

J O E S I X P A C K

***SISTERS
FOR THE
SUMMER***

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



2007 Paperback Edition

Introduction, story text, design & cover © 2007.
All rights reserved.

The body text is printed in New Caledonia.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part,
or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form
or by any means without written permission.

Printed in the United States of America.

joe@sixpacksite.com
www.sixpacksite.com

CAMP COUNSELING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No shit, lady." Brock replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This the kitchen?" He asked.

"Mess hall." She responded.

"Where's the kitchen, then?"

"Inside."

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

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

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

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

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

“Fuck nature.” He said to himself.

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

God, he hated them a *lot*.

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

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

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

“I’m Arianna.” She said.

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

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

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



“Hey, you’d better be nice to me. My daddy’s rich!” She pouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arianna lost her balance, she was laughing so hard.

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

“Hey!” She was angry all of the sudden. “Eww! That’s so gross! You’re mean!”

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

“What’s your problem, anyway?” He cracked. “You stupid?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Welcome to Jelly Bean cabin!”

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

Arianna smiled. “I lied.”

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

“The fuck...?” He snarled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rape!" She yelled, quietly.

Brock hesitated.

"Rape!" She yelled a little louder.

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

"Rrrrrr..." Arianna started.

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

The block of wood fell out.

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

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

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

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

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

"Stand up!" Arianna said again.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The kid was confused. “Lady?”

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

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

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

“What?” Brock shouted.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shit!” He yelled. “Goddamn it!”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go?" Brock said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



proached.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

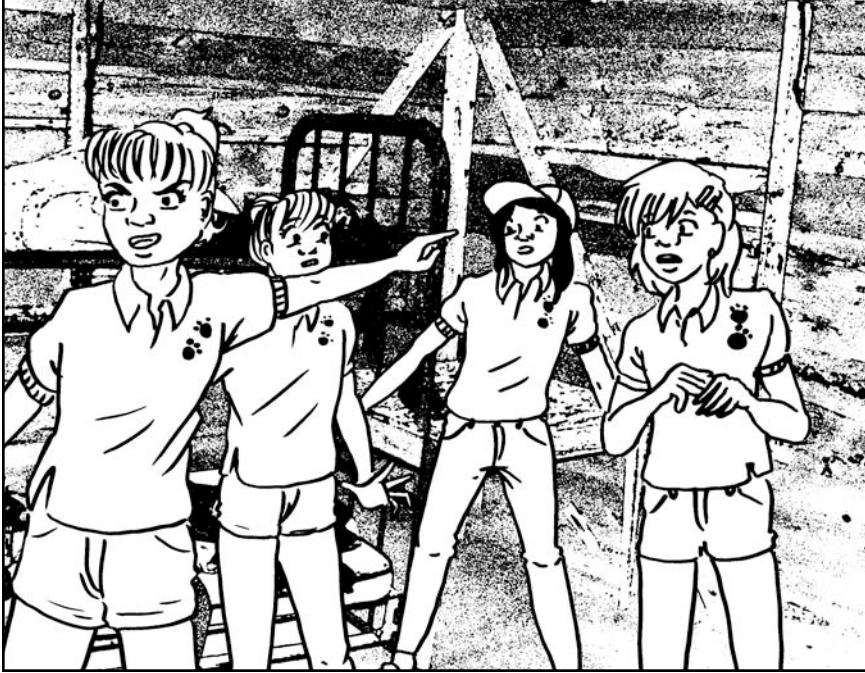
Brock froze up solid.

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

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

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

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



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

“Ms. Purcell, they’re her clothes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arianna blocked her attempts gracefully. “Brittany.”

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

“She’s transferring.” Arianna said coolly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who are you?" Arianna asked the girl.

"Shelley." She replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Great.” Brock said causticity.

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



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

“Here!” a voice said in the room.

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

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

“Arianna Whittington.” The instructor called.

“Here!” Arianna called out.

“Of the Southampton Whittingtons?” The woman inquired.

Arianna smiled smugly. “Uh-huh.”

“Very good.” She replied.

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

“Brittany Whittington!”

...leave or possibly even sneak out.

Arianna kicked Brock in the shins.

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

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

“Last call for Brittany Whittington!”

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

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

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

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

"You think of everything." Brock said coldly.

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

"Hey, just what is your name anyway?"

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

"It's..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brock squinted at her. "Huh?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Fuck off." Brock said.

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

Brock kept on walking.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

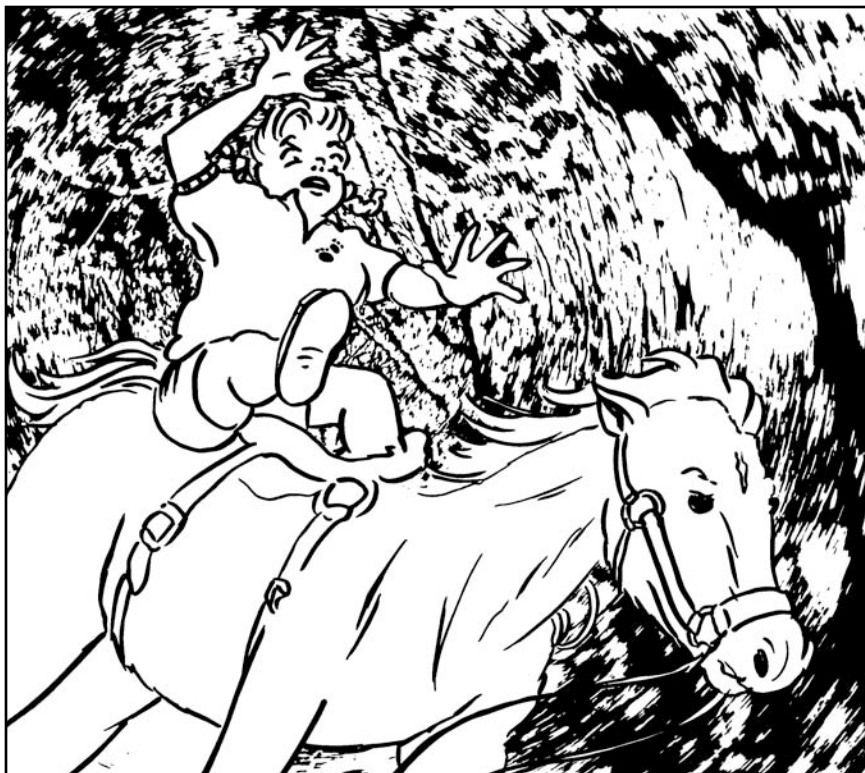
It then found a break in the gates, and charged out of the pen at top speed, and into the woods that surrounded the camp. Brock was losing his grip slowly but surely, and it wasn't long before he was thrown to the ground. He hit the ground awkwardly. In agony, Brock rolled over, trying to take the weight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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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