As for my tent, it was already up. I have a small two-person tent that I practiced setting up in the back yard of our house. That's where Erin and I would sleep. Mom, Dad, and Bobby would sleep in the bigger tent right next to ours.

That is, if Dad was able to keep it from collapsing.

Finally, just before it got dark, he got the tent up. We left a lot of gear in the car, because Dad said that we would be hiking back to another camping spot in the morning. We could leave the gear in the car for tonight, then load it into our packs in the morning.

As I lay awake in the dark tent, I thought about our trip. It was a dream come true. Here we were, camping in the wilds of northern Michigan. I had a new knife, and a new outdoor survival handbook.

This was going to be cool. The adventure of a lifetime. We were really camping. Real camping, not just backyard stuff.

In the wild forests of St. Ignace. After a while my eyes grew heavy, and I fell asleep to the sounds of a million crickets.

How long I slept, I don't know . . . but I awoke to the sound of screaming! A shrill painful wailing pierced the darkness. It didn't take me long to figure out who it was.

Dad!

Dad was screaming at the top of his lungs! Then Mom started screaming, too! When grownups scream like that, you can be sure that whatever is happening can't be good!

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I snapped up in my sleeping bag, and so did Erin.
What was it?!?! I thought. What was wrong?!?!

A light clicked on in the tent next to us. Dad and Mom were still screaming their heads off.

*Oh no! What's happened to Mom and Dad?!?!
What if something happened to Bobby?!?!?*

Now I could hear frantic shuffling, and in the darkness I fumbled for my pocketknife. I had set it on the floor of the tent next to my pillow. I found it instantly, and gripped it tightly. I unzipped the tent flap.

"What are you doing?!?" Erin stammered.

"I want to know what's going on!" I said.
"Mom and Dad are in trouble!"

In the next instant I had slipped out of my sleeping bag and was standing outside.

The coarse ground was cold and clammy on my feet. Gritty dirt stuck to my bare skin. I stood in front of my tent, gripping my still-folded knife, but ready to use it if I had to.

Mom and Dad were out of the tent, and they were shining their flashlight beams at one another. They looked silly like that, Dad in his pajamas and Mom in a nightgown. They were hopping up and down and brushing themselves off.

“Ouch!” Dad yelled, as he swept his hand over his chest. “There’s another one!” Mom was doing the same thing.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, running up to them.

“Ants!” Dad yelled, smacking his hand on his arm. “Ouch! We set up the tent on an ant’s nest!”

There’s a time in your life when you just want to roll over on the ground laughing. Sometimes it’s just better to hold it in and not let anyone know that you’re laughing inside.

This was one of those times. But I’ll never forget the site of Mom and Dad in the glow of the flashlight beams, hopping up and down like bunnies gone crazy, brushing ants off each other.

Somehow, Bobby slept right through the whole ordeal. The ants hadn’t bothered him (I

would tease him later about not being tasty enough). Regardless, Mom and Dad had to wake him up so that they could move the tent to another place. A place without ants.

Finally, after about an hour of stumbling and fumbling in the dark, Mom and Dad had moved the tent and went back to sleep.

But I was wide awake.

I found my small pen light, clicked it on inside my sleeping bag, and opened my outdoor survival handbook. It was so cool. There was so much to learn about the outdoors, so much to make and do. I really hoped that I would have a chance to make some of the things in the book. Maybe I could even find the right kind of plants and berries to eat. The book said that this was the season for blueberries, so I was going to be on the lookout for those.

After a while, I grew tired and was able to fall asleep.

When I awoke in the morning, I was the first up. I climbed out of the tent and stood. It was real early, and the sky was a rich, bright pink. Birds were singing, and the air was fresh and sweet. The sun would be up in a few minutes.

I was about to gather up some dead branches

for the morning fire, but when I looked at the ground, I stopped.

There were strange tracks on the ground. Not just tracks, but *animal* tracks. *Huge* ones.

I kneeled down to the ground. The tracks were big . . . bigger than my hand. And they were definitely animal tracks. I stood up and followed them around our campsite. Whatever it was, it had been all over our campsite during the night!

I followed the tracks around and around . . . and they led right to the door of Mom and Dad's tent!

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