

Summer Camp



8812. A SUMMER CAMP AT YELLOWSTONE LAKE.

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A short story By Jesse McDaniel

“Welcome to Camp Ridgeway!”

I

The hissing coffee machine woke me up from my deep slumber. I haven't been sleeping well ever since my car accident 10 years ago. I can still feel my brain rattling in my skull. My memory has suffered. Valuable childhood memories flushed down the toilet. I remember bits and pieces of my life before my 15th birthday, but not much. Anyway, this is my life now—a parentless 25-year-old college dropout living in a studio apartment: no girlfriend, a dead-end job, and zero motivation.

God, I hate Mondays. I pry myself out of bed. I don't entertain the idea of showering or brushing my teeth. I believed no one would notice if I put on enough cologne and chewed gum. *Who am I fooling?* Like a brainless zombie, I meander to the kitchen, pour myself some coffee, and sit on a chair on the verge of breaking. I rub my eyes before entering the passcode to the phone: 1234 - *who would have guessed?* My dirty thumb smudges my cracked phone screen. I run through my mindless routine of checking emails, watching pointless YouTube videos, playing Clash of Clans, and swiping through Facebook. Former high school friends post photos of their newborn babies, new cars, or vacations, and here I am posting pictures of my two cats, Raiden and Lui Kang. I won't lie; my cats are a hundred times cuter than half of the newborn babies I see on my feed. *Trust me, I know I'm an asshole, but life turned me into one.* I think smashing your head into a windshield would turn anyone sour. I quickly stopped scrolling when a post from the Appleton Police Department caught my eye:

Samantha, age 10, has gone missing. Here is her school photo. She was last seen wearing a pink backpack, a brown, long-sleeved shirt, blue shoes, and acid-washed jeans. If you see her, please dial 911. She was last spotted walking to Cherryhill Elementary. The family has posted a \$500 reward for any information leading to her location.

Strange... That's three missing children this month and seven this year. What the hell is going on in Appleton? I lock my screen and stare into my midnight-black coffee, thinking of unanswerable questions. I felt a sense of panic that wasn't foreign to me. I unlock my phone and check the time. *Shit - it's 8:05. I'm late!*

II

I kicked the double doors open and was immediately greeted by my degenerate co-worker, Brian.

"Hey, man. You're late... Again. And you look like shit. Damn, and you smell as bad as you look."

"Don't start. You're lucky I showed up to this God-forsaken place," I said with a cheeky grin.

“No—you’re lucky because the bossman called out today. I guess something is going on with his daughter. Becca said he called the store but didn’t say much other than that his daughter’s school called him or something like that.” Brian shrugged.

“Hey - at least he won’t be on our asses for not scrubbing the grills fast enough.”
I saw the wheels turning in Brian’s head, “the last thing you need is another man on your ass,”
Brian Winked at me.

“You dick!” I replied.

I clock out 20 minutes early, leaving Brian to suffer alone and close the store. *I swear that guy is dumber than me - and that says something.* After a few attempts, my car finally turns on. My tires squeal and my engine sputters as I pull out of the parking lot. Black smoke bellows from my Rusty exhaust pipe. For some reason, I could not stop thinking about the Facebook post I read earlier this morning. *Man, this world is crawling with weirdos. Well, I mean, I’m a weirdo, but at least I’m not a creepy weirdo.* I tightly grip the steering wheel and grit my teeth. I needed something to take the edge off. I think a trip to Goodwill will do the trick.

III

Darkness befell the town. Rain rolled down my windshield, and my wipers left streaks of dirt and bird poop. My headlights provided just enough light for me to see 10 feet ahead. It did not help that it was pouring rain. Cars passing me flashed their headlights to let me know to turn mine on, but they were on, just worn out like me. I stop at a red light and look over and see Sean, my manager, taping a flier to a light pole. He looked like a shell of himself. I squint my eyes to get a better look. Raindrops splattered the flier, causing freshly typed ink to run down the page. I take my sleeve and wipe the condensation off the inside of my window. I see Sean’s daughter’s most recent school photo beneath the word “MISSING” through the fog. Streaks of ink ran down the printer paper, making it look like a river of black tears ran down her face. He ripped off a long piece of heavy-duty duct tape and wrapped the tape around the pole to secure the flier—faded fliers from different years of other missing children already occupied much of the surface area. The amount of missing children could fill an elementary classroom. It didn’t matter if the flier fell or got ripped off by tasteless teenagers because he would be there the next day and every day after that, making his rounds, taping up, and handing out fliers to anyone who would give him the time.

BEEP BEEP

My concentration broke immediately. The traffic light was now green - for how long? Long enough to piss off the guy behind me. I look in my rearview mirror and see a skinny middle finger. I slam on the gas and take a right into Goodwill with my hand out the window, returning a well-deserved middle finger. *Fuck you too, buddy.*

A screeching sound pierced my ears as the automatic doors struggled to slide open. I walk past a teenage girl watching videos on her phone at the checkout stand. I quickly scanned the book section like I'd done a thousand times before - nothing caught my eye. *What a lousy selection. Where were the murder mystery books? Oh yeah, I bought them all last week.* From across the store, I see an oak nightstand. It hypnotized me. I felt like it was waving for me to walk to it. The closer I got to its undeniable presence, the more my stomach dropped—a feeling of nervousness and curiosity washed over me. Fortunately, I could afford it. Without hesitation, I place it in my cart and head to the checkout.

“5.39. Would you like to round up to help with job training?” the uninterested teenager asked, still looking at her phone.

“No. Thank you. What's the story on this nightstand? It looks older than you, and it's scratched to hell. Cool piece, though,” I said jokingly.

The girl looked up, reaching for my credit card as my question prompted eye contact. “Oh, some creepy guy with greasy, long hair donated it. The asshole tracked mud all over the place. He walked in, didn't say a word, and set it beside me. Before he left, he turned back and winked. God, I love it here.” Her words oozed with sarcasm.

“He sounds like a lovely fellow. Enjoy your night, and don't have too much fun.” I grab the receipt, walk out, and push the cart towards my car.

IV

Drenched in sweat, I placed the nightstand in front of my door, or should I say, it slid out of my slippery hands. I unlock the door, twist the knob, and push my knee against the door—*open sesame*. I take a wet rag and wipe the dust off the nightstand's rugged surface. Red blotches were stained into the wood, impossible to erase, so I moved on and began cleaning the inside. I tugged the drawer and ripped it off its railing; it fell out, hit the floor, and landed upside down. *Sorry, downstairs neighbors*. Four broken crayons rolled across the room. I kneel and notice the coloring of two stick figures on the underside of the drawer. One is of a man, and the other is of a girl with pigtails. They were standing beside what appeared to be a lake with a few trees. It looked like a drawing proud parents would hang on their fridge. I leaned closer to see the word “help” beneath the drawing. My eyes lowered to find two more words, “Camp Rig.” I snapped a picture before tossing my phone on the bed. I picked up the crayons, set the drawer back on its rails, and slid it beside my bed.

V

My alarm screamed at me to get up. My feet hit the floor, and I felt my sheets - they were damp. Like any sane person would do, I press my nose against the sheets and take a whiff. *Phew. Not piss*. Damn, night sweats. If I have another nightmare like that, I'll never sleep again. Trying to

recall the nightmare, Glimpses of my car crash popped into my mind, transitioning from one tragic moment to the next like a slideshow. This morning, I skipped my mundane routine of mindlessly scrolling through social media, and I Google searched Camp Rig. Through my laborious investigation, I only discovered that there are more than 20 types of camping trailers. I slip my phone into my pocket, check my zipper, chug my coffee, and waddle to the door.

VI

Brian greets me as I walk into work, "What's up, man? Do you know your shirt is inside out? And talk about pit stains." Brian waved his hand before his nose. "Don't even get me started on those bags under your eyes!"

"Brian, shut up. I couldn't sleep. I've been having night terrors again. And remember those migraines I would randomly get? They're back, and every time I close my eyes, all I can see is myself falling to the bottom of the ocean," I said.

I quickly changed the subject after thinking how strange I sounded, "Is Sean in today? I saw him putting up missing fliers last night."

With a rare look of seriousness, Brian answers, "Yeah, he is. But he hasn't left his office since he got here. Come to think of it, I saw one of those fliers on my way to work - that poor bastard's daughter definitely got snatched up."

"No shit, Sherlock. What brought you to that conclusion?" I snapped. "Sorry, man, I'm just on edge. On my way home, I stopped in Goodwill and found this strange coloring on the nightstand I bought last night. Shit was weird. Here. Look." I pull out my phone and swipe to the picture.

Brian grabs my phone and studies the picture, "Help. Huh. There are some real freaks out there - I mean, who would draw creepy stick figures with the word help? And that's a 'D' not a 'G,' dummy." Brian paused. "Oh shit, that must be Camp Ridgeway! I remember going there one summer when I was a kid. I remember the dude who ran the camp; he was a real weirdo. I am surprised parents still let their kids go there."

"Camp Ridgeway," I said under my breath. *That name sounds familiar.* "Brian, I'll be right back. If Sean leaves his office, tell him I took an early lunch." I snatch my phone from Brian's hand and sprint out the door. Brian stood there stunned, with his hand still open.

VII

In 2 miles, take a left on Ridgeway Drive. Okay, thanks, Google lady.

Where the hell am I? The narrow road divided two endless seas of trees, a small, brown vein running through Mother Nature's green arm. It eventually led me to a large wooden sign covered in moss and spider webs:

Welcome to Camp Ridgeway: home away from home.

As I drive past the sign, I feel a sharp pain in my side. It felt like I was getting stabbed. My ears begin ringing, and random images of a young me swimming in a lake start flashing before my eyes. I snap out of my daze and see a battered pickup truck with the words **camp manager** in bold letters painted on the side parked in front of a cabin. A neon **Open** sign flashed intermittently on the front window. This must be the office.

I park beside the dirt-covered truck, studying the landscape from the safety of my seat. *Hell no, I'm not getting out.* I see five different trails splitting off from the main road, taking the shape of a giant handprint. At the beginning of each trail were wooden signposts with different names carved into them. Four of the trails led to a cluster of cabins in the distance. The fifth trail led to a break in the trees. I didn't know what was beyond that trail, but after further inspection, I noticed a wooden post with the words **This way to Saddlerock Lake**. I study the sign, and coming out of the mysterious woods, I see a group of five teenagers: two males and three females. They had the same conspicuous smile on their faces. The closer they got, the more I realized they looked to be in their early to mid-20s. It didn't take me long to realize that they were camp counselors; each one of them had the same tan-colored collar shirt and khaki pants. They moved almost robotically. Before they got the chance to notice me, I slid further down my seat. I look in my rearview mirror as they walk behind my car. I squinted my eyes to sharpen my focus and noticed one of their name tags. The name **Braxton** was strategically printed in bold letters on the center of his metallic name tag. *Why does he look so familiar?* Before I knew it, I saw them disappear down a different trail.

TAP TAP TAP

I jump in my seat and look over. I crank my window down.

"Can I help you?" the curious man inquired.

"Oh, I was just checking the place out. I have a nephew who might be interested in coming to summer camp here." The lie oozed out of my mouth.

"Very good! My name is Damian Ridgeway. Nice to meet you. I oversee the camp here." The man extended his hand.

I grab his clammy hand. "Yes. Nice to meet you, Sir. I love your mustache, by the way."

Why the hell did I just say that?

"Thanks! It's been growing on me." He shot me a wink.

"And yes, we are always looking for new campers. We have been hosting summer camps since the late 1940s! I've been working here for 30 years." He proudly said, "My great-grandfather built this place with his bare hands!" He lifted his hands, attempting to add depth to his bland statement. "We have some of the best camp counselors. Most of them were campers themselves when they were younger. The kids love it so much, most of them never want to leave," the man said with unbridled enthusiasm.

He leaned closer. I could smell garlic on his hot breath, and I couldn't help but notice a few fresh scratches on his right cheek. "and most of them don't! Ahh, I'm just playing. We love joking around here. It keeps us young. If you know what I mean."

I laugh nervously. "Uhh yeah. Totally. Well anyway. My nephew turns ten next year, so I'll be sure to tell him about this place. He's quite the jokester himself.

"Please do! - I'm always here and always will be!" He looked around, stretching his arms wide, admiring his domain. " Oh! I didn't catch your name."

"It's Derek, and alrighty, then. It was good meeting you," I rolled up my window. As I drove from the office, I saw him in my rearview mirror, staring at me with buggy eyes and an enigmatic smile.

There's something off about that guy. No one loves their job that much. Mr. Ridgeway, I'm sorry, but my nephew is never coming here. Over my dead body.

VIII

There was no debate; a black cloud drifted over the town of Appleton and never left. Members of the community turned their back on each other. People began locking their doors and closing their blinds, measures that seemed ridiculous before the kidnappings started. Summer was coming to an end. Most parents sent their kids to summer camps out of town because the sense of security or safety went missing along with those children. Parents were relieved to send their children back to school because being supervised decreased their chances of getting kidnapped. Parents wouldn't let their kids walk to school anymore, and they watched up to the very second they got on the bus or walked through the school's front door. This fear was warranted as the missing children were never found, not even their remains. Regardless of how much time passed, their parents never gave up. They would be seen handing out missing fliers in front of local businesses every weekend. I would even see my manager visit the location where his daughter was last seen on my drives to work. He would stare off into the distance, frozen with disbelief, probably running through every scenario of how his daughter went missing, asking himself what he could have done differently to prevent the unthinkable act. Paranoia infected every adult mind. No one was immune to the sense of worry that thickened the air.

IX

"Hey Auntie Cheryl! It smells good in here," I said as I opened her creaky door.

"Derek! You scared the life out of me! How did you get in here?" she asked.

"Uhh. Do you realize you left your door unlocked? Even after all those kids went missing, you still leave it unlocked? You're basically asking someone to come in here - stab you, steal your delicious pies, and scoop up Jasper," I said with a half-serious smile.

"Oh, stop it. You can't scare a lady who has been through two divorces and a triple bypass surgery!" she said, waving her pie cutter.

"Okay, crazy lady! I'm just saying. Ever since my manager's daughter went missing, I feared the worst. You know? Especially since Jasper was in Samantha's class.." I looked down, shaking my head.

"Listen, everything is just fine. Jasper's a smart kid. He knows how to avoid those situations," Aunt Cheryl said while plopping a piece of pie onto a plate. "Plus, we can't live in fear. That's no way to live," she asserted. "Hey, can you bring this piece of pie to Jasper? He just returned from summer camp a few days ago, and I'm sure he wants to tell you all about it." She passed me the plate.

"Of course," I said with enthusiasm. "Which camp did you send him to?"

"Let me think," She rubbed her chin, searching for the answer. "Ah, yes! A place named Camp Ridgeway. A co-worker told me about it. It seemed like a good opportunity for him to make new friends his age. Because, you know, his friends keep getting kidnapped.." She looked at my face to gauge my reaction and saw I wasn't laughing.

"Okay, too far. I get it. It was the same summer camp you went to when you were Jasper's age. if I'm not mistaken".

Did I ever go there? It's times like these when I wish my memory bank had a savings account. The blood left my face, and my stomach dropped. My mind transported me to when I met that weird dude, Damian, with his greasy mustache and onion breath. I stood frozen in time for what felt like five minutes, but just a few seconds passed before Aunt Chery snapped her fingers in front of my face, "Earth to Derek- anyone home?"

I didn't answer. The lights were on, but no one was home. I mindlessly walked down the hallway.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

"Hey Jasper, it's Uncle Derek. Can I come in?" I ask hesitantly. "Your mom made you some pie."

"What's the password?" he asked. Jasper always asked for the password, but he never told me what it was, and it always seemed to change.

"Crash Bandicoot," I said, rolling my eyes.

The door opened; I was glad my answer was satisfactory. I saw Jasper wearing a dirty yellow Camp Ridgeway shirt with his name written in permanent marker on his right sleeve, sitting on the floor building Legos. I could tell he hadn't changed his clothes since he returned from camp. *Apparently, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.* I took a few steps forward and set the plate on his dresser.

"How was camp, buddy?" I ask. "Did you have fun?". Jasper didn't know my unbridled intrigue coaxed me to study his body language as I eagerly waited for his answer. I wanted to examine how he responded and his visceral reaction to my question.

Jasper stood up, grabbed his plate, and sat back down. "It was fun, Uncle Derek," he said. "Look! We even got to do some coloring. Here is what I did," He picked up a piece of paper next to his Legos and held it up. His drawing was of stick figures standing around a campfire. "and check this out: I even found a drawing on my nightstand next to my bunk."

Jasper set down his coloring and picked up the other drawing. He held it up, "this one is better than mine; they drew cool trees around a lake! They signed their name on the back. I think someone named Brittany stole it because the name Sam was crossed out."

"Sam, huh? I wonder if they forgot it before they left. Yours is better, though." I said. "Tell me about the best part of camp, bud. I know you have some cool stories!"

He looked up at me after taking a bite of the steaming hot pie, "Well, Uncle Derek. My camp counselor, Braxton, told us scary campfire stories while we roasted marshmallows - a cool story about Saddlerock Lake."

My eyes widened, and my focus intensified, "Saddlerock Lake? Sounds awesome. What did he say about it?"

Jasper took a deep breath, "He said that the lake -"

"Jasper! It's time for soccer practice! Get your cleats on and thank Uncle Derek for visiting." Aunt Cheryl's voice cut Jasper's response in half.

God damnit, Cheryl.

X

I could not sleep when I got home from Aunt Cheryl's house. All I could think about was my conversation with Jasper and the drawing he found. The drawing looked eerily similar to the one I discovered when I bought the nightstand at Goodwill. *And what the hell was Jasper going to say about that damn lake?* It was a spooky campfire story anyway, but what if it was more than just a story? There was no way of telling. Fuck it; I am calling in sick tomorrow. *I'm losing my mind.* I need to figure out what is going on at that creepy place. I have all the puzzle pieces; I just need to put them together.

BEEP BEEP BEEP

It's eight already? I just closed my eyes. If my phone's alarm didn't wake me, I'm sure my splitting headache would have—another terrible night's sleep. I rose from my damp bed sheets - presumably from sweat - and grabbed my phone. I stared at my nightstand and couldn't help but think about the poor child who colored a picture in the drawer, crying for help. I had a responsibility to help - no matter what it took. Finally, I felt I had a purpose - something I could live for. I could make a difference for once in my life.

Halfway down the hall, I unlocked my phone, and my heart sank. I nearly dropped it when I saw nine missed calls, 30 texts, and four voicemails from my Aunt Cheryl. Without hesitation, I called her. It didn't even ring twice before she answered.

"Oh my god, Derek. Jasper is gone," She cried.

I couldn't find the words. It felt like the wind got knocked out of me.

"Derek! Did you hear what I said? Jasper is fucking gone!" Her sadness turned to anger.

"What the hell happened? Did you call the police?" I asked calmly.

"What do you think? She snapped. "When his practice finished, he was talking with some of his friends. I told him I would be in the car. I waited and waited. I went looking and found his soccer cleat."

I searched for the words to say, knowing nothing would ease her pain, "I am so sorry, Aunt Cheryl. I think I might know where he is. I will call you later."

"Ashton! Wai-" I hung up before she could finish.

Great. Now, my Aunt will be just another parent hanging up missing fliers on every light post in town, sticking them next to all the others, and spending every waking moment thinking about 'what-ifs.' On the bright side, Samantha and Jasper will have their photos next to each other. I'm putting an end to this. I am going to that wretched place: Camp Ridgeway.

Immediately after hanging up on my Aunt Cheryl, I called Brian.

"What do you want, fuckface?" I could sense Brian was sporting a grin.

"Brian, tell Sean I can't make it in today. I have something I need to do." Before he could respond, I hung up and slid my phone into my pocket. *Man, I'm getting good at this hanging-up thing.*

I pass the distressed **Camp Ridgeway** signpost and park a few hundred yards from the main cabin. I sit in my car, giving myself a pep talk. I grip the steering wheel so hard that the veins in my forearms make a guest appearance. After building enough courage, I reach back and grab my backpack from the backseat. I quietly close my car door, walk off the main dirt road, and nearly sprain my ankle, stepping over a ravine. *I shouldn't have worn my low-top Converse, but fashion kills, right?* I slither through the woods. Branches scraped and clawed at me as I walked past each tree, almost like they warned me to turn back.

After about a hundred yards, I crouch and rest behind an old oak tree. I sling off my backpack, which I kept from high school. I slowly unzip it and reach in, feeling around for my binoculars after scooting old pencils and erasers to the side. I press the binoculars against my bloodshot eyes so hard they leave perfect circles on my face. I scanned the landscape for any signs of life, and I noticed that there were not any cars or trucks parked in front of the office. I waited a few minutes to ensure no one would cross my field of vision. There was not a soul in sight. I didn't see anyone, but I could notice that the air around me felt heavy and polluted with an indescribable dark energy. I creep toward the main cabin like a soldier walking through a minefield. The aged wood creaked as I stepped on each stair. I didn't know what I was looking for, but if any place had answers, it would be Damian's office. The open sign was flickering, but an **out-to-lunch** sign was hanging on the wooden door.

I pressed my face against the front window. No one was in there; if they were, they were incredibly good at hiding. I turn the door knob. *Damn*: locked. I take my utility knife out and jam the blade in the keyhole. I wiggle it back and forth and hear a click. I'm in. *Thank god for YouTube tutorials.* I open the door and take out my flashlight in one motion. I slowly wave my light back and forth, examining the room's contents. Nothing seemed unusual - just a snack bar, cash register, camp merchandise hanging on the wall, and racks with brochures and maps. My flashlight illuminated a bulletin board with a schedule for the last week of camp:

Monday:

BBQ
Archery
egg toss
trust falls
Bonfire
Arts and crafts
Swimming

The following days repeated the same activities. I moved my flashlight to the back of the lobby and noticed a door. I walked closer and saw a sign with the words **Damian Ridgeway - Summercamp Manager** just above the door's trimming. I tried the door, and it was unlocked. I took a deep breath and cautiously stepped into what seemed to be a portal to hell.

There was no way I was going to flip the light switch on and expose myself. I shine my flashlight across the room, looking for anything to help me find Jasper. It looked like your typical cabin office: nothing on the walls except a few taxidermy mounts of deer and a bear hyde hanging on the wall. I looked at the taxidermied deer's eyes, and I could tell that those marbled eyes had seen something pure evil - a man so heinous and horrible.

I walk to the desk nestled in front of the window. I pulled out the chair and sat on a still-warm seat. I took notice of a folder on the left side of the desk. "Summer Camp Photos" was written on it in red marker. I grab the folder, place it in front of me, flip it open, and see a stack of 8x12 photos. Each picture was of all the campers and staff standing in front of Saddlerock Lake from each year the camp has been running - from 1945 to 2024. Below each picture were the names of campers and where they were standing in the photo. I thumb through each year's photo. I noticed something peculiar when flipping through the years in succession: it was impossible to ignore that a few names and camper's faces were circled in each photo. It did not make much sense to me. *Why were they circled? Were these the campers who stood out for being leaders during camp?*

Out of nowhere, my Aunt Cheryl's voice penetrated my brain; the words she said to me yesterday raddled inside my skull: "It was the same summer camp you went to when you were Jasper's age. if I'm not mistaken". *Did I really go to this camp?* If she hadn't said anything, there was no way I would have remembered due to the brain damage I suffered when I had my car crash. This subtle reminder intensified my search for answers. I reached the photo from 2009 and brought it closer to my face after moving the camp photo from 2008 to the left side of the open folder. I examined it so closely I could almost vacuum the dust with my nose. I scanned each camper's face, and what do you know - I was at the bottom left with my crooked smile, high-knee swim trunks, and curly blonde hair. I examined the list of names below the picture and saw that names were circled like all the other camp photos. The circled face and name that stuck out was Leonardo Kelly's. Like a truck, I was hit with a flashback of Leonardo and me swimming in Saddlerock Lake. I recalled how terribly cold the water was that day. A flurry of missing memories was resurfacing - memories drowned out for many years. I close my eyes and dig deeper into the depths of my fractured past. I remember Leo being one of my best friends. We were inseparable. We both came from broken homes and shared the sad similarity that we were adopted. I couldn't have asked for a better next-door neighbor. He was two trailers down from me. A few weeks after camp ended, I looked forward to another mischievous school year with my best friend. When I walked into class, I looked around and didn't see Leo. *We needed to sit next to each other again.* Before class started, I asked my teacher where he was, and she said he moved across the state. I couldn't believe it because he would have at least told me. My eyes shot open.

While examining Leo's face, I couldn't help but think about one of the camp counselors I saw the day I drove here a few months back. I think his name is Braxton or Brady or something like that. Let's go with Braxton. I remember seeing that he had the same scar on his cheek that Leo had. I was with Leo the morning he flew over his handlebars and fucked up his face on our way to school... but how did Braxton have that same scar. I don't remember many things, but that is one detail my brain wanted me to revisit. Now that I think of it, when Braxton was walking from the clearing in the woods, he had the same limp as Leo. Leo was bowlegged, and so was this guy... *None of this makes sense*. I had goosebumps the second I entered this place, skin so bumpy a blind person could read the phrase "scared shitless" using braille.

When I got to the 2023 camp photo, I instantly recognized a girl in the image. It didn't take me long to realize it was Samantha: that poor girl who was abducted on her way to school. Her name and face were circled. My hands started shaking. My vision blurred as tears flowed off my face like liquid bombs dropping on an unprovoked town. The photo that shattered my world soaked up a downfall of grief-stricken teardrops. Her face was not the only one circled, but it was the only name I could recall; three other innocent children were trapped inside the confines of a red permanent marker.

I picked up the last photo from this last summer, 2024, and pushed the others to the side. Jasper's face was circled. My sweet nephew's face sported an enthusiastic smile, eyes filled with hope and promise. I'm sure those same eyes are filled with fear and uncertainty.

That mother fucker. I slam my fist on the table, creating a mini earthquake that scatters pencils and paper clips across the desk.

XI

CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH.

What the hell was that? I quickly slid off the chair and ducked below the window. I slowly lift my head above the bottom of the window. I see Damian carrying Jasper, walking past the Saddlerock Lake sign. I'm not sure what Damian did to Jasper, but he was completely knocked out - limp. I let them wander a bit further before leaving the office. I waited a few moments before crouching through the lobby and out the door.

I strategically tip-toed behind them, keeping a reasonable distance. My strides are light, and my breathing is heavy. I could feel my heart pound against my ribcage like the SWAT team breaking a door down. As I stepped, I felt a twig break beneath my foot, breaking the stagnant silence. Damian came to a stop. He whipped his head around. Before he could notice me, I tossed my backpack, laid flat on the ground, and quickly rolled into some bushes to the right of the dirt path. My shirt tore from the armpit to the collar. It felt like a million fire ants were crawling all over my skin and biting me hellishly—*oh great, damn poison ivy*.

I keep my distance after pulling leaves out of my hair and dusting myself off. A sharp pain ran through my right leg. I notice a deep cut on my thigh, parting like the Red Sea. I start limping, dragging my foot, creating a perfect wake of dirt and mud. Damian stopped about 15 feet from the end of the dock that extended into Saddlerock Lake. He lowered Jasper gently to the ground. I saw Damian's chest rise. He sucked in the ominous air and released it, contaminating the innocent environment. He fixed his gaze on the motionless lake. The water was as still as me. I stood frozen behind a tree, peaking around its large base.

Damian took a few more steps away from Jasper's immobile body, standing at the edge of the dock. He began muttering to himself just loud enough for me to hear. I tried to make out what he was saying, but his words were not English. *It sure as hell wasn't Spanish, either.* He reached into his pocket and pulled out a mason jar filled with a white powder. The small mason jar looked withered and appeared to be riddled with age. I took my binoculars and honed in on a decaying label wrapped around the yellowing glass. His hand covered half of the label, so the only word I could ascertain was "memory." He unscrewed the lid, taking a few more steps to the edge of the dock. He flipped over the jar and spread the powder into the lake, shaking it viciously. Once the jar was empty, he set it down on the dock. The water began thrashing violently, creating woeful waves. The once peaceful lake slowly transitioned into ripples of rage. The dark blue sky faded, taking on a color of grizzly gray. Damian turned around and picked up Jasper. He stepped closer to the edge with Jasper's blameless body.

"What the fuck are you doing with him?" I screamed with conviction.

Damian stopped in his tracks, whipping his head around so fast his greasy hair flung sweat.

"Ahhh, Derek. It's Derek, right? Fancy seeing you here. Aren't you too old to come to a summer camp for kids? Daniam radiated unbridled enthusiasm.

I disregard his condescending question. "Put him down right now!" I demanded indignantly. Were you about to drown him? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Of course not. Now, what use would he be if I killed him? I'm doing something far more special; I will just wash him off - a baptism if you will. Now that I think about it, I should've done this to you in the summer of 2009, but your friend was a much better choice." He smirked.

"What do you mean? You should have done what? And what friend? Are you talking about Leo? What did you do to him?" I wailed.

"You haven't figured it out yet? Man, that car crash must've really knocked that smooth brain around in your thick skull." He laughed. "Let's just say Leo, or should I say Braxton, has trouble remembering things himself."

"I fucking knew it. You're manipulating old campers, brainwashing them, and changing their identity so that they can be your slaves at this ungodly place." I pointed my finger at him, shooting him an ice-cold stare.

"Bingo. I wouldn't call them slaves, though, more like devout helpers. Thanks to this lake, all of this is possible. It's a beautiful thing. Isn't it?" He professed. "Oh, and tell your manager that Sam says hi. Well, Sam is her old name. I think I'll call her Brittany. Good name, huh?"

I could tell that he sensed my bewilderment.

"But don't worry, she and the newbies are getting along just fine," He continued. "They even get to bunk with each other!"

"You won't get away with this, you twisted asshole," I snapped, walking closer to him.

"Don't get any closer. You wouldn't want to interrupt the ritual. We are just getting to the good part," He said mockingly.

I stood there stunned. My daze broke as I saw Jasper's eyes slowly open.

Jasper slowly turned his head toward me and lowered an eyelid, shooting me a wink. His lips started to move, forming the words: "crash bandicoot."

Not more than a second later, he lifted his arm and jammed his thumb in Damian's eye. Jasper's sharp nail sliced his eye open, producing a gelatinous excretion. Shocked and disoriented, Damian lost his balance and dropped Jasper on the wooden planks. Damian stumbled back, losing control of his balance, and fell backward. Before his pacified body hit the water, his head smashed into the side of the dock. I hobble over to Jasper and scoop him up using all my strength. I turned and saw a mixture of murky water and blood coating the lake's surface like a red soup skin. Damian's lifeless body descended deeper into the very lake he worshipped and used for his maniacal acts.

"Are you okay, buddy? Did he hurt you?" I said, looking into his tormented eyes.

"I am Uncle Derek. He did, but I'm okay because I'm with you now."

I caressed his head and pulled him closer to my chest. "I'm proud of you. You were fearless doing what you did. You don't ever have to worry about him anymore. Now, let's leave this place and never look back."

"Roger that, Uncle Derek," Jasper said softly. "Oh, and you can put me down now". He laughed with labored breath.

As we approached the opening in the trees, we saw a cabin 100 feet off the trail to our right. Beams of light were shooting from the cabin's windows. We slowly walked to the side of the cabin and looked through the window. *Holy shit. Is that Samantha?* The girl sat in a circle playing duck duck goose with six other children. She seemed utterly oblivious to the chaos that transpired near the lake. I lifted Jasper so he could confirm my suspicion.

"That's her. That's Samantha. I see Devon and Isiah, too! They were classmates of mine," he whispered.

I lowered him to the ground quietly. His small feet gently reached the ground. A sense of hope and victory coursed through my depleted body, giving me the energy to make it to the car. I pulled Jasper's hand and led him back to the safety and warmth of the inside of my conspicuous hooptie. I opened his door, and he slid into the passenger seat.

I fell into the driver's seat, letting out a sigh of relief. I looked over. 'I guess your Uncle isn't such a loser after all'.

"Hey, I never thought you were a loser. Just because my mom says so doesn't mean it's true!" Jasper smirked.

"Watch what you say. We both know your mom talks out her ass". I gave him a friendly punch on his shoulder.

We both laughed. I flicked on the headlights, cutting up the darkness. As the engine squealed, my car shook like a coatless child in the cold. It was on its last leg—another thing my car and I have in common. My tires spun vigorously to find traction, kicking dirt into the crisp air. I pulled my phone out of my pocket as we passed a sign that read: **See you next summer! Yeah, right. Not even if hell freezes over.**

"Alright. Uncle Derek needs to make a few calls."

RING RING RING

"911. what's your emergency?"

"Yes, hi. You know those missing kids?" I rhetorically asked. I think I know where you can find them."

"And where would that be, sir?" the doubting voice implored.

"Camp Ridgeway," I said, deepening my breath, "in a cabin 100 yards from Saddlerock Lake".

"And how do you —" I hung up before she could finish her question.

Just before entering the town of Appleton, I see flashing red and blue lights in the distance, heading toward us. A few moments later, three cop cars zoomed past us.

“Jasper, I know what happened on the dock was terrible, but Mr. Ridgeway was an evil man. In this world, bad things can happen to good people, which isn't fair, but when bad things happen to bad people, the sun seems to shine a little brighter”—the heavy words oozed from my lips.

“Uncle Derek, are we bad people?” he asked innocently.

“Everyone has a choice to make. There is good and bad in all of us, but the difference between us and Mr. Ridgeway is that we choose to be good.” I said as I lifted my right hand off the steering wheel and set it on Jasper's shoulder.

”so, to answer your question, we are good people, and although a bad thing happened, that won't change who we are and how we treat people.” I answered. “I love you, bud. Now, let's get you home to your crazy mom. I'm sure she misses you. Maybe”

Jasper cracked a smile and nodded his head as we drove into the horizon.