

## The Perfect Plan

By: Nathan Jones

It was about eight o' clock when Jason knocked on my window, his face drenched from the storm that had been predicted to last only an hour, three hours before. He'd gotten to my house quickly, probably by way of the trail behind the Bakers' Field, and the gleam in his eye told me everything.

"It's time." he said, reaching a hand through the window to take the backpack. "Did ya get everything?"

His question was rhetorical. He knew I'd come through, same as always, but I settled his nerves with a quick nod before ducking out into the storm. My feet hit the first branch with ease. Though the bark was slippery, its outline periodically hidden within the flash and fade of the lightning above us, I had confidence that I'd make it down just fine. I'd climbed this tree on more than one occasion, and though my nerves made the next few steps a bit more cautious, my feet touched the cool, damp grass just moments after Jason's.

"We sure picked a good night to do this." he commented, throwing the bag over his shoulder. "I almost thought you'd chicken out on me."

I couldn't figure out why he'd say something like that. Maybe it was nerves, or maybe it was the lack of any real plan going into this, but regardless of what we did or didn't have mapped out, his comment annoyed me. I stopped where I was, letting the rain pool into the hood of my jacket. "We can go back if you want." I said, satisfied that he'd noticed I wasn't behind him, "but don't use me to cop out on this one. This was your idea, not mine."

"There won't *be* another night." His reply was short. He didn't like being called out. "Besides, Monica will be there. You can't tell me you don't wanna see her."

I looked at the ground trying to rationalize our decision to steal the pastor's car by reminding myself of the obvious: I liked her and she was out of my league. I couldn't show up to that party in my dad's Nova. If I wanted to get her attention, this was the best way to do it. Monica liked bad boys, not the kind of guys who stayed home all summer to mow lawns at the golf course. I was tired of being that guy and the pastor's Shelby would change all that. "She's the only reason, Jason." I said. "I want you to swear that you know what you're doing."

"Relax." he replied. "I know what to do." He reached into the backpack I'd given him and pulled out the coat hanger I'd pilfered from my aunt's closet. "This is our ticket." he said, a smile across his face. "This is gonna get us to that party in style. We'll be the coolest dudes there, Mikey. Just trust me on this one."

"What if someone sees us?" The idea had been swimming in my head all night, and I watched as Jason began to walk again towards the trail behind the Bakers' field.

"Trust me." he repeated. "No one's gonna see us, and no one's gonna know where it came from." He stopped momentarily to look me dead in the eye. "I asked around school, ok?"

No one knows this guy, and no one even knows he owns a Shelby. This is foolproof, man. Just roll with it and think about how hot Monica's gonna be for you when she sees us."

There were two things I hated about Jason. The first was that he was an asshole, and the second was that he was usually right about most things. It'd bugged me since the two of us had met back in third grade, and it bugged me now as I realized how much research he'd done on this. Though he knew I'd been skeptical when he'd pitched the whole thing to me over the weekend, I had to hand it to him. He'd done his homework, and he'd done it because we were best friends. He knew same as I did that jail for one of us was jail for both, and despite the queasiness in stomach, I nodded. "Alright." I said, finally moving from my post. "We'll do it."

The two of us were now moving once again into the field behind my house, the thick grass squishing beneath our sneakers as we tried to avoid the sinkholes I'd come to hurt myself in on more than one occasion growing up here. The field was large, and it bordered the Bakers' at the tree line, and though I knew the cows were likely in the barn safely huddled in their stalls and out of the rain, I thought about how scary it might be to bump into one of them in this storm, the two of us barely able to see where we were going in the first place. Cows were naturally nervous animals, and it only took a single frantic cry from one of them to startle the rest into a frenzy. I was sure that if we ran into any of the livestock out here, the Bakers' would hear it, and Mrs. Bakers was a gossiper and quick to dial 911.

"Please tell me you didn't use a flashlight on the way here." I said to Jason, watching as he attempted to re-trace his steps from his original trek. "I'm pretty sure I told you about Mrs. Bakers' love of storms."

"I didn't." he reassured me, hopping over a large puddle. "I know the old bag likes to watch the lightning. I will say this though." He hopped another puddle and turned to face me. "The trail's rough tonight. I nearly fell twice just passing through, and I even took my time. That's why it took me so long to get to your place. One of the trees back there must have fallen, because I had a hard time finding the markers that we set up."

"We'll make due." I told him, wondering yet again if this was even a good idea. The trail we were taking was man-made. Jason and I had cut it ourselves a few summers back, and even then, it still needed regular maintenance to keep it from growing back into the thicket it'd been before we decided to make ourselves a shortcut between the two farms. It'd started out as a project just for fun, but once we'd realized that we could hide things back there, store the shit we often stole from the barns and houses around the neighborhood, we quickly realized that it wasn't just an ordinary trail. It was a hideout. We'd need to be able to find it quickly if things went sour over at the pastor's garage, and if what Jason was telling me was true, I worried we'd have nowhere to hide if that happened. Despite this, the two of us continued on for a few more minutes, and the first of our markers suddenly came into view.

"See it?" Jason's voice was calm at this point, and I figured he'd already put what he told me behind him.

"Yeah," I said. "I see it." I tried to scan the area around the tire we'd used to mark this end of the trail, and couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. Everything looked to be in perfect shape. "So, getting in isn't the issue, I take it."

“Pretty much.” Jason said, moving one of the branches out of the way. “I mean, I got in no problem. I’m willing to bet the other side is just as easy to access. It’s the middle that gave me an issue. Like I said, I’m pretty sure one of those oaks must have fallen in the storm. There’s a whole area up here somewhere that’s so thick you can hardly move through it. I tripped at least once given the lack of light back here.”

This was the first time he and I had ever done this at night, and the lack of any real light was the sole reason why. We’d counted on it being pretty clear skies tonight, possibly even a full moon, as we both figured the starlight would at least help us to move through quickly enough to mimic the afternoons we’d normally bring in various lawn gnomes and barn equipment we’d pillaged from local farms. We may have been thieves, but at least we never took anything of real value. Most of the stuff we swiped was junk. After all, it wasn’t *what* we took that mattered, but the thrill of doing it. Here in our hideout, we weren’t just two losers from Jefferson High. We were *pirates*. Our junk heap was our treasure trove, and we’d collected quite the haul over the years. I thought about how cool it would be to add the pastor’s Shelby to our collection, to drive it headlong into the thicket and laugh as we pulled into the clearing we’d fashioned to house our spoils. I imagined standing next to our prize, a wooden sabre in one hand and a foot planted firmly on the bumper. Even if I was scared to death of getting caught, the fact that this was *so* beyond our usual target excited me. I was sure Monica would be impressed. I was sure of it.

I moved another of the branches off to the side, revealing the trail in front of us. Though it was hard to make out in the periodic flashes of lightning, I could faintly see the next marker off in the distance, an orange scarf I’d taken from my dad’s car this past winter. “I see the next one.” I said to Jason, pointing in front of us. “Let’s get moving.”

It took only minutes for the two of us to walk further into the trail, our bodies disappearing deeper and deeper into the thicket and onward towards the other side. High above us, thunder continued to boom, and the canopy above swayed and cracked in the wind. Despite being so dense, the forest proved helpful in a way, for though the rain had nearly drenched us on our way out towards the trail, the trees above caught and stored most of the drops before they could reach us. I suddenly remembered that I’d forgotten to pack a second pair of shoes in the bag we’d stored our dry clothes in, and I kicked myself for being so stupid. “*Maybe no one will notice.*” I thought. “*I mean, who looks at a person’s shoes anyway?*”

Suddenly, I saw Jason halt ahead of me, and his hand went to the bushes in front of him. “Here it is.” he said, pointing to a slew of branches that appeared to be blocking our path. “I knew something had fallen.” He pointed to the large trunk that rested only a few feet away, its exterior covered in thick, fuzzy vines. “Makes more sense if we jump over it.” he added. “Just try not to touch those. I think it’s poison ivy.”

Realizing that he wanted me to lead the way, I slowly maneuvered my way onto the trunk as best I could, given the condition of my shoes. I’d chosen to wear my Chucks, and though they made great shoes for hacking around the brush and quick getaways with Mrs. Jenkins’ garden tools, they were lousy for climbing. The soles, being so wet from the rain, could hardly grip the slippery bark of the trunk, and I fell hard twice in my efforts to climb it, ripping my shirt on one of the branches. “Shit!” I yelled. “This was one of my favorites, too.”

“Fine.” Jason said, hopping up with surprisingly less trouble. “Give me your hand. I’ll pull you up.”

With that the two of us were up and over the fallen tree, and with our only real obstacle out of the way, we quickly passed through the rest of the trail, emerging some moments later on the other side. I checked my watch. It was already nine o’clock, and had I realized how slow we were moving before, I might have pushed us a bit faster. “We need to get this going.” I said. “The party started half an hour ago.”

“Relax, Mikey.” he told me, pushing the hair out of his face, “We’ll make it there just fine. Look.” He pointed across from us, and in the distance, I could see the faint hue from one of the street lamps in the pastor’s neighborhood. “We’re almost there, see?”

Picking up our pace, we crossed the Bakers’ field in complete silence. I kept my eye on their front porch, looking for any sign that the old woman was still out enjoying the storm, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that her rocking chair was visibly empty. The lights were off too, which meant that the Bakers’ were already asleep, and I now shifted my focus to finding the pastor’s house amongst the others in the subdivision ahead. Most of the houses looked the same, each laid brick by brick in the middle of an acre or two, and though most were huddled close by, I knew from Jason’s scouting report that the pastor’s house had some slight differences, most notably a second garage, which likely housed the Shelby.

“I think I see it.” Jason said, tapping me on the shoulder. “Pretty sure it’s that big L-shaped one over there.” He pointed to a large house that looked to sit alone at the end of the street. The mailbox was covered in balloons, and the driveway seemed to extend in two different directions: one to the main garage at the side of the house, and the other down the hill and around the corner. Reaching into the backpack, Jason pulled two ski-masks from one of the front pockets. “Put this on.” he told me. “As much as I hate lookin like a burglar, we can’t let our faces be seen.”

We stuck to the lawns as we raced down the street, each of us secretly hoping, I’m sure, that neither of these houses had dogs in their backyard. If cows were the quickest way to get caught back near my place, an entire street of dogs barking was a surefire way to get spotted here. These people valued their privacy, and they’d built their mansions out here in the country for that very reason. I wouldn’t have found it out of the ordinary to come face to face with at least a Rottweiler or two, should the two of us get ourselves noticed. Passing the last house in front of the pastor’s, we now found ourselves directly near the tree-line where his yard met his neighbor’s. The driveway was a lot larger up close, and we soon realized that we’d have to pass fairly close to the house if we hoped to reach the second private garage out back. I cupped my hands together. I wasn’t sure why I was praying for the Lord to help us while we violated one of His commandments, but I relished in the irony of asking for divine protection in our theft of a pastor’s property. Reaching into my backpack, I pulled a basketball from the larger pocket. We were going to need to pass by the porch to reach the other side, and if the house was in any way rigged with motion sensors, we could at least find out from the safety of the trees. I closed my eyes again and rolled the ball hard through the front lawn, waiting for the lights to spring to life at any moment and ruin everything. Nothing. The coast was clear.

Jason wasted no time and bolted onward, his bulky frame tearing the grass as he sprinted headlong through the pastor's front lawn. "Come on!" he motioned, whispering at the top of his lungs.

Seeing him sprint so fast gave me the confidence I needed, and I ran as fast as I could behind him, keeping my eye on the windows to our left for any sign that we'd be spotted. Thankful that everything appeared to be dark and quiet in the house, I rounded the corner to find Jason, eyes fixed intently on a large, white single-car garage, this one very detached and very much more secure than the one attached to the house. "Bingo."

Jason now began rummaging around the sides, probably looking for a window for the two of us to climb into. I watched as he disappeared multiple times into the shadows, only to reappear with the same annoyed expression on his face, growing increasingly more defined each time. "I'm not seeing anything." he finally muttered. "Must be the only way in."

This was the worst possible situation. I wondered why Jason hadn't researched this during his scouting of the neighborhood, and again I had to wonder if what we were doing was even worth it. I began to think about Monica and how she looked the other day at school, how she'd caught me staring at her and instead of scowling and turning away at how creepy I must have looked, winked at me instead. It was at that point that I realized no matter how much I wanted to tell Jason what an idiot he was, no matter how much I wanted to yell at him for being so stupid as to not know that *this* particular garage had only one way inside, that there was no way he could have ever been able to get close enough to see it. We were going into this thing blind, and regardless of the obstacles in our way, I wasn't going to be able to shake the image of her winking at me out of my head. And then it dawned on me.

"Hold on a sec." I said, making my way over to the door of the garage. "What if it's unlocked?"

Jason had already turned his body to leave, and he cocked his head around, glaring at me like I was insane. "Don't be stupid." he snapped back. "There's a Shelby in there. Who in their right mind would leave a Shelby lying around in an unlocked garage?"

"Think about it." I told him. "Look at this place. Look at the houses around here. These people don't *need* to steal from one another. Hell, they probably don't even *care* about each other. Each of these guys has a mansion the size of both our houses combined, and each of them probably has the same damn vehicle parked in their garage. What possible reason would a pastor in this kind of neighborhood have to keep anything under lock and key? He's a *pastor* for Christ sakes. No one would even think about stealing from him."

"Except for us." I could see Jason beginning to smile, letting my words soak in.

"Exactly." I added. "Except for us." I placed my hand on the handle to the garage, bracing my arm to raise it as slowly as possible. There was no way of knowing how old this thing was, and if it creaked, I was willing to bet we'd see a light come on in that house. "I'm betting this opens." I told him, watching as he placed his hands near the bottom of the door. "Let's just give it a shot."

With that the two of us began to lift and, sure as the rain now stopped, the door to the garage slowly and quietly began to open. Up and up it went, its hinges peeling back to reveal the most beautiful piece of machinery I'd ever laid eyes on. The Shelby now sat before us, its headlights gleaming in the moonlight that now began to trickle through the once dense clouds and onto the pavement. Painted almost entirely black, the roadster looked near brand-new, and it was obvious that the pastor had done some restorations to what was probably a fairly old model. I wiped the drool from my lips and began to walk circles around the car, admiring each and every detail of a vehicle I'd never hope to own in my wildest dreams. I admired the leather seats carefully cradled in a convertible frame, the polished mirrors on either door, and as I rounded the back, my eyes caught the inscription on the license plate.

"GODSQUAD." I said.

Jason was still too busy drooling to hear what I was saying. "Huh?"

"It says GODSQUAD." I repeated, pointing to the license plate.

"Figures." Jason muttered. "I imagine anyone who owns a car like this would at least think he's some kind of superhero."

I chuckled at the thought, imagining what it was going to be like to get behind the wheel of this thing and pull into that party like we owned the place. I imagined the look on Monica's face when Jason and I, two nobodies from the freshmen class, pulled into Stephanie Cooper's front yard in a car which might as well have been the Bat-mobile. "Guess we don't need the hanger." I said.

Jason smiled and hopped into the driver's seat, basking in the glory of the moment. "Totally." he agreed. "We should change clothes, though. I'm tired of being cold." He tossed me the backpack and jumped back out of the car. "Here." he said. "You change while I find the keys. I'm sure they're around here somewhere."

I got undressed as fast as I could, pulling the dry clothes from the backpack I'd gotten from my mother in kindergarten. It was blue, my favorite color, and the small piece of tape where she'd written my name in case I couldn't find my cubby was still visible, the black ink scuffed and partially faded from years of abuse.

"Aha!" I heard Jason yell, paying little attention to the noise he was making rummaging around the garage, "I got 'em."

I pulled my dry shirt over my head, running my fingers through my hair to smooth it down. "You sure?" I asked. "That was pretty fast."

"Yeah." he reassured me, holding them up close so I could see. "I thought they were to a lawnmower at first, but then I saw this." He pointed to the small insignia of a cobra surrounded by a metallic loop and partnered with the number 500. "These are definitely to the car."

He handed me the keys and grabbed the backpack, proceeding to tear his own wet clothes from his body and rapidly replace them with a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a small hoodie from my closet. Throwing the last of our wet gear into the backpack, he threw up a rocker

symbol and tossed the bag into the backseat, jumping into the passenger side and grinning like a fox. “You ready?” he asked.

I tried to control my breathing, sliding into the driver’s seat alongside him. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I couldn’t believe we were actually doing it. My nerves were a total wreck as I looked down at the keys in my hand, my fingers grazing over the insignia on the keychain, my mind racing with a million different thoughts. I repeated her name over and over again in my head, trying not to think about the very real possibility that we could be caught and thrown into jail for something so stupid. I reminded myself that Monica was the new girl, that she’d risen from the ranks of obscurity to almost goddess-like status in less than a week at Jefferson High, and that Jason and I were still stuck at the bottom. I counted the number of times I had wanted to ask her out, only to find her surrounded by football players, each of them secretly betting the other as to who was going to be the lucky guy to take her to senior prom. It was then that we heard the sound.

We both froze, each of us looking to the other to see if both of us had caught it, or if one of us had imagined it entirely. Another thud, this time clearer, more concrete. I looked in front of us and saw nothing, and though I knew we’d left the garage door wide open, I prayed that it was just dark enough for whatever had made that sound to not notice.

“You don’t think--” Jason whispered.

“Quiet!” I snapped, cutting him off. “I don’t know. Just sit still.”

We ducked in the seats, each of us peering over the dash expecting to see some hulking beast of a man round the corner with a shotgun in his hand. We knew next to nothing about this new pastor save that he drove this car and lived in a big house. We’d seen the Shelby only a handful of times during some of our adventures into this area searching for treasure, and though I’d always thought about how amazing it would be to drive it, I had never imagined I’d be sitting where I was now, closer than I’d ever been to grand theft auto. This wasn’t a video game. This was the real thing. If someone came around that corner with a gun, we’d either be shot, or we’d have our description plastered on the five o’clock news the next day. It had to be just the wind. It *had* to be. Just then, the sound of crunching grass came within earshot, and I felt Jason’s hand clench the sleeve of my jacket. Looking over, I saw his eyes were wide, and his finger was pointing off to our left beyond what I could see. Scooting to get a better look, I spotted him: the tall, lanky frame of what could only be the pastor standing in his front yard. I closed my eyes and prepared for the worst, prepared for him to stroll over to his garage, find the two of us sitting in his Shelby, and call the wrath of God or the Jefferson County police on us. I imagined the sound of his footsteps getting closer and closer, our fate sealed and our days of treasure hunting over, my time at school crushing on Monica replaced by hours in prison with a man named Bubba who’d do everything in his power to make me his bitch.

Yet, nothing happened. No footsteps came. Opening my eyes, I peered hard into the darkness, trying to figure out why we hadn’t been spotted, why we hadn’t heard the undeniable slam of the pastor’s front door as he raced back inside to grab his phone. It was then that I realized that the pastor wasn’t outside because he’d heard us in his garage. He wasn’t out here toting a shotgun in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Instead, he was standing in his front lawn in nothing but his bathrobe, and he was praying.

“Holy shit.” Jason whispered, “I can’t believe this.”

“That’s the *last* thing you wanna say right now, dude!” I said, punching him in the arm. “Just shut up and maybe he’ll leave.”

The faint sound of the pastor’s prayer now traveled in our direction, and both Jason and I crouched lower in our seats. “Dear Heavenly Father,” he prayed, “please be with my family and I this week as we attempt to settle into our new home.”

“Unbelievable.” Jason giggled. I punched him again, putting my finger to my mouth in the hopes that he’d realize what an idiot he was being.

“Father,” the pastor continued, “please be with the Williams’ this evening as well, and please be with Mrs. Baker. She’s a sweet woman, Father.”

“Hardly.” Jason muttered.

“And I pray Dear Lord that You place Your hand upon her and take hold of the cancer. Take hold of it, Father, and bathe her in Your Holy Light.”

“We’re gonna get caught, Mikey.” Jason whispered.

“Shut up!” I repeated.

“May Your Light shine upon all of us, Dear Lord. Amen.”

Jason and I remained still, and holding my breath, I watched as the pastor turned back towards his house, began walking back to the front door, and stopped momentarily. I felt the hair stand on the back of my neck, and figured that Jason was probably right on this one too. This was probably the moment in which he’d spot the open garage.

“And please be with Anna, Lord.” said the pastor quickly, “She’s had her doubts about this move, and I need Your help to show her that this is a good place, full of good people.”

I looked over at Jason who remained giggling in his seat, balling my fist and wishing I could make contact with his jaw. Hearing the sound of the pastor’s front door close behind him, I breathed a sigh of relief. We were in the clear. Casting a glance over at the house, I checked to see if any of the lights were on. Though I wanted to wait there for a few more minutes, sit quiet in the garage to give the pastor time to fall asleep, I had a feeling that if we remained there any longer, that someone else might come strolling out of that house, and there was no telling what that particular person might do should they *too* decide to take a moonlit stroll in their bathrobe. Wrapping my fingers tightly around the keys, I looked back over at Jason. He nodded, and as I placed the keys slowly into the ignition, I prayed quietly to myself that the car was a silent starter. Seconds later, the smooth sound of the Shelby’s engine filled the garage, and the roadster, which had previously lain dormant, now roared to life. Had I been on a track, I would have revved the gas, and I closed my eyes for a brief moment to take it all in. This was it.

“Let’s get moving.” Jason said, snapping me out of my trance, “She’s waitin, dude.”



With that, the two of us brought the car slowly out of the garage, each of us keeping a close eye on the house for any signs of movement. The clouds were all but parted now, and the moonlight which had only peered through a few minutes before, now burst through the clouds, illuminating the driveway and the adjacent street like lights on a racetrack. I pulled the car up the driveway slowly, keeping my focus on what I'd learned while practicing in my dad's Nova. As the tires made contact with the street, I cast another quick look at Jason. His eyes were on a small piece of paper, and he held a cell phone, its backlight illuminating the directions he'd written down to Stephanie Cooper's party.

"We need to make a right over near Tanner Mill." he said. "I'm pretty sure the house is on a private driveway down there."

"Right." I said, putting the car into first gear. "Here we go."

I increased the pressure on the accelerator, surprised at the amount of power that shot out of the Shelby, its engine roaring to life. Gone were the insecurities about our plan, replaced instead by the sheer adrenaline and excitement of what we had accomplished. My mind flooded with possible scenarios. I tried to imagine the best way to pull into the party, tried to imagine the coolest, most bad-ass entrance that would catch Monica's attention. I wished right then and there that the two of us could pop a ramp, that we could fly into Stephanie Cooper's front lawn like true superheroes, and feeling the adrenaline pump through my arms and legs, I pushed the Shelby's pedal to the floor.

The car shot through the back-roads of Jefferson County like a bullet from a rifle, and Jason and I, screaming at the top of our lungs, cried out into the night air. "Eighty-eight miles per hour!!!!!!!"

Laughing hysterically, we flew past the Bakers' field, past the road where we'd found our first piece of treasure as kids, and raced past the old cemetery where we'd sworn we'd seen the ghost of that soldier from the Civil War. Our hair blowing in the wind and our faces caked with smiles, we turned onto Tanner Mill going entirely too fast, and pushing the Shelby into fourth gear, I watched as the houses flew by in a total blur. I counted the number of times in my head that I'd wished for something like this to happen, wished that I could do something so utterly once-in-a-lifetime that I could look back on it years later and swear to myself that I couldn't have done it better. I grinned from ear to ear thinking about the look on Monica's face when we pulled into that party like we owned the place, and I wished she was there beside me now, her head on my shoulder and my foot on the gas. Lost in my fantasy, I soon felt Jason tap me on the arm. I eased the car back into second gear, focusing my attention in the direction of his pointed finger.

"This is it." he said, pointing to a small, gravel driveway just off the road. "Turn in there."

I turned hard right, letting the Shelby's tires catch the gravel as gently as I could. I didn't want to risk tearing the paint underneath, and though we were putting at least a few miles on the odometer during this little joyride, I was sure that it would go unnoticed. Damage from gravel, however, would not.

"Holy shit." Jason muttered, his eyes now straight ahead. "Take a look at that."

I looked ahead of us, and my eyes caught the monstrous rooftop of the log cabin looming in the distance. Stephanie Cooper's dad was an architect, and it appeared that this particular log cabin must have been some kind of dream home he'd built for his wife. There were three decks, and each of them appeared to house at least twenty to thirty people, most of them noticeably intoxicated, and each of them looking very much like older kids. This wasn't some random party thrown by kids at our school. This was a college party.

"I don't see her." I said, scanning the lawn in front of us. I looked at my watch. It was almost eleven, and the party looked like it had been going for quite a while. "You think she's inside?"

"Yeah." Jason replied, smoothing his hair down in the rearview mirror, "Probably with Steph. They're pretty good friends now." He checked the mirror once more and popped a piece of gum in his mouth. "Come on." he said. "Let's do this."

Jerking my head to the right, I quickly popped my neck and tried to keep my nerves from pouring in. I wanted to do this right, and I wanted to get the attention of as many people as I could. I put the car into park for a brief moment, and placed my foot on the gas. Taking a deep breath to settle the last of my nerves, I pressed my sneaker down hard, revving the gas, feeling the rush of the Shelby course through me as its turbo engine roared to signal that we'd arrived. I flashed the lights twice for added effect, and putting the car back into first, I slowly coaxed it down the long, gravel driveway towards Stephanie's cabin, my eyes still scanning the decks and lawn in hopes of spotting Monica. As we got closer, I could see that my plan had somewhat worked. A group of people had gathered on some of the decks, and a couple of taller guys below stood in the doorway, their drinks in one hand and their fingers pointing directly at Jason, myself, and the Shelby.

I low-fived Jason and the smile on my face grew so large, it nearly hurt. I couldn't believe it. Though we hadn't succeeded in getting the attention of everyone there, we'd managed to gather enough to get a few of these people talking, and I watched as a majority of them began telling their friends to take a look at the two of us parking the Shelby. Hopping out of the car, I tucked the keys into my jeans and stood momentarily by the door, keeping my eyes on the front door of the cabin as two guys, obviously not from our school, strolled over to admire the Shelby.

"Sick ride, dude." said the first, taking his phone from his pocket to snap a photo.

I briefly felt a twinge of fear. Though I was confident in Jason's research that people wouldn't recognize the pastor's car, I couldn't help but fear that the photo might find its way onto Facebook, spreading between albums and comment postings about tonight's wild party at the Cooper's place. Moving to the back of the car to cover up the license plate as best I could, I made sure to stay out of the photo as well. "Thanks." I said. I watched as the guy admired the photo for a brief moment before putting his phone back in his pocket. I looked over at Jason, and he shrugged. "Let's go inside." I said.

The two of us now made our way inside, and pushing past the two taller guys standing at the front door, we entered into what appeared to be the main living room. Music was booming from all directions, and tons of people, some of them still staring at us, danced and laughed with

one another with drinks in their hands. “I’m gonna grab a beer.” I heard Jason shout, his voice muffled by the lyrics to ‘You Think You’re Cooler Than Me.’ “You want one?”

I shook my head and looked around. Unable to spot Monica in the crowd, I winced as I realized I needed to go to the bathroom. I took a look around. Though most of the room was completely packed with kids from our school as well as a ton of people I didn’t recognize, I managed to spot some stairs leading up to what appeared to be the second floor. Walking up slowly, I continued to look around for Monica. She was nowhere to be found. “*She’s probably on one of the decks.*” I thought to myself, and as I reached the top of the stairs, the house opened further to reveal a long corridor with several doors scattered throughout. A few kids were gathered nearby, and one in particular, a girl with long, black hair and a tight body wrapped in skinny jeans, stood next to one of the doors laughing with some other people I didn’t recognize. Tapping her on the shoulder, I attempted to ask her where the bathroom was, and as the music changed to ‘I Wanna Be A Billionaire’ downstairs, she pointed to a small wooden door at the end of the hallway. Filing past her, I reached the door and knocked a few times, hoping to God that there was no one inside. My nerves were in full swing now, and despite my confidence in what Jason and I had accomplished tonight, there was no way I wanted to greet Monica with a full bladder and a look of desperation plastered across my face. There was no answer. I knocked a few more times. Still no answer.

Slowly turning the knob, I pushed the door open and walked inside, realizing that this particular bathroom was separated by a sink in one room with the next likely housing the toilet and shower. With my body telling me it was now or never, I quickly pushed past the second door, and my eyes suddenly caught the two people pressed hard against the wall, their bodies moving against each other and their alcohol sitting nearby on the edge of the sink. Turning to leave just as quickly as I came in, I suddenly spotted the familiar black and red highlights, and the earrings, though obscured by the other face pressed hard against them, were easily recognizable as the two silver loops I’d always seen her wear to class. There, going hot and heavy with some random guy I had never seen before, stood Monica, the stranger’s hand going up and down that same pink sweater she’d worn the day she winked at me.