

# Chapter 1



ONCE UPON A TIME nobody owned anything. People ran around naked and the world was wonderful and free.

Now, everything is owned by *somebody*: some are filthy rich, and some are dirt poor; some live in gigantic mansions, and some sleep on the sidewalk. How did that happen? Why can't I go out in the woods and build my own castle? What would happen if I did, would they put me in jail? Who gives them the right to do that?

And who's *they*, anyway?

## 2 *The Kingdom of No Worries*

This question jumps out of me on the last day of school, while Mom makes my lunch and Dad grinds coffee.

“Who owns the land?”

They both turn and stare at me, but Mom just smiles, and Dad’s still waking up. I feel a hand come down on my shoulder.

“I’m glad you asked,” says Merilee, my sister.

*No!*

Merilee’s just three years older but you would guess she was a lot older than that. She’s a bookworm, an A+ student, and a political activist. She writes long letters to politicians and they write back. They always start out by thanking her for her sharp insight and end by asking for money. Once, a politician even asked her to join his re-election committee, but she turned him down because he was too conservative. They don’t have a clue that she’s only fifteen years old.

Dad calls Merilee a “*paragon* of conscience,” which sounds like a flying dinosaur to me. Mom says that when she was pregnant with Merilee she ate spinach, broccoli, and pine nuts, took long walks in nature, listened to Mozart, and read books. When she was pregnant with me she ate only mac and cheese, Skittles, pop, and slouched on the sofa in front of the soaps. That explains my cravings for junk food.

Merilee doesn't have a lot of time for me usually, unless I ask a question about the world, such as . . . "Why do people care so much about what other people wear, like . . . hijabs, burkas, and things like that?" or "Why can't countries just get rid of their dictators if they don't like them?" Then she'll follow me around all day long answering one simple question. She'll start slowly, for my sake, but will pick up speed after a while, especially if I appear to lose interest, and will go on and on if I try to run away, and even follow me into my tree fort in the backyard answering one measly question, which by then I won't even remember, and will wish I had never asked, and will promise myself never to ask again. But sometimes a question will slip out when I'm not paying attention, like now.

I look up at Dad, hoping he'll answer first, but he won't speak until he's had his first sip of coffee. I look at Mom, but she just keeps smiling. She never interrupts Merilee.

"There's crown land, and there's private land," Merilee says as she sits down and stares into my face. I look up at the clock.

"I have to get to school."

"Crown land is owned by the province. Private land is owned by individuals, or companies."

“I have to go pee.”

“It might surprise you to know that eighty-five percent of the land in Ontario is owned by the Crown.”

I start to get up. She digs her fingers into my shoulder, which is probably what a mouse feels like when it is carried away by an owl. I sit back down.

“Sometimes you can rent or buy land from the Crown, but you need special permission from the Ministry of Natural Resources, because land is considered a resource, just like forests and rivers and mines.”

I’m starting to feel sleepy. I wonder if I can stay home sick today. No, my friends and I have agreed to meet after school to discuss our plans for the summer, which just means epic sessions of video games, movies, and skateboarding. Still, it has to be planned out, which also happens to be a good excuse for an epic junk-food pig-out.

“Once someone buys land and is given legal title to it, they, or their heirs, hold it in perpetuity.” Merilee tosses her hair as if she’s in a shampoo commercial. “On the other hand, people sometimes just lease land, as from the Crown, in which case the ownership reverts to the Crown once the lease runs out. But land leases often run for a hundred years . . .”

I’m starting to zone out, but I hear Merilee use the

word *perpetuity*, which I'm pretty sure is a pot that old geezers spit chewing tobacco into. I wonder if you can pee into a *perpetuity*. I look down at the floor—we don't have one of those. I look up at Dad. He's standing over the coffee maker with his hand on the kettle and no water coming out. He has daydreamed himself into a trance. That's something I inherited from him. I have yet to discover any original traits within myself.

Merilee senses I'm not paying attention, so she picks up the pace. Her voice drifts in and out of the window with the breeze. My sister has two friends who are exactly like her: Mehra and Marcie. Dad calls them "the Three Fates." If you sit close to them in the school cafeteria when they are brainstorming, your head will explode.

"... is owned by the Huron Nation. In fact, our whole city is legally owned by the Huron Nation ..."

"*What . . . ?*"

I raise my head. For a second, I think I hear something actually interesting. I turn and look into the blindingly smart eyes of my sister. "What? The city of Briffin?"

Merilee is so unused to me asking a question once she's on a roll, she looks a little confused, like a lizard that has just stumbled upon a sleeping bug. "Yes. Legally, they own it. But . . . they can't possess it."

"Why not?"

“Because the treaties are contested. And there’s conflicting evidence, at least that’s what the Crown lawyers will tell you. The whole thing is so deeply mired in legal technicalities it would probably take a hundred years to sort it out through the courts. But mostly it’s because we’re living here, and it’s too expensive to move a city.”

“Wow. That’s interesting.” I really mean it. Merilee nods her head, stands up, and pours herself a bowl of cereal. She looks pleased. I wait for her to begin again but she doesn’t. She starts eating her cereal. I can’t believe it. I have just learned a most valuable lesson: to escape Merilee all you have to do is show a little interest.