

STARDUST

JOE BRUNER

FICTION WORKSHOP I
FINAL PORTFOLIO

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Redlands' Writers Series: Senior Portfolios Review

I really enjoyed listening to the Senior Portfolios. Many of the seniors/writers carried a sense of professionalism about them, and more than once I found myself feeling like I was listening to professional writers reading their published works. It occurred to me that those people standing up there will be me in four years, as I just declared my Creative Writing Major.

One of my favorite readers, if not my favorite was the girl who read a part of her novel with the characters talking about going out on a date that night. It was really quite funny, and I found myself wanting to hear more of the story and not having it end right there. It was quite an enjoyable night.

Statement of Revisions

I did two things for this portfolio:

(1) I went back through the sections and flushed out many scenes, adding character descriptions and new character interactions, sometimes adding whole new scenes to chapters, and other times setting up for more description in future drafts.

(2) I added one more chapter to the story (Chapter A) since the last submission. I wanted to give this story a working title, but because I feel that titles are one of the most crucial and sacred parts to a story, I didn't just want to arbitrarily assign one that sounded cool. So I wanted to explore the scene and the conversation that I anticipated the title would come from, and see if anything good came up for at least a working title: and it did. I have chosen the title *Stardust*.

Chapter One

The cabin door squawked as I opened it – something I knew would get annoying *real* fast – and my eyes took a moment to adjust to the musty, cool darkness. When I could see again, I quickly took in the rooming situation: bunk beds were placed in each corner, with the long side against the wall, in a rotating pattern around the room. Two desks faced each other at the foot of each bunk.

On each desk there was a red-clothed lamp, and a two-port outlet in the wall by each desk. I slowly began to realize every frickin thing was made of wood: the walls, the desks, the ceiling, the floor, the bed frames, even the blades of the ceiling fan in the center of the room.

To my right when I entered, was a door that led to the bathroom. I remembered from the employment packet, “Furnished with fully equipped plumbing for both flush toilets and hot showers!” Oh boy! How exciting... I mean if the job didn’t come with those, then they’d probably have a massive uprising or something.

Carla, Chip and James were already there, unpacking their suitcases, Chip and James taking the bunks in the back and to the right, and Carla the top bunk immediately to the right of the door.

They all looked up when I entered.

“Hey there!” Chip, or maybe James said to me, both of them grinned and waved as they tucked the sheets on their beds.

I glanced warily between them, slowly raising my finger. “You... must be Chip... and James. Or James and Chip.”

Their grins grew even wider.

“And you must be...”

“Carla.” She leapt down from the bed, and in three strides walked up to me holding her hand out while sweeping her long, straight dark-brown hair behind her. “How do you do?”

I stared at her expectant hand and cocked my head to look at her out of one eye before I took it. “Alright, I guess.” I glanced around the room. “So where do I get to sleep?”

“Wherever you want,” James said brightly.

I glanced around the room again, a little more slowly and beyond just the furniture. This time I noticed the moss-dotted windows in the front of the cabin. I did not want my bed next to those, thank you very much. Glancing again at the bathroom door, I decided having a bed so close to it was sketchy, so I passed that up as well, which left the bunk bed on the back wall but to the left (across from Chip and James). It was then I noticed just how musty it really was. The dust particles of 9 months disuse saturated the room to the point where you could see particles suspended in midair, just sitting there in the setting sun’s golden streams. “It’s really dusty in here,” I said dumbly.

“Why do you think we have the windows open?” Carla asked me, swinging her hair out of her eyes again.

I merely nodded and continued unpacking my suitcase. I wasn’t sure if she was sneering at me or just being snooty. I shrugged and figured, to hell with it, and went back to laying out my sheets.

The ritual was repeated when Simona showed up. I raised an eyebrow at Carla when we saw Simona very gingerly pick a few cobwebs off her uncased pillow and lightly dab at her mattress as if there were a small patch of dust on that spot.

Carla, who had bent over the edge of her bed to watch this spectacle saw my quizzical glance and shrugged back. We both grinned. This was going to be an interesting summer.

That left Dustin and Kyle to arrive, and Dustin entered just as we were preparing to head over to the dining hall for our first camp dinner. I had just shoved my suitcase under my bed when I heard the “*squaaaaaaaaawk*” of the door opening and I looked up and around.

I did a double take. There in the doorway stood a gargantuan of a human. He was well over six feet, and solid muscle. His dirty blonde hair lay in slight curls, one strand across his forehead.

“I’m Dustin,” he said gruffly, raising his hand.

My jock radar immediately went off in my head screaming *high alert, jock in the room*. Maybe my mistrust is unjustified, but after seeing a good dozen people in high school with heads shoved in toilets and other equally disgusting hazing rituals (and wondering if I was next), I was kinda scarred from any and all contact with jocks. Hence, I groaned inwardly, because just like all the other jocks that I knew, this guy just smelled of stay-the-hell-away to me.

“So are we headed off to dinner?” he said, clapping he hands together, looking around at us.

We all just stared at him for a moment, but then Carla nodded and motioned for him to lead with a small smile.

When we arrived at dinner, it was fairly empty. There were a few other counselors there, and the administration staff, all dressed identically in the camp staff's dark forest green polo and shorts uniform.

On the walls of the lodge, there were various deer heads mounted, and a bear skin with a fully stuffed head with a snarl frozen on its face hung down from the rafters. The rest of the space was lined with dozens, if not hundred of plaques of groups with accomplishments from the past 40 years.

More and more counselors started to pile into the room. Soon it was rowdy and loud, and no one could hear a thing that anyone else was saying.

Finally the director stood on a table and cupped his hands shouting, "Gooooood Eeeeeeveningggggggggg."

We were separated into smaller groups, three cabin groups who all report to the same boss, and we were loaded down with hideous details and rules such as *lights need to be off by 10 pm* and *no PDA* and *absolutely NO PROCREATING*.

I glanced around after that one, to watch people's reaction. My glance caught Dustin's and he looked at me a little too long for comfort. I squirmed in my seat and then shuddered. I made it through the rest of dinner by keeping my eyes firmly planted on the mashed potatoes I was shoving into my mouth, and not looking up again until we were dismissed.

When we got back to the cabin we found Kyle, who was surprisingly very short like me with bright blonde, very short hair and a watch on his left wrist giving him a preppy pre-college student look, unpacking his stuff onto the one bunk left empty.

“Whoa there!” Dustin said, in his booming voice. “What are you doing in here?”

Kyle straightened up and pushed his glasses back up his nose. “Hey there! I’m Kyle,” he said, giving a wide wave to everyone, “sorry I couldn’t make it to dinner. I had to stay for my brother’s birthday party and make sure nothing crazy happened. You know? The staff knew I was coming late.”

We all just stared at him for a few moments, like Dustin, until his smile began to falter.

Carla then swooped in for the high-five and Simona smiled, while Chip and James just stood there doing their stupid identical grin thing. I smiled weakly and raised my hand in a lame greeting.

Dustin just grimaced a smile at him and turned away.

I started unloading my personal things onto the desk. My books, my laptop (hey, they told us to bring it, don’t blame me) and my family photos (not that I was going to put those any place where I would see them regularly).

Kyle started putting his stuff down on the desk facing mine. “So you’re Seth, right?”

“Umm-hmm,” I said in the lightest, most polite tone I could muster.

“Hey, Kyle! Your desk is over on that wall,” Dustin’s booming voice came from the side.

A bewildered looking Kyle gingerly took his stuff and slinked over to the other desk, which Dustin had gestured towards.

Dustin came and sat down across from me, slamming his laptop down on the desk. “See you brought your laptop too,” he said pompously, “Don’t know why they had us bring them. We’re a camping summer camp, know what I mean?”

“Nnnngn.” I couldn’t bring myself to dignify any further of a response. I watched Dustin out of the corner of my eye, the pressure of contempt in my body building up gradually.

We fell silent as we all turned to our laptops and did our own thing. I checked my Facebook account. No updates. Of course there were no fucking updates. I sulked while on the web until ten, when we had to turn the lights off. I closed my laptop and turned to watch the others get into bed.

Carla jumped gracefully into her top bunk.

Simona flicked at her sheets a couple more times with her hand before slowly climbing in.

Chip and James just climbed into their respective beds and that was that.

I watched Dustin climb into his bed, obviously showing off. I shook my head and then glanced at Kyle. Our eyes met for a brief moment, a moment so brief I thought it might not have happened at all.

Chapter Two

The next morning everyone had to get ready for the campers arriving that afternoon. I threw on my forest-green staff polo shirt along with the even darker green shorts. I looked myself over in the mirror and rolled my eyes. If my dear *mother* ever tried to call to see how “camp was going” she would certainly get an earful from me. But that would require her to actually call first.

I joined Carla and Simon who were heading over to the dining hall, not waiting for Chip and James and Kyle (who were still crawling out of bed) and God-forbid, Dustin (still in the bathroom, probably slicking his hair back or some equally disgusting gesture).

As we stepped out into the woods, I squinted until my eyes adjusted to the sunlight. We walked down the dirt road, shifting wordlessly into a single file line whenever a car would drive by, and back out side-by-side as soon as they passed.

But still, the scenery was quite striking. The road twisted and turned slightly, allowing for a visible pathway wriggling like a snake through the overhanging oaks and maples and occasional willows. The amount of green that met our eyes was astounding and all the shades from glossy, oily forest green to the bright and pale fresh sprouts trembling in the sunlight.

The morning air was refreshingly crisp, and maybe, just maybe I might have started enjoying myself.

“Beautiful morning,” Carla said, voicing my thoughts.

“Maybe this won’t be so bad,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Simona asked in her singsong voice.

Carla looked over her shoulder at me as well.

I fidgeted with my collar, and picked at my elbow length sleeves. “I... it’s nothing,” I snapped.

Carla continued to star at me with her raised eyebrow. She was really quite the master at facial expressions.

I refused to look other than straight down the path until I saw Carla look away again out of my peripheral vision.

We didn’t say another word for the rest of the walk down to the dining lodge. Now that it was daylight, I could see the darned thing from the outside better. Like all the other shelters and lodges, it was made entirely of wood, and the front porch was loaded with “western” decorations: horseshoes, whips, train spikes and so forth.

Once inside, we moved through the buffet line pretty quickly and sat down at one of the far, solid oak tables with matching oak benches. I set my tray down and scowled at my oatmeal.

I just sat there scowling at it until Carla leaned forward, doing that eyebrow thing again. “Seth? Earth to Seth? Everything ok?”

“Every thing’s fine.” And that got me eating.

We ate in silence, me eating oatmeal and Carla and Simona both eating eggs and toast with tea. A few minutes later, as we were eating, we watched Chip and James walk in, followed closely by Dustin. I was finishing my oatmeal when Kyle finally showed up.

“I’ll feel bad if we let him sit by Dustin,” I said, and waved him down.

Kyle sat across from me, next to Simon. “Hey guys,” he said somewhat breathlessly. I watched him eat, studying him as he did so.

I watched the way he held the spoon deftly in his left hand, like holding a pen, and the way his head would bob up and down every time he brought the spoon loaded with oatmeal and brown sugar to his mouth. His short-cropped golden blonde hair really caught the sliver of sunlight streaming through the gap of the opened door. I couldn't help but notice how nicely his hair complemented the dark green of our uniform shirt.

I blinked and then squeezed my eyes together for a second. Why was I noticing these things? Shaking my head slightly, I mentally told myself to cut it out, and forced myself to look out the window across the room to my left.

That's when the great hulk Dustin sat down, blocking my view. "I see there's a party going on over here." He set his tray down which had a plate with the crusts of ham and flecks of bacon and a few remnants of hash browns.

"There's breakfast, if that's what you mean," I replied waspishly.

Dustin glanced at me, "This guy's a joker," he said, ruffling my hair.

I bristled, and fidgeted in my seat. "I'm going outside, I'll see you guys later." I walked around the back to a trail behind the dining hall. The trail led to a bluff that overlooked much of the mountain range. It was only a quarter mile.

My pace was quick and wide, but I didn't let that stop me enjoying the scenery. With each breath, I took in the pure mountain air, I admired the dew droplets clinging to the leaves, I felt the warmth of the sun hit my face every time I crossed into the sunlight. After about ten minutes, I made it to the bluff and sat towards the edge, cross-legged.

The sight was amazing. The sky was crystal blue and filled with majestic clouds that were fluffed out to the max, and the emerald valley lay before me like a present at my feet. I just sat there taking in the sights, the sounds, the smells, the air... I closed my

eyes and took a deep breath, slowly exhaling until it almost grew painful. I did this several times until I felt completely relaxed. I very slowly opened my eyes and looked around. Everything seemed fresher, sharper. For everything humans do that annoys me, nature seems to have a counter in response that's genuine and beautiful in some way.

Suddenly the crack of a snapping twig sounded behind me and Carla sat down next to me, swinging her legs over the edge. "What was that about?"

Wow, she really didn't mess around, did she? "I have no idea," I said.

"Do you think that Dustin likes you?"

The bluntness of the question made me choke. I spent the next two whole minutes trying to clear my throat of a bad swallow before asking, "Excuse me?"

"I asked if you think that Dustin likes you." She stared at me intently, her long, straight brown hair falling forward over part of her face.

I stared at her for a few seconds, into her unblinking blue eyes, and she stared back impassively, and completely serious. I burst into laughter. "You can't be serious. You can't be fucking serious." I paused for a second then added, "Dustin? Gay? What part of him strikes you to be at all effeminate?"

She just kept staring at me.

I couldn't hold her gaze any longer, and started picking at my sleeves again. "I don't know," I muttered, "maybe."

Carla nodded, her long hair spilling over her shoulders when she did so. "You know, a guy doesn't have to be effeminate to be gay," she said bitterly, staring out across the valley.

I didn't have a response to that one. We sat in silence for a few more minutes. I thought back to the night before when I'd caught Dustin staring at me. And how he had tried to embrace me multiple times the night before, albeit with one arm. Maybe... then I shoved the thought from my mind.

"Why do you care?" I finally asked.

She sighed, and folded her legs in, and wrapped her arms around them. "My brother is gay, and I will go to the end of the world to defend him. My biggest pet peeve is when people make assumptions about gays. My brother is huge into soccer, and other than the fact that he's artistic, you would never even suspect that he's gay. And even that is stereotyping."

I nodded slowly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed. So then where does that leave us? Me? What if Dustin is gay?"

Carla tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. "Are you worried?" She gathered her hair into one hand as if she was about to bunch it into a ponytail, but she just started twirling it with her fingers.

I stared at her incredulously. "You're kidding me, right? There's no way in hell I'm going to let his dick even get close to me."

She glared at me. "Assumptions."

"Sorry."

"Then just stay the hell away from him," she said simply.

"How? I live in the same cabin as him. He fucking sleeps on top of me." There was a silence that sunk in, as we both realized what I said.

Carla burst out laughing in a spray of spit and air. "Hahaha, that's good."

I blushed. “So mature. Thank you for that. And you know what I mean.”

“Oh yes,” she said, her voice shuddering with laughter, “I most certainly do know what you mean.” She winked.

I shook my head. People and their maturity, it just reaffirms my belief that sometimes people are just dumb. I stood up.

“Are you leaving?” She asked me with surprise, looking up at me and brushing her hair out of her eyes.

“Yeah, it’s almost time to head down to the staff wide meeting.”

“Then I’ll join you,” and she clambered up to her feet as well.

We walked back in silence together, enjoying the pure quiet except for our shoes crunching in the dirt and rocks. When we made it to our cabin, I sighed before entering.

Squaaaaaawk. Everyone turned to look at us. Damn I hate that door. I saw everyone zipping up his or her daypacks.

The others all started heading out, even Carla as she had pre-packed her daypack, which left Dustin and me together in the room. I zipped up my backpack and made a move for the door and his arms folded across his chest.

“Do we have a problem?” He said somewhat coolly.

“I don’t know,” I said, my temper rising, “do we have a problem? You’re the one blocking the door.”

We just stood there, staring at each other, him towering over me, and me glaring right back up at him. Finally he cracked a grin and stepped away.

As I walked out of the cabin with an especially abhorrent squawk from the door, Dustin called out to me, “You’re a tough nut to crack, aren’t you?”

Chapter Three

When I arrived in the amphitheater, the front few rows where the counselors were sitting were just about filled. I found Kyle and the others towards the front of the crowd, and I sat next to Kyle, filling in the last seat of the row thankfully.

“Hey Seth!” Kyle sat up and scooted over to his left a little farther, to give me more room, despite everyone already being extra scrunched.

“Hey.”

“Where’s Dustin?”

“Probably somewhere back there,” I said waving my hand behind me without even looking.

My voice must’ve been bitter or something, because Kyle asked, “Did he do something back there? Is that why you’re almost late?”

I rolled my eyes and tilted my head back. “Why does everyone think that Dustin is making move on me?”

Kyle grinned and leaned close to my ear to whisper, “Because he totally is.”

At that moment, the director came out and tested the microphone, saving me from any further embarrassment.

“GOOD MORNING EVERYONE!” He shouted out as loud as is humanly possible.

“Good morning,” was the half-hearted cry he got in return.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you!”

“GOOD MORNING,” the roar came back at him.

He grinned. “Excellent. Much better,” he said now picking up the microphone, “Well, welcome to our first day of camp. Who’s excited to kick off the summer today?” A cheer rose up from the several dozen counselors. “Very good! So we’re just going to go over the itinerary for the day, and a few other minor details, and then we’ll send you off to make final preparations to pick up your groups.”

“So after this meeting, you all will make posters displaying your assigned group number that you got in your employment packet, and then will come to the driveway across from the lake...”

And I started to zone out. I counted how many rows of benches there were in the theater, but I kept losing track. I think it was probably somewhere about 70 rows or something like that. Then my attention drifted back to the director.

“...after you bring them to your campsite, go over the ground rules, which are the following...”

Blah, blah, blah. All this was covered in our employment packet, that as long as you paid attention, you knew what needed to be covered with the kids. A butterfly flew into the theater, and I watched it, studying its loops and circles, going up and down and all over the place. When it finally flew out of the theater, I sighed and listened back to the director again.

“And when they have all their stuff set up, they will have the afternoon free to explore and have fun, as long as they stay in groups of two or more. And that’s it! We’ll let you go out to make your posters now. You are expected to be at the driveway at noon.”

There was a cacophony of excited voices and shouts and laughs as everyone stood up and left the theater. I was at the back of the seat when my mom called. Joy.

“Hello mother,” I said in an annoyingly sweet and falsetto voice, as I started pacing back and forth at the back of the theater.

“Hi honey! How’s everything going?”

“Just fine...” I let my voice lower to a much more mood-appropriate, surly-teenager tone.

“That’s good. I-”

“Is there a particular reason you called, Mom?” I have to cut her off and get to the point first, otherwise I’ll stand there for a good hour, which I did not have by the way, and listen to her yap away like a Chihuahua on helium.

“I was just calling to check up on you, and to make sure everything is going alright.”

“This is only the second day I’ve been gone, Mom. Last night was my first night here.”

“And you don’t need anything? We didn’t forget anything important?”

I rolled my eyes, making quite a show out of my body language for Kyle and the others. I felt mildly uncomfortable with them all watching me in the middle of my conversation, but my pacing impatiently and turning dramatically on my heels every few feet probably did little to help that – still behind the theater by the way. But to answer her question, my mind rolled back through the 12 hour shopping day we had done. “I’m fine, mother. We did not forget anything.”

“That’s good honey. I’m glad to hear it.”

“How’s Dad doing?” I knew he would still be working. I only asked so I wouldn’t get an earful from him on the next call as to why I didn’t ask about him.

“Oh he’s doing fine, the big wuss. You know how he gets when you’re not around.”

Oh yeah. Real emotional. Reeceeeal emotional. I wondered if he had even waited until he got back in the car to pull out his next cigar. All I said, though, was, “Of course. I do know.” While I waited for her response, I stopped pacing and stood there impatiently tapping my foot.

“So how do you like camp so far? Is it as beautiful out there as it is in the pictures?”

I sighed. “Mom, this isn’t my first time out here. I was here for counselor training right after they hired me. Remember? I’ve seen it all before. Now is there anything else? Or can I go? I kinda have to meet my group in a few minutes here.”

“Ok honey, well good luck. And if you ever need someone to talk to, you can always call home.”

Oh sure. That was about as likely to happen as Mom and Dad not going out to the town to get wasted and play the “rich, happy couple”. The thing is, they weren’t even that. It was so fucked up. Everything about their stupid marriage, all the way down to having me, was so fucked up.

I hung up without another word and pocketed my phone. I turned around and saw the other six standing behind me, all trying to listen in.

“What?” I snapped.

Carla grinned, “well?”

“Well what?”

“What did Mama Seth have to say?”

“None of your damn business.”

“Aww, come on. Please?”

I opened my mouth to retort, but Dustin was quicker. “He said it’s not any of your business. Got it?”

Carla looked bewildered and glanced quickly between Dustin and me.

All I could do was stare at Dustin open mouthed, my words having died on my tongue.

Dustin stared down at Carla until she and the others all turned and walked back to the cabin. When they did, he came to me and put his hand on my shoulder. “That Carla, I’m telling you. She can be a little bit of a handful.”

I shrugged his hand off my shoulder, but muttered, “Thank you.”

Dustin grinned.

Chapter Four

I was standing at the edge of the giant field adjacent to the lake, right by the drop off-driveway point across the field. I was holding my large sign over my head with the number 27 on it. Because we were supposed to decorate the sign, I drew a cliff and some trees, an ocean and the setting sun on the sign. It was something quick I could put together after the all-staff assembly, and a few of the things I appreciated about the wilderness and hopefully could make a few of my kids appreciate too.

I tried not to look excruciatingly bored as I stood there just holding a sign up over my head, waiting for my kids to show up. I ended up standing between Simona (26) and Kyle (28). None of their kids had shown up yet either. Simona let out a long sigh and looked up and around at the sky and trees. I turned towards Kyle.

“Are you excited?” He asked me.

“I don’t know, maybe,” I said slightly grudgingly. Truth be told, I kind of was. Even though I had had a rather big fight with my parents about the whole thing – I wanted to spend the summer relaxing, but my parents insisted I have a summer job (actually they just wanted me away from home so they could enjoy the summer without their brat kid getting in the way) and so it goes – but now in the moment, the prospect of leading trips in the back country with these kids excited me in a way. “What about you?” I shot back, even though the grin on his face already answered the question.

“Oh absolutely. I’ve been out here before and so I know exactly where I want to go and what I want to do to enjoy the summer with my kids.”

And you know what? I believed him. The way the corners of his mouth couldn’t help but twitch upwards as he spoke, and how he confidently held up the sign for

potential kids to see, even as he turned his head to speak to me. I could feel the energy coming off of him shouting out that he was truly excited about the summer. Somewhat heartened, I turned back to look at the now solid wave of kids wandering the field.

One kid started to approach me hesitantly. A kind of short kid with one of those “mushroom cut” hair cuts that was a dirty blond color.

“Group 27?” I called out.

He nodded.

“What’s your name?”

“Felix.”

“Hey there Felix, I’m Seth. Is this your first time here?”

He nodded again.

We fell silent. He looked to be about 12 or 13 maybe. He seemed pretty shy and stood there uncomfortably, like I had until moments before.

I turned my attention back to the multitudes of youth and teenagers making their way towards me, and impending wave of mass chaos, threatening to engulf me.

Counselors were calling out left and right, as were the kids.

“18!”

“36!”

“11!”

“9!”

Slowly I started to gather my group about me. Emily, this little energetic redhead was first after Felix. Rachel, who was about my height had jet-black hair that she wore in a ponytail, Faith who I could tell was going to need an extraordinary amount of sun block

to survive the summer unburnt, Justin, a skinny Hispanic wearing baggy shorts and a tank top, both too big for him, Chris who came in looking sharp with a fresh haircut, Katie who was very tall and athletic and finally Malachi, the last one to show up, an Israeli who demonstrated his abundance of energy by running and bouncing around and grinning excitedly. He wore synthetic sport shorts and a wicking t-shirt.

I led them out of the field and to the campsite. “This is where you guys will be sleeping every night,” I told them when we walked in. “Let me make that perfectly clear. This is where you guys are sleeping, every single night. Unless we happen to be out on an overnight, which I will talk about in a bit. And to make sure that you guys have this, staff members will be coming through the night to do a head count. Yes, they pay people to do that in the night, so that they can pay us to be effective counselors during the day.”

Malachi threw his hand up in the air. “How much do they pay you?”

I smiled, hoping someone would ask. “In peanuts. They pay us in peanuts,” I said, oddly satisfied that I got to give the silly answer they had prepped us with. We weren’t supposed to talk about details like that. It was to encourage us to be professional, I suppose.

“*How many* peanuts do they pay you with?” he asked with a sly grin.

I laughed. “Billions. Ok, enough of that. The tent on the left on the left is for the boys, and the tent on the right is for the girls. As you can see, these have some serious riggings, and are really meant to be set up and taken down only once a summer. So don’t mess with them. Come, I’ll show you around inside the guys’ tent.”

They followed me dutifully, like a bunch of baby penguins waddling after the papa penguin.

“So the door here is closed by latching these Velcro pads through the metal loops.” I said, pointing to the edge of the tent door flaps. “And then in here, as you can see, two bunk beds side-by-side. You’ve got a window on either end. The rest of the space is for you to store your stuff. I guarantee you, the cleaner you keep it, the happier you’ll be living here 90 percent of the summer. The tent is exactly the same for the girls.”

I let them stare around the tent for a few seconds, nodding endlessly. Then I led the way out of the tent.

“The thing with the tents: they are here to keep you safe and keep you comfortable. It wouldn’t be nice to treat them poorly, now would it?” I waited for the gentle muttering of yeses or nods before moving on. “Now, if you look here, in front of the tents and centered between them is this large wooden shelter. This is where we will have our evening meets, but again, more on that later.”

“Is that thing safe?” Emily asked, pointing up at the roof.

I looked up at it. It looked gross: covered in moss and lichen and the wood was clearly starting to rot away. “It should be. But I’ll inform my boss. Thank you. And finally, you’ll notice the fire ring here at the other end of the shelter, and the three entries into the campsite. The one here, right by the fire ring is where we entered the campsite. The one back there behind the girls’ tent is the trail down to the latrine. Don’t worry, if you ever have to get up in the night, there’s a light on and you can see it from camp. And finally that third trailhead, behind the guys’ tent goes up to your staff group cabin, which is where I will be staying all summer. Just so you know I am staying with other staff members, all of whom you’ll get to meet. The cabin is at most a hundred meters away,

probably not even that far. If you need anything, just head up there and holler for help. Any questions?"

The all looked dumbly at me.

"Great. Then take an hour break to unpack your stuff and settle down. Start getting to know each other, and we'll meet back under the shelter to play some name games, and talk about what this summer is going to look like."

There was a collective "harrumph" from the group as they hoisted their backpacks and marched off to their respective tents: Felix, Chris, and Justin followed by an antsy Malachi pushing them all forward to the left, and Emily, Rachel, Faith and Katie to the right.

Once they all vanished inside, I ran my hand through my hair and let out a big puff of air, blowing out my cheeks. It was going to be a long summer.

I enjoyed the occasional tweet from the birds as I slowly walked up to the cabin to rest and then prepare for the next part. When I entered the cabin, I was the only one inside. I immediately went over to my bed and lay down. I stared up at the underside of Dustin's bed.

What was up with that kid anyway? I glanced over at his desk. His laptop was closed, but I could see from the little blinking light that it was still on. A few pencils and our counselor binder were also there, but otherwise it was pretty sparse.

Oh what the heck, I decided to snoop. I got up and walked over. I opened the middle, "keyboard" drawer but there was nothing. I moved to the drawers on the right hand side. The top one had some papers we'd gotten from the meeting earlier that morning. I glanced inside the second one. Empty. Did this guy seriously bring no

personal items from home with him? When I finally opened the bottom file drawer...
jackpot.

There was a small picture frame. There was actually a photo inside of it too. The photo was small, three by four maybe, and it was of him with another guy, and they had their arms around each other's shoulders. Dustin looked a little younger, a year perhaps? Two at most. In the photo they looked remarkably happy together. Maybe Carla was right maybe Dustin actually was gay. But if this were his boyfriend, then why would he be hitting on me? More than being disgusted by the thought that Dustin might be attracted to me, I was unsettled and sad for this other guy who looked so happy.

I dug into his drawer again. There were papers. Letters, it looked like. I quickly leafed through them and saw they dated back... three years ago.

"Ahem, like what you're finding?"

It was Dustin. I dropped all the papers into the drawer. "I-I-I-I'm sorry. I-I- how the hell did you get in here so quietly?"

He held up a rag and oil. "I greased the door when I saw you going through my stuff from outside. I went back to admin to pick up the stuff."

I blushed. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-"

"Snoop? Because that sure as hell looks to me like what you're doing." His voice was calm, but there was a subtle edge to it. I could hear metal scraping metal underneath. Then suddenly his shoulders drooped, and his voice lost that edge. "It's ok."

I slowly let the air escape through my teeth. Could I yet survive? "If you don't mind my asking..."

"Who's the guy in the photo?" Dustin asked wearily.

I nodded.

“My boyfriend,” he said, very matter of fact. He closed his eyes and swept across them with his fingers. Pinching the bridge of his large nose, he looked up and sighed. He sounded exhausted, “Or at least he was.”

“Then why do you still have-”

“He died at the end of last semester.”

A lump formed in my throat. I slowly sat down on my bed.

“It was a car accident. He was driving our friends home from a party, I had the flu and so was in bed, and a drunk driver smashed into the driver’s side. The others had some injuries, but he was the only one who died.”

“Oh that’s sick,” I said.

“Tell me about it.” As he sat down next to me, I could see his eyes were red, and it looked like he was about to lose control, but he managed to hold it together. He took a couple shuddering breaths.

“Wow. I’m sorry man. That’s just plain bad luck. No other way around it.”

He nodded shakily. “You look like him, you know. You look a lot like him.”

And suddenly it clicked. It all made sense. Then I picked up the photo again and looked it. I dunno, I suppose if you stretched it a little, you could see it. He probably saw the resemblance more than me. The biggest difference was that I was short. Like Kyle.

“You’re beautiful,” he said suddenly. “And Sam was beautiful.” He took some more deep breaths.

I said nothing.

Then he kissed me. Straight and simple, he leaned forward, gently grabbed the sides of my head and pressed his lips against mine.

I had never been kissed before, at least not on the lips, and was too stunned to do anything. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. It was kinda slimy, kinda gross. I could easily taste the minty gum he was chewing.

When Dustin finally broke it off, he just stared at me. I stared back for maybe three or four seconds, and then quickly stood up.

“I-I-I need... I need to go,” I stammered.

“Seth, wait!”

I started grabbing the things I would need for meeting with my group: a map of the place, my folder of paperwork with their schedules, and my water bottle. I shoved everything into my daypack. Glancing around hastily, I made sure there was nothing else I needed.

“Seth, please! Wait!” He grabbed my shoulder, but I shrugged it off.

With one last glance behind me, I saw Dustin's desperate face, a deep golden curl of his lengthy hair reaching across his forehead. Then I walked out.

Chapter Five

I put as much distance between the cabin and me as quickly as I could. When I made it as far as the lake, I finally slowed down, and allowed myself to think. I realized I wasn't even angry. I felt sorry for Sam, no one deserves to go like that. I wasn't as sure about Dustin. I mean if I really looked that much like Sam, should I be flattered that he just kissed me? Or simply creeped out?

I took a lap around the lake before deciding to scramble up on top of a cluster of boulders by the north end. If there's one thing I pride myself on, it's being able to scramble up large boulders as quickly as I can.

When I got on top, I stood up, enjoying the pretense of being tall for a little bit and took in as much of the wilderness as I could. Way out in the sky, in the distance two hawks circled each other slowly, as if in some ancient ritual or dance. They were probably just circling for prey.

Beyond them, even farther in the distance stood a majestic mountain whose white peak glinted in the sunlight. I wasn't quite high enough over the tree tops to see very much of the sea of emerald leaves I knew must be there, but looking down, I could see a small sapphire lake with sandy shores blanketed in sunlight and warmth.

My mind wandered back to Dustin. Would it be so bad if I tested to see if there could be something special between Dustin and me? I pulled up my mental checklist of requirements for dating. Not that I keep a mental list of such things, it's basically just simple things, such as my number one, it must be a guy. Check. Dustin covered that quite well. Number two, he can't be a complete douche. Perhaps Dustin wasn't as bad as I first gave him credit for. I could give him a chance. Number three: never date. Oops.

I chewed my lower lip. The thought sent me back to my parents and their fucked up marriage. The first time that I remember it happened, I was six.

It was evening, and I was sitting on the couch in our living room, reading my favorite Biscuit the Dog books. My mom was running around like crazy, at first in a bath towel wrapped around her top and one around her hair. A few minutes later she came out of her room in a very fancy red dress, one of those loose, very delicate dresses with sleeves that seem to stretch to the floor.

“Seth, honey, dinner is on the table,” she said in a slightly breathless voice.

“I’m not hungry.” I grumped from behind my book.

She sighed and said nothing as she hurried out of the room. A moment later she came back out holding up a small mirror and dabbing make-up on her cheek.

“Seth, I’m not going to say it again, dinner is on the table.”

“I’m not hungry,” I protested once again. They say the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over, and expect a different result.

“It’s your favorite,” she implored, “its Mac and Cheese. It’s even Scooby Doo style.”

“Okay, okay,” I grumbled. “Can I bring Biscuit with me?”

She gave me a dead stare, “You know how I feel about books at the table.”

I pouted my lower lip and gave her my best puppy dog eyes – something I had perfected by the way.

She rolled her eyes but relented, “Fine. But don’t cry when you get Mac and Cheese all over it.”

“Yay!” I hurried over to the table and climbed up in my chair. I folded the pages flat and placed it next to my plate. I grabbed my fork and eagerly began eating while continuing to read.

The door opened suddenly, forcing me to look up before I had read anything, and saw my father had come home.

“Hi Daddy!”

He smiled absentmindedly at me, “Hi buddy.” When he saw the book he did a double take, and called for my mom as he went to the bedroom to drop of his stuff.

“Sarah, is Seth reading at the dinner table?”

“He really wanted to, I just told him to not cry when he gets cheese all over it like last time.” She called back from the kitchen.

A few moments of silence, then my dad came back out with his jacket off and tie loosened and went into the kitchen.

“Sarah, what the hell are you wearing?”

“A dress. I told you, I’m going out tonight.”

“No you didn’t. When the fuck did you say this?”

“A week ago. Jonathan called me and asked if I was free next Friday night and I said yes.”

“Oh no, you are *not* going out with that bastard.”

“Relax, he’s just a work colleague. We need to get this engineering project done, and he wanted to make dinner out of it.”

“So you put on a sexy red dress, make-up, eye-liner, the whole deal, just for an engineering project?” He hissed.

I tried to bury myself in Biscuit.

“I thought I would look nice.”

“Nice? NICE? NICE IS A POLO SHIRT AND SOME SLACKS. THIS IS MS. SEXY-AND-I-KNOW-IT-AND-I’M-SHOWING-OFF-FOR-YOU.”

No response. I heard some shuffling, and then I heard the sickening *whack* of a slap. A moment later, my dad stormed out and only paused to grab a cigar. Then he left, this time without so much as a glance at me.

I slowly slipped off my chair, and tiptoed over to the kitchen. Gripping the corner, I peered around until only my eyes peeked out, and I saw my mom kneeling on the floor, her legs pointed out in each direction. She was just quietly sitting there sniffing. I walked up to her, and she brought me into a tight squeeze, forcing me to bug my eyes out.

And that was the first time that I can remember. There was also the day at the beach when I was seven, that same year after my school play, the evening immediately following my eighth grade graduation, and the winner, my senior year in high school: their anniversary day.

Of course, whenever I tried to ask what was happening between them, both shut up like a clam, and insisted everything was fine. One day, when I asked my mom why she let dad do that to her, she insisted that it was only a one-time thing and that they really did love each other, and that I didn’t have to worry about divorce or anything scary like that.

I didn’t bother trying to correct her by telling her I’d heard it multiple times. I just stopped talking with my parents unless they needed something from me. That day I swore

to myself, that if that's what love really looked like, that I would never let that happen to me and so swore to never fall in love with anyone else.

I shook my head and tried to shake the thoughts out of my head. I sat and watched as two kids rushed by, under the boulder.

“We'd better get back to camp, we don't want to be yelled at for being late.”

I watched the kids walking until they vanished under the trees again. Poor kids, having to worry about being yelled at. I gave one last glance at the lake and saw the hawks still circling in their relentless, menacing hunt of death, and the mountain disappearing behind a rising sea of green, as I leapt from rock to rock back to the ground and made my way back to the campsite.

Chapter Six

As I strolled into the campsite, I heard voices laughing from both tents. I needed to set up, and so I let them hang out a little bit longer. Sitting down, I pulled out all their schedules and the group itinerary for the summer. There were also maps of the whole place and my water bottle. Once everything was organized, I walked by the tents. “Ok guys, this is your two minute warning.” And I went back to the table and sat back, enjoying the sun shining across the trees’ leaves. Eventually they started to emerge from the tents. Felix was first to arrive and so it went until finally Malachi managed to drag himself out.

“Great! So we’re going to start with a name game. We’ll just do something simple, because I’m not a huge fan of elaborate games that you guys probably don’t care for anyway, hence playing the animal name game. Basically the way it works, come up with an animal whose name starts with the same letter as yours. And you have to do an action that symbolizes that animal. I’ll start.” I thought for moment, “Snake Seth,” and I pressed my hands together and wriggled my body like a snake. It got a few chuckles. I looked pointedly at the girl to my right.

“Eagle Emily,” she said without hesitation. “Shreee, shreee,” she called out, in perfect imitation of an Eagle, while flapping her arms.

Everyone sat in stunned silence for a second, before we all burst into applause.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said bowing, her bright red curly pigtails flopping over her shoulders.

“How do you do that?” I asked stunned.

“I’ve just practiced a lot.”

“That’s really cool. Ok, next.”

“Fox Felix,” he said, timidly pawing in the air, like a fox slinking around.

“Rac-“

“Oh, sorry,” I interrupted, “I forgot one part. You have to repeat what everyone else has done up to that point, and then say yours. And you have to repeat the actions too.” I nodded to Felix.

His shoulders slumped but he said, “Snake Seth,” and wriggled his body, “Eagle Emily,” he looked despairing towards Emily. We all burst out laughing.”

“Go on, give it a try,” I urged enthusiastically.

“Shreee, shreee,” it came more out as a timid warble, and we all laughed again.

“Fox Felix,” he mumbled red faced.

I reached around Emily and grabbed his shoulder. He looked up in surprise, and I smiled at him and gave him a thumbs up.

He smiled in return.

“Ok, next.”

“Raccoon Rachel,” she said hissing and snarling, after running through all the names. We all laughed again.

“Fairy Faith,” she said prancing in a circle, flapping her arms.

“That’s not an animal,” Malachi protested.

Everyone turned to look at him, and then glanced towards me. “I think it’s ok, Malachi. It is an animal, just not a real one.” I then looked towards Chris.

“Chameleon Chris,” he said picking up a branch with leaves and hiding behind it.

“Jellyfish Justin,” and Justin slumped over and convulsed a few times in the motion of a jellyfish.

“Kangaroo Katie,” she said bouncing around and holding her hands up and curved over.

“Manly Malachi.” And Malachi flexed his biceps. The group laughed hysterically.

“An animal, Malachi,” I said trying to hide my smile.

“Men are animals,” he protested, sending the group into another bout of hysterics. I gave him a flat stare.

“Ok, ok, sheesh. Monkey Malachi,” he said. “Oh, oh, ah, ah, oh, oh, oh,” dancing around with one hand on his head and one curled into his armpit.

Everyone cracked up again.

“Ok, very good,” I said laughing, “let’s bring it under the shelter. What say you? Are you ready to learn what workshops you were assigned given the preferences you asked for?”

Everyone started whispering excitedly.

I pulled a stump from the fire ring and sat down at the head of the table. I lay the folders in front of me.

“You guys picked out some pretty cool workshops if you ask me. Someone had nature art?” I looked around the group.

Emily raised her hand.

“Yep, that’s right. It was you who got it. That one is pretty cool, I was reading about it. You create art from natural supplies, pinecones and pebbles and other more exotic things. You also will learn about using natural dyes and paints as well.”

Emily beamed.

“And someone else had nature meditation?”

Felix raised his hand.

“That’s really great too. You try out different meditations as well as going to different environments.”

He nodded eagerly.

“Let’s see, here’s another one. Beach yoga. I think that was you Katie,” I said, looking at her.

She grinned, and pulled her fist towards her in a triumphant movement.

“Natural rock climbing, both Chris and Faith ended up in that one.”

They high fived each other.

“There’s a shelter building workshop, which is essentially learning how to build forts with sticks and leaves and everything else nature-made. Justin, you’re in that one.”

“Woot, woot!” He said pumping his fist.

“And last but not least, both Rachel and Malachi got the nature photograph workshop.”

They did a crazy high-five, fist pump, hand tangling motion together in celebration.

“This is a small sample of what you guys will be doing this summer, and I think you guys all more or less got your first or second choices for all the different slots. I hope you enjoy them, because very few kids get to take two hours at a time just to enjoy making forts or paint with natural supplies or meditating in the mountains.” I took a gulp from my water bottle.

“So are we just doing these the whole summer every day?” Emily asked.

I smiled. “Let me pass these next papers out, and I’ll explain to you what the schedule looks like for the summer. Basically, this is a nine-week program for those of you who haven’t been here before. Every three weeks includes two weeks of workshops, Monday through two Sundays later, and one week of a group campout, Monday through Saturday night. That last Sunday will be a day off for you to enjoy to yourselves. When we go camping, we’re going to go with one other counselor from my cabin and their group as well.

“The schedule for your workshops, as you can see, is as follows: breakfast opens at 7am daily. You don’t have to be there then, that’s when it opens. Your first workshop starts at 8:15. You do have to be there then. Each workshop is two hours. With a 15-minute break in between the two workshops in the morning. From 10:30 to 12:30 is your second workshop, followed immediately by lunch. Lunch is from 12:30 to 1:45-”

“Wait, there’s no passing period between the second workshop and lunch?”

Malachi interrupted.

“You get the extra fifteen minutes until 1:45 in stead. Which allows then the last workshop of the day to run from 2 to 4. 4 to 6:30 is your own free time to go to whatever facilities you like, whether that’s the lake or the shooting range, what have you. 6:30 to 7:30 is dinner and 7:45 to 8:15 is evening meeting where we’ll reconvene and talk about the day. Then until 10 the night is yours to hang out around camp, or go do a camp-wide night program if there is one.”

“What are some usual night programs?” Emily asked.

“A big one is star gazing with campfires and smores and they bring telescopes in for people to use.”

She nodded.

“Are there any other questions? You guys know your basic daily schedules, which start tomorrow. You guys have your general summer itineraries.”

“What about the camping?” Emily asked again.

“Right. For that, I will get information to you when we get closer. I will get the packing list to you guys hopefully by the Wednesday or Thursday before since we leave the following Monday morning. I don’t even know who I’m co-leading with first yet. Whoever it is, hopefully we can get together with their group that Sunday night so you guys get a chance to meet them. I mean, you’ll see them around camp, but it’s always good to get a group together before it’s time to leave. Any other questions?”

The group just glanced around awkwardly.

“Great! Then the afternoon is yours until dinner. There’s no need for you guys to be baby-sat until dinner. Go and explore the camp, just be sure to meet here at 6:15 and we’ll all head down together for the first night. I’ll be in my cabin up the hill there, if you need me.”

“I see what you’re trying to do,” Malachi said nodding and winking at me knowingly. “You just want to get rid of us.”

I just smiled and nodded my head exasperated. I turned to walk back when Emily stopped me.

“Sorry, one more question.”

The others all walked off as we stood there. “No problem. What’s on your mind?” I asked.

“How much are we going to be seeing you? You made it sound like you won’t be around very much, with all our workshops going on.”

“I’ll be around. I’ll probably come and visit you guys in your workshops at least once to check up on you. And then I’ll see you guys in the evening, because that’s when we’ll reflect on each day. And then of course there are the camping trips. So I’ll see plenty of you guys. Don’t worry. You’ll be tired of me before the end of the summer,” I said smiling.

She smiled back and spun around and half-skipped back to the tent.

I walked back to the cabin, trying to keep my breathing smooth and controlled. Maybe Dustin wouldn’t be there. Maybe I wouldn’t have to face him.

Squaaaaaawk. Empty. Thank goodness. I sat down on my bed and pulled out my laptop. Facebook time. Not that I regularly spend time on it, but I do like to see what people are up to, especially over the summer.

Suddenly the door squawked and I slammed my laptop shut and looked up in alarm. It was just Kyle.

He looked quizzically at me. “You weren’t watching porn, I hope?”

I looked down and to my right, squeezing my eyes shut. Did I really just hear that correctly? “Wait. What?”

He blushed. “It’s just you shut your laptop so quickly...”

“Uh, no. I- uh- I,”

“I mean, it’s ok if you were. We’re all human, we all have needs...”

“No. I was just on Facebook. I just thought you were someone else.”

“Dustin?”

I just stared at him.

“What’s going on?” He sat down on my bed.

“He kissed me,” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

“He what?” Kyle froze midway to crossing his legs.

“Yeah, he fucking kissed me, right on the mouth.”

“Dare I ask how this came up?” He set himself into a comfortable position and ran a hand through his short cropped, bright blond hair.

“Um, I was snooping around his stuff.”

“Wait, let me make sure I have this right. You were snooping around his stuff, and his response was to kiss you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course not. He told me some other stuff. Personal stuff. Because I found some personal things.”

“Oh ho, so big, bold Dustin has a soft side to him after all, huh?” A gleam appeared in Kyle’s eye, that I wasn’t sure I liked.

“It would seem so.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“His soft side?”

Now Kyle rolled his eyes, “No, him kissing you.”

“I- I honestly don’t know.”

“Did you like it?”

“Maybe...”

Kyle opened his mouth and then closed it. He looked away. He glanced towards the door, and then to his desk.

“What? You were going to say something.”

“I- I just... are you, are you gay?”

“That’s personal,” I snapped.

Kyle reddened again. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.” He climbed off my bed and walked over to his desk.

“No, wait. Why do you ask?”

Kyle glanced up at me, his eyes wide. “I- I- well, I-”

And then Dustin walked through the door, and Kyle looked bashfully down at his desk again.

Chapter Seven

I couldn't fucking believe it. Of all the people it could have been to walk through that door, it had to be freakin' Dustin.

I didn't say a word as he walked in. And surprisingly, neither did he.

Kyle glanced furtively at me from his desk.

I shook my head at him.

Dustin set his stuff down on his desk and then crawled up to his bed and just collapsed, shaking the whole bunk like there was no tomorrow.

Maybe I wouldn't have to confront him about the kiss. That was a relief. But if I didn't do it now, would I have to do it later? Crap.

The door squawked as Chip and James walked in together however, sparing me from any further thoughts of confronting Dustin.

"Hey guys!" Chip grinned excitedly.

"Wanna join us?" James said, bouncing lightly on his feet.

"For what?" Kyle asked brightly, turning around in his seat.

"We're going to head down to the creek and enjoy the afternoon. Counselor's day out."

"Sur-" Kyle started, right as I said,

"Ehh."

Dustin just groaned into his pillow. "Mmmph."

"Aw, c'mon guys," Kyle said, looking at me. "It'll be fun."

Squaaaaawk. Carla walked in. "What's the holdup?" She said, frowning at Chip and James.

“Dustin and Seth are being party poopers,” Kyle said.

Carla glared down at me, cocking an eyebrow.

After a few seconds, I caved in. “Ok, ok. I’ll join you guys,” I said, trying to hide my smile by looking down to change into my Teva sandals, and then to grab my towel.

With a satisfied puff of air, Carla glared up at Dustin lying in his bed, and she raised her chin higher as she swept her long brown hair behind her. “Dustin.”

“Mmmmph.”

We all looked at each other. “DUSTIN!” Everyone shouted in unison. Even me.

“MMMMPH.”

Giving a puff in exasperation, Carla grabbed his arm and started dragging him out of the bed.

He allowed himself to be dragged to the very edge before sitting up. “What are you trying to do, woman? Kill me?” Dustin’s hair was very messy as he sat up, golden locks twisted in every direction.

“I’m *trying* to get you to join us. It’s counselor’s afternoon out while our groups explore camp. Let’s go.” She said impatiently, scrunching her eyebrows so tightly together, I was amazed that they could ever spread out to normal again.

“Uhhhhh.”

“Come on, let’s go.” She insisted again.

He looked at me and I nodded. Finally he jumped down off the bed and changed into his sandals, grabbing his towel as well.

As it turns out, Simona had been waiting outside the whole time, just staring up at the sky aimlessly.

“Alright,” Carla said, “ready to go Simona?”

“Yeah...”

And so off we went, trudging down to the creek.

Once again I found myself admiring the beauty of the camp as we walked down the trail. When we got there, we all stopped in a line.

The creek bubbled and splashed merrily. There were some rocks here in there creating a small-scale rapids-like effect, some fallen trees too. Mostly it was about waist deep water moving at a smart pace, but nothing that would carry us away. Beautiful deciduous trees lined either side of the creek bank covering the entire thing in cool, refreshing shade.

“Sooo...” Carla said, “This is kinda melted glacier water. Who wants to go first?”

Slowly but surely, they all looked to their right, all the way down the line until everyone was staring at me.

“What?”

They stood in silence, just watching me.

I sighed, “Fine, I’ll go in. But you owe me. All of you.” And so I stepped forward and when the ground became soggy, I started dragging my feet, one half-inch at a time. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Carla step forward. “Touch me, and die,” I told her, pointing at her behind me without looking and trying to hide a grin and rising laugh.

A second later, the water rushed over my foot and I gasped from the surprise. I dropped my guard, and in that second Carla shoved me in all the way and hurried back away from the shore. As I stood up, I flung as much water away from me as I could,

soaking all of them, and suddenly the air was filled with shrieks of surprise, and then laughter.

The others all jumped in as I wiped the water out of my eyes. We all splashed each other, tackled each other, and messed around in the water. Carla and I traded a few splash wars, sometimes just whacking the water at each other lightly and rapidly, like little kids, while at the same time blinking because the water got in our eyes and yet we were determined to stare each other down.

I paused to catch my breath for a few minutes, and I watched everyone else running around.

Chip and James were wrestling each other, both equally terrible at it.

Simona and Carla were splashing each other, and eventually joined Chip and James in the wrestling. Simona of course didn't last two seconds.

I chuckled, and then turned to watch Dustin and Kyle. They were duking it out. Dustin of course swamped Kyle every time, but Kyle put in a good fight. It was easy to forget about the kiss, at least for a little while.

"Seth!" James, or maybe Chip, called out to me. "Come back and join us!"

I stared at them for a second and rushed back in. I dived under the surface first, and instantly regretted it. Having stood out in the sun that long, I had started to dry out, and so the chill crawled down my spine again. But when I burst through the surface, and shook my head side-to-side vigorously, I did feel refreshed.

Chip and Carla went after me immediately. I didn't even have time to blink. After I recovered, I attacked back with rigor. Right when I was gaining the upper hand in splashing, I was bowled over by something extremely fast behind me. Whoever it was

clung on to me tightly. It was another guy, I could tell that by the muscles. I twisted and turned and finally managed to break free. The only person I could think of who could hold me down like that was Dustin. Coughing and spluttering, I sprang out from the creek. “What the h... Kyle?” I nearly fell back underwater in my surprise.

He grinned, and held his arms open in a taunting embrace.

I charged.

He leapt to the side a lot more deftly than he should have been able to.

I tripped, nearly turned around enough to stop his charge, but not quite. We fell under again. Damn, this kid was strong. It was another struggle but I finally broke free. When we were both standing, Kyle held his arms open and grinned again.

I shook my head. “I’m good Kyle. You’re damn strong, I think you’ve proven that by now.”

He grinned and put his arms down.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m going to lie on the bank and dry off.”

There was a general chatter of agreement behind me as I slowly walked to the bank. I lay my towel out and flopped down on it.

A few seconds later everyone else joined me with his or her towels, except for Dustin. I saw him look at me, our eyes met briefly, and he walked off.

Kyle lay next to me.

I looked up at the sky and sighed. A smile grew on my face that I could not stop or hide.

“You look happy,” Kyle said, turning on this side to look at me.

I turned my head to look back at him. “I am.”

“Why?”

I turned fully to my side, to better look at him. I took in the sight of his bare chest, his thin waist and his legs. My eyes wandered back up to his face, his wide smile, and his green eyes. I had to answer this question carefully. “This has been fun, spending the afternoon with everyone, playing in the creek.”

He nodded. “I agree.”

We both turned back and resumed looking at the sky.

I was in the middle of trying to decide if a cloud looked more like a dragon or a turtle when I felt something brush against my head. Lifting my head to see what it was, Kyle had grabbed my hand in his. I looked at him with my eyebrows raised.

He smiled, and left his hand in mine.

I smiled back. Then I looked up and around. “Hey, where’s Dustin?”

“Who cares?” Kyle asked.

I sat up. Sure enough, his stuff was there, but he wasn’t. He hadn’t come back yet and wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

“Seth, c’mon,” Kyle urged, “just lay back down and let Dustin do his thing.”

“Why do you care, Kyle?” Chip asked.

Kyle blushed. “Well, I just think if Dustin wanted company, he would be here lying down with us.”

But I couldn’t do it. I got up, and could see the ill-disguised disappointment on Kyle’s face. I felt guilty but it didn’t feel right just ignoring Dustin. I picked up my shirt and put it on and slipped my feet into my sandals. I walked into the woods. It didn’t take

long going up the trail to find him just a little ways off the trail, sitting on a boulder crying. “Dustin?” I called out nervously.

He looked up; his eyes red, and streaks running down his face.

“What’s wrong?”

Dustin took in huge, shuddering breaths. “I- I’m s-s-sorry about earlier.”

I looked down. “Is that why you’re crying? Because you kissed me earlier? Is that why you didn’t want to join us?”

He burst into a new bout of tears.

My breathing became shallower, and butterflies started fluttering, as I grew more nervous. “It’s ok Dustin, really, it’s not that bad.”

“But then you just r-ran out and w-w-wouldn’t talk to me.”

“I know, I’m sorry. Here, let me show you. It’s ok.” And before I could stop myself or double guess myself, I brought myself and kissed him, right on the mouth, enjoying the slippery and fruitiness of it. When we broke apart, he stared at me blankly. We fell in for a second one, and this time it was a little more relaxed and patient as he brought his hand to my head.

Chapter A

After making sure everyone was finished brushing their teeth and going to the bathroom and in bed in their sleeping bags, Kyle and I sat by the dying embers of the fire and we snuggled close together for additional warmth.

“Wow, I didn’t realize it would be so cold up here in the higher regions this far into the summer,” Kyle said shivering. I put an arm around him.

“Yupp, it gets cold up here,” I said, restating the obvious for no real reason.

We stared into the fire that was all but coals but this point. There was something mystical about it, the way the wood was glowing – no, pulsating – red, going from dim to bright to dim again. Each coal was going at it’s own rate, independent from all the others, giving it this effect like when you look down upon a city at night, and can see all the city lights: buildings and highways and cars all twinkling together. There was a wisp of smoke unfurling from the fire.

I followed the smoke until I was looking up into the looming pine trees, nothing but dark silhouettes at this point. The dark, jagged shapes stood in sharp contrast to the night sky, which was brightly illuminated by millions of stars and a full moon. Everything was awash in the silver sheen of the moonlight. I looked up at the stars and watched them flashing in the night sky as well. It reminded me of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”. They really were like little diamonds in the sky.

“It’s beautiful out here tonight,” Kyle finally said in a hushed voice.

“Mmm-hmm,” I agreed. This moment, sitting by a bed of glowing coals, underneath a full moon in an alpine forest while wrapping an arm around Kyle, reminded

me why I love the wilderness so much. It almost made me forget about the bruise on my chest from Dustin smacking me earlier. Almost.

“The stars are so... elegant,” Kyle said.

“I’ve always wondered...” I let my voice trail off.

He turned to look at me. “You’ve always wondered what?”

“See how the stars flicker?” I turned to look at him, but I pointed up at the sky. I could see his face as he looked up towards the stars and moonlight, which glinted in his eyes. His expression was solemn.

“Mmm-hmm. Yupp, I see it. What about it?”

“As a kid, I used to wonder if I would ever see one flicker out. You know, not back and forth like these, but one that would vanish and not return.”

“You’re talking about witnessing the death of a star,” Kyle said, turning his head to look at me. A slight grin started to creep on his face.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“That has been on my list of hopes for a long time. I figure if I just spend enough time looking at the night sky, enough nights out here in the back country, I’ll see it one day.”

“And what would you do then?”

I had no response.

“It’s strange to think, each one of those dots up there, except for the planets I suppose, is a ball of fiery gas, burning for billions and billions of years. And one day, it all just explodes into a magnificent supernova, the grand finale for a star, sending beautiful colors and gasses throughout the cosmos.”

“Or a star can implode on itself and turn into a black hole,” I reminded him.

Kyle fell silent. Then I suddenly became very aware of the cold, and scooted a little closer to Kyle. He reached his arm around my shoulders to give me a chance to tuck mine back in and warm it up again. The wind rustled in the treetops. A shadow flew overhead, of what had to be an owl.

“Did you see that?!” Kyle whispered excitedly to me. “Did you see it?”

“Oh yeah,” I said grinning, “that had to be an owl.”

“Super cool!” He said, glancing at me and then up to grin at the sky again.

The stars twinkled invitingly as ever. I looked back down and at our campsite: A large boulder right in the middle, which we had cooked dinner and had our fire next to. To our left, up higher on the hill all the sleeping bags were lined up in one large line, everyone having chosen to sleep out under the stars. The whole thing was in a relatively small clearing, which was evident when looking up at the sky, and seeing the whole sky through the small porthole in the trees.

“What do you think happens when a star dies?” Kyle asked suddenly.

“It explodes,” I said, “you said it yourself. It explodes into magnificent colors as the gasses and heat race across time and space.”

“I know. But surely something else happens. I mean it’s the death of a star, perhaps one of the most amazing and powerful natural phenomena to exist. Doesn’t something special happen, to commemorate the existence of that star?”

“Ah, now you’re starting to think like a fantasy writer,” I teased, “I don’t think so. It’s all nature. Nature designed itself to be a system of birth and death, of creation and destruction. I don’t think destruction has to be something negative. I think it just *is*. Just

as one star dies, another is born. You remember when we were little kids, and people told us that we were made of the same stuff that stars are?”

“Stardust...” Kyle said, slowly starting grin, “yeah, I do remember. And we would run around to our friends and say, ‘guess what, we’re made up of the same stuff stars are: stardust!’”

“Mmm-hmm,” I said nodding. I rubbed the bruise on my chest. “And that’s why, in the end, it doesn’t help to hurt others, because you’re only hurting yourself.”

“But it works the other way too,” Kyle whispered, “When we help others, we help ourselves.” And he lay his head down on my shoulder.

My mind wandered briefly back to Dustin, but the instant it did, I shut him out of my mind. I wanted to enjoy the moment of coals and trees, of wind and owls and of Kyle and stars and stardust.