

Caleb's Corner

"Here we go again..." Devin mumbled, his voice hardly audible over the screaming and foot stomping that had started across the room. Lindi rolled her eyes at her co-counselor and began making her way to the corner. *His* corner.

"What's wrong, Caleb," she asked, trying her hardest to sound concerned. But the five year old with his fuzzy blonde head and pouting lips was hitting a nerve.

"I don't LIKE pretzels!" Caleb screeched. Lindi took a deep breath as he beat his red fists against the classroom floor as she knelt down beside him.

"I'm sorry, Caleb, but that was the only extra snack we had. Maybe tomorrow you can ask mom to –"

"But I HATE them! I hate – pretzels!" The boy was manic. The rest of the children had begun abandoning their GoGurts and Cheeze-Its and were nosily coming over to investigate.

"No, everyone please have a seat! Devin, can you help here please?" Lindi's voice was strained as she shot a desperate look around the room. Devin began to usher the horde of campers back to their chairs and Lindi turned back to Caleb, anxiously tucking her dirty-blond bob behind her ears. "Caleb, can you come sit with your friends please? Or do you want me to go get your brother again?"

"NO! If you – you wait till you see what I'll do if he comes, you wait!"

Lindi blinked in surprise before the anger began to set in. This was the third day in a row this kid had thrown a fit over nothing, why was he even still here? For a moment she simply stared at him, trying not to narrow her eyes as his beady little blue ones stared into her face.

"You wait..." he let the words drag, threatening. God, this kid sounded like something straight out of the Exorcist. Lindi had had enough.

"Ok, you know what, Caleb? We're just gonna go outside for a minute." Caleb's ensuing screams didn't help her composure, but she managed to stand him up and walk him to the door.

Lindi led him outside with a stiff, guiding arm, remembering too late her boss' constant lectures about not having any physical contact with the kids. He threw her a look

as Lindi marched Caleb past the front desk, and she dropped her arm with a frustrated exhale. The last thing she needed was for the camp director to end up yelling at her for touching a kid while she was just trying to solve the problem. She took a deep breath as they approached the brick side of the building, but the humid summer air did little to calm her senses. Caleb's screams had stopped and he slumped against the wall as she turned to face him, tried to relax her tensed jaw, and prepared for the worst.

“Caleb, do you like coming to camp?”

“No,” he mumbled shortly into his knees, which were curled up in front of him. Lindi tried not to roll her eyes. Big surprise there, the kid had pitched a fit pretty much seconds after his mom dropped him off every day this week. And yet here Lindi was, trying to be nice to a kid who was making her remedial summer job a living hell.

“Well, what does mom say? Do you talk to her about it?” Her voice came out high pitched and sweet, but she felt ready to scream. Caleb had changed tactics completely; he wouldn't even look at her. Lindi crouched down a few feet away from him, waiting for a response.

“Caleb?”

He finally lifted his blonde head. “I don't – mom just has work.” Lindi's surprise at the slight quaver in his voice turned to shock when she realized that his pudgy red face was wet with tears. “Me and Owen and Jake come to camp and mom just has work,” he sputtered.

Lindi slowly opened her mouth, the words ‘what about dad?’ on her tongue, but then closed it, biting her lip. If his dad was around any more than his mom was, Caleb probably wouldn't be here in the first place. She felt a quick surge of sympathy at the thought and leaned against the wall next to him, staring at her aged blue converse sneakers. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him rub a still-red fist across his cheek, smudging his tears.

Lindi felt her vision begin to cloud as her mind found a different image, a memory of another five year old, red faced and crying, clinging to an off-white porch railing. The little girl in her memory had sandy blonde hair that was matted by tears and the gust of exhaust coming from the back end of a modest, gray Honda pulling away on the other side of the railing. *Why is daddy leaving, Lindi?* the little girl moaned. Lindi had

gently pulled her little sister's fingers from the railing and wrapped them in her own hands

Don't worry Jenna, it'll be ok.

Lindi was snapped out of her flashback by the sound of Devin's voice, yelling down a long line of five-year olds that it was time for sports. She glanced back over at Caleb, who was sitting, knees still curled up in front of him, and simply staring into the grassy hill. There was a strange comfort in the silence between them, and Lindi suddenly found herself wishing she could get inside the boy's head, know what he was thinking, and show him that she understood. She curled her own knees into her chest and leaned forward, with no fake sweetness in her gesture this time.

"Caleb, snack's over, want to go try sports for a while? I think we've got a really fun game planned." Sure, Lindi had no idea what kind of game they had planned, but she genuinely hoped that Caleb would find it fun. If he didn't, maybe they could go inside and play *Trouble*. He may make up his own rules, but it was one thing that had seemed to make him happy before.

Caleb stood up suddenly, and Lindi's breath caught in her throat. But her visions of him running away and screaming were eased when he turned towards her and there was a smile on his blotchy face. "Ok, let's go!"

She blinked again. This kid had to be one of the most bipolar children she'd ever met. Lindi let out a small laugh "You ok, then?"

He nodded and Lindi got to her feet, suddenly eager to find Caleb some fun distraction. As they headed down the hill towards a concerned looking Devin, Caleb reached up with one sticky hand and grabbed onto Lindi's dangling fingers. Lindi raised her eyebrows and looked up to see Devin's expression dramatically become one of shock as she wrapped her hand around a smiling Caleb's small fist. She couldn't help but grin herself as they walked hand in hand, camper and counselor, towards the field. Her boss could say whatever he wanted, but this time, she wasn't letting go.