

Chapter one



“Ease out the clutch slowly while you give it more gas,” Minerva Armstrong directed her brother. “Easy does it now . . .”

“Okay, okay, I got it.” Jacob grunted, gripping the steering wheel.

He was concentrating so hard, beads of sweat popped out on his forehead and trickled down his face. He wiped his eye and pressed on the gas pedal. The red Mini Cooper lurched along the narrow driveway.

“More gas!” his sister yelled. “Give it more gas!”

The motor raced as they jolted forward.

“Watch out! Watch out!” Minerva grabbed the dashboard. “You’ll crash into the house!”

Jacob gasped as the side of the house loomed up ahead of them. He swung the steering wheel left. Too far. The car crashed into the laurel hedge instead and came to an abrupt stop. He pitched forward, bashing his chin. The motor stalled.

“Now look what you made me do!” he yelled, clutching his throbbing chin.

“What *I* made you do?” his sister yelled back. “What do you mean? You’re supposed to watch where you’re going.”

“Humph!” he huffed. “Some teacher!”

“That’s it! I give up!” She shoved the door open. “You’re hopeless. Worse than hopeless. No way in a million years will you ever learn to drive a car.”

“So much for your teaching,” he yelled after her. “You got to be the world’s worst teacher.”

Minerva slammed the car door so hard his ears popped. She stomped away into the house.

Jacob rubbed his aching chin and stared out at the shiny green leaves pressed against the windshield. His sweaty T-shirt stuck to the back of the leather seat. Now what? Bushes were jammed up against his door so he couldn’t even get it open.

He clambered over the gear-shift to the passenger’s seat and opened the other door. He thrashed his way into the bushes and tried to push the Mini out by leaning all his

weight against the hood. The car was wedged so firmly in the hedge it wouldn't budge. No way could he get it out alone. No point asking his crabby sister for help.

He might as well get his soccer ball from the hall closet and get in a few good hard kicks against the garage door. Maybe it would help him think of something.

But as he tried to sneak past the kitchen door, his mother caught him.

"There you are, Jacob," she said. "That garbage needs emptying, my boy, and it's your turn. I shouldn't have to ask you every time."

His mom's hands were on her hips and her brown face was shiny with indignation. He could tell she was on a rampage about something. Probably with Minerva.

"Okay, okay." He wiped his sweaty face on his T-shirt and tried to yank the bag out of the garbage container. It was stuck so he had to kick it. He wanted to get out of that kitchen fast. He hated getting in the middle of the arguments his mom and Minerva were having these days.

"Now what's this?" his mother said to Minerva in a voice shrill with concern and heavy with her Jamaican accent. "You think I would allow a daughter of mine go right across the country to attend a school I haven't seen? In a city I haven't even visited? Where would you live, girl? Do they have safe dormitories at that university? No, no. I must go and see what this Winnipeg place is like for myself."

"Oh, Mom! I don't need you to come with me. I'm not a

little kid anymore, you know.” Minerva was winding her curly hair into a twist. “I’m eighteen now.”

Jacob knew his sister had planned to escape from their embarrassingly crazy family at the first opportunity. But now it looked as if her plans were dashed. Served her right for being so mean. He grunted as he gave the garbage bag another yank. It came out with a swoosh.

“Drive all the way to Winnipeg? What a marvelous idea, Rosa!” Fred Finkle said, hugging Jacob’s mom. Fred Finkle was their step-father. He was a tall, bearded Englishman with a red nose and knobby knees. “Excellent! Excellent!” he said. “I can take my holidays in the last couple of weeks of August, and we’ll all go, the whole family together, and see Minerva settled in her new school at the university in Winnipeg. We can camp and experience Western Canada’s great prairie wilderness along the way. And visit our friends, Elizabeth and Roger, in the Kootenays. They’re always inviting us, you know. And my brother’s living in Brandon. We’ll visit him and Peggy as well. We’ll have a smashing time seeing the country. Banff, the Rockies, the Bad Lands, Drumheller where they have that world famous Dinosaur Museum . . . Why, I was told that . . .”

“Count me out,” Jacob interrupted, relieved to have an excuse. “I’ve got soccer trials at the end of August. They’re looking for players for the sixteen-and-under provincial team, and my coach said I have a good chance this year.”

“Isn’t that at the very end of August?” his mom asked

him. "Winnipeg is not that far away. We could be back in plenty of time for your trials."

"But I'd miss all the practices." Jacob was grasping at straws now.

"Practices!" she huffed. "Practising with that soccer ball is all you ever do, boy. You practise all day long. Every day. No, no. Fred's right. We will *all* go to Winnipeg. It will be fun. A good family holiday. That's what we need. A family that holidays together, stays together. Remember that wonderful trip a few years ago when we all drove down to Mexico? Now didn't we have fun?"

The kids all groaned. Even Barney and Sam groaned. Barney and Sam were Fred Finkle's sons and Jacob's step-brothers. They were at the kitchen table playing a complicated version of The Lost World. Barney Finkle was a tall fourteen-year-old with spiky red hair and thick wire-rimmed glasses. His brother, Sam Finkle, was eleven, and knew everything there was to know about dinosaurs.

The thought of that excruciating trip three years ago when all six of them had been squashed into a smelly old station wagon for a whole month while his mom and Fred had their honeymoon, made Jacob sweat even harder. The whole newly "blended" family had travelled all the way down the west coast from Vancouver to Mexico and back like some kind of crazy Brady bunch. A wonder they actually survived.

"What about visiting our mom?" Barney asked.

“She’ll be out of the country until late September, son,” Fred said. “Remember she’s on assignment in South Africa?”

“Oh, right,” Barney said.

Barney and Sam got to see their mom only on rare occasions when she was in town, between jobs. She was a wild-life photographer for *National Geographic*.

“Do we all have to go, Mom?” Jacob said, brushing sweat out of his eyes. “The van would be mega-crowded with the six of us and our camping gear, plus all Minerva’s books and stuff. I could stay home and house-sit for you guys.”

“I’ve got an idea,” his mom said. “We can take two cars. We’ll drive the van and, Minerva, you can drive the Mini. I was going to give it to you as a going-away gift anyway, now that Fred wants us to be a one-car family.”

“Give me the Mini?” Minerva’s scowl vanished and her face broke into a grin. “Sweet! I love that car!”

“So it’s settled. I’ll take the last two weeks in August off,” Fred said. “Goldsmith Engineering Company will have to do without me.” He checked the calendar on the wall above Jacob’s head. “We’ll leave on August fifteenth.”

“But, but what about my try-outs . . .” Jacob squawked, ducking out of Fred’s way.

“It takes less than a week to get to Winnipeg,” Fred told him. “I reckon we could do it in three easy driving days if we had to. So as your mother said, we’ll be back in plenty of time for your trials, Jacob, old chap. Don’t get your bloomin’ knickers in a knot, worrying about that.”

Jacob stared gloomily at the calendar. He couldn't see any way of getting out of going on the trip. He knew his mom wouldn't allow him to stay home alone. No point even asking. You'd think she would, now that he was almost sixteen.

At least he and Minerva could get away from the rest of them in the Mini. He knew she'd let him ride with her. Maybe he'd even have a chance to drive it. He loved that peppy little Mini Cooper. It would be his last chance to learn to drive it until Minerva brought it home in the spring. And those roads on the flat prairie must be as straight as the centre line on a soccer field, so it would be a cinch to learn to drive there compared to their narrow twisting driveway. Maybe the family trip wouldn't be a total waste after all.

Now all he had to do was get that baby out of the hedge.

"Hey, guys," he said to Barney and Sam, as he dragged the bag of garbage to the back door. "Want to see something really cool outside?"