

PODUNK

MICHELLE KELLEY

The sound of the doorknob slowly turning made me freeze. My thoughts fumbled around, searching for a viable reason to be standing in the dark, fully dressed. I squinted at the small, dark form slowly creeping into my room, heaving out a frustrated sigh when I saw who it was.

“Ronnie?” My sister whispered softly, as if she was a co-conspirator in my plot. “Are you going somewhere? I thought I heard voices.”

“No, I was on the phone.” I tried to relax my tone. “Go back to bed, nosey.” Shadows moved across the room as the curtains parted and Jimmy stuck his spiky head in the window.

“Hey Ronnie, is that Amalie?” I scowled at the outline of Jimmy’s form, framed by the soft white curtains and the moonlit sky. I couldn’t see him that well, and I hoped he couldn’t see my sister in what she thought passed for pajamas. As much as I hated to admit it, I knew she at least looked like a woman. But she was only fifteen. Shouldn’t she be, I don’t know, cutting coupons with mom and practicing violin?

“I knew it!” She somehow managed to both whisper and shriek it into my face. “What are you guys doing? Where are you going?” Her hands were on her hips and her look was something fierce, but the fuzzy bunny slippers on her feet made it all appear ridiculous.

“Ama,” I sighed. “Nothing’s going on. Go back to your room.”

“Or what? You’ll tell mom and dad I’m bothering you while you’re trying to sneak out?” Of course the tattletale was gonna tell mom and dad. They were already livid with me for getting two B’s last semester. Indicative of a downward spiral, according to them, since the semester before I had gotten my first B. I had to sit through two hours of them lecturing me about college and ruining my life.

They grounded me like a kid, but I was almost 18. The days of them telling me what to do were numbered. Maybe I didn’t care about getting into the best schools or going pre-med. I’d been doing things the right way all my life, and I was starting to feel like I didn’t really have a clue.

My sister was still looking at me, and I watched as her gaze and

stance softened. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to say anything. But I want to come, too.” She smiled now, like a little angel, but I knew better. “And I don’t think you’re in a position to negotiate.”

We followed Jimmy down the street to Chase’s shiny, black ’69 Charger. I loved that car. It was a classic, edgy and fast. Nothing like my safe and boring ride. My car was ordinary, just like me: the brown-haired, brown-eyed son of a small town doctor.

Even Jimmy had more flash than me. His dad might’ve abandoned him and his mom before he could crawl, but I think it gave him something extra special to see how hard his mama worked to take care of him on her own. Most folks thought he was just a clown, but he cared about people in a way only someone who knew real sorrow could.

“I call shotgun!” Ama’s smile was smug as she skipped up to the car and hopped into the passenger seat. Jimmy, who’d been holding the door open for himself, just shrugged his shoulders and shut the door after her.

I shook my head at him. “Girls.” All the girls loved Chase. Hell, even all the guys loved Chase. He could charm a fish out of water, as my mom liked to say. He always knew the right thing to say, and even when it sounded wrong it would still feel right.

I got in the car and relaxed against its familiar leather seats. To me, it smelled like freedom. Jimmy slid in next to me and started rattling off a list of places to go. He was pushing for the kegger by the lake, which normally I would’ve been all for. The cutest girls and cheerleaders usually went to those. But my stomach was doing a weird twist as I watched the growing excitement in my sister’s green eyes. “No man, no parties. I don’t wanna have to babysit Ama all night.”

“Aw bro come on, she’ll be alright. We’ll help you keep an eye on her, right Chase?”

Chase nodded, but my mind was spinning with images of drunken idiots eyeing my sister up like fresh meat. Who knew what kind of creep would hit on her, or what kind of world she’d be getting into, too soon?

“Sorry guys, tonight has to be rated G. No drinking or parties.”

Jimmy looked exasperated. “Well what else are we gonna do in this podunk town?”

It was a fair question. The nightlife here wasn’t exactly teeming

with possibilities, which was probably why the kids in town made things happen for themselves on the weekends.

“I know what to do,” Chase grinned, interrupting our debate. We waited for a few beats, but Chase just kept driving. Once Chase made a decision, he didn’t leave it open for discussion. Jimmy must’ve been thinking the same thing, because he reached forward and flicked the back of Chase’s head. Chase ducked forward as Jimmy came back for seconds, and Ama turned around and smacked Jimmy’s hand. The jarring sound of a startling deep slap meant it might’ve hurt the teeniest bit.

Jimmy cradled his hand to his chest and raised an eyebrow at her. “How many times do I have to tell you woman, men can be abused too. That’s what feminism’s all about.”

Ama blew a soft brown curl out of her face and leveled her mean green gaze at him. Then she smiled; her face lit up as her eyes danced in mirth. “I just gave you a lesson on the correct definition of feminism. Don’t. Mess. With. My. Ride.” Her deceptively sweet face looked smug as she turned around and warmed her small hands over the vents.

Jimmy turned to me with a wide-eyed look of exhaustion. “Someday man, some guy’s gonna wake up and realize he’s spent the last twenty years of his life as that woman’s puppet.”

The car turned onto the familiar single-lane road that led to Chase’s family estate. I watched as Ama looked around at the huge old oak trees, whose long, lustrous branches formed an awning over the small road. “Where are we?” she asked.

Jimmy grabbed the back of the driver’s seat and looked at me and Chase, his electric blue eyes sparkling over his grin. “Don’t tell her bro.”

Ama turned around and glared at me and Jimmy. I shrugged at her like I didn’t know a thing. This was going to be fun. But Chase chuckled softly and looked sideways at her as he said, “This is where I live.”

Chase’s family had been in the area since the time of the Oklahoma land rush. There was Indian in his blood, you could see it in his thick, wavy black hair and his sharp, chiseled cheekbones. His gray eyes were pure blueblood though. His family came to this country rich. Something his mom liked to brag about after she’d had her afternoon cocktail or two.

As kids, we had the run of the place. Chase’s driver would pick me and Jimmy up back then, almost every day in the summer. A small

creek winded through the sprawling estate, where we spent many of the sweltering days fly-fishing and swimming.

Chase pulled up the driveway, turned off the car, and opened the garage. "I'll give you a hint," he said, pulling out a lighter and flicking the flame. Jimmy jerked forward and grabbed Chase's headrest.

"Are we gonna blow some shit up?" Jimmy bounced up and gave the driver's seat a double slap when Chase slowly smiled and nodded. "Oh yeah!"

I followed Jimmy's madly dashing form to the far back wall of the garage. A tall shelf was covered in fireworks. Cakes, fountains, novelties and roman candles, it was like a dream. I stared wide-eyed at Jimmy, wondering where it all came from and why I was only just hearing about it. "Dude, what's all this?"

Jimmy handed me some black cats and roman candles. "Me and Chase went to the res one day to pass around the peace-pipe, you know, and Old Tom's nephew was visiting from out of town. Turns out he had all these leftover fireworks he never sold last summer, so he gave them to us dirt cheap!"

"I'm not your bag, bro," I laughed as Jimmy piled more fireworks into my arms, his hands frenzied and face manic. "Where are we going to do this?"

"Out around Mt. Scott, where else?"

Normally we drove out to the mountains for stuff like this, where the rocky red soil didn't pose much of a fire hazard. But there wasn't time for that now, not with me and Ama needing to be home before our parents woke up.

"Let's do it here. His mom's out of town and the cops won't notice anything this far out." Jimmy shrugged. "I'm sure we can find a good spot."

We dragged our loaded bags to an old campsite a few hundred feet behind the house. Most of the property was covered in alfalfa and winter wheat, but this small patch had been cleared away for tents. There was a pit for campfires in the middle, and Jimmy insisted on building one. We threw logs into the pit and lit it with kerosene. The rushing autumn air threatened the budding flames, but with the help of some dry grass its flames started to reach out to us, blowing unpredictably in the changing winds.

Starting out small, we took turns lighting spinners and parachutes.

Ama lit sparklers, spinning and looking up at the stars like we used to when we were kids. You could see them real clear from here. There were so damn many of them, looking up could make you dizzy. I never understood why it was called the “fabric of space and time” more than when I was out here, away from all the lights, blown away by their sheer numbers and depth.

Ama wanted to send off a Chinese lantern, so Chase helped her set one up. Jimmy started playing with the fountains. He neatly set them in a circle around the campsite, then quickly ran from one to the next, lighting them so they’d go off together. I helped, meeting him from the opposite side. Finished, we ran to the fire pit and looked around at our one minute of glory. It was like being on stage at a rock show, but better. The fountains were sparkling, shooting, and cackling, the pink, yellow and green sparks reaching up above our heads. Ama’s lantern was floating up, a stately ember in our wild show.

“Let’s shoot it down!” Jimmy shouted, ripping open a pack of roman candles with a manic fervor.

“You’re brilliant, Jimmy!” There were no words for the satisfaction I felt at that moment. We hurriedly lit the candles and aimed up towards the lantern. But the wind was blowing it hard, far up and away from the paltry reach of our candles.

“Holy shit!” Jimmy yelled, snapping our attention back to the ground. The ground that was too visible in the dark night, too bright. The wheat near some of the fizzled out fountains was on fire. “Holy shit, the motherfucking wind!” Jimmy whipped off his jacket and started stomping at the flames. He jumped back as the fire burned through his jacket and started crawling up his leg.

Chase grabbed Jimmy and threw him to the ground. “Stop and Roll!” he shouted at him. I’ve never seen anyone roll back and forth so fast. My own feet felt glued to the ground. Shock, I was going into shock. Jimmy’s pants were out, but we were quickly becoming encircled in nearly waist-high fire. We were going to have to jump through it. “Run!” Chase commanded, and we obeyed. We ran towards the lowest point and leaped over the flames.

“Ronnie!” I turned around at the sound of Chase’s hoarse voice. Looking back, I could see my sister staring at us from inside the campsite. For a brief moment, I had forgotten all about her. Shame should have filled me, but all I could do was stare. Her face looked like it was streaked in tears, cheeks glistening in the glow of the fire. Chase

ran to her, jumping back into the campsite. I used my jacket to beat at the fire, but it was spreading too fast. I dropped the burning jacket into the flames and stepped back, watching helplessly as Chase took off his coat and wrapped it around Ama. He zipped it up, engulfing her small frame down to her thighs in his thick Italian leather. He said something to her, and I saw her nod. They backed up a few steps, then ran.

Ama ran straight through, flames licking up her jeans and around her jacket-wrapped waist. I'd heard about Marines running through fire in basic training, and I prayed it wasn't just a story someone made up to rattle me. If she was fast enough, maybe she could make it through.

Chase took a running leap, landing near the edge but not quite far enough. He must have not seen how far it'd spread, there was so much damn smoke, and burning embers were swirling all around us. Maybe it was the shock of being surrounded by flames, or maybe he got unlucky and landed on a dip in the ground or on a rock. Whatever it was, my surefooted and graceful friend stumbled and fell. I heard Jimmy screaming, anguish grating across the pitch of his voice. Chase rolled out of the burning wheat but his hair, my god, his hair was on fire. I wanted to cry, to feel something, but instead I was numb. I took off my shirt and beat at Amalie's burning shoelaces. I should have been colder. The fire was out of control.

"Get Chase!" she screamed. I looked up and saw Jimmy pulling Chase over the ground, his shirt wrapped around his head. Chase wasn't moving.

"I'm fine Ronnie! Just go!"

I got up and went to Jimmy, half running, half stumbling. I helped him lift Chase up, wrapping his limp arms around our necks, and we ran.

"Holy shit holy shit holy shit," Jimmy muttered, frantic. His hands clenched the steering wheel as we sped back to town. We called 911, but we weren't about to wait. We'd get him to the hospital faster than anything. Chase was breathing, not conscious. He was covered in burns. I prayed they weren't as bad as they looked.

"You guys live near the hospital," Jimmy was saying, "I can drop you off."

"We don't have time for that!" Ama's voice cut through me, high pitched and scratchy. Chase's head was cradled in her lap. She had never stopped crying.

“Then you can walk home from the hospital! Point is, no one needs to know you two were there. You shouldn’t have been. This is my fault. We don’t all have to get down for this shit.”

Plans started sifting through my thoughts. We could put our smoky clothes in a trash bag, shower, then climb back into bed like we’d been there all along. My friends had my back. I’d probably never even get questioned about it. Nobody else knew I wasn’t at home, safe in my bed.

“Alright,” I said. I clasped a hand on his shoulder, squeezing in gratitude. I could never repay him for this. I looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time since the fire started. There was ash in his hair and smeared across his face. His brilliant blue eyes were pale as they darted back and forth, wild and unfocused. Guilt flooded through me.

“No, I’m not doing that!” I turned and looked at Ama, taken back by the outburst. “He saved me! He’s all messed up now because of me. People have to know. I won’t let them think he’s just some punk rich kid that started a fire in his backyard and got what he deserved!” She unzipped Chase’s leather jacket and lifted up her shirt, showing us the peeling red skin on her stomach. “I never would’ve made it without his help!”

The hollow ache in my stomach burned, and I felt something inside me break. If we had just gone to the lake, we could’ve had a normal night out in our quiet little town. I knew then it was my fault, and no one else’s. I was a coward. And now I was about to throw Jimmy under the bus, just to protect my sorry ass.

I leaned back and gripped Ama’s hand. “You’re right, Amalie,” I said, and as my voice broke over the words my tears finally began to fall. Ama rested her warm forehead against my hand, hot tears splashing softly on my palm.

“I’m sorry, Jimmy, I’m so sorry I was gonna let you take the heat for this. I’m such an asshole.” Jimmy reached out to us and we both grabbed his hand. Our hands were clenched tightly together, the three of us crying quietly as we pulled up to the ER.