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Published by Dragonfly Publishing, October 2024

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A catalogue record for this work is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN (sc): 978-1-7635525-2-4

ISBN (e): 978-1-7635525-3-1

Printed by: Pegasus Media & Logistics

Cover illustration by Zoe Hoffman

Proofread by Zoe Hoffman



CHAPTER ONE

WELCOME TO THE SWAMP

‘WELCOME TO the swamp,’ I groaned, looking out at the overcast sky and muddy swampland spinning past the car window. ‘Why do you hate me?’

‘Sadie, please,’ said Mum from the front seat.

I sat forward so Mum and Dad could hear me. ‘I’ve heard there are places where the sand and the water don’t actually mix to form a muddy slime fest. I think it’s called a beach. Families all over the world are enjoying them!’

‘Sadie...’ Dad warned, apparently not a fan of my witty sarcasm.

I leaned my forehead against the cool glass of the window and watched as endless amounts of brown, muddy terrain blitzed past outside. ‘You can do a lot at a beach. You can go swimming, beach combing, play volleyball—’

‘Pfft!’ Charlie, my annoying big brother, snorted with laughter next to me. ‘Come on, Sadie, you’d have to be coordinated to play volleyball. I suppose you could stand on the sidelines and hand out cups of water!’

I rolled my eyes. ‘At least people would want me around. Unlike the rash-infested germ you currently are.’

‘It’s poison ivy,’ sniped Charlie, tugging the edges of his sleeves to cover the delightful rash he picked up from a recent camping trip.

‘Weird that your whole scout group didn’t get it. It’s as if it’s just you who’s completely disgusting.’

Charlie lunged towards me, but I batted him out of the way.

‘You’re giving me a migraine,’ Mum sighed. ‘Just five minutes of quiet, please.’

‘Where did you find this place, anyway?’ I asked as Charlie and I called a momentary truce.

‘It was recommended to us,’ Mum said, casting a quick glance at Dad.

‘Did it have to be so far away?’ I complained.

We’d been driving inland for about three hours, away from all sense of civilisation. The ground had become dark with mud and silt and the surrounding sparse bush had turned into a dense forest arching high above us like a thick green rainbow.

‘What’s that?’ Charlie squinted out my window. ‘Is that some kind of... monster?’

Mum and Dad gasped as I snapped my head around, searching the dark shadows amongst all the trees in the swamp.

‘Where?’ I said. ‘What is it?’

‘Oh no, wait,’ said Charlie, leaning back, folding his arms behind his head and grinning. ‘It’s just your reflection.’

Mum and Dad sighed, relaxing back in their seats as I punched Charlie in the arm.

‘You know, five years was a lot when I was three, but now that I’m ten, I could take you down.’

‘Is that so?’ smirked Charlie, flexing his fingers. ‘You wanna test that theory?’

Hmmm. On second thoughts... too late, though. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for a punch in the arm or a kick in the shin. Instead, I got something way worse.

‘Ew!’ I yanked Charlie’s gross wet finger out of my ear. ‘Muuummmm!’

‘She started it!’ yelled Charlie.

‘Did not!’ I screamed back, wiping my ear against the sleeve of my shirt. ‘He’s so gross!’

‘Charlie! Sadie!’ Mum yelled over us.

‘Will you all please be quiet!’ shouted Dad. ‘I can’t concentrate!’

‘You have the manners of a hippopotamus,’ I growled at Charlie, smacking his hand away as he wiggled his fingers like wet little worms.

‘At least I don’t have the face of one,’ he grinned.

Groaning, I pulled back my leg and tried to boot him with the heel of my sneaker.

‘If both of you don’t be quiet, I’m going to turn this car around!’ warned Dad.

‘Finally,’ I smiled, optimistic for the first time in three hours. ‘How long ‘til we’re home?’

‘You wish,’ said Charlie, getting one of his fingers near my ear again.

I squealed a high-pitched piglet of a squeal, causing Mum to drop her phone, which was currently telling Dad which way to turn.

‘Sadie!’ Mum groped along the floor for her phone. It was saying, in that robotic voice of all phones, that a right-hand turn was coming up. Actually, it might have been left. It was hard to hear amongst all the huffing and puffing coming out of Mum’s mouth.

‘Busted,’ Charlie sang into my ear.

Now that he was nice and close, I pinched him under the arm.

‘Ow!’ he yelped, jumping back to his side.

‘ENOUGH!’ Mum yelled, right as Dad skidded the car to a stop along a gravel track.

Charlie and I looked at each other. Eyes wide,

mouths grimacing. Was Dad finally going to make good on all his road-trip threats to leave our arguing butts on the side of the road? Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it, that wasn't the case.

Dad peered out the front windshield, wiping the frosty glass with his sleeve. 'We're here!'

In front of us was a dilapidated wooden sign overgrown with twisted vines of khaki-coloured ivy. Beneath the tangle of weeds, words were burned into the weathered timber.

'DeVolfe Sanctuary,' I read out. 'What kind of name for a holiday park is that?'

'That's the name of the Professor,' said Mum.

'What Professor?' Charlie and I asked in unison.

'The Professor that owns this nature sanctuary,' said Dad.

'Nature Sanctuary?' I repeated. 'But you said it was a holiday park?'

'Did I?' Mum sighed, rubbing her temples like she always did when Charlie and I were in a confined space for over three minutes.

'Technically, a sanctuary is a park of sorts,' said Dad. 'And we are holidaying here, so *technically*, it is a holiday park.'

'Technicalities,' I sighed, crossing my arms over my chest, all thoughts of actual holiday fun evaporating.

Dad put the car into gear and edged onto the gravel track.

It wasn't long before the sound of gravel spraying beneath the steel carcass of the car was replaced with a distinct sloshing.

'Ooft,' Dad grimaced as the tyres slipped on the slimy ground, the car now inching along the slippery track like an eel over an algae-covered rock pool.

I peered through my window as an eerie darkness crept through the cabin. The canopy of trees closed in above us until barely any sunlight could sneak through. A shiver rolled over my skin as I spotted the thick, oozing mud that was creeping up tree trunks and slathered across leaves. But one stinking second later, that shiver was replaced with my gag reflex.

'What is that...?!' I pinched my nose as the smell of the wonderful 'holiday park' wafted in through Charlie's open window. 'Wind that up!'

Charlie had his head hanging out the window like a dog. 'I'm hot.'

'Hot?' It was the middle of autumn, and without the help of any natural sunlight, it was bordering on icy. 'You're mental.'

Charlie slowly put his index finger in his mouth, then wiggled it near my face like some kind of slimy nuclear missile that had locked onto my eardrum.

'Don't even—' I gritted my teeth together.

‘Slowly does it,’ said Dad, momentarily distracting Charlie and his slimy finger. ‘We’ve arrived!’

‘Oh, thank all the gods in the world,’ said Mum as the car rolled into a parking lot in a small clearing bordered by wooden logs.

I gawped out my window. Snaking through a heavy patch of trees and ferns, a thin, muddy path led to a wooden cabin. Now, a cabin in the woods has the potential to be cute and welcoming, filled with several friendly mine workers *or* scary and chill-inducing, filled with elderly ladies and cauldrons big enough to boil children. This cabin rated way more on the boiled children side. Weeds taller than me swallowed the bottom of it, and thick ropes of vine crisscrossed along the worn timber planks. The cabin looked more tree than house.

‘You sure this is the right place?’ I said. ‘Seems a little...’

‘Gross?’ Charlie finished.

Finally, we agreed on something.

Mum and Dad looked at each other, their eyebrows knitting together.

‘The Professor’s busy,’ shrugged Mum. ‘Probably too busy to maintain an entire sanctuary. And you know what, it’s all part of the charm. Letting nature reclaim its wildness. It’s quite beautiful, really.’

‘Exactly,’ said Dad, squinting through the

windshield at the swampland in all its glory.
'Beautiful...'

I made a coughing noise in the back of my throat, signalling that I wasn't buying their tooth-achingly sweet positivity.

'Well,' I looked down the track to the creepy cabin. 'I guess someone better go get murdered—I mean, check in.'