

# **Hollow**

**Book 1 of The  
Blackbird Trilogy**

**BY: Stacy Walsh**

**Warning: Reading ahead in this book will ruin the story. If you are the type of reader who likes to flip through the chapters to see what's coming—don't. The chapter headings at the end will spoil the mystery. Thanks and happy reading!**

***\*\*\*\*dedicated to my mom, who inspired me in my youth, who roots for me still, and who never sent me away to camp; just look what could have happened.***

## Prologue

It rises up from the woods as though the trees themselves have created the structures they are now trying to reclaim. Rusty, broken, brown buildings dot the valley in this quiet and secluded space in the middle of America. Just feet away from a seldom-used trail, the pieces of a former existence remain, standing stoic and silent in a rarely seen area just outside of the community of Clearwater Springs, Missouri. One could simply walk for a mere twenty minutes and find oneself back amongst the busy and buzzing living. Racing people and packed attractions reside right next to this space of birds, bugs, silence, and, of course, memories. What happened here? Some of the remaining structures are still entirely intact. Some are even complete with several bunks pushed up against the wall. A few small twin beds still sport old brown-stained sheets and flat pillows that look like someone has recently been resting their tired skull on them. Indentations from long-forgotten campers, possibly, or another kind of forgotten populace, squatters, and the unhoused that may make this area their home. They never stay long, though; even those desperate for shelter can feel the suffocating presence of loss here. The structures closest to the moderate-sized man-made lake have borne the brunt of the destruction. They sag and moan as though declaring how hard life can be when you want to maintain appearances. They

sway in the breeze as though they are moments from crumbling, much like their ever-striving human counterparts who cling to such shallow beliefs. The laughter of the few brave souls that wander just feet from the safety of the trail to explore this lost world can be heard bouncing off the sides of the deep valley. The nervous giggles of the daring echo through the air, much like the screams that destroyed this camp twenty years ago must have. The past lives here. Many may want the past to stay exactly there, erased and extinguished, removed from our consciousness so we no longer need to justify not wanting to hear the painful stories it can tell. Not everyone wants to listen to what the land wants to share. Especially when peace is not what has burrowed down within this soil; pain has. The broken-down archway that once heralded the beginning of a new and exciting chapter in one's life now squats, barely big enough to be acknowledged, much less excited by. It only took one bent-up soul to turn this happy place into what it has now become. A place that wanted to make dreams come true produced a nightmare. At the top of the archway, if you look closely enough, you can make out the name of what was once a shinier and happier version of itself. A name that now conjures shivers of disgust and revulsion instead of the joy that was intended. Welcome to Blackbird Hollow, the camp that didn't mean to become what it became, but it became it all the same. It will still beckon to those who pass by it,

with its mystery and loneliness. But no one stays long. You can feel it once the novelty of the emptiness of this place wears off. There's a chill in the air surrounding these woods, even in the heat of summer. Blackbird Hollow wants to tell you a story, even if you don't want to hear it. But maybe, if you sit and really pay attention, then the peace that should be here can return. Just listen.

# PART 1

## CAMP BLACKBIRD HOLLOW

SUMMER 1989

**List of Characters:**

Campers:

*Norah*

*Val*

*Travis*

*Dane*

*Ashley*

Counselors:

*Jennifer*

*Ash*

*Barbie*

*James*

Owners/ Staff:

*Nancy*

*Charles*

*Sal*

**Excerpt from Ozark Mountain News Live  
Broadcast**

**August 15th, 1989**

**BREAKING NEWS**

*Good evening, folks. We start our broadcast with breaking news from local Camp Blackbird Hollow. Multiple emergency vehicles have been dispatched to the area this morning. One officer spoke off the record with our correspondent that they received a 911 call requesting emergency assistance sometime around seven a.m. this morning. Our source says Sheriff Brynon is not yet releasing much information, other than a statement saying there has been a death at the beloved camp run by the Stinton family for the past several years and that the death is being ruled a homicide. Our correspondent reported that the sheriff has advised all news personnel to give them space and that he will hold a press conference later to reveal more details. For now, the sheriff released a statement saying that there is no immediate threat and that they have a suspect in custody. Our correspondent relayed to us here at the news desk that the mood around the camp was somber and that they observed multiple officers struggling to process what they had seen, with at least one officer running to nearby trees to vomit. Speculation is running rampant that whatever they discovered at camp was, at the very least, a grizzly scene. And one that we are unaccustomed to here in*

*Clearwater Springs, Missouri. Rest assured, we will update you as soon as more information about this story becomes available.*

**June 5th, 1989**

**Dear Diary,**

*Where do I begin? I'm on a foreign bed in a foreign place, writing my thoughts in the diary my mom tucked into my suitcase before I left home this morning. It's weird 'talking' to no one, writing my feelings in a book, but maybe it will help me process some of the relatively new experiences in my life now. I think my mom knew I wasn't exactly thrilled to be carted out of the house and onto a bus heading to a camp I had never heard of, so she sat me down and handed me this journal all in the name of 'getting my feelings out on paper'. So here are some of those ever-important feelings. I'm in this strange new place because my dad invited the new youth minister from our church to stay with us over the summer, not that my parents exactly disclosed that he was the actual cause for my abrupt departure to me, however. This stranger in our home would have likely been okay if, once the minister arrived, he had been able to tear his gaze away from my chest for more than a few seconds at a time. I saw my dad's jaw tense and my mom start to fluster and flit about the minute I walked into the living room, yelling that I was heading outside to ride my bike. Youth minister Timothy had just arrived, and my parents were welcoming him with a chat and a glass of tea in our living room. The new minister, seeking guidance from my dad, the preacher of our church, got up way too enthusiastically to greet me, and I don't think*

*he ever once looked past my neck. It made me feel weird, much like so many new things are making me feel weird this summer. If I'm being honest, it started two summers ago.*

*When I first saw the blood in my underwear. My mom thought we could celebrate my becoming a woman and dealing with 'the curse' that I would now forever be saddled with by going to get this new swimsuit I had seen in a magazine and had become somewhat obsessed with. It's what happened after my swimsuit debut that caused me such discomfort. My best friend from next door, Jacob, and I decided to run through the sprinkler in the backyard. I remember not feeling self-conscious at all about wearing my new, I guess slightly more revealing, suit. It was how my dad looked at me when he got home and saw Jacob and me outside splashing and laughing in the water. There was something in his eyes that suddenly made me feel ashamed, and I still am not sure what it was I saw there that made it clear to me that I was not to run about with abandon anymore. I just remember running to my room, sending Jacob home, and taking off that swimsuit never to be worn again. Then the hushed voices behind my parents' bedroom door began later that night. The next morning, my mom was applying a fresh layer of foundation to hide the bruise on her cheek. I can still see the desperation in her eyes as she attempted to conceal this new badge of victimhood from those she might encounter through the day. I didn't*

want to see it myself, if I'm being honest. I didn't want to believe that the man who led the sermons and, up until that summer, had given me horseback rides and tickle fights, could hit someone he claimed to love. So I went along with the story that was being told to me. My mom ran into the bathroom door overnight while trying to find the toilet in the dark. But, since this diary is secret, according to my mom, and I can share anything here, I might as well admit that I never really believed that story. And while I'm being honest, I will admit that the steady withdrawal of my own father from my life these past two years has hurt. He looks at me now like I'm something to be monitored or controlled or solved, something that he can barely conceal his distaste for. How did I become something my father didn't like anymore?

But my father looking at me with that mix of slight disgust and fear isn't what got me on a bus and into an albeit cute but unfamiliar cabin, it was young preacher 'ogle my boobs.' At least I can find the humor in it. My mom found out about Camp Blackbird Hollow from another mom at church. A mom who told her it was the best thing that happened to her child, who is now almost a senior at our local high school. She told my mom her son's two years at Camp Blackbird Hollow changed him. I'm not sure what it is about me that needs changing, but maybe I'll find it here. At this camp nestled in a remote valley, among nature and about forty or so more kids my

*age from around this general area, somewhere in the middle of America. My mom sold it to me as if it was going to be the time of my life on our two-hour drive to the pickup location. Once we got there, I looked around at the other kids being shuttled by either distracted, vacant, or fussing parents onto the bus that would take us another four hours into the Ozark Mountains. An area I've been told is not only scenic but rich in history. I've never heard of it. But now that I'm here, I might as well make the best of it. I already made a friend. This girl who is sharing my cabin with me and happens to be my bunkmate, named Valerie, but I can call her Val. She sort of saved me from crying when my other cabin mates sized me up, found me lacking in some way, and decided to make a joke at my expense. Val seems really cool, and at least there is someone here who is more like me. She doesn't seem to have the same cruel streak that the other three girls in this cabin have, anyway. Thank God I met someone to hang out with, hopefully, it will make my summer away from the safety of my own home tolerable. Well, that's it for now. I have to find a safe hiding place for this journal, and Val just told me we should go check out the 'haunted lake' before heading to eat dinner. I'm going to just hold out hope that this summer turns out to be amazing instead of terrifying. Hello Camp Blackbird Hollow! I'm here now, for better or worse.*

*Love, Norah*

## Chapter 1: Norah June 5th, 1989

The bus seat felt simultaneously slimy and hot under Norah's thighs. She found herself slipping around on the seat repeatedly as the yellow bus bounced its way down the potholed road towards her new home for the summer. She crossed her arms in an attempt to control some of the jiggling she could feel due to the unkempt road beneath her that had no regard for how the bouncing would interfere with her fragile comfort. She could feel some of the boys' eyes on her as her somewhat newly acquired breasts bounced around embarrassingly in the loose bra she decided to go with instead of her sturdy sports bra. She resigned herself to her rigid posture, since she couldn't exactly go back in time and make another clothing choice. Luckily, Blackbird Hollow was less than five minutes away. She could feel her chest vibrating with nerves, fear, and just a touch of excitement.

Norah has never been away to camp before. She has really never even spent much time away from home in her thirteen years of living. She prefers the comfort of her own bedroom, so she tends to shy away from requests from even her closest friends for a sleepover. On more than one occasion, she has heard her mother describe her as precocious to the occasional visitor to their home from their congregation. She knows what her mom really means, is that Norah at times seems

painfully shy. She typically prefers time spent with books, nature, and animals, with only minimal time spent with her increasingly limited and carefully selected friends. Her Dad has become much more strict about exactly *who* she can spend time with anymore. For example, she is now to limit her time with her longtime friend, Jacob, from next door. Norah figures it has to do with the last time he came over; he looked at her a little too long, with a gaze just south of her face. Much like how some of the men at church look at her, with a combination of what she would describe as intense focus, coupled with a hint of shame. But none have been as obvious about it as their new youth minister, Timothy, whose eager gaze precipitated the very adventure she is on now.

Norah looks around the bus at her fellow campers, trying to find at least *one* person who might seem similar to her. Shy, a little uncomfortable with themselves, a little excitable, but smart enough to know when to rein it in. She smiles at another girl on the bus who is also checking out her surroundings, but not engaging with them. As the other soon-to-be campers squeal and loudly chat each other up with no thought of containing their excitement, Norah and the mystery girl just take it all in. She's the only other camper who has made eye contact with her, other than the cute boy diagonally across from her, who smiled at her kindly

after the other, not-so-cute boy commented on her bouncing breasts.

As the bus squeals to a jumpy stop on the rutted gravel road, Norah takes a deep breath in as she begins to get up from her seat, grab her backpack and small suitcase from the floor in front of her, and make her way outside of the steamy bus. The air smells sweet as her feet hit the dirt road where the bus has come to a stop. Coming from the overheated bus full of teenage sweat and hormones, the smell of evergreens, soil, and fresh air is a welcome change.

The other campers begin gathering around, jostling and awkward with heavy bags and expectant minds. Before them is a huge sign reading “Blackbird Hollow: home of Lake Arrowhead Adams, adventure and fun.” Norah smiles despite her nerves. There is something special about the kind of fear that comes with the unknown. She does her best to embrace the fear as excitement as she gets her first look at Camp Blackbird.

The entrance is a large archway made from some kind of sturdy wood. Maybe from the oak trees that dot the valley surrounding the camp. Under the archway is a lush landscape of well-tended grass with a trail of packed dirt winding its way through it. The first building Norah sees resembles a small ranch house and features the words “Camp Leaders” and the last name Stinton carved into a placard above the door.

At the entrance of the camp stand four kids who she guesses are still teenagers, even though they are much older than she is. The one that seems to be in charge and is currently clearing her throat is what she would describe as scary gorgeous. The kind of person you would see and immediately look away from in fear that you might forget not to stare with your mouth agape at her beauty. Her shiny black hair falls in Farrah Fawcett waves down to her butt, and she has the posture and body of someone confident enough to know *exactly* how she appears.

“Hello campers!” she yells over the crowd. Not all the campers are as besotted as Norah, as they are still talking loudly and fidgeting with their luggage. Another of the older kids puts his fingers in his mouth and emits an ear-piercing whistle to get the attention of the kids who have all jostled off the bus and are currently too full of energy to quiet down.

The crowd of young kids and counselors alike cover their ears but do indeed fall silent after he’s done. A small giggle escapes the pretty brunette at the front, which in turn gives the young campers all permission to snicker as well. The laugh contains a bit of nerves and is short-lived, as now none of them wants to be subjected to the headache-inducing whistle once again.

“Now that we um, have your attention, I guess,” the girl begins again. “Welcome! We are so happy you are all here! First, I’m going to introduce you all to the

four of us. We will be your camp counselors this summer, and we will be the ones you turn to for most of your needs. The camp owners will introduce themselves at our first dinner tonight. They live on-site and are always available to you if you need anything! But please come directly to the counselor who has been assigned to you first if you can.” She claps her hands and smiles as she looks around at the young expectant faces.

“My name is Jennifer, and I will be the lead for cabins one and two.” She steps back slightly and gestures at the pretty, but not as pretty, bubbling blonde twirling her hair behind her. “This is Barbie. She will be in charge of cabins three and four. As you might have guessed, cabins one through four are the girls’ cabins, and they are just up a ways on your left as you wind through camp.” She gestures down the trail, where Norah can just make out small cabins, all lined up, with little front porches and picture windows.

On the other side of the trail is a large house, which Jennifer explains is where the counselors sleep, and behind that are four smaller cabins. Cabins five through eight are where the boys will stay, separated from the girls by the large house in the center and a bridge that connects the sides from a small creek that runs between the main cabins. Likely a creek that leads to the lake mentioned on the welcome sign.

“This handsome man to my left is James.” Jennifer gestures to the good-looking, clean-cut boy right

beside her, who quieted the campers with his shrieking whistle just moments before. “James will be in charge of cabins five and six. And our resident class clown,” She gestures to another well-built guy behind her, this one just as handsome but with a look of mischief on his face. “This is Ash. He will be in charge of cabins seven and eight. Now, we will let all of you know which cabin you will be in and, therefore, which counselor will be your lead in just a few moments. Remember, your main counselor is your *first* point of contact, but we are all here to support you, as well as the rest of the staff. So reach out to any one of us when needed. Before you get cabin assignments, let’s leave your bags just up here to my left, and we’ll take a quick tour of your new home for the next several weeks.”

Jennifer and the rest of the counselors help the kids move their many bags to the shade of a large oak tree, and then they patiently wait for all the campers to congregate once again in front of them. Norah can’t get over how green everything is here at camp. It’s not like she has never seen a tree before; she lives in the suburbs, and there are trees everywhere. But the trees here are just so much taller and broader. They make her crane her neck back just to see the top of them. The valley that the camp resides in looks like something out of a fairytale, complete with the cute little cabins that dot around the space.

Jennifer and the other counselors lead the kids towards the large structure directly in front of them, up on a slight rise. They're told this is the mess hall, where the kids will have all their meals and participate in various fun activities throughout the summer. She introduces them to a small, petite, yet stern-looking woman named Sal, who merely grunts at the new arrivals as Jennifer explains that Sal will be the main chef for the camp and that 'she makes the best chocolate chip cookies you'll ever taste.'

The rest of the campground consists of two large shower and bathroom houses near a small laundry house towards the back of camp, and a small shack on the impressively large lake that stores canoes, life jackets, and other equipment for campers to use when they go swimming. Just a few feet from the lake is an area with a large pit for firewood and several long benches surrounding it. Jennifer explains that is where they'll enjoy s'mores and ghost stories, including the story of the family who settled this land and helped create the lake affectionately known as Lake Arrowhead Adams.

Jennifer tells the campers that their first night by the fire will likely be later this week, and that the counselors will share the terrifying story about the Adams family and what became of them. All she tells them, for now, is that the family who sold this land to the grandparents of the current owners many years ago left a

mark on this place, and some believe that Mr. Adams himself may haunt the lake on the land he once farmed.

Norah also notices a nature trail that snakes around the lake, and Jennifer let the campers know they were allowed to explore that area so long as they didn't wander into the surrounding woods or up any of the steep hills around the camp. Judging by the height of the hills that enclose the camp, Norah guesses that most of the kids here wouldn't be attempting to climb to the top, no matter how tempting.

By the time all the girls had separated from the boys for cabin assignments, Norah was very ready to get settled, maybe even rest, and write in her new journal that her mom had encouraged her to use before she left. Norah knew she would feel more comfortable once she was assigned a place that would be hers alone. Even if it will just be a small twin bed and nightstand instead of the entire bedroom that she has back home.

The girls' cabins were small, but cute and nicely decorated on the outside. The campers were told that each cabin has two bunk beds and one solo bed pushed up against the rear wall. Once Norah heard she would be assigned to cabin one, she had to contain her yelp of excitement that she would have Jennifer herself as her primary counselor. The other names called out for cabin one were Valerie, Ashley, Rene, and Jade. Norah glanced around as her soon-to-be roommates filed in around the front of the cabin they had been assigned to

and started to gather belongings to head inside. Three of the girls seemed to know each other already and were clearly assessing Norah and the other cabinmate with unconcealed appraisal. Norah didn't get the best feeling from these girls with their arms crossed and their squinty eyes running from her feet to her face.

Once she made eye contact with the dimpled blonde standing in front of the other two girls, she was met with what she could only call a curated smile. A smile that didn't quite reach the eyes of her appraiser. "Hey," she said as she put her hand out to Norah. "I'm Ashley, and this is Jade and Rene. This is our second year here, so we'll be able to, you know, tell you how things work, I mean, like how it is here at camp." She waved casually to the other girls behind her. Norah smiled in return and gave her a limp handshake. "So like hello? Are you just going to stare at me, or are you going to share your name as well and maybe acknowledge that you're thankful you have some experienced campers in your cabin?" Ashley asked her in a somewhat condescending tone with a roll of her eyes and a flip of her blindingly white blonde hair, to the only slightly suppressed giggles from the girls behind her.

Norah stuttered and turned red. "Oh, um, oh, yeah." She tried to smile through her embarrassment as she continued. "I'm Norah. It's um. It's nice to meet you. And that's great, I guess. That you guys have been here before, I mean, this is my first time." She could tell

she was speaking much too quietly and robotically, but she couldn't help the feeling of intimidation that these girls brought out in her.

Ashley coughed out a laugh at Norah's response. "I guess you better use protection then." She chuckled and joined her friends as she purposefully didn't conceal her whispered "What a freak!" to her friends as they made their way into the cabin, leaving Norah humiliated and frozen on the lawn in front of it.

When Norah finally regained some of her composure, she looked behind her and found the girl who she had noticed on the bus. She looked as red and shocked as Norah felt, but she was at least not laughing at her. She literally had her mouth in an O shape after witnessing the awkward exchange. When she met Norah's eyes, they both shared a nervous giggle. "That was kind of brutal," the mystery girl said. "Looks like we get to room with Satan and his cohorts." Norah let out an all-out laugh at that. A laugh laced with relief that she would indeed have a friend in what up to this point seemed like was going to be a cold reception into camp life.

The girl firmly stuck out her hand to Norah. "I'm Valerie, but you can call me Val. It really is *actually* nice to meet you, and I have no interest in your sex life by the way," she deadpanned, helping to lessen the sting in Norah's chest. "I think we'd better stick together." Norah wanted to hug her, but settled for the handshake.

“Geez,” Norah choked out with her voice still trembling slightly with nerves. “I guess I’m not used to mean girls. Thanks for not joining in with them; that was nice of you. I’m Norah, but I guess you heard that.”

Val smiled genuinely at her. “Well, I’m used to it. I have two older sisters at home, and they’re assholes. So don’t stress. I’ll help you.” She grabbed Norah’s shoulder in mock seriousness at the task before them. “Together we will defeat the evil within cabin one and emerge victorious.” Norah laughed at this bolder-than-her, beautiful, and genuinely funny girl she suddenly found herself aligned with.

Norah found her voice a bit firmer now through her smile. “Thanks, I guess let’s go in and dare the devil to try that again, huh?” She giggled along with her new friend as they gathered their things and headed for the front door of cabin one side by side.

## Chapter 2: Jennifer June 5th, 1989

Jennifer fell onto the worn-out sofa in the counselors' cabin with an overly dramatic sigh. Day one of camp always exhausts her. It's a combination of almost a mother-like worry for her new charges, accompanied by a bone-deep tiredness that maybe is also mother-like now that she thinks about it. Not that she would know from example. Her mother and father were always either happy and high or angry and coming down throughout her childhood. It's one reason this camp means so much to her; it saved her a little.

Barbie bounces in and jumps on the end of the couch, jostling Jennifer in the process. "So, what do you think of the campers this year, Jen? Will it be smooth sailing, or will we be constantly putting out fires? Some of the girls seemed a little bitchy, honestly." Barbie chuckled to lessen that blow since she *was* referring to children.

"Honestly, yeah, I noticed some of that too," Jennifer admitted. "I think one of the cabins I'm in charge of might be home to a gaggle of shit stirrers, but don't repeat that! They are just kids." She points to Barbie while she says it. "So that means I'll be on high alert for a little while at least. Until their target, or *targets*, grow a backbone, with my help, of course." She smiles with exaggerated seriousness as she says it. She remembers being the shy one surrounded by those who

always seemed more confident and sure of themselves, so she *does* have experience in the department of gaining a thicker skin, and she intends to use that experience to help those campers who happen to be a bit like her younger self.

She closes her eyes briefly and melts into the sofa next to Barbie as she lets her fatigue win, for a few moments at least. She guesses some of the exhaustion she is feeling might be due to her and James' most recent fight just last night, before the campers arrived. A fight on day one of being reunited may spell bad news for the entirety of the season. Jennifer feels her throat close up a little at that thought. She was initially so excited to see James; she hadn't seen him in a few weeks. But like many other times, that excitement waned when he became distant and passive-aggressive over the course of the day. The personality change is a fairly new development for him from her experience. Back when she first met him, right here at camp in the '80s, he showed very few signs of his recent, more needy and clingy behavior.

Jennifer remembers the first time she laid eyes on James, he was the cutest boy she thought she had ever seen. It was mid-camp season, and she recalls being terrified to learn to swim when the *fun-on-the-lake* day started, and the counselors carted all the kids to the dock. Poor Mrs. Nancy had to be called because the counselors couldn't seem to calm her down. Her parents had never

taken the time to teach her how to swim, much less taken her to a lake or pool.

Even with her life jacket on, Jennifer couldn't get over the irrational fear that she would sink to the bottom of Lake Arrowhead Adams and never be heard from again the minute she jumped in from the dock. Poor Nancy knelt down to be eye level with her as she wept, and tried to calm her nerves. Unfortunately, it did little to help until a young boy grabbed her hand and told her in his most solemn tone that "he would hang onto her the whole time and that he was an excellent swimmer, so there was no way she could drift to the bottom of the lake."

James was the first boy that Jennifer had ever held hands with, and Jennifer will never forget that jolt of electricity she felt when he grabbed her hand. But that wasn't the only reason she became so besotted with this new boy. She genuinely *did* feel safe with him by her side, as if his confidence were contagious. By the end of that day, she and James graduated from her warily exploring, floating around with her head above water, to her fearlessly jumping in and even going under briefly before her trusty life vest catapulted her back to the surface, all while never releasing the hand of the boy she now held an enormous crush on.

That crush turned into pecks on the lips, hidden away where other campers or counselors wouldn't see, to actual long talks about their home lives that summer.

Jennifer found out that she wasn't the only one at camp who didn't exactly have it easy back home. James was also living among dysfunction and chaos. The bond they formed their first summer together continued to grow while they were apart, through letters to one another, until they could finally be back together again the following summer. At that point, they became "the couple" that everyone wanted to be. It was a heady experience for both of them. Leaving their lives of insults and fear at home for a place where other campers looked up to them and envied what they had.

Jennifer still remembers that summer at camp as one of the best experiences in her fourteen years of living up to that point. She thought that what she and James had would last forever. But once they went back home after camp was over without the promise of returning as they got older and deeper into high school, Jennifer found herself writing less and less to James and getting more and more involved with the kids in her own hometown. She assumed James was doing the same, and by the end of high school, he was just a very fond memory of the boy who first stole her heart.

That was until she applied for and accepted this job right after high school graduation, returning to her formerly beloved camp to counsel the next group of campers until they, too, left camp in the rearview mirror, usually around the age of fifteen. She was elated to come back and counsel the kids who get the opportunity to

come here, and it doesn't hurt that it looks great on her college resume since she is studying elementary education. Now, even without that benefit, she wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the summer months. She loves being surrounded by kids who are at that most tender age when their bodies feel foreign and their need for acceptance is at its peak.

Last year, when she first came back, Jennifer was not only shocked but also surprisingly elated when she saw the same boy who, as it turned out, still made butterflies flit around in her gut, smiling at her from the counselors' porch when she arrived. "Look what the cat dragged in" was his first sentence as she set her bag down in almost stunned silence. It felt completely natural to throw her arms around him and hug him tight right there on the porch. It was as though no time had passed at all. And that was when Jennifer felt the first stirrings of her once-crush turning into legitimate love.

Their relationship blossomed from that point on. They were both over the moon when they found out that their respective colleges were only about a four-hour drive from each other, and they could now comfortably continue their relationship even during the months that camp was not in session. Jennifer figures they saw each other at least every few weekends and during breaks this past school year, and they were both excited to return to Camp Blackbird Hollow and spend the summer together again.

Unfortunately, before getting here, they had been apart the longest since last summer. It was only three weeks, but it was enough time for James to develop an irrational fear that, while apart, Jennifer had hooked up with her best friend in college, who happens to be male. Jennifer spent the entire night before the campers arrived this morning explaining to James that she and Cooper are just friends. She also clarified that she stayed *one* night in his dorm room because she was too drunk and tired to walk back to her room alone, but she did *not* hook up with him. In hindsight, she probably should have mentioned that she believes Cooper is closeted and, therefore, any chance of them getting together is squarely off the table, which might have helped calm James down. But Cooper hasn't even admitted that to her yet, and it's his story to tell, not hers. So she won't use it even to calm down her, at times, overly jealous boyfriend.

She finally got James to believe her after many hours of explaining that she is her own boss and that even *if* someone finds her attractive, that is her battle to fight, not his. It shouldn't be so hard to convince someone that you can actually be trusted! At times, she fears that what James likes more than anything is the feeling that, because she is his girlfriend, he somehow owns her. She doesn't like the look of satisfaction on his face when someone admires her, but he is around to show them she is not available. He usually does that by

either putting his arm around her shoulder and smirking at whoever might be glancing her way or by grabbing her around the waist and pulling her in for an aggressive kiss. Jennifer does have to admit that, at times in the past, she found his eagerness to claim her thrilling, but lately, more often than not, it just annoys her. However, she can still see the thirteen-year-old boy who offered to hold her hand when she was scared in his eyes. And therefore, she has to believe there is more good than bad in him. He's possessive but only because he is insecure in some ways.

Not that she can understand how someone who looks like James could be insecure. The epitome of the 'All-American Boy Next Door' who happens to be super-hot is the most accurate way she can describe him. A small smile slips onto her face at the thought of his taut body on top of hers once they *finally* made up after their fight last night.

Barbie pokes her in the ribs, bringing her back to the present and back to the ratty couch she is temporarily resting on. "Whatcha thinkin' bout there, Jenjen? Could it be the fucking smoke show of a man you get to do the deed with all summer?"

Jennifer gives a sly laugh at her friend. "Maybe? I mean, we didn't wake you up last night or anything, did we?" She laughs while she says it, but tries to hide the color on her face at the thought that their make-up sex could have been a bit louder than they intended.

“Oh my god, no! But now I’m curious,” Barbie teases her friend. “I may have to sneak out here and listen just for some material of my own, ya know. It is going to be a *very* dry summer for me.” She sighs dramatically as she falls to her side on the sofa that Jennifer just vacated.

“What do you mean dry? What about Ash? He’s fuckable, right?” Jennifer tries to keep a straight face while she asks it. She fails when Barbie stares at her with eyes like saucers.

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” The girls share a laugh at Barbie’s outrage at the thought of it. They are all second-year counselors and have known each other since their days as campers here. They have always had a running joke that while Ash is truly adorable, to actually have sex with him would never last more than a couple of seconds, and he would probably make a weird, inappropriate fart joke after the whole thing. The kid has never been able to sit still, and his sense of humor hasn’t developed past middle school. “But you know last year Ash did get a little mad at me once,” Barbie tells her.

“Seriously?” Jennifer asks in honest shock that someone as goofy as Ash would actually get properly angry. “Like how did he get mad at you?”

Barbie shrugs it off a bit. “He didn’t get like *really* mad or anything. I just, you know, had patted him on the head once, being affectionate I thought.” She sheepishly grins at the memory briefly. “And he

smacked my hand away and told me he wasn't a fucking Golden Retriever."

"Wow, really?" Jennifer is truly a bit surprised that Ash would ever say anything that wasn't intended to get a laugh. "I can't imagine Ash mad, that's so weird." She looks away genuinely trying to conjure up an image of an angry Ash in her head with no success.

"Yeah, but he like didn't stay mad for more than like one second. So I didn't really make too much of it. Still no thanks to that one for me! Too goofy and maybe a bit rage suppressed?" Barbie smacks her friend and laughs a bit at her joke as they start to get around and make their way to the table to begin making outlines and lists on their clipboards of all the activities they'll be overseeing and organizing this year. The first day is always good for that. The campers are getting settled and getting used to their new home for the summer, and usually a little too overwhelmed and tired to really want to start in on the fun things they'll do at camp quite yet.

As the girls start to calm their laughter at the thought of sex with Ash, the guys come tumbling in from the heat to sit with them and start their own planning. While Ash comes screaming in and tackles the girls off their chairs in a chaotic mix of legs and arms and laughter, James saunters in with the air and grace of the movie star his looks could afford him to be. After Jennifer extracts herself from the dog pile that Ash has created in his over-excited state, she smiles at her

handsome boyfriend as he gives her his million-dollar smile and wink. She can feel her heart melt and, somewhere between her thighs, light up in flames as she stares at him. *How could anyone who looks that good ever be bad*, she thinks to herself. He'll settle in and stop being so whiny as the summer goes on, she's sure of it! He has to. Otherwise, She will find herself calming more than just anxious or angry campers this season; she'll have something worse on her hands: a broken heart to heal. She just isn't sure whose heart would end up needing the most repair, hers or James'?

### Chapter 3: Nancy June 5th, 1989

*This is the calm before the storm.* That's the thought that keeps circling in Nancy's head as she sits with her tea and stares out at the trees blowing in the breeze from the relative safety of the cozy home she shares with her husband, Charles, right on the property of Camp Blackbird Hollow. The new campers have arrived this morning, and the counselors are hustling to prepare for the handful of kids' lives that have just descended on the property. It's always calm at first, until the kids get comfortable enough to let some of their true nature surface. And sometimes that nature is a bit ugly if she's being honest with herself, especially for the kinds of kids who come here every year.

She closes her eyes and relaxes as she sips her tea. At least they have four counselors with experience now. All four of her prior campers who have become counselors have returned this year, which should mean the summer will run relatively smoothly for the forty or so kids now in their care. Nancy has never been a quantity-over-quality type of business owner. From the moment she inherited this land from her grandparents in the late 1960s, who had purchased it from the original owners, she knew she wanted to build a camp on it. She envisioned a camp that would remain relatively small and personal, allowing the lucky kids who experience it every summer to feel a sense of exclusivity. She receives

several applications each year and vets them thoroughly. Some might think that she is taking a risk by choosing the campers she does. The applications that have a frantic vibe to them from parents desperate to unload their children, or the ones that seem as though they were haphazardly put together last minute by a parent who usually can't be bothered otherwise, but might bother if it means they get a kid-free summer. Those are usually the ones she decides to accept. She firmly believes those are the kids who need camp the most. They need a place to belong and to likely escape whatever they have to live with the rest of the year.

The land she now owns is absolutely perfect for a camp. There are hiking trails and nature, and of course, the man-made lake, Arrowhead Adams, supposedly named for the Adams family who farmed this land until they realized that the ground was too full of lime rock to be great fertilizer and eventually sold it to Nancy's grandparents before moving on to more fertile ground. The kids all firmly believe that Mr. Adams haunts the lake due to stories passed down through the small community of Clearwater Springs, just a few miles away from Camp Blackbird Hollow.

The townspeople regularly gossip about what became of the Adams family once they sold their land, for far less than it was worth, due to their inability to grow much in the way of crops on it. Some have heard that old Mr. Adams believed the ground was cursed and

blamed it for his poor crops, rather than the above-average limestone content. According to legend, he never became very successful and claimed that the curse had followed him to his new home even after he had left Blackbird Hollow behind. The story goes that due to financial strain, Mr. Adams snapped one night, killing his wife, four children, and then himself in a violent fugue state that has never been understood. Nancy has never researched this story herself to verify its factual accuracy; she's never been one for unnecessary gossip or excitement over someone else's misfortune. And she doesn't believe in ghosts anyway, but she's sure that the kids enjoy the spookiness of the tale at campfires by the lake, led by their counselors who typically know when to make the story scarier and when to back off.

Nancy can't help but smile at the thought of her seasoned counselors this summer. She really does adore them all, but she has a special place in her heart for James. She can still remember the shy kid who came to her camp just a few years ago, desperately trying to be confident. Even back then, when he was only thirteen, he shone like a gleaming piece of silver. It's like he has this glow about him that came through even past his fear and trepidation at being dropped off at a strange place by a harried mom who seemed overly anxious to be rid of him, at least for the three months of summer.

That first summer, Nancy really took James under her wing and tried her best to be the mother she

feared this boy lacked at home. She remembers feeling that swell of pride as she watched him come out of his shell the longer he was at camp. By the time he reached out to the even more shy Jennifer during the camp lake day in the middle of the season, Nancy felt like he was a different kid than the one who was brushed out of the car with a quick hug and nary a glance back from his mom before she sped away as though she was late for something more important than the adorable kid she left standing in the dust behind her.

Nancy gleaned a bit from James that year about exactly what home life looked like to him: a single mom, a dad who was never in the picture, and zero siblings to lean on. He had a mom who was struggling to make ends meet, which was why she chose him as one of five scholarship kids to join Camp Blackbird. She learned from him during their one-on-one talks that he was uncomfortable at home when his mom brought one of her many dates back to the house. And that he was uncomfortable with how often those many dates were with *different* men.

Nancy suspected then that James had had some sort of run-in with one or more of the many men his mom had allowed access to her son, but she didn't learn the extent of it until he returned last year as a counselor. Now a grown man, he was able to open up more to her as his surrogate mom about some of the horrors he had endured as a child. She shakes her head at the memory of

some of those talks. They ranged from being walked in on in the bathroom by random men, one of whom took it upon himself to comment on the size of James' penis as an emerging man, to smacks across the face, humiliating punishments, and a mom who just would rather look the other way.

Nancy feels a bit of pride at the man James has become. She even gives herself a bit of credit for it. She knows she wasn't his *actual* mother, but at least she was able to play that role for a couple of summers during his most tumultuous years. Her husband, Charles, has told her more than once that she needs to be less attached to the boy, but she doesn't listen to him. She suspects he might be jealous of all the time she spends with James; he may even go so far as to think she has an unhealthy attachment to him because of his obvious good looks, which she thinks likely makes Charles jealous.

She really doesn't care to defend or deny any allegations of attraction to James within her marriage. After all, she has seen how Charles has looked at the girl counselors over the years. She had just observed him yesterday, giving both Jennifer and Barbie a slow, head-to-toe appraisal when they arrived. She rolled her eyes in disgust and then proceeded to march the girls to their cabin and away from the prying eyes of her not-so-discreet husband.

For their part, the girls don't seem to notice, or maybe they just don't really care. Nancy, at her best

times, finds it kind of humorous. How on earth would her forty-plus-year-old husband think that two girls barely nineteen would find him attractive? It's why she doesn't defend her relationship with James. She's aware of her age and his, and she knows that he sees her as a mom figure, at least most of the time.

One would think that her husband would at least try to control himself when it comes to gawking at the girls, what with his ties to their local Baptist church and all. Nancy did her best not to giggle at him when Charles proclaimed that "he had found Jesus" and that he would like her to find him, too. Jesus lives at Ozark Hills Baptist Church, apparently. Nancy is not one for religion and has no interest in accompanying Charles to his weekly Bible study and Sunday services. Her opinion on religion, which she doesn't share with her husband, is not one that would align with any eagerness to participate. Religion is man-made and based on superiority and exclusivity as far as she is concerned. It doesn't seem to have much to do with making the world a better place. Not that she isn't spiritual, she has faith based in nature and the beauty that surrounds her every day. She doesn't have faith in anything that has attempted to explain the unexplainable and failed, letting human nature take over and monetize the crap out of it.

Nancy sighs into her teacup as the memory of when she began to despise religion floods her brain. It was a particularly hot summer when she was barely

fifteen years old and she was living with the very grandparents who gifted her this land. She was on the dock by the lake and she suddenly, and possibly inexplicably, got the itch to lay buck naked in the sun. She still can't figure out what possessed her to do such a thing. Her body was a new development and she had the strongest urge to expose it fully and unabashedly in the hot rays bouncing off the dock. She can still remember the feeling of bliss that encompassed her as she let the sun cook her in her unashamed bare glory while she lay there. She remembers how her muscles felt soft and malleable and she felt a great sense of peace descend upon her mind.

That was until her grandfather found her and 'taught her a lesson' about exposing oneself in such a manner. Up to that point in her life, Nancy had an, albeit distant, but *somewhat* comfortable relationship with the strict man she called her grandfather. She knew he loved to read his Bible and quote scripture and talk about the evil ways of the world. She knew he liked to control the people around him and that he ruled at times using fear instead of love. But she never considered *herself* to be one of the sinister temptations her grandfather spoke about so vehemently.

That was until that day. What she remembers most is the feeling of the ice-cold water that doused her hot body and brought her out of the blissful state she felt roasting on the dock under the false assumption of