

J O E S I X P A C K

***SISTERS
FOR THE
SUMMER***

**“Camp Counseling” by Joe Six-Pack
A Crossed Fiction Story**



2007 Paperback Edition

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CAMP COUNSELING

Brock watched the bus drive off into the woods, following the impossibly long and meandering route he had already experienced on the way in. He let out a heavy sigh in his chest and kicked some loose gravel. It was going to be a long summer. He turned around to face his obligation in life for the next two months: “Camp Na-Dle-O-Zhi-Tso.”

At least that’s what he thought it said. It was a moldy old wooden gate that proclaimed the name, and was well beyond need of repair. Brock continued to stand there, hoping that there was yet still some way out of it, but knowing very well that he was consigned to see this through. Literally. And anyway, he’d be hiking for days if he wanted to get out of here. There was no way back.

He was just a kid and was already locked into a fate of futility and lowered expectations. Brock didn’t particularly like the world, and it didn’t much like him. He had been assigned to this monument to decaying wood, insects and minimally edible food out of his debt to society. Brock was sentenced to 150 hours of community service by the court, and he had procrastinated long enough in doing it. The camp was the only way he was going to erase those hours before he had to go back before the judge.

Brock had been a foster kid, and a ‘ward of the state’ until he was twelve. At that tender age, he was able to save up some money from the various ‘enterprises’ he was involved in. A few dollars exchanged hands with the right people, and as far as the law was concerned, he was instantly sixteen. Which meant that the law was off his back for being a kid. He could now be on his own, and he could do what he wanted to do. But he hadn’t waited long before he got in trouble again, and now the law was even harsher when you were an ‘adult’. Now that everyone thought he was seventeen, being arrested while carrying a concealed weapon carried much harsher penalties.

He wasn’t even sure the gun worked, he had never gotten bullets for it. Brock just carried it to look tough.

Brock did a lot of things to look tough. His bulky leather jacket, his sunglasses and his baggy pants all helped the image. No one questioned his assumed age. He even used a little bit of cigarette ash on his face to give him the appearance of stubble. It also made his cheeks appear hollow and his face angular. It was very effective.

So, Brock slung his sack over his shoulder and headed through the ominous gates. Maybe he could make a go of this. The little kids would probably look up to him. He’d be a big-shot. And he could play at being the cool, sullen loner he liked to think of himself as. Maybe this wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

“What do you mean, there’s no entry!?” Brock shouted at the meek, bookish lady who was behind the counter.

“There’s no entry here.” She said, looking at the entries for camp counsellors. “Are you sure you’re in the right camp?” She asked.

“Yes!” he shouted. “I got on the bus, they assigned me to this stupid camp, and now I’m here!” When he shouted, his deep ‘tough’ voice gave way to his true lighter tone. So he got control. “Camp nay-de-ze-so. Or whatever.”

"You're not on my list. There's no Brock McCade on my list." The woman said, her nose in the air.

Brock looked around to see if anyone else was watching. "Check under Perry. Perry Campbell." He looked around again to make sure no one had heard his use his real name. "I'm supposed to be the camp counsellor in charge of recreation?"

"Oh, that's the problem." The lady said. "We already have two more of those than we should have." She shut the notebook she was referencing closed. "There must have been a mistake at the head office. I'll call." With that, she wandered away.

Brock unzipped his black, beaten leather jacket a little. It was hot, and he was already boiling mad. He hadn't taken three buses and spent the better part of two days to get out here into the wilderness to be sent home again. Sure, he hated the idea of looking after a camp full of kids all summer, but he had already committed himself. There was no return, mentally or physically.

The woman came back from around the corner. "Just what I thought, there's been a mistake."

"No shit, lady." Brock replied.

The woman raised an eyebrow at the language Brock used, but she otherwise ignored it. "They had us classified as a sports camp, but we're a crafts and activities camp for girls. That's why we have so many recreational directors." The woman smiled, satisfied in knowing she had gotten to the bottom of her problem.

"Great." Brock said, chock full of sarcasm. "And...?"

"Oh! Well, you're stuck with us until tomorrow, I'm afraid, that's when the supply van arrives, and you can get a ride back with them." The woman smiled, so pleased was she with her problem solving abilities.

"Look, lady, I have to be here because if I don't do my hours, I get thrown in jail, bitch!" Brock growled.

The woman's attitude turned nasty in a flash. "There's no need for language, young man! You leave tomorrow, I can't do anything else for you!" She crossed her arms. "Now please leave this window. Immediately!" When Brock didn't move, she reached above her head and found the handle to a rolling metal door that she pulled down in front of Brock. The window was closed.

Once he realized that there wasn't any point in standing there, staring at the metal door like an idiot, he made his way outside into the sun again. He looked around, seeing that he wasn't the first to have arrived. In fact, he may have been the last. Over towards the woods, a dozen smaller cabins had children walking in and out, unpacking and settling in. Towards the lake, the counsellors had all gathered, and were probably going over schedules and other stuff. Since he was a member of neither group, he decided to head off to the largest cabin, which he assumed was the kitchen.

Outside, and older woman of African descent was spraying down some large charred pots with pressured water. Brock walked up next to her.

"This the kitchen?" He asked.

"Mess hall." She responded.

"Where's the kitchen, then?"

"Inside."

“You fuckin’ said this was the mess hall.” Brock was confused. And when he got confused, he got angry. “Make up your mind, you fat whore!”

The woman, who would have been full within her rights to spray Brock with the hose in her hands, instead turned her back to him and continued on with her work.

Brock remained, cursing and shouting at the woman, but it wasn’t making much of an impact on her. “Bunch of stupid cunts.” He mumbled to himself. He figured that at a girls camp there would be nothing but crazy women around here running it. He was glad he wasn’t going to have to stay here.

The door to the kitchen was open, but the room inside was empty. He just went inside anyway. There he did find the kitchen, but no food. It was closed. He looked around behind the counter for anything, but it seemed that everything edible was still in boxes and cans. He saw that a schedule on the wall indicated that dinner wasn’t going to be served until six, five hours away. He left in a snit, cursing again at the woman washing the pots as he passed by.

Brock decided to kill some time and check out the lake, finding a small dock that was – at least for the moment – uninhabited. He dropped his large pack onto the boards, and sat on one of the pilings. He looked across a calm lake at least two miles wide. Some birds swooped around, skimming across the surface looking for food. The canoes tethered to the dock bobbed up and down slowly. It was a long way from the city.

“Fuck nature.” He said to himself.

If he had grown up right, he might have gone to a place like this out of his own free will. He’d be one of those kids over there who had rich parents and easy lives. Miffy and Buffy over there had no worries, and no problems. He hated them.

God, he hated them a *lot*.

When he got back to the city, he was just going to have to tell the judge that the system fucked up, and he should get those 150 hours just for showing up. And he wasn’t going to take any damn excuses. He checked his jacket pocket. Where were his smokes?

“Hi,” a voice came from behind. Brock turned around quickly, shocked and surprised.

When he was able to see, he saw one of those stupid yuppie kids. She was maybe fourteen or younger, another obviously spoiled child from the suburbs. It didn’t even occur to Brock that, in truth, he was only a year or two older in real age.

“I’m Arianna.” She said.

Figures, Brock thought. She had curly blond hair that probably took her half the day to do, impeccable white shorts, the camp-issued shirt and clear plastic sandals. Once Brock had sized her up, he returned to his mood.

“What’s your name?” The girl asked. Brock ignored her. “Are you a counselor?” She said. Brock sighed again, and gave her a look, to make sure that she knew he was able to hear her, but didn’t care. “I like your hair.” She continued to be a nuisance.

At least the girl had taste. His “biker” hair was his best feature. It was dark, greasy brown and fell to about his ears when he didn’t have it tied up. He looked so handsome with it, it was unfair – and he knew it. “Fuck off.” He mumbled to the girl.



"Hey, you'd better be nice to me. My daddy's rich!" She pouted.

Oh, that was perfect. That got Brock up and ready to show this prissy twerp that Brock McCade ain't the sort of person who cares about no silver spoons. He got up on his feet, and used his height advantage to stare down on her. He clenched his jaw, about to give the girl the verbal thrashing that she and her kind deserved, when he was kissed on the nose.

Brock's momentum was thrown completely off the rails, and by the time he had recovered only a half-second later, he was being pushed.

"Waaaaargh!" Brock yelled, as he fell off the dock into the shallow water.

Splloosh! The water wasn't deep, but it was cold. Brock thrashed in the unfamiliar environment. He hadn't ever swam, and hadn't even taken a bath in years. It took him an awkward minute to get on his feet. When he stood, he wasn't in more than two feet of water. But he was soaked like a rat. And just as he started to think about how his clothes were ruined, and if he had replacements, his sack came bobbing up from below.

"*Shit!*" He yelled to no one. Then he realized he had a target for his anger. That girl. "You fucking bitch! I'm gonna *kill* you!" He bellowed. He sloshed around, clumsily making his way to shore, and then once there, he scrambled madly onto the dock and ran at the girl, looking as fierce and angry as he had a right to.

But the girl stood her ground, not even flinching. She had a stupid smile on her face, as if she wasn't really here. As if she was just watching the scene through someone else's eyes. It stopped Brock's charge cold. He wasn't sure of what to make of this kids' indifference to her circumstances.

Girls. He hated girls. A lot of guys seemed to be struck stupid at the sight of an attractive girl. Well, in his opinion, girls weren't that attractive. Most of them were just grade-A number one bitches. Not that he was gay or anything. He wasn't. But at the same time, he just didn't see what the big deal was when it came to girls.

"You're all wet!" She said, pointing and giggling. Of course he was. She was the one who did it. Was she stupid? Was this some sort of camp for retardards?

"I'm going to rip your fucking head off and shit down your neck!" Brock thundered. The girl continued to giggle. "I'm gonna tear off your fuckin' legs and shove 'em up your ass!" He boomed.

Arianna lost her balance, she was laughing so hard.

Brock didn't know whether to really haul off on this girl or to just admire her for guts. He dived to split the difference and spit on her.

"Hey!" She was angry all of the sudden. "Eww! That's so gross! You're mean!"

Brock turned away and trudged back onto the shore. He didn't expect to hear the sound of the girl following him, but he did.

"What's your problem, anyway?" He cracked. "You stupid?"

"You need to get your clothes dry." Arianna said, noting the obvious. "And everything you have is wet."

Yeah? And who's fault is that? He thought. Brock didn't do anything but growl back.

"Unless you want to change out here in the open, you'll come with me." She smiled in superiority at Brock. "I've got a private cabin."

Brock was about to go into excruciating detail of how and where exactly she could shove it, but he did understand the problem. He needed to get out of the wet clothes. And since he didn't have anything else, he'd need a place to wait while they dried.

He gave Arianna a good long angry stare, to indicate he was pissed – but he was taking her up on the offer. Arianna turned and impishly skipped on ahead. Brock dragged his sopping wet bag behind him, and started to follow. But he decided to make sure she knew who was in charge here. “Don't fuck with me!” He grumbled.

Arianna continued on up a path, still skipping and humming. Brock found he had to pick up his pace to catch up. Looking around, he was glad to see that no one was watching. Who knows what kind of trouble he could get in for doing this.

Finally, he reached the front door, and followed Arianna inside. Once in, it took a minute for his eyes to adjust from the bright sun to the dark unlit interior of the cabin, but when he could see again, he saw a cabin full of twelve year old girls.

“Welcome to Jelly Bean cabin!”

“Fuck!” He said. “You told me you had a private...”

Arianna smiled. “I lied.”

Brock would have punched her right there, but the response of the ten or so girls would have been unpredictable. They'd probably call for help. He turned around and headed for the door. Before he could move, Arianna grabbed his wet pants and pulled them down to his ankles. “You're not going anywhere!” Arianna said, smugly.

“The fuck...?” He snarled.

The girls in the house all tittered and snickered, but Arianna shot them a mean look and they hushed immediately. It was obvious to Brock that she carried a lot of weight around here.

“Now, take your clothes off and give them to me.” Arianna requested. She held out her arms to receive the wet garments. The girls giggled again and Arianna quickly stopped it. “Knock it off!” She shouted.

Brock looked around for a minute, aware that undressing in front of a gaggle of twelve-year old girls was not proper thing to do, even for someone of his reputation. He pushed the pants down to his ankles, waiting for all hell to break loose. But when he looked up, he saw that the girls had all resumed whatever activities they were involved in before he arrived. It was like he wasn't even there.

He then removed his jacket and handed it to Arianna. “And...” She said. Brock then stepped out of his sopping wet pants, kicking them up into Arianna's arms. “And!” Arianna demanded. Brock removed his flannel shirt and surrendered it.

“And!” Arianna said louder. That was as far as Brock was willing to go. He wasn't going to budge. Arianna rolled her eyes in exasperation and dropped the pile. She grabbed his arm and led Brock through the cabin, to the very back where there was a private bathroom. She shut the door behind her.

She pointed at Brock's last remaining shirt. Brock wasn't going to give that up. Arianna stomped her feet petulantly, and then grabbed the shirt for herself. Brock was trapped. He couldn't really offer any resistance, without getting

into very deep trouble. He just remained still as Arianna fitfully tugged the shirt off of him.

Arianna appeared to be a little stunned when she saw his undeveloped, hairless chest. She got a funny look in her eye, but he didn't make an issue of it.

"Okay. The boots." Arianna crossed her arms.

Brock straightened himself against that. He crossed his arms and dared her to try. "Don't think so." He said. The boots were his favorite thing in the world. They made him. They were man's boots, big and heavy. He loved these boots. He'd die in these boots.

Arianna dropped to her knees and started to undo the laces. Brock pulled his feet back, and kept them from her reach. Arianna chased them, as he moved, but then gave up. She looked up at Brock with anger. Her face reddened and she looked like she was going to throw a fit.

"Rape!" She yelled, quietly.

Brock hesitated.

"Rape!" She yelled a little louder.

Brock realized the next time, she was going to be heard.

"Rrrrr..." Arianna started.

"Fine." Brock sat down on the toilet and started to undo his laces. It took him a while for the first one, as they were abnormally tall. They went clear up his calves. Arianna took the boot, and waited for the next one. As she held the boot, she tried to drain it of water, by shaking it upside-down. Brock, seeing this, dove to stop her – but before he could, the thing that he feared most happened.

The block of wood fell out.

Arianna looked at it, not knowing what to make of it at first. Why would someone have a triangular block of wood in their shoes? Then she figured it out. "It's a lift!" She giggled. "You wear shoe lifts!" She then held her sides, giggling like a fool.

Brock got up to leave, angrily swiping the boot, but fell over, losing his balance. Arianna was flat-out guffawing with laughter.

Brock reached for the door handle, but Arianna blocked him. She opened her mouth to yell. "Rrrrrrrraaaaaaaa...!" She started to get louder as she stretched out the word. Brock took the boot and threw it on the ground with fury.

"Other one." Arianna said. Brock continued with the other boot. As he did, Arianna looked at the triangularly shaped wooden lift. It it was put in one way, it was only a couple of inches tall. Then the boot heel itself was almost a full inch. And if it the triangle was put in the other way...

"Stand up!" Arianna said with anticipation. Brock had just removed his remaining boot, and set it down. He looked up at Arianna with fiery hatred. He was had a severe handicap, and she was taking full advantage of all his weaknesses. She had no right knowing this. A man has his own business. Women were always sticking their noses in where you didn't want 'em. So, he hadn't grown as much as he'd wanted to. Big deal. Puberty hadn't kicked in yet, and he was patiently waiting for the day when it would boost him to his full, entitled height. It would come.

"Stand up!" Arianna said again.

Brock slowly – very slowly – stood up straight, trying to look mad. He was actually hoping to distract Arianna so that he could stand on his toes. But she wasn't fooled. She watched his feet carefully.

And when he had finished standing up, it looked like he still wasn't finished standing up. He was just barely eye-to-eye with the five-foot-three girl. Only moments ago, he had threatened her with his apparent five-inch height advantage.



Arianna covered her mouth with her hands, trying to keep herself from squealing with laughter. "I'm taller than you are!" She screamed with glee. "Well you've got shoes on!" Was Brock's defense. He knew how weak it sounded, but it's all he had.

Arianna wiped the look of astonishment and ridicule from her face, and unexpectedly turned serious. "I'm sorry. I won't laugh again. I'm really very sorry."

Brock wasn't going to trust her newfound sense of respect. So he sat down again, not wanting to be ashamed of his height one second longer. He just sat there and stewed in his soggy boxers.

"Okay. You wait here and I'll set your stuff out to dry." Arianna said, leaving the room. Once she was gone, Brock could just hear her through the door. "Don't anybody go in there or I'll kick your butt!" She called out to the girls in the cabin.

The door then opened again, and Arianna threw him a blanket. She shut the door again and left without saying anything. Brock was left with a mixed opinion of the girl. Maybe she was really trying to help. *Maybe*.

It was a few minutes later when she returned. Brock had the blanket wrapped tightly around him, shivering slightly from the effect of cold water evaporating off his skin. Arianna entered this time with a little more caution, seating herself on the edge of the bathtub that sat across from Brock.

"So how old are you?" She asked. "Really."

She had an insight into people, that was for sure. But Brock didn't feel like answering the question. He kept his eyes fixed to spot on the floor.

"Have you ever kissed a girl?" She said. Brock didn't respond. Arianna kicked her feet in the air, idly. "Do you like me?"

Brock wasn't about to even address these questions. He just wanted out of here. In a couple of hours, the clothes would be dry enough, and he'd be gone. By this time tomorrow, this camp would be a memory. A forgettable one.

"I like you." Arianna said. "I think you're cool." She stood up again and headed for the door. "I'll let you know when the clothes are dry. I wouldn't leave this room unless you want a counsellor to find you." And she let herself out.

Brock turned his eyes back forward again, and slumped on the toilet seat. He pulled the blanket tighter and shut his eyes. He could hear Arianna outside, laughing and joking around with the other girls. But as he listened closer, there wasn't any mention of him. They weren't laughing about him. She acted as if the boy in the bathroom just wasn't really there.



He wasn't sure how much later it was, as he had fallen asleep, but he was stirred by the sound of a bell clanging. It took him a minute to figure it out, but he decided that it must be a dinner bell. The noise of the girls evacuating the cabin seemed to confirm it. Once he was sure everybody had left, he poked his head out of the door. The cabin was empty.

Wearing just his still-damp boxers, he tentatively poked his head outside, and saw that he had no one within sight. They were all going to eat. He gingerly walked out of the bathroom, and found his way to a side door, where his stuff

was drying. The sun was starting to set, and he figured that his clothes would get no dryer than they were right now. He picked out his usual outfit and put it on – along with his boots – and packed the rest of the stuff back into his water-logged sack. Now that he was back at his accustomed height, he felt more in control. He made his way back out to the common grounds, where he intended to find the lady who ran the place. He had to find a place to stay the night. When he got to the office, he found that metal door to the office, still shut tight. Everyone must be eating, he figured.

So he back tracked and went to the kitchen or whatever they called it, and decided to get something to eat before seeking out the lady. Inside the hall, he found a pile of trays, plates and a short commissary line. Brock grabbed a tray and slapped it down on the counter with attitude.

The lunch-lady looked up at Brock about to drop a ladle of something off-white onto his plate. Then she got a good look at her customer. “Oh, it’s *you*.” She said with sass.

Brock recognized her. It was that lady who was washing the pots earlier. “I’m sorry, but you’re too late. We’re finished serving.” She dropped the ladle back into the vat, and put her hands on her hips.

Brock hunched, ready to leap over that counter and take what he wanted. But just as he had built up the rage to do it, he got bumped in the side.

“Hi.” Arianna said, grinning broadly. “Dry enough?” She wasn’t waiting for a reply. Arianna offered her tray to the lady. “More?”

“Of course, child.” The lady said with a smile, looking not at Arianna but at Brock. He felt like ripping the woman a new one. But there were too many people in this room, and he was too far from home to get in trouble.

“Bitch.” He murmured. He left his tray and headed back outside. Arianna left hers behind as well, and followed. She quickly overtook Brock and headed to Jelly Bean cabin.

“Come on!” She said, motion him to follow. He took his time. When he got there, Arianna was already inside and returned to the doorway, with a handful of ‘Mounds’ candy bars. “I hope you like coconut. I don’t.”

She then left again, swiftly running back to the mess hall. Brock took the candy and tore them open. He was very hungry. He choked it down, eating the whole lot – despite the fact that he wasn’t much for coconut either.

As the group filtered out slowly from the hall, Brock waited outside to pick out the lady who worked in the office. He still needed a place to stay the night. On by one, everybody left, but the office lady wasn’t one of them.

He stopped one of the counsellors, a thin guy with a bad haircut. “Hey, where’s the lady?”

The kid was confused. “Lady?”

“Yeah, the lady who works the office. I need to speak to her.” Brock added. The kid had a clue. “Ms. McMurtry?”

“Whatever her name is. The old bag who was in the office today.”

“Oh. She’s over in the camp across the lake,” the kid said, pointing in that general direction.

“What?” Brock shouted.

The kid was feeling a little threatened. “Um. Yeah, she works here before one, and then takes a boat to the scouting camp on the other side of the lake in the afternoon. She’ll be back in the morning.” He went on his way.

“Fuck.” Brock muttered. He looked around and saw that the camp was now shrouded in near total darkness. Lights were being turned off. He didn’t have much of a choice anymore. He walked out to the edge of the camp, dropped his sack and laid his head down for the night. For the next hour, he tried to sleep amongst the distant sounds of laughing children, bites of mosquitos the size of jet fighters, itching from his damp clothes that picking up every bit of dirt and clinging to him, and the gentle lapping of waves on the shore.



The birds woke him with loud, obnoxious mating calls. He figured these birds must have been in heat, they were so loud. Maybe it was because they were perched five feet from his head. He brushed himself off fruitlessly, grass and twigs still sticking to him. He was shivering from the cold. He didn’t know for sure what time it was, but he figured it to be six or so.

He made his way back to the main camp area, and when he turned a corner nearly bumped right into Arianna. “You’re up!” She said cheerfully. Brock mumbled something unintelligible but caustic back. He continued on his way. “Did you sleep okay?”

Brock wasn’t taking questions. Arianna followed for a while, but eventually, she let him be and disappeared from the scene. He then found the front gate again, and planned on waiting there for the supply van that was supposed to take him back to civilization. He just hoped he wasn’t going to get his ass thrown in jail.

The front driveway was undergoing a small renovation, with the old gate in the middle of being painted white. An abandoned ladder with a bucket of paint on it was resting against the welcoming sign. He dropped his sack, removed the precariously balanced paint and put it aside. He then rested his aching bones on the ladder. Sleeping in the wild doesn’t do good for the back.

It was a half hour later when he heard the bell again. It was time for breakfast to be served. His stomach growled. It needed real food. He hadn’t eaten a meal for two days. Almost without noticing, he legs had delivered him back to the mess hall.

But he wasn’t going to bother entering. He could see from just outside the doorway that that lunch-lady was there. He wasn’t going to get served if he waited there a million years. When he turned around to leave, he bumped into Arianna again. Was she following him?

“You’re hungry again, aren’t you?” She asked.

Brock passed her on by, and headed back out to the gate area. It was best if he didn’t think about food for now. He sat back down on the ladder, and leaned back in the sun. That’s when the bucket of paint came down on him.

“Shit!” He yelled. “Goddamn it!”

The bucket hit him on the shoulder, and the paint ran down his back and then to the ground. His jacket was ruined, as was just about everything that he was wearing.

“Fuck!” he continued to curse. Hadn’t he put that bucket aside? He then saw where it had stopped, leaking out a giant puddle of paint in which his sack rested.

“Oh fer...!?” Brock was out of expletives. “What the...! I’m gonna...”



He then spotted Arianna. She was obviously waiting for him to notice her. "Come on," she said. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Brock thought it strange that she was around whenever bad things happened to him.

Back at Jelly Bean cabin, Brock had once more wiggled out of his ruined clothes and back into a blanket for warmth. Fortunately, the cabin was deserted during breakfast, or he'd be back in the bathroom again.

Arianna took his clothes and threw them into the sink, letting them soak in water. It was the best she could do, as a ready supply of turpentine was not the sort of thing you can easily find at a summer camp.

Brock was lucky, as his skin hadn't taken any of the paint, or else who knows what he would have had to do to get rid of it. And he still had his T-shirt and his boots. At least he thought he was lucky until Arianna threw some clothes at him.

"You can't stay in that blanket." She scolded. "You're going to have to put some clothes on."

Brock tried to disagree with her, but he couldn't come up with any reasonable arguments for staying wrapped in the blanket. For how long? Hours? A day? The blanket wasn't going to cut it.

But then he picked up the clothes Arianna had given him. The first thing he recognized was the bright blue polo shirt with the camp logo on it.

"No." Brock said. "No fuckin' way."

"Or what?" Arianna said sternly. "What are your options?"

"Maybe you could go ask one of the counselor guys for their clothes..." Brock asked.

"Hey, sir? Can I have some of your clothes?" Arianna mocked. "I've got this guy in on of the girl's cabins, and he's naked..." She trailed off, letting the absurdity of her words answer his question. The she looked around. "We've got a whole house full of clothes, and they're unfortunately all girls'. That's just the way it is."

Brock stood for a solid minute thinking about it. He removed his T-shirt, picked up the polo shirt and put it on. Alarming to him, it was a perfect fit.

Arianna frowned. "Sunglasses." She held out her hand.

Brock yanked them off his head indignantly, squinting even in the dim light. He dropped them in the girls' hand.

"Boots" Arianna said. "You're too tall for a camper."

Brock spat on the ground. He then bent over, untied the laces, and stepped out of his special shoes. As he stood on the floor in his socks, he had to live with the silent, private humiliation of watching the girl in front of him become his equal in size.

Arianna took a pair of jeans from her bed and gave those to him instead.

Brock was much more receptive to the jeans than the shirt. Jeans were tough and rugged. After he had them on, he would have been a little humiliated to know that the back pockets had red hearts stitched on them, if he had noticed. Brock then helped himself to a pair of all-white sneakers at the foot of Arianna's bed. They were a little tight, but he could manage.

"Stay there." Arianna said. She went into the bathroom, and returned with a washcloth. She wiped his face with the wet cloth, removing the last traces of his fake stubble. Standing back for a moment, she took in the whole picture. She shook her head.

She then went to her luggage and retrieved a long blue rain coat and baseball cap. Brock put them on and pulled the brim of the cap low. Arianna then took another look. "Okay." She said with no emotion. "Let's go."

"Go?" Brock said.

"Breakfast." Arianna said, leaving. "You wanna eat, right?"

If it were for any other reason in the world, Brock would have remained rooted to the spot, never to be moved by the forces of God nor nature. But his rumbling, growling stomach pulled him outside, leading him back to the mess hall. He pulled the raincoat tight, tugged the cap even lower on his head and hunched over to avoid anyone catching the slightest peek at the person inside the clothes.

Keeping his head tucked between his shoulders, he followed Arianna's feet as they quickly made their way to the kitchen. Once he had his tray and plate, he slid them along the counter, ready for the bitchy lunch-lady to give him trouble again.

"You're almost too late." She said.

Brock made a noise that could have been loosely interpreted as a response. Scrambled eggs dropped onto his plate, followed by two pieces of toast.

"Y'all gonna miss the best part of the day if you keep sleeping in like that, child." The lunch-lady continued.

Brock nodded his head a little. He then swiftly turned his back, and waited for Arianna to finish up. They then both turned the corner into the main dining area, where Brock was grateful that the place had mostly cleared out. He took a seat as far as possible from the nearest person, and hovered over his food to keep prying eyes away. Arianna sat down across from him, so as to further block any stares.

"Hey Arianna!" Brock heard from a little ways away. Instantly, a girl plopped herself down on the bench next to him. "Me and Michelle are gonna sign up for the painting classes, and we were wondering if you were going to take those too?" Brock couldn't see the girls from the way he was keeping his head lowered, but he could hear them clearly.

"Oh, please! Only losers take painting." Arianna said, dismissively.

"Oh, yeah. That's what I think." The girl answered.

Arianna sighed. "I'm taking dance, horseback riding and some pottery thing. Those are the classes that people with *culture* take."

"I was gonna take those too!" The girl said. "What a coincidence!"

"Me too!" Another girl said, arriving on the scene.

"Well, they're going to fill up quickly, so if you haven't signed up yet, I'd get moving!" Arianna said.

"You're right!" The girls quickly scrambled away. But no sooner had they left than another three girls ap-



proached.

“Arianna! What are you taking?” One said.

It was another ten minutes before Brock and Arianna were left alone again. The procession of girls asking for Arianna’s approval seemed endless to Brock. He had finished eating in a flash, and was now staring into his lap, sitting there silently like a lump, nervously waiting to escape.

Once they were in the clear, Arianna escorted Brock back to the girl’s cabin. There were a few girls milling about, but none of them seemed interested in Brock. A couple did still want to talk to Arianna, though.

Once she was free, Brock pulled her aside. “Look,” he whispered, “I need to know when the supply van is coming, so I can get out of here.” Brock looked around, anxiously. “The lady who runs the office knows who I am, and I’m not about to go back to her looking like...”

“Oh all right. You stay here.” Arianna said, taking control. “I’ll go check on the van. While I’m gone, you check on your... ugh... clothes.” Then she galloped out of the cabin.

Brock quickly went to the bathroom, to see if the soaking had been successful. What he saw told him that the result wasn’t perfect, but he could at least make do for the time being. The paint made it look kinda cool, he told himself. He took off the raincoat, grabbed the wet apparel and wrung it out. As he was doing that, he could see out of the half-open bathroom door into the cabin. He noticed a curious thing. Today, Arianna had dressed in red shorts and flip flops. She had combed her hair to the side and held it in place with a clip.

As he watched, some girls in the room were combing their hair the same way. One girl was fishing around in her bag, and retrieved flip-flops. And three others were also wearing red shorts. He shook his head, scoffing at the herd mentality of these girls. They all followed Arianna like lemmings.

“Who’s jacket is this!?” A loud, scratchy voice said from just outside the bathroom. “And who’s boots are these? Is there a boy in here?”

Brock froze up solid.

“No boys are allowed in the girl’s residences!” The voice continued. As Brock stood there, petrified in the bathroom, he could see the figure of a middle-aged woman step into view, with her back to Brock. She carried the boots that had been drying on the front steps. “I better not find any boys in here!”

It was obviously a camp counsellor, and Brock figured that her age and tone of voice meant that she was in charge. If he was caught now, he was dead. Embarrassment aside, charges could be filed and almost certain jail time would result.

He had to think quickly. Looking at what he had in his hands, a pile of his clothes – men’s clothes – he was about to be caught red-handed. He had no choice but to drop the evidence and scam. While the lady had her back turned, he snuck out of the bathroom, and quietly moved to the side, against a far wall, hoping to blend in with the background.

“I want answers! Who has a boy here in this cabin!?” The woman continued to press. Just as Brock had gotten to the wall, the woman turned and noticed the bathroom behind her. She strode in, and found the clothes. “A-ha!” She said. Holding the wet clothes, she brought them back out into the cabin for all to see. “Who’s clothes are these!?” She shook them in anger. “I’m waiting!”



As Brock stood there, stunned, he saw the eyes of several of the girls look his way.

“Ms. Purcell, they’re her clothes.”

All the heads in the room turned. It was Arianna speaking. And she was pointing at Brock.

Brock swallowed heavily. Arianna crossed the shocked-silent room, and the only sound that could be heard were her footsteps hitting the hard wood floor. She stopped in front of Brock. She reached down and picked up one of his boots along the way, and held the huge shoe up in front of his face.

“These are her boots, see?” Arianna said.

“Arianna, this is no time for comedy!” Ms. Purcell barked. “Those boots belong to a man, and not to a little girl!”

Little girl!? Brock thought. Who the *hell...!*? Brock took a threatening step forward. Arianna leaned against him to stop from doing something stupid.

Ms. Purcell checked the clipboard she held and scanned it. “And what’s your little friend’s name?” The woman asked, trying to get a good look at Brock’s face.

Arianna blocked her attempts gracefully. “Brittany.”

The woman was instantly skeptical. “I don’t think there’s a ‘Brittany’ assigned to this cabin, Arianna.”

“She’s transferring.” Arianna said coolly.

“I’ll be checking on that.” Ms. Purcell said, tersely. She got in Brock’s face. Brock kept the bill of his cap in between. “Brittany.”

Arianna got in the way again, forcing the woman to back off. “You’re an old, crusty bitch!” She yelled. “You go away and leave us alone!”

The rest of the cabin made an audible, collective, gasp.

Ms. Purcell tortured her face in a half-dozen different expressions of anger. But she didn't act on it. "I'm going to be watching you girls carefully from now on!" The woman bellowed to the rafters. "Whichever one of you is sheltering some trespasser... or vagrant... will be sent home, and... their parents called!" She took a menacing stance, staring at Arianna. "And there are no refunds! Do I make myself perfectly clear!?"

Arianna agreed. "Well, I can assure you, Ma'am, that Jelly Bean cabin won't be giving you any trouble. Because I won't be associated with anyone who breaks the rules."

Ms. Purcell gathered up Brock's clothes, sack and boots. "We'll be having our first classes in forty-five minutes, girls! I won't tolerate anybody being late!" She ignored Arianna's look of superiority as she left.

Brock tried to push Arianna out of the way, and go after her, but he immediately realized what a mistake it would be to try and stop the woman who was carrying his stuff away. He turned around and punched the log wall instead.

Arianna grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him away. "Now you've gotten me into real trouble! We don't have much time." She said. "We'll be in class in forty-five minutes."

Brock flew his arms into the air wildly as he was being tugged. "What!? Class!?"

"I checked on the stupid supply van. It comes at five in the morning. You missed it, loser." She let go, and allowed Brock get his balance. "So now, we have to work fast."

Brock was still digesting the part about the van. "The van left!?"

"Yes!" Arianna said, impatiently. "And it doesn't come back until Wednesday! You're not getting out of here for four more days." She turned her head towards two girls. "Shannon! Michelle!" The two girls quickly came to attention. Arianna ran over to them, and started to give directions. They nodded recognition, and scrambled out of the cabin. "I want donations! Hair clips, tweezers, anything!" The rest of the girls started to go through their things.

When she got back to Brock, she shoved him into the bathroom. "Look, I'm not taking any hooley from you." She said. He was too confused to really fight back.

The first sign that something was wrong was when Arianna took the cap off Brock's head and started to fluff out his hair. The next danger signal was when she started to pinch Brock's cheeks. "You're cute when you blush," Arianna said. She then left for a moment to take a look at what the girls had come up with.

A short girl with buck teeth was dropping a her contribution into a hat, with the rest of the stuff.

"Who are you?" Arianna asked the girl.

"Shelley." She replied.

"Well, Shelley. I don't think we need any dumb band-aids!" Arianna hissed, "What are you, retarded? Thanks, but no thanks, spaz." Arianna grabbed the hat and rifled through it's contents as Shelley slunk away.

She came back with a bottle and before Brock could see what it was, Arianna had his head pushed down into the sink. His hair was immediately immersed

in cold water, and Arianna ran her fingers thoroughly through his scalp. Brock tried to sit up, but Arianna held him down.

"This isn't going to hurt, you know." Arianna remarked. "And you need a good wash anyway."

"What! The... fuck! Are you... doing!?" Brock spat out, taking water up his nose.

"You're going to have to be out there with us in a few minutes, and you're going to have to look like you belong there!" Arianna said, with surprising vigor. "We don't have time to waste."

The water stopped running on Brock's face, and Arianna pulled a shower cap onto his head. Brock was sure she had gotten that backwards – you were supposed to put the cap on before you got wet. Arianna then pulled him back upright.

"Okay, don't move. If you do, this will burn through your skull." Arianna said, dipping a q-tip into the bottle. Brock tried to argue, but when she held the swab to his head, he stopped moving. Who know what the girl was doing. Arianna carefully dabbed his eyebrows with the swab and then tossed it away.

Brock was staying rock solid still, causing Arianna to smirk. "Kidding!" She said. Brock snarled at her. Arianna then picked out two items from the pile. "I'm going to give you a choice. Mango or Strawberry." She held two tubes of lip gloss.

"The fuck you're putting that shit on my face!" Brock shouted. He pointed an angry finger at Arianna. "What makes you may think that you can push me around, you stupid little bitch!"

"Strawberry then," Arianna said, tossing the other back into the pile. "And I can do this, because otherwise, you're going to jail."

Brock gave Arianna a steely gaze, tensing every muscle in his body, looking as irate and dangerous as he could. Arianna pushed the tube of gloss onto Brock's lips, which he tried to move out of the way. He couldn't decide which was stupider, letting it be done to him or acting like a child in trying to avoid it. Finally, he relented, just staring above Arianna's head as he stoically took the shame.

"Now..." She said when she was done. "Nail polish." Brock reflexively curled up his fingers to hide them. "Will you just take it like a man!?" Arianna whined. "You're making this so tough!"

"You're not dressing me up like a little girl!" Brock proclaimed. "What's the hell's wrong with you, anyway!?"

Arianna gave up and released Brock. She sniffed, and her lower lip started to tremble. She turned around quickly, trying to hide her emotions.

Brock waited for her to bounce back, like she was surely going to do. She was a pretty tough girl, he thought. And she was probably faking anyway. Crying was the one trick she hadn't pulled yet. But as minute after minute passed, Arianna was still gently sobbing. A feeling started to creep up on Brock. He felt like shit. Sure, he'd made a lot of girls cry in his lifetime, but he had always been trying before. He wasn't trying right now. He was just acting like a baby.

"C'mon." He grumbled, touching her arm. "Let's go." He held out his hands, palms down. Arianna turned around to face him, still sad. She doubted his sincerity. Brock held his hands up higher and closer to her. "Get it over with."

She unscrewed the top of a nail polish bottle and brought out the brush. She held it still, seemingly expecting Brock to yank his hands back or curse at her again. But Brock kept his hands there, waiting.

"Don't wiggle your fingers." She said. Arianna took one of his hands and started to dab on the polish. Brock let out a nervous breath of air, and shrugged his shoulders in unease. He watched as finger by finger, a little bit of himself was leaving him. When Arianna had finished with the first hand, he looked at it closely. It wasn't like it was even attached to him anymore. It couldn't be his. He had manly, rugged hands that held hammers, tied rope and dug in the dirt. These were delicate hands, fair and fine, never having seen a day of work in their life.

Maybe he wasn't as tough as he thought he was. Maybe, he had been kidding himself with his age. He had told a lot of lies about himself, and he had started to believe them.

"Okay." Arianna said, finished with the fingers. "Now. Um..." She scanned the pile for the next item. "Here we go." She picked up something that looked like it was designed to pluck out eyeballs and slice them. She held it up to his face and flexed the handle. Brock flinched when he saw it move. "Eyelash curler, dummy." She put it to his lashes, as Brock slowly pulled his head away. "It doesn't even touch your skin, tough guy."

She did both lashes and then put the device back. "You wanna look?" Arianna said.

"Not really, no." Brock cracked. Arianna held up a mirror anyway. When Brock saw himself, he snickered. It wasn't like he had been transformed into a girl or anything, magically swiping his face away for that of a pre-teen princess. It was his face still his, just gussied up a bit. Although he did find it unsettling that the application of makeup on his face didn't make him look like a freak. The color didn't really look that out of place. He would have felt better if he looked worse. He turned around to look in the larger mirror on the wall.

"There's no way anyone's going to believe I'm one of you, you know." He said. "I know. It's a lost cause." Arianna smiled.

Brock examined himself closely in that mirror. The more he looked, the less he liked it.

Arianna then checked her watch. She put one hand on Brock's head, and directed it back to the sink. "Time's up." She said, mystifyingly enough. The water was turned back on, and his hair was rinsed out again. When the water was turned off, he tried to sit back up, but Arianna gently prohibited him. "Just a sec." She said.

Brock could feel her hand on his back, but then only felt a single finger keeping him down. Looking to the side, he saw that she was stretching her legs out the bathroom door, ready to bolt. She was trying to run. Brock's heart skipped. Something was up.

"Okay!" she said, quickly escaping the room, and slamming the door behind her. Outside, she braced it closed, and motioned for some of the other girls to help her.

"*Aaaargggghhhh!*" The girls heard through the door. "*Jesus Christ!*" Brock bellowed. The door handle shook furiously. The girls put their backs into it, as Brock started to pound on the door. Then, he started to ram into it with his

shoulder. “*Goddamn you fucking cunt!*” He hollered. The ramming against the door continued.

After five minutes, the obscenities had ceased, along with the pounding. The girls still waited a full few minutes before backing off.

The door swung open slowly to reveal Brock, just as Arianna had left him, but now with shocking blonde hair. He held in his hand the bottle that Arianna had hidden from him, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

“It’s for a disguise.” Arianna said, keeping a safe distance. “People might have recognized you.”

“Yeh.” Brock said. “That’s what I figured.” Arianna smiled. Brock didn’t. “You pull shit like that again, and I’m going to take this pencil...” He held up an eyebrow pencil. “And see how far I can stick it in between your eyes.” He stuck the pencil in his back pocket. “Anything else you want to do, or have you stopped fucking me over for now?”

Arianna looked him up and down. “Stand up straighter.” She said. “Smile more.” Brock did neither. She rubbed her chin. “Oh!” Arianna fiddled with something on her wrist and removed something. She tied it around Brock’s wrist. “Friendship bracelet.”

“Great.” Brock said causticity.

“Let’s get your hair dry.” She got a hair dryer out of her things and motioned for Brock to get back into the bathroom.



“Michelle Volker.” The counselor read off of her list.

“Here!” a voice said in the room.

Brock had made it through a couple of tests, being seen by the counsellors and other campers. No one seemed to react much at all to his presence which was both unsettling and comforting at the same time. It seemed to Brock that he wasn’t in much danger of being caught anymore, but he was in danger of losing his mind.

He had tagged along with Arianna, following her to her first activity of the day, horseback riding. The class was packed, not surprisingly. You might have just as well named this magical princess pink pony class, Brock thought.

“Arianna Whittington.” The instructor called.

“Here!” Arianna called out.

“Of the Southampton Whittingtons?” The woman inquired.

Arianna smiled smugly. “Uh-huh.”

“Very good.” She replied.

Brock was wondering what was going to happen when they found out he wasn’t enrolled in this class, and he had to...

“Brittany Whittington!”

...leave or possibly even sneak out.

Arianna kicked Brock in the shins.

“Brittany Whittington!” The instructor called out a second time.

Brock then received another kick. “Here.” Arianna whispered. Brock wondered what Arianna’s problem was.

“Last call for Brittany Whittington!”

“Here!” Arianna called out, in a slightly different tone, to fool the instructor.

Brock wasn't at all sure what the kicking was for. It wasn't until they had gone through some basic orientation and had left the class to go to the stables, that he had put everything together.

"How did I... How did 'Brittany' get in the roll call?" He asked Arianna.

"Brittany Whittington is signed up for all my classes." Arianna said smugly. "I had Michelle and Shannon sneak into the office and add the name to classes, and to the list of kids attending camp." She smiled wickedly at Brock. "You're my cousin by the way. Cousins do everything together."

"You think of everything." Brock said coldly.

Arianna was having none of Brock's attitude. "Lucky for you." She paused.

"Hey, just what is your name anyway?"

"What?" Brock said. How had gotten this far without even saying his name?

"It's..."

Arianna interrupted. "Never mind. For now it's Brittany. You'd better get used to it."

"Believe me, I'll never forget it."

The horse riding class passed slowly, mostly just introductory lectures to riding. Brock wasn't even listening. He was too busy scanning the crowd for anybody paying too much attention to him. He spent most of his time hiding behind Arianna and anything else that would visually protect him.

Lunch passed with him sitting by himself in a corner. He didn't even try to sit with Arianna, as she attracted too many people. And after lunch, he sat through another ignored lecture in a dance class, where he went through the motions of stretching exercises. So far, so good. No one was paying much mind to him.

Brock figured that there just so many kids in the camp, that no one was really paying too much attention to him. After all, if anyone gave him a second look, it would be obvious who and what he was. It was just as plain as it could possibly be. He wondered how long he had before someone just looked at him for too long and realized it was a man in disguise. Or maybe that should have happened by now.

There was an afternoon "free period" where kids did swimming, boating, games and the like, but Brock spent it back in the cabin, killing time with a deck of cards.

For the afternoon activity, he had been signed up for Pottery. Which seemed to involve a lot of talking about what they were going to do when they finally given some clay to work with. Which hadn't arrived yet from town. Brock weathered that class without hassle.

After he had made it through dinner, he was grateful to find himself back in the relative safety of the cabin, where it appeared everybody was already in on the deception. Brock found himself the new proud owner of the bunk above Arianna, complete with his very own night shirt. It had a picture of "Totally Spies!" on it.

As the sun set over the camp, and the shadows grew into night, the stars came out in the inky black sky. Crickets chirped in the cool night air, and the world seemed to slowly grind to a halt before it's inhabitants gave in to slumber.

Of course, Brock's eyes were wide open and stuck that way. Being alone with his thoughts was torture.

But he had another reason to stay up. At four forty-five, Arianna was woken by the sight of a leg dropping down from the bunk above.

"What're you doing?" Arianna asked. "You're not trying to leave on the supply van, are you? No one is going to take a twelve year old girl anywhere at five in the morning. And it's not coming for a few more days anyway, stupid." She lowered her voice a little, to make it sound more important. "I think you're stuck here for now."

Brock's leg dangled, then withdrew back up onto his bunk. Arianna closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

After the sun rose, Brock watched from his perch as the girls got ready for their day, feeling slightly put off. They didn't seem the least bit concerned with having a boy watch them dress and walk around almost naked. Of course, there wasn't anything to see, as they all were still too young. But Brock had at least hoped for some sort of token complaint, as it would have made feel a little bit more masculine.

After the girls had swarmed over the bathroom facilities, they left for breakfast, leaving Brock behind. He took a shower and got dressed, when Arianna returned to help.

"You can't wear that, dummy." She said, looking at him.

Brock squinted at her. "Huh?"

"Girls don't wear... Well *humans* don't wear the same clothes every day. I'll pick out something new, and then I'll do your hair and stuff." Arianna said, going though her things.

"Just forget it, okay?" Brock said, gruffly. "I'm hungry." He left without discussion.

Arianna came after him. "Hey!" She said, running to catch up. "I can't have my cousin making me look bad. I have a reputation to uphold!"

"Not my problem," Brock said, sinking his hands into his pockets. "Shoulda made me a distant relative or something."

Arianna stopped walking and stood still as Brock walked on. "I'm not kidding! Come back here *right now!*"

"Fuck off." Brock said.

Arianna's jaw dropped in disbelief. "Don't you take another *step!*" She shouted.

Brock kept on walking.

Over his meal of sausage & egg biscuits, he was trying to formulate a new plan. The camp lasted for six weeks, and it seemed that Arianna was intent on having him stick around for the whole time as her pet. What he needed to do was get back his boots – or at the very least get a hold of some real clothes – and hitch a ride out. He hadn't even ruled out just hoofing it and taking his chances in the wilderness.

Leaving the mess hall, Arianna was waiting for him. "What's your problem?" She sniped. "After all I've done for you, now you won't even talk to me!"

Brock just looked off in another direction as he went by.

"Of all the ungrateful...!" Arianna made an exasperated squeal. "No one does this to me!"

Brock shook his head as continued on. She really was just a petulant child.



Searching the camp, he eventually figured out where the counsellors, administration and staff were living – and found the rooms locked up tight. Assuming that the woman who took his boots still had them, it looked like he wasn't going to just be able to sneak in and retrieve them.

The bell rang out for the first activity period, and Brock dejectedly headed off for the stables and his riding class. He couldn't just hang out around camp – he'd be asked questions and probably sent off to some detention room or something. He didn't need that right now.

Riding class was still in the “what you need to know before getting on a horse” stage, so Brock kept himself at the back of the crowd, far away from the instructor and far away from Arianna. When the class was being shown how to “approach a horse,” he could see Arianna smugly answering all of the instructor's questions and generally making a spectacle of herself. She was such a self-involved prima donna. Brock felt like going up there and giving her quick two-fisted lesson in humility.

Then it occurred to him: Horses. Escape. It was almost too perfect. A few hours on horseback, and he'd be to the interstate. That was his ticket out of this place.

Casually, Brock let himself drift away from the class a little, wandering out of sight. Once he knew no one was watching him, he opened a stable gate and clambered up onto one of the horses.

The horse broke out of the barn like a shot, right through the crowd, and into the riding pen. The students screamed and scrambled away, terrified. Brock enjoyed watching the crowd of stuck-up little twerps, knocking them over and then fleeing in panic. But riding horses wasn't like it was in the movies. He figured they handled like a car. But cars don't have a mind of their own. The horse was wild, and Brock found that he was just hanging on as it galloped around and around, looking for a way out.

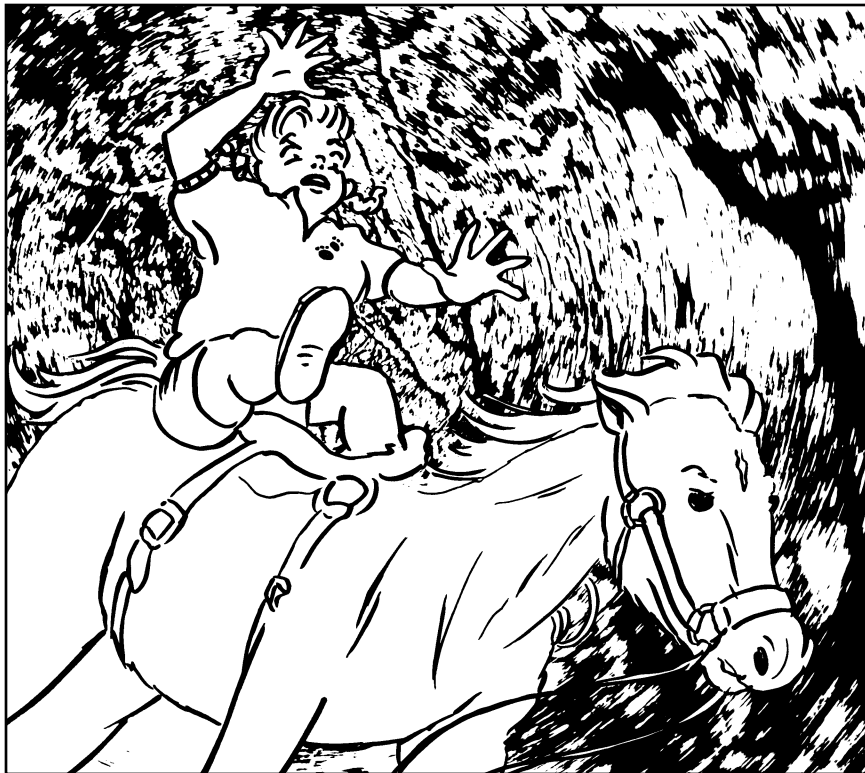
It then found a break in the gates, and charged out of the pen at top speed, and into the woods that surrounded the camp. Brock was losing his grip slowly but surely, and it wasn't long before he was thrown to the ground. He hit the ground awkwardly. In agony, Brock rolled over, trying to take the weight off his side. In between jolts of pain, he saw the horse run away. Brock grabbed his ribs, convinced that they were broken, and rolled around in the wet leaves in torment.

A clamor in the distance started to get nearer. Brock could make out sharp whistling, and the instructor calling out.

“Salazar!” The woman was yelling. “Salazar!” It must have been the name of the horse. It wasn't any use. It was long gone.

Brock staggered to his feet, his sides splitting with pain, and headed off in the opposite direction. He couldn't get caught now, no matter how bad he hurt. Looking around, he really had no way to know if he was getting closer or farther away from the interstate. He just assumed that the best way to go would be away from the voices that kept following him.

Brock picked up the sound of running water. If it was a creek, then Brock's limited knowledge of the natural world told him that it would run into the lake. If he kept going upstream, that would at least have him going in the right general direction. Brock heard the sound get louder, and picked up the pace a



little to find it. His ribs were getting all knotted up with pain, but his hands couldn't locate a break under the skin. Maybe they were just bruised.

His next step in the wet, dead foliage of the forest floor suddenly gave out from under him. He slid down an embankment and lost his balance along the way. Brock's head struck something hard, and the lights went out.



A disconnected, hazy parade of memories followed. He remembered shivering cold, voices, being dragged along the ground, and then warmth. Voices were all around him. Whispering and snickering. The sound of the wind howling. A distant, muffled crowd.

Then there was the light. A singular, bright, light above him. It hovered there, shining down on him. It was all he could see for what seemed like hours. Time didn't seem to be passing. All he knew was that he existed. Where or how was beyond his ability to reason. Eventually, he could see that he was in a tiny room. There were things he couldn't make out all around him. Shapes and colors. All he could really see was the light.

"You tried to run away." A voice blew in his ear. "Why do you have to make this so difficult!?"

Brock recognized the voice. Arianna. He focused his eyes, squinting out the bright light. It was hazy, but it looked like her. And she had brought friends.

“Why do you keep fighting me!?”

He could now see clearly around him. The room he was in was very small. Probably a utility shed. Arianna hung over him, smiling. A couple of girls he recognized were with her. Michelle. Another girl he knew as Shannon. They had piled up the corners of the shed with things he couldn't make out. His vision was failing him again.

Brock felt a damp cloth cover his face. It smelled caustic. He tried to twist his face away, but he didn't have the strength. As he inhaled the fumes, his brain felt like it was losing its grip on reality.

“I don't know, Arianna. I think that the inhaling that much ether might be bad for him.” Michelle said, tentatively.

Arianna stuck her nose in the air. “Well, that's nothing compared to what he's done to me. He's been rude and ungrateful. He deserves whatever comes to him.”

Michelle and Shannon looked at each other, unsure of how to proceed. “I guess.” Shannon said.

“Yeah, I guess you're right.” Michelle seconded.

“Of course I'm right.” Arianna snapped. “Besides, if we didn't keep him sedated, he'd be running off again. Now, Michelle. Keep this cloth on him while Shannon and I take dance class. Shannon, you'll come here during the afternoon class to relieve Michelle, and then we'll all be back here to get started tonight.”

Brock hadn't heard much of anything from the conversation. He wasn't able to focus anymore. He just kept breathing in the fumes.



It wasn't until dusk that the girls were ready to deal with him, and by that time he had been breathing in industrial ether for five hours.

“Brittany... Wakey wakey.” Arianna said, shaking Brock. “Brittany's such a sleepy head.”

He wasn't at all sure of the world around him. He hadn't recalled anything about how he came to be here, or his present circumstances. The reality of life had faded far away. He did kind of recognize the girl taking to him. She had made him angry.

“You've been nasty to me, Brittany. And I think you need to realize that I just wanted to help you.” Arianna was trying to get his attention. “Because I don't think you appreciate all that I've done for you.”

“I want you to say you're sorry, Brittany.”

Brock tried his voice. “Ffffuck yooou.” He said in a raspy voice.

“Little girls don't curse, Brittany.”

“Ffffuck you.”

“Who are you to talk to me like that!? I'm Arianna Whittington!” Arianna was mad. “My daddy is one of the richest men in America! And you treat me like I'm some common... child!?” Arianna got right into Brock's face. “You're just some second-rate piece of trash! You're worthless scum! I gave you everything I had to help you! And you even spat in my face! You're not good enough to even talk to me! So... go... Go to hell! I could have turned you in at any time! But I didn't! I protected your secret!”

Brock couldn't really understand what she was saying anymore. His mind was barely conscious.

"Now I don't want to hear another word about trying to leave! It's a good thing nobody could tell it was you who pulled that stunt with the horse, or you'd be dead meat!" Arianna calmed down a little bit. She put her scowl away and replaced it with her smug smile. "At least there's a chance we can still do this."

Arianna then produced a remote control. "I'm going to teach you how to be a girl, Brittany. And you're going to stop thinking about who you used to be, because it doesn't matter anymore."

She pressed the buttons on the remote, and started up a TV in the corner of the room. "This may keep you entertained while we figure out what to do with you."

Brock recognized the Disney Channel starting to play.

"Let me help you sit up so you can watch, Brittany." She pushed something around and then hoisted Brock's shoulders up onto it, so that he was reclined. He had a perfect view of the TV set, but that didn't stop Arianna from moving the set inches away from his face. He didn't have the strength to turn away. There was no way to avoid watching it.

The show was about a nice girl who had a nasty little brother. He couldn't help but watch the show. Then, slowly, it started to change. It was just like any dumb kids show as it began, but the colors started to pulsate. The images became almost three-dimensional. The sounds were deep and far away. The voices were speaking, but they didn't sound like words anymore.

Brock had taken some drugs before. He knew what was happening to him. The ether he had been breathing had really done a job on his mind. Colors washed around in front of him. Nothing had any form or definition. This intensity was incredible. His mind was melting away at a speed he had never felt.

"I'll leave you alone for now, Brittany. But I'll be back to check up on you." Arianna said. She locked the door behind her as she left, but it wasn't necessary. Brock was in a world of light and color, a million miles away. His hands floated out in the air, trying to grab onto things only he could see.



Hours passed. It was possible that days could have passed as well. He couldn't really tell anymore.

There were these memories floating around in his head. Memories of himself combing hair. Was it his hair? No. Not his, but the hair of the doll in his lap. For the moment, he didn't remember the details. All he knew was that it made him feel better. It was hard to explain. It was soothing.

When he looked at the doll, he was transfixed by it. The smoothness of the plastic. The shine of the hair. The glisten in the eyes. The everlasting smile on the doll's face. It was the most beautiful thing in the world. It really was.

It would be great to have that soft, shiny hair. But talking care of it was so hard.

Then he remembered his hair being combed. He could just recall Arianna taking a hairbrush and combing through Brock's chin-length hair. With each stroke it became fuller and shinier.

"Here," Arianna said, handing over two small pink satin ribbons. No, maybe he had dreamed this. Or could it have been real?

Brock took the ribbons and marveled at them. They were so smooth and they shimmered in the light. He rubbed them against his cheeks, loving the feel. They were made of the same wonderfully smooth material his ballet shoes were made from. The ones he had been practicing in.

Had he, really? Or had he seen it on TV? It was very hard to think clearly.

"Thank you," Brock said. Arianna was just so nice. She must be his best friend in the world. He couldn't think of anyone he liked more than Arianna.

She was just as nice as the people on TV. She smiled, laughed and acted just like the TV people. Maybe the TV people were just like real people. It would be nice if everyone were just like it was on the shows. So polite and funny. Even when they got into trouble, as long as they meant well and were honest, everything would be okay in the end.

"I love you, Brittany." Arianna said. "Like a sister."

"Oh yeah..." Brock said, his mind starting to expand beyond his understanding. "Sisters forever."



As the sun rose over the tree-tops, Arianna checked her pockets. It was odd, she thought to herself, odd how Brock had been hurt so much by the ether. She just wanted to keep him quiet. That was all. But he must have had too much of it or something. He had been spacey for nearly a week, unable to say more than a few words at a time or answer questions. The good news was that he had recovered from the pain in his ribs. The ether was like a drug, taking away the pain long enough for him to recover.

It was funny, a boy on drugs acted a lot like some airhead girl. She didn't know if she'd ever have any use for that information ever again, but she filed it away in her memory just in case.

Undoing the lock for the shed, she saw her little patient soundly sleeping. She banged her knee into a table in the dim light and cursed into the air. Brock barely stirred.

She looked over his face, which looked so young and innocent when he slept. When they first met, he had all this junk on his face. Cleaning it all away revealed pale skin with naturally red lips and blushed cheeks. No way was he seventeen or whatever he said he was.

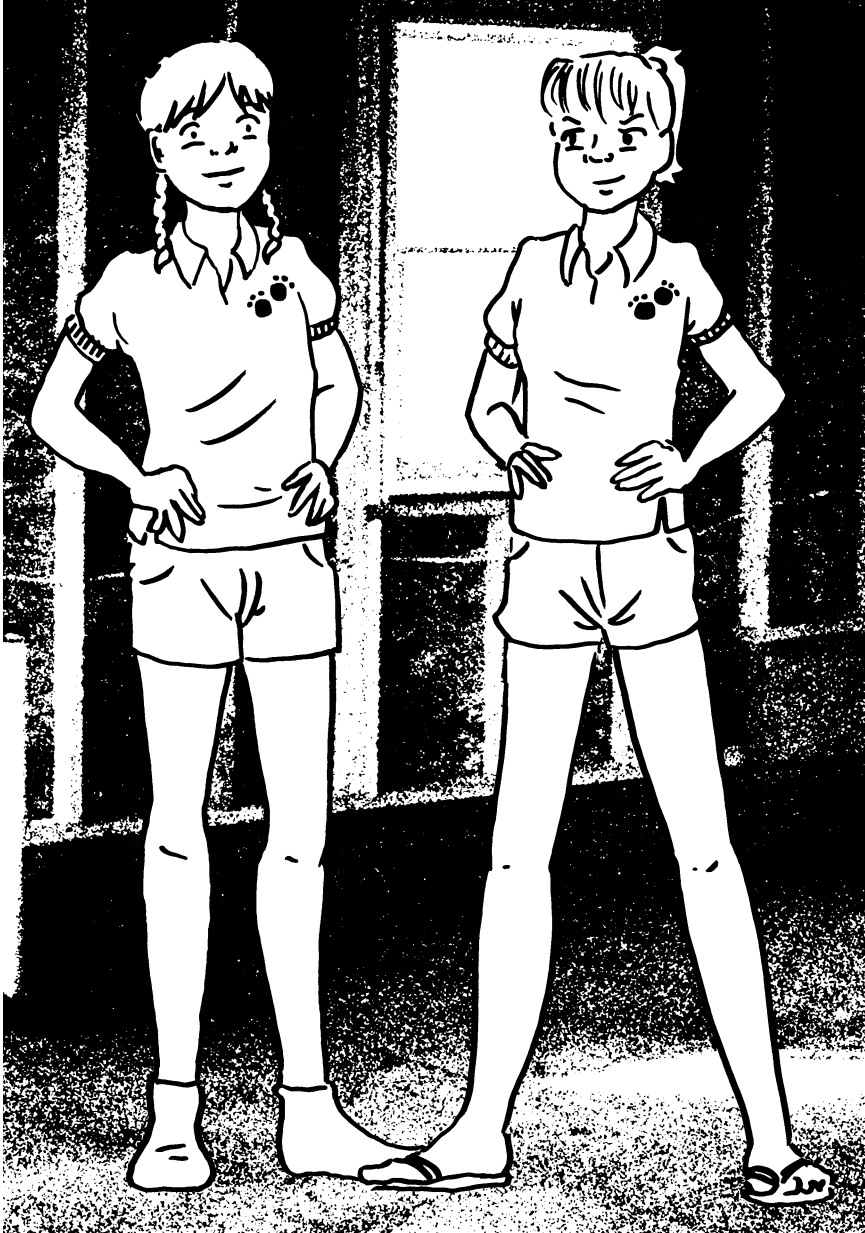
Fishing a pair of tweezers from her back pocket, she plucked a dozen or so hairs that were growing from Brock's upper lip. With no facial hair, he looked perfectly feminine. She took a few more from his eyebrows.

"Good morning, sleepy head!" Arianna sang as she shook Brock's shoulder.

Brock opened his eyes and was already smiling like an idiot. Arianna doubted if he even knew where he was right now.

"Can you stand up? I wanna see if you're okay."

Like a newborn fawn, Brock found his legs, and uprighted himself in fits and starts.



Arianna smirked, noting that as Brock stood, he held his hands turned out, with his arms hanging out at his sides. His legs were demurely kept together. Where had he picked that up from?

“Here we go.” Arianna said. She walked over to the other side of the shed, and picked up a candy bar out of a pile and started to eat it.

Brock watched. He then walked over, swinging his hips and taking small mincing steps, to the pile, picked up an identical candy bar. He proceeded to unwrap it, a little unsure in his long acrylic nails. Well, since he was sleeping, Arianna figured she'd use his nails for practice.

Brock was also hindered by his now natural habit of sticking his pinky fingers in the air. He then took a small, delicate bite of the candy bar.

"Are you copying me?" She asked Brock, suddenly realizing what he was doing.

Brock just smiled back.

Arianna then walked over to a chair and sat down, pretended like she had a cell phone and flipped it open.

Brock did the same, mincing over to another chair, standing in front of it, and then gently lowering his butt onto the chair, keeping his knees together. He straightened the camp shirt to make sure it didn't have any nasty wrinkles in it, and then crossed his legs to protect his modesty. He mimicked Arianna and pretended to flip open a cell phone.

"Hey, girlfriend!" Arianna said to the phone. "Download me!"

"Hey, girlfriend!" Brock said, just as merrily as Arianna had. "Download me!"

"Ohmigawd! You're kidding! That's totally fresh!"

"Ohmigawd! You're kidding! That's totally fresh!"

"Ritchie Smith? Oh, he's, like the the hunkiest guy! I just want to, like, do him so bad!"

"Ritchie Smith? Oh, he's, like the the hunkiest guy! I just want to, like, do him so bad!"

Arianna then finished up. "Okay, gotta fly! Kiss kiss!" And she flipped her imaginary phone shut.

Brock did the same. "Okay, gotta fly! Kiss kiss!"

Arianna was amused with Brock's effusively girlish manner. Yes, he may have thought he was just imitating her, and playing a game, but the old Brock would have never willingly acted like this under any circumstances. The little touches that he was adding by himself were great. Even now, as he smugly smiled, imitating Arianna, he was smiling like a girl. His cheeks were round as he flashed a big smile, showing all of his teeth. He then giggled, unable to contain his delight at playing this game.

After all, he had been totally surrounded by all things girlish and childish for – what was it, four days now? As far as he was capable of understanding the concept, that was his whole world.

Arianna took a tube of lip gloss from a desk, popped the top and applied it to her lips. She slowly rolled it around, being sure to give herself an extra thick coat. Brock grabbed a tube as well. He rolled it on his lips and got the same wet, glossy shine.

Then he made a sour face.

"What's wrong, my little sissy?" Arianna asked, concerned with his hesitance.

"Peach! I hate this flavor. It's gross."



"Wake up, wake up!" A voice called. Brock's eyes opened slowly. He had been sleeping so deeply it was hard to move. Someone was shaking his arm.

He knew the voice, but it was hard to place it. Airy... Air... Something that started with "air."

"Get up, sleepyhead!" the voice demanded. "We're going to be late for breakfast!"

Well, he didn't want to be late. So he swung his legs around and sat up in bed. He pulled the stray hairs from his face and tucked them behind his ears. What was the name? It was on the tip of his tongue.

"Are you going to move, or do I have to throw you in the shower?"

"Okay, okay!" Brock replied, jumping down from the top bunk onto the cold floor. "I'm up!" He walked over to the bathroom and found it occupied.

"Hey!" He said, appealing to be let in.

A girl's head popped out of the door. "Just a sec! Jeeze!" She said, and the door shut again.

A girl?

He looked around. The place was full of young girls. Then, he remembered where he was, and a little bit of what was going on. He was still in this camp, and he had to stay here. Why? He didn't know.

Arianna. That was her name. She was the one behind this. He looked around, and found her putting her hair up in a pony tail. "What happened!?" He said to her. "What's going on?"

She looked back at him with a confused expression on her face. "Uh, well, you slept in, and now you'll never get in the bathroom. Duh."

He got closer to her so he could lower his voice. "No, I mean, the last thing I remember was... Was..." Well, exactly what was the last thing he remembered? It was all so hazy. He was supposed to be here, and then there was some sort of mix-up... And the rest? He was sure there was more to the story. But in fact, he really didn't know where he had come from. Nothing was clear anymore.

For some reason, he knew this Arianna girl, and that he was supposed to be her friend. She was... Helping him?

"What's going on?" He asked, a little afraid of the question.

Arianna looked at the sky in exasperation. "What's going on is that we're late, and it's your fault. As usual." She removed her nightshirt and tossed it onto her bed, leaving her naked. "Hand me my bag." She requested.

Brock, more than a little fazed by a nude teenage girl standing nonchalantly in front of him, was still able to grab the bag of Arianna's clothes and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said. She quickly plucked out some shorts, panties and a sports bra and put them on quickly. "Bathroom's free," she said, pointing.

No sooner than had Brock turned his head than a girl ran to it and closed the door.

"You snooze you loose, Brit." Arianna said.

Brock was in a daze. He didn't understand. "Uh, is everything okay? I mean, I thought there was..." Brock's voice drifted away. He was sure there was some reason he shouldn't be where he was and that things were definitely not right.

"Get some clothes on and let's go!" Arianna demanded. She forcibly tugged on the nightshirt Brock was wearing and lifted it up over his head. Now he, too was naked. And as embarrassed as he was, no one else in the cabin seemed to care. No one even gave him a glance.

“Now get dressed!” Arianna said, pointing at the bag at the foot of the bunk bed.

Brock gingerly walked over to the bag, still checking for anyone who was looking at him, and took a look inside. He quickly grabbed a pair of nice pink silk panties and slid them on. He grabbed the camp polo and then tried to figure out what to put on next. He looked at Arianna, who had chosen a pair of white shorts. Brock grabbed the first pair of white shorts he found in the bag and put them on.

It seemed to him that this wasn't the first time he had worn girls' clothing. He had done this before. Maybe? Well, probably. And if no one else in this cabin was having trouble with him doing this, then obviously it wasn't any big deal.

“Can I borrow your white flip-flops?” Arianna asked. Brock winced in bewilderment. He had never owned a pair of flip-flops in his life. But there were a pair resting next to his bag. So they must have been his. If this was actually his bag.

“Sure,” Brock replied.

Arianna quickly swiped the shoes and stepped into them. “These go great with my shorts.” She said.

Then Brock was hit with a wave of anxiety. If these were his shoes, if these were his clothes...

“Arianna,” he asked. “If you're saying those are my shoes...” He looked at his bunkmate apprehensively. “Then what am I going to wear?”

“Wear mine.” Arianna said, tossing a pair of clear plastic sandals at Brock. He caught them and then buckled them to his feet. That solved that problem.

“Now let's go get something to eat before they close up the mess hall!” Arianna grabbed Brock by the arm and they both went running out of the cabin.

Just a few short minutes later, they had grabbed trays and were going down the line as food was being served.

“You nearly missed breakfast, child!” Said the large black lady serving the food. Brock flinched when he saw her. He didn't really remember her, but something about the woman caused him to be afraid. He dropped his tray on the counter.

“Steady, now, girl!” The lunch lady said. “See, you skip breakfast and you start dropping thing, 'cuz you ain't got no strength!”

“She's sorry.” Arianna said for Brock.

Embarrassed, but still nervous, Brock held his tray for his serving of food. His hands were shaking, though. Once he had his food, he turned his head away and followed tightly behind Arianna to a table.

The joined with other members of Jelly Bean cabin.

“Hi, Arianna! Hi, Brittany!” One girl called out. “Come sit over here!” She scooted over to make space. “Brittany, you sit next to me.” She said, patting the empty spot on the bench.

Brock did as he was told, and took his seat. “Th... Thanks.” He said.

The girl looked at Brock funny. “What's the matter with you? You're acting all weird and stuff. Even for you, Brittany.”

“I am?” Brock replied. How exactly was he supposed to act? And who was this girl?

“Shannon, she's just a sleepy head today. She's still waking up.” Arianna said.

“You slept like a bear last night, Brittany.”

"I heard you snoring from all the way across the room!" Shannon said, with a giggle.

"Oh." Brock felt bad about that. "I'm sorry... Uh, Shannon." He swept the hair that had strayed from his head out of the way so he could eat. No sooner had he done so, then he started to feel a little funny. Good, but funny.

"What's so funny?" Shannon asked.

"Huh? Brock said, grinning.

"Why are you laughing?" She asked.

Brock then realized he was giggling. He just felt so good all of the sudden. So light and free. So wonderful. "I dunno." Brock replied with a shrug. Something about touching his hair made him feel wonderful.

"Oh, Brittany, let me do your hair," Shannon said. "I'll do French braids."

"Okay." Brock replied and turned his head so Shannon could do it.

"And you do mine." Arianna said, turning he head.

"Sure!" Brock said, still giggling. He started to twist a strand of her hair.

"French braid, pigtails...?"

"Do the French braid," Arianna said. "And then I'll do Shannon's. We'll be triplets!"

Brock giggled even more. "Oh, wow! That'd be so cool!" He said. Since when had he been a giggler? He had never giggled in his life, he didn't even laugh that much, and now he couldn't stop it. And you couldn't wipe off the smile on his face if you had a cloth full of alcohol.



The three finished eating and headed over to the first class of the day. Riding. They all gathered around the outside of the stable, standing around and waiting for things to start.

"Michelle Volker." The counselor said, finishing up her list.

"Here!" a voice said.

"Arianna Whittington." The instructor called.

"Here!" Arianna called out.

"Brittany Whittington!"

"Here!" Brock replied quickly.

It only seemed momentarily odd to him that he was so easily responding to being a girl called Brittany. It passed through his mind quickly, because it really didn't seem all that important. He was still giggling about having the same hairstyle as Arianna and Shannon. He thought it was hilarious.

"Today, we'll be learning simple care and grooming for your horse." The instructor said. She pointed to a brush, a sponge and a bucket. "These are the basic tools you'll be using."

"Ugh. We get to clean horses today." Arianna said, looking less than pleased.

The instructor then walked into one of the stables and pulled on the reign of a large, brown horse. "Now, Salazar here..."

Brock immediately gasped. The horse was so large, so huge. It was a wild animal. Uncontrollable. It could run right over him.

Without thinking, Brock slipped behind Arianna and used her as protection. He was scared to death.

"What's wrong?" Arianna asked Brock.

"It's... It's..." Brock was trembling. "I'm scared." Flashes of pain and terror went through his mind. He had no idea where they were coming from, but they were so strong and powerful.

"You're scared of horses?" Arianna said, to clarify. She said it loud so everyone could hear. "You are afraid of horses?"

Brock looked at Arianna with silent desperation in his eyes. He truly was scared.

"Hey, look everyone! Look who's scared of the horsies!" Arianna teased. She looked around to the room of girls who were all trying to listen to the teacher. "Big baby here is afraid of the ponies!"

"I don't want to stay here. I have to go." Brock turned tail and ran from the stables, behind a nearby building.

"What did you say, Miss Whittington?" The instructor said.

Arianna was indecisive. She stammered as she talked. "I, uh... Uh... Sorry." She said. "I think she's sick." Then she ran after Brock.

She found him, hugging his legs, seated on a bench well clear of the stable area. "I don't know why I'm afraid of it." He explained. "But I really am scared!"

"It's okay, Brit."

"I know it's silly, but those big black eyes and that huge head... I keep thinking it wants to hurt me."

Arianna sat next to Brock. She put her hand on his bare knee. "It's okay."

"Please don't make me ride the horses," Brock said, tears in his eyes. "Please don't make me go back there!" Emotions overwhelmed him, and Brock started to realize he was going to cry. He fought it, but the feeling was just too strong. He buried his head onto Arianna's shoulder, sobbing. Sobbing like a little girl.



"Have you been crying, Brittany?" Michelle asked when they met up for the next class.

"She's fine." Arianna said.

Brock wiped his nose. "I think... I think I just have a case of the sniffles." He said, sheepishly.

"See? She's fine." Arianna reiterated. "Did Ms. Kilbaush say we should change into our tights?"

Michelle nodded. "Yeah, she said we should get into our dance clothes."

They walked into the room and were greeted by a room full of girls in various states of undress, changing from camp clothes into leotards.

Brock almost didn't notice when he was directed to a small cubby hole on the wall that had his name on it. Well, Brittany's name on it. Inside was a pair of black tights with black ballet shoes.

"Let's go, girls!" The teacher said, clapping her hands. "Two minutes!"

Under the gun, Brock shed his clothes down to his panties. He was sure people would stare at that bulge he had down there, but once again, no one paid any mind. He tugged the tight-fitting leotard over his body and tied up the ribbons on his shoes. He wrapped a loose black skirt around his waist and then

ran to the center of the room, where all the girls were gathering. He pranced all the way there, running on his tippy-toes, just like all the girls did.



“You’re making us all look pretty bad, Brittany.”

“What?” Brock replied. It was lunch time, and he was slicing a burrito with a fork & knife.

Arianna looked to be a little displeased. “You’re such a good dancer, we all look like amateurs next to you.”

“I’m not that good,” Brock said.

“You must have taken classes before, am I right?” Shannon asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“What, can’t you remember?” Michelle said.

“You must have taken classes,” Arianna said. “That’s the only way you could be so much better than everyone else.”

“Yeah, you don’t get that good without practicing,” Shannon agreed.

“Maybe I did take classes,” Brock said, unsure. “I guess.”

“See, I told you,” Michelle said. “I bet you’re a prima ballerina at home and just weren’t telling us!”

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” Brock asked. “Guys?”

“Well, it would have been nice if you had told us,” Michelle said, irritated.

“Sorry,” Brock replied. He wasn’t truly sure he had anything to apologize for. He didn’t remember taking dance classes. But then again, a lot of things were missing from his memory.

“I swear to God, you are such a princess!” Arianna said. “I bet you have to have the pinkest, the frilliest, the cutest stuff. You’re such a girly-girl.”

“No I’m not,” Brock replied.

“Little Miss Goody-Two-Shoes,” Michelle added. He smirk told Brock she wasn’t totally serious.

“I have to go to the cabin and get something,” Arianna said.

“I’ll go with,” said Michelle.

“Me too,” Shannon chimed in.

“Brittany?” Arianna asked.

Brock was still eating. “I’ll finish up and meet you guys later.” He watched as the group exited. As soon as it was clear, Brock picked up his tray and dumped the rest of his food in the trash. Making sure there wasn’t anyone watching him, he quickly sped off to the Nurse’s office, mincing his way across the courtyard.

“Can I talk to the nurse?” Brock asked the woman at the desk.

“I’m the nurse. What’s the problem?” She said with a smile.

Brock looked around nervously. “Can we go inside the examining room?”

“Sure, follow me.” The nurse said. “What’s your name?”

“Uh, well that’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about.” Brock said.

“Sorta.”

“Okay then, have a seat.” The nurse gestured towards the examination table. Brock used both arms to hoist himself up on the table and sat with his knees tightly together. “What can I do for you?” The nurse asked.

“Well, it’s... Um... Kinda... Strange to talk about.” Brock said, his cheeks blushing. “You’re like, bound by an oath not to tell anyone what’s wrong with me, right?”

“I’ll keep everything between us, if that’s what you mean, sweetie.”

“Okay.” Brock said, considering the answer. “It’s just that, uh... It’s like this... You see... Uh... I have a question and, uh...”

“Just calm down and tell me.”

“Uh, okay. Well, you know how when there’s this something that might be wrong with you but no one else will tell you, but it’s not something wrong, but like, you’re different than everyone?”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” The nurse said, not understanding at all.

Brock hopped down off the table. “You see, I just have to see and ask you if you...” Brock cleared his throat, which was frogging up. “I’m not really a girl. You promise not to tell, right?”

“Not really a girl?”

The nurse was puzzled.

“Look, I know this is strange, but I want to take off my shorts and ask you what you see, okay?”

“I don’t think...” The nurse was trying to stop him, but Brock went ahead and unzipped the shorts anyway. He dropped them and then pulled his panties down his smooth thighs.

“I’m not a girl, right?” Brock said, showing his privates to the nurse.

The Nurse was obviously put off, but it was nothing she hadn’t seen before. “Well, I’m not sure what you want me to say,” The nurse replied, obviously uncomfortable. “I don’t see anything wrong, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

Brock was shocked



by the answer. He looked down between his legs and saw his penis there, just as it always had been there. But it was like the nurse didn't even notice it.

"You can see that, there, right?" Brock asked, unsure. "You can see the penis, right?"

The nurse took a step closer, doing her best to understand. "Sweetie, I'm not sure what you're trying to say. Do you see a penis there?"

"Y..." Brock had suddenly lost confidence in himself. "Y..." He had this growing feeling that all his answers were wrong. He was so unsure of everything. If he answered yes, and he was wrong, what would they do to him? "Could you..." He had to know what reality was. If what he saw was really there. He just had to know. "Could you... touch it?" He asked.

The look of shock, disgust and astonishment on the nurse's face was frightening. Brock immediately realized he had said something very wrong and utterly humiliating. He quickly pulled up his panties and shorts and ran out the door. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He said, dashing past the nurse. "Please don't tell anyone. Please! I'm so sorry!" He ran out the door and back to Jelly Bean cabin. He flung himself onto his bunk where he grabbed his pillow and tried to hide from the world.



"What's wrong with you today, Brit?" Arianna said, seeing her bunk mate wrapped up in a mess of bed sheets.

"Something..." Brock tried to talk, but was coking up. "Something's not right here."

Arianna stepped up on her bunk, so she could just lift herself enough to get face to face with Brock. "C'mon, Brit. Are you home sick?"

Suddenly, Brock turned to look directly in the eyes of Arianna. "You know I'm not a girl, right?" He said.

Arianna smiled. "You have the freakiest sense of humor sometimes, Brittany."

"I'm not a real girl!" Brock insisted.

"Aw, you're just having a rough day," Arianna said. She fished around in her bag and found a big, oversized lollipop, the kind little kids like. She handed it to Brock. "I was saving this, but I think need it more than I do."

Brock stared at the offered candy for a moment, thinking it over, but he went ahead and took it. "Thanks," he said. He unwrapped it and gave it a good few licks.

"Look, everyone develops at their own rate, my Mom told me that. Shannon's got breasts, but girls like Michelle don't. Yet. It's no big."

Brock shook his head. "No, that's not what I mean, Arianna!" He quieted his voice. "I mean, I'm a boy. And you know that, right? Tell me you know that."

"Brit, as long I've known you, you've always been hung up on this boy/girl thing." She applied a little blush to Brock's cheeks, making him look garishly over-made up. He was too distracted to notice much.

Brock's brows were knit in confusion. "How long have you known me, Arianna?"

"It seems like forever, Brit."

Brock frowned. He was obviously tired of not understanding things. "That's not true." He felt his head. It hurt.

"Maybe you're sick. Do you want me to take you to the nurse?" She said, knowingly.

"No!" Brock yelled. "No, no, no!"

"Okay, then if you're not sick, what's the problem!? I don't get it! Are you just going to ruin summer for everyone, or do you want to have some fun!?" She tied big pink ribbons on the ends of Brock's pigtails. With his lollipop, the ribbons and the bright blush on his cheeks, he looked cartoonishly ridiculous. He looked like a sissy. Arianna giggled.

Brock had been feeling so rotten lately. That was the only thing he could truly remember. A long-standing sense of misery. "I don't want to ruin summer." Brock said.

"Then we need to get to class, Brittany." Arianna tried to tug on his arm, wanting to show him to everyone outside. "You look so pretty, wait until everyone gets a look at you."

Brock didn't move. He just laid there, his eyes out into space.

"C'mon!" Arianna said, hugging Brock with her free arm. "We can have a lot of fun together, if you want to." Finally, Arianna stepped down and walked to the door. "You need to get moving, if you don't want to be late." She didn't see any movement. "Fine then." And she left.

Brock, with his head mostly nestled in his pillow, watched her leave with just one eye. "Is this some kind of trick!?" He yelled out the doorway. "Are you guys trying to play some kind of joke on me!?"

All of the sudden, he just felt awful. Arianna was just being nice, and he was being a brat. But worse than that, for the first time in a little while, he felt completely alone. It was familiar to him. He was used to being alone. He had been on his own for most of his life. No help, no friends and no worries. And the feeling was back. It felt cold. It scared him.

He leapt off the bunk. "Arianna! Wait up!" He called. Brock sprinted out the door, still licking his lollipop. "Come on, wait up!"

Arianna dragged him right back though the door into the cabin. She washed off the blush, undid the ribbons and placed the lollipop aside. "So we'll be a little late." She said.



"God, doesn't this thing have shock absorbers!?" Shannon asked.

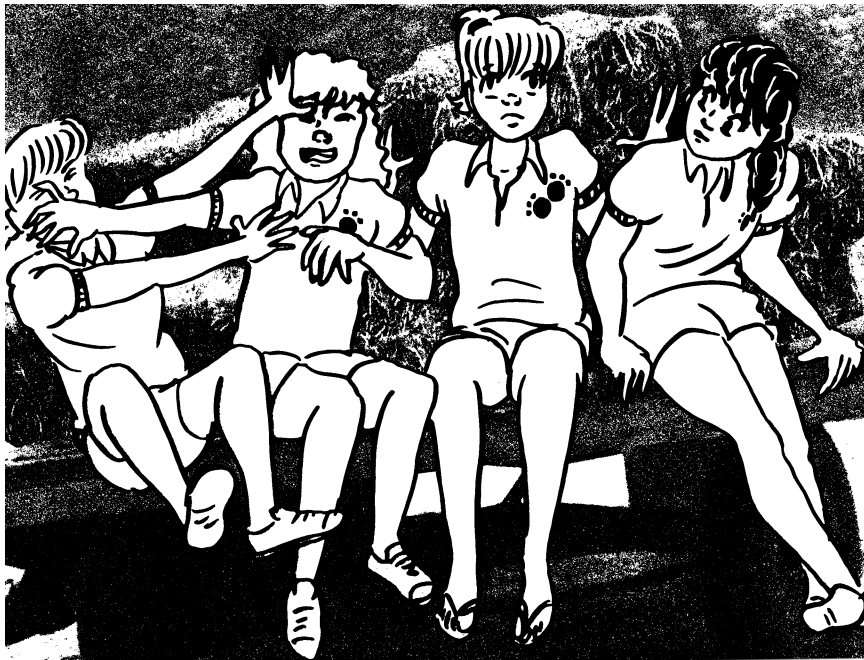
Arianna looked at her with a cross face. "Just stop complaining! This is fun!" "I can't believe we're actually taking a hay ride," Michelle said. "I mean, how cliché can you get?"

"It'll look good in the pictures they have in the brochure." Shannon said.

"That's the only reason they do it."

The tractor was wheezing and rolling along, spewing out black smoke. It pulled a flat bed with a pile of hay that all the Jelly Bean campers were riding on. And despite what they were saying about hating it, they were all having a good time. Especially Brock.

"Eeek!" He screamed when the flat bed hit a bump. He pushed his hair back and then giggled. "Pull me back up! I'm falling off!" He said, slowly losing his balance. As he started to slide, Arianna grabbed him by the arm and started to pull. He screamed even louder, and giggled even more. Surely, he'd never



survive falling off the tractor bed at the speed of 2 mph. "I'm slipping!" He said, further over-dramatizing his plight.

"Well, go then!" Michelle said, pushing Brock in the back.

Brock screamed again, easily able to keep himself from falling off. "You go!" Brock said, pushing Michelle back.

"Why don't you all get off my tractor!?" Arianna said, pushing the two tussling campers and Shannon as well.

Shannon fell first, holding on to Brock, who yanked Michelle. The three were shrieking and laughing as they started to tumble off.

"Finally." Arianna said, folding her arms smugly.

"Oh no you don't!" Michelle said, grabbing Arianna by the shirt and yanking her overboard. They all fell in a heap on the ground.

They were all laughing and shouting. "Get off me!" "You get you foot out of my face!" "Ow!" "You get off me, bitch!"

Finally untangling themselves, they watched the tractor pull itself over the top of a hill. "I bet that guy doesn't even know we're gone." Michelle observed.

"I bet he does," Shannon said. "And he's going to leave us out here in the woods where we'll get eaten by wolves!"

"Or we could just walk over the hill and get back our cabin." Arianna said, pointing the the roof of their residence.

"Well, ruin my fun." Shannon said, pouting. "Race!" She said, quickly bolting for the hill.

"Wait!" Arianna said, watching the group run off. "I can't run in flip-flops!"

Chugging over the hill, Brock was sure he could beat everyone, but for some reason, he found himself running like the girls. He was moving his body quite a bit, but not going very fast. Just a lot of arms and legs. They were not going to win any track and field medals. Eventually, they all arrived at the door of the cabin, with Arianna pulling up the rear.

"You get to sweep the floor tomorrow, Arianna." Shannon said. "We all decided."

"Just because I was last?" She said. "That is so not fair!"

"Oh, like how you decided I had to make all the beds yesterday because I was the last one to get up!?" Brock pointed out.

"That's, like, an international rule of bed-making!"

Michelle disagreed. "I've never heard of it."

"Yeah, me neither!" Shannon said. "In my house, everyone makes their own bed!"

"You're so rich, you have have butlers and maids who make your bed anyway!" Michelle added.

"Nuh-uh!" Arianna objected. "My parents..."

The sound of the trumpets over the loudspeakers interrupted, and signaled the beginning of the afternoon classes.

Brock grabbed Arianna. "We gotta go!" He said. "We're late!"

Michelle grabbed Shannon and ran off in the other direction. "We'll see you after class!"

"Back at the cabin?" Shannon asked.

Although quickly running out of earshot, they were all still talking, running backwards so they could see each other. "I was going to try and go sunbathing!" Arianna yelled.

"On the dock!" Brock added.

"We'll meet you there!" Shannon said.

"See you then!" Michelle added.

"Okay!" Arianna yelled.

"Go Jelly Beans!" Brock said, just to say it.

"Go!" The girls all replied in unison. They all then turned around and ran off to their respective classes.



Shannon and Michelle were already stretched out on the dock, lying on their towels in bathing suits, soaking up the sun. Arianna and Brock showed up a bit late.

When Shannon detected a shadow, she looked up to see Arianna standing there. "Where have you been?" She asked. "We've been waiting for you, and this was your idea."

"We had to stay late." Brock said. "And clean up."

"We just came by to see if you were already here." Arianna said.

Michelle opened her eyes to see for herself. "You've still got your camp stuff on." She observed.

"And you're covered in dirt." Shannon said.

“Clay,” Brock clarified. “Pottery clay.” Arianna and Brock looked at each other conspiratorially. They were both holding back giggles. “We kinda got in a little bit of a fight.”

“You started it!” Arianna said, pushing Brock in the shoulder playfully.

“I did not! You were the one who...”

Michelle interrupted. “Well, if you don’t go get showered and changed, you’re both going to miss out n’ stuff.”

“Okay!” Arianna and Brock both said in unison. They ran back to Jelly Bean cabin and quickly stripped themselves of their clay-caked clothes.

Jumping in the shower, it was the first time Brock had been by himself for a while. It gave him a moment to think to himself. He had little doubt that everything was very much out of whack. But once he stopped fighting it, it wasn’t so bad. He was sure that he’d usually be concerned about doing what he was doing. This was a really freaky thing that was happening to him.

But at the same time, he felt great. Every moment felt new and fresh. He had tons of energy. And he had the distinct feeling he had been floating. It was great.

Better that great – he was having the time of his life. And he wasn’t about to ruin the experience by thinking too hard about it.

After he had scrubbed off the clay, Arianna tossed him a bathing suit. Without even questioning if he should wear such a thing, he pulled the blue bottom right up his legs and over his hips. The bottom had a little built-in skirt that protected his front and masked the obvious. And honestly, Brock never even thought about it for a second.

The top was a mis-matched tankini top in pink. Arianna wore a daisy-print bikini. She then cut a thick sock in two. “I’ll kill you if you tell anyone about this,” she said to Brock. She then stuffed each breast pocket with one half, and that gave the top a little bit of definition. She then did the very same thing for Brock.

“You stuffed your tops, didn’t you?” Michelle said, when Brock and Arianna arrived at the dock.

“No!” Arianna said, emphatically.

“Better not be my socks you cut up.” Shannon said.

Brock and Arianna spread their towels down. Arianna oiled up Brock’s back and he did hers. “Is this sunblock?”

“Oh my God, no.” Arianna said. “We’d be out here for for hours if it was. This stuff will make you tan faster.”

“Cool.” Brock said. He didn’t feel like wasting a lot of time lying around.

Arianna grabbed a tiny little radio from her bag and flicked it on.

“Where’s your iPod?” Michelle asked.

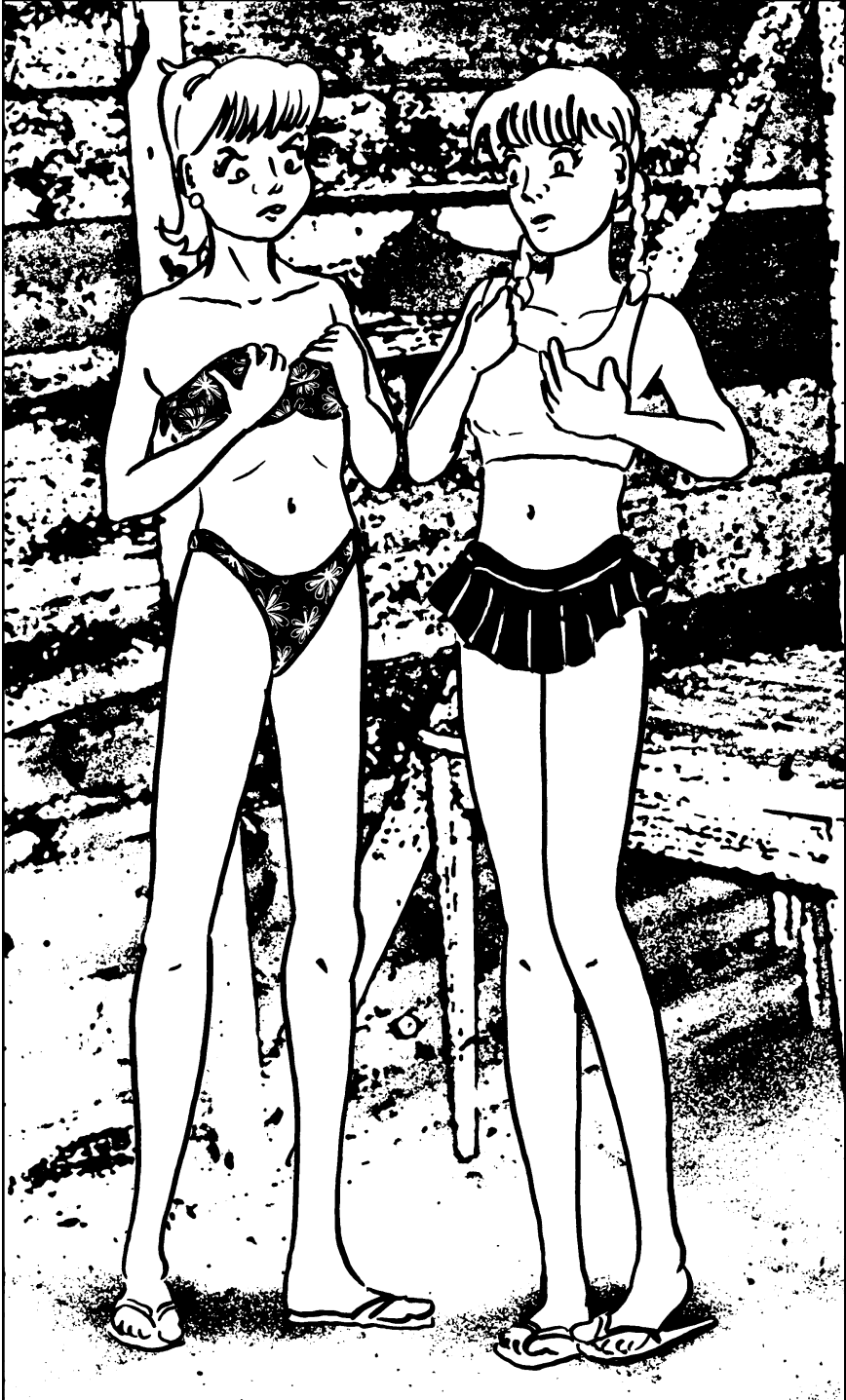
“Recharging.” Arianna fiddled with the dial for a while, angry because nothing was coming in. They were a long way away from the city and and radio stations. Finally, she found one that was coming in clear and turned up the volume.

“This is, like, old folks’ music.” Shannon said with a sneer.

“Yah, this is like an all seventies station.”

Just to prove the point, Starland Vocal Band’s “Afternoon Delight” started up.

“Well, yeah, it’s old stuff.” Arianna said. “Maybe I can...”



"But that's what everyone at my school is listening to." Brock said, backing up his friend.

"I guess it's okay then." Shannon said, and placed her head back flat on the towel.

After a few minutes, in which Brock realized this activity was nothing more than lying still for a while, Brock sniffed the air. It was the smell of cocoa butter. He had always associated the smell with hot girls on the beach. He giggled to himself when he realized the smell from coming from him. He was the hot girl. We wondered if he saw himself right now, if he'd want to do himself.

What a perverted thought. He shouldn't be thinking like that, he decided. He needed to think more like the sweet girls he was surrounded by.

"I think this song is about fucking." Michelle said, slightly unsure.

"You've got such a dirty mind." Arianna replied.



Maybe an hour had passed, maybe two. No one had spoken to each other for quite a while, except for Shannon's mention that it was time to turn over. The puny little boom box was still pumping out all the AM hits, but they had grown adjusted to it.

"I wonder if they've even heard of hip hop?" Michelle mused some time ago.

"These guys are so old, they only know about hip replacement," Brock replied.

But that was a while ago. All they could hear now was the distant sounds of rippling water, some kids play-fighting somewhere in the lake, and the occasional chirping bird in the far-away trees.

"Hey, is that a platform or something?" Arianna said.

Brock opened his eyes, fighting the bright light for a moment. He was following Arianna's pointing finger, and sure enough, there was a wooden platform bobbing gently in the water a few hundred feet away.

"Let's go." Brock said.

"Yeah, let's go!" Arianna said to Shannon and Michelle.

Shannon stood up, taking her towel in her hand. "I've been out here long enough. I burn easily."

"Oh, come on!" Arianna whined.

"I gotta go in too." Michelle said, standing up and joining Shannon. "I wanna get an early start on dinner. I'm starved."

Brock looked up in the sky, and saw the sun was an hour or two away from setting. "It'll be fun!" He said, appealing for the girls to go.

"You guys go and tell us about it." Shannon said, walking away. Michelle followed close behind. "See you when you get back."

Brock looked at Arianna. "You still wanna go?"

"Hella yeah and a half!" She said with a smile. "I'll grab us a canoe."

Brock picked up their towels, and used them to wrap up the boom box and tanning lotion. By the time he was done, Arianna was paddling by in a beaten-up canoe.

Trying to get in, Brock stepped exactly where you shouldn't step in the canoe, threatening to spill it over. "Eeek!" Arianna yelled, her voice bouncing off the surface of the lake. "Stop it!"

“Aiie!” Brock screamed, nearly falling over the side. He braced himself just before doing so, and squatted down, keeping it from tumbling. They both breathed a sigh of relief.

“Wait a minute, I’m facing the wrong way.” Brock said.

“No!” Arianna yelled in panic.

He stood up to turn himself around, and it was then that the canoe spilled its riders into the water. “Yaiii-iii-!” And sploosh. Sploosh.

When Brock’s head bobbed to the surface, Arianna was already waiting.

“Smooth.” She said with a grumble. She splashed some water in his face.

Eventually, they got back into the canoe and paddled their way to the platform. Once there, they clambered out onto the wooden slats. It was just a deck that had been nailed to some tires for floatation, and was in serious dis-repair.

But it was theirs. They had their own little island in the middle of the lake. For there, they could see everything: the camp and its’ cabins in the distance, and the smoke rising from the mess hall as they started to cook for dinner. In another direction, the sun had started to fall, and the light had turned golden.

The shadows had grown long. The sky faded from blue to red, orange and yellow. The birds in the distance quieted and the owls started to call out.

Arianna and Brock laid out their towels once more and reclined on them, feeling the gentle breeze of the heat being replaced by cool evening air. “This rocks.” Arianna said.

“Hella yeah and a half!” Brock agreed.

Of course, the novelty of lying somewhere and doing nothing – in a totally new location – wore off after about five minutes. But neither would admit it to each other, because they had worked so hard to get out here.

“Isn’t this awesome?”

“So awesome.”

Somewhere in the distance they heard some noise. A buzzing sound. It was just in the background like a lot of noises, but then it started to get stronger. Both Brock and Arianna heard it coming, but neither could be bothered to open their eyes and see what it was for a while. When Brock finally troubled himself to do so, he saw a trail of water spray.

“What’s that supposed to be?” He said.

Arianna looked for herself. “Uh... I think it’s a... thing.” She thought for a moment, trying to find the word. “One of those jet things.”

“Jet skis?” Brock clarified. “No way!”

As the noise and spray got closer, it was obvious that’s exactly what it was. Two people on jet skis. And they were headed their way.

Arianna and Brock just propped themselves up on their elbows to watch, just to have something to pay attention to. Slowly, they were getting nearer and nearer.

“They’re probably from the scout camp down on the other side of the lake.” Arianna theorized.

“There’s another camp?” Brock asked.

“A couple. Some yoga camp and then the scouts.”

“The scouts have jet skis and we have canoes?”

“It’s a boys camp. Boys and their toys.”

For the first time in hours, Brock was reminded of reality. “Oh. Yeah. Boys.”



“They’re not turning, are they?”

Brock looked closer. They weren’t – they were definitely coming towards them. “I guess not.”

“And they’re coming right at the platform.”

Brock agreed. He got up on his feet and shaded his eyes to get a clearer look.

“They sure are.”

“They’re not slowing down.”

“No, they’re not.”

“They’re not turning!”

The motors were getting louder.

“They’re going to ram us!”

The skis were seconds away. “Are they nuts!?”

“Grab your stuff!”

The sound of the engine was almost deafening.

“Get in the canoe!”

“No time!” Brock said. He ran past Arianna trying to jump.

She blocked his attempt. “No, don’t...!”

And at the last second, the two jet skis parted, turning on an angle and missing the platform by inches.

The surge of the waves tossed the platform, and unable to see anything in the spray of water, Brock and Arianna were thrown into the lake.

Brock took a moment to right himself underwater, but quickly rose to the surface. He looked around in a panic for Arianna, but she also got to the surface quickly.

That turned Brock’s attention to the jet skiers. “What the hell was that!?”

“You could have killed us!” Arianna yelled, shaking her fist into the air.

They had cut their engines, and were waiting nearby. Just as Arianna had predicted, they were just a couple of boys. And they were pointing and laughing.

“Classic!” Said one with black hair.

“They were all, like, ‘eek!’ and stuff!” One with blond hair said.

“Oh, dude that was so awesome!” The black-haired kid said.

“True. True.” His friend said.

Brock wasn’t liking this at all. “Are you guys insane?” He yelled, changing from his gruff to a girlish voice in mid-sentence.

“Hey, you guys are okay, what’s the problem?” Blond-haired asked.

“Yeah, what’s your deal?” his friend added.

“What’s the deal!?” Brock shrieked. “What’s the deal!?”

“The deal is that you guys owe us.” Arianna said. “Major big-time.”

“And how are we supposed to get back to camp?”

“I dunno, swim?” Black-hair said with a dirty smirk. “That’s why you’re wearing bathing suits, right? To swim?”

“Fuck off.” Brock said. “Fuckin’ go fuck with someone else, okay?”

Black-hair revved his engine back to life and gunned the motor as loud as he could get it to go. He then gently guided the jet ski over to Brock and held out his hand.

Brock didn’t quite get it at first, but he was offering a ride. Grudgingly, he took it. The boy was strong, and hoisted Brock up into the air with a mighty pull, where he landed on the back of the seat. Now close enough to hear the kids’ voice over the engine, Black-hair said “hold on tight.”

Cautiously, and with dread, Brock wrapped his arms around the mid-section of the kid. "Tighter," he said. Brock adjusted his grip. "Tighter," he said again. So there he was, in a bathing suit just short of a bikini, tanned and smelling of cocoa butter, his slender and bare arms wrapped around a boy, embracing him as tight as his arms could hold.

He turned his head, to see Arianna being offered the same courtesy, as she held on to the blond-haired boy on his jet ski.

The skis revved loudly again, and sped over the water. First, it seemed a modest speed. But then it got faster. And faster. Too fast.

The boy drove his jet ski at top speed, and headed towards shore.

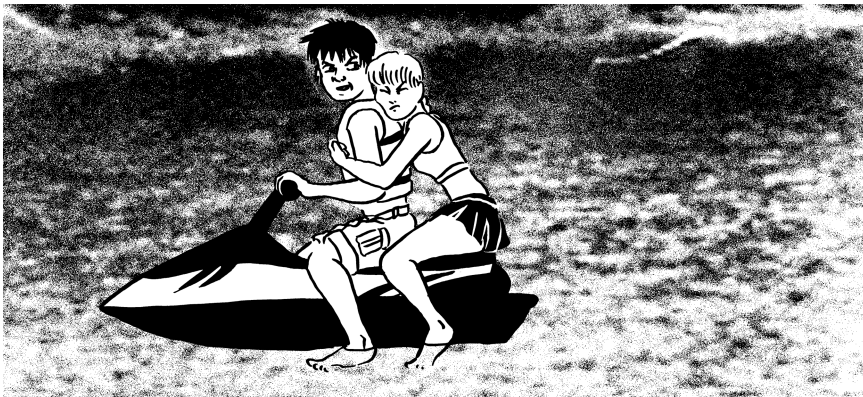
"We're going the wrong way!" Brock shouted as loud as he could. Either the boy didn't hear him, or ignored him.

He aimed the ski at a downed tree, with its trunk dipping into the lake at a low angle. The ski hit the tree, using it as a ramp, sending it several feet into the air. It landed with a loud splash. Brock found himself holding on as tight as he could, practically glued to the boy's back.

They then did some tricks, zooming around in small circles and zig-zagging around some buoys. But they went back to the tree three more times before they finally headed back towards the girls' camp.

In stark contrast to the last few minutes, the skis gently glided to a stop in shallow water where Brock was finally able to pry his arms apart and let go.

"So, you're back safe and sound." the boy said to Brock.



Arianna's ride then pulled in, and she stepped off her ride, cursing at the blond-haired kid.

"That was fucking stupid!" Brock yelled.

Arianna was just as angry. "I'm gonna tell your scout master that you did that! You'll really be in trouble!"

The two boys looked at each other. They didn't seem too scared. The one with the black hair just smirked at Brock and shrugged. "So, you wanna go for another ride?" He asked.

The question struck Brock a little funny. He looked at Arianna, to check her reaction. Her face was blank. Then he just kind of smirked back. "Well, okay."

Then his face was as stern as his voice. "Only if you promise to be more careful."

"And no more jumps!" Arianna said.

Brock got back on the jet ski and gripped his arms around the kid's body as tightly as he could.

They sped around the lake for a while more. This time, the boys kept their promise not to do any jumps. But they did take it much faster than they had before. And they made sharp turns that put the jet skis nearly sideways, with Brock's butt skimming the surface of the water. Back and forth they went, across the small lake. If the engines weren't as loud as they were one would have easily heard the girlish screaming and screeching from Brock and Arianna. They loved it. This went on until it became too dark to really see what was going on. When they were done, the boys dropped them off at the shore.

Jake and Dallas were their names. Jake was about fourteen, and he was the one with blond hair. Dallas was maybe fifteen, and had a coil of jet black hair. He was the one who seemed to have a fire in his eyes, and was definitely a little more dangerous. Brock could appreciate that.

"Hey," Dallas said, as he and Jake unmounted. "So, you guys here for camp?" He said, trying to look smooth. He was only about ten percent successful at looking sophisticated and mature, but that was better than the five percent most boys his age could muster.

"Yea," Arianna said. Brock hung closely on her wing, unwilling to move an inch too far. He was afraid either of these two predators would pick him off in a second if he strayed far from the herd. He hadn't felt this particular feeling before. A feeling of being perused. Stalked.

And there was little better way to describe the behavior of Jake and Dallas than as caged animals. As they stood there, they punched each other periodically and tried to do some air-karate. But even as they were doing this, they were still trying to carry on a conversation.

"So, uh, where do you guys live?" Dallas asked, looking at his shoes.

"Saint Louis." Arianna replied. It was a lie. "Where are you guys from?"

"I'm from Little Rock, and Dallas is from..."

"I'm from Saint Louis, too." Dallas said, cutting his friend off. All four of them knew it was a lie, but at least it was a way to start a conversation.

"Really?" Arianna said, feigning excitement. "That's *so* weird!"

"So, you two, are you like, sisters or something?" Dallas asked.

"Cousins." Brock said.

"I told you, dude!" Jake said, punching Dallas in the shoulder.

"Knock it off, fucker!" Dallas quickly retorted. "So do you like canoeing?" He asked Arianna, with a smile. "Into water-sports n' stuff?"

"Yeah, I love water-sports." Arianna replied. "I love getting wet."

Brock was shocked – Arianna was flirting with Dallas! He was sure of it. Well, he wasn't going to let that stand. He wasn't going to let them pair off and be stuck with Jake.

"So, uh, hey." Arianna said, starting out a little shy. "If you're from Saint Louis, then you must like going to Busch Stadium, huh?"

"I go to Busch all the time!" Dallas said, grinning.

"Oh, me too." Brock said, returning the grin. "They built a new one, you know. So, if you haven't gone, maybe you need to take a look." She paused for

a moment, and then realized he may not have picked up on the subtlety. "And visit the new Busch."

"Hey, that reminds me," Arianna butted in. "So, do you guys know where we can get some beer?" She asked.

"Ever had beer before, little girl?" Jake said.

"Pssh!" Arianna said, paying that no mind. "All the time. My parents let me drink whenever I want."

"No way." Jake said.

"Yeah-huh!" Arianna asserted. "Any time. Whatever I want."

"I bet you've never even had a single beer." Dallas said.

"Yes she has!" Brock said, sticking up for his friend. "She's telling the truth!"

Dallas looked around for anyone else listening. "Okay, well, I'll tell you what. You meet us..." He pointed to a giant tree, clear at the end of the lake. "There, at the big tree tonight at eleven. And we'll have all the beer you can drink."

"But...!" Jake objected. He was jammed in the ribs by Dallas' elbow before he could complete his thought.

"Tonight at eleven." He repeated.

"Okay." Brock said, agreeing for both him and Arianna. "We'll be there."



When night fell, Arianna was woken by Brock, and both snuck out of the cabin. They didn't even bother to wake Shannon or Michelle. "Especially not Michelle. She'd screw the whole thing up." Arianna remarked.

No, this was just going to be the two of them. On a mission. They were both dressed in dark clothing, and had stolen the flashlight from the emergency kit. They found the shore of the lake and followed it along for a while.

"Keep it quiet!" Arianna told Brock. "And stop laughing!"

"This is so totally gonna rock!" Brock said.

"Shhh!" Arianna said, giggling and barely able to keep her balance. They both knew that this was going to be good. Very good.

It wasn't too long before they heard some voices, and Arianna flicked off the flashlight. Sure enough, there were Jake and Dallas, sitting on an overturned log, whispering.

"If we get caught..." Jake whined.

"We're not going to get caught." Dallas told him. "Unless you fuckin' blew it when you knocked over that chair!"

"It was dark, okay?"

"I think we're good. No one saw us."

"What do you think the Scoutmaster's going to say when he discovers his beer missing?"

"He'll say nothing. He's not allowed to bring it into camp anyway."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Did you hear that?"

A twig snapped in the distance. "Maybe it's the girls!" Dallas said excitedly, losing his cool for a moment. "Don't say anything stupid, okay? I told everyone back home I was gonna get laid this summer, and that's what I'm gonna do."

“Me too! I’m gonna get laid! Laid hard!” Jake replied, his choice of words indicating he didn’t quite know what the term meant.

“Shut up, they can probably hear us.” Dallas said. They both waited for a moment for something to happen nothing really did.

Arianna flashed her flashlight in Brock’s direction. As soon as he saw the signal, he screamed as loud as he could.

“Holy shit!” Jake yelled. “What was...?”

“I dunno!” Dallas replied, a scared look on his face. “But it was over this way! C’mon!”

The two boys ran as fast as they could, tripping in the dark over sticks and rocks.

“Do you see anything?” Jake called out.

“I don’t see shit. What about you?” Dallas replied.

“Nah.”

They fumbled around for a while before the two found each other. “I don’t know what that was, but it’s gone now.” Dallas said. “Let’s get back to the tree before the girls get there.”

“Do we tell them...”

“We don’t tell them anything. They may get freaked out and want to leave.”

They walked back, re-tracing their footsteps. They found the log they had been sitting on and looked around.

Suddenly, Dallas kicked a small stone into a tree trunk. “Aw, fuck!” He said, disgusted.

“What?” Jake said, wondering what the problem was.

Dallas pointed at the beer. Or where he had left the beer.

A note was all that was waiting for them. It read, “Thanks for the beer, boys! XOXOXO” And it had two sets of lipstick prints.



They were sitting around in a circle, in a grass field. Somewhere, maybe a few feet away, the instructor was going over the details of making a leather wallet. Shannon, Michelle, Arianna and Brock were just ignoring it, chatting amongst themselves.

“I saw you guys sneak out last night.” Michelle said.

Arianna and Brock looked at each other, pretending that they were shocked.

“Surely, I have no idea what you’re talking about, ‘Shell.”

“So what were you guys up to?” Shannon asked, biting her lip in expectation of a good story.

Brock giggled. Arianna quickly slapped him on the shoulder to knock it off.

“Nothing.” She repeated. “But if you’re good, we’ll invite you to our little party.”

“A party?” Shannon said. She looked intrigued as she took her long, kinky red hair and tied it back in a pony tail. “Tell me more.”

“What’s there to tell?” Brock said. “Nothing special planned.”

“A little music, a some food and a few... Uh, party favors.” Arianna said, being as vague as she wanted to be.

Brock giggled again. “Paaaarty favors.” He said.

“When?” Michelle said, eager to know.

"We haven't decided yet." Arianna said. "But we'll invite you."

"If you're nice." Brock added.

Michelle still had her suspicions. She played with a strand of her brunette hair as she thought. "Did this have anything to do with those two guys who you met yesterday?"

"What were their names? Jake and Austin?" Shannon said.

Michelle's memory was triggered. "Yeah, Jake was the shorter hyper one. And Austin was the tall goofy one."

"Goofy?" Brock said, alarmed. "His name is Dallas and he's not goofy at all! If you'd met him, you'd know how cool he is."

"He looks like a loser." Shannon said.

"He's a better guy than you'll ever meet." Brock retorted.

"Sounds like your cousin is crushing hard." Shannon said to Arianna.

"Kinda sounds like that, doesn't it?" Arianna replied. "All I know is that she wouldn't let me even talk to him without interrupting me."

"I don't have a crush on Dallas!" Brock said, firmly. "That's stupid!"

"Brit's got a crush, Brit's got a crush..." Michelle taunted in song.

Shannon had her own little ditty. "Brittany and Austin sitting in a tree..."

"His name is Dallas!" Brock was pissed off. "Will you shut up? Crushing is for fourteen year old girls."

Arianna, Shannon and Michelle all looked at him blankly.

All the sudden, Brock was worried he'd just stepped over the line. He'd just broken character.

"Uh... I mean, It's not that..." Brock cleared his throat. "What I meant was..."

"Oh yeah, definitely crushing." Michelle said.

Brock rested his head onto his fists, pouting. "I don't have a crush on him." He repeated to no one's satisfaction.



It was during dance class that Arianna could no longer contain herself.

"You did what!?" Shannon cried out, right in the middle of the *Black Swan Pas de Deux*. Every head in the class turned to look, and Shannon pretended like she hadn't spoken a word.

When the class eventually went back to concentrating on their dancing, Shannon whispered the question again.

Arianna glared at her friend for having the composure and maturity of a toddler. "I said, we stole some beer from these two guys."

"Ohmigawd, you're lying!" Shannon said, not accusing her fiend – just not believing her.

"It was my idea." Brittany said.

"It was my idea!" Arianna said.

Brittany was aghast. "Oh, that is so not true!"

Shannon wanted more info. "So when are we..."

"We?" Arianna said, tauntingly. "Who said anything about we?"

"You said! You said that..."

Brittany smiled. "If you were nice..."

"I've been nice!" Shannon insisted.

“Well, you did use the last of my toothpaste.” Arianna said, searching for something to needle her about.

“That was Michelle!”

“And that looks a lot like my necklace I made in arts and crafts.” Brittany said.

“You said I could have it!” Shannon cried. Which was true.

“I don’t remember saying that...” Brittany teased.

“Come on! Seriously!” Shannon begged.

“I don’t know.” Arianna said, pretending like she was being put out. “I was only going to invite Michelle.”

“We only have six beers. You can divide that by three. Not by four.” Brittany added, thoughtfully.

“That’s a very good point.” Arianna agreed. “Besides...”

“Wait a minute.” Shannon said. From her expression, you could tell that it was something she was reluctant to say. “I’ve got something, too. I can make it an even better party.”

“I dunno. It’d have to be pretty big...” Brittany said.

Shannon looked around to make sure no one was listening and then she whispered her contribution into Arianna ear. Immediately, Arianna’s face went beet red.

Shannon then whispered it into Brittany’s ear. Her face went flush as well.



That night, after the loudspeakers declared an end to the day, the girls snuck out again. Michelle and Shannon went off in one direction and Arianna and Brittany in the other. Brittany got into her bathing suit while Arianna was lookout. Brit slipped into the water by a piling and dove down. It took her a couple of tries, but eventually she found the six-pack of “Milwaukee’s Best” they had stashed underwater.

“And it’s cold, too.” Arianna said as Brittany climbed back onto the pier. She got into a t-shirt and flip-flops and followed Arianna into the woods.

After going a quarter-mile or so into the woods, a they found a clearing. Shannon and Michelle were already there. Shannon was clumsily trying to get a camp fire going, while Michelle was fussing with her iPod speakers to play some music.

“Let’s kick it!” Brittany said, hoisting the beer into the air.

“Woo-hoo!” Michelle shouted.

Then Shannon got something from her pocket. “And now it’s a real party.” She said, unrolling the small baggie.

“What is that!?” Michelle asked, not recognizing it at all.

“Pot.” Arianna said.

Michelle’s face dropped away in awe. “Really!? You’re kidding! Oh my God!” She touched it like it was going to bite. “Where did you get it!?”

“I stole it from my brother’s room.” She answered. “He called them roaches.”

“Boys are so gross.” Arianna said. “Only they could call something this cool something so stupid.”

“Who’s got a lighter?” Brittany asked.

Shannon quickly produced one. “Now I only have a couple of them, so we’ll have to share.” She lit it up and handed it to Michelle.

"What, don't you want to try it first?" Michelle asked Shannon without taking the joint.

"Oh." She replied, unsure. Shannon exhaled. "Okay. Well. Here goes." She hesitantly put the spliff to her lips, where she gathered her courage and then inhaled as long and as hard as she could.

Everything was fine for a few seconds, until her skin started to turn an odd shade of green. Her eyes went bloodshot and she fell over onto her side.

Arianna pushed her shoulder. "Let it out, dummy!" She said.

Shannon's lungs gave way with a mighty burst, and the noxious smoke drifted from her mouth. She started to laugh. A cackle might have been a better way to describe it.

The three looked at each other with uncertainty. It was Arianna who broke the tension with a wicked smile. "I think that means it's good."

"Ohhhh *yaaaahhh*..." Shannon agreed, from her sideways position.

Arianna took the joint from Shannon's limp fingers and sucked a little less on it than Shannon had. Her reaction was to freeze in position for a few seconds before a glassy look came to her eyes. a goofy grin slowly came over her face like she was remembering the best joke she ever heard, but recalling it in slow-motion. Before she completely lost touch with reality, she handed the bud to Michelle.

Michelle quickly handed it to Brock, like it was about to explode.

"It's not going to bite, 'Shell." Brock said. He offered it back. Michelle pushed it away gently.

"I can wait." Michelle replied, trying badly to cover for her hesitance.

"You don't want to do it, do you?" Brock said, making sure Arianna and Shannon weren't listening. They were totally zonked out, anyway. If they were hearing anything, it wasn't forming into words.

Michelle didn't reply to the question.

"You've never taken drugs before, have you?" Brock asked.

"Have you?" Michelle said.

"Sure, lots." Which was true. That was just part of his hard-living lifestyle Brock had worked so hard to create for himself. "But you don't want to do this, do you?"

Michelle shook her head. "I hate them. My brother does it all the time, and he's ruining his life. He's become some jerk I don't like anymore."

"That's not going to happen with just one blunt, you know." Brock said.

"I know." Michelle replied, keeping her eyes trained on the joint like it was a coiled snake.

"You don't have to do it if you don't want to."

"But all you guys..." Michelle's eyes started to show a sense of fright and anxiety. "I don't want you guys to think..."

Brock interrupted. "Fuck them." He said. "Do what you want. Who cares."

Michelle looked at Brock in the eyes, then at her zoned-out friends. With a deep sense of dread and loathing, she tentatively took the joint and steadied herself. She brought it to her lips.

"I can't... I just can't..." Michelle's voice warbled, on the edge of crying. "Look at them." She said, gesturing at Shannon and Arianna. "I just don't want to do that to myself. I can't... But I don't want to make you guys..."



Brock took the bud from Michelle and brought it to his lips. He clearly brought it short, never getting any closer than an inch from his mouth. “Whoooooaa...” He said, like he was as spaced as his friends. “That’s good stuff.” He winked at Michelle.

Michelle took the hint. She pretended to smoke it, and did much the same. “Wooow...” She said, letting herself relax. “That’s some good shit...” She handed it over to Shannon who eagerly took it.

“Please don’t tell them.” She whispered to Brock.

“I’m waaaay too waasted to saay anythiiiing...” Brock replied, with a smile.

“Oooooohh... Sooo am Iiii...” Michelle said. She giggled conspiratorially.

“Groovy, duuuude...”

“Waaaay ouuuut theere, maaaannn...”

Shannon suddenly got to get feet and started to shake herself around like a rag doll. “I want to dance!” She declared.

After a minute or two of watching Shannon try to dance, Brock decided it was probably a good time to start the music. Arianna’s iPod was already cued up for OutKast’s last album, and it blared loudly into the night. It wasn’t long before Arianna stumbled to her feet and joined in dancing, although heavily listing to one side.

There was no way they were going to trick him into dancing. Brock wasn’t going to do it. What he had done at dance class was already embarrassing enough. There was no way they were going to get him flouncing around out there.

“Join us, Brit!” Shannon yelled.

“Yeah, come on!” Arianna seconded. “You’re the best dancer!”

Brock waved them off. “I came for the beer.” He said, grabbing one from the six-pack. Something was telling him he had earned the break. He reclined against a fallen log and sipped the horrible, bitter, flat beer and let whatever tension and questions he had left slip away. There was no room for them anymore.

He watched as Arianna and Shannon threw themselves around like they were possessed by spirits. Albeit possessed by the spirits of incredibly bad dancers. After a little while, Michelle joined them and did her best to look as uncoordinated as her friends. When she looked back at Brock, she winked at him. He winked back and finished his beer.

Eventually, the music ended and the three girls looked like the life had just suddenly left the party. "Thank God that's over." He said.

"What?" Shannon said, sensing some slight insult. "Pardon us if we want to have some fun."

The inference that there was suddenly an 'us' that didn't include Brock, pricked.

"I just thought we were going to drink." He said. "Arianna and I worked pretty hard to get these and I don't want to waste time watching you guys do... Uh... Whatever you were doing."

"We were dancing!" Shannon said, testily.

"Yeah!" Arianna added.

Brock tossed his empty can aside and punched the button on the iPod, starting the music again. He hopped to his feet and trotted to the center of the clearing. "Let me show you how you guys were dancing." He started to lazily throw his limbs around as he dragged one foot behind him, looking like a zombified mummy.

"We were not!" Arianna objected. "Were we, Michelle?" She asked for backup.

Michelle turned her back to try and obscure the giggling that she couldn't help.

Arianna turned to Shannon. "We didn't look like that!"

"Well..." Shannon said, rolling her eyes. "I didn't look like that."

"Oh!" Arianna relied, insulted. "Well, here's how you were dancing!" She planted her feet and started to pump her arms up and down. "You dance like a guy!"

"I do not!"

"No, you were dancing more like this." Brock said. He threw himself around, looking like a marionette on strings, controlled by a puppeteer with a muscle spasm.

"Yeah, and you were doing this..." Michelle said, tossing her head back and forth. "And this..." She threw her elbows up into the air and moved them in tight little circles. "What was that!?"

"Well at least I wasn't doing this..." Shannon said, immediately doing a dance that looked like she was trying to swim. "What is this, the sixties?"

"My mother dances like that!" Michelle said, put off.

"You've watched your mother dance?" Shannon said. "Oh my God, my eyes would burn if I ever saw that."

"Here's how my Dad dances." Arianna said. She planted her feet and pumped her arms up and down.

"You said that's how I look!" Shannon said.

"Well, I can't help that." Arianna answered.

In retaliation, Shannon did her imitation of Arianna. Michelle quickly joined in with her imitation on Shannon. And Brock started to imitate Michelle who was doing Shannon. They did that for a song or two, their imitations becoming

more and more exaggerated. After a while, the dancing became so ridiculous that they weren't imitating each other anymore, they were just trying to look as strange as they could. One by one, they quickly disintegrated into laughing, and did whatever the hell they felt like.

Two songs played through before they could no longer manage the double feat of dancing like loons and laughing like hyenas. As the music played itself out, they finished off the beer and packed up. Checking the time, it was well past four, and they needed to get back to camp.

By that time, Michelle had rather predictably fallen unconscious at just half a beer. She was draped over the back of Arianna, who carried her that way. Brock was pushing Shannon along, who kept stopping to examine small rocks and twigs for no discernible reason. Since she refused to give up possession of the flashlight, it was important to keep her on the trail.

She was also singing parts of songs at random levels of shouting. Arianna joined in from time to time when she recognized the song. Or thought she did.

As they reached the top of the final hill back to camp, they saw some lights on. Some flashlight beams could be seen frantically searching the trees and the shore.

"Fuck." Brock said. "They know we're missing."

"Theeey know weere *misssiinnnggg...*!" Shannon started to sing. Loudly. The moment she did, all the flashlight beams shined in their direction.

"Shut up!" Arianna yelled even louder than Shannon's singing. "They'll hear us!" And she put a finger to her lips. "Ssssh!" She was clearly a bit too drunk to know how loudly she was yelling.

"Too late." Brock said, as the flashlights started to advance.

Quickly – too quickly to have done anything about it – they were surrounded by the camp counsellors. There were calls of "Where have you been?" and "Just what do you think you're doing?"

It was Ms. Purcell, the horrible woman in charge of Jelly Bean cabin, who spoke first. "That better not be beer I smell on your breath!"

Arianna stood tall. "Weeeve not been drinning any beer tonights!" She said with certainty.

"Where did you get that beer!" Ms. Purcell demanded to know. She stuck her head in close to examine all four of them minutely.

As the woman got close to Shannon, she made a reflexive move to cover up one of the pockets in her shorts. But she was too intoxicated to be smooth about it. It just made it clear she had something to hide.

"What do you have there?" Ms. Purcell sniped as she dug her hand into the pocket. "What is this? What are you hiding?"

She pulled a baggie from the pocket, and held it up to be seen in the flashlight.

"Whoa." One of the counsellors said, unseen in the darkness.

"Marijuana!" Ms. Purcell shrieked. "This is marijuana!" She tucked it away and then grabbed Shannon by the collar. "How dare you bring illegal drugs into camp!"

"It's not mine!" Shannon tried to say. "I don't know where it came from!"

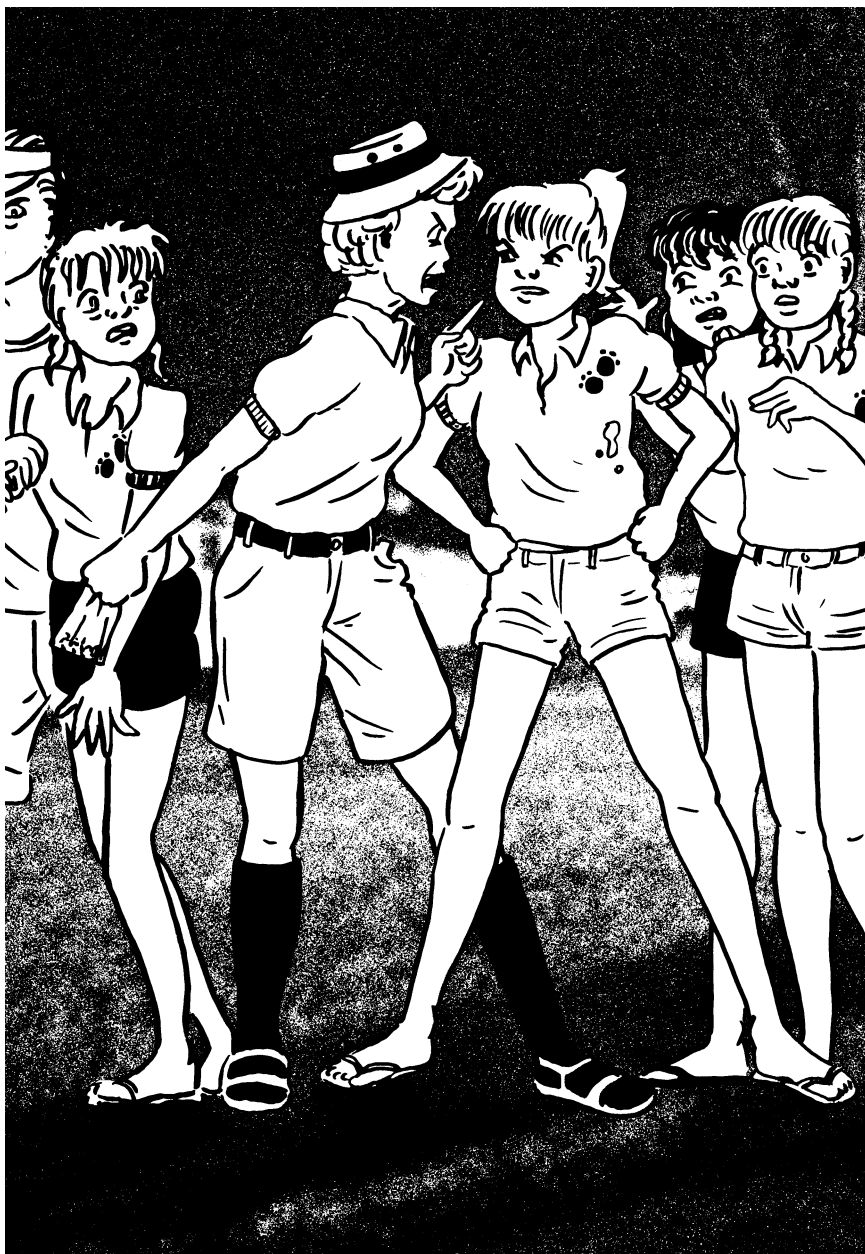
But she was already being dragged off by the shirt. "I'm phoning your parents and you're going home immediately!" Ms. Purcell yelled. "And thank your lucky stars I don't turn you over to the police and have you thrown in jail!"

Shannon fought, but her captor was much taller and a lot stronger. "Let go of me!" Shannon shrieked at the top of her lungs. "Get your hands off me!"

"You will be quiet young lady!" Ms Purcell scolded. "Or things will be much worse for you!"

"No!" Shannon yelled. "No, no, no! It's not fair! You're hurting me!"

"You let her gose!" Arianna commanded. "Right this second!"



“Not this time. This is camp business, and this is what I have to do!” she said, talking only and directly to Arianna. There was something beyond the normal relationship between counsellor and camper. There was a sense of history behind this exchange. “And you just let me do my job!”

As Arianna and Brock watched Shannon get hauled away, they didn’t know what to do. It was suddenly such a serious situation. They were just having fun. That was all. No one deserved to be punished.

Michelle tried to run after her friend, but was stopped by a counsellor. “Shannon!” She yelled. “Please don’t send her away!” She was on the edge. She was mad. Howling mad. “She’s my best friend! You can’t send her home! Pleease!”

“Come on, get back to your cabin.” One of the counsellors said, corralling them. “Revelry in in an hour and a half.”



The next morning, the three were busy cleaning the cabin. They had been assigned all the daily cleanup duties for the entire cabin for the duration of their stay. It didn’t seem even a fraction as bad as losing Shannon.

“What do you think’s going to happen to her?” Michelle asked, as she was scrubbing the floor.

“I think she’ll be fine.” Arianna said, trying to say the right thing. “I’m sure they aren’t going to call.”

“How do you know!?” Michelle shot back, angrily.

“I know.” Arianna shrugged.

“Yeah, she’ll be fine.” Brock said. “Don’t worry.”

“You don’t know her folks. If they get called, they’ll send her off to boarding school,” Michelle said.

“You don’t know that.” Arianna questioned as she arranged another bedsheet. Michelle shook her head. “No, she told me so. They wanted to send her off last year just because she was dating this guy they didn’t like.” Michelle threw the scrubbing brush down onto the soapy floor in anguish. “She’s going to get sent away.”

“Parents always say stupid stuff like that.” Arianna said. “They never do it.” She finished making up the bed she was working on and started on the next one. “Hey, so, they’re having a dance on the last night. And the guys from scout camp are going to be here.”

Michelle didn’t respond.

Arianna wasn’t deterred. “I was thinking we’d get some of those colored lights we saw in the shed and make it look real romantic.”

“I’ll tell them it was my pot.” Brock said, interrupting the train of conversation. “After all, I’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Why?” Michelle asked.

“Yeah, what do you mean you have nothing to lose?” Arianna questioned.

“Your parents are going to kill you!”

“Yea, exactly!” Brock said. “I don’t have anyone to answer to. I don’t have to worry about that.”

“Even your parents are going to give you hell for doing drugs, Brittany.” Arianna said.

Brock was frustrated. "Look, just drop the act, okay? We all know the truth here, and if I take the blame, no one gets in trouble!"

Michelle and Arianna looked at Brock in bewilderment.

"Please let me do this!" Brock begged. "You've been great to me, we're all really good friends and, and, and I just wanna..."

"We should all admit to it," Arianna said.

"What?" Michelle yelled.

"Look, Brit has a point. We're all in this. We need to stick up for each other." Arianna pointed with her finger. "When one of us gets in trouble, we all get in trouble."

Brock tried to get back to his idea. "But I can..."

"You taught me this, Brit." Arianna said. "Friends are friends and we don't walk away when one gets in trouble."

Brock was a bit flustered. He wasn't sure exactly how he had taught anybody anything. He was pretty convinced he was the one being taught a few lessons this summer.

"We're going to go in there and each one of us admits to bringing the pot into camp." Arianna looked at Brock first, looking for agreement.

"But, there's no need to do it! I'm not going to get in any real trouble!"

"Are you with us or not, Brit?" Arianna asked.

Brock was unquestionably confused. He had the answer. He could help all of them get out of this. But as he saw Arianna's determined stare, he just caved in. "Okay," he replied.

Arianna then looked at Michelle. She wasn't as sure, but she nodded her head. "Yeah. Let's do it."

They got up, not terribly sure of what they were doing. And without really noticing, they held hands. And they were still holding hands as they marched over the the main cabin.

"Ms. Purcell, I have to tell you that it was my pot," Arianna said.

"It was my pot, Ms. Purcell." Brock said. "And no one else's."

"Don't believe them, Ms. Purcell. It was my pot." Michelle said.

The expression on Ms. Purcell's face was the visual equivalent of a shattered plate glass window.

Needless to say, the counsellors didn't like four girls admitting to the same crime. Without one person to singularly blame, they needed to re-think their strategy. It just wouldn't do to send all four girls home. One was passable. But when four were sent home, the counselors would have to answer to someone for doing that. Then there would be angry letters from the parents. And bad word of mouth.

"Don't think because you're all sticking together, we won't send all four of you home!" Ms. Purcell threatened. But of course, she was lying. That was exactly what her only option was. "We're going to tell your parents unless you tell the truth," Ms. Purcell said, but that was a bluff, too.

When all was said and done, the four of them just spent a day confined to their cabin, "thinking about what they've done." And then it was never mentioned again.

So, in short, the girls had won. Or, at least, friendship had.



Brock stuck his head down from his top bunk. His hair was falling from his upside-down head. "Hey," he said, just quiet enough so no one but Arianna could hear him.

"What now?" Arianna complained.

"So, what's the deal? I mean, I don't want to sound ungrateful, I'm having a lot of fun with you guys, but..."

"That's great. We're not supposed to be talking."

Brock looked over at the counsellor who was watching over them during their one-day detention. She was staring out the window, barely conscious.

"Just, I don't know, is there... I mean..." He examined Arianna's face for any crack in emotion. She didn't flinch. "I mean, it's weird. In my mind, I can really believe I'm just another girl in camp."

Arianna eyed her friend suspiciously. "Are you talking to me? Because you're not making any sense."

"I just thought I should tell you, just in case it means anything. I just... If you have anything to do with this, I wanted to..."

"Okay, fine!" Arianna said, exasperated with this conversation. "Now shut up before we get caught!"

"You've made this a great summer. I've never had a best friend before."

"Jeeze! Are you going to start crying? I'm fed up with all this drama!"

"I just wanted to say thanks, because if you're doing this... But if you're not doing this, then..."

"If I say 'you're welcome,' will you stop talking?"

"Sure."

"You're welcome. Now quiet."

"Okay." Brittany said, as she pulled herself back up onto her bed and laid her head into the pillow. She floated into a wonderful, crazy daydream. She dreamt of an endless summer.



Time passed by quickly. The days were long, but the kids burnt through them like there was an everlasting supply. The four girls spent almost all that time together. They worked on their tans, did the stupid camp-mandated craft projects, disrupted some of the camp activities and made a nuisance of themselves to the people looking after them.

There was the time they all decided to have a canoe race to the other side of the lake, which resulted in Shannon breaking her wrist and having it put in a cast. Everyone signed it, the three biggest being Arianna, Michelle and Brittany – of course.

There was the food fight that covered most of the mess hall in mashed potatoes, which the girls had *nothing* to do with. Starting such a fight by throwing food around was just so beneath them. Obviously.

When the camp went on that nature hike up into the hills, they wandered off to go see exactly what was on the other side of those hills. They returned late that night, much to the displeasure of the counsellors. But they were loaded up with candy and soda they bought from the mini-mart they discovered there. Which is exactly what four young kids need. More sugar.

When they had the Camp Olympics, Jelly Bean cabin finished dead last. That was probably because for most of the events, Arianna, Shannon, Brittany and Michelle were just trying to make each other laugh rather than win. The consolation prizes they were awarded, condescending ribbons that read “Great Effort!” were worn with ironic pride for the rest of the camp.

Somewhere along the line, they started to do their hair alike. And dress alike. They all cut off the sleeves of their polo shirts the same way. And all four had stripes of yellow and blue paint they had put on their cheeks. Indian war paint. They called themselves the Jelly Bean Squaws.

Then someone told them that ‘squaw’ was actually a Native American word for cunt, and they stopped doing that.

But that was alright. They didn’t need war paint to show the bonds that had grown between them.



The cabin was a beehive of activity. The twelve girls who made Jelly Bean cabin their home were madly scurrying around, doing everything they could to prepare. It was tonight. It was just hours away. It was the night of the dance.

The meager supplies of beauty products that were available were being traded around. Deals were swung for mascara, lipstick, nail polish, perfume and zit cover. It was frantic. The girls made the floor of the New York stock exchange look like a nap in the park. More than one minor cat-fight broke out that night.

But the girls had prepared for this. Well, at least Arianna had – and her wealth of stuff she had been saving was more than enough for the four. They had all the things they needed to be the best looking girls in the camp that night. And they would have settled for nothing less.

They still had to fight for space in front of the one small wall mirror in the bathroom, though. They were two deep, crawling on top of one another to see themselves. They were frantic. It was the last night. The last chance. The first time most of them had seen boys in weeks. And in just hours, they would be back home, under their own roofs and back where they came from. Their parents, their friends, their siblings and their established reputation would keep them hamstrung for another year.

They had one shot. One more chance to make this the summer they grew up. And this was it.

Shannon did Brittany's nails, Michelle did Arianna's hair. Brittany borrowed Michelle's necklace, while Arianna fixed Shannon's makeup. They hardly spoke to each other. They really didn't need to. They were nervous wrecks.

Especially Brittany.

She didn't want to have to go digging through a pile of guys to dance. Oh, maybe she could somehow find an excuse not to dance with a guy, but she had already been thinking about it all week, and everything she came up with sounded lame. And besides, she didn't want to let her friends down. They were all going to have a really great time tonight, unless she spoiled it by being a prude.

So she had already decided. If she was going to have to dance with someone, she was going to dance with Dallas. He'd be there, and she knew him. She liked him. It was the only thing she was comfortable with. And she had made up her mind.

Of course, Arianna was also probably thinking maybe the same thing. And though she felt awful about stealing a guy from Arianna, she was prepared to do just that. After all, a beautiful rich girl like her would have her pick. She really wouldn't be that disappointed. Right?

Well, even if she was, they'd be able to get past it. Arianna wasn't the type to let a boy get in between them.

So, as the time grew nearer to leave, the frenzy for last-minute repair and fine-tuning became furious. A fight was breaking out every minute between girls fighting for cosmetics or jewelry. The four girls didn't get involved, although Michelle and Arianna got a little snippy over who's earrings were exactly who's.

Like they had gotten used to, Michelle, Arianna, Shannon and Brittany had all dressed alike. They were wearing T-shirts, tied tight by a knot in the small of their backs. It made the shirts fit snugly to their bodies. They had managed

to get together four skirts, which were all of the same length. And they had all put on simple flip-flops for shoes.

The hours of concentrated effort on doing their makeup had done very little to enhance their appearance. Very little – to the untrained eye. For those who knew, they'd notice the crisp outlining of the eyes in mascara that made them look deeper and more alive. They'd notice the smoothness of the skin, with the slightest bit of makeup applied to it.

Which wasn't easy, as their summered skin had bronzed over the past several weeks, and the pale makeup hues the girls had brought with them were no longer usable. They borrowed some from an Asian girl in Justin Timberlake Cabin.

Yes, the girls voted for the names of their cabins.

Even their seemingly perfect sun-highlighted hair was given tremendous amounts of care and grooming. For everyone had seen their "everyday" hair. Now it was time to make it "special occasion" hair. This was accomplished by taking the lustrous, thick hair they had and imbuing it with elixirs, cremes and solutions that promised to make their hair... lustrous and thick. And as was the fashion for the girls, they all wore it the same way. They combed it straight and flat against their skulls in front, with a huge sweeping bang that was practically glued to their heads. They added a flower in front, and the rest of the hair was then twisted and clipped askew at the back.

Ms. Purcell and her sour expression turned up ten minutes to the hour and led the girls to the tennis courts, keeping them in line and marching with military precision. The tennis court had been dressed up, strewn with lines of small bulbs, sparkling in the dusky sky, like Christmas tree lights. Why Christmas tree lights were in a lakeside summer camp was a bit of a mystery, but they had found them and used them to great effect.

Once they had arrived, they gradually clumped up in small groups, lingering around people they knew. With so much anticipation and so little to do, the tension and anxiety was thick in the air. If harnessed, it would have powered a small city for years.

Ms. Purcell stood at the entrance to the courts, checking her watch and looking rather annoyed. But gradually, a rustling noise could be heard approaching in the distance. As the girls strained their eyes to see into the darkness beyond the cyclone fencing, they didn't see much for a while.

But eventually, the figures of the boys could be seen. They were in single file, dressed in full scout uniforms. They looked as uncomfortable as people could look, marching to a dance in ridiculously archaic clothes. They were led into the tennis courts, and stopped just before entering. Their scout leader blew a whistle and yelled "*dis-perse!*"

The boys milled in, staying close to the fence. As they did, the girls instantly chose the other side of the court and stayed close to that fence as well.

"You're late." Ms. Purcell yapped at the scout leader. She showed him her watch to prove it. "Two minutes."

The scout leader shrugged. "Sorry, Maggie. I tried to set a..." The rest of their conversation was drowned out as someone, somewhere started to play music through horribly distorted speakers. It was a shrill little song by some pop artist no one really cared much for.

As Michelle, Arianna, Brittany and Shannon huddled tightly around each other, they promised that they would go find a boy to dance with “soon.” Long after “soon” had passed and had become “later,” they were still promising.

Three songs had played out and so far, no one had budged an inch from their entrenched positions on either side of the court. They barely even looked at each other, stealing glances as they tried to look too distracted and involved to pay any attention to one another.

But some time during the fourth song, a few adventurous boys ventured forth into the void. Some were repelled by girls too shy or too conceited to accept the offer. But a few did succeed, and were awkwardly swaying to the music.

The pressure was on. Brittany knew that any moment, Arianna could make her move. She had already spotted Dallas across the way, and he looked ready to move as well. If there was anyone who was brave enough to come and ask for a dance, Dallas was the one. It was just going to happen any moment.

And sure enough, with his eyes trained on Arianna, Dallas took a few steps forward. Realizing she had no choice, Brittany rolled up her skirt to shorten it by a few inches and then intercepted Dallas before he could make it all the way.

“Hey, remember me?” Brittany said, smiling brightly.



Dallas's attention was broken from staring at Arianna, and he refocused his attention on the girl in front of him. He seemed to come to a realization, as he did so. "Yeah, you're the one who screams."

"Screams?" Brittany replied, puzzled.

"A few small jumps on a jet ski and you were clinging to me for life." He said with a superior look on his face. "I suppose you want to dance?"

Brittany was taken aback. "Well... I was, um..."

"Hey, me and my bud. Jake. We're a package deal." Dallas said, thumbing in the direction of his friend. "He needs a date, too."

He said yes! Brittany thought to herself. Sure, it was kinda conditional, but Dallas had said yes!

"Arianna!" Brittany said, approaching her friend. "Arianna, Dallas is gonna... With me! Ohmigawd, can you believe it? I'm *serious!*"

Arianna, didn't say anything, she just scowled back.

"But, can you, like, do me a really really big favor?" Brittany saw the squinting, angry eyes staring back at her, but for one reason or another didn't seem to fathom the meaning. "Pleeeeeease?" She begged.

"What." Arianna said. It wasn't a question. It was just a word.

"Um... I know this is a lot to ask, but I was just hoping, and Dallas said that he need to do this for his friend, and that the only reason I ask, cuz it's really really important an' stuff." She paused for a moment before she realized she had never actually gotten around to asking the question. "Could you go with Jake?"

Arianna took her sweet time to size up the situation. "So let me understand this. You want me to dance with Dallas's toady little friend over there so you can have Dallas all to yourself tonight? Is that what you're asking me to do?"

It didn't sound that nice when Arianna read it back to her. "Uh, Yes?" Brittany said, wincing at her own audacity.

Arianna took a deep breath, scowling as she did. She arched her back, like she was about to let loose with an explosive tirade that would have left a crater where Brittany was standing. She didn't do much more than that, though. She brought out a finger to point and accuse, but it just got waved listlessly before going away.

"Fine!" She said sharply. "But you owe me!" Glimpsing a look at Jake and comparing him to Dallas, she added, "I mean you *really* owe me."

"Honestly?" Brittany replied. "You don't mind?"

That was a mistake, as it gave Arianna a chance to reconsider. The scowl came back, and then went away. "Yes." She said as firmly as she could.

"Thank you thank you thank you!" Brit hugged Arianna quickly, so she could get back to Dallas. "Thank you!" She said again. Brittany ran off a few steps, stopped and ran back to Arianna. "Well, come on!" She said, grabbing her friend by the arm. She dragged her friend clear across to the other side of the tennis courts, and flung her in front of Jake. "Arianna, you remember Jake, Jake you remember Arianna. Okay? Great! Good." Brittany quickly then turned to Dallas. "Deal?"

"Yeah, sure." Dallas replied with a grin. He put his arm around Brittany's back and guided her out to center of the ersatz dancefloor.

"What are you doing?" Brittany asked, unsure.

Dallas looked down in her eyes. "You wanted to dance, didn't you?"

Before Brittany had a chance to reply, Dallas had already started to sway to the music. Not wanting to look like a fool, standing still while Dallas started to dance, Brittany found herself joining in. She really didn't want to dance. She just wanted to talk. Or something. She wanted to see him again. To just hang around. That sort of thing.

But it wasn't that bad. She knew she could dance. Everyone told her that. Of course they might also be saying that she had just gotten the best-looking guy to spend the dance with her. And that wasn't so bad either. Following Dallas's lead made it fun. She wasn't following a pre-set routine, but working off whatever Dallas was doing.

When she caught the eyes of Michelle and Shannon looking on, she jumped around wildly or a brief moment. It was just like the dancing they did the night they got caught. Michelle and Shannon snickered. Looking over at Arianna, she was definitely not snickering, a look of resignation on her face.

Smiling, she then returned to the attention of Dallas, who had his eyes locked on hers. No sooner had that happened, then the music



quickly changed tempo. It slowed down. And Dallas wrapped his arms around Brittany and held her tight to his body.

She had no idea where Dallas could have possibly learned how to waltz, but that's exactly what he started to do. She looked up again, seeing the intensity in his gaze. Brittany suddenly felt her legs go weak. She was having trouble saying on her feet. But Dallas compensated, holding her even tighter than before.

She found herself leaning into it, letting Dallas hold her as hard as he wanted to. She looked back at the other couples dancing, and noticed most of them looked nervous and uncomfortable. Some had even separated, rather than endure the closeness of a slow dance.

Brittany looked into the eyes of her dancing partner again and wondered what could possibly make them uncomfortable? She wasn't uncomfortable at all.

The music suddenly changed tempo again and became a fast dance song. The floor flooded with kids, as they could now just let loose and do whatever they wanted. Lost in the crowd, Dallas took Brittany by the hand and led off off, out of the tennis courts and behind one of the nearby cabins.

"You having a good time?" He asked.

Brittany nodded back. She really couldn't speak. There was this weird, pulsing sensation that was taking her over. This odd sense of longing. Of needing.

Dallas set her against the wall of the cabin and leaned over her, bringing his face close enough to talk in a slight whisper.

"That's good," he said. "I'm liking this too."

Was this what it felt like? Was this what it felt like when you were attracted to someone? All this time, it never seemed real. It was all just bad songs and flowery language. But now it was real. It was true. You actually could feel something when you were attracted to someone else.

When she looked into Dallas's eyes, it was clear that he wanted something from her. And Brittany knew she wanted something from him. It just wasn't quite clear what that something was.

But the longer she remained in Dallas's arms, the longer she looked into his eyes, it felt like she was getting closer to knowing whatever this needing was. And the closer his lips came to hers, it seemed like this answer was just so close she could taste it.

Letting go with her lips after many long minutes, Brittany was sure she had figured it out. She had figured everything out. It all made sense to her now. She tried to catch her breath, but her own impulses overrode her and she went right back in, wrapping her hands around Dallas's neck and dove deeper into the unknown. Just in case she might forget something she had just learned.

"Has anyone seen Brittany? Shannon asked Arianna and Michelle.

"Last I saw she was leaving with that guy." Michelle said.

All three of them looked around quickly, coming up with nothing. They all knew what it meant.

"Oooooo..." They said, intimating the answer to the question.

The more kissing Brittany had done on Dallas, the more she wanted to do. She also mad made sure she left one doozy of a hickey on his neck. That way everyone would know he was... Well, everyone would know, and that's what she wanted.

As her breathing slowly returned to normal, she placed her head on Dallas's shoulder, listening to his heartbeat. It was racing just as hard as hers was. She had never felt so close to someone before. So complete. So peaceful.

As Dallas unclipped her hair and started to run his fingers through it, she started on massaging his back, and working her hands lower and lower. Dallas was doing much the same.

Then she got a whiff of something. A harsh smell.

"What's that smell?" She asked.

"Smell?" Dallas replied. "What... Oh, it might be from painting the boats. It's probably the turpentine."

Brittany sniffed harder. It did smell like alcohol. Like turpentine. Like... She inhaled deeply. The smell went straight up her nose and hit her brain like sledgehammer.

And it dislodged memories. An avalanche of memories. The shed. The TV. Arianna tying her up... No. Him up. He wasn't dreaming. This wasn't a game. He wasn't one of the girls. He was Brock. Brock McCade. It all suddenly came back. In an instant.

Without a word, Dallas was pushed away, and fell on his butt. He couldn't even utter a word before he realized his date had run off.

"Was that Brittany?" Shannon said, looking off into the darkness.

Michelle looked around in random directions. "Where?"

"I thought I saw her..."

"Where!?" Michelle demanded to know.

"Over there."

"Over there?"

"No, over there!"

"I don't see anything!" Michelle whined.

"No, she was running. She's not there any more."

"Well, where is she now?"

"I don't know!"

"Well, why did you..."

"Never mind!" Shannon said, exasperated. "Forget about it!"

"I'm going to find someone to dance with tonight if it kills me," Michelle said.

"Same here."

They both stood there without moving.

"I'll say you danced with a boy if you say I did."

Shannon nodded. "Deal."

Brock walked back and forth the length of the entire camp twice, trying to make reason with what he now knew. He returned to the shed to see it, look inside and see all the things he remembered. The things burned into his memory. The ropes that bound him. The cloths they used to knock him out. He went to the stables to see the horses. He went to the dock.

There, he stood and stared out across the waters for many minutes. He knew what he needed to do. He needed to stop this. He needed to stop her.

Brock returned to the dance and found Ms. Purcell. "I need to talk to you, Ms. Purcell."

She turned and gave him little notice before returning her attention to the dance. "What about?" She asked.

"I can't tell you here." He said. "We need to talk in private."

"I have other things to worry about tonight. Maybe..."

"Now." Brock said, with a tone of voice Ms. Purcell hadn't heard from this person before.

"Just a few minutes, then," she said, and they walked to her private cabin.

"Do you know what Arianna has done!? Do you know what kind of things she's done to me?" Brock said.

"I don't want to get involved in your childish quarrels."

"This isn't childish, Ms. Purcell. I'm not a child."

"That girl has done evil things to me, Ms. Purcell. Evil and illegal things!"

"Has she?"

"She's a monster! She..." Brock made sure they couldn't be heard as they entered the cabin. "You remember when that camper ran off on the horse? Do you remember when that happened?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was me. I got thrown and was knocked unconscious. Arianna and her cronies found me, dragged me back to a shed, bound me up and drugged me! I tell you, she's dangerous! She's..." Brock was reaching the crescendo of his anger. "I'm going to turn her in to the police! She needs help! She needs to be locked up!"

Ms. Purcell just looked at Brock, her eyes dead. "Well isn't that going to be wonderful."

Brock wasn't sure at all he had heard her correctly. Did she understand him? That definitely wasn't the reaction he was expecting. "You don't understand. I'm not this Brittany character. I'm Brock McCade, and I'm..."

"Yes, yes. You're male. I know that." Ms. Purcell responded. "Everyone here knows that."

Brock's jaw, dropped as far as it could drop, hanging limp. He gathered it back up so he could speak. "What do you mean, 'everyone'?"

"Well, what exactly do you think is going on here?" She snidely remarked.

"Everyone here at the camp is well aware of what's been going on. How could anyone *not* know?"

"That can't be true!" Brock objected.

"Do you think we're all fools? Do you think we wouldn't notice when a boy comes into camp, disappears, and then a girl who looks just like him materializes out of nowhere? Of course we know."

"Why aren't you doing something about it, then? Why hasn't anyone said anything?"

"Five thousand dollars for each camper's college fund and ten thousand dollars for the other camp counselors. And she's buying us new cabins for next year. That's why we haven't said anything. Arianna Whittington's family is rich beyond your conception of the word. She can purchase whatever reality she wants."

"She paid you off?"

"And you weren't aware of this? I assumed you were in on this from the beginning." She glanced at Brock in his skirt. "After all, you certainly didn't object."

"I couldn't remember what happened!" Brock said. "And you should have asked questions!"

“She paid all of us not to ask any questions. As far as we’re concerned, you were to be treated like any other camper. All we had to do was not let on. And frankly, you make such a wonderfully sweet girl, I’m sure most of us here don’t even know why they’re being paid to believe something they were already convinced of.”

“This is insane!” Brock yelled. “You’re all sell outs!”

“Call it what you want.” Ms Purcell was curt. “But I’m not sorry.”

“Not sorry!?! She had me tied up in a shack for a week! I was given enough fumes to cause brain damage!”

“Well, I am sorry about that, but I didn’t know.”

“Oh, thank you very much for your heartfelt concern.” Brock reconsidered his options and returned to his threat. “I’m going to call the police! This is fucking nuts! You’re all fucking nuts!”

“Well, you’re not calling anyone.”

“What!?” Brock replied. “Is that a threat?”

“Do you know what’s it’s been like to deal with that spoiled brat year after year? Arianna Whittington is a monster. She’s not fit to breathe as far as I’m concerned. She uses her family’s money and power to ruin the lives of anyone and everyone she comes into contact with. She’s as evil a human being as I’ve ever met, and...”

“That’s just my point!” Brock interrupted “We need to stop her from ruining people’s lives, Like she did to me!”

Ms. Purcell raised her voice. “Ruin you!?! Ruin *you!*? She’s been wonderful to you!”

“Aren’t you listening!?! She tied me up and...”

“Yes, she may have done that. And she’s gotten five camp directors fired, dozens of counsellors thrown in jail and sent near a hundred campers home – just because she didn’t like them! And she just doesn’t get rid of them, she’s relentlessly devious.” Mrs. Purcell looked like she may have been speaking from experience, now. “She makes plans to torture them... Imprison them in debt or force them into a life they don’t deserve...” Ms. Purcell approached Brock slowly. “But ever since you... Ever since Brittany’s been here, Arianna’s been a thoughtful, decent... I can’t even believe I’m saying this... Arianna’s been a normal kid.” Ms. Purcell turned her back to Brock and headed for a chair to sit down in. “When you three marched into this office and helped your little dope-smuggling friend there, it was the most shocking thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Shocking?”

“The Arianna Whittington I knew would have never done that. She’d have thrown all of you under the bus. She’d never have taken it upon herself to share the blame. That girl has never shown one ounce of humanity at any time I’ve ever been cursed with her presence!” Ms. Purcell fell into her chair, letting her arms go limp. “In all my years I’ve never seen anything like it. One day, she’s a... A... Scourge to society, the next... She’s... She’s just another kid goofing off with her friends.”

Brock shook his head. “So what?”

“So, if you call the police, you’ll just anger her. Her family will pay whatever they need to keep it quiet. There won’t even be an arrest.” Ms. Purcell sighed. “And that despicable little devil-child will destroy us all.”

“If she’s ruining people’s lives, she needs to be stopped!”



“Of course she needs to be stopped!” Ms. Purcell barked. “But trying to teach her a lesson by threatening her doesn’t work. Believe me, I know!”

The look in her eyes made it immediately clear that she did, indeed, know. Brock wanted to ask, but he didn’t. He could feel a flash of the anguish and torment this woman was holding inside, and it was overpowering.

Mrs. Purcell refocused her eyes on the desk in front of her. “She doesn’t respond to pressure. She doesn’t respond to threats. They just make her angrier.”

“I’m not going to let her get away with this!” Brock declared.

“The only thing left for her is you. You and your little friends. Don’t destroy that! Don’t destroy what you have!”

“I’ve got nothing!” Brock yelled even louder. “I’ve got nothing, never had nothing and I’ve got nothing to lose!”

Ms. Purcell thumped her desk with her fists. “If you want to learn the hard way, then be my guest. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She walked past Brock as she left the room. “The phone’s on my desk if you want to use it.”

Brock watched as she exited. He slowly walked to the desk, stared at the phone, and then picked up the receiver. He dialed 9-1-1. "I want to report a crime," he said.



After he had finished telling his story to the police, Brock realized he had to go back to the cabin. He let himself out and wandered over to Jelly Bean cabin, watching a few people gather up the strings of lights and pack them away in cardboard boxes. The scouts had left, and everyone else was already in bed.

"Where have you been? *Hmmm?*" Shannon asked as Brock entered. "Staying out late after the dance?" She said, using the most insinuating tone.

"Just had to do some stuff." He looked to his bunk, where Arianna was waiting for him, already under the covers.

"You didn't." She said, accusingly.

"No, I didn't." Brock replied. He stripped himself of his clothes, pulled on his nightshirt, and climbed up to his bunk. He wished he could be anywhere in the world but here right now. He felt as if here sleeping above a time bomb. Someone who could ruin his life with any tiny whim.

"I saw you kissing him." Shannon said, from her bed.

Brock laid down, wrapped a sheet around him and turned to the wall. He wasn't going to have to wait long. This would all be over soon. "Yes, I kissed him. Like any other girl would."

"I knew it!" Arianna said, enthusiastically. "You *did* have a crush on him!"

"Yes, Arianna. You wouldn't have it any other way."

And no more was said about it.



The next morning, the sound of a fleet cars coming into camp woke Brock up. It was early. Too early. But he knew what was happening, and maybe he could just sneak out and not be seen. That was probably for he best.

Brock was the only one left in the cabin, the others having left the place in a hurry. So he gathered up his stuff, or rather, Brittany's stuff, and dressed himself for the long trip ahead. He didn't want to be seen. He could probably slip out of the area if he worked quickly.

Shannon came running into the room in a panic. "Ohmigod!" She yelled, in a panic. "Where's my hairbrush!?"

"Michelle has it," he replied. Shannon ran back outside. "Michelle!" She yelled, angrily.

Brock stepped out cautiously, peering around the corner. The cars were choking the gate area, rounding up the campers.

It was the parents, returning to pick the kids up and take them home. No, it wasn't the police barging in, asking questions, arresting people. When he had called last night, the cops had laughed at Brock's story. He told them everything that had happened to him. And they never took him seriously for a moment.

In retrospect, Brock couldn't blame them. He spent the night thinking hard about what had happened the past six weeks. And the honest truth was, he had gone along with this. He was even more a willing participant than those who had been paid. He thought he had been tough and independent, living like he did, outside of society. But at the first sign of human kindness, he threw everything away – everything that made him the person he was. And he knew he should be ashamed of himself.

Should be.

He realized he had already walked half way to the gate before he remembered how he wanted to sneak out. Maybe he wasn't sure anymore that it was the right thing to do.

"You were right, she had it." Shannon said, brandishing the hairbrush she was looking for. "The little thief."

"I guess I'll see you around, Shannon."

"Are you coming back next year?" She asked.

"What do you think, Shannon?"

"Oh," Shannon said, suddenly contrite. It was over. There was no more pretending. "Yeah. Yeah, so, I've got to go." She turned and left. Quickly.

"Hey, Brit!" Michelle called. She ran over to Brock and hugged him warmly.

"Promise me we'll keep in touch, okay? And don't you even think about not being here next year."

"Well, I..."

Michelle wagged her finger. "No excuses!"

Brock paused, with a wry smile on his face. "But I've got one hell of an excuse, though, don't I?"

"What could possibly..." And then the obvious seemed to catch up with her.

"Uh, right."

Brock thought he might have been a little too abrasive. "Listen, I know that..."

Michelle suddenly looked frightened. "Uh, my parents are waiting for me. Gotta run." She then sprinted off to a waiting car.

Brock sighed, and looked for Arianna. Two down. One to go. He might as well just get this out of the way. All he had to do was look for the large limousine in the group of cars, and there she was.

"You know, don't you?" Arianna said, the first thing out of her mouth.

He wanted to lay into her right there, and tell her off. She deserved it. She deserved anything he could come up with.

"It was a great summer, Arianna. I'll... I'll never have another like it." Brock said, forcing a smile to his quivering lips.

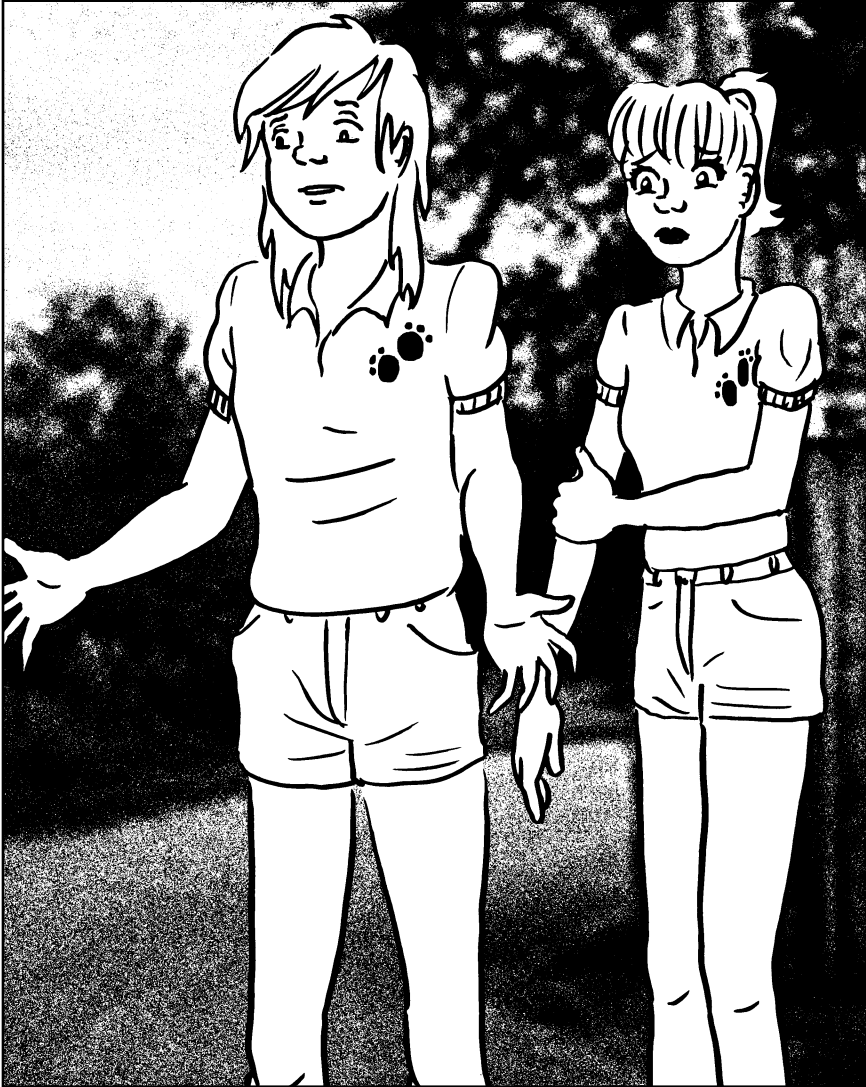
"There's always next summer." Arianna said.

Brock slowly shook his head. "I don't think it works that way for me."

"You can come back. If you'll be here next summer, I'll come back. I'll make sure everyone does."

Brock wiped something from his eye. "It's going to be a year, Arianna. I'm going to be growing older. And I don't know where I'll be or what my life will be like. And one trip to this camp is enough."

A sad realization of the truth struck Arianna's expression like a slap to the face. "I don't want to think you hate me," she said.



Brock turned away, not wanting to let her see his pained expression. After what she had done, after what he knew about her. That she could even ask such a thing.

“Are we still friends?”

Brock gained control over his emotions enough to turn back and face her. “You did a lot of stuff that hurt.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I really am.” She reconsidered how well she had expressed that sentiment. “I *really* am. I wish I knew what to say.”

“Just remember that real people have real feelings...” Brock stopped himself. “Crap, I don’t want to lecture you. Just don’t do stupid shit like this.”

Arianna nodded eagerly. "I know. I know I know I know. I'm just sometimes so... Out of control." She clasped her hands together and looked Brock in the eyes. "Are we still, I mean, even in the smallest way... Are we still friends?"

"We're best friends," Brock replied. "Best friends forever."

Arianna's face was saying a thousand words. It was an apology. It was regret. It was love. It was goodbye. "I'll miss you, Brit," was all she could say. She closed the door on the limo, pausing half way for one last, sad, mournful look.

Then it slammed shut.

The motor started up, and the big black beast eased forward. It pulled off the gravel and onto the road and picked up speed.

As Brock looked on, he could see the silhouette of Arianna's head, dimly visible in the small tinted window at the rear of the car. Brock wondered if she was facing forward or backward.

Brock watched as it pulled away. It was going down the highway, slowly dipping over a hill, and then gradually rising up the next.

The sun was out in the clear sky. It was a nice day out. Looking one way and then the other, it was tough to decide which direction to go.

He looked once more at Arianna's limo. The last moments. He enjoyed this sensation of lingering in the present as it turned into a memory.

Then – it may have been a trick of perspective – as he looked on in the distance, Brock wasn't sure what he was seeing. The limo was going up and down the rolling hills, and it looked like it was slowing down.

The End

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