

Full-Fledged Indian: A Novel

BY

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The first time that Rory Strasser and I really spoke, she was teaching me how to dive. It was still early that first summer. The campers would not arrive for a week still, and the directors filled our days with menial tasks to get the camp ready. I had just spent that entire morning combing through my long-jump pit, picking out any small rocks or animal turds that might give the impression of a mediocre instructional. If it were not that, then I would surely have been assigned to one of the crews tasked with repainting all the bunks, or made to line the fields or count plates in the Dining Hall. That of course was if there was no meetings on camper safety or resource management to attend. At the end of the nine-day Orientation, they could have hauled in the worst horde of monster-spawn children and we would have been glad.

The swim test served as one of the dubious highlights of Orientation. Some state regulation required that every staff member needed to be able to swim a lap in our roped-off pool. The swimming was not the hard part. The problem lied in the fact that even my mid-June, the average lake temperature hovered barely above an Arctic level. Scuba instructors wore full-body wetsuits to the test. Directors suddenly had to be pulled away for important phone calls, or would discover new inventory checklists to thumb over. Veteran counselors bribed their friends on the swim staff to falsify their records. No ploy was too deplorable.

I too would have begged out of it, if not for Rory. We had talked before, but never directly at each other. I had been her noticing for a week at that point, where she sat in the dining hall for those first few informal meals, or across the Fieldhouse as we underwent team building activities. I thought that she was shy and demure from the way she let escape a little squeal during the trust fall exercise. I spent a few days orbiting the veteran girls that took her in, and we talked in a roundabout way, which mostly consisted of me nodding along to something she said in response to someone else, or offering lame answers to the most basic questions. I couldn't imagine that this good-looking thing in soccer shorts would actually have an interest in me. I mean, I did okay back home, but that was without being surrounded by a cadre of Australian water-skiers and their nationally mandated five-percent body fat.

She stood at the end of the dock, looking entirely comfortable in her red lifeguard suit. As the line formed to take the test, I did some quick math and placed myself in her rotation. When it came my turn, I attempted to walk casually down the dock while also keeping the muscles on my upper body tense. She greeted me with a smile, said my name.

"Is there supposed to be some goal I'm shooting for?" I asked.

She checked something off on her clipboard. "Don't drown."

"You are about to be so impressed," I said.

I lined my toes up with the end of the dock, gripping the edge of the wood-grained plastic. Without giving myself time to contemplate the serene, lunar-cold surface before me, I leapt forward. The shock of the water caused me to spring back to the surface as soon as my feet touched the soft clay of the lakebed. I held the dock with one hand.

"Ready?" I asked.

Rory put her free hand on her hip. The other instructors were already moving on to their next swimmer.

“What the hell was that?” she asked.

“What? I dove?”

“You did?”

“I think so.” I was never strong in water sports. Early on in my life, I discovered that a swift doggy paddle would get you where you needed to go more often than not. Diving seemed too extravagant, I told myself. If I could keep my head above water, I was doing just fine.

“That sucked, Lee.” She set down her clipboard and reached out for my hand.

“I’m not letting you take the test unless you can manage a dive.”

I paddled out a few feet out of her reach.

“That sounds abusive.”

“Come here,” she said, trying to coax me in with her hand, as if I were a boat looking to dock. She got on her knees and extended her arm, displaying an ample chasm through the neck of her suit. A few strands of hair, drying from the lake water, swung between us. “You’ll be so proud of yourself.”

After briefly considering the effects of pulling her in after me, I accepted her hand and climbed back on the dock. I immediately regretted my decision. The slight morning breeze brought about a full-body shiver. I eyed with envy those on the opposite dock and the giant beach towels they had procured.

“This is fun.” I tried to keep my teeth steady as I spoke. “Really really great.”

Rory proceeded to tell me the proper way to bend my knees, and to lead with my arms and then my head. It all sounded so simple coming from her, and I almost believed that I could do it. My second attempt resulted in me smacking my midsection against the water, which led to the interesting combination of freezing and burning. I coughed out a lung’s worth of lake water upon surfacing.

“That felt better,” I managed to say after a minute. Rory regarded me with an expression that was equal parts charmed amusement and blinding frustration. I didn’t think that flavor was possible until that moment, though I would come to know it quite well. Finally, she shook her head and picked up her clipboard.

“Maybe if you just promise not to drown this summer.” She made a few marks with her pen.

“Tell you what,” I said. “What if I buy you a drink tonight, and you’ll pretend that I’m not a liability at the waterfront?” I floated on my back and gave one good stroke with my arms, and returned to the dock. After my second jump the water no longer seemed so cold.

“You guys sure you don’t need some extra help down here?” I asked. “Looks like you still have a lot of work to do. Maybe I could test out those sail boats.”

“Two drinks, and make sure you dance with me so that Fink kid can’t.”

“Three,” I said. “And you promise to leave him out of it.” I lifted myself out of the water, and flopped onto my back on the dock. I coughed again.

“It’s a deal,” Rory said, and then nudged my shoulder with her bare foot. “So get back in there and swim your lap. I have a job to do.”

1. In this corner

We called him the Jittering Jew. He was a young boxer that came to offer the camp a brief clinic in the finer points of punching. He appeared before the assembled camp with his fists already gloved, and his red satin robe appearing vaguely obscene in the late July heat. His manager announced him as “Dancin’ Danny Rosen” and signaled to the DJ booth, where the AV guy pressed a digital button and a song heavy with synthesizers and guitar riffs rattled from the ceiling-mounted speakers. Rosen emerged from the side door, a sad New England Boxing Association belt – really a red, white and blue strap with a few shiny plates the size of coffee saucers – raised above his head.

“If this leads to him telling me to drink my milk and say my prayers, I’m leaving,” Adam said from over my shoulder.

I looked back. We held our customary spot in the Fieldhouse, a corner of the bleachers that was up high enough where you could put a rafter between your eyes and whoever was down on the court expecting your attention. Adam and I were co-counselors, and our five campers sat around us. They were the oldest kids in camp, and saw some of these evening activities as little more than a required nuisance. From up there Adam and I kept a lid on them, for the most part.

“That hypnotist from five summers ago, the Great Gangino, he was worse than this,” I said. “The volunteers ended up faking the whole thing because they felt so bad about it.”

“They weren’t faking,” said Ack, one of my campers. It was my seventh summer with him, the most of all my campers. I remember him throwing up when he was ten and took a bet to smell the swill bucket in the dining hall, and then I shuddered when I realize that he now has a driver’s license.

“They most definitely were faking,” I said.

“I’d take the Great Gangino over the Jittering Jew any day,” Adam said, putting a stamp on the conversation. He was the one who came up with the nickname earlier that day, when the clinic was announced after breakfast. The name picked up steam in the dining hall, and soon the entire camp body – which was ninety percent Jews from Boston and Miami – was chanting “Jittering Jew *clap clap clapclapclap*.” I thought that there was an aspect of Hebrew pride going on, but that good will was lost in the muggy clench off the Fieldhouse.

The gym was packed to capacity, the youngest campers spilling out along the baseline of the court. The space-cadets among them flicked the springs of the gym doors, or tried to attract the attention of one of the camp dogs. Their counselors alternated their tasks crowd management – mostly sleeve tugging and quiet hissing – with bouts of amused indifference to the proceedings. It was the night before Visiting Day, and Right Now was just about killing time.

Rosen had just finished narrating a highlight reel of his short career, which climaxed in his fourth round knockout of a Mexican boxer I kind of remembered from the classic sports channel. The final part of the video featured the beaten veteran giving a post fight interview, speaking with a towel atop his bruised head. After the lights came back up, the manager cackled and called out, “Hey Danny, you remember the sound his body made when it hit that canvas?” to which Rosen lowered his head a tiny bit and shrugged. I picked up the cadence of a routine hastily written and performed into the ground night after night, and the boxer’s shoulders reflected that. It only lasted a second

though if it was even there at all, and he quickly sprang back up onto the balls of his feet, his smile cocky.

“Like a bag of meat, Mike,” he said. There came the predictable laughs and hoots from the younger campers below. I craned my neck and after a few seconds spotted Rory, her brunette head a blur of reproachful shaking. One of her special little guys had an arm fully through a hole in the screen window, grabbing at I don’t want to know what.

“So again, it’s about perseverance, duty, and responsibility,” the boxer said, repeating something he learned from his early training days, when no one thought that an undersized kid from Newton, MA (big cheer from the crowd) would ever make it in the boxing game. “Not exactly things you hear about in the real world today, huh?”

“Great, the toughest guy ever from my hometown and he dresses like my nanna,” Ack said.

I felt a tap on my other shoulder. Karp, another of my campers, slid into the open spot next to me.

“Lee, let us got back to the bunk. C’mon, this guy sucks.” Karp was a tall as me, and probably the most athletic kid at Arrowdance. He was the best hoops player, the only kid in camp history to get a chunk of his hair caught up in the backboard of the main court. He could even an athlete on par with the Jittering Jew, I thought, but Karp didn’t lean towards the bloodlust. He was much happier tossing the younger kids into the lake during Free Swim, or making an ass of himself while flirting with the female staff.

I shook my head. “You’ll have time for whatever else once this is over. And he’s not that bad.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, adding some extra glum to his tone. I knew he wanted to go meet one of the kitchen staff girls someplace illicit, such as the driving range or softball dugout. Still, he started to scoot back up the bleachers. He paused, and asked, “Hey, my parents wanted to know if you’d come out with us tomorrow.”

“Can’t,” I said right away. “I’m already going out with Rory and her folks. Apparently two summers is as long as they could wait to meet me.” My tone was neutral with a hint of overt matter-of-factness. I reminded myself that lunches between intimidating parents and their daughter’s summer boyfriend were meant to be times of celebration and mirth.

“Oh,” he said. He had a smirk across his face. “So have fun then.”

“Thanks Karp,” I said, and turned back to the show. Rosen had shed the robe at some point, and hopped from heel to heel. Little pools of sweat collected on the hard-clay floor. He threw lazy crosses and jabs while the manager, a real slick character this guy, called out different combinations and descriptions. When Rosen would purposely botch a move, the manager would groan loudly and shadow-box a quick POW!POW! for those in the front row, flop-sweat flying.

“Maybe these kids aren’t getting the full picture,” he said after a few more minutes of watching his guy throw fake punches. He laughed to himself and threw up a theatrical index finger. “How about we amp things up a notch?”

This was apparently an important moment, where presentation morphed into clinic, and one of the camp owners stepped out onto the court. His name was Dave and he was a younger guy, someone who ten years ago had his own place in the corner of the bleachers. He and Aaron, the other one, were in their first summer of running the place,

and maybe in future years they would have the experience to think twice about giving the impending go-ahead.

“You’re all going to get a chance later to come down here and learn some things from Danny Rosen,” Dave said, raising his voice to the level of camp director. To veterans like me, our ears heard it as slightly unnatural, maybe the way like if you used to be in the same frat as the guy who was now president of the country, and you remember the time when he passed out while wearing nothing but a lobster bib and gym socks. “But first,” he said, holding up a hand to those who wanted their turn right now, “we need one volunteer to help Danny warm up.”

I was caught up in watching Rosen bob and hop his way around a small, invisible square, facing inwards and now throwing real punches. The air created a sheen to his skin, and there was a cool, machine-like quality to his movement. His earlier act of merely going through the motions was over, and now it was possible to see precision and intent in his form. I did not notice the whispered conspiracy taking place around me, and when Dave came to our end of the bleachers to grab a volunteer, his voice snapped me back to the moment.

“Okay, how about you, Lee?”

“Yeah, how about Lee!” Ack shrieked, and I turned in time to see his finger, along with a number of other camper’s fingers, pointed in my direction. I attempted to protest, or failing that, to smack as many people as I could in the head, but already a chant had emerged from the crowd. I looked down to the court, where three other volunteers waited, none of them over the age of eleven. Their hands were already taped into junior-sized gloves.

“So much betrayal tonight,” I said through clenched teeth. I made a good show of holding my aching back as I climbed down to the floor. Despite my protests though, I felt a little bit of pride. The camp cheered my descent mostly in earnest, I thought. It was the middle of my seventh summer, and somehow I had achieved a minor-level of camp personality.

“You know, I still have all my original teeth,” I said to Dave as he handed me a pair of target gloves. “I’m kind of proud of that fact.”

Dave grinned and began to walk back to his spot under the basket. “Just don’t call him the Jittering Jew,” he said softly, just within earshot. I stage whispered that I never did call him that, but his back was already turned. Instead, I scanned the assembled camp before me. Two hundred and fifty campers, plus about a hundred counselors and directors sat shoulder to shoulder. The Fieldhouse was one of the oldest buildings in camp, having served at one time or another during its sixty years as a basketball arena, hockey rink, theater, and dining hall. During my first year, the infirmary staff turned it into a giant sick bed, when a bad shipment of foot-long hotdogs took down dozens of staff and campers. I survived that, just as I planned to make it through this episode.

Most of the camp focused their attention down the line, as one of the young campers rattled soft jabs off of Rosen’s torso. The kid could not have been more than seven or eight, one of the Venezuelans that get shipped up every summer by their shady and monstrously wealthy parents. Adam smirked and shouted, “Magical,” something of a catchphrase that had caught on in recent weeks. I made a show of scratching my nose with my middle finger. The target gloves muddled the message a bit. My campers laughed.

A cheer belched out as Rosen mimed receiving a tremendous uppercut, staggering down to one knee. He pleaded with the camper, who swung at the air despite being lifted a foot off the ground by one of his counselors. Finally, the kid relented in his assault, and pounded fists with Rosen.

"This little guy reminds me of someone," Rosen shouted as the campers was received like a conquering hero.

I caught Rory's gaze. She sat at the far end, and when she noticed my attention, she leaned forward so that I could see her full face. I gave her a sheepish wave coupled with a good smile. She raised her brow and gave me her best "of course that would have to be you down there" look.

"Here's the deal," the manager said, suddenly breaking the connection. "Danny's going to come down, swing a few times, give some tips to the crowd. You're not going to puss out, are you?"

I raised my flat-palmed gloves to his face. "Just hold these things up?" He looked like his name should be Doc or Pauley, a clump of missed whiskers growing defiantly under one cauliflowered ear.

"Yeah. And don't get any ideas of playing to the crowd, trying to be big shot. Champ's got a fight in five weeks, and would have no problem dropping your ass."

"Because that's what I'm planning to do," I said as a half-assed joke. He must not have picked up that half though, because he just gave me a sour expression before shuffling off.

Rosen plowed through the next three volunteers. After a counselor led the Venezuelan back to his seat, the boxer demonstrated the proper way to evade incoming fists, which would be very helpful if your next opponent was a lactose-intolerant twelve-year old with ADHD. Volunteers three and four received the same treatment, the chance to interact with what I began to think of as the human equivalents of a trained circus bear. He would put up with the requisite amount of humiliation, but dangle a real nice chunk of salmon before him, and he can't be held responsible for his actions.

Those were my thoughts at least, watching him slowly approach me. First thing I noticed was that he was shorter than me, not quite a foot but still something significant. His hair clinging to his forehead heavy with sweat, and he regarded me quickly before putting his head down and resuming his predatory bob.

"I think Dancin' Danny is ready to redeem himself, after the beating you guys put on him," the manager shouted. A few laughed, but most sat waiting quietly. Rory smiled and bit her lip. The manager leaned in close for a final word.

"Remember, just keep your hands up and try not to sneeze."

I nodded and raised my gloves, seemingly just in time to intercept the first of Rosen's punches. I imagined he was going easy, contacting the targets with light jabs and hooks. Within ten seconds, I felt a burning ache in my shoulders. Keeping my arms raised for an extended time would have been hard enough without the Jittering Jew peppering away.

Seconds became minutes. The manager barked out numbers in an increasing elaborate code, and Rosen instantly threw out a new combination, and then again three or four more times. I began to fall into a lull, between offering a decent amount of resistance to the punches and really trying hard not to flinch. Rosen barely made a noise,



the only sound in the Fieldhouse being the taut *thwack* of his gloves meeting my padded palms.

I noticed Rory standing now against the side wall, not exactly a look of concern on her face, but maybe something approaching it. It was our second summer together, and she had just finished her freshman year at Penn. She was a very attractive female counselor at a boys' summer camp where the male staff outnumbered the females nine to one. So to have her worried about my well-being and facial structure when she could have had her pick of any number of guys with actual futures and career options, I felt pretty lucky.

A number of things happened very quickly in the time between this point and a few seconds later. I smiled at Rory, and I think I shrugged in a simple "look at me, the giant idiot" manner. Adam later recounted that the movement seemed to snap Rosen from his motion, jarred him from his dialed-in routine. Suddenly the dangling salmon was showing some life after all, and the well-trained bear got a vivid memory of cold rushing water and crisp mountain air. I don't know about that. The manager stated that I created a new angle by shrugging, and Rosen's carefully aimed uppercut glanced off the pad and connected squarely with the side of my face. And that I was lucky that it was just a deflection, he added, or else I wouldn't have gotten up so quickly.

The short of it was that I heard what could have been a wet mop hitting a tympani drum, and then all the walls and ceiling parts shined extra-white. That was it for me and Rosen that night.

Rory sat on the corner of my bed, her hand keeping the ice pack in place. I don't want to say that that was the first thing I remembered, because bits and pieces of the meantime did exist. Getting back into the bleachers, taking a few pats on the back and trying to joke it away, having kids shout, "Good job, killer!" from their porches as I walked down the hill, back to my bunk. Lying down on the bed though, it all started to reform into one coherent tale. With some help from my campers, of course.

"The best part," Ack said from top bunk across the cabin, "was when you popped back up and kept shouting 'No big deal! No big deal!'"

"I do remember that," I said. A feeling akin to having my brain caught in a bear trap accompanied my head nod. "So you see, I'm alright." I was aware of no less than three different tunes playing from various music players, and from the backroom I heard our contraband GameCube revving up another round of Tiger Woods. I then looked up to Rory. "How long have you been here?" I asked.

She regarded me for a few seconds, and I tried to decode that unspoken bond that I liked to believe we shared. How I could just look into her greenish-brown eyes, and see the nurturing instincts just waiting to pour out.

"Yeah, he's definitely dumber than he was before," she called out to the bunk. She brushed a curl off her forehead and returned her attention to me. "I was the one who made you go to the infirmary, and then walked you down the hill. Remember that?"

"No yeah, that. Okay," I lied.

"Sure," she said, poking at the side of my head with my finger. "They said to take it easy the rest of the night. It's probably not a concussion."

I sat up, and immediately regretted it. It felt like I was towing a tractor trailer behind my skull, and when I stopped moving it just slammed forward into the hitch.

“As long as I’m healthy, then,” I said, and looked around the bunk. I saw from an alarm clock that it was not yet ten-thirty, so we still had forty minutes or so before lights out. The main room of the bunk was just a big open space, with bunk beds along the walls. There was room for twenty campers plus counselors, but our bunk roster was undersized this summer. It was my kids’ last summer as campers, and from the eighteen campers I had seven years ago, only the five made it through this far. The rest either took a trip to Israel, or were forced into summer jobs, or just discovered that life actually exists back home in July and August. The few that remained though, we had been through a lot together, and I took a good bit of pride from knowing that they would chose no other counselor than me.

And this cabin was our reward for sticking together all those summers. Bunk 14 was one of the few original buildings left standing, back from when Arrowdance was a winter logging and fishing camp. The cabin may have holes in the bathroom floor, where if you sit on the can at night you think you can see the eyes of possums reflecting the light off your bare ass, but that only added to the charm. The windows and ceilings lacked the fancy insulation of the new bunks that the owners built further up the hill. We were right on the lake. We could hear loons calling out at night, and our porch was the best place to watch a storm roll over the lake. When the nights got colder in August, we just grabbed extra blankets.

Most important though, was that spending a summer in a place like Bunk 14 reminded you had a place in the history of Camp Arrowdance. On every exposed surface, every panel of wall space available, past occupants had written their names and years, or inside jokes between bunkmates. The rafters, toilet stalls, and dresser drawers were all similarly tagged. Brave individuals even made makeshift scaffolding in order to write bunk rosters on the ceiling. Adam and I moved in a few days before the campers arrived, and I immediately reserved a small space on the coatroom’s wall for our bunk. The Bunk 14 campers of 1979 claimed a panel directly over my bed, and I’ll probably remember until my dying days that Adam Hershmann won the Uncle Henry award, and that Louis Riffkin liked it in the ass.

“Where is everybody?” I wondered aloud. The novelty factor of the short-term memory loss was losing its charm, and I realized that of my five campers, Ack was the only one accounted for.

“Josh and Frasier are back there,” Ack said. He pointed to the backroom without taking his eyes off of his beloved fantasy football magazine. “Garrett is in Bunk 12, and Karp, you know. Lauren texted him. Rifle range.”

“Gross,” Rory said. She shared the opinion of most of the other female staff, that the boys of Arrowdance needed to be protected from the devious girls of local descent. When I first started at Arrowdance, the old owners hired the kitchen servers from overseas – large Eastern Europeans that would invade the lakefront during their hour off between lunch and dinner, smoking cigarettes and sporting blue Speedos. When the Dave and Aaron took over they conveniently lost the former Soviet Bloc’s phone number, and began hiring girls from the local high schools. We all agreed that it was worth the step backward for global relations.

I didn’t really disapprove of Karp’s frequent absences most nights, as long as he was back when the lights went out. In a few weeks my kids would be high-school juniors, and I thought we could take some liberties with the official rules. And to be

honest, I didn't believe the owners would ever press us on it, not with them being former campers themselves. If the stories were to be believed, the Bunk 14 of ten years ago used to welcome rowboats from the sister camp every Saturday night.

"Listen," Rory said, pushing me back down to the mattress. "I got Newbie to cover for me, so I can hang out here if you need me." Newbie was one of her co-counselors in Bunk 20A, up in the sophomore village. He was from New Zealand, and got his nickname because he was almost indistinguishable from one of his campers, more like a mutant ten-year old with a funny accent.

"You're nice," I said. She put the icepack over my face and patted my head. I felt the coolness transmit through the thin towel and into my eyeballs, and the thumping sensation in my temple started to fade away. I needed the softness of the bed and the slight scratchiness of the camp-issued blanket. Tomorrow was Visiting Day after all, and I would need some level of strength to bear all that went with that.

"I didn't look stupid, did I?" I asked. "When I got hit? I can't really picture it."

"It wasn't the worst," Rory said. "You didn't fall down or anything. Maybe it just sounded worse than it really was."

"It feels pretty worse," I said.

"Well," Ack said. "Your head kind of snapped around. But it didn't look like he hit you that hard."

"Okay, so thanks for that, Ackerstein." I was about to make a rude comment about regarding his manhood when I heard footsteps kicking gravel outside, and then heavy footsteps onto our porch. The screen door banged shut.

"No Fink, go away," I heard Ack say.

"Jesus, someone punch me in the face," I muttered.

"Man, you took a fucking dive, huh?" I swept the icepack from my forehead and regarded the skinny counselor before me, leaning against my dresser.

I thought that Ari Finkelstein got a bad rap. He probably wasn't the biggest liar in camp history, but he did once tell everyone that his dad once managed Boyz II Men. His campers were low seniors, just going into eighth-grade, and they loved him. They gave him twenty dollars so that he could buy them ten dollars worth of porn, and he always scored them an extra night in the camp arcade. Everyone else thought he talked too much and tried too hard to be your number one buddy, but he was harmless. Mostly.

I sat up. "I was just told that I took it like a man, so I'll go with their version of it."

"Yeah, maybe," Fink said. "It doesn't matter though. Boxing's a dying sport these days." Fink of course professed to be an expert in Krav Maga, the Israeli art of street fighting. "Where's Adam tonight?"

I thought for a second. Adam was not in the bunk.

"He's up at the fire," Rory said for me.

"Cool," Fink said. "I'll probably go up there in a while. Not much else to do on an in-night. You can come up with me."

"Tempted," Rory said, "but someone has to look out for Glass Joe here."

"Seriously," he said. Fink shadow-boxed an uppercut my direction, and turned back to Rory. "Hey, we saw your sister yesterday at Matoaka. We went over for the social."

"Yeah, great. You didn't give your boys any advice, did you?"

Fink shook his head. “Didn’t need to. My boys are gentlemen.” He then walked over and opened the fridge. “Which of these are yours, Ackerstein?” he asked.

Ack slammed his magazine down and heaved himself off the bunk. “That’s my last one, Fink,” he said, reaching for the can of pop in Fink’s hand. Fink warded him off with a bony fist, and sat on an empty bed.

“Your parents are taking you to Wal-Mart tomorrow, so don’t worry about it. I remember the drill.” Fink was a former camper, like most of the veteran staff. They grew up at Arrowdance, and then made the shaky tradition to full staff member. Some, like Fink, never really left the camper side behind. “Between the five of you, after tomorrow you should all be set for the rest of the summer,” he continued. “I can’t wait until my kids are high seniors. We need a fridge bad.”

“I really don’t need the extra attention,” I said as I swung my legs to the floor. “This wasn’t the first time a regional champion got a clean swing at me.” I tried to stand in the manner of one without a scrambled brainpan, but only half pulled it off.

Fink took a long swig from his can and grinned at Ack, purple soda running down his chin. Ack flipped him off and went to the backroom. Fink waved and turned to me.

“Hey, I saw you at the track during instructionals. What were you having them doing?”

“We were visualizing our races,” I said. Track was what the owners actually hired me to teach, but seven summers is a long time to demonstrate how to run in a circle. “Track can be mostly mental, you see.”

“Because from the soccer courts, it looked like you were just sitting around the discus circle.”

I shrugged. “It can look like that, yes.”

“Oh hey.” Fink snapped his fingers. “The reason I came down. I was standing outside the office, and I heard Dave telling the unit leaders to do a bed check at eleven-thirty. So like, in a half-hour.

That made sense. On a normal night, I’d let my kids do their own thing after the lights were out, as long as they were quiet enough to keep the heat off me. But with Visiting Day tomorrow, the owners wanted to make sure the campers actually fell asleep before midnight.

“It’s just that Karp won’t be back by then,” I said.

Fink nodded. “That’s what brought me down here. I’d go find him, but I’d rather be at the fire.”

“That’s fine.” I stood there for a full five-count, hoping my silence would transmit the necessary question. The rifle range was about as far away as it could get, and I only half-trusted my senses at that point.

“I’ll cover the bunk until you get back,” Rory said. She pushed my flip-flops over to me with her toe. “Just be sure to tell Karp that this needs to be the last time.”

Because he’ll listen to me, sure, I thought. I was probably the last person that could reasonably lecture Karp on the unseemliness of his activities. Relationships between the staff was not against the rules – the owners didn’t even bother to discourage it. Rory was six years younger than me though, which still surprised me when I thought about it. I had no problem admitting that I could be a bit challenged when it comes to maturity.

"I'm not entirely pleased with this." But I slipped my toes into the sandals and kissed Rory on the mouth. Ack gave me a curt cheer as he entered the room. I silently cursed the fact that I was on-duty, which meant that I was forced to spend the night in my own bed. I had grown used to sleeping in her room in the women's cabin, before sneaking back down the hill before the sun was up.

"Just try not to get beat up between here and there," she said.

"So how are things with you and Rory?" Fink asked me. He was kind enough to escort me to the top of the hill before our paths diverged. A right turn at the flag pole took you past the arts and crafts huts and the maintenance building, and then all the way to the back entrance and the counselor parking lot, where there was a near-nightly bonfire. I needed to continue up to the ball fields, where the rifle range was shoved into a small valley behind the theater.

"We're good." I didn't want to offer much more than that, given my audience. I knew that in a little over two weeks I would be back home. I wasn't looking forward to giving a long distance effort with Rory another chance, not after we flamed out miserably last winter. That topic didn't come up between us when we saw each other again this summer; we just fell into the same exact relationship as the previous summer, as if we were both just waiting to repress the play button. But now, our unspoken pact to not mention anything post-camp was becoming more and more of a material thing, something round like a basketball that we kept tripping over whenever we were alone together. And if I told Fink any of that, it would quickly become a very-much verbal thing.

We had reached the top of flagpole. A small group of foreign counselors stood waiting for a pizza delivery. I nodded at them, a little envious of their position. They were on some grand adventure, off in exotic central Maine. Those that didn't go back home to university or whatever either stuck around town and lived off their summer paycheck, or they charmed their camper's parents into a series of one or two month winter visits. Come next summer, repeat.

"So, you think Karp's banging that kitchen girl?" Fink had not yet made his necessary departure.

"I can't imagine."

"One time when I was a camper, I hooked up with this girl at a Mega-Social. In the bus, while everyone was still dancing."

"That's not true though, is it?" I said once we reached the flagpole.

He didn't seem taken aback. "No, well, we went to junior high together, so technically I already knew her."

"Okay then, have fun at the fire." I began to move away, but Fink quickly closed the distance and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, have you heard anything?" His leaned in close and kept his voice low enough so that the others could not hear. I glanced over at the waiting group. They didn't even seem to notice our presence. I felt bad that I couldn't place their names with their faces. Most of the summer had already passed, and I hadn't bothered to get to know most of the newer guys. My first summer, I would have been over there with them, waiting for greasy corner-store pizza.

"Heard anything about what?" I responded.

“You know, from the owners. War drums beating, Chief Stafford, that sort of thing.”

“Oh yeah. No.”

“What else could I be talking about?”

“I haven’t heard anything yet,” I repeated.

“Okay,” Fink said, and gave me a sympathetic look. “I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Thanks.”

Fink nodded, and pushed back away.

“Just let me be the first to know,” he said loudly.

As I was walking away, I heard him trying to score a free slice from the foreign guys.

There was an expression that I had heard some of the older directors say from time to time. It went, “Follow the money up the hill.” These were hardened veterans from the sixties and seventies, holdovers from the previous administration who probably wondered how it came to be that they now took their orders from a pair of former *campers*. What the phrase meant was that you could follow the evolution of Arrowdance simply by walking up the hill. At the bottom, along the lakefront, stood the old hunting lodge, *the* original building. If you graduated from counselor and became some kind of junior director, you lived there. Every night in the lodge was a party, and my kids could lie in their beds at night and manage to catch up on all the important gossip.

Scattered around the lodge and lakefront were the original cabins, and nothing below the flagpole was built after the moon landing. Then in the early seventies, the ownership passed from an older brother to the younger, and that’s when the theater and street hockey rink appeared, among other things. The fields all received lights, and electric scoreboards dotted every basketball court. The summer tuition began its steady climb, so that now I could afford to go to college for two years with what these parents paid for seven weeks of soccer and waterskiing. Arrowdance and their competitors tipped off a summer camp arms race. We now featured the only little league sized replica Fenway Park in all of camping, complete with working Citgo sign.

I went to church camp one summer, back in grade school. You could ride a pony, and one time we grilled hotdogs. Arrowdance had a high-definition media room and three professional golf holes. Though no one ever made mention of my decidedly lower-middle class background, I still felt that I would always be at least one degree removed from most of my friends up here.

I turned off the road once past the dining hall and followed a gravel path to the rifle range. That the camp still entrusted kids with live ammunition was one of the remaining mysteries of Arrowdance, a place where the directors long ago cracked down on pillow fights and recreational drug use. I thought of Karp’s habit of taking on more than he could handle as I stepped gingerly along the dark path. On clear nights, your best bet was to look at the sky and follow the path of stars visible above the trail. The range sat on the far border of camp, like a marble on the end of a long, thin finger. Even after almost seven summers, I still sometimes got creeped out when walking through the woods alone. Boulders jutted towards your shins at uncomfortable angles, and headlights

from the highway created a slide-show effect through the trees. I sensed bears and deer and wolverines all around me.

“Karp?” I called tentatively once the range structure became faintly visible. I heard the sound of bodies rustling on cheap foam. The rifle instructors made their students fire from their bellies on old mattresses, and the thought of making out with anyone on those element-exposed relics gave me a shiver. A pale head peered over a wooden railing.

“Lee?”

“Yeah.” I felt uncomfortable standing there, in the darkness without even a flashlight. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was stepping over some unspoken boundary, like I was impugning on the natural rights of a sixteen-year old at summer camp.

“They’re checking the beds in twenty minutes or so,” I said, looking away as they both came out from the shelter. “I need you back in the bunk.”

“That’s cool. We were just talking about school and parents.”

I nodded. Lauren stood next to Karp. If she was embarrassed about the intrusion, she kept it to herself. She looked like what I imagined a camper would think of as the ultimate summer fantasy, all track shorts and tangled hair. I knew that she played soccer for her high school, and that she and Karp could probably share a lot of interests in a conversation. What that meant to them, I didn’t know. What I was certain of, though, was that when the parents showed up tomorrow, she would be the one serving from the buffet line and saying “sir” and “ma’am.”

“I heard you knocked out some boxer,” she said by way of greeting.

“It was closer than it looked.” I shot Karp a look that was lost in the darkness. We made quick time back to the main road, where we stood for a few seconds. It didn’t matter to me that they probably wanted me to give them a few seconds. My headache had gained a second wind, and I saw faint rainbow swirls when I glanced at the dining hall’s floodlights.

“I’ll see you in the bunk,” I said to Karp. “I’ll walk Lauren to the gate.”

He looked about ready to mount a protest, but started down the hill after a quick wave good-bye. I watched him for a second, still caught up in the stark contrast between his mature frame and childlike demeanor. He probably already let this last incident slip from his mind, now only concerned with what cabin windows he could make lewd sounds into.

“So, you don’t really need to walk me to my car. I got someone waiting for me,” Lauren said, and I suddenly realized the potentially awkward situation I’d put myself in. Karp probably thought that I meant to actually scold her, and I would be lucky if that’s all Lauren thought.

“I didn’t mean to get Seth in trouble,” she added.

“What? No, I – ”

“I mean, Seth really sweet. He’s a fun kid.” She began walking up towards the main gate, where the day staff parked.

“I know. But the summer’s almost over, I just hope you guys are aware of that.”

She snorted, and I winced at the words coming out of my mouth. What I really wanted to say was the she better not Mezibov my kid, but she wouldn’t get the reference, and even I knew how out of line that would make me. Jon Mezibov was the Karp of the early nineties, a legend that the campers still talked about when the lights were out. He

had girlfriends all up and down the cove, and he would sneak out at and visit a different one every night. The he impregnated one of the girls, Jon's parents got involved, and camp had to settle to avoid a lawsuit. I then remembered that he was bunkmates with the Silverman brothers. Suddenly I wondered exactly how forgiving they would be if they ever caught Karp.

"Seriously?" Lauren said as we stopped at the gate. "I think I'll be alright."

A car engine grunted to life, and headlights lit the lot. I raised my hand to block the light, and heard a car door open.

"My ride." Lauren straddled the fence and swung her legs over scissor-style.

"What's up," said a voice from the white light. I adjusted my hand, and saw a massive frame backlit by the rattling car. The tone was not pleased to meet me.

"Derek, this is Lee. He was coming up to check the gate."

"Okay," he said. "You ready to go?" Lauren got into the car without responding or looking back.

Derek stepped out of the light, now within arm's reach. He was huge, easily as tall as I was, but with sides of beef attached to his back and shoulders. I could only assume that his pullover sweater had to be stitched on anew every time he wore it.

"Lauren's brother?"

"She's my girlfriend."

"Oh yeah, of course. Sorry." I repeated the "of course" to myself. That Lauren had a boyfriend was completely new information, something that would have been good to know. And the knowledge that he was also half buffalo would have helped, as well.

"Drive safe," I said, and waved towards the car.

## 2.

Rory pulled me aside after breakfast. I pulled myself from the mass of campers exiting the dining hall and joined her on the long porch. She looked fresh and beautiful in her staff shirt and khaki shorts. I had yet to shower, or even fully wake up. My head throbbed to some internal beat, only reinforced by the slamming screen door behind me.

"You look like hell, Lee. Did you sleep?"

I shrugged. "A little. I thought that maybe I needed to stay awake as long as possible in case sleep would have killed me." I was not completely up to specs in living with possible concussions, but that one rule seemed important at the time. "Also, do you hear something when I do this?" I stuck my lower jaw out and moved it from side to side. Every time I juked it to the right, I felt a little thud near that ear.

"So my parents will be ready to go after instructionals." Rory probed the side of my face with two fingertips and shook her head, apparently satisfied with her diagnosis. "You're still excited to go, right?"

"Sure," I said quickly, the forced chipperness sounding more alarms in my head. Rory first hoped to introduce me to her parents on Visiting Day last year. Her parents were both successful professionals, he a doctor and she a businesswoman. I met them briefly last summer, and missed a potential lunch date by grabbing a spot on the Orphan Trip, which was where we bussed out all the kids whose parents weren't visiting. It really was the best trip possible, as we stuffed it full of go-carts, ice cream, and matinees



in an attempt to occupy the kids' minds with thoughts other than home. And besides, Rory and I were still a new couple at that point last summer, and I am usually just shockingly terrible with parents. Visiting Day was not my favorite activity.

"Good. Then you better get showered now, so we can leave on time." She pushed herself away with a knuckle to my chest and bounced down the gravel path, soon lost in the march down the hill.

I let the trickle thin a bit before I followed. Through the chain links of the tennis fences I saw that the fields were already dotted with cars, and no less than a dozen sets of parents sat in softball dugouts or on wooden bleachers, shopping bags bunched at their feet. An early highlight of Visiting Day was the Rush, when after clean-up and inspection the bugle played over the intercom and the counselors opened the doors of their bunks. A mad wave of campers ran up the hill, only to meet on the basketball courts by a unified front of trumpeting mothers, their arms wide in a Pilates-toned maelstrom of limbs. By the time the matching son and mother combos formed, the dads had finished their lumbering march, shoulders hunched from the strain of the bags of cookies, chips, sodas, and whatever else they deemed was of absolute necessity. After a few minutes of joyful reunion, the campers would lead their parents back down the hill, to show off their immaculately clean bedspread and neatly kept drawers. We would all then spend a few dozen minutes staring at each other and attempting small talk. I once had parents of my own, but these here were of a different species entirely. Every summer they sent their sons off with bags of new sports equipment, sometimes for sports that the kids never even attempted to play, along with the latest camp logoed shirts and shorts, polos and slacks for the socials, ten pairs of shoes, music players, canvas outdoor chairs, digital cameras, and hundreds of dollars worth of spending money for the days when we took trips outside of Arrowdance. When my campers were younger, we'd unpack their bags for them before they arrived. We filled one whole drawer with a kids's extra baseball pants. And for some sets of parents, you multiply that cost times two or three for any additional brothers, and then you do it every year from age seven to sixteen. Most of my friends on the staff were former campers, and on some long weekends off I would go with them back to their homes in Boston, and try to understand the fact that they grew up items like an indoor pool or a live-in maid named Eva. What intelligent thing could I possibly say?

I sat on a lone volleyball judge's stand amidst a glittering field of luxury automobiles. It was only still mid-morning, but I was already wary of the attentions of campers and their inquisitive parents. On Visiting Day, I became a real-life track instructor. I limited water breaks to two minutes, down from the usual fifteen. I no longer interspersed our stretching routine with long dialogues on past glories or our hopes for lunch. Even if we wanted to wander onto the soccer field to attempt penalty kicks, we couldn't, as the entire upper fields west of our sharply-cornered track had been turning into a makeshift parking lot.

The turnout for today's class disappointed me, in that all my students bothered to show up. They appeared with their parents when the instructional call blew, as if auditioning for the official recruitment tape. I told them yesterday that it wouldn't be the biggest tragedy if they kept their parents away from our demonstration, as there must be more exciting things to watch, such as the kitchen workers setting up the buffet table. Instead, I squared my shoulders in a professional matter and told the assembled group of

my qualifications as an accredited track instructor and began a textbook display of proper stretches.

“Why is this drill called ‘tapioca’?” one of the parents asked me after I sent my group skipping sideways down the track, their ankles crossing wildly with each step. The routine was one of many that I picked up over the seven summers, cherry-picked from the lesson plans of other instructors, guys who ran in college and then stopped working at Arrowdance when that time was up. I remained, and the directors made me Head of Track when no one else was left to take it.

“It’s meant to loosen the ankle joints, keep them fresh,” I said. The parent was of a type that always gave me trouble on Visiting Day, the kind that did the stretches right next to you, and then asked for a turn with the javelin. Last year, one father tried to take a hurdle in slacks and sandals. We spent the rest of our hour waiting for the medical golf-cart to arrive so that it could take him to the infirmary. With this guy today, I gave my answer just a hint of an authoritative tone, hoping that it was dissuade him from asking further, lest it reflected poorly on him.

He nodded. “We called it ‘perestroika’ at Tufts. So, you know.”

“The ‘oika’ is probably key, then,” I said as the students finished their return.

I spent the next thirty minutes demonstrating a baton hand-off in extreme slow-motion while bored mothers swatted at gnats and their spouses gathered in tight huddles. Whenever I had a spare second alone with one of my students, I warned them that they would run extra laps tomorrow for putting us all through this. A part of me wanted to feel bad about trying to shirk the thing the owners actually paid me for, but I ignored it. I displayed my worth in other areas, ones that were not always suitable for parents’ eyes. Other instructors taught sports such as baseball, or basketball. Even golf was more exciting.

Adam joined me soon after the instructional period ended. He threw his tennis racket under the judge’s stand and fell onto the grass of the court.

“My fucking back,” he said as he arched up from the ground. I heard a loud pop, and he collapsed back to the turf.

“Rough instructional?”

“Right,” he said. “That was a piece of cake. I just set up a father-son tournament, and had my underlings take care of things.” Adam, like me, rose to a position of leadership more because of seniority than any real sense of aptitude. At least he could beat his students in a match, though.

Satisfied from his chiropractic remedy, Adam hopped back up. “No, I think it was from the fire last night. Some of the Kiwis needed help throwing one of the old mini-golf windmills into the pit, and I volunteered. Things are very bottom-heavy, apparently.”

I grunted to show that I was sorry to have missed it. From my elevated position, I could see down to the far end of the fields, where the main soccer fields butted up against a line of trees. On the other side of that green boundary was the narrow state highway that connected us to little Oakland and bigger Waterville. Between the trees I saw an increasingly steady flow of rented cars headed away towards town. It was thing of minor importance that the parents not take their kids out until after lunch, but it’s not like any one of us would throw ourselves in front of a car to stop them.

“Fink came by. Said he asked you about the chief thing.”

“He did ask about that,” I said. I hoped that the conversation would end there. I knew that my mere thoughts could ruin this one thing, a little bit of mental alchemy that I dare not tempt.

“Oh. So you really don’t know anything yet?”

I shook my head. “I know almost less than that. But this is how it goes, I think. They won’t tell either of us, or whoever it is, until the end of the month. Even then, that might still be early.”

“Fink was saying that they told Ian during Orientation.”

“Well then, that just shows what I know.”

Color War was one of those things that was impossible for me to explain to anyone outside of camp. It was five days during the last week of camp, where everyone was split into two team. Sports and competition filled each day, and it was the biggest thing ever. Each team had a chief, a veteran staffer that people respected and would say about them, “Yes, he deserves to be chief because he is valued and so respected.” I had a good shot this summer. But those were just naked facts, and did nothing to inform an unknowing public about the passion it brought out among both the men and boys of Arrowdance. I tried once to explain how one kid, no more than seven years old, gripped the rope after his two teammates slipped during a pivotal tug of war, and held his ground for the long seconds it took for them to regain their footing, and the tears he shed after his team rushed to hoist him up when they won. It was something that meant absolutely nothing in December or January, but in the late summer days, it meant more than life to us. For the past six summers I let that feeling take me in and smother my lungs and pores, and I wanted the headdress that came with being a chief.

“Fink lies though,” Adam said after seeing my face. He climbed up and sat next to me. We both wore our official staff uniform – khaki shorts and a white staff shirt one size too small that clung tight to our shoulders and across our backs. One benefit of going home every summer was the perfect tan I gained from spending every day outside, and the fifteen pounds I lost running from camp food.

“Heard you busted Karp last night,” he said after a moment.

“Lucky for him. Better me than one of the owners.”

Adam laughed. “Yeah, but he was complaining about it during clean-up. Said that he was about to receive oral sex. His words.”

“The sacrifices we make.”

“He’s living the dream. It won’t be like this for much longer.”

I recognized in Adam’s tone a concern for more than Karp’s love life. I never talked much with Adam about his plans after this summer, but I knew that he was done with Arrowdance come August. He had graduated from Wheaton in the spring, and was only able to return to camp for this one last victory lap after promising his dad that he’d take an internship in the family’s accounting firm.

“So get this,” I said. “I met Lauren’s boyfriend last night. The guy’s freaking huge. Like a linebacker.”

“Defensive line.”

“What?”

“Yeah, for UNH. Second-team all conference, going to be a junior.”

I shrugged. “No, that sounds perfect. So Karp’s dead, then.” Then, “How’d you know about him?”

“Derek, right?” Adam peeled a long strip of paint from the volleyball stand and rolled it into a mushy green ball. “I don’t know. Karp mentioned it once, thought it was cool.”

“Okay.” Derek the Defensive Linemen. I could see that, all explosive force rushing in for the kill. “Karp told you this when?”

“Don’t worry too much about it. A week ago, maybe.” He paused for a second, and then let out a slow whistle. “That effing Lauren.”

“Yeah.” I had to agree on that, and thought of the way she would hold a tray of bug juice pitchers above her head as she made her way from table to table in the dining hall. A sixteen year old boy could get his brains dashed by an All-Conference Behemoth for worse things.

We let the sun warm our faces for a few minutes as we waited for the call. Next would be an invitation for all families to move down the hill to the waterfront, for a ski show. Two of our campers would form the base of the pyramid, and I promised to watch. Activity still happened all around us. Car doors slammed. The announcement speaker played a jaunty, faintly martial tune, signifying the end of the instructional period. I watched a swarm of shiny beetles down in the grass. We called them orgy beetles, for the way they crawled and writhed over one another. There was a whole mess of them, their colors of their carapaces mixing like spilt oil. A baseball bat pinged, followed soon after by a loud, wooden thud. Someone managed to hit the outfield wall. These were the types of things that I tried to explain back home, when someone would ask why I chose to spend each of my last seven summers in this little place. Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to be Adam, for whom camp is an extension of his social life back home. The idea of an Arrowdance must be familiar, when everyone spent their summers up in the backwaters of Maine. My people, they listened and then nodded and said, “That sounds nice,” after which we would quickly talk about something else. They just never understood that it was good that I had my face warm and bugs fucking at my feet.

“Big day with the Strasser family?” Adam asked. He stretched his legs out and slowly eased off the stand. I reluctantly followed.

“Yes. Big day. Shopping in Freeport and then lunch.”

“You should hope that they take you to a place called Scooner’s. Good oysters.”

“I’ll be sure to request that, yes.” We walked to the end of the tennis courts in silence. Soon we would be at the Fieldhouse, and then a sharp turn to the basketball courts and the flagpole, where Rory said they would wait. A thought occurred.

“Why don’t you come with us? We could squeeze in the back.”

Adam cocked his head just long enough to find a flaw in my plan. “What about Sarah?”

“Yeah. Sarah.” I forgot that Rory’s sister was joining us. Camp Matoaka shared the same Visiting Day, so of course she would be there.

“And besides, I’ve got the whole bunk to myself until tonight. Figure I’ll just jerk one out and take a nap. And then shoot some hoops maybe.”

“Great,” I said. “Just be sure not to mix those up.”

Adam stopped, but I didn’t notice for a few seconds. When I turned, a tennis ball thudded off my chest.

“What the hell?” I said. “You got anymore of those?” I rubbed the sore spot on my pectoral, and then stopped when I realized that it didn’t really hurt. Then I just stood there feeling stupid.

“So what’s the problem then?” Adam asked. “If you don’t want to humor Rory anymore, I’m sure there are plenty of other guys who wouldn’t mind stepping in.”

“When did I say that?”

Adam put his hands up and his palms out, and closed the distance between us. Somewhere close by the sound of an electric golf cart whined by. I turned just in time to see it disappear behind the Fieldhouse, its back laden with cases of Mountain Dew.

“Never orange pop,” Adam said wistfully. “Is it that hard to get right?”

I snapped my fingers to get his attention back. “Seriously, I’m fine with Rory. There are no problems.”

Adam shrugged, and continued down the hill. “You complain. She wants you to sit with her and her kids in the theater. Sometimes you have to hang out on her porch when she’s on-duty. She’s making you burn a free day to eat with her parents.”

“I’m just not great with her parents. They intimidate me some.”

“Dr. Strasser’s a pretty cool guy, actually. He’s in the same club as my dad.”

We approached the front of the Fieldhouse and could see a ways down the hill. Groups of people dotted the small lawn around the flagpole. Further down bunk doors opened and slammed. A pair of families shared the small basketball court, fathers holding toddlers up to dunk. I didn’t yet see Rory and gang. I stopped.

“When I met them last summer, he asked me to call him Jon, and I did, but she never gave me the okay, but I just called her Beth anyways, and then it was just awkward. And that was just talking here, where I could make up a dozen excuses to get away.”

“Hey, there they are.” Adam pointed, and I saw. Rory stood by her sister along the fence that ran under the Chief’s tree, a convertible sedan parked nearby. Her parents read the bulletin board by the office, twenty feet away. Rory wore a white skirt that ended just above her knees, and a sleeveless shirt. Sunglasses covered her eyes, and when I thought she saw me I waved, but she didn’t move.

“You know what you can try, if all else fails?” Adam said.

I nodded.

“Stop being a chickenshit, I guess.” I shook my head and continued down the hill. Of course Adam was right about this thing, or at least right enough to make me feel chagrined. I had three and half more weeks of this place, and only then would I have any real worries. The sun was still warm. Adam clicked his tongue.

“I know. Sometimes it’s so easy, right?”

Sarah saw me first. She grinned and waved in a wide arc, directing me through the mass of parents. Rory’s head snapped up at the movement, but her smile was less exuberant than her thirteen-year old sister’s.

“Look who they let out of camp,” I said to Sarah, as she was the first to greet me. I knew her mostly from the occasional brother-sister lunches Arrowdance held with Matoaka. Her camp allowed her to tag along to see Rory. Sarah filtered everything through an attitude of exuberance and dauntlessness. The younger campers here regarded her as something of legend. There was a picture of her taken during one of our weekly social dances. Someone dared a wide-eyed sophomore to ask her for a dance, and the

photographer captured them after she gamely accepted, her hands on his shoulders and her head a twelve inches above his, as they shifted their weight from foot to foot.

“So do you know what day it is? Can you still do math?” Sarah giggled, and mimed knocking my face in with her braceleted fist.

“That’s funny. Word gets around,” I said, squinting a glance at Rory. She pushed off from the fence and met me. Her hair hung in slow waves and caught the slight breeze that followed me down the hill. She did not seem thrilled.

“We were waiting,” she said. “I thought we said after instructional.”

“It is,” I said. Her parents had not turned from the bulletin board, despite Sarah’s loudness.

“We just got here,” Sarah said. “We had to haul a bunch of stuff into Rory’s room first.” She arched an eyebrow and her sister, and waited for a response. I had a sudden urge to lean back and study the grass at my feet. I could think of a half dozen of my personal things that littered the floor of Rory’s alcove in the women’s cabin. A crafty nineteen-year old girl could explain away maybe two or three of them. Her parents knew of our relationship sure, but hopefully not that much.

“Just go get Mom and Dad,” Rory said. She exhaled loudly and softly touched her forehead to my arm once Sarah turned. Her hair still smelled of shampoo. I put my hand on the small of her back.

“Tough morning?”

“You didn’t change.” She grabbed a pinch of my t-shirt between her fingers.

“It’ll take me five minutes, tops.” I began to make a move for the road.

She pulled me back by the shirt. “No, it’s okay. It’s fine.”

I leaned in close and said quietly, “Did they see anything, you know – ?”

Rory scrunched her eyebrows in thought for a brief second. “What, no. No. They’ve been just talking to me about school and my life. My best topic.”

School was a heavily secured line of demarcation between Rory and her parents, tersely worded emails serving as mortar shells lobbed over barb wire and bouncing betties. From what she said, when she felt like talking about it, was that they wanted her closer, and to pick a useful major by the end of the summer. Not being one to lecture anyone on the importance of choosing the right path, I could offer no more than empathetic gestures. I sometimes forgot that there existed a Rory outside of Arrowdance, one that had to worry about things like her major and career. The Rory I was most familiar both cursed with the Australian water-ski instructors, and hugged her campers when they were homesick, but never appeared unsure of her own self. This moment would have further endured her to me, if I wasn’t distracted by her approaching parents.

“The big man himself,” her father said, extending his hand. His grip was firm, and he held it for a second longer than I expected, my hand momentarily limp. He was nearly my height, and built like a formerly fleet athlete whose genetics were only just now losing the battle to age. I knew that he had to be in his mid-forties, but nothing more than the gray above his ears betrayed that.

“Dr. Strasser,” I responded, and then repeated the exact same greeting to his wife. I forgot what kind she was – not hearts, because the husband specialized there. Maybe brains, or bones. She wore simple clothes very well, and even I could tell that her shoes were impressive. Rory took after her mother when it came to looks, both petite and

brunette and seemingly lethal. She stepped close and I stumbled through the cheek kissing routine.

“Jon and I were just talking about you,” she said. “An old friend of ours from Yale just visited us. He’s been living in Kansas City for the past five years. He’s a writer too. Perhaps you’ve heard of him.” She said a hyphenated name, and I had to shake my head. She clucked her tongue and said that I had to look up his work; he was becoming quite popular.

“Lee did a reading there this spring,” Rory said, then looked at me. “Didn’t you? Kansas City, right?”

“A suburb, a community college, but yeah.”

“Of course, a writer,” Beth said. She smiled. “I am so interested in that. We must talk about that later.” Rory’s fingers dug into my side.

“So I’ve heard that today will involve some shopping,” I said. “I haven’t had a chance to make it to Freeport yet this year.”

“Oh, we decided that Ogunquit would be better,” Beth said. I nodded to show that I saw the perfect sense in that. That town was almost in New Hampshire, hours away and then hours back.

“Ogunquit,” I repeated. “It never sounds like I’m saying that right. But I’m excited.”

Jon grunted. “Remember that feeling,” he said, glancing over the women. He clapped me on the shoulder and led me towards their rented car. The others feel in behind us. “You’ve never been shopping with the Strassers before.”

There was not much for me to do at the Banana Republic than to follow Jon around the men’s section, occasionally flipping my hand through a rack of pants. Hour one quietly fell to hour two. I had not seen Rory since shortly after we arrived. She locked herself in a dressing room, and accepted heaps of clothes from her mother over the door. Sarah was off somewhere on her own. Outside, seagulls landed on parked cars and left white messes on windows, hoods, and door handles.

“I don’t joke, do I?” Jon said. “Whenever a woman says ‘just ten more minutes’, you may as well look for a good place to stretch out.” He chuckled and I joined a second later, although the kernel of the joke seemed old and expected. I found a shirt that I liked and flipped the tag over. I moved away from the rack.

“But I’d rather be out here than in there with those two. Beth promised to hold off on more school talk until after lunch, but you never know.”

I let loose a nervous chuckle, not sure what else to do with his honesty.

“Yeah, Rory might not respond too well to that,” I ventured.

He raised his eyebrow. “Oh, so you’ve met my daughter?” He waited for me to laugh again, and then joined in.

“Did Rory tell you that I used to work at Arrowdance?” Jon said. He busied himself with the buttons on a jacket, turning the cuff inside-out to examine the stitches. I did the same with one near me.

“She did,” I said. Maybe that more than anything was what unnerved me when it came to dealing with Rory’s father. He was once in my shoes, and back then probably spoke of things like possible camp relationships in the same terms as I used to with my

friends, before Rory. There had to be some part of him that flinched whenever he thought of his daughter dating a counselor.

“Were you a camper also?” I asked. I remembered that he was, but thought that this might establish a rhythm to the conversation that I could keep.

“Since I was ten. I think that if you added it up total, I spent a good two years of my life around that lake.”

I nodded to acknowledge the gravity of that statement. Jon Strasser’s name marked a number of plaques and award lists around the dining hall from his camper days, and he was a counselor back in the seventies. That was a time we spoke of in hushed tones, when the atmosphere of summer camps in general made the eighties-era movies they inspired seem tame in comparison. This was back when horseplay was expected, and van trips into town didn’t require release forms.

“I was the one that brought Andy Arenson to camp,” Jon said. “He’s still around, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Ranger’s still around.” Andy was an old man of camp, a holdover from the previous owners, and the new guys were too afraid of him to do anything. He lived in a small cabin on the edge of camp and ran the lacrosse program.

“I met him on a team trip one fall. Told him that Arrowdance might have a place for him. Thirty years ago, and he’s still there. Should have known that he’d go full-fledged Indian.”

I acknowledged the term with a bemused puff of breath to show that I understood the dangers of getting too caught up in Arrowdance, of forsaking a steady career for a series of seasonal jobs that you could quit in time to return every summer.

Jon laughed. “Ranger. You know why he’s called that, don’t you?”

I didn’t play dumb on this one. “It used to be ‘Re-Arranger’, right? After what he threatened to do to the faces of some townies.”

“Close,” Jon said, laughing again. “Except it was Uncle Saul, the camp director. Andy came back, I mean, four or five of us came back late one night after hitting the bars, and we drove right down the hill and parked on the beach. We were singing and throwing bottles onto the metal roofs of the cabins, and old Saul comes marching out of the lodge in his boxer shorts. Did you know that Saul used to be a professional wrestler?” I nodded, as that was another fact that had passed safely into myth. “Andy got right up to him and threatened to rearrange his ugly face if he wouldn’t let them finish their song. Every cabin was awake by now, all standing on their porches watching. Saul just spat and went back inside.”

“He just backed down?”

Jon shrugged. “Andy was fine. He could say those things and get away with it. Saul even made him chief that summer. Speaking of which.” He stopped and waited for me to pick up the cue.

“I don’t want to jinx anything,” I said, feeling lame in my assumed qualifications after hearing that story. I had seniority and that was it. No one could call me a fighter.

“I understand that you have a good shot, though. I envy that. I never had my chance with the headdress. I went Gray every summer I was there. That was almost impossible, if you think about it. But in my last summer, they gave it to Alex Sauer.”



The dejection in his voice took me aback, and for a moment, he was a disappointed college kid again. To be so close to something that important and to not get it had somehow stuck with him, despite his present life.

"I really want to be chief," I said. "I lay awake some nights and plan my speeches, and how I want my war paint to look that night. And the way I'll hold the war club when I speak." I didn't notice if any other shoppers were giving me a wide berth as I spoke – it felt good to actually be saying those words. Jon nodded as if there was nothing absurd about my words, here among the khaki slacks and casual dress shirts.

"But you're Maroon, though," he said after a moment. When I confirmed my allegiance, he smirked. "I knew you weren't to be trusted." He then checked his watch and shook his head.

"I'm fucking starved," he said. "I'm going to call the restaurant and get a table. You can go corral the women." He had his phone to his ear before I could express my doubt of that.

I announced my intentions through the thin particle board of the dressing room door. Beth was currently fetching something in an alternate color or size. Sarah sat texting on her phone.

"It is my job to corral you now," I said to the door.

"Just one second," Rory said. "Is my mom back?"

"Right here," came her voice from behind me, and a satin skirt brushed past my head. Rory's hand snatched it from the air.

"She's impossible," Beth said. She shared a little conspiratorial smile. "Why can't they just listen to wisdom."

I told her that she was probably asking the wrong person for that. "You should see her before she goes out at night."

Beth smiled again, this time with an expression a marked degree cooler.

"Why's that?"

Just then Rory came out and did a little turn for us. The inside of the dressing room looked as the Rapture had taken a flock of young fashion models, just poof and their corporeal existence was suddenly gone and their perfectly assembled attire was left to fall to the floor.

I did my best to give my admiration a chaste gloss. Usually Rory fit the model of spritely, all track shorts and t-shirts borrowed for her campers. Today though, her actual smart glory reminded me that she also belonged to a world of designer tops and fitted denim. She twirled again, swishing the flowing ends of her blouse from side to side.

"A different color," Beth said after a moment of study. "Sarah, come with me." They both left, and Rory regarded me, her eyebrows raised.

"So how's it going out here?"

"Really super awesome."

Rory leaned in close to the mirror and fused with something on her belt.

"You sound convincing," she said, pleased with what she saw.

"You look tall," I said.

"The shoes." She turned and kicked them through the dressing room door.

"You're doing fine, Lee," she said, and came closer. "You don't have to win them over all at once."

I winced. "I have to win? See, that's not really my M-O?"

She took another step, and I prepared for a hug. Her fist hit me hard in the chest.

"You won me, so shut the eff up." She smiled in a way that made her eyes wink up and I really loved her an extra amount there.

"But if they start talking about your old boyfriends, I'm walking back to camp."

"Not much chance of that," she said. "They hate all my boyfriends."

We ate a late lunch of lobster and other seafood items. Despite my seven New England summers, I never managed to master the art of destroying my lobster meal in order to eat it. The organs inside the red shell grossed me out, especially the parts that were edible. I found the actual meat delicious, but hardly ever found the work required to get at it worth it. I usually dug around the tail for a few minutes before giving up.

"You grab the thorax I think it's called, and just supply some good torque," Jon said. Surely he knew what a thorax was, but I appreciated the gesture. He grabbed the boiled animal and held it above his plate. His forearms were huge compared to the rest of his arms, and he broke the shell apart in one savage twist. Fishy juices squirted across the table.

"That's gross, Dad," Sarah said, shielding her shrimp pasta from the spray. I sat between her and Rory, their parents across from us along the railing. The restaurant sat suspended over the Atlantic on wooden timbers, and when I looked down, I could see gray surf between the boards of the deck. The sun still had a high purchase in the sky, but the breeze off the water made us shiver.

I thanked Jon for the demonstration, and set to work on my plate. We made small talk before the food arrived, and then assaulted our meals with the full brunt of our hunger. Crab legs and clamshells rattled off the table and our toes. Sarah aired a hushpuppy over her parents' heads towards the ocean, and squealed when a seagull snagged it midflight. She was quickly told not to do that again.

"You're awfully quite, Rory," Beth said after putting her napkin down over her plate of steamed clams. "Tell us about your spring, about Penn." Rory had been tapping her toe against my calf, but when her mom mentioned the name of her school, the rhythm hit a bump.

"It was fine," Rory said. She went back to picking through her fries.

Beth stared at her daughter for a second, and then gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. She then focused her attention on me. I suddenly became very interested in something floating in my vodka cranberry. I tried to get it out with my finger.

"How about you, Lee?" Her mother rotated her eyes to me. "Rory said that you're getting a degree in communications."

I wiped my hand on my napkin. "No, I already got that one. I'm in school to be a writer now."

"A writer?" She said it with a wide-eyed sort of wonder, to convey that I must be some kind of god-damned visionary to think of a career path like that.

"Yeah," I said. "If not now, when?"

"He will be a writer," Rory added. She made a defensive position out of the word "will", a fort from which I could weather any barrage. I gave her toe a quick grab as it rebounded from my leg.

Jon leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table.

"I think that's really admirable," he said. "Giving it that one shot, huh?"

"You should lend Rory some of that ambition," Beth said. "Two semesters now at that school, we've yet to see anything for it."

"That's really unfair," Rory said. She was about to say more, but Beth put her hands up in a consolatory fashion."

"I didn't mean it like that, dear. We just would like to see some direction. You've changed your mind so many times, we can't keep it all straight sometimes. Accounting, business, law, journalism. We don't know where you got this meandering way from."

As I shrunk into my chair, I caught a glance from Jon. He looked smaller with every word he didn't say, and I wished he would jump in and refute the "We" in his wife's rhetoric. The tapping against my leg grew more pointed, as if providing a prompt.

Jon spoke up, but addressed it to me. "Once you get that degree, you could settle anywhere. You ever think of the East Coast?"

The sudden change in topic caught me between mental steps, and I stumbled for my balance.

"Maybe," I said. "There's no real rush for me to move. I'm not one to make any big moves or anything like that."

"Really," he said, and he bit a tiny section of his lower lip. "I think you'll find that you could really like it out here. Well, not here. But there are some great opportunities around Boston for a guy like you."

All I said then was, "Maybe", and glanced over his shoulder to the cold waves approaching the shore. There was something more I needed to say, or should have said, but something stopped me. An old boat crossed my vision, lobster traps stacked along the stern.

Rory would tell me later that it was obvious what he was getting at, that I was cruel to not see it, that her father was on my side. Instead I just repeated myself to Jon and said that for the time being I had all that I needed back in Kansas. The beat of Rory's toe stopped, and the meal was over soon after that. I reached and took Rory's hand as Jon signed the check, and squeezed the slender fingers. Her eyes failed to meet mine when she turned and smiled. The sun still gave the same warmth as when we sat to eat and the water continued to gurgle below us. I imagined the steps I would take if I lost my keys in water like that, the chances of retrieval minimal. Maybe a wallet instead, or something of more importance. The waves continued to wear away at the bleached wood.

### 3. That night at the fire

On the far corner of camp we kept a bonfire. It sat in the middle of the counselor parking lot. Unlit, it was nothing more than a smoldering hole, a foot deep at most. In daylight, the lot was the color of ash and gravel, with only an old storage building and a single line of trees separating it from the highway. An access road ran from the highway down to the lake, servicing not only the back entrance of camp, but also a smattering of local houses and docks. On still days you could just barely hear the loud speaker as secretaries made announcements or called campers in for phone calls. When I found

myself out there on occasion while the sun was up, I sometimes fooled myself into thinking that I someplace else, neither camp nor home, but just away somewhere amongst woods and rocks.

At night we built the fire from the broken-down bunk beds and old wooden bleachers found behind the storage shed. We came to the bonfire after the office played Taps and the on-duty counselors took over the watch. Counselors gathered next to cars, deciding who would ride in what with whom before hitting the town. Others pulled thin benches from the woods and sat around the fire, drinking beer from cans that they kept under blankets in the car trunks. The fire was popular with the underage counselors, especially late in the summer after the bars began collecting their fake IDs. By ten o'clock a car or two of kitchen girls and their townie friends would show up, and somebody would begin playing Bob Marley or Dave Matthews Band from their car stereo. The Silverman brothers even stopped by on occasion. They rode in on their patrol golf cart and sat parked at the edge of the lot, sipping from their bottles. They would soon be surrounded by their friends and end up being the loudest group at the fire. One night I was volunteered to drive them back to their duplex cabin by the basketball courts. I nearly lost Dave from the backseat as I drove over a large rock by the back gate.

During the camp day it was easy to fall into your own sub-group among the staff. Most of my friends by now were veteran counselors, almost all of them former campers. We concerned ourselves with the life of camp, the histories and competitions and all the legacies of numbers and colors. Why did Maroon only beat Gray by twenty-one and a half points in 1998? Why was the varsity basketball coach so criminally misusing Karp in the low post? What about the rumors of the Red Sox dealing Nomar? We walked around during the day with clipboards in our hands and the 100 yard dash times of a group of eleven-year olds in our heads. The same sort of thing was true for the ski staff, who spent every spare moment either on the water or smoking behind the boathouse, or the grab-bag of more random foreign staffers who usually only worked the one summer, in the States while on vacation from university, and banded together out of their otherness. Seated around the fire though, all the social structures and groups dissolved into an alcohol and tobacco-spiced soup.

Rory's parents dropped us off a few hours ago. I sat with Adam and Newbie, a first-year from England and a co-counselor of Rory's. I couldn't actually remember Newbie's real name. On the first day of Orientation he broke one of the washing machines when tried to clean his travel suitcase. After that, the nickname stuck.

"Not the worst day," Newb said as we stared into the flames. The fire was quickly eating through half of a windmill from an abandoned miniature golf hole. The heat warmed our faces, and the fake grass on the windmill's ramp created little blue flames.

"Not as far as Visiting Days go," Adam said. I hadn't spoken much to him after returning. We were both off duty, and I assumed that our campers were snug in the bunk. I had not even been back down there since the morning, but after the lunch, I imagined I would be spending the night down in my own bed.

Newb snorted and tossed a can into the fire. "Can you believe that one of my campers came back with an inflatable sofa? Where the hell are we supposed to fit that thing?"

“That’s nothing,” Adam replied. “One summer, my dad took our entire bunk to the Super Wal-Mart in Augusta, and each of us walked out with our own Slip N’ Slide. We ran them together from the top of the hill all the way down to the waterfront before they managed to stop us.”

We both nodded approval, although I stopped short of arguing the logistics of it. My mind was still on Rory, and whether it was by her design that Sarah sat in between us on our way back from Freeport. Rory said that she would be up to the fire at some point, but I had stopped waiting.

“I managed to get a good fifty dollar tip out of the day,” Newb said. I sucked in my breath through my teeth.

“What?” he asked.

“Risky,” I said.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s against the rules,” Adam said. “The Silvermans actually forgot to warn you new guys this summer. We’re not supposed to look like we play favorites. And the parents know this. You never know when someone is going to report you.”

“And he doesn’t even mean just the parents that see it happen,” I added.

“Bullshit,” Newb said. After a summer of living up to his nickname, he was finally beginning to get a sense of when people were joking at his expense.

“No, it’s true,” Adam said. “My dad pulled that shit when I was a camper.”

He was interrupted by a loud crash. Two large Kiwis had just caber-tossed half of an old utility pole atop the now smoldering windmill. Sparks flew out from the impact, causing a few shrieks from the underage girls present.

“I was eleven, like a low intermediate, and he was talking with Dean, my favorite counselor,” he continued. “He’s the one who taught me to play tennis. And so we’re in the bunk, about to walk up to instructionals, my dad has Dean’s racket and asks him for a tip in his swing. My dad’s so impressed, he tells Dean to come down after camp, stay with us for a few weeks, and he’ll get him a job teaching lessons at our club. Dean’s pumped, because he that would mean that he wouldn’t have to go back to England right away. And my dad gives him a hundred bucks for new strings for his racket. Next day he gets called into the office, and gets a written warning from the directors.” Adam swung his tennis racket in a wide arc, aiming at an imaginary opponent. “The guy can be such an asshole.”

I couldn’t think of what much to say after that. Adam managed to flip his opinion on his father seemingly on a minute-to-minute basis. Regardless of his mood though, he always spoke of him with some measure of awe. Only the tone of that awe would change. I had never met the man, but I knew that Adam won something of a minor victory just to work at Arrowdance this summer. With his son freshly graduated from Cornell, Mr. Friedmann wanted Adam to intern in his office, filing papers and drinking from water coolers. Adam spoke of his impending professional life as if he was to face the gulag. I never pressed the matter with him, but to me, the idea of some defined future had its appeal.

“I want to leave,” Newb said suddenly, breaking the silence. “To go out. These in-nights suck.” While barely eighteen, Newb was among the most brazen of the foreign staff when it came to braving the local bars. Their naturally strong tolerance towards

alcohol, along with the weakness of American beer usually resulted in epic nights on the town.

“The Ranger Rule,” Adam and I said nearly as one. Adam smirked and took the lead. “Be sure to ask Ranger about that when you get the chance, Newb. It should be pretty good.”

“Probably won’t,” Newb responded. “That man scares me.”

“Mostly harmless after his second mental breakdown,” Adam said. “I think he’s only gone postal on two counselors since I’ve been here.”

“He’s kidding,” I added. “He’s probably the nicest guy here. Talk to him and you’ll learn some things.”

“Like how to become a legend in your own time, and do more drugs than the Doors in theirs,” Adam said.

“Again, probably an exaggeration,” I said. I didn’t grow up with Ranger like most of the former camper-turned counselors. I mostly knew him from the uncensored stories he told during my first Orientation seven years ago, all about the madness that was Arrowdance in his prime.

I let myself zone out again when Newb began pestering Adam for an explanation of Ranger’s Visiting Day story. A few nights ago, I helped toss an old mattress on the fire, and now only the springs remained, poking through the ashes. I stared at the coils for as long as I could bear, and when I finally looked towards the dark woods, little white zig zags hounded my vision. July was nearly over, and the fall chill had already begun to encroach. I still wore only my staff shirt and shorts, and pulled my shoulders up to the back of my head to ward off the cold.

“I’ve got to stand,” I said after a moment. By now it seemed like half the staff was up at the fire, and I made my way away from the fire, through the crowd and back towards the trees. I hoped to see Rory somewhere, but then took it back, because I wasn’t sure what could be said to her. We didn’t speak much on the ride back from Freeport. Jon shook my hand and wished me luck with the rest of the summer, and Beth gave a quick hug around my shoulders. I watched them leave to drop Sarah off at her camp, and when I turned Rory was already half-way to her cabin. Inside her little room she told me she was tired and that if I wanted to go to the fire later without her, that was fine.

I didn’t want to think of it as a fight. This happened sometimes, where I would either say or not say something that she wanted to hear, and I would go away for a few hours. It happened last year around this time as well, and then I agreed that it could be possible for us to continue our relationship during the winter. To try, we both said. Every time, I knew what she wanted to hear, but knew that I could get by without saying it.

After a few minutes of this, Adam approached. He was free of Newbie, and had ditched his beer next to the fire.

“Everything cool, Lee?”

I was about to honestly answer, but a sight along the access road grabbed my attention.

“So that can’t be a good sign,” I said. Adam turned and sighed.

“Yep,” he said after a moment. “Those are our campers.”

Ack and Josh stood shoulder to shoulder at the far end of the lot, just off the access road. They straightened up as we approached. Both wore ballcaps and baggy sweatshirts in what I gathered was an attempt to look nondescript, but the way they gawked at the proceedings gave them away. Campers overheard campfire stories in the bunks or in the dining hall at breakfast, and ten years ago it wasn't too uncommon for counselors to escort their favorite older campers up for a one-time beer. That sort of thing predated even me, but I don't think I would go for that, even if it were an option. I always thought of the fire as our one refuge. Adam and I squared off in front of them, both to block their view, and to keep them at least somewhat out of sight.

"What you're going to want to do is just turn around," I said, dusting off the rare voice of authority.

Ack looked over my shoulder, squinting against the blaze. "Hey, I don't see Rory over there."

"You're hard of hearing, then? Get back to the fucking bunk," Adam said. He didn't have the history that I had with the kids, and didn't mind playing the heavy when needed.

"We're going to in a minute, okay," Josh said, raising his hands as if to block Adam's words. "But a problem's come up."

Adam shook his head. "You've clogged the toilet, fine. We can deal with that in the morning. Just go away before the owners get up here."

"What's the problem?" I asked. My campers could have lapses of judgment, like the time three years ago when Ack tried to use the bunk urinal as a stepladder and knocked it off the wall, but they weren't exactly stupid. Both still scanned the crowd, but it didn't seem that they wanted to join in or anything. It was more like they were looking for someone specific.

"It's like this, Lee," Ack said. "Karp promised that it wouldn't be a problem, and that you'd never know."

"I'm not liking this," Adam said.

Josh half-smiled, but there wasn't much mirth in his voice. "Just wait," he said.

"Well, he had his parents drop him off at Lauren's house," Ack said. "Instead of camp. But she was going to drive him to the front gate before the curfew, and no one would know."

I turned to Adam and shared a look. The stupefaction on his face must have been a perfect match for my own expression, because neither of us could find the right words for the situation for a few seconds.

"Probably pretty dumb idea, when you think about it," Josh added. The three of them were all friends from back home, but at least Ack and Josh seemed to acknowledge that they were in fact at a summer camp, and not an extension of their Boston suburb.

"You two knew about this?" I asked.

"For a couple of hours, only," Ack said. "He texted us on the way there."

"So we kill Karp when he gets back," Adam said. "I don't see the problem."

"Lauren's having a party," Josh said. "And her boyfriend shows up looking for Karp, because somehow he found out."

"Shit," I said.

"But Lauren convinces him that Karp's not there--"

“Because he’s hiding in her bedroom closet,” Ack finished. “And he texted me again, asking for an evac.”

“Well,” I said, searching for the right word. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” Ack said.

“This is for real?” I asked, and turned to Josh. “You’re not just being dumb? This isn’t like the summer you decided not to use contractions?”

“I am sure it is not.”

“Shit.”

Adam rubbed his knuckles into his eyes and exhaled loudly. This could be bad. Arrowdance usually practiced a pretty liberal policy when it came to camper forgiveness, but not even Karp could shake this one off. Ack and Josh’s faces indicated that they knew as much. Besides being friends back home, they’d been bunkmates for just about every summer. We were as much like a family as you could hope to find up here.

“Who saw you come up here?” I asked.

“No one,” Ack said. “We took the fields.”

“Then take the fields back.”

“So you’re going to...?” Josh asked. I heard the worry, and almost told them to forget about it, that if Karp could get himself into this, then that’s that. He was on his own. I had certainly given him enough chances.

“We’re on this,” I said.

The relief on their faces was instant, and I remembered that they were just boys after all. They turned without saying another word and disappeared across the road, onto the moonlit ball fields.

“We’re on this how?” Adam said. We turned back to the fire, expecting to see fifty faces aimed in our direction. Life in the parking lot continued as usual though; even Newbie was off with another group.

I thought for a moment. “We need a car, I guess.”

“Can’t take mine,” Adam said. “I lent it out on Tuesday, and they brought it back on empty.”

“I’ll get Rory’s keys,” I said, not looking forward to that conversation. She kept her Volvo at the other end of camp, in the staff lot outside of the main gate. Leaving undetected should not be a problem.

“And we need an address too.”

“Right. Could be important.”

“Yeah. You get the keys, I’ll follow the idiot twins and get Lauren’s address. We’ll have Karp back here in an hour, tops.”

I nodded. “After all, all we’re doing to crashing a townie party in the middle of the night and asking to see a seventeen year old girl’s bedroom. This will be awesome.”

Once the camp’s museum, the women’s cabin consisted of a long corridor of small cubby rooms, each barely large enough for a single bed and a set of drawers. Shower curtains or heavy drapes acted half-successfully as doors. At the end of the hall was the communal bathroom, an awkward place to find yourself if you happen to be a man and need to go to take a leak in the middle of the night.

I stood by the screen door and eased it closed to keep it from slamming. A sliver of light shone from underneath the heavy pink sheet that Rory hung for privacy, and I



could barely make out the tune of the music from her stereo. The cabin was otherwise dark. I walked down from the fire alone, trying to think of the first thing I would say to her. Something that I said at dinner bothered her – I wasn't that obtuse. But even though whatever was between us would soon pass, and that she couldn't be mad for too long, I hesitated to take that first step down the hall. I felt the uncomfortable sensation of my pulse in my throat. It was like a mirror image of the first night I came looking for her in this cabin, more than a year ago now. Back when the most important conversation we could have dealt with whether we should take a paddleboat to the island on a day off, or just float in the middle of the lake and listen to the local children playing on the docks along the shore. On rainy days, when all the campers were confined to bunks and played trivia over the intercom, I'd sneak up to the cabin and we'd lie on the bed, listening to the fat drops pelt the corrugated metal roof. Rory was always funny and biting, and at her best she still was. Only when she wasn't at her best, I knew that more often than not, the moment sprung from me.

"Are you back already, Danielle? What did you get?" Rory said from inside her room. Her voice shook me back to the present, and my footsteps sounded like rocks on wood as I moved forward.

"Um, not Danielle," I said from outside the sheet. Just barely could I see her silhouette, hunched over on her bed. Her head shape gave a quick jerk as it turned, and it remained still as she sat.

"What do you need, Lee?"

"Can I come in?" The sides of the curtain were pulled tight to the doorframe, thumbtacked from the inside. I was only used to seeing it from the other side.

Rory slowly exhaled, and I wondered if she was going to let me stand there all night. At that moment I probably would have, and left Karp to his fate. When Rory was really angry, like the time early this June when I forgot to coordinate our days off with the office, I expected her to come at me with both barrels, and to soon exhaust her energy like a hurricane over land. I didn't know how to handle disappointment though, and this right now felt like a cousin akin to that.

Her silhouette reached out, and one corner of the sheet fell limp. I sheepishly squeezed through into her room and planted my feet near the foot of her bed. Rory sat cross-legged with her laptop next to her. She wore her glasses and had her hair pulled into a tight ponytail. The explosion of curls that created for some reason placed in my head the image of a fist punching through drywall. She did not smile or otherwise acknowledge my entrance into the room.

"So," I said. "What do you have planned for tonight?"

Rory slowly rolled her head along the full range of her neck, and then tapped a button on her keyboard. The music stopped, and she pushed to screen closed. She finally looked up at me.

"Danielle's getting some movies from the mini-theater. We're both staying in tonight."

I nodded to buy myself some time and looked around at all the stuff crammed into the small space. One of the first things I did to involve myself with Rory was offer to help her paint her walls, and she chose a bright shade of pink that practically glowed in the dark. She soon covered the fresh paint with photos of friends back home and a poster of Dave Matthews Band. Over the course of that first summer, more pictures were

added, of new friends made and her favorite kids, as well as artwork from her campers, or souvenirs from her time in Maine. A menu from the Waterville House of Pancakes, ticket stubs from the whale watching tour in Bar Harbor, scorecards from miniature golf games at Gifford's, a popular destination for Bunk Night trips, a picture of her in costume doing her best Natalie Wood from last summer's big final musical; all this she put back up on day one this summer, and she still found more things to tack up. She devoted to the two of us a whole subdivision by her pillow. There was one of me helping her stand up after finishing the Pudding Slide, one of the highlights of the counselor talent show that was held at the end of the first full day of camp. The photographer captured her post-slide – all covered in an unhealthy mix of chocolate pudding, liquid dish soap, and water – right as I was extending my hand towards her, and right before she pulled me onto the goopy tarp. Rory must have been following my eyes, because she shifted and her shoulder blocked the wall.

"I thought you said you wanted to go to the fire," she said.

"I did. But something came up." She sat and waited for me to continue, her eyebrow raised and chin jutted out. I quickly told her about what my campers told me, but stopped short of asking for her keys.

"That moron." She closed her eyes and leaned back onto her pillow.

"Pretty much." I gulped down a deep breath, and then jumped in.

"I need to go get him, and Adam's car is in the counselor lot, so we can't exactly go away unnoticed."

"Keys are on the dresser," Rory quickly said. I said thanks, and grabbed them by the U of Penn keychain. I made a move for the curtain, and stopped.

"I had a good time with your parents," I said.

"You already said that when they left. I know." She watched me stand there with one shoulder already in the hall. I knew that at that moment I had a camper hiding in a townie's closet, but I couldn't commit my feet to the effort. Rory was calm and seemingly comfortable with some sort of resignation. Maybe she got sick of me standing there looking at her, when she spoke next her voice had a different kind of sharpness. Her eyes pinched in the corners.

"I would help, Lee, if you actually said what you wanted. For once."

"I said I wanted the keys." It was a dumb thing.

"Yeah, no shit," she said, and she shook her hands in front of her, the muscles of her forearms taut. "That's exactly what was referring to. Good job."

"I don't want anything else right now."

"That's stating the obvious, Lee."

"Look," I began, but then stalled. I noticed some of my belongings, mostly things that I left in the mornings and then forgot, stacked and folded neatly by my feet.

"I have my parents breathing down my neck to transfer schools, pick a major that I don't want, whatever. The absolute least you could have done was to stick up for me today. Act like you have something invested in this."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Honest. I didn't feel like it was my place."

"And thanks for making me feel like the idiot there. How could you say that you'd have no reason to move once you got your degree?"

"That's not what I said."

"No, you didn't say anything, Lee. You never say anything."

"I'm sorry," I said again, and a miniscule hint of pleading crept into my voice. "I'm just not totally comfortable around your parents."

"That's fine," she said. "I understand that. But maybe I'm not totally comfortable with this relationship anymore."

It was my turn to put my hands up, and I asked her to just calm down for a second.

"We don't really need to talk about this now, Rory. I do want to talk about this. Just not now."

"When is a good time, Lee? At the airport in two weeks? Maybe over the phone, like last winter? Wait, we never did that. It sure was great not talking to you at all this spring and then just picking up again like nothing happened. That was awful good for us."

"Hey," I said, bringing my body back fully into the room. "That's the way it happened. I didn't hear any complaints from you at the time."

"Maybe I was an idiot," she said. "Probably still am. Why do I even call this a relationship? Twelve weeks in all, out of the last thirteen months of our lives? Have we ever gone on a date, just the two of us?"

"I really don't know what you want me to say."

Rory rolled her eyes. "Then that makes you are an idiot, too."

I dropped my arms to my side. Nothing she said was wrong or even a stretch of the truth as we both knew it, but at least now I felt lucky to have the Karp crisis to draw me away. I felt the need to muster some sort of defense, though, even if it was only a petty jab.

"I've had a good time getting my ass kicked," I said, "but I need to go."

We didn't talk for a few seconds. She stared intently at the little clasp that locked her laptop screen down, and I watched her work her jaw around, her bottom lip sucked in. I grabbed the keys. Nothing more was said.

I nosed the car into a dark driveway and dropped it into reverse. Instead of easing back onto the street, the same street that we had been up and down for fifteen minutes, I let Rory's newish four-door idle smoothly as we contemplated the events of the night so far.

"Maybe that was the right house back there," Adam said, leaning back to peer out the rear window. "We just can't tell if the yard-ball was purple or blue from the street."

"I didn't even see the yard-ball," I said. The house we were now in front of had two of the ubiquitous glass orbs, a red one and a gold one, perched on little stands underneath a picture window. I learned to notice yard-balls early in my Arrowdance career; I had never seen one before travelling to Maine. They were everywhere in Waterville, rising above flowerbeds like Martian tripods. I developed a sense of affection for them despite their aggressive tackiness, and made it my mission to spot them anytime camp let us out in public. We bought one for our bunk a few years ago, only to have it stolen and then proudly displayed by an older cabin.

"Go back and drive slower this time. That has to be the house." Adam held Ack's hand-written note up the stereo and squinted in the dim blue light. He cursed. "All I can make out is the street name, and yard-ball blue."

"Then yard-ball blue it is," I said, taking my foot off the brake.

This was the most I had spoken since starting this adventure. Adam first made some attempts at conversation, about his instructionals or detailing some off-the-books punishment we could send Karp's way. After my minimal responses, he acknowledged the desired silence by rummaging through Rory's CDs, settling on a mix of Latin and dance tracks. I silently gave thanks that he did not choose one of the numerous Lee/Rory mixes that formed the backbone of her collection. After the third or fourth song I caught him watching me for a reaction to the absurdity of his choice, but I just shrugged and kept on driving. Adam was no stranger to the troubles the occasionally came up between me and Rory, but I never bothered him with the details. I liked to maintain a certain balance between my camp life and my real life. I don't think anyone at Arrowdance knew my parent's names, or about the award I won last winter for my writing. I rationalized that it made me easier for me to leave it all every August, and to focus on school when I returned home. I needed my two spheres separate, lest they become like two balloons rubbing together, shocking us all with static charges.

I kept Rory very much in the camp realm of my life. That was the problem we always came back to, and I knew it. I also knew that talking about this with someone would give it too much concentrated reality for me to take at just this moment. It was much easier to wait it out and let the whole thing scar over. The relationship or whatever would fudge it and give the incident a nice shiny patch, not perfect, but not a glaring wound either. And then we could continue with our summer.

"Definitely blue," Adam said. I pulled the car over on the opposite curb and turned off the lights. The house was a good thirty yards from the street. A large porch wrapped around to one side, and a few dark shapes milled around. As my eyes adjusted, I noticed a number of cars parked in the side yard. The yard-ball sat in the elbow of the front walk.

"And there's the music now," Adam said, turning down our own stereo. He cocked his head, and laughed after a moment. "Coolio maybe."

"Fantastic Voyage."

"Yeah. It will be." He reached back to turn the stereo up.

I sighed and let my hands fall from the steering wheel. It was already past midnight, and there was not another car moving on the street. We left camp for this whole episode with a certain amount of excitement, but now it just seemed too daunting. Between us and Karp were probably thirty teens in various adverbs of drunk, none of whom would be that pumped about seeing two snobby preps from the boys' camp invading their space. I took quick look at Adam, and calculated our odds of playing it sufficiently cool at roughly two percent.

"For real, this summer needs to end," I said after a moment, and then I took another few seconds to be surprised at what I just said. That was counter to my standard status. I didn't have anything other than a year of school and increasing my student loan debt waiting for me. As I continued to not get out of the car though, I felt a pressure building in my chest and throat. My latest round of friends were all preparing to finish school and find meaningful employment. Something that Rory's father said, about becoming a "full-fledged Indian." Was there a window in which one could break free of Arrowdance, and if you missed it, then you had to resign yourself to an endless chain of summers in Maine, while the world hummed off on a tangent course? Something to consider.

“Visiting Day’s over,” Adam said.

“Don’t put that one to bed just yet.”

“Still. So what, like fifteen more days?”

“Give or take.”

“And the big things we have left? King Neptune Day, Apache Relays, the musical.”

“Day of Champions, Fight Night,” I added, rattling off the big events that dotted the remainder of our calendar. “Steve Hirsh Night tomorrow.”

“And then the War,” Adam said, his voice taking on a hushed quality an Arrowdancer would usually reserve for when speaking of their first kiss, or Larry Bird.

“Then the War.”

Adam did not follow up on that note. I maintained the position that the less I said about Color War, and my chances of being named a chief, the better. It also seemed somewhat wrong to think about it outside of camp borders, or with Karp supposedly still waiting for us.

“It might be useful to discuss how we’re actually going to do this,” I said. Adam immediately nodded and turned down the stereo.

“I’ve been thinking about that. I think that one of us needs to stay here and guard the car, and that should be me. So that’s part one of the plan.”

“This is an awesome plan already.”

“For these reasons. You’ve known Karp the longest, and I think he would really appreciate this coming from you. Also, I’ve never really spoken to Lauren before.”

“Think of the great ice-breaker this could be for you then,” I said, although I knew it was a moot. From the start, this had to be my deal. Karp was my responsibility, and this situation had a lot to do with how I ran the bunk, anyways.

“And I’ll be honest, I won’t fit in there at all,” Adam said. “This is really your type of crowd.”

“There it is.” But he was right. Already I was remembering parties from high school, where a dozen different car stereos played their disparate tunes behind a barn while we alternately groped or high-fived beer to beer. I opened the door.

“Finally,” Adam continued, “if you are running down the driveway with Karp, you’ll need someone here gunning the engine. For effect.”

“Glad you could make it,” I said. I slammed the door.

I counted ten cars as I walked up the rocky drive. The house was near the edge of town, and the woods were not the type that merely provided a border between the next house over. I heard rough noises and twigs breaking, and a giggling pair of girls emerged from the trees ahead of me. They linked arms as I followed them to the house.

Lauren’s parents were not home. I gathered that much as I passed over my first semi-conscious body, a particularly scrawny kid huddled next to the porch stairs. He had one arm around what I first thought was another person, half-hidden from the porch light by the shadows of other partiers. When I got close though, I noticed that it was a drab green duffel bag, and what I took for hair was just dirty laundry spilling from the top. I asked him where I could find Lauren.

“Lauren,” he repeated back to me. “That’s her name.”

“Yeah. Her. Is she here?” He stared at me for another five seconds, deciphering what I said into whatever language he was currently hearing. I had time to check out the other porch goers. Three shared a rickety swing chair, and a few others milled around, not paying me any attention. That was okay. I wanted to make this as quick as possible, easily in and then out, but my new friend wasn’t helping.

“That’s Maggie’s sister,” he finally said. He brushed a pair of boxer shirts from his shoulder and pulled his knees in, bracing his back against the porch.

“I guess so,” I said, offering him a hand. He regarded it for a second, and then fell back, slowly exhaling as he went. “Is this their house?”

He shook his head and said, “Yeah, but Maggie’s not home. She’s at work. She’s supposed to let me use her laundry.” He jabbed the bag with his elbow for emphasis.

“That’s good,” I assured him. I wished him luck with that, and looked forward towards my next step. A small red chair propped open the screen door, and the music beckoned lost sailors in with little hooks that took purchase in my skin and pulled me closer. The house reminded me of home, the painted white frames and wooden floors. The sensation became stronger as I stepped into the front room. High school letter jackets covered one end of the couch, next to two teenagers engaging in an intense make-out session. Empty bottles and cans littered the floor like cheap votive candles, and a massive, empty birdcage dominated the far wall. Shit-stained scraps of newspaper flapped over the lip of the metal frame. I felt my legs growing tendrils and anchoring me to the floor, and only the sudden halting of the throbbing music snapped me to the present. The stereo emitted a series of clicks and whirls as the CD tray spun to a new disc.

I heard laughter down the hall, and I followed it into the kitchen. The two girls from the trees stood with their backs to me, and speaking to them was Lauren. She hadn’t noticed me yet, and she leaned in to whisper something to her friends. They laughed again, and Lauren shot a look over her shoulder, towards a darkened window. On her return movement, she caught me standing in her house.

“Good party,” I said. The two girls faced me, and I nodded in greeting. They were both cute in the periphery way, in that you noticed appealing qualities from the corners of your vision, but only because you couldn’t help staring at Lauren. I didn’t know what to do with my hands. Lauren reached towards the counter for a sweating bottle, and took a long swig before answering. She squinted as if the light was suddenly too bright, but never broke her stare.

“So you’re going to be the white knight,” she said after putting the bottle back down. Her hair dropped loosely before being diverted over her left shoulder. The brown strands obscured the lettering on her nylon jacket, but I recognized it just the same.

“Karp doesn’t make much of a damsel, I’m afraid.”

“Huh. Well.”

She tapped one of her friends on the shoulder. I recognized them both from the kitchen staff. The other kept watching me, a coy smile on her face. I quickly looked at the fridge and studied with interest the pictures magnetized to it.

“You two go out back and keep Derek and his friends away from the house,” Lauren instructed her friends. They nodded and departed out the back door, and as it opened, I saw the glow of a small fire, and heard loud voices speaking over each other. I watched them go.

“Nice girls,” I said.

“Jailbait’s the word for that.” She chuckled and hopped up on the counter, nearly bumping her bottle to the floor. She snatched it as it wobbled in a tight circle and held it with both hands. I suddenly became aware that I was fully on her turf, and that she fully appreciated that fact. The predatory look in her eyes was something new. She had discarded the mask of solemn faced obedience that she utilized in the dining hall.

“So while your boyfriend is outside,” I said, “you have no problem flaunting this around.”

“Flaunting, please.” She snorted and took another drink. “And don’t worry about me and Derek. He heard he was here, and as far as he knows, he was wrong. Worry about your boy upstairs.”

“That’s nice of you. You’ve got a pretty good deal here. Maybe they can fight it out for you.” I meant to supply the statement with an appropriate amount of heat, enough to make her think that I had some power over the situation. I then realized that I was trying to bully a seventeen year old girl in her own house.

“Listen.” She lowered herself from the counter and came to speak close. “Seth is sweet. He’s really sweet – I told you that last night. But this is dumb. I didn’t invite him here, and he’s lucky that Derek didn’t find him. So I’ll go outside and do my best to distract him, and you go upstairs and get him out of here. And that’ll be it.”

That sounded like a good place to leave it. I agreed with her, and she pointed me back to the stairs. Someone tapped my shoulder and I jumped, but they only wanted to get to the fridge. I stepped aside.

“But this is it, then,” I said to Lauren before she disappeared out the door. She stopped and turned, the orange firelight framing her head.

“No, yeah,” she said. “Because I want more of this in my life.”

#### 4.

I awoke at my alarm, six-thirty sharp.

I am up before most everyone else at camp every morning, except on Sundays when we’re allowed to sleep in. At the beginning of the summer the owners came to me with a problem and the hope that I would be the solution. For the past twenty summers, the morning wake-up call was made by the same guy, an overly enthusiastic soccer coach from the Azores. When he finally failed to make the return flight to the States, either due to a deep questioning of his own life, or failure to get his visa renewed, Arrowdance was faced with a profound void. Campers had become used to his foreign cadence and strange habits, such as his delight in announcing which bunks had laundry on that particular day. The Silvermans asked if I would take over those duties. I wanted to increase my visibility as a way to covertly campaign for Chief, so I said yes. Every morning I regretted it a bit more.

I fumbled a bit with the alarm before silencing it. It was my own clock by my own bed, and I had forgotten which button to press. Usually it was Rory’s alarm, and her elbow that triggered my response. We got back to camp late that morning, and I didn’t try to see her. And if I did, I doubt she would have been pleased to see me just yet.

The process of swinging my feet to the floor sent empty pop cans scattering under my bed. Something gritty entrenched itself between my toes. I inspected the bottom of

my foot and found orange dust and nacho chip pieces. I was too tired and it was too dark when we came in early that morning, but now I could clearly see the full extent of our post-Visiting Day existence. Besides the afore-mentioned empty cans and upturned chip bags, the floor was littered with scattered fun-sized Kit Kat wrappers, hot chocolate mix pouches, and the little plastic sleeves meant for individually wrapped cheese slices. It looked as if a convenience store had exploded sometime in the night.

“Like I’m living with god damned monkeys,” I shouted as I stood. The sound reverberated from the bare rafters and probably out the screened windows and across the still lake, but no one stirred. Karp and Ack both lay with their mouths agape, and Josh was for some reason cocooned in his sleeping bag. Even Adam seemed dead to the world, his pillow placed almost delicately over his head. I kicked a half-full box of Nilla Wafers across the room for emphasis.

“There will be such a reckoning,” I warned. By then I had my flip-flops on and was already half out the door. I couldn’t quite account for my anger, but it felt right and I went with it. A good bit of it rested on Karp, of that much I was sure. We snuck him back into camp like it was *First Blood: Part Two* in reverse, stalking behind the backs of the cabins and offices, being careful not to step on the exposed pipes and other hidden traps. There was a hairy moment at about the halfway point, when we had to duck behind a large rock as a golf-cart came back from the fire. It may have only been a few Aussie counselors out for a joyride, but I would rather risk the scraped knees suffered while hiding. Once we were back in the bunk, Karp hit his mattress without saying a word. I laid in bed and stared at the ceiling for an hour maybe before I even felt tired. What had I seen in that long day; what had I done? I thought of all the stories that I’d heard of the old days at camp, the things that the counselors were able to get away with back then. Smuggling townies girls back into their bunks, getting into fistfights with those girls’ boyfriends and fiancés the next night in the bars. Ranger’s entire legendary resume. I now had one of those stories, and maybe in five years I could tell it. And apparently if I took a poll of my friends, I would still be here in five years to relive the glory. That would make me thirty years old. Maybe by then I’d be out of school, would move up here and do winter work. I didn’t know what was more responsible for keeping me awake: the very real possibility of all that happening, or that a part of me didn’t really care. Finally I closed my eyes and slept.

Arrowdance was at its best in the early morning. I wasn’t aware of that until last summer, when I first began making my daily sneaks back down to my bunk from the women’s cabin. Summer mornings were much cooler in Maine than I was used to, and there would always be a low fog over the lake. You couldn’t even see our island way out there at the lip of our cove; only the tops of its trees were visible. Sounds came from some of the docks and houses maybe a mile away from the porch of Bunk 14, and it was as if from some ethereal void just beyond your reach. I made the short walk up the hill to the office, the eight or so bunks I passed along the way still dark and silent. I would hear a snore from the lodge perhaps, or someone’s fan pressed against a screened window. No direct evidence of a human in a waking state though, and I was perfectly alone in those two short minutes. And to know that in just a few more of those minutes I’d be the one to end it soured my trip just a bit.



I announced my presence to Dave Silverman as I entered the building. He said hello, and I poked my head into his office. Dave was the younger of the two brothers, only five or six years older than I was. He was my co-counselor for about a month my first summer, and between him and Aaron, he was the only one that I could say I was comfortable around. Last year we had a carnival with our sister camp, and I was assigned the cotton candy machine. I had a real system going for awhile, until Sarah Strasser and some of her friends raided the station. It ended with the girls sticking their actual arms into the rotating drum, them giggling as the wispy confection magically clung to their skin. More and more campers gathered around, and I had no choice but to shut the machine down. Dave finally came over and sent the crowd elsewhere. He looked at me, looked at the pink candy mess, and shrugged. Go take a break, he told me.

“Big night for your boy last night,” he said. Dave had the weekly numbers spread around his desk – tallies for food orders, movie ticket counts for the next bunk night out, gas receipts. The brothers started the summer out with a ton of steam and wide grins, but I think the reality of their situation set in soon afterward. They owned a multi-million dollar camp, and it was their first real job.

“Big night how?” I was still not awake enough for my heart to skip a beat, but it came close.

“That’s right, you weren’t there.” He closed a ledger and rubbed his eyes. “Johnny Damon with the home run. We watched the replay in the theater.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, shifting my weight back out the door. “My boy.”

I glanced at the clock behind Dave and found my excuse to make a retreat. Dave nodded and went back to work. I went back into the main office and sat next to the public address system. With one hand holding the microphone and the other waiting to press play on the stereo, I counted down the last twenty seconds. I was about to play the single most annoying call of the day. The least I could do was be exact.

The thing about Reveille is, after your first month or so, it’s not even the bugle call that wakes you up. It’s the sudden crackle of the live mic, the dead air before the track comes on. The sounds of bouncing electrons and kinetic energy opened your eyes. Usually you had enough time to muffle a curse or chuck a pillow at the speaker high up on the wall of your bunk. Then came the spiel, something that I was still not entirely comfortable doing. Maybe it was the knowledge that as I announced the morning and its accompanying weather, three hundred separate minds collectively added to a mighty damning of my existence. Still though, I tried to keep it in perspective. It was better than working at the Target back home.

I pressed the button and waited for my cue.

“It is now morning. Good morning,” I said after the bugle finished. “Wake up.” I went quickly through the prepared list announcements and then gave best wishes to those campers with birthdays. I tried to sound as if I meant it.

“So in closing, it’s time to wake up,” I said. Then, “I’m sorry.” I turned off the mic and set my mental timer for ten minutes, when I would have to go back on and reawake the camp. I sat and watched camp slowly stretch and come back to life. Two maintenance workers zipped by on an electric golfcart, on their way up to the fields. I could only imagine the mess that awaited them. A couple hundred sets of parents could create a surprising amount of discarded paper cups and ski-show programs. A few counselors jogged by the flagpole, probably already on their tenth or eleventh lap around

camp. A few campers even passed by, with their eyes barely open and laundry bags slung across their backs. I could see all this from my chair, and through that I watched the women's cabin. One guy stuck his head out the door and then made a break for it, soon followed by another.

I hoped that Rory was awoken by my voice and felt immediately bad about how things went last night, and would seek me out during breakfast to let me know that things were okay. I also did a rough calculation on the chances of that, and realized that my best course would be to just take responsibility and as a result, grow as a person. At that point, it might even be possible to just shake my head and clear out whatever was keeping me from telling Rory that yes, I wanted to have something between us in the winter, and to actually make an effort for it to work this time.

Because there was something wrong with me. Had to be. Rory was a win, a catch, someone that even on my worst, most harried days, I wanted to be around. And if I met her in class or someplace back home, I wouldn't have this hang-up. We each had our own life though, and I knew that whatever came from camp would not continue to live in the winter.

Dave's voice snapped me back. He leaned into the room.

"Lee, are you going to blow First Call?"

I kicked my feet off the desk and quickly turned the microphone back on, three minutes late. I asked everyone to report to the flagpole. Three minutes later, I played the second and final call. I had just turned off the equipment when Dave reappeared in his office door.

"Can you come by after instructionals, Lee?" he asked. His fingers drummed on the doorframe. "Aaron and I need to have a word with you."

"Okay." I maintained what I thought was a casual stare. I thought of searching online for cheap tickets back home right then and there. Dave vanished.

Usually after reveille, I liked to hang around the office and listen in on the early director's meeting. I went to those a couple of summers ago when I was a unit leader in charge of a number of bunks, but then they decided that I should not have that job again. That summer three of the counselors under my watch got fired in increasingly spectacular ways. One guy from Texas came back some early morning very drunk and pissed on one of his campers. I handpicked this guy. I think the owners shared the notion that I had been raised above my natural abilities, like a good soldier who makes sergeant and then leads his platoon right into a German machine gun nest. But there was no meeting that day, so went outside to watch the camp slowly trickle out of their bunks and come up the hill.

"So what got into you this morning?" Adam asked. He found me underneath the Chief's Tree. I had my back against the short fence. I nodded as he took a place next to me, but didn't answer his question. Adam could be trusted to keep campers clean and from starting fires, but his investment really stopped there. I didn't doubt that he viewed last night as nothing more than an annoyance, not the potential disaster that it nearly was.

I looked past him down towards the bunk, then back up to him. I repeated the sequence again for his benefit.

"They'll be up," he said. "They were all getting dressed when I left."

"It's a good thing they've earned my trust, then."

"There're fine. What's your problem today?"

"I just want you to know that if I'm going down," I said, "you're going down with me."

"What is that supposed to mean?" He kicked his foot and sent a small rock tumbling down the hill. Campers and counselors were beginning to issue from their bunks in an increasing stream. Three sophomores raced to the top, hoping to be asked to assist in raising the flag. I lost track of the pebble as it bounced off the path and into the shrubs around Bunk 10.

"Dave and Aaron want to talk to me after Instructionals. So look for me to be ghosted before lunch."

"You won't be ghosted," he said. "What did you do? You couldn't just leave Karp in some townie's closet."

Ghosting was what happened to you when you found yourself being fired. My fourth summer, one of my co-counselors was Wayne, a native of Cape Town with a thick neck and a short Mohawk. He liked to regale our campers with tales of his life on the streets of the South African capitol, and he spoke warily of the militant blacks and other "undesirables." Only he pronounced his home country as "Sooth'rica," which was too much for the already incredulous audience to take. When Karp said that he himself was from "Sooth'Dedham," Wayne untucked the front of his shirt to reveal a long hunting knife. Second call for lunch came soon after, and I mentioned what happened to one of the directors. When we came back to the bunk, every trace of Wayne was gone. Someone even scrapped off the nametags from his dresser drawers. "Ghosted," Karp said.

"We couldn't, actually," I corrected him, careful on the emphasis. "Because remember, I'm taking you down with me."

Adam shook his head and sent another rock flying.

"It's probably nothing. They just need your help to sign their names on the checks. Don't worry about it."

My head still hurt from the Rosen beating. Still. I wondered when I could officially become worried about that. Most of the camp was up the hill by now, and circled the sliver of grass that made up the flagpole area. I scanned the heads around me, looking for Rory's brown strands. I finally spotted her on the opposite side, underneath one of the junior-sized basketball goals. She wasn't looking my way. A few other girls were with her, but she stood somewhat apart from them.

"Remind me to talk to Karp later," I said.

"Think about going easy on him," Adam said. "These things happen. Maybe not like this, but it's all part of being a camper. It's his last year."

"You did this sort of thing?"

He snorted. "Shit dude, if I had Lauren back then."

"She has an older sister, apparently."

"Strong," he said. Then, "Hey. Come up to tennis after your meeting, if you still have a job. Damn half of the Caracas Mafia signed up for me. I'm going to have them running sprints all period." He smirked. "It'll be about time they learn what the deal is."

"Maybe, sure. I don't know." Rory turned back my way, but someone tall and hairy stepped in front of her.

"If you don't have any big plans, of course," Adam said. I was about to comment in some sort of affirmative way, but there came a shout for silence and the three younger

campers brought out the flag. As two of them hooked it to the line and the third failed to keep it from touching the ground, Adam leaned in close.

“I forgot to tell you. Karp dared Ack to bare-ass your pillow. Sorry.”

One day last summer, Rory and I had the same afternoon off. It was a fluke of scheduling; my kids were all away on a soccer trip, and she managed to wiggle out of an all-unit golf clinic. The weather was perfect – middle of July, just the lightest breeze, calm lake. We grabbed a canoe and hit the water after lunch, or bodies still slow with cordon bleu and sugary fruit punch. She left her flip-flops on the dock and rested her feet on my knees as I rowed, her back nestled into the bow of the little boat.

I took us out far, past the small island that camp owned, the go-no-further point for campers out on the lake during Free Swim. With no real destination in mind, I just paddled and enjoyed how the sun made my hair hot to the touch. A Hollywood actress and her writer husband owned a house in an adjacent cove, and I thought of taking us close, as it was a popular pastime to bring a boat and binoculars out there with a hope to see her sunbathing on their private dock. A motorboat crossed in front of us maybe a hundred yards or so, and I put the oar aside as the waves began to pitch us up and down. Rory had been dosing, an old Red Sox cap over her face. The motion woke her, and she sat up.

It really was a remarkable day. East Pond was shaped like a hand with four outstretched fingers, each digit a mile long and dotted with small personal beaches and hand swimming docks. Our canoe drifted near the middle of palm, nothing but deep cold water around us. Forty years ago, the lake was the home of a dozen summer camps, three alone in Arrowdance’s cove. If I squinted I could spot the former sites, now either a patch of empty beach and a clearing that went back from the shore, or a row of new vacation homes. Now it was just Arrowdance, and Matoaka on the opposite side of the lake.

Something out on the water had Rory’s attention. I didn’t notice what. When I first met her, her hair was a dark brown, like a fertile patch of soil, but by this point in the summer a few strands had been bleached to a golden hue. Her shoulders were tanned, but still showed freckles that grew taut on the skin when she stretched. I was very happy then. She yawned and saw me watching her. She smiled.

“Lee,” she asked, “what’s the most beautiful thing?”

She asked me those types of questions as a habit, when she was feeling thoughtful or contented or bored. Before we both would drift off to sleep, she would ask for a story about us. I did my best to answer, not realizing until it was too late that she didn’t care what I said. She just wanted to hear me talk. Even then though I was trying to put things into their place, our relationship and my life once camp was over. On that day, I knew the answer before she even asked for it, and I wanted her to know that she was of course the most beautiful thing. But I don’t think I said that, probably something about the mountains that were in Canada and just barely visible on the horizon, or the soft push of air against our skin. She may have even been okay with that answer, but if I had spoken the truth, I think that would have been a good thing, too.

I taught the first instructional period, and let my kids break off early. There was ten minutes before the call for the next period, and I felt like wandering for a bit before

talking with the owners. By that point I had mostly gotten over my fear that they knew something about last night. If they had, I probably wouldn't have been given the chance to teach one last subpar track lesson. We practiced long jump, with techniques that I learned from equal doses of watching past instructors and general winging it. I cut my five students loose after a good forty minutes of that. They were mostly regulars by that point in the summer, on their second or third rotation through my instructional. They knew the drill. They made their way to the water fountain, or to the tennis courts, where they watched Adam struggle with a dozen Venezuelan preteens.

I waved at Adam through the tennis fence. The kids darted from court to court, Adam's staff futilely yelling at them. The Caracas Mafia wore bright white shorts and crisp polo shirts, and their rackets flashed expensive branding. Halfway through every summer they came up as one group, flown into the town's small airport on a chartered jet. Their mothers escorted them to camp, and we lined the road to the office in order to see them. It was easy and fun to assume that they were the wives of the lords of some drug cartel. I heard a rumor that Aaron and Dave accepted double the tuition for just a few weeks of camp. It wasn't worth it. Once the mothers left, the kids were in their own world. They chose to speak very little English, and always rolled in the same group. Their counselors actually got pay and a half.

Adam did not wave back.

Activity occurred everywhere on the fields that morning. One sign of the impending end of summer was that many of the other counselors had adapted my attitude of instructional malaise. Tired from six weeks of teaching how to pick off a runner at third base, or the art of corner kick, most instructors devoted their classes to pick-up games and skill competitions. College kids ran the fields with campers half their ages, whooping and hollering with every goal or near-miss. I passed by two soccer fields and nodded at Fink as he manned one of the goals. A camper had the ball and was in a breakaway down the field, and in one motion Fink whipped one of his padded gloves at the kid's torso to distract him. The shot went wide left.

"Goal kick," Fink shouted to the teams as he trotted out to retrieve his glove.

"Nice move," I said once he returned the ball to play. I turned to keep walking, but he whistled for my attention.

"You might want to talk to Karp," he said, keeping his eyes at the mess of players midfield.

"Word gets around," I said, deciding not to be surprised by Fink's knowledge. Most anything worth keeping a secret at Arrowdance soon became just short of public knowledge, especially with a mouth like Fink around.

"You didn't notice anything funny when you drove him home?" The way he asked, I got the familiar sense that I was missing out on some joke. I usually felt that when talking to Fink, though.

"There were a few things funny about last night."

"Yeah well, I would talk to him before too much later."

I told him it was noted, and then waved myself off. I had meant to speak to Karp during clean-up, but both he and Ack had already escaped to musical practice, Ack as Danny Zucho, and Karp as street tough #2. Much of my anger was gone by that point, and I only felt mild frustration as Josh and I swept the floor alone. It would have been easier to zone out. Adam laid on his bed with his headphones on, but I needed to do

something, especially after trying to make eye contact with Rory on a number of occasions from across the Dining Hall.

Without thinking about it, I found myself near the lacrosse area, in the far corner of the Arrowdance fields. Only a thin stretch of evergreens separated us from the highway. Ranger was just finishing up the varsity practice. A few instructors chatted with campers, all decked out in various states of pads and helmets. Lacrosse was a big deal on the east coast, and I fell hard for the game in my first summer. I bummed around a few instructionals in my time off, and learned to catch and throw with reasonable accuracy. I immediately bought two sticks when I got back to Kansas, with that thought that even with my meager skills, I could be the best player in the state almost by default. My first experience with the club team taught me differently. I still enjoyed watching the sport at Arrowdance, though.

“Hey Lee, come on over here for a second.” I looked over and saw Ranger behind the equipment shed. He waved me over and lit a cigarette.

Ranger was an All-American right attack wing for John Hopkins in the seventies, and in many ways looked like he could still make a go of it. His calf muscles were the size of softballs, and each bicep had a racing-stripe vein that ran from shoulder to elbow. Even his gut looked firm. His hands shook when he brought his cigarette to his mouth though, and one knee still looked as if someone had taken a corkscrew to it.

“How’s the team looking?” I asked. I stood next to him and tried to assume a coach’s stance, arms crossed tight with my hands in my armpits.

“I’ve got some players that like to hit,” he said after a drag. Camp was officially smoke free, but no one told Ranger otherwise. “I wish I had a few of these kids back home. Then we could do something.

I nodded as if I shared some bit of lacrosse knowledge. Ranger was what amounted to a lifer at Camp Arrowdance. Counselors still told each other early Ranger stories around the campfire, or to their bunks after lights out. He was the reason that we were not allowed to go into town around Visiting Day, after he banged one of his camper’s moms at the Holiday Inn. After he blew out his knee in the national tournament his senior year, he moved to Augusta to be close in the winter. Now he taught high school civics and coached the school team in order to keep his summers free.

His thinning hair laid plastered across his forehead in a perpetual sweat. A few summers ago I wrote a joke about him for a camp skit. A character was supposed to ask the camper playing Ranger if he wanted a Pepsi, and he would respond, “No, I’ve always been a Coke man myself.” Even if he had just delivered the line as it was supposed to go, I would have regretted it the next day, I think. But the actor was smarter than me, and added and exaggerated snort and sniff for effect. The audience ate it up, and Ranger was a good sport. I don’t think he ever knew that it was my line.

“You having a good summer, Lee?” he asked.

“Pretty good,” I responded. The practice had fully broken down by then, campers and staff milling around, waiting for dismissal. A few spent their time speculating on lunch; someone spotted chicken sticks thawing during breakfast. Ranger took a long drag from his cigarette, slowly bobbing his head to some unheard beat. After a few seconds he exhaled, blowing smoke out the corner of his mouth and back into his hair. I noticed a pale shine in his temples, the skin in parts showing the blue from the network of vessels

underneath. I never thought that he was old until this summer. Like he could still kick all our asses, but would no longer look very good doing it.

"How would you feel about being a Color War chief," he asked. The directness of the question took me somewhat aback. I always considered it bad form to just speak about it in the open, especially with a director.

"It would actually be pretty great," I said.

"Let me tell you something about being a chief, Lee," he said. Ranger did that often, showing a sense of what you were thinking, and then launching into a collection of his thoughts on the matter. Most of the times, he was frighteningly on the point. Ranger was at his best in the first early weeks, before even the campers arrived. He held court every night in the lodge, new and old staff alike often staying in to hear his version of Arrowdance history.

"First thing to know," he continued, "is that in thirty years, they won't remember by how many points you won or lost, unless they're someone as old as you've become. In '74 my team won by over seventy points, which was a lot back then. Then the next year, we lost it in the last event, four and a half points. Kid named Marty Shankman drops the relay baton coming out of the lake, takes him ten seconds to find it, and by then he'd already been passed. But I'm the only one here now who could tell you that.

"So don't worry about the games. There are only two things you do that can have any effect on the outcome of the war. Make sure you pick the right team out of the hat. That's a good start."

I nodded along as he spoke. Ranger flicked the last bit of his cigarette until a coffee tin. By then the call had blown, and we were alone in our little corner of the fields. The only real sound came from occasional cars on the highway.

"What's the other thing?" I asked, sensing that he was waiting for the prompt. Or maybe he was just seeing a memory before him, something not accessible to me. I was content to wait it out.

"That to some of these kids, you'll be like a god." He stopped, and found another cigarette in a pocket. He lit it and then laughed. "That sounds crazy. Maybe it's not as true anymore. Sometimes I think the kids have changed. I know they have. But you have your team in front of you, that first night. They're keyed up. Your warriors are holding the torches behind you, you still have your paint on. The war-club in your hand. They're kids and all they have are another four days of volleyball and soccer for Christ's sake, but they're listening to you and they're ready for blood. And from that moment until those four days are up and you're either celebrating in the lake or crying right back up on these fields, you are the man to them. What you say to them, what you leave them with, they won't forget that."

"I've thought a lot about that," I said. I don't think he heard me, because after another quick puff, he continued.

"And then to come back the next year, and see your name up in the Dining Hall, to be listed with the others. Some days you'll overhead campers talking about it on the basketball bleachers, telling some new kid what kind of things they can expect. You'll relive it every night around the fire, maybe you'll speak to the new team during the next war. It's an addiction. The disease of more. It can keep you coming back."

I couldn't really think of what to say next, so I offered a soft "Yeah," and wondered if I should make my way down the hill. The owners were expecting me now.

"How old are you?" Ranger asked.

I told him twenty-five, but left out that I had a birthday in less than a month.

"I thought you were younger. So is this it for you?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. But then I thought that last year to. But what's one more summer?"

He stared me down for a few seconds. I noticed a tightening around his eyes, and looked away.

"Just one more summer could be enough," he said. He enjoyed another drag. Then, he said, "You've got a good girl there. How's that going?"

"Fine."

"Her father was a camper. A counselor for a couple years, too. He was a good man. So what's the story with you and her?"

I hesitated, and then told him the truth. Or at least the truth as I understood it, which I suspected could be about as reliable as some of Ranger's stories.

"I don't think it's going to last the summer," I said. "It didn't last winter, and I'm not sure if I even want it too. I don't think it's something that will work."

Ranger shook his head. "I brought my first wife up here after we got married. An April wedding, and then not even two months later we're sharing a small bed in the Lodge. Could barely even call it a room. I told her all the important things to know, like how you can mark the passing of the summer by how far to the left of the boat docks the sun gets when it sets. You know what I mean?"

I told him that I did. I knew what he meant. The look on someone's face when you tell them of the things you find special up here, and how they nod and say "wow" without really matching your smile.

"The danger of this place," he said, and the utter silence of everything thundered in my ears, "is that after too long you begin to fail to see properly. You think that things are either a camp thing, or a real thing. It's easy to segregate the two, and then you resent the real world for not understanding. You lose that perspective, and then you only want what's easy."

"She made it through three of those summers," Ranger said. "I'll give her that." I waited for him to continue, but it soon became clear that he had finished on that topic. I thanked him for the talk. He called out after I had taken three steps.

"I heard Karp's knocking the bottom out of some girl in the kitchen."

"That's true." If Ranger knew anything else, he kept it to himself. He spat.

"The kids of today," he said. "Used to be the challenge of sneaking the tail into camp was half the fun. You all make me a little sick, you know that?"

5.

I took the empty chair across from the large wooden desk. We were in Aaron Silverman's office, the two owners and myself. Aaron was the oldest brother, and claimed as his prize the larger of the two offices. The giant picture window was to his back. Under the previous owners, the office could have served as a camp museum in its own right. Arrowdance had been in the same family since its first summer in 1947, and faded photographs had lined the walls, small individual frames containing group pictures of individual bunks, ten or twelve pasty campers and their stern counselors, dark hair



molded into shiny helmets. You could then follow the progression from one side of the wall to the other, as the pictures turned to color and hairstyles grew longer. Long panoramic shots of the entire camp body also used to display from the walls, the first years with no more than a hundred campers and counselors combined. I used to look forward to my yearly exit evaluations, just so I could sit in that office and absorb that history.

Most of that was all gone now. The previous owners cleared out over the winter as soon as the check cleared. Now, stacks of files and receipts bordered the room, waiting for cabinets to be placed in. Aaron's golden retriever slept in the corner amidst a pile of dirty basketball shorts. It was almost the end of July, and it still looked as if they were only temporarily holding down the fort. The only picture was above Aaron's desk, and was of his and Dave's senior bunk. It must have been from fifteen years ago, and I wondered if they had ever held a job that didn't involve snipe hunts and softball tournaments.

"Thanks for waiting, Lee," Aaron finally said, clearing a spot on his desk. Dave leaned against the back wall. I tried to get a read from him, but his face remained blank. If he was thinking about six years ago when he took me under his wing, and how confused and disappointed he was, I could not tell. I began lining up my arguments in my head, maybe try and take them back to when they were young and posed for the picture on the wall. Anything would be worth a shot.

"So what's going on?" I asked, trying to sound unconcerned.

"It's been a busy couple of days here, that's for sure," Aaron said. "If we had known how much trouble parents could be, I don't know if we would have made an offer on this place." He laughed, and rubbed his eyes exactly as Dave did that morning. Aaron must have been older by only a few minutes, but it looked like he had five years on Dave. He carried a little paunch, and a few gray hairs sprouted from above his ears. Most of that seemed new this year.

"Well, tonight's Steve Hirsch Night, so that could help tip things back in your favor." Hirsch Night was one of cornerstones of the Arrowdance experience as far as I was concerned, a legendary Ranger production. Maybe the mention of it would put them in a more forgiving mood.

"So the reason we called you in here," Dave said, and then looked down at Aaron. Aaron nodded back at him as if to give him permission to continue.

"I think you should hear it coming from Dave," Aaron said. "He feels partly responsible, I guess."

I braced myself, even as I knew that I was blowing things out of proportion. The ghosting wouldn't be so bad. They'd keep me in the office with the blinds down until lunch, and then they'd let me pack my bags in an empty bunk. There would be no one to say good-bye to that way. I did not even feel a rise in my pulse until I thought of Rory, but maybe even this would be for the best.

"We've thought a lot about it," Dave said, and his face formed into a wide grin, "and we'd like you to be the Maroon Chief this summer."

"Oh," I said.

"Of course you'll have to keep it under wraps to everyone," Aaron added. "We haven't told Ian yet."

I continued to sit there speechless as they gave me the few details they had secure at the time. It would happen in some form in six days. The athletic department would draw up teams. I would get my staff together, draw up some plans for t-shirts. I followed their points as well as I could, which became easier as the reality of the situation became more clear. The moment still wasn't registering with me completely – that would probably come later. I listened though, and became caught up in their growing excitement. This is why they bought the camp, I realized as they laid out for me their elaborate plan to “break” the war to the camp. They were like the kids in the picture hanging from the wall again.

“We can't tell you exactly how it's going to break yet,” Dave said, then they both proceeded to tell me a disjointed version of their plan. The Break was in many ways the most important part of the whole war – an elaborately staged scenario that sprung the start of the competition on the campers out of nowhere. The Color War breaks from the early days were legends now. In 1958, a parade of circus elephants interrupted a counselor basketball game. Two elephants were painted in maroon, two in gray, and the respective chiefs rode in atop them. The Break of '65 featured paratroopers from a local military base, and an actual tank that burst through the woods during a soccer tournament. My favorite story was from the summer of 1978, a break that was made possible only by Ranger's Waterville adventures with the local folk. The owners borrowed the services of one of Matoka's male counselors, a gymnastics instructor from Georgia. He was reportedly massive, just thick with muscle and a coat of hair across his back and shoulders. His role was to harass random bunks late at night – throwing rocks onto their roofs, shouting anti-Semitic profanities, and shattering a few pre-approved windows. After a few rounds of this, the camp was in an absolute state of emergency. Rumors of an impending townie invasion swept the Dining Hall. Kids slept with baseball bats, and counselors – unaware of the ruse – organized night watches. It all came to a head the night of the Break. The Georgian placed himself in the middle of the shallow pool and began slapping the water with an oar, calling for the owner's head. Two off-duty police officers appeared, flashing lights and everything. This was at one or two in the morning. Every bunk had spilled onto their porches and front steps to watch these two cops slowly approach the enraged man and began to lead him to their car, and from there back to Matoka. It was all going according to plan until this one sliver of a man, his name forgotten to history, stepped out from his campers and slugged the giant gymnast square across the jaw. The officers held tight to the man's arms, not sure if this was part of the script. The arrested man supposedly stared down this counselor, who was nothing more than a five-foot-three radio instructor, but he ultimately just put his head down and allowed the officers to escort him out of there. As the police car drove back up the hill, the two chiefs emerged onto the roof of the Lodge, and that was the Color War Break of '78.

“It'll be pretty good,” Dave said. “Don't worry about that.”

I left their office still somewhat in a daze, and found myself standing near the water fountain. It was still Instructional period. Campers formed a free-throw line on a nearby court. A photography instructor walked by with a few students. I posed as a Korean camper fumbled with his digital camera. Students in the other track instructional ran by, nodding at me. I was a Color War chief. They all were not.

I must have spent ten minutes standing there, until the runners passed me again on their next lap. A few of them gave me strange looks, which snapped me back into the moment. I must have looked like a shell-shock victim, not quite able to process what had just happened. I gave a casual wave and acted like I had just been waiting my turn at the water fountain. After taking a cold sip, I went down to Bunk 14.

One of my absolute favorite places to be in camp was in my bunk during Instructionals. In my first few summers, when both my campers and I were suffering through their pre-teens, the time they spent off learning their new sports and skills was often the only peace and quiet that I could get. I spent most of my off periods napping or listening to music in the darkened cabin, the room still retaining the chill from the night before. It was even better now that we were at the bottom of the hill, the lake no more than ten feet away from our porch. I loved to listen to the fishing instructional as they hooked their first worms, or to the various voices as they called up and down the hill. I had less than a half hour before the office would blow Recall, sending everyone back to their bunks to wash up for lunch. I wanted some time to think about Rory. After the initial shock of being named Chief passed, the first thing I wanted to do was to find her. She could then be happy for me, and whatever mess I had caused could be over. I was surprised how much of a part I wanted her to have in it, and instantly felt guilty over feeling that surprise. Of course she would want to know about it. She would understand what it meant, more so than anyone else I could hope to meet. I needed that.

I found the bunk not completely empty. Ack laid stretched out on his bed, a leg dangling off the edge. He looked up as I entered, an expression of guilt on his face. It was against the rule for campers to be in the bunks during Instructionals, and while Adam and I usually didn't care, sometimes the directors sent scouts from cabin to cabin.

"It's just you," he said when he saw me.

"Just Lee." I kicked off my flip-flops towards my alcove, a little annoyed at having my potential peace disturbed. "What are you doing here?"

"Practice ended early," he said. He laid his fantasy football magazine aside and sat up. "The Matoaka girls had to get back for a group hug or something."

I shrugged, and went over to my bed. Ack took this as an invitation to stay, and hopped down and went to the fridge. He grabbed two cans of Wal-Mart cola, and pulled a canvas chair over to my area.

"So are you pretty mad at Karp?" He handed me one of the cans, and in my head I kind of laughed at the gesture. In that moment we were close to equals. For as long as they've been at Arrowdance together, Ack has always served as Karp's wingman, helping smooth over his lapses of judgment. I wondered what it was like for them back home, in a high school with normal people and the options that went with it. In the real world, did the same dynamic exist? I was very aware that there was a camp-Lee that slowly faded from existence whenever I returned home. The first month was always the worst, as I adjusted to once again being indoors for class, and having the freedom to get into my car and drive somewhere whenever I wanted. By mid-October people stopped commenting on me tan, and a normal diet of college-food would have put the lost pounds back on my frame. So to imagine any of my campers behind the wheel or talking to actual functioning people, it gave me the shivers.

"I'll talk to him. Then I'll decide how mad to get."

"I think he feels pretty bad," Ack said. "He's actually afraid to talk to you."

"He should be afraid," I responded, but we both knew that if would have done something in the way of punishment, it would have happened by now. I couldn't bring it up to the owners, even if I wanted to, and especially not now. And besides, it wouldn't matter much in a few weeks. I just hoped that next year the camp karma gods would remember this when Karp got his first bunk as a counselor.

"I know, I know. He knows it too. But he's had a rough year. Sometimes, he's not always all there," Ack said, pointing to his head. "He gets up here, and forgets himself."

I let out of burst of air through my lips, but it was mostly for show. I knew a little about Karp's family life, although I usually tried to stay clear of things like that. His parents were going through something, and spending all of yesterday with them probably wouldn't help anyone's mental health.

"I'm not really angry," I said. There was a good chance that I wouldn't exactly talk to him about this at all. Like Ack said, he knew what he did.

"You sounded pretty angry this morning."

"There's a lot more going on than just that," I said. The pop was not exactly cold, and it burned the back of my throat a bit.

"Yeah, I talked to Sarah at rehearsal. She said that Rory was mad at you."

"Magical," I said.

Ack was the only true original left in the bunk, besides me. Karp and Josh didn't join the bunk until our third year, and the others came and went on their own course. My first real memory of Ack was the first night of camp six summers ago. Usually your table in the Dining Hall was randomly assigned to you, but for the first few days you ate with your bunk, to help new kids feel less overwhelmed. When it came time to clear the table, we dumped all the extra food into a metal bucket, the contents of which the camp then sold to a local pig farmer. It was called the swill bucket, and that night one of my co-counselors offered two dollars to anyone at the table that would eat a spoonful from that mess of collected chicken patties, green beans, and milk. Ack accepted the dare, but only made it so far as to peak over the lid into the foul abyss. He immediately threw up into it, at which point the dare was raised to ten dollars. The counselor didn't last the summer, but Ack became my early favorite for best camper ever. I didn't doubt that I was a different person after almost seven summers of Arrowdance than I was before, and Ack had been there for all of it.

I swished the lukewarm soda around my mouth, and thought back to those first few years, thirteen or fourteen campers all crammed into one bunk. If I wanted to, I could close my eyes and imagine those cabins, and tell you which kid slept in which bed, where their drawers were, who kept their Gameboys under their pillows, or which campers needed to leave lunch early for their ADHD meds. If I tried to remember my summers before Arrowdance though, I drew a blank. Surely I must have hung out with friends, lounged on my porch with random people until two or three every morning, spent hours in a car looking for nothing to do. College and Arrowdance were my constants for the better part of a decade now, and my adventure in one of those was most definitely in its final stages. I just had to wonder if I could drop camp as readily.

“Do you ever talk to any of the others?” I asked Ack. His face looked as if I had just voiced a thought aloud, which I guess wasn’t far from the truth. “I mean, like Jake, Billy, Evan. Those guys. The ones that didn’t come back.”

Ack shrugged once he got what I meant. “Sometimes. I see them around. Bill and Jake go to my school. I don’t know about Evan, or Jesse.”

“Why didn’t they come back?” The ones I named were only the latest offenders. They’d all been here last summer, and gave no sign that they would not return. I tried to keep in contact with all my kids once the summer was over, but always lost momentum after a few weeks. It was just easier to shut down that part of my brain until May or June.

“I know that Jake’s dad made him get a job. And that Bill went on a trip to Israel with some other friends.”

“Jesse probably is at tennis camp,” I said. It was the normal story of attrition. They got older, realized that the world is bigger than a just a clearing in the Maine woods, and their parents weren’t shipping them off as soon as school ended.

I looked again at Ack and tried to picture him in school, carrying a book and taking notes. Or any of them just doing something simple like sitting on the couch and watching television. I couldn’t get the image to sit right in my head.

“What made you come back?” I asked.

Ack looked genuinely shocked at the question. He laughed.

“Why would I not? Where else could I sit around and drink a soda at eleven-thirty in the morning?”

“Anywhere in the world, I would think.”

He shook his head. “It wouldn’t taste like this, though. At home, it would be the right kind of cold, and it wouldn’t be this fake Wal-Mart crap. And I wouldn’t look forward to going to the store to buy more. I wouldn’t even have to do that. Someone would do it for me. And in the afternoon, I wouldn’t have a handball game.”

Ack eased back and placed his can in one of the handy cup-holders built into his chair.

“Do you want to be a counselor?”

“Yeah,” he said, as if he could not even humor an alternative. “I’m going to keep coming back until they have no choice but to make me Chief. Years for now, they’ll be talking about the Ackerstein/Karp War.” He was quiet for a moment, and then leveled his gaze at me.

“Why do you still come back?” he asked.

I wanted a good answer. Something that explained how I felt more like a real Lee Stafford when I was at Arrowdance, how I noticed it that first summer when I was able to start things from scratch, tell someone my name and learn theirs, and have that be the person they knew me as. How back home I was the person I had been my entire life, and that was as good as a fact.

“I like the whoopee-pies,” I said. Ack nodded and I looked down, fiddling with the pop-cap. When I looked back up, he was again staring at me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Let me ask you something else.”

“Shoot.”

Ack put his elbows on his knees, rocked forward, grimaced, and then went back into his chair. He mustered up the energy again, and leaned towards me again.

"I've been working with Sarah a lot this last week or so. We just nailed the 'Summer Love' duet. We have this real chemistry," he said, his tone trying to lead me somewhere I didn't want to go.

"No."

"What's wrong with that?"

"She's fourteen, Ack."

He shook his head vigorously. "She turns fifteen in November."

"That still seems sketchy."

"Really? How much older are you than Rory?"

"Sarah's just a kid," I pointed out.

"What the hell am I, then?"

I shrugged, conceding that point. Sarah could do much worse, and the Matoaka directors kept their girls under lock and key, so really there was nothing to worry about.

"It's not an idea I'm crazy about," I told him. It wasn't too surprising, though. Most of the older campers seemed to have a crush on her to begin with, but Sarah Strasser had quickly become something of a fascination around my bunk. Maybe it was due to my relationship with her sister, but Sarah had somehow become an unofficial member of Bunk 14. Other kids were allowed to dance with her at the socials, as long as they were respectful. Sarah was a good sport about it. She lacked the cutthroat gene that the other Strasser women shared.

"She'll be a freshman, I'll be a junior. And I don't turn seventeen until January. So it's not like I'm even a full two years older than her."

"You have a birthday in January?"

Ack looked hurt. "Wait, you don't know when my birthday is?"

I waved him off. My break time was rapidly circling the drain, but I felt I it to Rory to put this fire out.

"You'll be home in less than three weeks, Ack. Don't you have girls back home?"

"What are you talking about? We live like a half-hour apart. She's transferring to my school."

"Wait, I thought you lived in Newton?"

"Yeah," he said, and looked at me as if I was failing basic math. "And the Stasser's live in Needham."

"Is that close or something?"

"Yeah. How do you not know this?"

"I failed asshole geography. Wait, asshole-ography." I threw up my hands to ward off his response, which looked as if were to be steeped in frustration. "I'm probably not the best person to take advice from, especially about a Strasser. Does she even seem to like you?"

Ack cocked his head back and ran his teeth across his lower lip.

"That's a tough one," he said after a moment of thought. "Probably. I don't know. Did she talk about me yesterday?"

I shook my head and fell back onto my pillow. I half hoped that I would miscalculate the maneuver and knock myself out against the headboard.

"I'll lie to you and say yes. Ack, yesterday was a long one. I'm trying to block out as much of it as I can."

“Okay, that’s fine,” he said, standing up and scooting his chair across the room with his foot. “But admire the parallels that are lining up. It’s like ‘Grease’, but real.”

I told him that I would be full of nothing but admiration, and planned to wish him the best of luck, if only I could rest my carcass for the next five minutes. He relented and I heard his footsteps retreat into the back room. Then I remembered my encounter on the soccer field with Fink.

“Did you tell anyone about last night?” I yelled out.

“No,” Ack responded, his voice full of the echo gained from the toilet stall.

“Did Karp?”

Silence.

“Ack, did you hear me?”

I heard the toilet flush, and soon Ack reappeared. I couldn’t quite read the expression on his face, but it reminded me of the time he knocked the urinal off the wall in Bunk 18. Something between fear of reprisal and genuine wonder.

“What did Fink say?” he asked.

“Just if I noticed anything funny about Karp last night.” I sat up, abandoning any chance at rest. I only assumed that Fink was just trying to make it seem like he knew something important. I really just wanted that to still be the case.

“Funny like him hiding in a closet?”

“You’re right.” It sounded good enough, and I had too many other brushfires in my head to have to worry about anything else. Whatever Karp got himself into in the next two weeks, someone else could handle it. I just needed to put a cap on this one thing.

“Tell Karp to come find me in the Lodge,” I said as I worked my toes into my flip-flops.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Ack said. He still stood there in the door to the bathroom, one hand on his belly. “He’ll be glad, actually.”

“Someday you’ll see,” I told him before stepping onto the porch. “This is how you earn the corner bed.”

I waited for Karp in the lodge. A few minutes remained in the final instructional period, and I had dropped into one of the old, garage-sale quality couches that populated the main room. Through the window behind my head, I heard Rory’s voice as she instructed her students on the finer points of the breaststroke. I silently cursed the windows for being open, the campers that caused her to raise her voice, and Karp for putting me in this spot. More than that though, I was mad at my own stubbornness. Identifying it was never the problem, it was more the lack of me standing up and making things right with Rory. Well, that *is* stubborn, I thought. I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

The lodge was the only building that remained from Arrowdance’s original days as a fishing and hunting camp. A father and son built it shortly after they both returned from the First World War, and the foundation included dirt from five European nations. It smelt of treated wood and damp furniture – always, regardless of the weather. Bookshelves lined the walls, packed with fifty-year old adventure novels with titles like *True Science Mysteries* and *Ambush by the Red River*. A few young directors lived upstairs in the cluster of bedrooms, former counselors and a few veteran women staffers

that stuck around long enough to claim some assistant position, something high up enough to get them out of the bunks and into the lodge. Up there the wooden floors reeked of years of soaked-up beer, and the individual rooms were all but passed down in a system of debauched lineage. I had a chance to move up there the summer I was a unit leader, but I knew that I would lose some important connection to whatever brought me back summer after summer.

Most of the downstairs was one giant room, full of couches and two battered pool tables. A fireplace dominated the center of the room, and the stone mantle included one mineral from every state that was in the union at the time. If you knew where to grab, one particular chunk of quartz could be twisted out to reveal a fist-sized hiding place. The entire lodge seemed to hug onto that fireplace for dear life, as if it were afraid of sliding into the lake. That was actually more the case than the owners wanted to be made public, I'm sure. You could drop a marble at the foot of the fireplace and watch as it beat a hasty retreat to one of the room's corners. The floor creaked when you walked, and on hot days water dripped from the exposed pipes overhead. It had become a near tradition that at the end of every summer we'd throw the lodge a going away party, safe in our assumptions that in no way could it survive another winter – either owner prudence or the hands of the Arrowdance gods would see fit to bring it down.

I must have dozed, because it took me a few seconds to register Karp's voice. I opened my eyes and found him leaning against the pool table, shin guards half dangling from his ankles.

"What?" I grimaced as I sat up, and reached behind my back. I retrieved a cue ball from a fold in the couch, and tossed it to Karp.

"Ack told me to come find you," he said. He looked around at the empty room. "This place looks a lot different in the daytime."

"But of course you never come in here at night either, right?"

"That's a good point." He hefted himself onto the pool table and rocketed the cue ball towards a corner pocket. It popped over the lip and rolled loudly across the wooden floor. I watched as it eventually reversed course and wandered back to us.

"What are you up to, Karp?" I asked. I watched as he thought the question over. For all the show and almost theatrical buffoonery he sometimes displayed, I knew that he was fiercely intelligent. That was the Karp I wanted to reach.

"I know what you mean," he finally said. "And it's not like I didn't know what could have happened."

"It could have been real bad. I mean, shit Seth, what if that Derek guy had found you? And if something had happened to you? That would have been it for camp. Places have been lost for a lot less than that." I said it in a harsher tone than I meant to, and Karp retreated back into himself, his shoulders pitching forward and his back arching out.

"I know," he said, and repeated it a few times, his eyes losing contact with me.

I stopped short of laying into him further. Karp had not been with me as long as Ack; his bunk was merged into ours a few summers back, and I did not feel that we were as close as a result. I knew only a few details of his home life, and that was from bits overheard between him and the other campers in the bunk.

"Just so that we both know that this is over," I said.

Karp nodded, and sniffed into the back of his hand.

"Yeah, I think that's the case," he said.



“And actually really over,” I stressed. “Don’t be looking over at her in the Dining Hall. If she’s the only one in your section, and you want a refill on chicken fingers, you go hungry.”

Karp laughed and said okay, he got the message. I pushed myself off the couch and went over to him. Over his shoulder I noticed Rory pass by a window, on her way up the hill. Her wet hair was gathered and brought forward over one shoulder.

“You’re a camper for what, thirteen more days? Enjoy that. Next year when you’re a counselor, you won’t have to hear this talk.” I clapped Karp on the shoulder and looked to the door. Rory was booking it, already half up the hill. I felt a sudden urge to go catch her.

“There’s probably something else I should tell you,” Karp said. I had already shifted my weight towards the door and felt like reversing course was too much effort. Each second brought Rory closer to her cabin, where during the day all men were for real actually forbidden.

“It can wait though, right? You need to get ready for lunch.”

Karp looked as if he was about to speak, but he nodded his head. I think he said something else, but I was already down the porch steps. I half-jogged to the front of the lodge and looked up the hill, but Rory was gone.

## 6.

Ranger stood before the assembled camp. Miles to his back were Canadian mountains, a descending sun wedged between them. The waters of East Pond lay dormant. Were it not for his voice, cracked with raw emotion, the only sound would be that of distant loons that made the island their home.

“Steve Hirsh was a troubled man,” he said. He stood in front of a collection of wooden bleachers, enough to hold the entire camp. The youngest campers sat cross-legged in the grass, their elbows on their knees. They followed Ranger’s every movement with the rapt attention usually devoted to only television or their dessert. Behind them sat the rest of the camper body, and although for some this was their first Steve Hirsh Night, and for others their eighth, their look was the same. This night was Ranger’s night, one of the few times that both his and Arrowdance’s reality crossed into the same plane. It was his last best thing.

“A troubled man for as long as I had known him. Ever since he came back from ‘Nam, people who knew him said that he was not the same,” Ranger continued. He paced back and forth, a lacrosse stick gripped in one knarled hand. He was not alone up there. Standing with him were five assistants, senior campers from his team. They stood before a picnic table, each of which was covered by a thick white cloth. Beneath the clothes poked bewildering shapes – cones, cylinders, and domes. Ranger’s disciples wore full pads, and every one of them was armed with a stick as well.

“Now, I can’t claim to know of the darkness that he saw in that far-off land. I did not know the old Steve, but I saw the man that was left. All men are creatures of vice,” Ranger said. “For some, it is the thrill of gambling. For others, the lure of women. I myself was once tormented by many demons, and Steve, the friend that he was, stood by me as I grappled with each of them in turn.”

I stood to the left side, my campers occupying a corner of the bleachers. Usually it was a struggle to get them out of the bunk in the evening. They were all veterans of many summers, and had seen most of the evening activities five or six times. Most nights the camp organized a poor man's Price is Right or Tonight Show, with cardboard props and the ropes course counselor as special guest. Or we'd get something like Danny Rosen or the fifth man to walk on the moon. Good for the new camper, but not so much the old. Hirsh Night was different. My campers were down at the waterfront ten minutes before the activity call, saving the best seats and trying to peak at what laid atop the picnic tables.

Ranger continues his routine, his eyes lost in what were probably memories of two dozen past performances. Not for the first time, I tried to picture him in front of a chalkboard, railing about photosynthesis or the endocrine system.

"He's on a roll tonight," Adam said softly. He stood next to me and Jason, a first-year baseball counselor from Oklahoma. Jason's kids were all seated in a group near the middle of the pack, but Jason kept to the outskirts so he could safely spit his chew.

"Does he always go on like this?" he asked. Like most fresh meat, he had not yet fully bought into Ranger's brand of mania.

"Usually, yeah," Adam answered.

"Shit, this is nothing," Fink commented. He was sprawled in a canvas chair that probably belonged to one of his campers, a bug net over his head. "One time, he went until it was full-on dark, and we had to use flashlights for the ending."

Adam nodded. "That's right. This is nothing."

Ranger did not have my full attention. I still had not talked to Rory that day. She seemed to avoid my section of the dining hall went she went from her table to fetch more rolls, and made a quick exit back to her cabin after the meal. I tried to bump into her during Free Swim, but it turned out that she had that day off from lifeguarding. I had not even thought about my impending chiefship since that afternoon. It was irritating, for one, this constant pressure to worry about where things stood between us. This wasn't the first fight we'd had, that much was sure. We spent two days not talking last summer, and then we were right back to where we were before. This would be no different.

She now sat on the ground with her campers, each arm around the shoulders a different boy, her expression no different from theirs. When her campers made an ooh sound, or sucked in their breathes, Rory giggled and shook them excitedly. Whatever cloud of uneasy sweats and thoughts that inhabited my day seemed to have let her be. I wanted to sneak behind her and cocoon her with my knees, drawing her into me.

Ranger was quickly drawing things to the breaking point, his cadence quickening and spit collecting in the creases of his mouth. As if sensing the tension coursing through his audience, he sped through his account of the later years of his friendship with Steve Hirsh. and his discovery of his companion's damning vice. Ranger girded himself for the big reveal. Finally, one of the younger campers, already conditioned to provide the appropriate prompt, raised his voice.

"What was Steve's weakness?" he asked, his voice cutting through the cool air.

Ranger stopped pacing, the center picnic table at his hip. He paused for just a second more than expected, savoring the moment. Then, he gripped one corner of the spread cloth and whipped it from the table.

"Milkshakes!" he shouted, and the crowd roared.

The assistants uncovered the other four tables. Upon each were two large metal drums, each deep enough to conceal one of Rory's campers. Next to each drum were a full dozen tubs of ice cream – vanilla and chocolate and cookies and cream – already growing soft and malleable. Closer to the edge of the table, and in some cases threatening to spill to the floor, sat the rest of the items – chocolate syrup, gallons of whole milk, candied sprinkles, marshmallow bits, chocolate and caramel chips, and dozens of small plastic cups.

"Poor Steve always had a sweet tooth," Ranger confided, his tone now laced with what seemed like genuine sorrow. "By the end, he was eating five, six, seven milkshakes a day." Ranger held a container of Rocky Road above his head as his assistants began adding the secondary ingredients into their tubs, cherries and Rolos by the handful. As he continued to speak, Ranger began dumping wet fists of the stuff into the metal drum. "Andy, he said to me, I've brought this upon myself." The ice cream added, he held his lacrosse stick high above his head, and plunged it handle first into the thick mess. He began to stir.

"I tried to reason with him, pleaded with him for hours to just put down the glass. To see this man, who served his country through war and peace, a great friend to us all, I wanted nothing more than to help him. But when I looked in his eyes, I saw that my friend was gone. It damn near burst my heart." He paused, and I swear I heard a choked gasp from somewhere in the mass of campers.

"His heart was the one that burst, though," he said as he continued to stir. He made a big show of straining with the stick, fighting the thick current with all his might. The thick, chocolaty substance sloshed over the lip of the drum, and Ranger's forearms were dark with ice cream. Finally, he raised the stick back over his head, milky gore running up to the neck. Whatever chatter had arisen once the work began suddenly stopped. Even the other stirrers ceased their labor for this moment. Adam poked me in the ribs. I grinned.

"It is in this way we honor that man," Ranger said, his voice barely above a whisper. "To Steve – warrior, poet, friend."

Ranger's lacrosse stick slowly took its shit. A thin rope of soft ice cream oozed from the open end of the handle, and we all started to make that "oooh" sound in anticipation. The strand became longer and longer until it just could not hold anymore, and fell into the can. We exhaled as one.

After that, moment things progressed quickly. Karp vaulted from his spot on the bleachers, chanting, "Go, go, go." My other campers followed soon after, throwing hips and turning sideways while maneuvering to the front of the rapidly forming mob. Ranger's assistants began dipping cups into the vats of milkshakes with their bare hands. Campers walked away with overflowing portions and moved right back to the end of the line.

"My personal record is nine," Adam said. We held back from the swarm, content to sit this one out for now. Karp and Ack held the second servings over their head and pounded them together, causing a minor milkshake downpour around them. Of course the younger campers saw this, and soon dozens of pairs copied the behavior. I glanced over and found Ranger standing out by the boat shed, watching the water and smoking a cigarette.

“Remember Bam Bam?” Fink asked. As he spoke one of the more huge campers – a nationally-ranked water polo player, despite his massive size – slammed an empty cup down open the table and shouted “Eleven!” to massive cheers. When they could not refill his cup fast enough, he grabbed the tub with both hands and held it up to his mouth. His friends helped him tip it downward.

Jason turned to spit. “What kind of name was Bam Bam?”

“He drank what, like sixteen? Seventeen?”

“Nineteen,” Adam said. “That’s still the record, I think.”

“That can’t be good for the body,” Jason said.

“Just wait,” I said. Presently, the camper’s friends led him down to the waterfront, slowly over the rocks and with great care not to jostle him too severely. Every so often, he let out a loud groan – a sound the seemed to come from his toes all the way up. Most of camp stopped their minor debauchery and rushed to the fence to get a good view. The camper – seriously with calves that looked like catchers’ mitts and a back twice as wide as mine – stood up to his ankles in the water and his hands on his knees. He groaned again, and mid-bellow the sound stopped abruptly. He pitched forward, and let lose a solid stream of lactose-fueled vomit, like a thick rope hitting the water. A solid ten seconds of productive heaving continued with the crowd cheering behind him. After a second effort, he turned and acknowledged his fans.

“Only one puker, though,” Adam said. “Kind of disappointing.”

Jason turned away.

“I think I might be sick,” he said. Adam considered that for a moment.

“But you didn’t drink any Hirsh, so it wouldn’t count.”

Rory stood by the table furthest from me, sipping from her cup. I pushed myself away from the bleachers, and told the others that I would be right back. I managed to make it over to her without getting too messy. The ground was like what I imagined the freezer of a Baskin Robbins would look like if you turned off the power to the freezer.

She noticed me quickly and watched as I approached. A few of her campers lingered near-by, and I high-fived one of them as I walked past. My hand came back sticky with dried milkshake.

“Fun night,” I said.

“For you.” She held out her arm to slow one of her kids, who was attempting to grab the tail of Curtis, the camp dog. The camper protested for a second, and then reversed course. He joined some friends over by one of the tables, to try to score the last of the Hirsh. “I’m going to be dealing with these spazs and their upset stomachs most of the night.”

“No one does,” she said in a slightly melodic voice. Rory then studied the bottom of her empty cup, waiting for me to say something of substance, I supposed.

“I thought you weren’t on-duty for a few days,” I said after a moment of silence. I felt as if the din around us had died out, and all were witnessing my effort. I never found it difficult to talk to Rory, even when we began, until now. Eventually Rory shook her head and tossed her cup into the trash, and then turned her body to me.

“I’m going to stay in tonight. Danielle and some of the other girls want to watch a movie, so I’m just going to do that.”

“Sounds fun.” I didn’t mean to sound as if I was making light of her plans, but she looked at me harshly still.

“No one’s asking you to come,” she said. I began to tell her that wasn’t what I meant, but she shook her head and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Forget about it,” she said softly.

I looked over my shoulder, back towards my friends across the waterfront. Adam and Fink both had a hold of one of Karp’s arms, and were anchoring him like two tethers as he leaned his body from a dock. The water below was murky with regurgitated milk and syrup.

“This is the kind of thing I don’t even bother trying to explain back home,” I said. I glanced back at Rory. She looked as if she had been studying the back of my head, and then directed the scrutiny towards my face. After a few seconds she smirked.

“Arrowdance,” she said. “Teaching valuable life lessons for seven weeks a summer.”

I smiled back, and took a tentative step closer. Already counselors were helping to clean up, and we’d all get the call to go back to our bunks. The sun had nearly set, and the lights from the Lodge’s porch backlit Rory’s shoulders and neck.

“Hey, so I missed you today,” I said.

“Me too.”

“I’ve been thinking about a lot of things today,” I said. “It’s dumb that we spend this time fighting – and I’m not saying that this isn’t my fault – but why fight in our last few days here? That’s not the kind of memories I want to leave with.”

Rory sighed. Somewhere behind us, one of her co-counselors began calling names, in a weak attempt to get the campers in order. There was a steady stream of people headed up the hill, and almost every second a different screen door slammed shut.

“I’m going to have to deal with this, Lee.”

I stepped in front of her. “Okay, okay,” I said. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry.”

Rory took the hand that I had up and curled her fingers around mine. She moved the hand out of her way, and our skin parted with a sucking sound from the milkshake.

“I’m done being mad at you, Lee,” she said. “I was done with that last night. But that doesn’t really change things.” As she continued past me her foot briefly caught the edge of a rock or a root, and her hand grasped out for support. She was gone though, after a quick squeeze of my shoulder.

Rafterball was a dying sport, unfortunately. Many of the newer bunks had the high ceiling required for proper play, but somehow were built without the necessary rafters. The previous two summers we lived in cabins built within the last ten years. Their walls were clean of tags, and on cold nights the act of closing the windows was more than a toothless gesture. For all their modern amenities though, nothing beat the charm of the old bunks, squeaky floors and drafty walls included.

“I’ve got winner,” Karp called out from atop his bunk. He sat right at the centerline, the rafter that bisected the bunk. We had cleared the floor of all debris and obstacles shortly after returning from Hirsh Night. Adam and I took one look at our campers as they either jumped from bed to bed or began to organize their sock drawers with twitching hands and decided that a quick rafterball round robin was in order.

“No, there’s an order,” I said, the tennis ball encased in my right palm. It was match point, and I held the serve. If the owners ever decided to make a rafterball

instructional, they would find no one more qualified than me to teach it. I was good. The secret was backspin. Everyone always ignored the actual rafter, and relied on the opposing player to make a mistake in their return volley. It took me a few years to refine my technique, of preying on my campers and they suffered through their awkward early teenage years. They were all now athletic studs – relative to the rather nebbish Arrowdance baseline, at least – but I still owned them when it came to this.

Ack shifted his balance from heel to heel directly across from me, awaiting my serve. He played a solid ground game, but his heavy feet always betrayed him when it mattered. It wasn't enough to simply catch the ball and send it back over the rafter. The youngest kids at Arrowdance could handle that. Rafterball required you to catch and return the serve while in mid-air. A volley between two accomplished players was a glorious sight. My best ever shot involved darting across the bunk for the catch, planting my foot on the door of the refrigerator, and sending the ball back over the rafter to the far corner, well out of reach. Afterwards, if a game was going on, I always made sure that someone heard new heard that story.

"Me and Lee, then Adam and Josh, then you and Lee," Ack said through his teeth, beads of sweat forming along his forehead. "That's the order."

"That order sucks," Karp said. "That's too much time for me to think about it."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Josh said, emerging from the backroom. He had taken the time to change into his official rafterball uniform – knee pads from his hockey gear, and toeless socks over his forearms.

"You look awesome Josh, seriously," I said, still readying my serve. Josh was my primary competition, the only one with enough disregard for his body to pose a threat to my record. I needed to get into his head. "I can't believe that you have girl issues."

"Shut up shut up shut up," Ack said loudly. "Serve the thing." He intensified his rocking, each shift of weight causing the loose things atop the dressers to rattle. He managed to stretch this match into a final set of tiebreakers, and it looked as if he was about to unravel from the top down. I couldn't resist the temptation to push him a little further down that line.

"This is close, Ack," I said. "Almost like back in '01, when you had me tied. And then you threw up."

Ack shook his head, sending a few drops of sweat to the floor.

"It was the cordon bleu that night," he said, his eyes never leaving the fuzzy green ball in my hand. "You shouldn't have made me finish the game."

"This is your moment Ack," Adam shouted from his corner of the bunk. He had been silently watching the action, but now joined the act. "Man up or sit down." Josh and Karp shouted similar sentiments, and soon began chanting Ack's name at an increasing tempo.

I stood a full ten feet away from the rafter, at the furthest boundary of the court, marked by two large rocks we collected from the lake bottom. I rocked once in preparation, and then leapt forward. At the height of the jump, I finger rolled the tennis ball towards the rafter, my middle finger applying a backwards spin. Ack moved late and not far enough in, expecting the ball to cleanly clear the rafter. The ball caught the top edge of it however, its momentum dying with that soft bounce. It fell forward, only crossing the centerline by a long inch. Ack tried valiantly to compensate for his error, but his dive was too late. The ball bounced onto the ground and rolled under a bed.

"That's it then," I said, and walked over to the fridge to move one more magnetic dot over to my name. "I really appreciate the time and effort you put into this, Ack." I walked by him as he pushed himself up from the floor, and went over to my bed to watch the next round. Josh began skipping around the bunk, performing his version of rafterball calisthenics. Adam pushed past him and pushed a pile of laundry aside and sat on my mattress.

"You staying in tonight?" he asked.

"I guess. It's been a long day." Once Rory left me to attend to her campers, I headed straight back to the bunk. The idea of being outwardly social lacked a great deal of appeal.

"I might pop up to the fire then later, if you're sticking around." Adam eyed me hopefully. He was on duty, and needed me to cover.

I shrugged, and told him that could probably work. Before I could ask Adam what he planned to do up there, I heard footsteps leading up to our cabin. A few seconds later, the door banged open.

"Oh Fink, get the fuck out of here I hate you!" Karp shouted, kicking a flip-flop across the room. Fink jukeed to the side, and the sandal bounced off the wall.

"You're not getting this back now," Fink said, bending to grab the projectile from the floor. He held it behind his back. "I own this. I'm adding it to the collection."

Apparently satisfied with his victory, Fink sauntered over to Adam and me. I waved off Karp, who had sprang from his bunk and held a hockey stick in a threatening manner.

"You're leaving the flip-flop here," I said.

"No, sure," Fink said. He tossed it back to Karp, hitting him in the back. Karp cursed at him again, but stayed in his corner.

"Where'd you go off to?" he asked me, taking the seat that Ack left out earlier that day. The three of us were clustered rather close together, and Fink put his shoes up on my blanket. "At Hirsh Night. We turned around and you were gone."

"He was talking to Rory. What do you care?" Adam said. I nodded at him. I had not mentioned to him the current state of affairs between me and her, but he knew me well enough to pick up that things were certainly no better.

"I don't mean to pry, okay," Fink said, holding up his hands. "I just came by to see if you wanted to come up to the fire with me." He had a dumb grin on his face, a look of which I had learned to be wary. Usually that grin was followed by a request to join him in raiding a rival bunk, or to ask me to be his wingman down at the local miniature golf course where all the high school kids hung out and drank beer from the trunks of their cars. For some reason, I was his easy mark.

"I'm staying in tonight, Fink."

"I think you'll want to come."

I shook my head. The smile on his face had only grown to a scale that now approached complete shit-eating. Across the bunk, Josh yelled for Adam's attention. It was time for their match.

"I'll make this quick," Adam said. Once he was gone, Fink took his spot on the corner of the bed.

"How do you sleep with all this shit on your bed?" he asked. I ignored the question. To be honest, I came in so late the night before I didn't notice the various shirts

and socks and other bits of laundry, and before that night, it had been weeks since my last night in the bunk.

"You know, my bunk invented rafterball eight years ago," Fink said to my campers. "You guys play it all wrong. The rafter should be an automatic fault. Out of play. Those were the rules."

"Over here," I said, snapping my fingers to draw Fink's attention away from the response to his comments. The last thing I needed that night was for one of them to flip out on Fink and throw more than a shoe. Fink was an alright kid, but he had trouble reading a room.

"So come down to the fire," Fink said, instantly back on track.

I told him that I didn't know. Even if the chances of Rory being there were slight, I didn't want to risk facing her around others. If she still needed time to cool off, I would give it to her.

"You're going to be at the fire tonight," Fink insisted. "And here's why. You get your shot at a rematch."

"What are you even talking about, Fink?"

"The Jittering Jew is at the fire."

"What, who? The boxer?"

Fink nodded, the satisfaction at his well-played reveal evident on his face.

"He's there. I talked to him awhile. You should go up and meet him."

"No. I don't care. What's he even doing here?"

"That's the thing," Fink said, lowering his voice. "Justin from my bunk came back to tell me. I had to see it for myself. Rosen is just up there, drinking beers and macking on some local girls. It's happening Right Now."

I stopped myself from shrugging dismissively. It could be worse. Of course I wasn't about to go up to the champion boxer and demand satisfaction, but the absolute trainwreck potential of the situation had its appeal. For all we knew, Rosen should have been miles away, back on his training regimen for whatever bout he had next. I wondered if the trainer was at the fire too, rubbing the boxer's shoulders or leering at the underage action. And if I wanted a distraction, I could hope for none better.

"What are my chances of regretting this?" I asked, already reaching for a jacket. We were half way out the door before Fink responded. I barely had time to wave to Adam.

"You think I've ever worried about regret?" Fink said. "I'm the camp idiot, remember?"

The path to the fire took us past the women's cabin. I kept my eyes fixed on the orange glow ahead, and the occasional licks of flame and darkened bodies the briefly appeared through the layers of trees. We walked without speaking, Fink and I, cutting onto the back road. As we walked we triggered a sequence of motion sensors, which activated strong halogen lights overhead. Each created a bright disk of scattered rocks and pine needles. Seconds after we exited the light, darkness again resumed.

We found Rosen exactly where Fink indicated he would be, leaned up against a townie's hatchback, a bottle of beer in each hand. Despite the chill, he wore only a white t-shirt and track pants. His championship belt laid over his shoulder, the small gold plates glittering in the reflected firelight. A couple of girls hovered on each side,



listening intently to whatever he had to say at the moment. For a second I half-expected to see Lauren there among them, but it turned out that I did not recognize any of the girls. Where Rosen found them, I had no idea.

I stopped twenty or thirty feet short of the boxer, near a group of counselors. Most everyone gave Rosen a wide berth, and most eyes seemed fixed on the spectacle. For his part, Rosen seemed oblivious except when one counselor or another stepped up to high-five him or offer another beer.

“How long has he been here?” I asked someone to my right. Justin turned around and chuckled.

“Since who knows?” he said in a thick Boston accent. Justin was one of Fink’s co-counselors, on a hockey scholarship at a small college. I got along with him okay, although I was a bit suspicious of his ability to cohabitate with Fink for three summers. “He was up here when I came to start the fire, an hour ago. Already pounding beers then.”

“Anybody actually talk to him?”

“This guy here did.” Justin indicated Fink. “Not that I believe anything he says about it.”

“It’s true,” Fink said. “Go ask him yourself.”

“What?” I asked. I moved closer to the fire, and the two of them followed me. The dorm furniture from the night before had transformed completely to ashes and random metal pieces. A half-dozen genuine logs burned in their stead, and for the first time in weeks the fire did not have the slight scent of treated wood and plastics.

“He went AWOL,” Fink said. “Just left his hotel room in Concord and drove straight here all day. He said he liked the place.”

“Awesome,” I said. The corners of my mind twitched a bit at the fact that this guy was probably technically trespassing, and a boxer that had escaped his handlers in order to hang out with high school girls and camp counselors probably was already in a rather questionable state of mind.

“Come on, let’s go talk to him.” Fink rapped me on the shoulder, and made a move for the car.

“You guys go right ahead,” Justin said. “I’m enjoying the freak show good enough back here.” I shot him a rueful look and then followed Fink, feeling the brief, intense heat from the fire as I walked past.

Up close, the Jittering Jew was much as I remembered him from two nights ago. Dressed in somewhat regular clothes, he resembled what I pictured as a street tough from a mid-century musical. The words “Dancing Danny Rosen” ran up the length of both legs, and his t-shirt featured a graphic of two boxing gloves coming together in a brilliant explosion. His short hair glistened in whatever bit of light it could find. He saw Fink and I approaching, and leaned back against the car, his hands balled into his pockets. When I looked down, I saw his shiny white sparring boots.

“Hey champ,” Fink said, as if they were already old friends. “This is the guy I was talking about.”

I realized that my back was to the fire when Rosen squinted at me. I moved a bit to the side, close to one of the seemingly anonymous girls, who frowned and straightened up her posture.

“Yeah, I sorta do,” Rosen said. When he wasn’t projecting his words to a gym full of rowdy campers, his voice was disarmingly soft. I found myself leaning in. “Sorry about the jaw. What was your name again?”

“Lee. Stafford.”

“Right right. Sorry.” His smile indicated self-consciousness, but his eyes maintained an edge that made me uneasy, like if I were to summon a mystical fist out of thin air with which to assault him, he’d be ready for it. He twirled a finger. “All these camps they have me going to, I forget those sorts of things sometimes.”

“You should have seen him later that night,” Fink said to him, again knocking me on the arm. “He didn’t know where he was.”

“Um, yeah,” I said. “Happens all the time.”

Rosen laughed, apparently satisfied that I was cool. The sound was surprising as well – a quick, throaty cough more suited for one of my camper’s asthmatic grandparents from Florida.

“You should have heard Mike afterwards,” Rosen said. “He was pissed; thought you were going to sue or some shit.”

“Mike’s his trainer, remember,” Fink said.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “So.”

I felt it become awkward after a few seconds, but Rosen just drained both his beers in turn and tossed them into the bushes. I looked over my shoulder at the other counselors, expecting an audience of unabashed gawkers. I certainly would be in their shoes, but something else must have been more exciting from the looks of things. The three of us, plus the girls, stood in our own little isolated corner. I half-imagined invisible strings pulling me back to the fire and some semblance of reality.

“So listen,” Fink said to me. “Danny’s out of beer, so I told him we could take my car into town. We’re ready to go.”

“Do I have to decide right now?”

Fink smiled crookedly and looked over to Rosen, but the boxer had returned his attention to the girls as he pantomimed what looked like a devastating combo of punches. I pulled Fink aside.

“What’s going on, Fink? Who is this guy?”

“What do you mean ‘who is he’?”

“I mean, he just shows up in the parking lot and now you’re drinking buddies with him?”

He shook his head and smiled at me the way I would at a camper that couldn’t tie his own shoes.

“It’s alright. You didn’t stay for the clinic. I got to talk to him. He’s alright. And tonight he said that he liked this place, and just needed a break.”

“You said he went AWOL.”

“I just wanted it to sound cool.”

I ran out of steam. On one hand, I could see something rather close to noble about going into town with them, if I really tried. Like staying behind in a sinking sub, if it meant that everyone else got out alive. The combination of Fink and a flaky middleweight had about as much disastrous potential.

“Think of the stories we can tell,” Fink said, and that sealed it.

Rosen said a few words to the girls, and pushed himself fully to his feet. I followed the two of them over to Fink's car, a few steps behind. While I could tolerate Fink most of the time, the same could not be said for most of the foreign counselors, who quickly got fed up with his boasts and exaggerations. At the end of most nights, when the fire was out and most everyone else was gone, Fink's car served as a suitable urinal. I didn't want Fink to see me open the back door with my shoe.

"This is going to be great," Fink said once we were all in. Rosen pushed his seat all the way back, and reclined nearly into my lap before I managed to move over. Fink flashed his brights as he maneuvered out, and I alone saw the middle finger responses.

"You ever just feel like hitting somebody?" Rosen asked.

7.

Two summers ago, I went out with Fink for the first time. It was late June, and a group of my friends left without me that night. I ran up the hill late and found Fink waiting by the water fountain, keys in hand. He pushed himself off the fence as soon as he saw me, and held out his hand for an awkward combination shake finger snap thing.

"I told them to go on ahead," he said once we had completed the maneuver. "They said they'll save us a spot."

I decided against faking a sudden stomach malady. This was still back in Fink's first summer as a counselor. He was the only one from his bunk the previous summer to come back as a counselor, and he was having a hard time adjusting to the employee side of camp. To many of the veteran counselors, he was still the annoying camper that would constantly pester you about your off-time activities, or for any inside gossip. As a colleague, he seemed to spend way too much time trying to impress everyone. Maybe all he needed was a solid role model to help him with the adjustment, I thought.

It took ten minutes on the road for me to question my conclusion.

We had just crested a large hill, and began our descent into Oakland. Fink assigned me as the trip's DJ, and asked for a new Dave Matthews's album every half mile. Each new song provided him with an opportunity to tell me about the band's most recent concert, and the "clutch" tickets his dad had provided.

"Check this out, Lee," he said. I was twisted around the passenger seat, digging through empty sports drink bottles and CD cases. Fink tapped on my shoulder until I turned around.

I did my best to use the same tone of voice from when my campers were little kids, and one of them would wake me up in the middle of the night to help him change his sheets. I was a little out of practice, but Fink did not seem to notice my annoyance. He had an almost giddy expression on his face.

We were slowly cruising down the one main Oakland street, our only real corridor between Arrowdance and Churchhill. Oakland had a few spots popular to our campers, like a small roadside ice-cream and miniature golf stand, but the depressed nature of the town always made me feel uneasy, at least when I was with my campers. Most of the roadside houses had porches with tattered screen windows, and rusted out cars rested on blocks at the end of the gravel driveways. My kids joked about the things they saw, not in any malicious way, but out of a real ignorance nonetheless. I could only imagine what

it was like for these local people to have their town invaded every summer, especially when the Visiting Day parade rolls through.

I asked Fink what it exactly was that I should have been seeing, and he pointed down the road, about fifty yards ahead of us. I recognized an Arrowdance van, one of the half-dozen or so the camp rented every summer. Most likely, it was full of off-duty foreign counselors, or others not lucky enough to have a car or ride, like me.

"They're probably headed to the same place as us," I said, failing to see what had Fink so excited.

"Yeah, well watch this." He then had me grab the wheel as he groped blindly behind him, much as I just was. I was too busy trying to not clip the mailboxes that zoomed a little too closely by my window to notice what he eventually found. He took the wheel back from me, and I noticed a round, plastic lump in his free hand.

"Did I ever tell you about my job as a volunteer fireman back home?" he asked. Before I could answer he reached out the window and slapped something to the top of the roof. A flashing blue light suddenly reflected from the windows and parked cars around us, and the Arrowdance van's brake lights came on. A few seconds later it had come to a stop. Fink pulled onto the shoulder behind it and turned on his brights.

"You don't think this is too close?" he asked. We weren't the only ones on the road that night, and as cars passed us they too hit their brakes. Fink laughed and slapped the dashboard. "What do you think they're doing in their? Pissing their pants, right?"

I nodded and wondered if I could make a good case that I was a victim of a random kidnapping for when the Oakland police eventually happened by. I should have asked Fink to demonstrate his numerous black-belt moves before I got into the car, for the convincing bruises it would have produced. Instead, I made my attempt to reason with him.

"This is really very cool," I assured him. "But don't you think that it's going a little too far?"

Fink laughed again. "I don't think it's going a little too far enough." But soon the novelty must have worn off, because he slipped the car back into drive and slowly pulled around the van. He leaned over and gave a slight wave from my window. I was all too happy to sink further in the leather seat, my hand to my forehead. It all worked out okay, though. I made Fink by the thirteen van passengers a round of drinks once we got the bar, and the next morning Fink found his car in the middle of the hockey rink, its doors open and full of pine needles.

I remembered this all very shortly after Rosen and I piled into the car, when Fink took a quick left turn into an Oakland neighborhood and said, "Just one thing first."

It had already not been a comfortable drive. Rosen had not said a full sentence since expressing his wish to punch someone's face. Fink regaled Rosen with tales of varsity soccer, college fraternity parties, and romantic conquests dating back to his first awkward gropings at his friend Jon's bar mitzvah. I sat alone in the back, in relative obscurity once I cleared enough debris from the seat. Between Fink's monologues Rosen's sporadic "yeah's" and "uh-huh's", I had enough time to question my own decision making process. I was most concerned about Rosen, of course. I kept expecting for the car to be cut-off by an ambulance, and for a number of doctors to spill out, each chasing the boxer with oversized butterfly nets.

"This is not, by the way, the way to Waterville," I said, assuming that the town was in fact our destination. Fink was kind of vague on what his plans for the evening were, and I hoped he wasn't feeling too adventurous. I had no experience in Oakland other than the main street and the convenience store that was exactly half-way through town, but Fink made enough determined right and left turns that I figured this was not some random detour.

"It's not a big deal," Fink said. "I told some guys that I would come by and drop a few things off, as long as we were getting out."

I cursed. Fink claimed to be a great many things, and cool drug dealer was his shiniest, newest persona. It basically amounted to him receiving a number of shipments of special Louisiana pot throughout the summer, packed by his Tulane roommate into re-pressurized containers of tennis balls. The whole process seemed pretty smooth, to be honest. We still expected for the whole situation to blow up in his face sometime during the summer, but it was the one thing that Fink played pretty close to his chest. You wouldn't really know about it unless you were actually friends with him, or found yourself in a car with both Fink and a championship boxer.

"This can't wait until another night, Fink?" I asked. "Don't you think there's already enough on your plate?"

Fink shook his head and turned one final time, and then slowly crept the car down the darkened road. The street continued for one block before forcing a right turn. There was a single streetlight on that corner, illuminating a big yellow arrow that warned of the turn, and five people sitting on a blanket picnic style in the middle of the pavement.

"I'm on duty for the next three nights, and this is the last of it," Fink said. "Some of my campers are starting to sniff around my sock drawer, so yeah, it has to be tonight."

As we came closer I saw that the group of people were just kids, and that while they seemed to expect us, no one moved from their spot on the street. A few smoked cigarettes. Fink pulled off the road into the driveway of the closest house. Two yard balls, a red and a green, bounced his headlights back at us. He left the car running.

"I'll be just a minute." He got out of the car and headed for the corner, one hand in his jacket pocket. There was not much else for me to do besides lean back into the leather headrest and wait for Fink to either return or cause a literal hail of bullets. I really couldn't see any other possible outcome. The kids didn't actually look dangerous, to be completely fair. Without hearing their heavy Maine-layered accents, I could see them passing for teenagers from my own hometown. Even the quiet street seemed familiar. Move the party to one of the nearby porches, and put some grungy-sounding music on a boombox, and I'd feel like I was back in high school.

"Believe it or not," I said after sharing a few moments of silence with Rosen, "but the night will only get better from here." Rosen's head nodded once, and I thought that was all the response that I could expect, but he surprised me.

"This Fink guy, does he ever shut-up?"

"He's okay, once you get used to him." I laughed. "That's usually my go-to line, whenever somebody asks about him. He means well. Maybe he's just off his meds."

"He's taking what, ADD stuff?"

"I actually don't know. He used to be a camper, and most of them are on something. Adderal, Ritalin. You should see when they do the call for meds during the meals. Seems like half the camp heads for the infirmary."

Outside Fink and two of the kids spoke in an animated fashion, slapping shoulders and chuckling with hands over their mouths. I must have missed the actual deal going down, for what it was worth. Now just looked like wasting time, and I contemplated laying on the horn.

“He said that you’re a chief or something.”

“Who?”

Rosen tilted his head towards Fink and gave me the “who else?” look. I readied my standard categorical denial, the same one I used every time a nosy camper asked me if I was going to be a chief. I began to sound like a politician at some point, all “I’d love the chance if offered, but no comment.”

“I guess I am,” I said. If Rosen actually told someone this important news, I could just point out the fact that he’s probably crazy, so I saw no harm in telling him. And it felt good to actually say it out loud, I told myself.

“Is that a big deal?” Rosen had twisted around and had his elbow resting against the back of his seat.

“It is here. I probably can’t put it on my resume, though. I can’t imagine what job exists out there that looks for war-paint and club wielding experience in their new hires.”

Rosen raised an eyebrow. “You get a club?”

“That’s the best part. It’s just like this old stick, with an eagle head carved into the top. But you get to carry it around all day – have to – actually, but when people see you with it, they know you’re the man.” I nodded at Rosen’s golden belt, still up on the dash. “Kind of like that, I guess.”

“This,” Rosen said, casting it a strange look, “it’s like, just a souvenir.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, and the way he kept staring at it discouraged further discussion. That was okay though, because Fink was returning to the car. He stopped to respond to something one of the kids said, and then he was back.

“Those guys know of a party, if you two are interested.” He must have forgotten that he left the car running, because he turned the keys and grinded the engine.

“The fuck we are,” I said. “I’m about five minutes from throwing you into the ditch and driving back to the fire.” Rosen chuckled and Fink briefly looked hurt, as if surprised by this sudden bond we seemed to have created. He quickly shook it off though, and began offering plans for the rest of the night.

We debated for a few minutes, and it became clear that Fink’s main plan was to go to be seen with Rosen by as many people as possible. When he suggested Champion’s, I had to put my foot down.

“Not Champion’s,” I stated flat-out. On a night like this, that place would be full of under-age locals just looking to prove a point any preppy kid from out of town. I added that I left my jean cut-offs in my dresser, and that we should go to The Duck. A former waterski instructor bought The Duck after he married one of the camp secretaries, and the bar was always Arrowdance friendly.

“Nope,” Fink said. “Lost my good ID there.” If there was a message inherent in that statement, he failed to see it.

“Bootlegger’s then,” he said. I could give no objection, so that became our new destination.

The Bootlegger's parking was full, so we parked down the block. I tried walking slow enough to be a few steps behind, but Rosen mirrored my pace, and soon we were side by side. When I glanced over at him, I noticed that he was already watching me.

"Be honest with me," he said. "That punch hurt like hell, didn't it?"

"It did later." Without really thinking, I moved my jaw from side to side and was pleased when the clicking did not return. "I honestly don't remember much from the actual collision."

Rosen nodded. Fink was a few steps ahead of us, a cell phone to his ear. The darkened houses were of a style I didn't see much of back home, and I had come to consider them something exotic. They looked normal from the front, a porch and door and all that, but then they just kept on extending to the back alley, one big tube of rooms and windows. Most of the time the paint was not fresh, or the porch screens were holey or blown out. That didn't matter much to me, not when I tried to draw them in the margins of my notes back in school.

"Well, I am really sorry about that," Rosen said. "That was the eighth show in six days. I'm just lucky that I was too tired to put anything behind it. We might not be having this conversation."

"Really?"

"Not with your jaw wired shut."

"Oh." I had directed my initial surprise at the mention of his schedule, but I appreciated his sentiment.

I saw the green Volvo with Massachusetts plates a second before Fink slapped his phone shut. One of its tires rested upon the curb, and part of a seatbelt dangled from a rear door.

"Good news," Fink said. "Some of the camp girls are already here. Really quality, Danny. Not like the local ones. Just ask Lee."

"Or don't," I said.

"That girl that ran out when I decked you?" Rosen asked.

"She did?" Alarming, that was news to me.

"I'd fought a lot of tough dudes, but man, she shot me a look." He laughed and nodded approvingly. "I took a step back."

I felt a bit of pride at Rosen's reaction, followed quickly by an equal amount of guilt. Rory never mentioned being at my side, I was pretty sure of that. I looked up when I thought I heard her laugh. Bootlegger's had a second bar up on a roof deck, two floors above the street. From up there you commanded a healthy view of the downtown plaza and river, and I was sure that she and her friends would have a table to themselves.

"You'll like this place," Fink said as we approached the door. A few older men trickled out, big guys in flannel and boots. I stepped aside to let them pass, but they had to move a bit to get around Rosen. They grumbled to their trucks. The doorman stopped us before Fink could even reach for his wallet. He had a thick rubber stamp in his hand.

"Save it, Finkelstein," he said. He held the stamp in the ready position, waiting for the back of a hand to present itself.

"Come on, Jerry," Fink said, moving in close. "You're kidding, right?" Jerry was the back-up goalie for Colby's hockey team, and helped the camp whenever we bussed kids over to the college for special instructionals. He sported a shaved head and

thick sideburns, and cursed at the campers in a thick backwoods accent, but he was alright.

“Wish I could,” he said straight-faced. “But there’s four sheriff’s deputies in their tonight, so if you don’t mind.”

Fink looked back at us, his plan blowing up as we stood there. He shifted from foot to foot, biting his lip and waiting for me to speak. Rosen leaned with his non-belted shoulder against a lamppost. His eyes were slits and he stood still, but I still sensed movement just looking at him.

“Not Champions,” I said. “This place will be fine.” Jerry waved me past.

“Me too,” Rosen said, and pushed himself forward. He glanced at Jerry as he past, and Jerry glanced at the belt.

“But I’m your ride,” Fink pleaded. I felt bad for him, but there was not much I could do except hold the door open for him.

“It’s probably not the end of the world,” I said. Fink weighed his options and noticed his claim to fame already disappearing into the interior darkness. Jerry waited until Fink showed his hand, and gently pressed the ink into his skin.

Once inside, peanut shells and littered popcorn provided traction on the floor. A long counter ran alongside one side of the room, and the large mirror behind the bar reflected the lights coming from the small stage and karaoke machine. The jukebox sang of islands and sunburn. The dance floor looked packed to capacity, and in more than one case someone from a table would slowly rise and rock in place before being pulled back down by their sleeves. I recognized a few regulars seated at tables or on stools, but no one from Arrowdance.

“I’ll be over there,” Rosen said as he headed for the bar. I watched as a few big guys at the opposite end took notice of him and his belt.

“What’s his story, anyway?” I asked Fink once we were clear. “What do you know about him?”

“Hey, I don’t know any more than you do, Lee.”

“You said you talked to him that night.”

Fink shrugged. “Sure, for a few minutes. I gave him my card. But I didn’t know that he would come back.”

“You have a card?”

“Well, my dad’s. He represents some local athletes. I wrote my name on the back. So when he saw Justin at the fire, he asked for me.”

“Then he’s your date.” I clapped Fink on the shoulder and turned for the stairs.

“Wait, Lee,” Fink said, jumping in front of me. “What am I supposed to do with him?”

I looked back and saw an empty stool next to Rosen. On his other side were a pair of older women in short skirts and boots. Rosen held a glass of dark beer and tipped it to the ladies.

“Go take a seat and sit with the man,” I said. “It’s pretty obvious that he just needs someone to talk to. Buy him a drink or something.” I didn’t wait around for Fink’s response.

The rooftop deck was sparsely populated, so it wasn’t hard to instantly spot Rory. She was seated in a far corner, along with three other girls from Arrowdance. Most of their backs were to me, and I took a quick turn towards the bar. My attempt at subtlety



went to waste though, as I nearly ran smack dab into Danielle. She took a step back and held two drinks away from her body, a minute amount of cranberry juice sloshing onto the floor.

“Shit Lee, that was close!” she said. Danielle seemed to be perpetually recovering from a good laugh, at the same time both pleased but not yet ready for further merriment. She had been at Arrowdance almost as long as I had, and had somehow managed to ditch most of her Australian accent along the way. Rory told me that Danielle helped pour the foundation for our relationship by telling her that I was not obtuse, just Kansan.

I apologized and took from the way that Danielle looked over my shoulder that we had drawn some attention. I resisted the urge to face the table. Instead, I focused all my attention on poor Danielle in an effort to show how totally normal I felt about things.

“I heard you were all staying in tonight,” I said, painfully casual. It was useless, of course. If anyone else on camp knew about the current situation between Rory and myself, it would be Danielle. She served as the de facto older sister to most women’s cabin, due to both her seniority and the unsubstantiated rumor that she once threw a counselor into the lake after he disrespected one of her girls.

“I overruled that,” she said. “We needed to get out and unwind a bit. It’s been a rough few days.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I won’t.” She drew in close and pointed a finger. “And you effed up, boy-o.”

“That’s not really news, Danielle.”

“But eventually you’ll figure it out, right?”

She left me alone to consider my options. I could either stand by the railing with my back to the group, painting myself an obvious target for either scorn or sympathy, or return to the relative warmth of the downstairs bar.

I drew my arms in tight to my body to ward off the Canadian wind. The deck sat above the trees and houses, and the steeples and roofs of Colby jutted from the dark canopy. Down in the parking lot, a man fumbled in his pockets as a woman waited by a car door. Around the corner, parked almost down by the laundry place, was the gray and pink van. I let myself imagine a beer-drenched Fink flying through a window into the gravelly lot, and I felt warmed despite the chill.

“Can I say something corny? Penny for your thoughts?”

“Hey, it’s you,” I said. Rory got up next to me and rested her elbows on the rail. “That’s a good thing. I was half-expecting Danielle to grab my by the ankles and flip me over the edge.” I expected a funny retort from Rory, something biting and endearing at the same time. I was used to that. But she just smiled tight-lipped and said “yeah”. I fought the urge to say something else, fishing for that familiar response, but I kept quiet. Her shoulder still rubbed against mine, and she leaned into me.

“Sarah wants to go to school here,” she said. “She’s already thinking about that. She wants to go to Colby during the school year, pop back home just long enough to pack, and come then back up here to be a counselor. But she still lives with them, so I guess I can’t blame her.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t know about your parents,” I said. “I should have.”

Rory shrugged, the contact made between us making it more of a group effort. Her hair fell loosely down her back, and every so often she shoved a strand behind one ear.

“If it wasn’t school, it’d be something else. It was in high school, junior high. My grades, my weight. I’m used to it.”

“I should have noticed,” I repeated.

“Yeah, well.”

I remembered our first night this summer. Orientation had just started, and camp was beginning to fill up with new and returning staff. I volunteered to lead a van caravan down to pick up most of the foreign staff as they arrived into Boston. The job promised a few extra bucks, and I wanted an early chance to size up the staff – already thinking like a future Color War Chief. We didn’t get back until almost midnight because of a late flight from London. I slowly drove us past the staff parking lot and spotted Rory’s car, still packed full of bags. The caravan unloaded at the top of the hill, where the owners met the arriving staff and showed them to their Orientation bunks. I lingered for awhile under the Chief’s Tree, giving handshakes the turned into awkward hugs to some of the veteran staff that were still awake. My temporary cabin was Bunk 19, up there hill by the Dining Hall, but I knew that sleep wasn’t an option, not with Rory somewhere in camp. The Lodge was all lit up, and the sounds of numerous stereos wafted up the hill.

She was upstairs, sitting on a couch with the assistant waterfront director. A bunch of counselors and young directors were in the room, catching up after the long offseason, a joint passed around between a few. Most of them got up as I entered, slapping my hand or giving me a hug; I reached across the coffee table to the ones I couldn’t quite reach. I said hi to Rory but my voice caught. She smiled as well, but then actually looked back down into her lap. She was shy! That blew me away. We had not seen each other since the end of the last summer, had not even spoken since one unfortunate call on New Years. I had all but resigned myself to the fact that she was over me, if it was even fair of me to use that phrase, or at least past whatever misguided phase of her life that allowed us to be a couple. I expected her to practically knock me over when she first saw me, wrap me up quickly in her arms and then demand to hear all about my semester – what classes I had, did I meet anyone cool, all of that. But here was a Rory that seemed even more unsure and timid than I felt.

Thankfully, the conversation had already resumed and no one really noticed the exchange. I sat directly across from her and tried to appear as if I was keeping up with what everyone was saying, but I couldn’t help glancing at her every three or four seconds. Half the time I caught her looking at me. Seven minutes passed. Maybe eight. We did say a few words to each other after I found my voice, but nothing that would set the Lodge on fire. Then she stood up. “Can you help me get my bags down to my cabin?” she asked. We left the Lodge together, and by the time we made it even halfway up the hill, it was like the previous ten months just didn’t happen.

Back then to Bootleggers. The warm of Rory’s body was present even through two layers of cotton. I remembered something from physics class: the nature of atoms, and if space can be infinitely big, the same goes for small. No matter how narrow you draw the focus, things can never truly touch.

“I think things are moving fast,” I said. “We don’t have to end it like this. I mean, I know that’s what we’re talking about. The end.”

Rory shook her head. She straightened her hair; I don't know how I didn't notice that before. It shone in the light from the street lamp, its bulb level with our heads.

"I don't know how it was with you last time Lee. I almost wish I did. But I was sick with it for a month. I couldn't eat, or concentrate in class. I missed you. I missed waking up with you in a too-small bed, half my body hanging over the edge. Bumping into you at the salad bar those first few weeks, when we tried to keep it a secret, the looks we had between us. And I tried to make it work, but it wasn't there. Not from you. And don't deny that."

"That's not what I was thinking," I said. I brought to mind the points I told myself back then, the reasons why things would not work. "You were in Rhode Island. You didn't even know if you were coming back yet this summer. I wished you were with me. But you weren't. And I couldn't act as if you would be."

"And I'm not mad at you for that." She laughed. "Hell, if I thought you didn't care for me, nothing would have happened between us this summer. I know you care. I was shortsighted, not stupid."

She laid her fingers atop my left hand but kept her face out, towards the trees and night. Her profile was half silhouetted by the very top of the Bootlegger's neon sign, her little pointy chin almost perfectly in line with the upper loop of the capital B.

"But listen," she continued. "I know that I'm a camp thing, and if I somehow showed up on your doorstep, I'd still be a camp thing. You're not the same Lee as you are here. You come back every summer chasing whatever it is that makes you feel so free, and then you don't even fight it as it leaves your body back home. You don't have the courage to let us be anything more than this. But I got my Lee for eight weeks, and for the longest time, I thought that was enough."

"It's not easy." My free hand reached up to wipe my eyes, and I didn't try to hide it. Rory tightened her grip. I had more to say, about the nights I stayed awake in the darkness, hoping for my phone to light up but afraid to make the effort myself.

"Hell, Lee. I love you, all right. You think that doesn't suck?"

She let go of my hand, but stopped mid-turn.

"You wanted to tell me something earlier," she said.

"What?"

"At the waterfront. You said there was some news or something. What was it?"

"Oh. It's not really important." I hesitated, and then said, "They made me a chief today. Before lunch."

Rory gave me a hug, and let me hold on for a second longer.

"That's great for you," she said. Something about her tone, and how she didn't look me in the eye as we parted, sounded false. "I'm happy for you then."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Nothing. I really am happy for you." I held my stare, and eventually she met it.

"You don't sound happy. Like, I'm not asking for fireworks, but thought I'd get more of a reaction than this."

"Lee, I do know how important it is to you. Really."

"What does that mean?" I repeated, letting the words come out a degree sharper.

"You want to know, honestly? I was kind of hoping that you wouldn't get it, and that you would be pissed and then maybe not come back. Being chief is the last thing

you need, Lee. I don't want there to be stories of you up there shouting names all painted up and being this mythical figure. I want you to fade. There's nothing more I can hope for you than to just make a break from this place. Before you're a lifer."

I turned away from her, and when she put a hand on my shoulder, I shrugged it off like a spoiled child. Rory puffed out her breath.

"It's probably fine that you're actually mad at me, Lee. That's something you've never done enough of." This time she did walk away. I watched as she returned to her friends, who did a good job of acting as if they weren't watching our backs the whole time. After a few minutes, I unclenched my jaw and went back downstairs.

## 8.

I was not in any sort of mood to humor Fink when he grabbed me at the bottom of the stairs. He had a wide-eyed look, like a man caught in a desperate search for toilet paper, pants bunched at his ankles.

"Have you been standing here the whole time?" I asked him as he pulled me aside.

"We should go soon," he said.

I sighed. The downstairs population had dwindled since I left for the roof. A few stragglers occupied the dance floor, swaying the guitar chords of a triumphant-sounding rock ballad. Elsewhere sat six or seven women, a few wearing pastel Matoaka staff shirts. Jerry manned the bar, and stood at the elbow of the counter, talking with the few husky men that still held their position. Rosen sat alone, his championship belt occupying the stool next to him.

"What's up with the Jittering Jew?" I asked. Fink winced at the phrase, and indicated for me to keep my voice down.

"He won't talk to me. I tried to sit by him, but he just put that stupid belt down. And he keeps getting one last beer."

I debated this point for a moment, whether tell Fink that we could just leave him here, that he's not really our responsibility. Maybe he could even get a ride back with Danielle and Rory. I smiled at that, if only for a brief second. The truth was that I wasn't leaving the bar without a drink, so that at least my night would not feel like a complete waste.

"I'll see what's up," I said, and added that Danielle and a few others were upstairs. Fink's mood quickly changed, and he practically bounded up the stairs. With him occupied, I went over to Rosen. He sat at the end of the bar, so I had no choice but take the seat currently occupied by the belt. I grabbed it with both hands, carefully as if it was a dangerously overstacked plate of pancakes. It was surprisingly heavy, and I cleared space on the countertop with my elbows. I glanced at the mirror. Rosen watched my efforts with an expression more tilted towards amusement than anything else. Once I was sure that no bottles or spillage could harm the belt, I took my seat.

"Any chance of me getting one of those?" The belt had a surprising heft to it. Jerry had abandoned his post and was currently behind the bar, but down at the other end and I couldn't get his attention.

"Good luck with that," Rosen said, and I couldn't tell if he was speaking of my prospects of winning a championship, or being served. An empty bottle rested before

him, and he tapped his current drink on what I guess would be the belt buckle, a small golden plate that was about the size of my two fists. Two figures, their gloved hands ready to strike, squared off on the engraved surface. A small nameplate gave the champion's name.

"Let me tell you about that thing," he said. He spoke clearly and without hesitation, but his hand shook as he held it towards me. "That's a New England Regional Boxing Commission belt. The NERBC. Too many initials for my age. I should be in the three-letter range by now. WBO. IBF." He let his hand drop, and one of the bottles briefly teetered. "That's the big time. But forget all that."

I nodded as if taking his advice. A collection of photographs surrounded the mirror, small pictures that from the door looked like a sort of mosaic tile. They showed various bearded men posing with rifles and bloody carcasses, some antlered and some winged. Sometimes they knelt down, so that their head was on the same level as that of the stag or bird. When I squinted, I noticed that sometimes the men were woman, but they all shared the same expression. The photographer captured them as if they were in the middle of sharing some joke with the dead animal, both sets of jaws slacked.

"You know," I said after what I felt was an appropriate amount of silence, "I can't think of a single thing to say right now. I am a little worried that you're a psychopath."

Rosen snorted and a little bit of the last sip of beer came out his nose. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"I guess it would probably look that way," he said.

"But that's not it?"

Rosen shrugged. "Not yet, at least."

"But can we just get it out in the open that this is kind of strange, you showing up out of nowhere?" I was probably walking a thin line with Rosen – the vein in his forehead may have been a sign of that – but he was talking.

"What was your name again?" he asked.

"Lee."

"Lee. Right. Sorry, sometime I forget." He again made the swirling motion with his finger up against his temple. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five." I grimaced involuntarily, just slightly. It came from the combination of me not looking that old and anticipating their reaction, and from the faces I usually got when people learned that I was a camp counselor in my mid-twenties. Rosen's confirmed at least one of those.

"Oh."

"Well, I'm still in school."

He nodded. "Man, sometimes I think I would have loved to go to college." He stopped talking, and I remembered a few of what he called during his presentation "career highlights". He mentioned home-schooling, and being moving into a group home for young fighters at seventeen in order to prepare for Sydney. couldn't have been much older than me, if that even. Already his left ear was puffy with blown cartilage, and he more leaned against his stool than actually sat it in, probably because of those slipped vertebrae.

"You know," he said. "I've been thinking about that stuff you said about being a chief, knowing that you're the man. Is it really like that?"

I was taken aback. Hearing my own phrasing through his voice made me a bit embarrassed, at the inflections of wonder I must have put in it. I should have known by then not to try and explain Arrowdance to outsiders.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I imagine it's like that. I've had friends that have been chiefs. They spoke highly of it. Like I said, it's not the biggest deal in the world."

"Fuck that," he said. His voice was soft all of a sudden, and he stared at his bottle intently as he tore the wrapper off in sudden segments. "Don't trivialize the act of going after what you want. And don't let them twist it, take it, make it something that it's not." Rosen slurred a few syllables, gathered a second wind, and then burped. He was very drunk.

"You're not a boxer anymore, are you?" I probably should have put more care into my words, or minded my own business entirely. This was getting dangerously close to talking about feelings, and I would soon be at the end of repertoire of deflections and self-deprecating jokes. For whatever reason though, Rosen decided to place himself in this group of slackers and borderline degenerates. There had to be some reason.

"I'm always goin' to be a boxer." He chin pointed at me defiantly, and he spoke with his former assurance. "That's not for anyone but me to decide."

"You're here, though. What part of the training montage this?"

"That's another disappointment." He again jabbed at the belt with his finger. "It turns out that in NERBC, when you vacate a title, you don't even get a press conference where you throw the belt into trash. I had to do it over email."

"You quit?"

Rosen chuckled once, and extended sound that slowly reduced to nothingness. "This fucking camp tour – no offense – and then we get back home and it's right back in the gym, no time for a break or nothing. It got to the point where I just had to ask myself, 'Danny, remember when it just used to be about hitting people in the face?' That's all I really ever needed."

"The simple things, I guess."

"Fuckin' A."

I repeated the phrase.

"You going to be a doctor or lawyer or something?"

"A writer."

Rosen contemplated that for a bit. I felt like the line of questioning had disappointed him, like he had some important message to reveal, and my seeming lack of aspiration dumped ice water on that. I would not blame him.

"You're good at writing?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you like it?"

"Yep."

Rosen gestured as he was revealing the Thanksgiving turkey, his hands saying, "There it is, then." The juke box switched to something slow and twangy, and a few at the tables hooted in appreciation. It was nearly twelve-thirty somehow, and more people began to leave. I kept one eye on the mirror, ready to ignore Rory when they came back down the stairs.

A pretty woman emerged from the storeroom behind the bar, a heavy bucket of ice in each hand. She must have been the bartender, but I had never seen her before. She

was tall and very thin, but she heaved the buckets up and then emptied them as if they were jugs of milk. I sat up straight and crossed my arms, elbows on the table. She saw Rosen's empty bottle and came over.

"You get one more of those and then we're shutting down," she said to him. She grabbed a bottle from the ice and unscrewed the cap with a towel. She then caught me staring and assumed I was waiting for service. I stammered something and she produced another bottle for me.

"Are you a champion too?" she asked. She leaned on the bar with one elbow. I noticed a bare hip where her t-shirt crept up the side. I must have seen her before – I had been to Bootlegger's at least once a week all summer – but something beyond that seemed familiar about her.

"That's really a tough question," I said.

"Lee, you don't know Maggie?" Rosen asked, as if he was introducing two old friends. Maggie smiled and excused herself before ducking back into the storeroom.

"She was attractive," I said.

"Yeah. I need to piss." Rosen pushed himself upright on the stool, and then put his hand on my shoulder as he swung his legs around. When he stood, his eye line was still only barely level with my forehead. I felt compelled to wish him luck. He passed close by the men at the end of the bar, a fair amount of strut in his walk. No one challenged him, if that was what he was looking for.

Fink returned briefly and dropped his keys in my hand. Somehow he managed to talk Danielle into taking him to Champions, which still had more than an hour before it closed. I waved to the group as they waited by the door. Rory must have been already been outside.

"Oh," he said. "Rosen's sleeping in my car, if you're wondering where he is."

"What? No, he just went to the bathroom." I looked over to the men's room door, and saw that it was wide open with no Rosen in sight. "How'd he do that?"

"I don't know. But he was yelling up at me from the parking lot, so I tossed him the door opener from up there."

"Great," I said. "So I guess I'm babysitting then. Thanks for that." I dismissed him.

"What's up with your friend?" Maggie asked when she came back and noticed Rosen's empty stool. She collected the empty bottles and began to wipe down the counter.

"That's kind of the question of the night."

Maggie had blonde hair, pulled straight back into a ponytail. She had to have been a soccer player, a runner, or something like that to explain her bronzed skin and toned shape.

"You're staring at me, you know." Her accent was local for sure, but not strong enough for me to have to break it down.

"Are you new here?" I asked, aspiring to deftness in my verbal counter. Maggie's mouth didn't betray as much as a smirk, but I thought I saw something like amusement in her eyes.

"No. But I've been gone."

"Really? Where to?" She was probably a college girl, gone down to the Vineyard or up to Montreal with her girlfriends.

“Spain.”

“Oh, okay. Spain. That’s – that’s another country, then.”

“I know, right? I actually knew that before I left, but thanks.”

“No problem.” I finished my beer, and began to study the label for lack of something else to do. I thought of Rory. She was right about most of what she said. I didn’t have courage. I could blink and ten years would have passed, and I’d find myself still up here every summer. Maybe I’ll have just quit another winter job, something easy that would be just enough to keep me going until summer. Then at Arrowdance, Rory’s campers would be counselors, and I could tell them stories of when I was a chief. It really wasn’t a stretch.

Someone coughed, and I looked up to see Maggie. She leaned against the back counter, working the rag though a mug but with her eyes on me.

“Now you’re staring,” I said.

“So you’re not a boxer,” she stated.

“I’m not?”

“You’re what, six three? Rangy, sure, but you’re kind of built like a stick.”

I set my jaw and threw on a look of resignation. “I could have been something.”

Maggie laughed. “You’re a counselor.”

I nodded. “Obvious?”

“No, not really. But you’re not from here, obviously. Just don’t say Arrowdance.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, but if you say that you are, then I think I can guess your name. You’re Lee, right? You know my sister.”

“Right.”

Of course, once I had that bit of information all the pieces tumbled into place. She could have been Lauren’s twin if not for the few years’ difference. Karp may have even mentioned something about her; the part about Spain suddenly sounded more familiar.

“You’re Karp’s counselor.”

“It would probably be fair to hold that against me, I guess.” I braced myself for her to suddenly grab an empty bottle and break it off at the neck over the counter. Instead she sighed and rolled her eyes.

“You don’t know Lauren. Let’s just say she’s still working a few things out.”

“Let me ask you a question,” I said. “Did that guy at the party ever get a chance to do his laundry?”

Maggie slung the wet rag into a little sink behind the bar and began turning the liquor bottles around so their labels faced out.

“That was Jeremy. He was just in here. You could have asked him yourself.”

“Your boyfriend then, I bet.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“It must be going around then,” I said. “I’ve been broken up with, I think, three times in the past day.”

I must have spoken into my bottle, or else Maggie was too busy to hear me. The bar continued a slow slide towards closing around me. Jerry made a steady circuit around the now empty room, flipping chairs and stools atop the tables. The jukebox sounded



much louder, so much less fleshy bodies around to soak up the waves of country-rock. I felt no motivation to move and help things along. As long as Rosen was asleep in the car, I wouldn't have to worry about him. Returning to camp meant seeing faces back at the fire, and being within sight of Rory's window once I decided to finally return to my bunk.

After a while Maggie came around the bar and asked me for a ride back to her house. She had let her hair down, and she ran her fingers through the strands, as if she wanted to root out as much of the bar's essence as possible before leaving. Her jacket featured the polar bear mascot of Colby College.

"I would usually have my own car, but I let Lauren borrow it. She had to go down and get her boyfriend for some reason."

"I thought he just left for football practice," I said, and Maggie shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't really know. So do you mind giving me a ride?"

"No, I can do that." I twirled the keys around my finger to illustrate the point. She called out to Jerry and did a curt wave, and then followed me out the door, not quite at my side. I gave the lot a quick survey before remembering that Fink's car was a few blocks away. I mentioned this to Maggie, and if she could sense the possibility of stilted conversation in her future, she gave no sign.

I mentioned something to Maggie about hoping that Rosen chose the backseat to pass out into, but we found the car very noticeably lacking of any comatose welterweights. One of the rear doors was not entirely closed, slightly ajar in it's in between state, but otherwise nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

"Well that takes care of that problem," I said. I looked up and down the road, but saw nothing but flashing traffic lights one direction, and a deepening darkness down the other. Maggie studied the car from the curb, not exactly grasping the situation.

"You don't know of any fight clubs or anything in the area, do you?" I asked.

"Did we lose someone?"

"Nothing important." If Rosen wanted to wander the streets of Central Maine like a pugilistic version of Kung Fu, then who was I to question his decision? The car was unlocked, and Rosen left the electronic key in the driver's seat. I shouted a warning to Maggie, and rushed over to her side of the car. With my jacket sleeve pulled over my hand, I opened her door.

"I wouldn't reach your hands underneath the seat, either." I closed the door. On the way back around to my side, I forced myself to objectively see what the situation was. A hot bartender asked for a ride home from a random camp counselor. Then correction, not a random counselor, but one who happened to be in charge of the camper that was currently involved with her kid sister, who also had an armored van of a boyfriend. I told myself that sometimes people just need rides, and unassuming Midwestern types often make the best drivers. Rory also existed somewhere in the alcoves of my consciousness, despite the recent activity on that front. And not to put too fine of a point on it then, but Maggie did happen to be an attractive girl. I added italics to her name in my mind.

"It took you about a minute to go from my door to yours," Maggie said as I turned adjusted the seat and steering wheel. "Are you okay to drive?"

"I was just thinking about Rosen," I lied. "It might reflect poorly on me if a promising young boxer disappeared on my watch."

“We can go look for him if you want. I’m still on Spain time.” She directed a few of the air vents towards herself and pushed her head back into the seat. The faint scent of beer and perfume hit my nose. The fuel gauge showed a nearly full tank. The clock read only a few minutes past one, and the heater began to offer a warm push of air. I told her that this could end up being something of a disaster, just in case I ended up in Canada or something. She cut me off.

“I’ll point and you’ll drive. That’s going to be the plan.”

She pointed. Down dark alleys that led to the behind areas of the downtown strip malls, past dumpsters overflowing with the accumulated extras from Murphy’s Diner and the Waterville House of Pizza. Through enough unfamiliar neighborhoods and patchy asphalt streets to put me totally at her mercy, unable to even point towards Arrowdance’s general direction. If she planned to lead me into the further middle of nowhere and ditch me, as some form of retribution for Karp’s entry into her family dynamic, then things were proceeding towards perfection. Not that I could blame her, if that were in fact the case. I’ve heard that you can tell a lot about one’s parents just by viewing the child, and my situation wasn’t so dissimilar in that way.

I asked her about Spain. I did not possess a very fine understanding of foreign cultures, something that was further hindered by my experiences with many of the counselors at Arrowdance. I tended to imagine other countries as just like America, only with different cars and names for French fries. Maggie fiddled with the radio before settling on a local station, something unfamiliar and likely to get turned off if it ever made it into the rotation at the Lodge. After a few moments I came to recognize the song though, something I may have listened to in high school, or one of those long nights spent sitting on my porch with my step-siblings. I wondered about them and how they spent their last seven summers. By now they would be out of college and off to real jobs, and the summer months would no longer lead to thoughts of a ten-week vacation and the prospect of buying new textbooks in August.

“Spain was great,” she said. “I was only there for three weeks. I stayed with a family in Barcelona, but on the weekends when there was no class, they’d take me out into the country, or up into France. My last weekend there, we took a train to Valencia. That’s where I got these.” She held up a wrist and jangled a pair of golden bracelets. “I don’t think I know how to talk about it, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just – so I’ve been back not even a full day, and everyone I’ve ran into wants to know about Spain, and then when I try to explain how great it was, it just sounds so flat. And then I see it in their face, and it’s just nothing.”

“No, I know that.” I meant for that to be a knowing comment, to lead towards similar frustrations of my own, but apparently feeling the epic futility of any attempt to relate to me the awesomeness of the Iberian peninsula, Maggie turned back to the window.

After an hour or searching, we still found no sign of Rosen. All evidence pointed towards the Jittering Jew just vanishing into the pine-scented oblivion that surrounded the town. I began to question his very existence, if not for the still dull pain in my jaw and brain. And if we did find him, that opened up a new level of questions. I wondered how

much effort I would expend getting him into the car. A few attempts at asking nicely seemed about right, before I showed him the taillights.

"You know where we haven't tried," Maggie said. I had just pulled us back onto the main road, the one that if I followed west would take us all the way to the campfire. The corners of my eyes felt stretched, and an increasing number of my sentences began with me stifling a yawn. Maggie really must have been fresh off the boat from Spain though, and leaned forward with each turn, trying to crane her neck towards roads I didn't take.

"A few places, probably." Though naturally predisposed to awkward moments, so far in my time with Maggie, I had little to be embarrassed about. I sensed that she saw this as an amusing diversion if nothing else.

"Campus. Colby, I mean. He could have seen the steeple from pretty much anywhere, and just gone towards that."

"He did say that he wished he had gone to school."

Only a short while later we were navigating the narrow lanes of Colby College, surrounded by red-bricked rows of buildings that all looked like giant Monopoly hotel pieces. At times I wasn't sure if I was driving on a sidewalk or a road, but Maggie kept giving directions. When she finally told me to stop, we were parked next to a small pond at the far edge of campus.

"I know this place," I said. Maggie raised her eyebrows and bit into one corner of her lips. The road went right up along the pond; there was only a few feet of grass between us and the still, inky water. A bit further down some stone benches and one trash can formed a picnic area.

"I use to come up here with my friends on off-nights, before we all turned twenty-one," I continued. "We'd pick up a couple of six packs at the Korner Store, or have someone do it for us, and we'd spend a couple hours up here, just lying by the water."

"We did that too," Maggie said. "On weekends, I'd grab a bottle of wine from my dad's cellar, meet my people."

"It's strange we never ran into each other."

She turned towards me smirked. "It stops being our place when you guys show up, right? You thought that a place like this was really your secret."

In response I turned my attention back to the odometer or some fuzzy point of light just above the tree tops, and its rippled reflection upon the pond. There was a type of counselor she was referring to, an attitude that I even saw in my friends on occasion. Sometimes it was easy for them to see locals as like extras on a movie set, or workers at an amusement park; just people set up to complete some tableau. I thought of the pancake house waitresses, or the girl named Tricia who served us at the highway Friendly's, and how I laughed at her nametag and asked if it was pronounced "Tri-See-Ah." And then I thought of how much local spit my friends and I must have ingested in our burgers that night.

"You aren't that bad," Maggie said after a minute of listening to the idling car and subdued Dave Matthews. For a second I thought she meant me personally, but she continued. "Most of the guys that come into the bar are pretty cool. Although I don't understand the girls. How uncomfortable must it be to be stuck for eight weeks in a boy's camp?"

“It can be rough on all of us. You’d think that it was great if you just check out all the bullet points: mini-theater, arcade, ice cream machine. It gets old smelling the same teenage feet for two months.”

Maggie made a non-committal noise, something small and in the back of her throat. I maintained a rightward slump; the space between us was less than a foot. I did not think of Rory or expectations both of greatness (being a chief) or mere competence (my ability in relationships). The car slowly filled with our exhaled breaths and silences that I thought were on a level more profound than stilted.

“Do you remember someone named Devin?” Maggie asked.

“What?”

“From – I guess – three years ago?”

I shook my head. “Maybe. There’ve been a few Devins. What was his last name?”

Maggie thought for a minute, and her eyes grew wide. “Wow. Awesome,” she said quietly, and then more to me, “I don’t actually remember. He taught soccer, though.”

An image of a body snapped into focus. A heard Scottish voice samples from the field next to my track, someone calling for a pass or instructing a corner kick lesson. Dreadlocks and bare feet. Devin made the most of his exotic accent and good looks in his forays into Oakland and Waterville, if I was remembering correctly. That is also what got him into trouble.

“I do remember a Devin. Three years ago, okay. Why?”

“We went out a few times. I was a waitress at the Applebee’s back then.”

“But you know that he got fired, right?”

Her expression told me that this was in fact news to her. She held her hand up, thought about something, and then dropped it into her lap.

“We didn’t “go out” go out,” she said, “but he told me he was going to stick around once you all were finished. I just assumed that he found something better. Well, no loss.”

“Yeah, he got himself ghosted with a week to go. It might have been the latest one on record.”

“Ghosted?”

“When they fire you, you get ghosted. They bring you into the office during breakfast, or whatever meal is next. Breakfast usually, because what you did probably happened at night. And then once everyone is up in the Dining Hall, you have twenty minutes to wipe your bunk of any trace of your existence before you’re thrown in a van for the airport. Then the kids get back, and it’s like you were never there.”

“Sounds fun.” She took a moment to build up the nerve, and then asked, “So, what did Devin do?”

I told her what I did know, which was not much; something about his conduct during a Matoaka social. Rumors pointed towards an illicit liaison with either a counselor or her sixteen-year old camper. Maggie didn’t need to know the details.

“I didn’t know why I thought things could have gone any differently,” Maggie said after a moment. “I was only twenty at the time, but I’d already heard enough similar stories by then. Town girl, camp guy. It can seem fun at the time, but you’re lucky if all it ends with is a bunch of unanswered emails.”

I guessed that was right. Thoughts of Mezibov surfaced, joined by those of Karp and Lauren. Even just sitting in the car with Maggie carried the feeling of brushing against a taboo world, even though we probably had most things in common.

"Can I ask you a question?" When I did not turn back to her right away, Maggie nudged my elbow. The vinyl of her jacket made a small zipping sound against the armrest. The bell tower chimed twice, the steeped peak rising above the other muted rooftops. We used to hold our thumbs to the sky and try to blot it out, cooing at the halo it caused around our flesh. I told Maggie that she had my complete attention.

"Who's this girl that's broken up with you three times today? It is one girl, right?"

I tried to remember how much of anything I'd said earlier, if I'd even supplied a name. Maggie seemed not coy or especially invested in my response, but I couldn't figure out if I was only meant to think that. The thought of Rory brought the situation into a sharper focus though, and I was surprised at the small twinge of relief I felt at that.

"Yeah," I said. "She's a girl from camp. A counselor."

"Third time the charm?"

"After the first and second time, it was probably still up to me," I said after a moment. "If I had you know, said or done something. Anything."

"So why didn't you do anything?"

I thought about that for what seemed like minutes and hours. I knew that an easy answer would get me closer to Maggie's arms, if she really was just kicking the tires.

"Because I really don't know what to do. She thinks that I think she's just a camp thing, and I've really given her no reason to think otherwise. And if I can't even muster up the whatever to make her not think that, then she's better off."

"You don't seem like the kind of guy that just sections himself off like that," she said. "But also, I really don't have much to base that on."

"Just a hunch."

"No no no no. You don't want my hunches. That's what got me with Devin." Maggie sighed and scooted down a bit in her seat, bringing her heels up to the dashboard in the process. She closed her eyes, and for a second I thought she had drifted off.

"You're really not like the others," she said. "I hope you take don't take that the wrong way. I've waited on enough to know that I'm a townie and all that."

"It's not that simple."

"It is what it is. Whatever, it's not a bad thing. To me they're either slightly spoiled Massholes that don't realize how well they have it, or they're half-alcoholic foreigners that see everyone in terms of how much pleasure they have to offer. And that's totally unfair on my part. So, you know."

"Okay."

"But you're not like them really, are you Lee? How did you get involved in all this?"

"I answered an ad during my sophomore year at Kansas." I stopped short there, hoping the matter-of-factness of the answer would speak for itself. The statement represented the truth, anyways. At least enough of it.

"I get that, sure," Maggie said. "If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I just was wondering what brought you back."

I wanted to tell her that there was nothing to understand, that the owners simply paid me well and that I was able to still screw around for eighty-percent of my day. Or that I could come home with a great tan and longer hair, and that for a few weeks into the semester I could still be camp-Lee, a little cocksure, even. None of that would constitute a lie, but it also would not be a truthful answer to her question. Those were benefits, not a driving need.

"I lived at home my first year of school, drove the twenty miles to school every morning at six-thirty," I began. Maggie had been put off my tone, and I wanted to make up for that. That was part of it, at least.

"I can relate to that," she said.

"Another friend of mine stayed back too, went to school at the small college in-town. So really for us, nothing changed other than the commute. We hung out at the same places, played the same videogames every night. lame probably, but it felt safe.

"The next thing was that my parents died that year." I intercepted whatever response Maggie had ready before she could fire it. I needed an understanding, was all. "Both in February, totally separate things. So I had a hard semester and I dealt with it as best I could. After finals I came home to my step-mom's family, and that's when I realized how much things had changed. I felt like a visitor in my own house, and not even a very welcome one. It wasn't her fault, my step-mom's. I didn't want to be there either. My other friends were around, but when we hung out, it just felt like we were going through the motions. Like we had watched the same movies or driven the same downtown loop so many times, the patterns were just branded into our brains. They were different people from a year ago, and I very decidedly was not."

How much more could I tell her? She remained quiet, maybe considering placing her hand over my forearm, mistaking my silence for some sort of social cue. When I first told Rory she laid just as still, except for the warmth her hand rubbed into my heart. I wanted Rory to understand then, just as I wanted the same now from Maggie. I felt something bitter in the back of my throat, a taste perhaps akin to betrayal.

"Those two things," I said. "I had no real home, and soon enough I would have pushed far enough from my friends for it not to matter. At the end of the summer, I sold as much of my stuff as I could to whoever offered money, and left the rest on the curb. I haven't been back home since."

The CD looped back around and started fresh. A pair of headlights appeared across the lake, and I followed them as they slowly traversed the body of water. I tried to figure out if I recognized the car, but it was too late for even Arrowdancers to still be out. The car never turned our direction, and we were alone again.

"I have sixty-eight thousand dollars," Maggie said.

I expected from her a sad statement of understanding, or the type of remark you need to make after someone happened to tell a significant fact or anecdote. Her hand was on my arm. I only noticed its removal, right before she spoke.

"What?"

"Don't you want to know how I got that much money?" She looked at me and smiled crookedly. "It's an okay story, and then you can take me home."

"It would have to be."

"It's kind of okay. So. My mom moved to Springfield Mass when she remarried, and I used to take the train into Boston, and then a bus to her house every other month. I

was in high school; Lauren was maybe still in grade school, but she never wanted to go. You ever taken a train?"

"Once to Chicago, to catch a cheaper flight up here." I thought of the trip, the long hours in an aisle seat with my head lolling from side to side. My face must have shown the emotions on that.

"Yeah, well I loved it. Especially when I moved from car to car, I imagined that I was jumping some huge gap when the cars weren't perfectly lined up."

"My train stopped in some field for three hours in the middle of the night," I said. "That was about it for me."

Maggie leaned forward and brought a leg up to then sit on. Her bracelets jangled. They looked especially real golden, I then noticed, slightly dinged and dimpled.

"That's just it," she said. "My train is stopped under some tunnel in New Hampshire, who knows, someone left a stalled car on the track. I have nothing to do but stare out the window, and I see this briefcase tucked behind a bush. I just got lucky and saw, it was half buried in snow. The whole time we're sitting there, I'm trying to imagine what's in the suitcase. Have you seen *Fargo*? Don't you wonder what would happen if someone found that bundle of money?" She cursed suddenly. "Shit. I guess I kind of already gave it away."

"You got off the train?"

"No, not then." She sounded dejected, but decided to carry through to the end. "I thought about it the whole week I was with my mom, and then one the way back, I got off at the stop that I thought was right before that bridge, which ended up being the case, only it was actually still twenty miles away. I ended up walking that whole way into the morning, with only my Hello Kitty flashlight. But I got the money."

I shook my head in amazement. Maggie quickly got over her error in storytelling and smiled back, her head resting against the window.

"They let you keep the sixty-eight thousand?"

Her grin became even more lopsided.

"Well, these two things," she said. "It was seventy-four thousand. I've been good. And I never reported the money. I spent a few weeks looking over my shoulder but I was in high school right, so I was already doing that. Nothing ever happened."

"What are you waiting for?" I meant the money specifically, but also all that it could bring. To sit on that pot for six years astounded me.

"I have plans, when I'm ready. Once Lauren is out of school, I'll see where she's at. She wants to design clothes, I think. And Derek has a real future in football. If Lauren's fine, then I'll see what I can do with it.

"And Lee," she said. "Guess how many people I've told this story to?"

"One?"

"Alright. Now take me home."

I didn't remember taking most of the turns necessary to place us back at her house, nor if I stopped at any of the flashing red stoplights. I thought of Maggie's elbow against mine, and how with every bump and jostle from the road, she pushed a little further into my side.

This time I turned into the driveway, slowly navigating the rutted path. The house was just as lit up as the last time I was there – light pouring from every window – a fact

that Maggie questioned aloud. She said that no one was supposed to be home, and our arms broke contact. A small red Honda sat to the side of the porch, the rear hatch open and spewing athletic duffels. "Sister's home," Maggie said.

I intended to walk Maggie as far as the porch, the destruction of all other possibilities silently acknowledged between the two of us quickly enough. We got the first step and I was about to say something of special wit when Lauren burst from the front door. I turned my head in time to see her stop short, a mixed expression of shock and anger directed at me.

"Hey Laur," Maggie said, quickly pivoting so that we stood shoulder to shoulder. "I thought you were going to spend the night in Durham?"

Lauren took her narrowed eyes off of me long enough to answer her sister. From within the house I heard the sound of boxes hitting a hardwood floor, and a voice that cursed in return.

"I thought so too," she said. "But he said it couldn't wait, so I turned right back around."

As if on cue, Derek joined us on the porch, preceded by the sound of his heavy footsteps in the entry hall. Under full electric light, he looked less massive than before, but more full of depth and structure. He did a double-take when he saw me and gave a cautious nod, as if he wasn't quite sure if he was supposed to remember my face.

"Yeah, it's not here," he said to Lauren. He took off his cap and ran his fingers through his long hair twice before firmly placing it back atop his head. The way he looked at Lauren reminded me of how my campers when they were younger, if they were homesick or anxious for an upcoming game, and they needed a cue for their next move. That's when you realize that you're the adult in the situation, whether you're ready for that or not, I found.

"What's going on?" Maggie asked. Lauren told Derek to look back up in her room, and that she was sure that was the last place she had seen it. Once Derek stormed back inside the house, she looked back down at us.

"He's about to report to his first practice, and he realizes that he doesn't have his playbook. So he tells his coach this, and of course he blows up over it. Tells Derek that if he doesn't find the playbook, then he's going to sit."

"What do you mean 'sit'?"

"Like off the team, Maggie." Upon saying her sister's name, Lauren's bottom lip shook once, and she brought a hand up to hide it. Maggie brushed by me and was quickly at her side, grabbing her other hand.

"So we'll find the playbook, Lauren. Are you sure it was here?"

Lauren nodded, glancing again at me. I remembered what Adam told me about Derek's prospects, and I knew that if he really was that good, then he'd need every snap he could get if he was going to be noticed at such a small school. Lauren must have known that even better than me.

"It would have to be," Lauren said. "He let me quiz him over some of the coverages that afternoon before the party."

"Someone could have taken it by mistake," Maggie said. "One of his friends who didn't know any better. Jeremy was stoned. He probably has it."



“Maybe it got pushed underneath a couch or something,” I said. I felt bad just standing there and wanted to help. My voice only seemed to remind Lauren that I was there to see her in this moment, and her frustration was quick to resurface.

“We check everywhere, Lee.” Then, as the realization of my presence continued to kick in, she turned Maggie. “What is he doing here?”

“He was at the bar, and was nice enough to give me a ride home,” Maggie said, bringing her arm around Lauren’s shoulders. Seeing them together only magnified the sense that they were the same person, only six or seven years in between iterations. Maggie led her sister back to the house and opened the screen door for her. “I’ll be in in a second to help you look.”

Lauren mumbled a thank you and looked over her shoulder as the door closed. I saw only a flash, but the trace of suspicion was evident on her face.

“Sorry about all that,” Maggie said. She skipped a step on the way down and more or less hopped to my side.

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “I’m actually tired.” I thought of Rory alone in her room, and felt a small amount of grudging relief.

“Okay, well.” Maggie reached out and placed her hand on my arm, and let it fall down into my open hand. For a second I considered pulling her in, but that was not what I really wanted. Our hands fell. “Thanks for the drive, Lee.”

“Good luck with everything,” I told her.

“You too with your girl,” she said. She left me with my hand half-up in the air, her hair nearly catching in the screen as the door slammed behind her.

## 9.

It started at the far end of the dining hall, from the tables nearest the restrooms. I didn’t hear it until the first repetition, and by then half of the camp body had joined in. It only grew in intensity and volume from that point. By the third go-around, every camper – and a good number of counselors – chanted the familiar words, their pounding fists rattling the plastic glasses and dented silverware atop the tables.

“One Two Three Four! We Want Color War!” the west side of the Dining Hall yelled, a few of the older campers punctuating the rhythm by standing atop the benches and pumping their fists.

“Five Six Seven Eight! We don’t want to wait!” the opposite side responded. I kept myself from joining in, my hands pressed together at the head of the table. Instead, I let the pride flow whenever a camper from a nearby table would glance over at me, hopeful for a knowing smirk. They seemed to know as well as I did what was in store for me, and they wanted only to be able to go back to their bunks and tell their friends that they knew for a fact that Lee Stafford was one of the chiefs. Arrowdance was ready for Color War, the reason many of them came back summer after summer. I reached across the table towards a sophomore camper as he raised his dirty plate above his head, ready to smash it onto the table in glee. Arrowdance needed the war.

A few of the kitchen girls stared at the ground and shook their heads as they grabbed the trays of half-eaten food and stacked plates from the tables. They had stood witness to a number of seemingly inexplicable events in the Dining Hall during their employment – impromptu bar mitzvahs, Ranger’s mock outrages upon hearing of the Red

Sox's latest miserable box score, and the infamous Chubby Bunny – but this seemed to push even our rather generous boundaries. They were in for a treat, as we still had seven or eight days before the war.

The chant continued for a full minute, neither side willing to be the one to let it die. The owners and the younger directors looked like all their strength and restraint was the only thing keeping them from joining in. Many of them had been chiefs in the past, their names still fresh on the wall plaques. Even the remaining old timers seemed amused. Ranger sat with his arms crossed, an otherwise private smile across his lips. I quickly scanned the visible heads until I found Ian at his table by the vegan counter. We locked eyes, and he slowly nodded. Finally Dave raised his arm for silence, and slowly the counselors adopted his posture. Once he had achieved silence, he began to give the morning announcements.

From a few table over I saw Adam gesturing for my attention. I waved him over after a few seconds of his pantomimes and silent over-enunciations. He scuttled over, trying to keep his head below the line of sitting campers. Once at my table, he wedged himself a seat at the end of the bench, causing everyone else to knock elbows.

"I don't read lips," I said.

"Pretty bad-ass, I said." He whispered in a conspiratorial tone. He grabbed my shoulder and gave it a brief shake, and I briefly regretted telling him so soon. Adam wanted it for me almost as much as I did. That he knew that he would never get that chance had to make the moment bittersweet, as well.

"We'll talk later," I said. The excitement over, my table immediately reverted back to their normal level of inattention. The young sophomore engaged himself in a thumb war with the counselor at the end of the table, while the others traced circles on the table or simply spaced out. The only real sign of awareness came when a few quietly groaned when Dave announced the Day of Champions for after lunch.

"Easy day for us," Adam said. I nodded. Our kids would be out for most of afternoon, trying to set new camp records in hastily arranged events like the three-quarter court basket or the "kick the soccer ball into the trash can from across the field" competition. Adam could pass the responsibility onto his staff, and no one ever came to the track. The day was already bright, and I checked my flip-flop tan. Maybe I could borrow a golf cart to carry our porch chair to the long jump pit.

"So how was last night?" Adam asked. I knew that he didn't envy my outing with Fink, and was only looking to rub it in a bit. I played along, determined not to mention Maggie. The last thing I needed was for that to get around the bunk.

"About what you would expect. A bit of an adventure with Fink. I lost Rosen, though."

"What'd you do? Drop him off in the middle of the woods?"

I shrugged. Once I left Maggie's house, I drove straight back to camp, slowing at the winding curves in case Rosen had decided to walk back to Arrowdance. There was no sign of him though, though his car was still there when I got back to counselor lot, the last embers of the fire still glowing.

"Something like that," I said.

"Well, you didn't miss much in Bunk Fourteen," Adam said. "I let them use their cell phones, as long as they let me turn the lights off early. I think they were all still awake when I fell asleep." I kept to myself any reaction to Adam's breaking of two camp

rules – the phone usage and sleeping on the job. There were only a couple weeks left, after all. The War would keep everyone in line.

The sudden sounds of benches scraping the concrete floor and two-hundred conversations erupting at once told me that I missed Dave's dismissal. Adam immediately made a line for the salad bar to grab a few apples, but I sat and let the mass of campers flow out before me. I saw Rory heading for the side door, tugging on one of her kid's collar. He wore his shirt both inside out and backwards. She looked somehow fresh in her sweatpants and plain t-shirt. Her wet hair was gathered back in a thick ponytail. I rose from my seat and plotted a course of interception where the path met the road.

"Hold on there, cowboy," came a voice from behind me. I knew who it was, and I got my wince out of the way before I turned. Lauren waited, her arms around a half-full metal tub of lumpy oatmeal. I smiled and said good morning.

"You can save that," she said, placing the oatmeal in an empty chair. The tub teetered before tipping to a rest against the chair back.

"You know, nothing happened," I said.

"I'm just glad I was there. How do you even know my sister?"

"We're old friends, back from the party," I said, feeling first silly and then slightly resentful for having the natural inclination to explain myself to Lauren. It was one thing for her to expect it – something understandable, considering both their past histories with Arrowdance men – but I had nothing to feel guilty about.

"She seems really cool, though," I said. "I have her number, in case you want to double date." I stopped just short of added that she would have to choose between Karp and Derek, of course.

"Whatever, Lee. She's a grown-up."

She shook her head and brushed her face with one hand, leaving a small streak of flour above one brow. Lauren looked very much her seventeen years then, someone who should worry herself with homework and soccer practice. I asked her what was wrong, and she held her hand back up.

"Listen," she said. "I need you to talk to Evan. He has Derek's playbook."

I shook my head, but Lauren's eyes insisted. She leaned one shoulder against the wall, as if she had not slept in days. Still, I argued.

"I would have noticed that. It's a small bunk."

"No, I know that he was looking at it up in my room, and it was in there before you came to get him. There's nowhere else it could be."

"Karp plays lacrosse."

"Lee, I'm not kidding around. Derek's coach is a real hard-ass, and he will kick him off the team, and that'll be it. He'll have to sit out the whole year, even if he manages to transfer."

"No, I'm sorry. I know it's serious."

"So, tonight after dinner," she said. "If I don't have the playbook, I don't know what I'll do." She spoke without an inherent threat behind her words.

I gave up and told her that I would ask Karp as soon as I got down the hill. I did not add that it would do no good, and that she should know that even Karp could not be that dumb. Lauren nodded and briefly looked as if she wanted to say more, but she left

her mouth half-open, her attention somewhere outside the Dining Hall. I wanted to be out there too.

“He’d really lose his spot?” I asked. My voice brought her out of whatever state she was briefly in, and when I heard her response, it was again the predatory sports-car speaking, all striking lines and dully amused eyes.

“I’m not asking for you to give a damn, Lee,” she said, hefting the tub of oatmeal from the seat. “Just do it.”

Dave waited outside the dining hall, standing the decked-out golf-cart reserved for ferrying around prospective parents and their young children. The important things that separated it from the normal fleet were its fully functional brakes and an extra row of padded seats. Dave waved me over and fell into place behind the steering wheel.

“Let me give you a ride,” he said. He wore a brightly clean director’s shirt, the Arrowdance logo in full stitching on the left breast. I thought briefly of Karp’s adventure, but this was the second morning since then, and I let the brief flash of apprehension run its course.

“I’m finally getting the tour?” The cart had a full roof, the hinges attaching it to the frame freshly bolted after someone took it from the garage one night and drove it through the volleyball net.

“Get in. We just need to run through a few details.”

I hesitated for a moment, thinking of the ten minutes I had left in which to catch Rory in her room, before she joined her campers for inspection. I felt like I finally had an order of things to tell her, words that she needed to hear. I fell asleep that early morning accompanied by thoughts of Maggie and her suitcase, of the moment when one’s internal compass found a true north and stopped spinning. Rory needed to know of my North.

“I’m headed to the bunk,” I said, and Dave said that he would take me as far as the office. The cart spit a few pebbles of gravel as we drove off. Instead of taking us down the hill, Dave veered through the small picnic area and onto the main fields. The grass still glistened with drops of wet dew, those that had not yet turned to a muggy mist by the sun. I already felt my shirt clinging to my back, my feet uncomfortable in their socks.

“It’s going to be a good afternoon for Day of Champions,” I said as we skirted the third base line of Diamond Number One. Even as a camp owner, Dave was cautious of the immaculate infield, the prize jewel of the veteran athletic director. I wondered if Dave felt that he was only still playing the role of the head director, or if he was still surprised every day by the reality of this place, of being the one behind the big desk. Only six years ago he was just a veteran counselor, sharing the bunk with thirteen campers and one quiet Kansan.

“That’s not going to be your problem today,” he said. We were past the tennis courts, pointed towards the climbing tower and then the back road. A few maintenance workers patrolled the grounds, painting fresh lines on the fields or stabbing the last few pieces of Visiting Day litter with sharp sticks. “After rest period, come through the back door of the office. It’s time to start making some plans.”

I thought of the chant at breakfast, and of then donning the old feathered headdress and standing before the camp, and I wanted to feel the same excitement that

kept me going through the long winter, but only of a fraction came back, more a reverberation than a full emotion. Rory's words came back to me. Did I really need this?

"You and Ian can draw teams and draft your staffs, and Becky and Joel from the theater department will be there to discuss your body paint for the break. That's something else we can talk about. Are you afraid of airplanes?"

"Not necessarily," I said. Dave pulled the wheel once we hit the dirt road, and we headed back down to the service entrance. I craned my neck towards the counselor lot. Rosen's car was gone.

"Good. We've been talking to a man that owns a seaplane, you know, the type with the big pontoons that can land on the water. Picture standing on one of those with the whole camp watching you come in for a landing."

"Yeah." I knew that he was not joking, and if such a plane could be secured, I would surely be on it – hopefully tethered – raising my war club and trying to keep the lake water out of my mouth. I wondered how our neighbors would take it all. I pictured a gathering of local friends, grilling hamburgers and watching the spectacle. What would Maggie think?

"I remember my time." Dave slowed the cart as we drove past the maintenance shed. He took us into a small clearing that served as our handball field. Over our heads ran a zip-line, the final stage to a ropes course that had long ago fallen to disuse. I once saw the promotional video that Arrowdance gave out on recruiting trips. It featured a camper zooming down the line, his mouth frozen in a shape of terror and glee and his legs mere feet above the heads of the ropes staff. Now the course was a casualty to camp inspectors and high insurance rates, one of the first things the Silverman brothers lopped off the camp body.

"Me and Jason, the first brother war since 1959," Dave said. That was what, your second year?" He shook his head and laughed. "After that, owning the camp was almost a letdown."

"So it was worth it?"

He seemed taken aback. "Worth what?"

"I don't know," I said quickly. "All the work leading up to it maybe. The time spent waiting on it."

Dave smiled, satisfied with my answer. He pressed on the accelerator, and the cart's little electric engine spurred back to life.

"It'll be over before you know it, to be honest." He put us on the path back to center of camp. "When you come back next year, and you first overhear them talking about it, that's when it'll hit you. Really, pow."

I did not argue that point. For the first time, I anticipated the blow.

I took the steps to the women's cabin in one giant lunge, the porch creaking under the sudden weight. Already campers marched past with heavy bags of laundry slung over their shoulders, others dragging their bounty through the grass. My hand hovered before the screen door for a second as I wondered if I was too late and Rory was already gone, and then I was in.

The cabin seemed different during the daytime, the pale gray walls between the wide alcoves unfamiliar without the warm electric light. The privacy sheets were all

bunched at one end of their bars; the place seemed deserted. I felt the need to creep slowly to Rory's room, a trespasser all of a sudden.

She had made her bed with tight hospital corners, a skill I still had not mastered. The corners of the blankets were folded over and tucked in, and I probably could have bounced a corner up to my chin off the taut surface. Pictures of us still adorned the walls, something that I was quietly relieved to see. I was about to lean over and fold back the corner of a photo that showed the us both next to the state's largest blueberry, something we saw at last year's Bangor State Fair, when I heard the footsteps on the porch. The screen door banged shut and I stood up straight, the trodding feet stopping short at Rory's room.

"What the hell?" Rory gasped, cursing under her breath as I turned and with her hand over her chest, like a woman from an old movie suffering from the vapors. "You scared the hell out of me! What are you doing in here?"

"Hi," I said, feeling sheepish and quickly unable to remember what brought me there. I sat on the bed and my weight upset the delicate balance upon the mattress, causing pillows to fall from their stacked places. Rory regarded me with a look of annoyance as she willed her heart rate back to normal.

"Lee, what are you doing here?" she repeated.

"I thought I would catch you before you went down for clean-up." I offered the explanation as plainly as I could, as if it were perfectly reasonable for her to find me here in broad daylight, alone in an empty cabin.

"I was there. I just came back to get my clipboard." She grabbed that item from atop the dresser, her lifeguard whistle dangling from the attached string. That task accomplished, she waited with a hand on her hip.

"By the way," she said after I failed to respond, "thanks for dumping Fink on us last night." She still had the stern expression anchored to her face, but her voice no longer carried such an edge.

"That actually was not my fault," I said. When I continued to make no effort to remove myself from the room, Rory sighed and dropped her clipboard onto the bed. She still stood there in the door, but I took this as a small step.

"Yeah, save it." She scratched the corner of her nose and crossed one ankle over the other.

"You're pretty cute when you're frustrated," I said. I hoped that I could throw her off-guard for a second, force a lop-sided smile. Rory raised both eyebrows, but her mouth stayed a thin line. I heard the PA outside announce twenty more minutes before inspection.

"I've got to get back, Lee. My kids actually clean, you know."

"They'll grow out of that," I said. Even I was aware by then how annoying I was being, and whatever plan I had come in with was fraying wildly at the edges. I reeled myself back in. "This will just take a second. I need to tell you something important."

She pondered that for a moment, a corner of her bottom lip pinned behind one tooth. I pictured her with that same expression in college, while taking notes in class, or as a friend tries to convince her to go out some night. I longed then to see that context, actual longing. Finally, she shrugged.

"Yeah sure. They know how to work a broom by now." She nudged my legs aside with a knee and told me to move over. She leaned her head back to the wall, her

neck bent and with her chin practically touching her chest. I pulled her up when she grunted in discomfort.

“Long night then,” I said, as much a statement of my own fact as it was an inquiry of hers. Again I thought of the suitcase, and of the pursuit of a known want.

“Danielle actually got us kicked out of Champions,” Rory said. “They stopped serving fifteen minutes early. Fink actually did come in handy then getting us back home.”

I told her that was all part of the plan. Rory curled her head onto my shoulder, and drew her knees up against my ribs. Before I had a chance to second-guess my phrasing or to fret over her response, I continued speaking.

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” I put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer. “You need to know that I want you. In my life, very much. I’m surprisingly bad at expressing this, but you should know it.”

I expected a reaction from her. If she wanted to pepper me with kisses and gleefully jump into my lap, well, that would have been a stretch, but I would have accepted that. I would have settled for a soft thank you. I even saw an angry dismissal of the too little too late variety in the running of possible outcomes. Rory was quiet for a long time, and it wasn’t until I felt that wetness through my shirt that I knew she was crying.

“It’s nothing,” she said when I asked her what was wrong. “I know you meant well.”

“It’s a lot more than that.” I leaned back from her and pointed her chin upwards. I briefly saw her eyes before she wiped her nose and looked away. “This is what I want. And I’m happy to actually know it.”

Rory shook her head and gathered her things into her lap. She rested her elbows on the clipboard and stared straight into the opposite room.

“Why now, Lee? Why’d you think this was the right time?”

I told her that I could come back after lunch, since she was in a hurry. She said that of course that wasn’t what she meant. How did I come to this decision overnight, after six and a half weeks of decidedly not having that opinion?

“It’s not as easy as just saying that, Lee. I’m done here after this summer. I can’t come back and see you here again, and know that we’re just going to keep going through this. And I don’t want to see you and not be with you.” She straightened her spine and stood, letting my arm fall down her back.

I told her quickly about vacations we could plan together, off-setting Spring Breaks and weekends spent in whatever city we decided was perfectly in between our two colleges. I stopped short of mentioning my post-graduation plans, but even that was on the table, if it would only get her back on that bed.

“I’ve never been afraid of a long-distance thing, Lee. That’s never been what this is about.”

“I’m going to try, Rory,” I said, pleading now and surprising even myself. I stood up and considered any number of gestures, embraces, or expressions designed to keep her in that room for as long as it would take for her to remember that only last night she said she loved me, and how that could not change in only twelve hours. I sat back down.

“You say that now.” She repeated herself quietly. “But we both know.”

She kissed me then. It happened quickly, and our noses bumped before we worked out the angle. Her skin was hot against my face and when she broke away, my lips grazed her forehead and I tasted a tangle of hair.

"You can't be in here Lee," she said. "You'll get in trouble." Rory took my hand and led me to the door, her fingers clutching mine tightly. They still became untwined easily enough once we crossed the threshold.

The call for instructional period played just as I returned to Bunk Fourteen. I briefly surveyed the cabin. The campers had done their versions of making the beds, which was to pull the comforter up and over any clothes they could not stuff into their drawers, and the air still carried the metallic tang of overused disinfectant spray. The trash cans on either side of the fridge were only half-full, at least. All in all, a fairly successful clean-up.

"We got a six today," Josh said as I walked in, his palm high up in the air. I ignored the invitation for celebration and turned the corner towards my bunk. The blankets that I borrowed from the laundry room at the start of every summer, their arrangement on the bed designed so that their several holes and threadbare areas complimented rather than overlapped each other, were still thrown back from the night before.

Adam spotted me as I contemplated closing my eyes for just a few minutes, waiting track students be damned. I tried to remember of today was the final day of the cycle, and if they would really miss me up on the fields that morning, or if they needed my supervision to goof off properly.

"You kind of look like shit, Lee." Adam sat on the corner of the bed and twirled his tennis racket against the floor. Ack was the final camper in the bunk, and he glanced over at the two of us and then stuttered in his step, as if he planned to say something and then thought better of it. He exited.

"I've heard that so many times," I said, using one arm to push back up off the pillow. "It's been a rough couple days."

Adam nodded and looked away, towards the rear of the bunk.

"What's going on?" I asked when he did not speak, but only rocked back and forth, his knees a pivot like those automatic oil pumps I used to see in the fields back home.

"Karp is back there." He meant the backroom. "I think he skipped breakfast."

"What?" If we let our campers sleep through breakfast every time they wanted to, we might as well tell the kitchen to just prepare thirty less pieces of French toast every morning.

"I know," Adam said in defense. "I didn't think to check. It's so late in the summer, I thought who cares?"

"So I'll talk to him," I said, as if there was another option present. Adam shrank back to the foot of the bed, the racket grip now between both hands.

"I tried to talk, but it didn't go far."

I knew what Adam meant, that these were my campers and he still did not feel comfortable getting too involved. The thought of chastising him for that crossed my mind, but I was tired and my head still hurt and my last two weeks at Arrowdance seemed merely a collection of minutes that I would then have to go and live. I guided my



toes back into my flip-flops and we both stood. Adam went for the door and when I called his name, he quickly turned.

"How do you go back home?" I was aware of the surface absurdity of the question, and Adam shook his head in confusion. I thought of how to clarify that, although that would first mean that I had to know what I was asking.

"Rory say that we're not going to work out because I shut out this part of me when I go home, that I can't be the same person there as I am here."

"Is that what you want?" he asked. I didn't understand. "To be with her."

"Of course," I said, giving my voice more of a cut than I had any right to. I was only angry at myself that my best friend at Arrowdance would have to ask that question.

"It's not always easy to tell," Adam said, returning the emotional volley back to me. "Whatever the problem is, just deal with it."

"Yeah, probably should do that," I said.

"Seriously man." Adam was tapping his racket between his knee and the door frame. "Not to fluff your ego too much or anything, but you are going to be the Maroon Chief. That's never going to happen to me. Or Fink, or to most of the other guys here. You're not a loser."

"That being said."

Adam rolled his eyes and retracted his first step out the door.

"Lee, fuck, I'm about to take all that back. I know something about your life back home – barely, mind you – but come on. This kids love you, Lee. They really do. It's why I can't go back there and talk to Karp, or be the one they want to go with them to the hospital when they have appendicitis. It's something I can't compete with. I'm just one of them, their old counselor's brother. You mean more to them. And that's not because of who you are at Arrowdance. That's just who you are."

"Okay," I said. Already I heard the splashing of campers in the shallow pool, a few shrieks at the temperature of the water. "This is kind of a moment right here." Adam began to step back onto the porch.

"Right," he said, propping open the screen door. "Come by the courts when you head up. You can have your students shag balls."

I had almost forgotten about Karp, and I nearly followed Adam out the door. Even when I remembered, I considered for a full second leaving him be. Ultimately though, I headed for the darkened bathroom door.

The backroom was really nothing more than a glorified closet. On the camper's first day, we moved the extra dressers to the porch and replaced them with an old couch from the lodge. The owners allowed the senior campers a certain leeway when it came to pilfering, an allowance that my kids quickly took advantage of. By the end of the first night, our backroom was complete with a battered coffee table found near a maintenance shed and a lamp from the women's cabin. Even I didn't know where the small TV and Gamecube came from. Our late night rounds of golf were practically a spectator sport among the veteran staff.

Karp sat on the couch with the videogame controller in hand. He briefly took his attention away from the game as I sat opposite him on an overturned milk crate. I craned my neck to look at the screen.

"This is where I got that hole in one last week," I said, recalling the best-ball tournament Adam and I hosted. I then suggested that he try clubbing down, on account of the wind.

"I remember. You guys woke up the entire bunk with your yelling."

"It was a big moment," I said. "Got us a van the next night." I hoped that little bit of insider knowledge would draw more of a reaction out of him, but Karp only muttered "cool" and took his shot. The computer spectators groaned their reaction.

Karp wore basketball shorts and a tattered t-shirt, and he kept his bare feet propped up on the table. He had clearly skipped breakfast. The remnants of last night's milk and cookies, one of the most revered Arrowdance traditions, littered the room. And empty skim milk half-gallon was wedged in between Karp and the arm of the couch.

"I can see why we only got a six in inspection," I said. I meant it as a joke; if our inspectors did anything more than pop their head in the door, it was only to talk to one of the counselors or take a meager bribe from the fridge. Karp kept his eyes glued to the screen.

"Sorry."

I surprised both myself and Karp by turning off the TV mid-swing. It smacked of an overtly parental move, something that cool-counselor Lee would never do. I expected an indignant reaction from Karp, a rebellious teenager to match the overbearing parent, but instead he merely put the controller into his lap and turned his attention to me. He was ready for a fight.

"Have you talked to Lauren since the party?" I started. I thought it was a simple question, not destined to offend or incite. I wanted to be careful not to overload on the disapproval.

"No," he said. "Ack's making sure of that."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He's like my mom all of a sudden. Always keeping tabs on me."

"He's a good friend."

"Sure."

I stayed determined to wait him out when again he fell silent. I watched him work his jaw around in a tight circle, giving the impression of a tough young rebel set out against the world. I was sixteen once, too. When he finally spoke again, much of that front had fallen aside.

"He's the same way back home too. And now he's all up on Rory's sister, talking about her all the time. Like I don't get sick of hearing about that."

"Well, come on. Cut him some slack, right? How often does he have to hear about Lauren?"

Karp shrugged and sunk into the couch. Above his head I noticed a new list of names, and it wasn't until after a double-take that I noticed that it was our bunk roster, the ink still black and fresh. I wondered how long it had been there, and if I would have noticed it if not for right then.

"I want to know what your endgame is with her," I asked. "Lauren."

"What do you mean?"

"She has this boyfriend. It seems pretty serious." I paused, hoping for some sort of application of significance to my next statement. "How is this all going to work out?"

Karp tried putting his arms behind his head, found that uncomfortable, and then pressed his hands to his face, his knuckles white under the pressure.

"I don't know, man," he said, revealing his face. Bright white marks from his fingers quickly disappeared. "Does it matter? This is just a camp thing."

"Right." It was my turn to nod and give the one syllable response. I couldn't say that I've taught him any different. "But do you like her?"

"You know, people act like I'm some big shot, but she's the one who came after me. None of this is my fault."

"But what do you want?" I figured that was the question of the day, and it was only fair to ask Karp. He sighed loudly and stared at the dark TV, locking eyes with his rounded reflection. The video game machine whirred softly.

"It doesn't matter," Karp said.

"Sure it does."

"No, really it doesn't," he said, raising his voice. "I'm going back home soon, so whatever."

"If you like her, you could always tell her. She's pretty cool."

Karp looked at me as if I had just proposed that he simply move the earth and sun, no big deal. He spared me another eye roll, though.

"That's not going to happen, Lee. Don't worry about that."

"Okay," I said, laughing it off. "This one thing then. Lauren says that Derek is missing his playbook."

"So?" He made a big deal about reaching over for his basketball shoes.

"Nothing. She just wondered if you knew what happened to it."

"You talked to her?"

"She asked me after breakfast. Probably would have asked you if you were there."

Karp wiggled his foot back and forth, working through the tied laces until his heel hit jackpot with a thump. He then wrestled with the other shoe.

"Does she think I took it?"

"I don't know," I said. Karp managed to avoid my eyes once both shoes were on, and I noticed the effort he put forth to do that. That was enough for me. "It's not a big deal if you did. She just needs it back."

"So you believe her?"

"Karp really, I don't care. I'd understand if you took it, really. I'd be pissed at her too. But if you have it, we need to get it back to her."

"You think I'm pissed at her?"

"I don't know," I repeated. Karp was speaking louder, and it took an effort for me not to respond in kind. "But you don't want to be a guy that does something like this."

"Whatever."

"Come on, Karp. Not whatever." I sensed that I was losing control of the situation, that if I pressed with the tumblers too much, applied too much torque, the lock would be irreparably jammed. Karp stood and stepped over the coffee table. "She needs the playbook by the end of dinner, and I don't think she'll go to the owners. This is an easy fix."

"I have to go to basketball," he said. I met him at the door, blocking his path.

"If you want to talk about Lauren, we can do that," I said. Karp kept his head down and slightly tilted to the side, like the manner of a bull contemplating a charge. "It's not right to take it out on Derek, though. You know that."

"Just because you failed with Rory doesn't mean you can fix things with me," he said, brushing past my shoulder. I felt a jolt of fizz and light aside from the contact with Karp, and the muscles and tendons and air in my chest seemed to pull tight and cracked. I followed Karp into the main room, my eyes narrowing on the back of his head.

"What did you say?"

Karp stopped in the middle of the bunk and his shoulders dropped. I should have seen that as a sign that he regretted what he had said, and that I had brought it out only by pushing against his teenage pride. It would have mattered, but I didn't give him a chance to respond.

I said, "You don't care what you're doing to this kid, do you? He doesn't have the chances that you do, and you're going to fuck him over because you're just a stuck-up kid with a trust fund." The words came too easily, and if I had just stopped then, I would have felt the shame of what I was doing.

"So go ahead and be worthless," I said.

10.

The water folded softly upon itself. I atop the fence closest to the small boat dock, one hand securing a thin rope across the entrance. Every minute or so a camper or two approached me, put their name tags onto a peg board, and I lifted the rope. They would then continue past me to board their floatable craft of choice, most often one of the fat, plastic playaks that allowed them to dangle their feet in the water as the paddled and maneuvered around the lake. If they needed help pulling a windsurf board from the back, or to steady a canoe as they stepped gingerly from the dock, then I would leave my post just long enough to do that.

On most days I found excuses to miss Free Swim and whatever duty the waterfront director assigned that day. I justified it by telling myself that there were plenty of counselors – not necessarily eager, but only in their first or second year – to handle the load, and that my veteran-status had earned me at least that much. I would spend the hour up on the basketball bleachers with a few friends, or more often than that, with my eyes closed in my bunk. Today though, I could handle the sounds of splashing and the manual labor of retrieving boats from the water. The work did not take much thought, and that, more than anything, was the pull.

A few minutes into the period Fink wandered over to me to ask about his car keys. I told him that they were safely back in my bunk, still in the pocket of my jeans from the night before. He nodded and leaned his back into the opposite fence post.

"No rush," he said. "You're good for it."

I thanked him for the compliment, and swung my legs to the other side of the fence. The once calm lake was by then dotted with playaks, kayaks, and paddleboats. Further out, in the wide expanse between the Arrowdance shore and our island, the fleet of ski boats crisscrossed over each other's wakes, sending their trailing wards high above the water.

“Where were you at this afternoon?” Fink asked once he realigned himself to me. He picked a piece of rotted wood from the post and flipped it into the water.

“Nowhere,” I said, pausing for a second to come up with a believable lie. “I was in the office making phone calls. Enrollment stuff for school.”

“Sounds fun.”

I shrugged. It should have been, that is, the actual truth to my afternoon. Ever since my first summer, when my chief called me out by name to join his team, I knew that I wanted to be in his place, atop the stand with a roster in hand and paint across my chest. When Dave was my chief the next summer, he allowed me into the late-night war rooms, where he planned for the next day with his inner circle. They would spend hours into the early morning either sequestered in safe cabin, or around a table at the Waterville House of Pizza, debating the merits of one basketball line-up over another, or if we could afford to weaken our intermediate hockey team by placing our best goalie into a tennis match. Now it finally was my turn, and I had just spent the better part of the afternoon in an actual secret meeting, the blinds in Aaron Silverman’s office twisted shot and with heavy drapes drawn as well. As Ian and I chose our coaches, going back and forth and arguing whether it was fair for me to pick his brother, a first-year football counselor, I kept thinking of the way I left Karp alone in the bunk.

“What are you supposed to be doing now?” I asked Fink, not as a way to get rid of him, but only as an opening for conversation. He was always good for that.

“Danielle told me to take the swim docks,” he said. I looked over to the pools, the first one that started with the shore and stopped at the swim lanes, and then the second pool further out, cornered by two large floating docks and framed by floating ropes. On either side of the first pool were the wooden docks, one of which was where Fink currently belonged.

“Still no idea on Rosen?” I asked.

“No idea,” Fink said, another piece of splintery, painted wood in his hand. He dug into it with his fingernails, sending saw dust remnants down into the grass. “I tried calling him a few hours ago, but it went right to voice mail. Weird, man.”

“Well, he probably got what he came for.” I wondered when it turned on Rosen, that passion he once felt for boxing, and what would drive him to give it up. Out in the second pool, a handful of directors treaded water and threw campers into the air. Most of them were counselors when I started, already grown men to me.

“You think he got with that bartender girl?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Good for him,” Fink said, an unmistakable scrap of disappointment in his voice. Then, “Hey Lee, I wanted to get your opinion on something.”

I asked what, distracted then by what I saw a bit down the shore. Ranger stood on the porch of his cabin, the last Arrowdance building down the line, wearing a pair of pocketed fishing shorts and nothing else. He stared out to the water as if he had just woken from a nap, and it took him a minute to process the shrieks and motor sounds that woke him. I let my eyes lose focus and there were two of him profiled against the far shore, the lit cigarette dangling from his lip. Against that blurry backdrop he looked as rooted in place as the boulders that served as fishing rocks and the Canadian mountains far away.

“Lee, did you hear me?”

I apologized and widened my eyes, snapping the surroundings back into sharp clarity. A lifeguard whistled, and I heard Rory yelling. She sat atop her tower and pointed at two campers in the first pool, one caught mid-dogpile atop the second.

"It's like this," Fink continued. "My kids are going to be seniors next summer, you know, finally. And yours will counselors. Or gone, I guess. I mean, I was only one of four from my bunk that came back. Well, I guess I was wondering what your plans for next summer are."

"I haven't really put a lot of thought into it yet."

"That's cool," he said. "It's still a year away. I was just kind of assuming that you'd be back since you're still in school."

"That's probably about right," I said. I thought the first time I would see Ack or one of the others at the fire and not feel compelled to chase them away. Maybe they would ask me to buy them beer, and I'd pass on a few stories that they were finally ready to hear. When I placed the idea in those terms, it was not the worst.

"So there's no rush," Fink repeated. "I was just wondering if you planned on starting over. You wouldn't want to take on fifteen new sophomores at your advanced age, would you?"

"I don't know," I said, entertaining the idea. "It might be time for me to get a made-up executive gig. Director of Rest Period. Finally get a room in the Lodge."

Fink chuckled and lowered his head. Ranger still held his post. I wondered what he saw when he looked out at the lake – if the houses had changed much over the years, if he noted a difference in the water line as we dumped new truckloads of sand onto our beach every summer. Did he see the symptoms of the disease of more?

"I only wanted to ask," Fink said, "if you wanted to think about joining my bunk next summer. The kids really look up to you, and I'm not kidding myself about the responsibility. I could use the help."

"No, yeah," I said. A cloud passed in front of the sun, and the water fell into chunks of grey and white where the wind added chop. The island was still clad in sunlight, though. Its pocket of evergreens tilting slightly to the right, as if the island hoped the evidence of fifty years of camp use would just slide off. "Thanks. I'll think about it."

Fink said okay, and then waited as I checked the tags for a threesome of canoers, grabbing them life vests from a rack. When I returned he let the subject pass, and began talking about the night's upcoming entertainment.

"It might be pretty good," Fink said. "Not like they used to be though. Those were productions."

"I'll tell Ack that you wish him luck. I'm running up to the theater after this."

"He doesn't need it. Ack's the real lucky one," he said. "To have Sarah Strasser to sing to. You weren't here yet, but back when I was a camper, we didn't have these co-ed productions. They made me play Maria in West Side Story before my voice could change."

"I was here for that."

"Shit. Wow, that was like six years ago. Makes me feel old."

I did the math. Fink would have been no older than fourteen, as old as his campers would be next summer. I knew a few of them from my instructionals or random

tables in the dining hall. It would not be so bad to be stuck with them, or even Fink, for that matter. I'd be entering my elder statesmen phase after all, if it came to that.

"I might not be back next summer," I said. "I should actually be done with school, so who knows?" I kept watching the island, the car sized rocks that lined the shore no bigger than the tip of my pinkie nail. Our bunk went to camp on the island at least once a summer back when the idea of sleeping in tents and roasting marshmallows seemed exciting rather than lame. After a few times, it got hard to overlook the fact that you'd wake up amongst a small party of daddy longlegs with a pine cone lodged in your back.

"Do your kids still like going to the island?" I asked Fink. He was surprised at the question and had to think about his answer.

"Maybe. I think so. We're supposed to go later this week. They made me promise to sneak some Mountain Dew onto the boat."

"I remember this one time we went. Must have been our second year, so it was Karp's first. Dave bought each of the kids a Kansas City Strip with his own money, and we grilled them ourselves. Only we forgot to back the knives and forks. So imagine these thirteen campers tearing into the steaks with their fingers, juice and grease just running down their chins. I got some pictures of that somewhere."

"Sounds gross."

I didn't really hear him, at least not enough to react. The memory was so vivid – I could smell the charred meat and the fire again. I didn't worry about teaching track or what my place amongst the others was. It was just enough to be around my kids, laughing in the pine needles while they farted into the fire.

"That was a big day for Karp," I said. "He was homesick most of that first month, but he had a good time on that island. You remember how short he was?" I shook my head. "You think you're getting old."

"I was just exaggerating," Fink said. "You are old, though."

Rory's whistle sounded again, followed by the shrill cry of the waterfront air horn. Free Swim was about to be over, and campers began their slow, water-logged march out of the pools. Across the lake, the Arrowdance boats began to turn back to the shore, and I slipped off the fence to help bring the craft back to their racks. I turned to say one last thing to Fink, but he was no longer there.

We had an hour before dinner, just long enough to sneak in a nap or a few rounds of rafterball. I eyed my bed with real longing, the meat behind my knees feeling especially weak. I could not though, not with the Karp situation still up in the air. He avoided me after his basketball instructional, his head down as he shuffled to the backroom. The other campers fell silent, and I in turn retreated to the Lodge. Lauren's deadline flashed in my mind with bright red alarm-clock letters, and I was running out of choices. I promised myself that I would not involve the owners, and that my resistance to that final measure stemmed from my concern for Karp's future. The other side of that was equally true, though. I didn't want to lose anything else.

Footsteps pounded the front steps and my neck muscles tensed, but it was only Adam. He walked past without seeing me and threw a collection of items onto his bed. I cleared my throat and he spun around.

"What's up?" he asked, throwing a blanket over the notebooks.

“Have you seen Karp around?” I asked, not sure how much he knew. I hoped that he had managed to stay completely unaware of the playbook situation, so that he could point to a factor of deniability, if it came to that. He shrugged and told me that he had not seen Karp since just after lunch.

“He said that he wanted to hit the track, get ready for the Day of Champions,” he said. He then fidgeted with a corner of the blanket, further covering whatever he wanted hidden. I couldn’t resist walking over to check it out.

“Okay, fine,” he said. He reached under the blanket and pulled out a spiral bound notebook, maroon-covered and with golden engraved letters. I held it up to the light.

“I ordered them on-line,” Adam explained, taking it back from me. “The custom lettering took a little longer than I thought. I was afraid they wouldn’t make it here in time for the war.” He dropped the notebook back on the bed. Even in his shadow, I could still read my name with the word “Chief” preceding it.

“You did this yourself?” I asked. I grinned despite an effort towards restraint. The maroon was the perfect shade, and there was even a little war club emblem in the corner.

“Well, the printers did.” Adam quickly busied himself with collecting the other notebooks. He stuffed them into his shirt drawer. “I got ten of them, one for every one in the inner circle.”

“Kind of jumped the gun. Risky.”

“You could always have used them next year,” he said after a moment of thought. “Of course, I would still take one, even if I wasn’t here.”

I resisted the urge to hug him, which would have shown blatant disregard for the shaky balance of our “no awkward show of emotions” pact. Instead, I took a step back and nodded my head slowly.

“Pretty cool,” I said. I went back and dug around in my dresser until I found what I was looking for. I laid the old blue staff shirt on my bed, rubbing my hand from the collar down to the hem in an attempt to remove the wrinkles.

“I have to run up the theater real quick,” I said, rolling the shirt back up. “If you see Karp, keep him here, okay?”

“Anything you want me to say to him?” Adam eyed the shirt with open jealousy. It was a relic, a style not seen since the last decade. Dave entrusted it to me after that first summer, before he went on to be a minor director. The old Arrowdance logo of an Indian in full headdress adorned the left breast, directly above the intricate stitching of the camp name. On the walls of the Aaron Silverman’s office, this style of shirt was as much a part of the staff photos from the seventies as muttonchops and feathered hair. Years of camp laundry had softened the fabric to a nearly intangible level, so that you felt the individual atoms against your skin. Only a few still existed in the wild.

“You’re seriously not,” Adam began, unable to bring himself to finish the sentence.

“Keep Karp here,” I said, securing the shirt under one arm. “Even if you have to hold the GameCube hostage. It’s important. I’ll be right back.”

The theater was the last building up the hill, or the first one you’d come to after the main entrance. It was still new my first summer, a gleaming building of varnished wood and expansive picture windows. On show nights the light of the foyer cast a glow



onto the trees and grass outside the doors. My feet crunched and sent small bits of gravel into the grass as I stepped to the front entrance. Above the door, the small, polished bits of limestone spelled the word “Arrowdance”.

Once inside I heard the final beats of “Grease Lightning”, followed by the director’s voice calling out to the actors. I took the steps as quietly as I could, my footsteps like the starting clapper we used for track meets. The actual theater ran twenty rows deep, the seats patched together cast-offs from when the old Waterville cineplex went out of business. I came out into the darkness of the back rows and ducked into the closest aisle seat. The creak of my seat caused a few heads to turn from the front rows, mostly cast members that were not needed. Most turned back to the stage, but one blonde head kept pointed my way. I waved back at Sarah Strasser.

Onstage, Ack and the rest of the T-Birds circled a thin plywood cut-out of a car, its side painted like an old muscle car. The rest of the stage was bereft of further props, save for a few background boards that had probably seen dozens of Arrowdance productions. While the theater director spoke quietly to the costumed gang members, the rest of the crew began to wander. I had only been involved in one camp play before – the director recruited me for the role of Audrey II five years ago, back when they considered it funny for counselors to make cameos – and I knew the strange mix of nerves and jitters that accompanied an opening night.

There was a sound of movement and rustling fabric behind me, and a body vaulted into the seat next to me. The figure’s giggle cut off suddenly, replaced by a muffled noise of pain.

“I think I caught a spring,” Sarah said, leaning forward and feeling the bottom of her seat. She wore the poodle skirt and sweater required of any proper Sandy.

“Take it easy, kiddo.” I used a quiet tone in the hope that she would follow suit. The director turned and scowled in our direction, and Ack gave a curt nod, all business on stage.

“You here to wish me luck?” Sarah asked, her voice breaking free on a few syllables. I shushed her again.

“Of course. This could be the start something huge. Just be sure to mention me first in your acceptance speech.”

Sarah snorted loudly, drawing an exaggerated palms in the air gesture from the director.

“Yeah right,” she said after he had turned back to the stage. “I just did this to get out of Matoaka for a few hours. I’m starting to get tired of all that pink.”

I understood how she felt. The first time I took a van over to the sister camp – some Orientation team building exercise, I think – it was like someone had messed with the world’s color knobs. Pink paint on the cabins, pink rocks around the flagpole, and pink tennis balls on the courts. Rory once said that even the toilet stalls shared the same hue.

“Hey, so after my parents dropped you two off, they wouldn’t stop talking about you.”

“Well,” I said, injecting enthusiasm into my voice for her sake, “we are quiet the couple.”

“Gross. No, I meant “you” you. I think they really like you.”

“Really?” That surprised me. “I didn’t get that impression.”

"My mom can be scary," Sarah said. "But no, she especially said that she was very impressed. You seemed like a good young man, she said." She left it at that and began to look intently at the stage as the music track started back up. Ack perched behind the prop care, and I noticed the thin wires that connected it to the ceiling for the first time.

"He's so worried that he's going to fall off tonight," Sarah said. I looked up to the rafters and saw two members of the stage crew manning an electric winch. I gave Ack even odds.

"I have a favor to ask, Lee," Sarah said, this time with a determined effort to keep her voice down. She leaned in. "I also don't want to ask you, because maybe I'm thinking too much, or it could just be a giant bother. I'm sorry."

"Are you sure you and Rory are blood-related?"

"Shut-up," she hissed. "Okay, so listen. Does Mike have like, a girlfriend?"

Despite my best efforts, I barked out quick laugh before I could bite my lip. Sarah slugged me good in the arm and turned away, her forehead placed into her palm. I felt bad enough to nudge her with my elbow.

"Sorry," I said. "You caught me off-guard with that one." I elbowed her until she came back. "We're talking about Ack, right?"

"Forget I asked," she said. "But I meant back home. We're going to be in the same school next year." I told her that I already knew that, and her eyes grew about double in size. "He told you?"

"Sarah, I don't really get into my campers' personal lives."

"I know, I know." She settled down further into her seat, forcing me to cede the entire armrest to her. Ack's knuckles whitened as the car halted mid-transit, close to seven feet from the stage. The director yelled cut and a crewmember brought out a stepladder.

"He's talked about you a few times," I said. "Probably more than a few, I guess. But a few times to me."

"Cool," Sarah said, her voice pointed towards the floor. I wished her luck and decided to be kind and leave her in her embarrassed state. She stood with me, and wrapped me in a tight hug.

"Come up to Boston sometime," she said once she let me go. "When Rory's back home. Do that, okay?" She smiled and the light bounced from her braces. I wanted nothing more than to tell her it was a sure thing, but instead I smiled back and walked down the aisle.

I followed Ack backstage once he was back on solid ground. I snuck up on him as he fiddled with the fake pack of cigarettes that was rolled up in his sleeve.

"It's going to be quite a show, huh?" I asked. When he turned I tossed the old staff shirt into his torso. He caught it with a finger before it hit the floor. Once he realized what he was holding, his professional demeanor vanished.

"What's this?" he said out of shock, rather than ignorance. I'd only worn the shirt on the most special occasions, but I knew he recognized it.

"It's something I've been thinking about," I said. "Dave Silverman gave that to me, you know, and I think he got it from one of his counselors, and so on. So here."

"This is really cool." Ack looked genuinely choked up, and I couldn't help but let the emotion soak into me as well, if just for a second. Then came a crash from the stage, followed by a chorus of flavorful curses.

"I'm starting to grow out of it," I joked. I wanted to leave it at that, as one of the few gestures that I actually managed to pull off. Ack let me get almost to the open back doors, two big barn-style devices.

"You talked to Karp today," he said. My shoulders sagged.

"I tried to make it easy on him," I said as I turned. "You knew about the playbook, didn't you?" Ack nodded, the staff shirt over one shoulder. He looked older, no longer the kid that once streaked from cabin to cabin in a pilfered pair of women's underwear.

"He can't exactly keep a secret very well. Fink knew. You should have."

I thought of the when I brushed him off in the Lodge, and Fink on the fields. Ack was right; I should have known something was up in my own bunk. I'd been spending too much time at the fire, or inside my own head, worrying about the war and a role that I was not assured to get.

"Karp knows what he needs to do," Ack said, stepping out of the theater. I followed him. The ditch of the highway was just past a thin row of trees, and past that the road itself. A ponderous semi and trailer rumbled by. "He feels like he's let you down. He's afraid that you're going to tell the owners, and he'll get kicked out of camp."

"He told you all this?"

"He had a really bad phone call last night," Ack said. "Adam let him use his phone, and he called his parents. I think they told him they're getting a divorce after all."

"Okay." My neck grew warm and I found my fists clenched. I said, "These are things I should have known," and I meant it for myself, but Ack heard and took it the wrong way.

"He really didn't mean what he said."

I nodded. "It's okay. It's going to be fine." I put my hand on Ack's shoulder. "Seriously. He just needs to give the playbook back. It's not even a big deal." I dropped my hand. Ack turned back to the theater upon hearing the director's call. Before he left, I asked him if he knew where Karp was.

"Around, I guess," Ack said. "I saw him headed up to the fields after Rest Period."

I thanked Ack, told him to break a leg. More crashes, and then a loud curse from the stage. He regarded me a look not short on glum, and tossed the shirt back to me.

"Hold onto my shirt for awhile," he said, cringing at an aftershock of what sounded like calling chairs and ripping paper. "I'm afraid it might burst into flames back here with our luck."

The sunlight was just beginning to filter through the leaves of the western trees as I left the theater; I held my hand up to my brow until I hit the dirt and gravel road. About a hundred feet down the hill was the Dining Hall, and a bit past that a massive crowd of campers and staff marching in my direction. I looked down at my wrist though I never wore a watch, and then remembered that dinner was always early on theater nights. The second call for dinner had already played.

I slowed my pace watched as the first few campers – most always sophomores that sprinted for the Dining Hall as soon as the flag was lowered – round the final corner, their arms held out as pivots on the fence post. The back of their heels kicked gravel into the picnic tables, and the kitchen staff could barely open the doors in time. Soon the rest of the camp followed, a many-headed snake that took a full minute or so to pass through. Some had their arms around the shoulders of friends, boasting of records and glories attained that afternoon. I hung back, looking to fall in with the stragglers at the end.

I felt okay, for some reason. Rory loved me but didn't want to be with me. I still had time to change one of those variables. In a matter of days, I would be revealed as an Arrowdance chief, the next man up in a proud line of painted warriors. I needed to make things right with Karp, but even that seemed attainable. Out of anyone, I should know what Arrowdance means to someone who feels like they've lost their home. It was all going to be okay, I repeated to myself. I couldn't help but smile as I joined the last of the line.

I almost was able to enter the Dining Hall with that feeling intact.

Adam cut me off short of the porch. Josh was with him, and they were both breathing loudly. Adam's forehead was damp with sweat, and he coughed into his hand before managing to speak. He ran a hand through his mat of hair and then wiped it dry on his shirt when it came back dry. Josh looked at Adam, as if waiting for a cue to speak.

"What's going on?" I asked Josh. Adam held up his hand and answered.

"Tell Lee what you told me," he said to the camper.

"Okay, I was about to," he said, then faced me. "I don't think Karp is in camp."

"No one's seen him since right after lunch," Adam said, cutting in. "I was waiting for him to come back to the bunk just a few minutes ago, and this one," he motioned to Josh, "gets a text from Karp, saying what?"

"That he's sorry, and he's going to take care of it," Josh said. They both waited for my response, to throw out a beacon of logic that they could then follow. I shook my head.

"Have you tried calling him back?"

"Straight to voicemail," Adam said.

"Do you know what his text means?" I looked at the two of them in turn.

Josh looked at Adam and then back at me. He said, "Karp took a playbook from Lauren's house, and he's going to get kicked out of camp if he doesn't give it back."

"Is there anything that the two of us," I included Adam, so that Josh might think that we actually had a grip on things, "don't know?"

Josh shook his head.

"So he's gone?" I asked.

"Shit, I guess so, Lee," Adam said. "So what do you want to do about it?"

I couldn't tell them that I didn't know. I stared down at the dirt surrounding the fence posts, and at the little ants forming a trail to a bit of dropped cheese from the meal before. Adam and Josh still waited.

"We should tell the Silvermans," Adam said. He was resolute in his decision, disastrous though it was. "I don't want to, but we should."

"Wait," I said, and then repeated the word again, buying some time to think. Karp actually was good kid, interested in doing the right thing when it counted. If all he needed to do was give the playbook back to Lauren, he could have done that at anytime.

I would need to check with her. His disappearance, although worrisome, had to be temporary. He most likely just needed some time to himself.

"This kind of thing has happened before, right?" I asked Adam. He was about to answer when two older directors walked past us, late for dinner. Adam and I both huddled around Josh, as if we were chewing him out for his Dining Hall behavior. Once they were inside, I turned to Josh.

"Go ahead and get in there," I said, and Adam nodded in agreement. "This is just Karp being Karp, right?" Josh visibly sagged in relief, more than ready to believe what I told him. That was just as important as the truth, I thought. Every summer at least one older kid threw a scare into his counselors, and most of the time they had just decided to peace out up in the luggage loft for a few hours, asleep on a pile of sleeping bags. Josh took the three steps onto the porch in one leap. I motioned to Adam, and we put some distance between us and the Dining Hall.

"You think that's true?" he asked.

"What?"

"About Karp being Karp?"

"Well, this had happened before with other campers. At least once a summer, someone's girlfriend breaks up with them, or they're pissed over a lost game, or their parents get divorced. Karp's could be out behind the lacrosse shed, smoking a joint with Ranger."

"You really think that?"

"Maybe. He does know that Lauren needs the playbook back after the meal, because Derek's coming to pick her up."

"She's going to have fun explaining that one."

"She'll figure it out," I said, and mulled the other possibility over in my head. "I did say something dumb to him earlier, about him fighting for Lauren."

"You mean a 'fight' fight?"

"Yeah." I laughed. It was all I could do. "That would be about the worst thing."

Adam ran both hands through his hair this time, and kept them there as he pulled his scalp tight. He did not laugh.

"We do have options, if I'm getting this right. He's either getting high under some cabin and everything's going to work out, or he's going to get his ass kicked by the kitchen girl's boyfriend."

"He doesn't have a car. What's he going to do, steal a golf cart and drive four miles on the shoulder?" Adam raised an eyebrow. "Okay, I'll check the golf carts."

"He's taken a car before." He lowered his head when I glared at him, but quickly met my eyes again. "Just a few times. Some of the office girls have him make runs to the gas station down the road during rest period. I did it when I was his age."

"I'll talk to Lauren right now," I was too angry to say anything else. Fink's keys were still in the pocket of my jeans, half-kicked underneath my bed, I remembered. "At least we can make sure that second thing doesn't happen."

"I still don't know, Lee."

"What else do we do?" In the Dining Hall came the sound of five dozen wooden benches scraping the concrete floor, followed by three hundred voices reciting the blessing. I lowered my head and waited for it to pass, happy for the chance it offered my

nerves to stop twitching. “If we go to the owners, then it all comes out, and that’s it for Karp.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Right.” I ignored the doubt that threw rocks from the sideline at my resolve.

Adam would have already known of the consequences of going to the owners, not only for Karp but for us as well, probably better than me. “I’ll talk to Lauren before anything else, make sure everything’s cool. And if I don’t see Karp by the end of the meal, I’ll talk to Dave.”

“No Lee, I’ll go with you,” Adam said, his voice firm again. I shook my head.

“No. I’m the senior counselor. But I trust Karp. He wouldn’t leave camp again.”

I made Adam agree, and then I walked with him as far as the porch steps. As he opened the doors, I repressed the urge to follow him through and make a line straight for the director’s table to come clean to Dave and Aaron. Seven summers of meetings and Arrowhead dogma told me that was the only move, that I should think of the camp first and let the directors handle it. Karp had taken things into the realm of risk management and lawyers. I rationalized the Visiting Day episode away as being the fault of his parents. This was different, though. If anything happened to him, if Derek hit him even once, it was as good as a death penalty for Arrowdance. I almost let myself edge through the screen door as it closed, but I knew that I could bring Karp back, low and under the radar. If it even came to that. I needed to talk to Lauren.

The cooks left the back door to the kitchen open to let the heat out, and I slipped between two pallets of paper plates and into the prep area. Both the chefs were professionals, seasonal guys that packed up at the end of every summer and headed up North to fishing camps in Nova Scotia. Their work done, they smoked their cigarettes and looked away as I passed. Just past the dishwashers I saw the serving staff, lined up to accept trays of flour tortillas and ground beef. I didn’t see Lauren, so I waited until she would rotate back from the main room.

After a few minutes of activity – the girls going out one set of swinging doors laden with the Mexican-themed feast and coming through the opposite doors ready for more – the pace slowed, but Lauren still had not appeared. One of the servers noticed me on one of her trips, and when she came back, I recognized her from the party. She was one of the two that were with Lauren in the kitchen. Once the initial serving was finished, she walked by with four empty juice containers, two in each hand. I followed her to the multi-faced spigot, labels for orange and apple and cranberry even.

“Excuse me,” I said, coughing through a cloud of dishwasher steam. “Where’s Lauren?”

“She’s not here right now,” the girl hollered over her shoulder.

“Is she coming back soon?”

She shook her head and tried to sidestep past me. I put myself in her way and she stopped short, sloshing a trickle of juice onto my shoe. She looked as if she was about five seconds from dropping one of the chefs on me.

“Sorry,” I said. “But where’s Lauren?”

“She never came back from her break. Something with her boyfriend.”

“Oh.” That mass of lead was back in my stomach. “Did a tall kid come in here looking for her, buzzed hair, kind of a doofy expression on his face. Carrying a notebook maybe?”

She rolled her eyes. "I know who Seth Karp is."

"Right. So?"

"Really wish I could help you. But no, he wasn't here." She made another move to get past me and slipped by, but I kept to her elbow.

"You're sure?"

She stopped with her back against the swinging door, ready to throw her weight into it.

"Can I go?" She held the four pitchers before my face. "These aren't light."

I thanked her and quickly exited. Once outside I leaned against the back wall and looked into the mess of trees. They were not Arrowdance trees, but the edges of the space that was not our camp. There was a sense of things to make, I told myself, a sum of components that looked completely okay once I could get the proper perspective. The simple facts that I told Adam – this would work itself out because that's how things happened around here – were simply not true. I breathed deeply.

I'll make things right, his text said. If he found that Lauren was not in camp, then he would have to find her. That much seemed clear.

I took in another breath.

11.

Quickly to the bunk, just long enough to grab Fink's keys and to dash a final hope for finding Karp, either sitting on the porch steps or on his head, feet hanging down. The bunk was empty though, the evening shadows already darkening my alcove. I groped blindly under my bed until I found last night's jeans. I pulled them out, the legs sweeping a flock of dust bunnies along for the ride.

I jogged to the counselor parking lot with the keys in my hand, and the jangle of the metal caused Rory to lift her head. She was fully leaning into the trunk of her car, her knees pressed against the rear bumper. I almost missed her – or to be more accurate – I almost got past her – but she called out from across the fire pit.

"What?" I asked, my skidded stop sending a few pebbles into to the tires of the nearby cars. I noticed that I was out of breath then, and Rory's sudden appearance further brought out the sweat.

"Why aren't you in dinner?" She wore a short purple dress and had arranged her hair atop her head, though a loose strand glanced off her bare shoulder. I glanced down at her feet and held my gaze.

"Yeah, I know," she said, and raised one dirty tennis shoe above the ground. "But I had to book it out here before the musical started, and sandals weren't cutting it."

Rory dropped her foot back down and put one hand on the back of her car. She stood half turned from me, and I didn't even think she was aware what the effect of her near profile was doing to me. I coughed and squinted down the road, as if I could see Karp through the evergreens.

"So what are you doing out here, Lee?"

"I left something in Fink's car. From last night. My wallet." I looked back to her. Rory nodded, and I knew that she didn't believe me. I only wondered how long she would wait before cashing in on the lie. I then returned the question. She grunted, and blew a shot of air towards her forehead.

“Come over here and check it out,” she said. “You can help me put it back together.”

To my credit, I thought about Karp for a full second – the probability that he made his way to Lauren’s house, and whether he was currently engaged in a battle for the girl’s affection – before stepping through the stoned-off pit and up to Rory. This time, she watched my feet.

“Don’t you ever wear shoes?” she asked. I drew one foot out of the flip-flop and wiggled the toes, trying to work the ashes out of the cracks. I moved closer to her and rested a forearm on the lid of the trunk, as if I was staring at something like a busted radiator.

“So whatcha got her?” I asked. I really didn’t know what to make of it. Inside the trunk and overturned wicker box spilled green streamers, the kind my mother used as fake grass for Easter. The other former occupants of the box – small, individually wrapped chocolates, a clear rectangle of expensive soap, and an assortment of envelopes perfectly sized for gift cards – littered the far corners of the otherwise clean trunk.

“I’m trying to think of a way to blame this on you. I went out yesterday after lunch and bought all this to give to Sarah tonight after the show, and I thought it would be safe in the seat until then.” As she spoke, her hand found its way to the small of my back. I suppressed a twitch. “And it would have been, but we needed to make room for Fink last night, so into the trunk it went.”

I reached in and righted the box, uncovering a thick, folded piece of construction paper in the process. I recognized Rory’s sharp script on the front side, the lowercase t’s threatening to impale the words above them. She had drawn stick figures under the words “Congrats Little Sis!”, their hair and features still apparent despite the crayon.

“I know that it looks like one of my campers drew it,” she said. “We had art time last night before light’s out.” She blushed and grabbed it when I smiled at her. “I got caught up in the moment.”

“You’re a pretty great sister,” I said, and then deciding to halt the embarrassment, I helped her gather the other little bits. Soon the small box was as it once was, I imagined. I stepped back, the sharp edges of Fink’s keys still in my palm. Rory reached back into the trunk and took the card.

“Here,” she said, holding it out to me. “You should sign it too. I know it’d mean a lot to her.” Her eyes especially reminded me of our first summer, when just the touch of our skin was only the most exciting thing anyone ever imagined. I told her that of course, I would love to sign the card.

“You look great, by the way,” I said, accepting both the card and a pen. I signed my name next to hers, and added a plus sign in the space between them without thinking. I handed it back to Rory closed, hoping she wouldn’t check.

“So what are you doing out here?” She closed the trunk and rested the box atop it.

“I didn’t say?”

Rory began to question me, and then shook her head. Another strand of hair fell, and she stashed it behind her ear. Then, she said, “Sorry, no, I know. It’s not really my business.” When she looked back up, her eyes seemed to glisten with their own internal light. “Really, I’m sorry.” She apologized again.



I began by telling her of the fight I had with Karp, and how I didn't even bother to look at him as I left the bunk. Once I went back and explained about Lauren, and then how no one had seen Karp since lunch, and of the text message, my knees had grown weak and I found myself leaning against Rory's car. Somehow the keys had left my hand and found the pebbled ground.

"So I just need to do this one last thing," I said. "This one is my fault, and I just need to make it right."

I thought at first that Rory put her hand on my shoulder just out of comfort before setting me on my way, but after a few seconds of that her fingers tightened, and her other hand came up under my arm. She tugged twice.

"Get up," she said, and popped the trunk once I had moved. She placed the box back in the trunk before slamming it back shut. "That can wait until tomorrow."

"What are you – ?" I began before she cut me off.

"The Matoaka show's tomorrow night," Rory stated. She already had Fink's keys in her hand. "Closing Night's a bigger deal than Opening Night, anyway."

I opened my mouth again and finished my previous sentence. Rory shouted from across the lot.

"Keep talking Lee," she said. Fink's car beeped as she unlocked the doors. "I'll just beat up this Derek kid on my own." She had the driver's door open.

I darted back through the pit and vaulted a bench, catching my foot on the seat and nearly spilling into the gravel. Rory raised a perfectly formed eyebrow.

"I can do this alone," I said in a desperate attempt to regain some form of composure. "I need to."

Rory shook her head and her smile did not include her eyes.

"I call bullshit on that, Lee," she said. "You don't have to do everything alone."

Rory asked me what my plan was. We were on the road and she managed the driving while I watched the dark green blur fly past us.

"Because you're sure that he's there, or on his way there," she said, looking not only for confirmation, but also for me to lock us into this thing – that yes, we were doing this. "Do we even know that he has a car?"

"I'm not sure of anything." I wished that I could give her a different response, something with the key words confident and resolute. She acted as though I spoke with the same affirmation as Ranger above his tub of ice cream, though. "But if he's there, and he's not just a red smear in the driveway, then I'll throw him in the trunk and you'll get us the hell out of there."

Rory reached out her hand blindly, patting first the armrest, and then where my seat belt attached, before finding my knee. She gave it a good squeeze, her eyes still on the road. We were not yet even to Oakland. Lauren's house was still fifteen minutes away.

"It's going to be okay, Lee," she said. "You're doing the right thing."

I mumbled a thanks, and laid my fingers over hers. I was glad she was with me, and that she didn't ask first. The thing I feared was that she saw when me, it was just as a process that she needed to see through to its conclusion. But, I realized, that was all I had left her to hold.

"This means a lot to me," I said, "that you would come along. I wanted you to know that."

"Of course." The ring on her middle finger pressed into the soft flesh between mine. I realized that this might be the last time that I shared a car with her. She must have known it too, or else why would she have insisted on coming with me?

"I hope you figure out what you want to do with school," I said, and she shot me a startled expression.

"Yeah?"

"You've got the sharpest compass I've ever seen, and it's about done spinning. When you find what you want, you'll know." I drummed a beat on my other leg. "Take it from someone whose compass has no true north."

"You're going to be fine, Lee. Really. I don't know why you have such trouble believing that."

"Well," I said. I geared up. "You've always thought that. I love you for it."

I needed her to hear that, even if it was too late. I could let the rest go unsaid. We would continue to inhabit the same space together for a handful more days, and then take our damage to other parties.

"I never would have pegged Karp for the grand, romantic flame-out type," she finally said. "He has quite a career of dramatic gestures to look forward to."

"I'm just glad we're here to witness it."

"Do you think he loves her?" She hesitated over the word, both hands back on the wheel.

"He probably thinks that he does," I said. "She was the only thing they talked about back in the bunk after the first meal. For like, three nights straight, until he finally talked to her. She's just this species of girl that he can't believe actually exists, she's just so different that everything he's been used to. But he'll forget about her soon enough once he's home." Halfway through I realized what I was saying, and what Rory must have thought I meant by it. A great pressure built behind my eyes. I rubbed my palm into my forehead. "He is only sixteen."

"She's just a camp thing," Rory said.

I couldn't form a response. The dull sound of tires traversing asphalt filled the void. I glanced over at her quickly to see if I could draw her attention, and studied her when she didn't look back. To have her with me in this meant more to me than I could tell her, and that killed me a little bit. We crested the last big hill before Oakland, and my stomach did the customary zero gravity drop as we made our way into the small town. Rory quickly decelerated to avoid a speed trap just past the first church.

"There was this thing that happened the first night I fell asleep in your bed," I said. "I don't think I ever told you this." Rory sighed, something long and pained. Her face flashed in the reflected sunlight from the rear-view, the last grasp of day before it left the town. When she reached over to angle the mirror away, a tear fell to her dress. The light purple fabric became dark, and I almost lost my resolve to make this a moment, something that mattered.

"You were drifting in and out," I continued. That first night involved nothing more than me joining her under the covers still in my t-shirt and shorts, and we talked quietly as twelve private parties roared in the alcoves around us. The walls didn't reach the ceiling, and abstract shadows played across our ceiling. "I felt my heartbeat in my

throat, just being that close to you, I don't know how you didn't hear it. How you could sleep, I don't get it."

"It was three in the morning," she said, her voice barely a whisper over the drone of the engine.

"You were talking in your sleep. I remember the way your shoulder felt under my fingers, and your leg kind of curled over mine, and you were having this little conversation."

"I don't remember, Lee."

The car slowed. Up ahead the red lights of a railroad crossing flashed, the striped arm already descending. We pulled up a few feet behind it. From around a corner to our left came the shrill tone of the train whistle.

"I know," I said. But you were talking and I thought it was to me, and you told me that you thought you loved me. And I wanted to hear it again so I asked who you were talking to, but you just hugged me tighter. I didn't sleep that night. I just kept telling myself that I had better not screw this up."

"That's so stupid, Lee." Rory smacked the shift column with her palm, putting car into neutral. "And I'm so tired of hearing the same sort of thing from you. How many times can you ask me what I see in you, or that how lucky you are that I decided to grace you with my presence?"

Her anger startled me, as did the tears that rimmed her eyes. She regained control quickly, rubbing her face with the back of one hand while rolling down the window with the other. I didn't know what to say, so I apologized.

"Don't do that, either. Please," she said, the sudden storm gone. "I've had about enough of being awful to you. I'm sorry."

"You don't have anything to be sorry about." I felt a low rumble in my chest as the train approached. I looked over my shoulder at the line of cars behind us, and the heads within them as they dully stared back at me. When Rory next spoke, I had to lean in close to her.

"I did choose you, Lee," she said. She put the window back up, but I did not give back the space. "Not that I had to make a choice. A relationship was the last thing I thought I wanted."

"So what was it?"

"We were on the docks and I was trying to make you dive." Rory made a sound that was someplace between a laugh and a wet snuffle. "I thought that you were just pretending to be so bad at it to get me to pay attention, until you kept choking on the water. And then when you asked me out, you were so – I still don't have the words for it. It was all I could do to keep from jumping in after you. I'd already seen my share of cocky that summer, but not you. You were so confident and cool, even with this line of snot streaming from your nose. That's who you are Lee. And I can't for the life of me understand why you think it all comes from a place like that." She nodded past the back of the car, back up the hill and all the way to Arrowdance.

The train kept coming around the bend, car after car stacked two high with giant freight containers, each uniquely tagged with graffiti. I thought of Maggie's train, the one that led her to the pot of gold. She followed a hunch, took a risk. I knew with a frightening amount of certainty I could not do the same.

The last car of the train chugged past and we passed through the crossing. Rory began asking for directions. We crossed the line from Oakland to Waterville, the only mark of distinction being a roadside barbeque stand. Soon enough we neared Lauren's neighborhood, and I felt a tightness growing in my chest.

"You can be so great, Lee," Rory said as well slowly rolled through the empty side streets. "I want more than anything to be the one that helps you see that. Here's what I thought this summer, even after I promised myself over the winter that I wouldn't let us start back up; whatever you're afraid of back home, I wanted to help you through it. And if you don't think that you have a home, then I would say screw it. What are you still doing there? Let's piss off my parents and both of us transfer someplace warm. I think I'd still take that, if I knew you meant it when you said you wanted to be with me. I still see that in you, Lee. You say you want it. For all the times I've said otherwise the past two days, I'm still right here. This is real life."

Lauren's house was just up ahead, around a left turn and then up the dirt drive. I had Rory idle the car to a near crawl. Her face spoke of sheer exhaustion, and her mouth hung slack, bereft of any other way to express herself. We came to a stop just short of the driveway and she turned to me, waiting for me to make the final call.

"I'm the camp thing, Rory. I'm the one that doesn't exist out of this place. Not you," I said. "You never were, and that you think so – it kills me that I made you think that. I've never had anyone like you in my life. When I'm up here with you, I'm not afraid of going back. You give me a safe place, and as long as it's only for one more year, I feel okay. I see Ranger, and there's nothing I'm more afraid of being. But I can't let you be my lifeline out. You've got a real life."

I saw it all before me, the space beyond Rory's shoulder blurry and indistinct. Next summer she would intern or find a job back home. I would share a bunk with Fink and his gang of young clones, and whenever I'd join a new table in the dining hall, someone would ask about the time I was a chief, and what it was like. Or maybe I would finally get that room in the Lodge, with a door I could at the end of the summer, so that I wouldn't have to cart as much up the next year.

"You're never going to know," she said. She turned the key and the car shuddered. The keys fell into my lap. "You're going to miss it all, Lee. You've had more pain than is right for anyone, and I almost want to say that that's a good enough excuse to hide up here. But you can't wait for a break that's never going to happen."

After that, there was nothing left to say. We left the car under an elm tree and started for the house. Rory grabbed my hand and let me lead her over potholes and thick wheel ruts.

Nothing seemed strange about the house as we approached it: no tire tracks in the lawn caused by Karp spinning out in retreat, and the porch looked to be intact, as if an enraged Derek did not flip out and attempt to impale my camper with an Adirondack chair. Only a few lights were on upstairs, and the living room flickered and glowed from a television. Rory released my hand as I reached out for the doorbell.

"Welp," I said, and pressed the glowing button.

I could not see much through the old glass of the door and the veil behind it, but from the living room came the sound of a retracting recliner, and then heavy footsteps on

wood. I brazed myself as a large form moved into view. The hall light blinked on, and the door unlocked.

It was an older man who opened the door. He was tall and thin, and wore the rumpled slacks and white shirt of a man just home from work, his tie loosened a few inches off his neck. He looked recently shaved, and his hair was nicely parted but a bit long at the ends, curling out onto his neck. He looked tired, but not yet annoyed at the evening's interruption. I wondered if we were the first strangers to come to his door that night, and noticed a pair of suitcases at the foot of the stairs. He smiled and said hello.

"Hello," I said, and then stopped. I didn't know Lauren's last name. I began again. "Hi, we're wondering if Lauren is around."

"Maybe," he said. He looked over to Rory and then back at me, and I got the impression of him going quickly through his book of faces, all those of friends of his daughter that he may have once noticed during the few hours he and his daughters inhabited the same space. "I think she might still be upstairs. I'm sorry, I must have dozed off for a bit." He widened his eyes, briefly fixating on some spot just beyond my shoulder, and then stepped aside. "Come on in – I'm sorry to keep you standing out there. Are you friends of Lauren?"

"We work with her at Arrowdance," I said, stepping just past the threshold. Rory scooted right behind me, and bumped into my back when I stopped short. "We're don't want to bother you too long. We just need to ask her something."

Her dad nodded and stood with one hand hidden behind his back. The volume of the television in the other room was lowered but not muted, and I heard the scores of the local sports report.

"Can you believe they went and traded Nomar?" he asked, his voice incredulous. "I was just in Chicago, you know?" He laughed. "If only I had done something."

"You're kidding me," Rory said. She leaned past me, as if to be the first to intercept the next sound wave.

"For a prospect and a couple of has-beens." He shook his head. "Those morons don't have a fucking clue." His face turned red and he quickly apologized for his language, but Rory repeated his judgment. He laughed again, and waved us further inside to the living room.

"Have a seat," he said. Someone had cleaned the place up since the party. The quilts along the backs of the couches had been straightened, and the floor looked freshly polished, bereft of even the rings left by sweating beer cans. Rory and I sat elbow to elbow on the smaller couch, me with a stack of newspapers under my elbow.

"Sorry about the mess," the man said, clearing the armrest for me. "I've been gone for a week, and one daughter just gets back from Spain and she's already back to work, and the other –." He trailed off and looked to the ceiling. "Well, you must know Lauren."

As if on cue, we heard a few thumps from the second floor, around where I knew her room to be. Her father shrugged and put one hand at the start of the banister.

"You two wait here just a second," he said, tossing the remote control to me. "I'll see if I can't drag my daughter on down here."

"Okay," I said to his ankles before they disappeared. For her part, Rory seemed completely engrossed in the drama unfolding on the screen, the rolling bar at the bottom spilling the details of a four-team trade.

“We’re so fucked,” she said nearly under her breath.

“Thanks for the confidence,” I responded, although I knew that for the moment her mind was safely within the confines of Fenway Park. Still, she looked about to respond when we heard a new set of feet on the stairs, pattering down with the sounds of bare toes on wood. We looked up to see Lauren standing on the first step, her eyes wide.

“Hey?” she said. Her hair was wet and left a dark stripe on the shoulder of her t-shirt. Her father’s shadow stretched down the length of the staircase, and Lauren cast a look his way before stepping into the hall. She jerked her head and disappeared further into the house. We followed her into the darkened dining room and then the kitchen, the only light coming from a pair of florescent bulbs over the stove.

“What,” she said, and carried the anticipation of the next word over to the back door, which she held open, “are you two doing here?” She stepped gingerly with her bare feet down the rough, unpainted steps.

It was already a marked degree darker than when we first arrived. My eyes adjusted quickly after a few blinks. The yard went back and back, maybe a half mile of shadowed grass and clustered trees. Then a hill lifted the stretch upward, to where the eastern sky was a deep, inky blue.

“Where’s Karp?” I asked.

“How the hell should I know?” Lauren responded. Her neck tensed, as if repressing a shiver. She worked her calves in a stationary march into grass, as if the dampness caused pain.

“I thought he would be here,” I said with a confidence that was quickly battered by Lauren’s confused look. Off to my side, Rory rubbed a knuckle around one of her eyes.

“Well no, he’s not here. Sorry,” Lauren said. “Should he be?”

“If he wanted to give you the playbook back, he would be,” I said. The first of the night’s fireflies flashed between us, and I was again reminded of the hour. Dinner at Arrowdance had to be nearly over, if it wasn’t already. The curtain might have already been raised, I thought.

“Playbook?” Lauren’s tone dropped, and for a second I flashed Maggie’s face upon hers. “Derek has it. He’s already on his way back to Durham with it.” She must have seen my face. “Why? What’s wrong with Seth?”

“So you haven’t seen him tonight?”

“Last time I saw him, it was right after lunch. That’s when he gave it to me.”

“And that’s the last time you saw him,” Rory asked as she took a half-step in front of me. Whatever state of compassion Lauren had temporarily found, it was dust once she took notice of Rory. She squared off her shoulders and stilled her feet, as if accepting some unspoken challenge.

“That’s what I said, right? I see him after lunch like someone’s shot his puppy, and we go out back to talk. And I haven’t seen him after that.” She raised an eyebrow. “What, you guys lose him again?”

“Hey, listen bitch,” Rory said, claiming the other half-step. She was giving up a good four inches to Lauren, who huffed and rolled her eyes. “This wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for you. You led that boy around all summer.”

“Right, blame the townie,” Lauren responded, and the back of my shoulders came into contact with her as I stepped between them. Rory strained past me, and I felt

Lauren's hot breath before I back Rory off. "You people think you can just walk in and take what you want," she said.

"Knock it off," I said, measuring my voice to avoid attracting her father. I looked at them in turn. "Both of you. This isn't helping."

"Whatever it is," Lauren said, "it's not my fault. Seth knew what this was from the start."

"Get over yourself," Rory said. "Karp's a sixteen year old boy at summer camp. The hell he knows anything."

"Quiet," I said again. I went to put a hand on Rory's shoulder, just to show that I appreciated her support, but she shrugged it off and brushed past me. I called her name, and she said that she was going to wait in the car.

"I kind of like her," Lauren said once Rory went around the side of the house. She crossed her arms and looked down into the grass. "Can't really see why you left my sister hanging, though."

"Karp didn't say anything else to you," I asked. "You really don't know anything else?"

"No Lee, I don't," she said, but there was no exasperation in her voice this time. "He told me what you said. That really sucked."

"Not one of my better moments." I tried to meet her eyes and failed. The crickets started up out in the woods. I heard a car door slam.

"He talks about you all the time, you know. Lee said this, Lee did that. It was actually pretty cute." Lauren looked away, tracing a memory through the air. "Even before this summer, his home was pretty rough. You really mean a lot to him."

I thanked her, the words half caught in my throat. Lauren's shoulders sagged and she came in quick with a soft jab to my chest.

"Hey, what the fuck's Seth going to do, run away?" she said. "You guys are the only family he's got. He belongs there."

"He told you all that?"

"Never had to, Lee. He needs that place, right? It's the only place he still feels safe."

I nodded, the kernel of an idea starting to form from the impression of Lauren's words. I thanked her, and apologized for everything, but she shook it off.

"You're going to find him, no worries," Lauren said. She smiled and gave me a tight hug, her fists locking together behind my back.

"What's that for?" I said once she released me. She giggled and vaulted up the back steps.

"So I can tell Maggie that I did that."

She closed the door and shut off the back light, leaving me to pick my way slowly to the side of the house, weary of mole holes and loose rocks. Once I put the front door to my back I was able to pick up the pace, until I was in a jog towards the street. Rory started the car once I stepped onto the paved surface. I shielded my face from the headlights and took the passenger seat. Before I could even say anything, she managed cut me off.

"Lee, I'm sorry about back there, that was totally out of line," she said in a rush. Her eyes picked up the light from the dashboard, and little orange flecks glittered as she blinked. "I know I wasn't helping."

“It’s okay,” I said, and grabbed her hands before she could continue. They were warm despite the late summer chill, and she squeezed my fingers. I took her hands and put them on the steering wheel. “But drive us back to camp now. I know where Karp is.”

## 12. The Island

It was near full dark by the time we made it down to the lake. Most everyone was still up in the theater, but we still played it safe and avoided passing by the office. With a flashlight Rory found in Fink’s car, we skirted through the woods, into the forbidden area behind the bunks. We stepped over exposed pipes and held our hands before our faces to ward off any wayward branches. The trail kicked us out between Bunk Fourteen and Ranger’s cabin, the small boat dock only a few feet away. With only one more step to go, I hesitated.

“I need to leave a note,” I said once I realized that I had not followed the plan I laid out for Adam. He needed to believe that I had things under control.

By the time I came back out, Rory already had a grip on one of the bigger canoes, digging her feet into the soft ground as she pulled. The canoe scrapped against the wooden rack. I marveled at her for another second. Once I told her of my suspicions, that I might know where Karp was, I more than half expected her to tell me that that was it, that she agreed with Adam and we should tell the owners. I still wasn’t convinced that wasn’t the correct path, and if she had only pushed me in that direction, then it would be over. She did not, though, and only told me to wait outside her cabin while she changed into something warmer, and to grab one thing.

“Some chips,” she said, tossing a small bag of Doritos at my chest. “Kid’s probably starving.” Now, she had the canoe half off the rack before I could even think to help. She stood aside as I lifted it up and over the guard rail. After pulling an extra life-vest and oar from the rack, I quietly slid the craft off the dock. The water billowed at the canoe’s prow as it entered the lake, and I pulled it parallel to the dock for Rory. She held my shoulder for balance as she stepped in.

I pushed us away with my oar. The lake was utterly still. Even the mosquitoes and their larger friends, the long-legged insects that skipped along the shimmering surface of the lake, seemed to have taken the night off. After only a minute of paddling, we were well past the range of the single light atop the boathouse. The horizon to the west was outlined in a deep crimson, only the lowest of clouds still visible in their willowy grayness. To our left and right, hundreds of yards on either sides, the reflections of porch lights glistened like ghost lanterns. Ahead of us, our destination was visible only as a black patch, an absence of existence set apart from the opposite shore, miles away.

“It’s getting cold,” I said, once I decided that we were far enough away from shore. We alternated sides with our paddles. The back of Rory’s head was just a faint outline, her white sweatshirt a shape I could only really see when I put it into the corner of my vision.

“Summer’s almost done,” she replied softly, as if afraid her voice would leave ripples in the water with which to track us. She held the flashlight between her knees, ready to flash and wave it in case a motorboat came our way. We were breaking about



seventeen different rule of the Arrowdance waterfront, but she never mentioned any of that.

"I noticed you stopped telling me that I didn't have to do this," she said.

"I know."

When I stared ahead I lost the sensation of movement completely. The island looked no closer than it did five minutes ago, and I couldn't shake the feeling that new water was forming just beyond our sight, an endless runway of glassy lake. Rory exhaled loudly with exertion, and her paddling became more rapid. We began to veer in one direction, and I increased my speed to compensate.

"I don't even know what to say to him," I said. The work of the oars felt good; whatever fatigue I had accumulated over the past few days seemed to transmit through the wood in my hands to the lake itself. It radiated out behind us, diminishing in our wake. "I am angry with him – I can't even say that a large part of me is angry, it's really the whole part of me. Like, how could he be so irresponsible? I want to tell him that by all reasonable standards, he's burned his last chance. And I'm afraid that I actually will say all that."

"You'll do the right thing."

"Whatever that is."

I let myself believe what she said, or at the least, I opened myself to the chance that she was right. I didn't want to see Karp suffer, and if it were possible, I hoped that we could all move on from this day as if nothing happened. I looked then at Rory, or rather her shoulders beneath the hooded sweatshirt. I could not ignore everything from that day, of course. Rory tilted her head, ready to throw back a response, but instead she just stopped rowing and balanced the oar across her knees.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I want to tell you that I'm sorry about last night," she said. "About me wishing that you weren't chief. You are going to be great at it, you really are. I don't want you to think that I was wishing that you weren't."

"I never thought that, Rory." I wished I could see her face. Even in the darkness, I wanted to know that I was pointed in the same direction as her eyes and cheeks and mouth.

"It's not fair for me to make that call for you," she continued. "As long as this camp is giving you what you think you're missing, then I really don't have any right to disagree. I can't imagine how you must feel, and I shouldn't act like I know what's best for you."

Somewhere, maybe a mile away across the open water, a loon whistled its fluted call and I shivered involuntarily. I knew our position. The shore to our left soon fell back as we passed the entrance to our cove. I looked up and saw the thousands of stars, no artificial light to pollute the dome above us. Suddenly I was up with them, an endless infinity in every direction I looked. Back home we had the same stars, this of course was something that I knew, and my face picked up a new chill when thought of all I had given up through my seven summers, opportunities that I never took. I stared until I became dizzy and had to close my eyes, the steady sound of my oar entered the water bringing me back down.

"I actually am a coward, is the thing," I said. "People who were once my friends back home, they have jobs now. Houses even, sometimes wives. I go back there and I

feel old. Worthless, and of course that's not the case and I'm just feeling sorry for myself, but it's just easier to wait it out and pack my bags every June for here, where I have a place. Even then, as I'm starting to feel like this old videotape that's been on pause too long, and sooner or later the edges will fray and I'll lose the image. And if someday I'm sharing a cabin with Ranger, that won't be so much of a surprise." The line where the stars met the pointed darkness rose higher now before us, the treetops of the island visible against the night field.

"You should do something, then. Camp didn't do anything to them," Rory said. "They all made choices."

How good was I at making choices, I wanted to ask her. She would know, of all those who ever were close to me, how adept I was at putting off the obvious, of finding easier avenues.

"I didn't lose you this summer," I said. "It happened before we even saw each other again. I know I can make choices. When I started to not answer your phone calls, or I'd make an excuse to cut our talks short. That was me being the coward. You were something real and great and right there for me, and I couldn't have that. Because you wanted in, and I saw this," I waved my hands to encompass all around us, though of course she couldn't see, "as all I could allow myself to want."

Rory's silence at that point said enough to me. I was only telling her things she already said in one way or another, except she probably thought she knew them days or weeks before I did. That was the only way in which she was wrong. I always knew. She continued to row the rest of the way, an occasional pop from her shoulder joint the only accompaniment to our work. Soon we were close enough to the island to be able to see the last traces of daylight in the sky through the pine branches. Rory held out the flashlight and I guided us through the last few rocks that lay between us and the small dock that floated just off the shore. I tied our canoe to one of the corner posts, the bottom of which was secured to a sunken barrel on the lake floor. Rory climbed onto the dock and surveyed the tree line with the flashlight.

"Check it out," she said, illuminating the smaller canoe that was half-run ashore. "I don't even want to know how the waterfront staff missed one of their boats."

Rory hopped along the two stepping-stones to the solid ground, and turned to light my path over. A few more steps took us from the shore into the island proper. Under daylight, I would have been able to see through the network of trees and rocks to the other side, the gray lake always visible. Now though, I was unsure. I stared into the darkness, trying to figure out where was the path that led to the clearing at the island's center. The thought of walking blindly into a mouthful of spider webs sent another shiver through my body. I yelled out Karp's name. If he in fact he was on the island, he would have heard my voice.

At first, the only response was a momentary silence from the resident crickets, but as I took a breath for another shout, there came a light from within the island, only thirty or so yards away. It flickered orange and white, and the trees around it formed almost a pocket in the otherwise black night. I heard a sudden intake of breath, but I couldn't quite tell if it came from Rory or myself.

"Let's hope no one else notices that," I said.

I led the way through the trees, keeping the light as a reference before me. Soon our feet found one of the numerous trails that criss-crossed the island, all leading out

from the central clearing to a different swimming or fishing rock. The ground was thick with pine needles, the perfect foundation for a tent and sleeping bag. It cushioned our steps as we approached, the sound of a young, hungry fire crackling growing drawing us nearer. We rounded a corner, my shoulder scraping a protruding branch, and there was Karp.

He looked up as we entered the campsite. A ring of large rocks formed a rough circle around the clearing, with a small fire pit in the center. Karp sat on one of the rocks, his legs propped up on the next boulder. On the ground below him were a small pile of twig and a bottle of lighter fluid.

"Hey," he said. His face showed a mixture of both worry and relief. The former I understood, and I assumed that the later came from the fact that it was the two of us that stumbled from the darkness. Rory stepped around me and whipped the bag of chips towards his chest.

"Thought you might want these," she said. Karp caught them by instinct, but he kept his eyes on me as I slowly circled around the fire. I needed the few seconds the maneuver bought me, as I had not one idea of what to say to him. Only a small part of me still held the anger from earlier in the day, but any thought I had of Karp not knowing the gravity of the situation disappeared as I came to rest two rocks over from him. He looked very small as I began to sit, twisting a bit to find comfort against the hard folds of the boulder. The light from the flames played across his face, and only his eyes seemed to stay free of shadows. He looked away.

"Where'd you learn to build a fire?" Rory asked. It was a fair question. Despite its inherent nature, Arrowdance was not exactly known for teaching its campers to rough it.

"I found some matches and this other stuff in the emergency kit," he said, nudging the lighter fluid with his foot. "I figured it couldn't be that hard." Maybe Karp thought that I wasn't going to swing for the fences on him, so he brought his head back around. Rory moved some fallen leaves aside and sat cross-legged on the ground, her back to the fire.

"I'm going to need the name of the person that gave you that boat, Karp," she said.

"It's not from camp," he said, shaking his head. "One of Lauren's friends lives around the other cove. I borrowed it." Karp opened his mouth to laugh, but only a dry wheeze escaped. He fell silent. Rory looked at me, as if willing me to say something finally, one way or another. I sighed.

"What the hell, Karp?"

"I know." His voice was flat and his words short, resigned to whatever fate I held in store for him. He was already defeated, I thought.

"Really though?" I couldn't help asking. "Do you have any idea what you put us all through? The bunk still doesn't have any clue where you are. You had the two of us going all the way to Lauren's house looking for you."

"I'm sorry."

I sighed through the side of my mouth. "I was only guessing that you were out here. What if you weren't, or what if you decided to do something really stupid?"

"I'm sorry, Lee," he said, and I noticed that his words were clipped only as a means to keep some composure. He looked away from my scrutiny. "I just wanted to

come out here for a few hours, and then I'd row back in when everyone went up for dinner. That's all I wanted to do." Karp's voice caught and he swore. "And I've screwed everything up."

"No you didn't, Seth," Rory said. "At most, you've messed up our evening, and took a few years off Lee's life. He wasn't using those anyways."

"Yeah Karp, really," I said, though I was distracted by Rory's joke. "I'm not mad – at least not anymore – and no one's told the owners. You get a free pass on this, somehow."

Karp shook his head. The fire was beginning to die down, having nearly completed the meager meal of twigs. Every few seconds another bit of sap would boil and explode, and a few sparks rode the furnace air up into the canopy.

"I can't go back," he said. "Not after this."

"You're not going to make it out here long with just a bag of chips," I said, though I knew what he meant. Karp continued to shake his head as I spoke, and I felt worse for trying to make him laugh.

"No, I can't go back to camp," he said, almost pleading with me. "It's better if you take me to the owners and let them ship me back home."

"Karp, that's not going to happen."

"But you were right about me. What you said back in the bunk." He was crying now – no sobs, but he hid his face in his sleeve when he talked. "I didn't want to give the playbook back. I didn't care what happened to Derek, not right then. I was worthless, and I don't even have anyplace to be. I have to choose who I want to come pick me up, my mom or my dad, and that's who I get to start to the school year with. I might as well just lose everything. I need to go."

I let him cry. Rory stood and began to go to him, but I raised my hand and she stopped. Karp continued, a few croaking bellows erupting from deep in his chest before he could cover his mouth. I watched. I began by trying to imagine what his parents must have said to him, which one he spoke to first last night. Did he know that it was coming, or did he dream that the world would go into stasis while he was at Arrowdance, nothing moving, only waiting for his return. Maybe he hoped that in just a handful of days, when his parents picked him up to take him home, it would have been like a long rest for a fevered body – all sickness and darkness would be gone. To be honest though, I didn't know what Karp hoped. I only knew that he was a sixteen year old boy whose real life was in shambles, and thought that his only safe place was lost to him. That I understood. After a few minutes he began to dry up. The fire was almost dead, only a red glow deep within the ashes, just enough to highlight our features like a dim taillight on a dirt road. I waited for the silence to unnerve him. He looked up.

"You can go home now," I said. "You'll be back there in a few days anyway, so maybe it doesn't even make a difference. But it would really just be running, wouldn't it? I don't know enough about what's going on with your parents to really say anything helpful, and that's my fault, Karp. You're part of a family here, and I wasn't playing my part. How many times did you try to tell me about the playbook?"

"I don't know. Twice."

"And I'm ashamed of that, Karp. I came to camp six years ago with nothing; I mean, I was barely holding on. And what I found here, all the people that surrounded me, they gave me something to hold onto. I took and took from it, and it was always

there for with more. My only problem was I couldn't get enough, that Arrowdance became the real world for me. But you're not going to have that problem, I don't think."

"I just wanted things to go back to how they were. But they won't," Karp said. I recognized the tone, and the sentiment even more.

"It took me the longest time to realize that I couldn't have that, and it cost me a lot," I said. "So you're already way ahead of me." I looked at Rory as she came to stand at my shoulder. Karp's attention wandered, and I kicked a stick towards his feet.

"So you can go home now. You probably are stronger than me, so maybe it's for the best," I said. "But I'm going to be selfish and say that if you do that, you ruin my summer." Karp responded with a sullen shrug, and Rory threw me puzzled look. "I'm going to be chief in three days, and that's something I've wanted since my first summer. Did you know that they had us pick the teams out of a hat, me and Ian?" Karp looked up, his curiosity winning out. "It's an actual hat, probably the same one these last sixty years. Ian won the coin toss, so he got to pick first. And I'm watching him reach his hand in, and I think that he can have the stacked team, even the best Gray team ever, but I just want to see four names on my roster."

"I always thought you actually got to pick teams," Karp said. His voice sounded torn, naked.

"The point is," I said, "I'm going to be standing on a volley-ball stand, half-covered in body paint, so when I call your name last, I kind of expected you to be there."

"I'm on your team?" He smirked in half-belief, wary of any desperate tricks on my part to win him back over.

"Sure you're on my team," I said. "Just go easy on Ack. He's not going to like having his name called before yours."

"You got us both?"

I smirked. "Magical."

Rory groaned. Karp slid down from the rock, and I stood with him. We stamped out the last of the fire while Rory readied the flashlight. Once back at the dock, the three of us gingerly boarded our canoe, with the promise that we'd return Karp's tomorrow. Rory relinquished her oar and sat with her back against my knees. We pushed off, and soon rounded the corner with a clear line back to camp.

It took me a few minutes to realize what I saw on the distant shore. Rory noticed it shortly after me, and her back straightened. Karp was oblivious for a few moments longer. When he finally saw what waited for us, his oar went slack and we drifted slowly to the side.

"Crap," he said.

The fire, I thought. I had hoped that Karp's improvised camp fire would have gone unnoticed, or that the rocks would shield the light from the Arrowdance waterfront. But on a moonless night, I should have known better. The musical would have ended shortly after Rory and I landed on the island, I guessed. Sixteen of the camp's twenty-five cabins were either on the water or on the hill. More than half of the campers would have noticed the glow coming from the island, and the word must have spread quickly, especially with the ever-present promise of a sudden Color War break. All the factors came together in a perfect powder keg.

It must have been all the directors could have done to keep the hundred of campers behind the waterfront fence and off of the docks. Dozens of flashlight beams

scanned out, hopeful for any sight of a waterlogged chief or two. At that hour, with a otherwise perfectly calm lake, the sound travelled like light.

“Are they yelling what I think they’re yelling?” Karp asked. I nodded along to the cadence, counting off the 1-2-3-4 of the first verse, and the 5-6-7-8 of the second.

“This is not as bad as it could be,” I said. We resumed paddling, and with Karp’s strength and the natural current, we were soon within the scope of the miniature search lights. The first camper to see us shouted a triumphant call, and soon a virtual starfield assaulted our eyes.

“Color War!” someone shouted, and soon those two words were all we could hear.

“It gets worse,” Rory said, patting Karp on the shoulder. “Wait until you hear what the Sox got for Nomar.”

The two owners were the first to meet us as we rowed back to the boat dock. Once the amassed crowd of campers realized that the canoe did not hold a single headdressed figure, the chanting died and their spirit became less frenzied. A natural charge still coursed through them though, as they were outside in the dark and they had just missed their lights out. While the other directors did their best to disperse the audience, Dave reached out on his hands and knees to pull the canoe in. He didn’t say anything just then and neither did Aaron, except to tell Karp to head back to the bunk. I think they were just as confused as the rest of them, probably having just followed the flow of campers down the hill once word of the strange happenings on the island spread. I told them that Rory had nothing to do with this, and that I would explain everything to them. Dave looked at me without blinking for the longest time, and when he finally did, he shook his head in short lateral lines – as if he had just forced himself into action. He said that it would probably be best if I made my way up to the office, then.

### 13. Ghost

So there I sat. Through the thin door behind Dave’s desk, I heard one half of a conversation in the adjacent office. Aaron was speaking on the phone, his voice quickly falling into apologetic tones. The inter-office door was closed to me, as was the door to the main room. Dave had followed me in after asking me to take a seat, but he stayed only long enough to draw the blinds. He then left me to sit on his old couch and wait. So I did. Dave’s office was even less decorated than his brother’s. The clock on the wall read a few minutes past eleven. I winced when I realized how poorly I had misjudged the time. Among other things, I noted. Not for the first time, I looked to the window, only to be rebuffed by the curtain. On a normal night, there would be nothing to see outside, maybe not even the road down the hill or the even the bushes immediately outside, not if the office lights were on. Tonight though, I imagined a steady stream of curious counselors lingering on their way to the fire or some other spot. I wondered where Rory was, and hoped that she was safe in her cabin. Aaron and Dave didn’t seem to take interest in her, not in their seeming daze, but now that the situation was becoming a more tangible beast, that could change.

Aside from the ever-present stacks of official forms and accounting papers, the only item of note was a simple maroon-painted rock, on the floor and almost hidden under the desk. It was the kind that you often stumbled upon while walking barefoot in

the lake, the shallow sludge working through your toes. I leaned forward and stretched my hand towards it without thinking, my back straining and knees burning as I reached. The rock was no bigger than my palm, perfectly flat on the bottom. The paint was worn off and cracked along the natural lines, but the white lettering was still visible on its broad face. Dave's name was written in what could have been white nail-polish, as well as the date almost fifteen years ago to the day. I turned the rock over in my hand, letting it work through my fingers. How long must it have waited under the inches and feet of water until it was finally kicked over by a wayward toe, then grasped and claimed by child's hand?

The door at my shoulder creaked upon, its bottom edge scraping roughly against the carpet. Dave entered from the main office and pushed the door back shut. He took a step and a half towards Aaron's door, reached out towards the door knob and then retraced his hand. For another brief second he stood with his back to me. When he turned, he settled on awkwardly sitting on the corner of his desk.

"Aaron's just finishing up talking to Karp's parents," he said. He worked his thumbs along the seam of his pockets. "We're just trying to get an idea of what all happened."

"About how mad are they?" I stopped working the rock when I noticed Dave's stare.

"I'm not sure," he sighed. "We made a point to lay some of this at their feet too, at least for the thing two nights ago." Dave looked so far removed from the young counselor I first knew, the one who had taken me under his guidance. I felt a pang of guilt at what I had brought to their door.

"I do understand you not telling us about that, Lee," he said. "I probably would have done the same too. I can still remember what it's like, how you want to look out for them."

"I thought he deserved a chance. And another one. I know the spot I've put you in." I had already apologized once, and I didn't want to sound too pleading. I really had no room to argue with anything they decided when it came to my fate.

I could think of nothing to say, so I only nodded and looked towards his feet. Presently came the sound of a creaking chair from the next room, followed by a few muffled steps and the opening of the second door. Aaron stepped into the office, still wearing his slacks and dress shirt. Dave shifted to the far corner of the desk, allowing his brother the driver's seat. I steeled myself, and then laughed.

"What's funny?" Aaron asked. He did not sound angry, only exhausted.

I apologized. "I just got a sense of déjà vu. From yesterday, when you brought me in here. I was convinced that you knew about Karp then." I laughed again. It seemed so long ago, when all I could think about was securing my spot as chief, and smoothing things over with Rory. Now that I was convinced that both of those were less than possible, I felt strangely relieved. I couldn't explain it.

"So what's the story?" Dave asked. I looked up, ready to respond, until I figured out that he was talking to Aaron.

"I only talked to the mother," he said. "I think she more in shock than anything else. She kept saying that her son said that it was okay to drop him off at that party, I don't know how much else got through to her. I said we can call back in the morning, talk about what to do with Karp."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She's going to let him stay, though she has every right not to," Aaron said, turning his attention to me. I was not nearly as close to him as I was Dave, and he didn't bother in masking his irritation. "She doesn't have much reason to trust in our ability to keep Karp out of trouble. I can't blame her."

"But you can't send him home. I promised him that wouldn't happen."

"Lee, you can't exactly make those kind of promises."

"No, I understand," I said, leaning forward. I wanted to stand but then that would force them to stand as well, and the room was too small for three standing men. So I sat, my elbows on my knee and one hand gesturing. "I've blown it, but not Karp. He needs this place a lot more than I do. You guys know that, right?"

The two brothers shared a look, as if sharing that special kind of mental link between twins. Dave looked away first, his jaw set firmly to one side. Aaron addressed me.

"Well, like I said, I don't think it's going to come to that for Karp. You'll just have to keep your eye on him these next couple days before the war."

I nearly stood again. "What do you mean?"

"The war will take care of everything," Aaron said, surprised that he would have to explain such a thing to me. "He'll get wrapped up in that, and you're his chief, right? Karp will do anything to keep from letting you down again."

I didn't understand the meaning behind his words, like I had missed some vital part of the conversation. Aaron was already back up on his feet, busy evening out a stack of papers his movement disturbed. Dave watched me silently.

"You're going to fire me, right?" I asked. Aaron turned quickly. "Don't you have to fire me for this?"

"Do you want us to?" Aaron raised an eyebrow. Dave cut off my response.

"We talked about it, but decided not to. You're one of us, Lee." He seemed embarrassed that I would even make him point it out. I shook my head.

"I don't know," I said.

"What do you mean?" Aaron asked, sitting back down.

I repeated myself. It didn't seem right. Everything I did that night, and before on the night of the party, I did with the knowledge that there would be no easy out for me, that I was risking everything for my camper. It justified my action, gave me at least that much logic to whatever happened.

Dave spoke. He said, "The alternative is that you spend the night in the infirmary, and when everyone goes up to breakfast, we'll escort you down to your bunk and let you clear out your things. You know how that goes."

"That's what you should do," I said, the words on automatic fire.

"You want us to fire you?"

"I think you need to." The palms grew warm and my bowels twitched, but I could not stop myself from speaking. The possibility of an exit sparked in my mind, even as I suspected it was only the false harbor of a bug-zapping light.

"Lee, think about this for a second," Dave said. "You're going to be chief in three days. Almost two days now. Why would you away throw something that you want so badly? We don't want to fire you. Wasn't that clear?"

"I don't need it." I said it so quietly that they leaned in, so I said it again.



“You don’t need it?” one of them asked. It wasn’t clear who.

What could I say to them? That if they let this stand, any motivation that I could ever have to end my time at Arrowdance would disappear? I would never again have to worry about distinguishing between those things that are camp, and those that are real. The fact that I was too afraid to let someone who loved me into my flawed world – no family, no place, a familiar despair – just this: perfectly negated. I could see myself sharing a table in the Dining Hall with the Silvermans in twenty years, our stomachs a bit rounder and our hair thinner, laughing at the one time so many summers ago, when a visiting boxer knocked me out in front of the entire camp. It was Ranger’s words that came back to me then, what he told me behind the lacrosse shed. The disease of more, he called it. How many more summers could I watch the setting sun creep west down the mountains? When I left for the winter, would that disease be my only companion? I would have called all that an epiphany, if only it wouldn’t mean then that I was so blind before.

“I guess not,” I said.

They gave me a room in the back of the infirmary and said that they’d be back in the morning, and that I wasn’t allowed to leave. Dave seemed almost mournful. I smiled and told them that I understood, and they closed the door behind them. It was past midnight.

I sat on the bed. It was a new mattress, the corners still firm and defined. The walls were simple pine paneling, completely bare and bereft of tags and signatures. I had no idea who had been there before me, or if this was the room they hid my Texan counselor in after his infamous night. The blankets were pulled tight across the bed. I didn’t bother to pull them loose. The pillow accepted my head and I closed my eyes.

I hoped I made the right decision, that it wasn’t a panicked rationalization brought about by a minor concussion and a scary lack of sleep. It felt drastic at least, and fast. Aaron arranged a ticket for me in the morning – a flight out of Portland – while Dave tried once last time to talk me out of it. I thought of my campers and how I would not be able to explain to them what happened, I why I felt the need to leave, and I almost relented. I’d sleep on it, I almost told him. But then that would be the easy way out, and it would not lead to any sort of change in my life. There had been enough of that in my life, and I tried to explain it in those terms. Then Aaron hung up the phone, and it was done.

Rory would be tough. I knew she’d never forgive me for leaving her like this, but that too was probably for the best. I didn’t question that I loved her. She would be fine, though. I thought of where she’d be in a few weeks and a few months and then past that. I could be the story she told to her friends, when they shared stories of guys she once dated, and when the turn came to her, she would tell them of her camp thing, years ago.

I opened my eyes. Something was tapping on the window, soft and regular. I used my cell phone to light my way over, and jumped back when I saw the eyes staring at me through the glass. Putting the phone down, I unlatched the window and opened it.

“What’s up?” I asked Adam. I pressed my face against the screen enough to see that he stood on a tree stump, a few feet from the infirmary. He wore Ack’s bug net over his head.

"I'm getting my ass bit up out here." I couldn't see much of him except for his stare. "You sick?" he asked, though his tone betrayed that he already suspected the truth.

"Not exactly."

Adam swore – almost sweetly, I thought. He looked away and shook his head.

"How'd you know I was in here?" I asked.

It took Adam a few moments to return his attention to me; he just kept slowly shaking his head. I asked again and he had trouble finding the first few words.

"I, uh, I waited on the bleachers. I figured you had to be in the office with the blinds drawn. That's usually how it works, I guess."

"Were you alone?" I tried not to be too obvious, but of course he saw through that sad attempt.

"Rory was there for awhile," he said. "She didn't say much, and then Danielle had her come inside."

"That's good."

"They can't do this," he said, getting worked up suddenly. "I've been talking to some of the guys. We're going to march in there and stand up for you." I could tell that he meant it, and if I wasn't sure he would take it the wrong way, I would have laughed. That someone would fight for me, I didn't know what to do with that. Because I didn't laugh, I felt my eyes began to burn.

"I asked for it, Adam. Literally. I told them to fire me. It was the only way."

"I don't believe that." Adam leaned one hand against the wall and came in close, his face only a few inches from the screen. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"Well for one, they really did need to," I said. "Imagine if word got out about tonight, and parents heard that they didn't fire the counselor behind it all. What would happen to camp then? The Silvermans didn't want to fire me, because of who I am. But that's why they needed to do it."

Adam didn't say anything for awhile, only slowly pushed off back and forth from the wall with one arm. Past his shoulders flashed the occasional lightning bug, and I thought I heard voices far off through the woods, towards the counselor fire. I wondered who was there, and what they laughed about now.

"Can you get out of here?" Adam halted his motion. "Just for a few minutes. They're going to want to say good-bye." Again I felt a sharp pang in my chest.

"I don't think so," I said. "I kind of have to do this right."

Adam sighed and pushed himself away from the wall. He told me exactly how messed up this all was. I agreed.

"Do you want me to tell them anything? They're all still awake."

I sighed. It was almost enough to break through the screen and wiggle through the hole. It wasn't like they could fire me twice. All I said was, "I don't know." Adam nodded and pushed back from the wall. Again, his face was just eyes.

"Besides the thoughtful gesture of looking out for the Silverman's business," he said, "why'd you want to be fired?"

"That's an easy one. A few years ago, when you mentioned to your brother that you're going to be my new co-counselor, did he say anything?"

"I don't remember. He said that he was surprised that you were coming back."

"Yeah well." I shrugged. "That's kind of it. Fink asked if I wanted to join his bunk next year, and I realized that I just assumed that things would stay the same. Even

if the rest of the world moved on, I'd still have a place here. And I guess I don't want that."

"I knew it was all Fink's fault," Adam joked.

"I'm just tired of being afraid, Adam. Maybe that sounds hard to believe. But I just don't try. Anything. And I could end up being what I want to be, but at least I would see it for myself. And it wouldn't be the worst thing. Make me a chief though, and put me up on your shoulders and into the lake if we win, then I might never leave."

"We'd definitely win," Adam said. This time I did laugh, just once.

"So tell them something like that. Except make it make sense."

"No," he said. "It makes sense already."

We talked for a few more minutes, both of us trying to avoid being the one to say good-bye. Eventually it petered out. We shared a look, and then he dropped down from his stump. His thrashing through the underbrush was the last I heard of him.

My voice did not wake up Arrowdance in the morning. When Reveille had finished and Dave spurred the camp towards the flagpole, I uncurled from the bed and waited. I heard the growing number of campers as they met, their voices becoming one mess of human static. Then silence as track five – the flag-raising call – played. After that came the slow stampede up the rest of the hill. A few minutes after I heard one last camper running to the Dining Hall, Dave came for me.

He waited on the porch while I packed my things. I used both hands to stuff clothes into my oversized duffel, shoes and books and anything else into the corners. My desk was next, and I paused over the small stack of envelopes that I found there, one from each of my campers. I placed them into my satchel and went out to find Dave. He asked me if I wanted to take a minute. We still had a time, he said. Aaron was going to keep them in breakfast a few minutes extra. I shook my head, and said no.

A van was already idling outside the office, an older model the camp had bought cheap from a local dealer. It was mostly used for maintenance tasks, or for days like this. I recognized the driver as one of the first-year counselors, but I could not remember his name. He opened the rear hatch for me, and I threw my belongings into the back. That was it. I hugged Dave and told him again that I was sorry.

We left through the back way, making one brief stop at the counselor lot so that the driver could grab an mp3 player from his car. My last sight of Arrowdance was the fire pit. An old batting cage laid half consumed by the last night's flames, it's burnt end black and jagged. The van sputtered once as the engine threatened to stall, and then we were gone.

#### 14. Leaving on a jet plane

Of course she found me.

I sat with my back against the glass wall of Gate 5A. Every seat was taken in the regional terminal. Small children on the return leg of their family vacation darted through the crowded aisles, dodging oversized carry-ons and outstretched legs. I couldn't help but peg them into Arrowdance age groups, judging their footwork and wondering if they could turn the corner on a double-play. I felt a thud against my back, some impact

reverberating through the glass. Thinking it was just someone in the security line, perhaps losing their balance as they de-shoed, I ignored it. Then it happened again, twice in rapid succession. I took out my headphones and craned back to see.

Rory stood. Her hair was an absolute mess, sunlightened strands of brown escaping the clutches of her loose ponytail at all angles. She had running shoes without socks and the eyes of a cornered animal. I quickly came to my feet and put my palm against the window.

She said something, two words. No sound reached me, though she spoke loud enough to draw the attention of ten or so of the line-dwellers behind her. I shook my head. She only stared back, an expectant look on her face. I grabbed my bag and walked all the way back to the gate entrance, past two different coffee shops and a gift stand. I passed no fewer than four dozen future passengers as they waited to be scanned and prodded. It took me an hour to make it through that process when I arrived, but that wasn't something I considered. I had the familiar feeling of my heart beating in my throat as I stopped a few feet from Rory. I wanted to place my hands under her arms and spin her in quick half-circle before setting her back down, and I thought if I did that, she might just then fall into me.

"What?" I asked.

She replied in clear tones, as if speaking to either the very old or the very young.

"You ass."

I wasn't really going to spin her around.

"I should be mad, right," she asked. "You were just going to leave and fly home and never speak to me again?"

I closed half the distance between us with one step, with my hands out to show that if she was open to me putting them on her shoulders, I was primed and ready.

"I had to hear it from your campers this morning," she said, teetering on one back heel. "At the flagpole and everyone could hear."

"I'm sorry."

"I thought they were just going to yell out you some last night. I still wanted to wait and talk to you, but it was late and I let Danielle talk me into going back to the cabin. And then you were gone."

I took another step and Rory pitched into me. It was an awkward one-armed hug until I could shake free of my satchel, but she didn't seem to mind. Her hair still smelled of last night, the island and smoke and bug-spray. Her one arm went across my shoulders, and the other wrapped around lower, her fingers on my ribs. I felt her breath against my chest.

"I hit my head against my car." Her voice came up muffled and hoarse.

I led her to a row of plastic backed seats. What could have been my plane touched down outside the expansive window, white smoke erupting from where the tires struck. Rory sat with her head against my arm, and my arm wrapped with her hands. I didn't want to speak for fear that any noise from me would cause the moment to whisp away, even though I knew that she did not come here just for that.

"I thought I might call you in a few weeks," I said. "I know that sounds like a nothing statement, something that naturally I would say. I have a history of that." Rory half-grunted in agreement, her breath turning my sleeve warm. "But I wanted some time

apart from this, for both of us. And I'm not actually that dumb, Rory. As much as you like to talk, there is a 'both of us' to be concerned about."

"I'm not entirely saying there isn't."

"Right. So." Her agreement left me with nothing to say in the next moment.

"A couple things first though, Lee," she said as she leaned away now, one elbow propped up on the armrest. Her eyes were clear and only slightly narrowed in the familiar Rory way. "I would have killed you if you waited a few weeks to call me. Seriously."

"Fair."

"And that I'm here right now? That's a surprise to me too. So basically, I don't know what any of this means just yet. But I guess I have this hope. I came up with it on the way over, because I knew I'd need something to say to you once I found you." She raised her hand. "No, let me work this out first. I called my mom on the way here, and I told her that I'm spending a week in Kansas as soon as they cut my last paycheck."

"Rory, that's crazy," I said. "What about school? I mean, I'd love for that, but you don't have to –"

"I know you didn't do any of this for me. You didn't give all that up just to win me back. Right?"

I shook my head.

"It probably would have still worked though, is the thing," she said. "On the island, what you said to Karp. I died hearing you say those things; it broke my heart. I hated myself for trying to make you feel ashamed, but now – I don't even have words for it, Lee. But just to say that I know something about you now that I had only dreamed of before."

"What's that?"

"If I knew how to say it, I would have shouted it through the glass, Lee. The whole airport would know it. But it's something important, I think. It gives me hope. So the least I can do is go west and see what there is there. Maybe I can bring with me whatever it is that you think you lose at home. Maybe Camp Lee can live a few days longer. I can do wonders for your esteem."

"I don't know what to say."

I felt as if that was the biggest lie I could tell, while at the same time being an honest truth. What she said sent a chill through me, and I sensed a giddy outburst of amazement – an expression that would no doubt mortify Rory and send her running back to Arrowdance – threaten to escape. And Rory somehow knew. She reached out tentatively, her fingers running along the back of her seat until they found my collarbone, where she began to knead the muscles.

"You usually don't, Lee," she said. "But sometimes you know what to do."

I could have had a good rest of my life right there in that regional jetport somewhere just outside of Portland, Maine. Too soon though, an intercommed voice called my flight. My shoulders slumped as I looked over to the security line, but Rory was already standing, my bag slung across her shoulder. She held my hand as I willed the line forward, and we watched each other as I waited for check-in. I handed the flight attendant my boarding pass and turned one last time, but Rory had already disappeared. I allowed the tide of anxious passengers carry me through the tunnel and onto the plane. The turbine jets roared to life. I took my seat, obeyed the safety notes, and closed my

eyes. When I opened them again, Arrowdance was already hours behind me. Nothing but clouds outside my window.

I thought of Rory, and all the things I would tell her.