

Safe Passage

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Chapter One: Getting There

“Bel, come on, we’re going to be late! And if we miss the connection to Isla Cara, there’s not another plane for three days.”

I opened my eyes. My dad stood in the doorway, his arms folded across his navy blue and white checkered shirt. His just-showered hair stuck to his skull like wet feathers. He raised his eyebrows.

“Ten more minutes.” I stuffed the pillow over my head and mumbled through the covers.

“Downstairs and ready to go in fifteen.” He pointed to the 1980s calculator watch strapped to his wrist. “Want to get to the airport in plenty of time.” Without checking whether I heard him, my dad pulled the door shut and marched down the hallway to Jack’s room.

Three minutes later, my mom walked as she pretended to knock. I groaned, rolled over, pretended to snore.

She pulled the drape until the first shaft of sun dribbled across my face. “Belinda Anne, you heard your father. Up, up, up!”

I squinted into the light. “Another family vacation, beginning at the crack of dawn.”

My mom’s voice softened. She yawned and stretched her hands over her head. “You know how your dad likes to travel, Bel.”

The wood felt warm under my feet as I dragged myself out of bed. “I’m just saying, no human should be that cheerful this early. It’s against all laws of nature.”

“Get dressed and come downstairs.” My mom looked around at the piles on the floor. “Wouldn’t hurt to clean this up a bit before we go.”

I traced her disapproving glare and shrugged. A mound of magazines leaned against the scuffed pine bureau. The matching desk and chair carried their weight in dirty laundry, a tower of CDs ripped to my mp3 player, and lonely earrings looking for their mates. “What are you talking about?”

She left the door ajar and replied over her shoulder. “Don’t start.”

The vintage, cherry-red alarm clock clicked over to five-thirty. In the bathroom, the snail shells of my cropped black hair only needed two seconds at the sink and a quick hand flick. I swished a capful of spearmint mouthwash, scrounged in the just-washed basket for my favorite teal t-shirt, and pulled on my oldest pair of jeans. After dumping another armload of stuff into my leather shoulder bag, I frowned at the mirror. Wide-set hazel eyes and round face from my mom; long torso and short legs from my dad. “Okay, Bel—a month of family in the wilderness? Everything’s going to be okay.”

My little brother Jack, twelve, jumped from halfway up the stairs and landed in the kitchen. He stooped and rubbed his shin, which was already covered in a scab from a nosedive from his skateboard at the park the first week of summer vacation. “That killed my leg. Mom, check out this huge bruise on the back of my knee.”

Babying him the way she always did, Mom mussed his hair and inspected his injury. “Looks like it really hurts, Jack. What did you do?”

I stomped down the stairs and leaned through the open counter between the beige dining room and the pine green tiles of the kitchen. “Forget about that stupid bruise. What was all that coughing last night, Jack? Thanks to you, I slept for a grand total of an hour in between all that racket.” I swallowed another yawn and wrinkled my nose. “I mean, seriously, what’s your deal?”

Jack tore open a bag of blue corn chips and stuffed them in his mouth. “How should I know? Didn’t notice, because, dope, I was asleep.. ” He pulled a face at me and turned to Mom. “But this bruise, man. Soccer practice, maybe.”

He jogged to the hallway closet and dug out another pair of grungy sneakers. Mom and I listened to his excitement as he yelled through the house. “Anyway, who cares? No school for the entire summer and we are going on vacation to a desert island.”

Dirty shoes in one hand, Jack reappeared and hopped up on a stool. “With giant spiders, and snakes, and—”

I rolled my eyes, slung one foot up over the other stool, and held up my hand to stop him talking.

“Whatever. All I’m saying is, your stupid coughing kept me dead awake.” A thought elbowed my exhaustion in the ribs. “Hey, maybe you’ve got pneumonia.”

With a glare, Jack ducked into the family room to grab his backpack. I played with my idea. “You know, Mom, if Jack’s not feeling too good, maybe we should toss in this whole island idea. I mean, don’t want him dying on us, right?”

My mom wiped up spilled raspberry jelly with a damp paper towel and scowled. “Bel, don’t be ridiculous. We’re going, and that’s final.” She looked over at my brother. “Jack, take your feet off the table. There will not be snakes. We’re going on an archeological tour so I can finish collecting data for my thesis. I’m sure there will be plenty of interesting things to see besides giant snakes.”

Jack squeaked his basketball shoes on the white lino floor and sneered at me. He caught me thinking it. “No, my face is not going to freeze like that.”

He stuck out his tongue, leaned his head in his hands, and turned to watch our mother making waffles.

“Mom, it’s the jungle. Don’t you know

anything? I looked it up in my Crawly Creatures book, and there will definitely be spiders. Do you know that there are jumping spiders in Central America that can fly about eight feet through the air?”

He rubbernecked from the back door to the oven. “That’s, like, if you’re standing here”—he pointed to the refrigerator in the corner of the kitchen—“and I’m a spider hanging a web over here”—he hopped on the window sill in the breakfast area—“I could just take one flying leap and wham! you’re toast. The end.”

“Eat your breakfast,” she said. “We can discuss spiders in the car on the way to the airport.” She centered her attention on me. “And Bel, honey, that t-shirt is filthy. Please go change—when you’re done grab your bag and give it to your father in the garage. He’s packing the van.”

I oozed off the stool, scraped my fingernails along the edge of the stainless steel sink and chewed the last bite of my bagel. “Fine. But let’s not forget, that if it weren’t for Jenna kissing lameboy Brandon Curtis and getting mono before school was out, I’d be halfway to North Carolina with her family on that camping trip.”

“Don’t argue.” Standing beside me, my mom

poured the dregs of a carton of milk down the drain. “You’ve made it abundantly clear that you’re rather spend the summer with your best friend. Not an option, I’m afraid. But I’m sure you’ll find a way to cope.”

Her sarcasm fired up mine. “What’s wrong with this t-shirt, anyway? It’s no skankier than Jack’s boots. You’re already dragging me into exile on some stupid island with this little dork and my two archeology-freak parents, and you won’t even let me wear what I want? Great.”

She pointed through the doorway arch and up the stairs. “Change. Now.”

My dad pattered in the garage. Our minivan, a russet brown dinosaur, gave birth to mismatched baggage scattered across the floor. I pulled my duffel onto the concrete and set it down beside the car’s sliding door.

“Thanks, hon. I’m sure we’ll be able to find a place for this.” My dad flattened one of the soft-sided pieces of luggage and grinned at the extra inch of space in the trunk. He glanced at my contribution. “Confession time, Bel—you packed every shoe in your

closet, didn't you?"

"Too early to be funny, Dad. Which you're not." I nudged a stack of bubble-wrapped and duct-taped equipment. "I'll take what I need, and you'll haul all this junk along."

He laughed and bent to pick up another bundle. "Lenses, tripods, film. The three essentials of great photography."

I wedged my other bag onto the floor of the backseat. "You're an accountant. This whole 'I'm an artist' shtick is sad. And the chemicals smell like cat pee."

"Give it up, Belinda." My father coiled the last adapter cable into the hardtop suitcase.

I cracked my gum. "I'm just saying, I don't know why you need all this. All we're doing is going to some lame island to look at ruined buildings and old stones. Boring."

My dad cocked a warning eyebrow. "Go tell your mother we're ready." He called through the open door to the mudroom. "Jack, let's hit the road, buddy!"

Jack bounced into the garage and piled into the car with a sigh. "Man, I'm wiped. Maybe I need more

breakfast.” As Dad turned the ignition, Jack zipped the window down and yelled over the engine. “Mom, can you bring the Doritos in the car?”

Mom turned on the house alarm, slid into the passenger seat, and clicked shut her car door. “No more chips for breakfast. Here, have a banana.”

Reaching into the cooler at her feet, she pulled out a plastic bag full of fruit. “Bel, do you want something, honey?”

“Not hungry.”

She packed for a famine, and the three members of my family dug in. Apples, bananas, muffins, yogurt, and cartons of chocolate milk disappeared into ravenous stomachs as Dad’s dino climbed onto the interstate. We drove through tree-cupped blocks of colorful ranch houses, driveways pocked with bicycles and skateboards, and shades pulled tight in dark windows. The sun tiptoed over the flat horizon beyond the subdivision’s border with a farmer’s field.

“This is the best part of the day,” Dad said as he warmed up to his inevitable speech. I leaned tighter against the window, trying to drown his lecture. It was too early to argue. He droned on.

“Up with the sun—at home, a frosted glass of iced tea with mint and lemon in the summer, a double rich mug of cinnamon hot chocolate with marshmallows in the winter. And on the road? Nothing like getting behind the wheel to appreciate the endless possibilities of new adventure.”

Four hours later, he slotted the car into long-term airport parking, tossed the remnants of breakfast-on-the-go in the garbage, and carted twelve pieces of luggage to curbside check-in.

At the gate, I folded myself into a chair and flipped on my headphones after replacing the batteries.

Jack kicked my chair to get my attention. “Want to check out the newsstand for a comic or something?”

I could hear him over the music. “Don’t try to talk to me.”

“Come on, let’s go check out the Internet kiosk I saw a few gates down.”

“As if.” I turned up the volume and slouched with my head down. “Leave me alone. I checked my e-mail before we left home, and there’s nowhere I want to be with you.”

Jack mumbled to himself. I pulled off one headphone. “What did you say?”

“I said, we’d be better off without you and your freakazoid, non-talking self.”

He rolled his eyes. “What happened to my sister, who trekked up that mountain for a week in Nepal and got lost with me in the Louvre?”

“You’re the loser, Jack.” I folded my arms and slid over to leave two empty seats between us. “Get lost yourself.”

“See, that’s what I mean. All you ever do is yell at me to go away.” He gave up and turned to Mom, who was studying the departures monitor and trying to ignore us. “My headache’s trying to scrape out the inside of my skull, and I’m starving. Can I go get something to eat now, please?”

Mom reached into her purse and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. “Keep a lookout for something nutritious, okay? There’s a deli counter.” She pointed across to the next gate. “Why don’t you grab a turkey sandwich?”

My dad stretched and stood up. “I’m hungry, too. Let’s go rustle up some snacks. What do you say?”

He reached over to tousle Jack's hair, who jerked away and screwed up his eyes. "Don't!"

Jack walked away. "What I need is food. Right. Now. Before I die."

"Right. Like you're really do us that favor." I pulled my knees up to my chest and tapped the beat with my nails on the oatmeal vinyl chair.

"You really should be nicer to your brother." My mom checked her makeup in her compact mirror and smoothed on some frosted pink lip gloss. "He's just trying to be your friend."

Over the noise in my ears, I said, "I have friends. My dipshit brother is not my friend."

Mom squinted at my cursing and leaned across to pull out my left earphone. She talked at the side of my head. "Watch your language. Your father and I can ground you just as well on vacation as we can at home, young lady. I hope you check that attitude and get on board here."

I swallowed my 'blah, blah, blah' reply and skipped ahead a few songs. The rising bass pounded my ears as my mom pricked her hair with another bobby pin.

Jack and my dad returned with armloads. Sandwiches, sodas, chocolate bars, and a bag of Twizzlers. Non-food items too, including a souvenir key chain in the shape of a thermometer, Roloids for Dad's travel heartburn, and three newspapers.

I couldn't let that one slip by. "People are starving, you know. You've been eating since five o'clock this morning, and now you've bought all that crap?"

My mother snapped. "Belinda Anne, quit it. I have had enough. I don't want to hear another word out of you. If you can't say anything positive, keep it to yourself. We'd all appreciate it."

"Bet you would." I wasn't sure if I meant to say it loud enough for her to hear.

Her voice rumbled like a thunderstorm, low and threatening. "Just give it a rest, alright? You have made it perfectly clear that the last thing you want is to be part of this family trip; to be blunt, your father and I are tired of hearing you whine about it."

She tugged on my arm to make me face her, and scooted in close. We plan on having a great time—well, your father, Jack, and I plan on having a great time—

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