WRANGLESTONE

DARREN CHARLTON

Stripes

STRIPES PUBLISHING LIMITED
An imprint of the Little Tiger Group
1 Coda Studios, 189 Munster Road,
London SW6 6AW

www.littletiger.co.uk

A paperback original
First published in Great Britain in 2020
Text copyright © Darren Charlton, 2020
Illustration copyright © Jana Heidersdorf, 2020

ISBN: 978-1-78895-121-0

The right of Darren Charlton and Jana Heidersdorf to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work respectively has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed upon the subsequent purchaser.

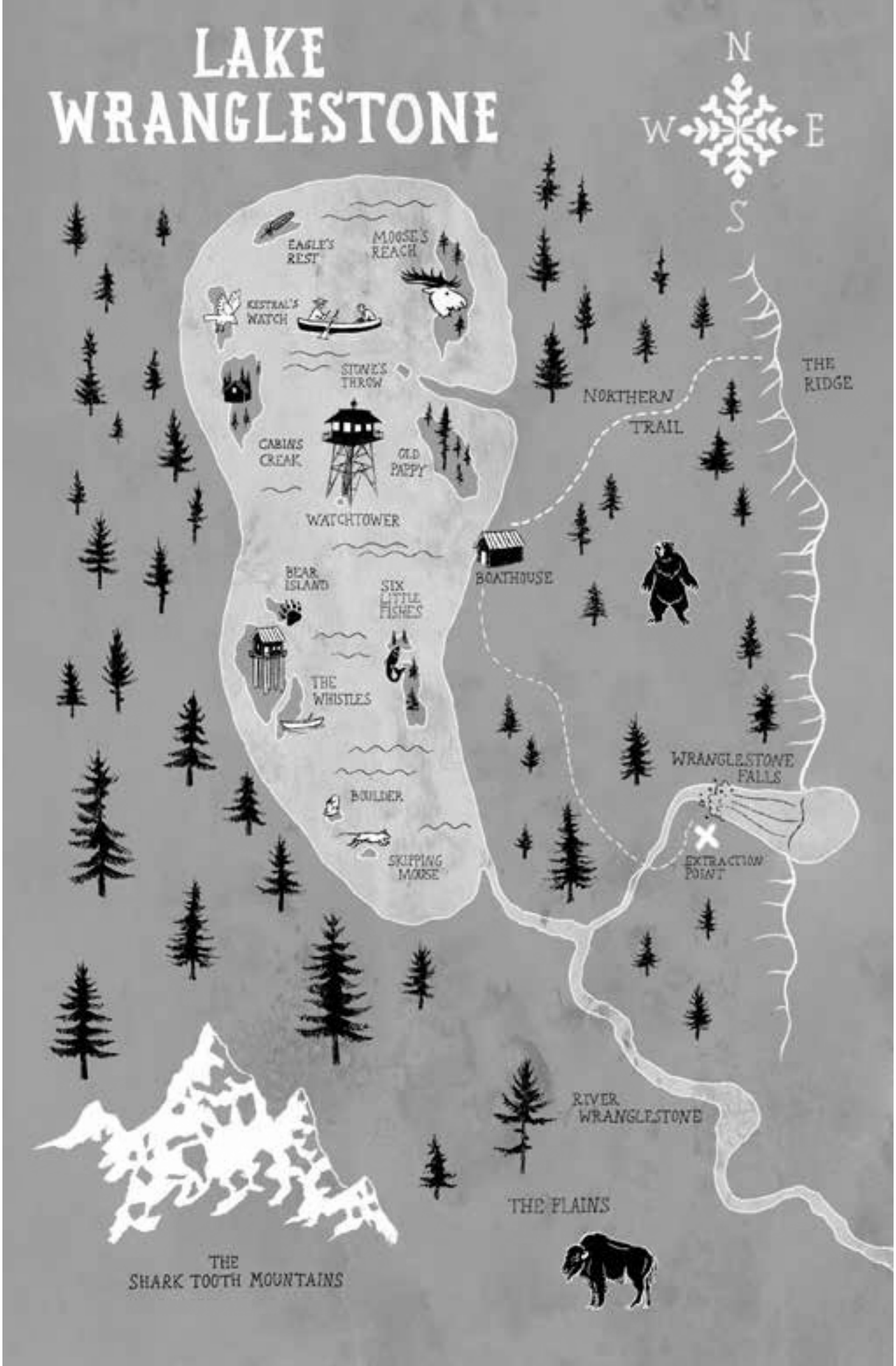
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK.



The Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) is a global, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of responsible forest management worldwide. FSC defines standards based on agreed principles for responsible forest stewardship that are supported by environmental, social, and economic stakeholders. To learn more, visit www.fsc.org

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1


LAKE WRANGLESTONE
N
W
E
S
EAGLE'S REST
MOOSE'S REACH
KESTRAL'S WATCH
STONE'S THROW
CABINS CREAK
OLD PAPPY
WATCHTOWER
BEAR ISLAND
SIX LITTLE FISHES
THE WHISTLES
BOULDER
SKIPPING MOOSE
BOATHOUSE
NORTHERN TRAIL
THE RIDGE
WRANGLESTONE FALLS
EXTRACTION POINT
RIVER WRANGLESTONE
THE PLAINS
THE SHARK TOOTH MOUNTAINS

1

Peter was born into a world of unwelcome visitors. And winter on Lake Wranglestone sure as hell was one of them. Just when the bears had started to leave for higher ground, those damned dark clouds came down off the mountains, carrying something far worse inside.

Peter drove his axe into the woodpile and looked out across the water. The lake, tucked in between the Great Glaciers to the north and the Shark Tooth mountains of the south, was among the most remote of all the refuges built for the nation's National Park Escape Program. A dozen little islands, all peaked with pine, dotted the deep blue eye of the forest.

His island, Skipping Mouse, on account of it being the smallest, was down one end. Eagle's Rest, where Cooper lived, was all the way up at the top. On a clear day, you could watch him skimming stones in nothing but his undershorts, but not this morning. Fingers of icy cloud

hung so low over the water that the islands disappeared inside them. Peter steadied himself on the grip of the axe. The lake took on a special eerie feel now that the year was dying, and the air was thick with log smoke and bull elks grunting. But there was something else.

A loon bird wailed like a wolf in the night.

A canoe broke through the mist.

A moment later, it came.

"No," Peter whispered. "Not yet. Please go away. I'll be real good, I promise."

A single snowflake bobbed over Peter's head and settled on the blade of the axe. He chewed the skin around his fingernail and the snowflake dissolved to nothing. But it wasn't nothing. It just wasn't. Soon more snow would be on its way. More than just the snow too. Soon *they* would come.

Peter swung round, furiously scanning the shoreline. Over on the mainland, yellow leaves shimmered down from silver branches like sunlight on water. The lake clapped the rocky shore. He sighed. At least there was no sign of the ice forming yet. Their clawing hands couldn't get to the islands for now. But the big freeze was coming and it was coming fast, and no one was going to dig out their box of sleigh bells and Christmas stockings for First Fall. Not any more. Not ever.

Peter turned back. Above him, candlelight twinkled from inside the island's piney chamber. They were safe

in their little timber tree house. The six wooden stilts that held it up there in among the pine cones and black squirrels were built to withstand a heavy knock, even a herd. That's what his dad had always promised him anyways. Not that it made much difference. Nothing stopped those stilts from looking as flimsy as matchsticks at this time of year. But then winter was the one season every Lake Lander feared. Not because Montana was about to get colder than a bald eagle's gaze, but because the Dead could make it across the lake's frozen waters.

2

"First Fall, huh?" came a gravel voice from behind.

Peter swung round and watched the canoe approach the island. It was a stranger's. An old man lifted up the wooden paddle and sliced it back down through the water. The flaps of his trapper hat swung about his face like the ears on Bud's old bloodhound, Dolly. He looked just as harmless too. But he'd got a good pace going and hadn't asked for permission to come ashore yet, so Peter made his way down to the water's edge.

"Who goes there?"

"Permission to land?" said the old man, hoisting the paddle out of the water. "Yes, yes. Permission to land."

Peter glanced back up toward the tree house. He shouldn't really be letting strangers anywhere near the island on his own. But his dad was nowhere to be seen.

"Bah!" bellowed the old man. "You can make up your

own mind, can't ya? You're a big boy."

"Yes," said Peter, without convincing himself. "I'm nearly sixteen."

"And you're real handy with an axe too."

"You think?"

"Sure."

Peter shrugged. "I s'pose."

"No suppose about it."

"Well, I'm trying my best."

"Better than trying."

"I'm trying real hard."

"I can see that. Broad shoulders n'all."

Peter creased the corner of his mouth into a half-smile and looked down. Darlene had told him that if he wore extra-thick knit it'd fool the eye into thinking he had the same broad shoulders as Cooper in a T-shirt. But he was nothing like Cooper. Nobody was. Peter braced his hand across his bony collarbone and wondered if he'd be lucky enough to spot him out on the lake today. He hadn't seen him for a few days now, three and a half to be exact.

The old man rested his paddle across the width of the canoe, smiling broadly.

The canoe glided into the shallows under its own momentum and grazed the shingle below.

"No," said Peter. "I'm skinnier than an aspen mauled

by beavers. But I patch up all our socks, and I know how to make a quilt out of old shirts and sweaters big enough to cover a king-size bed *and* make sure all the colours match up and complement real nice too."

The old man pulled off his trapper hat in an *I'll be darned* kind of way and used it to wipe the sweat off his bald head. "Well, fancy that," he said. "And a good thing too. We all need a use, a trade in this world. But I gotta admit, it is kinda unusual for a boy. You must take after your ma."

"No," said Peter quietly. "She's dead."

"Too bad. Then who do you get it from?"

Peter shrugged. He didn't know what made him this way any more than anyone knew why the planet had become a walking graveyard all those years ago, just before he was born.

A moment passed in awkward silence. The sun broke behind a passing cloud and dazzled across the water like starlight.

"Anyhoo," said the old man. "I take it I got permission to land?"

Peter looked up, embarrassed that he'd forgotten his manners, and rushed down to yank the nose of the canoe on to the shore.

"Oh sure! Sorry."

The old man wiped his hand across his thigh and

thrust it forward. “Ben.”

“Peter. “Nice to meet you.”

The old man nodded as if to say *likewise* and whipped an old blanket off the front of the canoe to reveal a big pile of stuff. He was a trader. The lake was full of them in the summer months. Whether it was rare essentials like cooking pots and flare guns, or novel trinkets from the old world like CDs for shaving mirrors, there was nearly always something to find if you rummaged deep enough. And, just as long as Peter didn’t dwell on how traders had to raid dead people’s homes for these items, he always looked forward to their visits.

“Anything take your fancy?” asked the old man. “We got pairs of boots in all sizes, a Swiss army knife complete with a corkscrew and some good old titty porn with all its pages intact.”

Peter pushed the bundle of magazines aside and started to rifle through the rest.

“Oh, they were so sure the internet had killed off print,” the old man went on. “But then the world blew its fuse and look who’s laughing now!”

“I guess,” said Peter, none the wiser. “Do you have a needle and thread?”

“You’re a right little homebody, ain’t ya?”

“It doesn’t matter what colour it is.”

“Well, I’m not too sure we do, Peter.”

“I mean, it does matter. You don’t want to mend a pair of white socks with black cotton if you can really help it, but anything will do really.”

The old man looked up into the pines toward their tree house. “And what have you got to trade anyhoo?”

“We got a freshly hung deer,” said Peter, distracted by a neatly stitched gingham oven glove.

“Uh-huh.”

“And I made a dreamcatcher out of some twigs and eagle feathers.”

“Right.”

“I can show it to you if you like.”

“Bet you got it looking real nice in that there tree house of yours.”

“Yes,” said Peter. “Dad felled trees for a bunch of logging companies before the world went dark. The cabin’s made out of solid pine. Real good grain apparently. And he made the roll-up rope ladder too. The Restless Ones can’t climb up it, but the bears will have a good go.”

“Is that so? Well, I bet it’s real cosy.”

“Oh yes. It’s just the one room with an outhouse round the back. But we’ve got a log burner and some old deer hide in the middle of the floor to make it soft underfoot.”

“Well, lucky ol’ you.”

Peter continued to rummage through the pile. A few things caught his eye, but he'd made serious mistakes before by trading hard-hunted meat for things his dad decided were frivolous. He put the oven glove back on the pile because nobody had ovens any more and kept looking. After a while, his fingers came across something small and plastic, and he pulled out a toy animal. Peter turned the black and white striped horse over in his fingers and wondered how such a thing was ever possible out there in the world.

"Aha!" said the old man. "Zebra."

Peter looked into his eyes and smiled. "Wow."

"Yeah. Zee used to be for zebra, on kids' alphabet charts, I mean. But now zee just stands for—"

"Yes."

Peter held eye contact with the old man for a moment and a silent understanding passed between them. Nobody knew what was worse: being too young to remember what life was like before the world was turned upside down or being old enough to have to live with the loss. But this wasn't the first time Peter had felt someone look inside him and wish their memories were as short as his.

Tears welled in the old man's eyes. Peter noticed just how bloodshot and tired they were and wondered if he should invite him in to sit by the fire.

Snow drifted over the canoe. Heavier now.

"Suppose you'll be battening down the hatches if the snow keeps up like this," said the old man, clapping his hands together to warm them.

Peter looked out toward the islands where the other thirty or so Lake Landers lived, and nodded.

"Yes. Once the lake's frozen over, we're in for the long haul."

"How d'you even manage to defend yourselves? I know you've got a tree house n'all, but if a herd of Rotters came toward ya, I mean."

"The watchtower mainly," said Peter, pointing at the middle of the lake where the vast wooden structure stood. "The military built it when everyone had to abandon the towns and cities, and they turned all the national parks into refuges."

"Yup, I remember. And you're the lucky few who get to live here, huh? I heard Yosemite and Yellowstone damn near bust they were so full."

"I don't know," said Peter. "Why, which park have you come from?"

"You must all be scientists and neurosurgeons the world can't live without."

"I s'pose." But the truth was Peter had never really given it much thought.

The old man held eye contact. "Well, fancy that."

Peter smiled. An awkward silence passed between them so he quickly filled it.

"We don't even let the Restless Ones get this far. As soon as one of them breaks cover from the woods, we shoot on sight."

"Just like the old infomercials told us to do, before our television sets went dark."

"I heard," said Peter. Except it was hard to imagine how TV even worked, or the internet, or planes or electricity or anything.

"Yup. *IF YOU SEE SOMEONE WHO DON'T LOOK RIGHT, CLOCK IT. KILL IT—*"

"*RID THE WORLD OF IT!*" said Peter, nodding. "My dad taught me it was better to forget my pants in the morning than ever to forget that."

The old man's eyes narrowed, but he wasn't smiling any more. "Uh-huh. We all got told a lotta things back then."

"So people use the watchtower for fishing and diving in the summer months, but in the winter, we're scanning the shoreline like hawks on the wind. They don't stand a chance."

"I see. And what about others approaching the lake? Not the Dead, I mean, just good clean folks looking for sanctuary."

"There's a strict vetting procedure. All newcomers

have gotta report to Henry over on Cabins Creak."

The sun disappeared behind a cloud and the water dulled to a murky grey. Peter became aware of just how much cooler the air was when, all of a sudden, he felt a searing, stinging pain in his side. He looked down and watched the old man yank a bloody knife out from inside him.

"I'm sorry, boy," said the old man as if he genuinely meant it. "But who are you people? I brought my wife here on good faith we'd both be taken care of and you're not even wearing the snowflake."

Peter's legs gave way beneath him. He grabbed on to the nose of the canoe for support. It was only then that he realized the old man wasn't alone. Another blanket stirred at the far end of the canoe.

"It's gonna be OK, Martha," said the old man. "This nice boy was just being careful we were who we said we were. He's gonna let us up now. I'm sure our ol' knees can manage the rope ladder."

Peter fell forward on to the canoe all woozy. The air was suddenly so cold. He stared into the man's eyes, but there was no menace or evil hiding inside them, just the most practised look this world knew: need. Peter tried to push himself free of the canoe, but the old man clapped his hands down on top of Peter's to keep him there.

"It'll be over for you in seconds," he said. "I promise."

He wiped the bloody blade across his leg. His eyes scanned Peter's body, deciding where to stick it next. They glanced at his chest. Settled on his neck. But before the blade could find its way there, Peter heard a sudden *swoosh* and the knife fell from the man's hand.

An arrow jutted sharply from the old man's face. Peter watched gore seep out of his punctured eyeball and ooze down toward the quill. His life left him in seconds. Peter felt his own consciousness leave him, but his dad's footsteps pounded across the ground behind him and he fell backward into his arms.

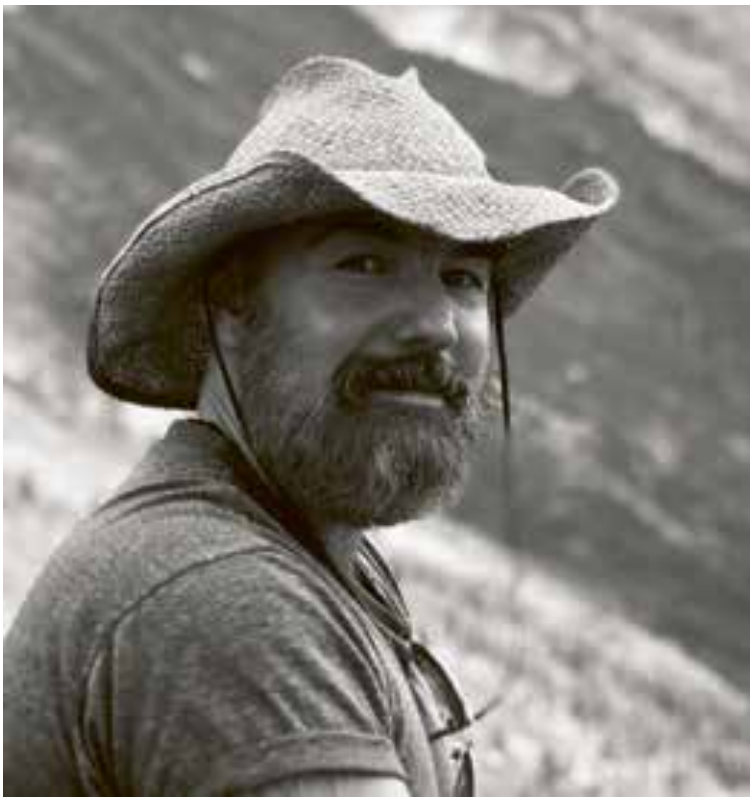
"He said I was good with an axe, Dad. I'm sorry."

"Damn it, Pete," said his dad, helping him up. "You don't need a stranger to tell you that." He saw the blood and gasped. "Shit, Jesus. Darlene's got our first-aid kit. We've gotta get you over to her place quick."

Peter felt his body being lifted up, then lowered down into the canoe. His dad tossed the old man's body overboard, then scrambled in too. He was barefoot and hadn't even changed out of his white long johns yet. For some stupid reason, it crossed Peter's mind that his dad's black stubble was too thick now, too thick for Darlene to take any interest in him anyhow. Before he had time to mention the old man's wife, Peter felt

the canoe push away from the shore. He drifted off to the sound of the paddle cutting sharply through open water.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Darren Charlton lives in London with his partner and works in the voluntary sector for a homeless organization. His lifetime obsessions with the National Parks of America, horror, film music and 80s kids' movies have all worked their way into his writing.

For more information about Darren Charlton visit:
www.darrencharlton.com

Follow him on Twitter @DarrenRCharlton