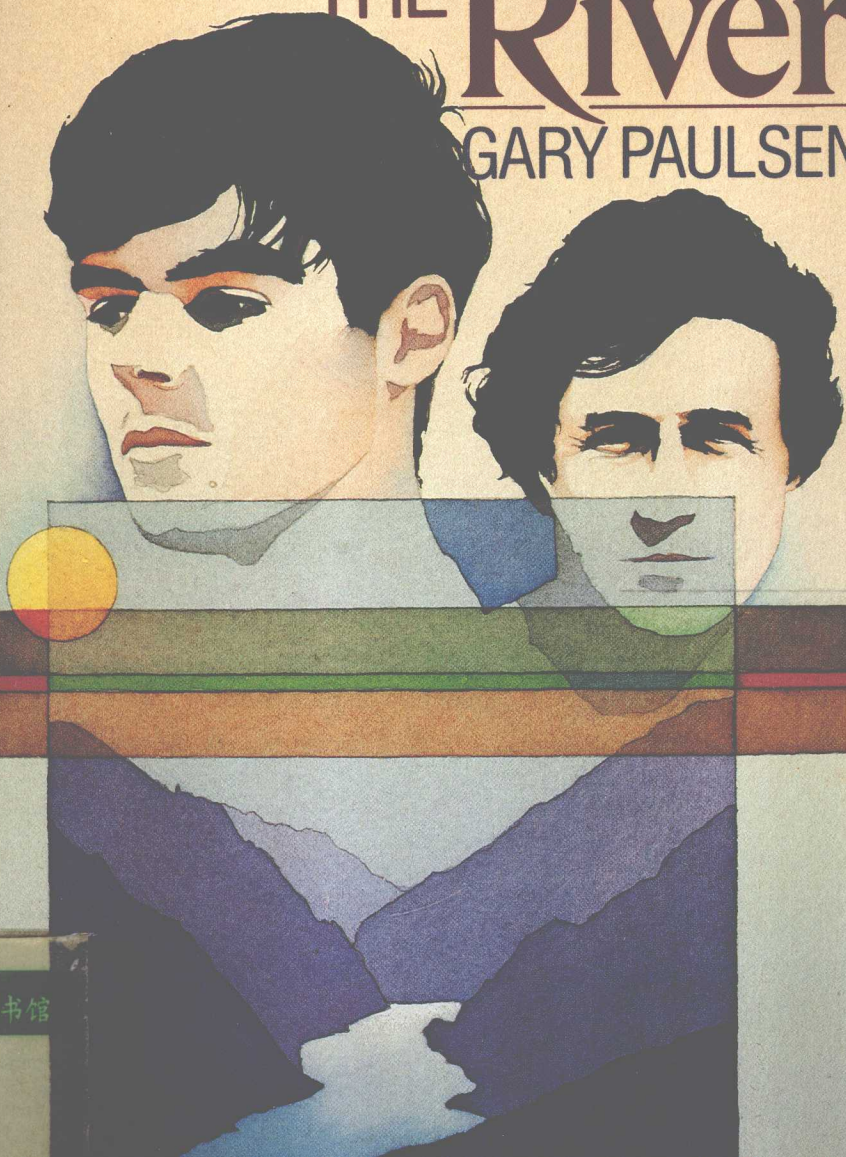


The riveting sequel to *Hatchet*

THE River

GARY PAULSEN



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A Yearling Book

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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 momentarily 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 ac-

count 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. He went on a few dates, and pretty soon the press was bug-
ging her as well and that was too much. He started going out the back door, wearing sunglasses, meeting Deborah in out-of-the-way places, and sliding down the hallways in school. He was only too glad when people stopped noticing him.

And here they were again. "I mean, are you with television or anything?"

Derek shook his head. "Nope—not even close. We're with a government survival school."

"Instructors?"

Derek shook his head. "Not exactly. Bill and Erik are instructors, but I'm a psychologist. We work with people who may need to survive in bad situations—you know, like downed pilots, astronauts, soldiers. How to live off the land and get out safely."

"What do you want with me?"

Derek smiled. "You can probably guess. . . ."

Brian shook his head.

"Well, to make it short, we want you to do it again."

Brian stared at him. "It's a joke, right?"

Derek shook his head. "Not at all—but I think we should wait for your mother to come home and talk to her and your father. We'll come back later."

He turned to leave and the other two men, still silent, followed him to the door.

"Just a minute." Brian stopped them. "Maybe I didn't understand what you said—let me get it straight. You want me to go back and do it over again? Live in the woods with nothing but a hatchet?"

Derek nodded. "That's it."

"But that's crazy. It was . . . rough. I mean, I almost died and it was just luck that I made it out."

Derek shook his head. "No. Not luck. You had something more going for you besides luck."

Brian had a mental picture of the porcupine coming into

his shelter in the dark, throwing the hatchet and hitting the rock embedded in the wall and getting sparks. If the porcupine hadn't come in and he hadn't thrown the hatchet, and if the hatchet hadn't hit the rock just right, there wouldn't have been sparks and he wouldn't have had a fire and he might not be standing here talking to this man now. "Most of it was luck. . . ."

"Let me explain what I mean."

Brian waited.

"We teach what you did, or we try to. But the truth is, we have never done it and we don't know anybody who has ever done it. Not for real." He shrugged, his shoulders moving under the jacket. "Oh, we do silly little tests, you know, where we go out and pretend to survive. But nobody in our field has ever *had* to do it—where everything is on the line." He looked directly at Brian. "Like you."

The one named Bill Mannerly stepped forward. "We want you to teach us. Not from a book, not from pamphlets or training films, but really *teach* us what it's like. So we can teach others more accurately."

Brian smiled. He couldn't help it. "You mean take a class out and show them what I did?"

Derek held up his hands and shook his head. "No. Not like that. Nothing phony. We haven't worked it all out yet, but we thought one of us would go with you and stay out there with you, live the way you live, watch you—learn. *Learn*. Take notebooks and make notes, write everything down. We really want to know how you did it—all the parts of it."

Brian believed him. His voice was soft and sincere and his eyes were honest, but still Brian shook his head. "It wasn't like you think. It wasn't a camping trip. I lost weight, but more than that, I didn't come back the same." And, he

thought, I'm still not the same, I'll never be the same. He could not walk through a park without watching the trees for game, could not *not* hear things. Sometimes he wanted not to see, not to hear everything around him—noise, colors, movement. But he couldn't blank them out. He saw, heard, smelled everything.

"That's what we want to know. Those things." Derek smiled. "Look, don't say no yet. Let us come back and talk to your mother, explain it all, and then you can make a decision. All right?"

Brian nodded slowly. "All right. Just to talk, right?"

"Just to talk."

The three men left, and Brian looked at the digital clock on the table in the entryway. It would be an hour before his mother got home. He had some studying to do—it was the end of May and there were finals—but he decided to cook dinner.

He loved to cook.

It was one of the things that had changed about him from the time when he was in the woods. He thought of it as the Time.

Just that. The Time. When he was speaking quietly to Deborah about it—he'd tried to tell her of it, all of it, including the moments when he tried to end himself—when he spoke to her about it, he always started it with just those words:

The Time.

A year had passed, and in the world around him not much had changed. His mother still saw the man, though not as much, and Brian thought it might be passing, what they had between them. The divorce was still final—and would probably remain so. He'd gone to visit his father after the Time and found that he'd fallen in love with another woman and was going to marry her.

Things ground on, a day at a time.

But Brian had changed, completely.

And one of the things that had happened was that now he loved to cook. There was something about the food, preparing the food, looking at the food—there was so *much* of it compared to what he'd had in the woods. He enjoyed taking the food out, working with it and cooking it and serving it and eating it. Chewing each bite, *knowing* the food, watching other people eat. Sometimes he would just sit and watch his mother eat what he had cooked, and once it bothered her so much that she looked up at him, a piece of sauteed beef on a fork halfway to her mouth.

"What is it?"

"I'm just watching you eat," he'd said to her. "It's something—eating. Just to see somebody eat. It's really something."

"Are you . . . all right?" she'd asked. Of course, he wasn't—or maybe he was and had never been all right before in his life. But he'd smiled and nodded.

"Sure, fine . . ."

But it was more that he couldn't tell her what was wrong, or even if anything was wrong—he couldn't really talk to anybody about it because nobody understood what he meant.

His father and mother had insisted that he go to a counselor when he first came back, and more to humor them than anything else he went, but it didn't help. The counselor thought he was somehow mentally injured, somehow harmed, and the truth was almost the exact opposite. He tried to tell the counselor that he was more than he had been, not less—not just older, not just fifteen when before he had been fourteen, but more. Much more. But the counselor didn't understand, couldn't understand, because he hadn't been with Brian in the woods during the time. The Time.

"I discovered fire," Brian told the counselor.

"Well, sure, but you're back now—"

Brian had stopped him. "No. You don't understand. I truly *discovered* fire—the way some man or woman did it thousands and thousands of years ago. I discovered fire where it had been hidden in the rock for all of time and it was there for me. It doesn't matter that we have matches or lighters or that fire is easy to make here in the other part of the world. I truly and honestly discovered fire. It was a great thing, a very great thing. . . ."

The counselor had sat behind his desk and smiled and nodded and tried to know what Brian was speaking about, but it wasn't there—he couldn't.

And that became the way of it for Brian. In all his dealings with the new world around him since he was reborn in the woods—as he thought of it—he had to be evasive, hold back. If he told the truth, nobody believed him; and if he was silent—which he found himself becoming more and more—they thought he was sick.

He couldn't win.

He took two pork chops out of the freezer and thawed them in the microwave. Then he found the cookbook and flipped to the page for breaded pork chops.

When he first returned home, he found himself wanting to eat a great deal. He would buy a hamburger, eat it, drink a malt, then think immediately of buying another one, but that only lasted a brief time. His stomach had shrunk and the food made him feel heavy, wrong somehow, and he'd stopped overeating.

But he still took great pleasure in food, and he now prepared the pork chops slowly, enjoying himself as he worked.

He cut the fat off them, breaded them, preheated the oven, and put them in a glass pan. While they were baking he looked at the clock again—his mother was due in less than

half an hour and she was never late—and put two potatoes on a plate to bake in the microwave. He would start them when she came home—they baked in a few minutes—and they could eat before the men came back.

"It was a wonderful meal," his mother said, leaning back from the table and smiling, "as usual."

Brian nodded. "Something I whipped up."

They cleared the table. They had become strangely closer since his return. So much of the divorce, and the other man, had bothered him, but coming close to death in the woods had led him to understand some things about himself and other people. He realized that he was not always right, was, indeed, often not right, and at the same time he found that others were not always wrong.

He learned to accept things—his mother, the situation, his life, all of it—and with the acceptance, he found that he admired her.

She was trying to make a go of it alone, working in a real estate office selling lots, and it was rough.

"We have to talk," he said, putting the dishes in the dish-

washer. *To have dishes, he thought, just to have dishes and pots and pans and a stove to cook the food—it still marveled him.* "Some men are coming over to talk to you."

"What men?"

He explained Derek and the other two, what they wanted.

"You mean what they *said* they wanted. They might be anybody. We should call the police."

He shrugged. "If you want. I was a little worried at first, but they didn't do anything and they seemed all right, so I told them to come back."

She thought it over and finally nodded. "Let's see if they come—we'll play it the way it looks best."

As if on cue the doorbell rang, and she went to the door with Brian following.

Derek stood alone on the front step. He backed away so they could see him well through the peephole in the door.

She opened the door.

"Hello. I'm Derek Holtzer—"

"My son told me about you. Weren't there two others?"

"We thought one man might be less pushy. They stayed in the motel."

"Please come in. We'll have some coffee."

Derek followed her in and they sat down at the dining room table and Derek explained to Brian's mother what he wanted—all that he had told Brian.

"We would control the operation closely," he said, "and take every precaution possible. Of course, we wouldn't do anything without your permission, and Brian's father's as well," Derek concluded.

His mother sipped coffee and put the cup down carefully. Her voice was even, as if talking about the weather. "I think it's insane."

Brian half agreed with her. In all the time since his return, he had had dozens of kids and not a few adults say how much

they would have liked to do it—be marooned in the woods with nothing but a hatchet. But they always said it when they weren't over a block and a half from a grocery store, usually in a room with lights and cushions on a couch and running water. None of them had ever said it while they were sitting in the dark with mosquitoes plugging their nostrils or night sounds so loud around them they couldn't think.

To want to go back was insane.

And yet.

And yet . . .

Yet there was this small feeling, a tingle at the back of his neck as his hairs went up.

"I know it sounds strange, but Brian has had a unique experience," Derek said. He set his cup down carefully on the saucer. "It could save lives if he would help us."

"It's still insane." Brian's mother shook her head. "I don't think you have the slightest idea of what you're asking. You must realize that for the time Brian was gone we thought he was dead. Dead. We were told by experts that he couldn't possibly still be alive and then we got him back. Back from the dead. And now you're asking me—his mother—to send him back out there?"

Derek took a breath, held it, let it out. "Don't you see? That's exactly *why* we must do it. Because he was thought to be dead and lived, because he did something nobody else could do and if he could share that with us, show us, take us through it with him—he could save others who are in the same place. It's not just what he learned about survival—we know most of that. Or at least the survival instructors do. It's his thinking, his psychological processes, how his mind worked for him—that's what's so important."

"I have to do it." God, Brian thought—was that *my* voice?

Both of them looked at Brian. Derek in surprise, his mother with a stunned look on her face.

“What?”

Brian leaned back. “I know, Mother. But he’s right. I . . . learned something there. About how to live—I mean how to *live*. And if it could help others, I have to do it.”

“There is money,” Derek said. “We can contract him and the government will pay well for his help.”

His mother was still staring at him, but he knew, Brian knew, that she understood. There was much between them since he came back, much understanding. She treated him much more as an adult and she understood. Still, she held back, and the worry was alive in her face. “Are you sure—absolutely certain?”

Brian sighed. “I have to—if it will help others.”

She nodded slowly, biting her lower lip. But she nodded.

“I’ll have to call his father,” she said. “He may say no.”

But Brian knew.

He was going.