

They Burned the Flag

It was 2.30.

Jake Cross felt very much like a king as he sped ever-so-carefully along Settlement Road, in his newly-acquired gift – A shiny, new Honda Civic, equipped with all the bells and whistles his parents cared to purchase.

Yea, in this, King Jake's Polyester Palace, Jake reigned over all. He saw all. He knew all. For once in his seventeen years of living, Jake had complete control.

Jake's queen, Alexis Goodman, sat beside him in the passenger-side throne, smoking one of her mother's Virginia Slims. She too felt a sort of empowerment from the vessel: her being with Jake meant an indefinite permanent stay of her pedestrianship, and that all her other girlfriends would be jealous of her for just about forever.

Alexis exhaled a sigh of contentment, and flicked her diminished cigarette-butt out of the open window. She sat up straight, and let her hand hang lazily out of the window for a while, enjoying the way the wind felt as it gently abraded her skin. Life was good. She then began to wonder if her own parents could be talked into buying a convertible for her seventeenth birthday. They practically owed her, anyway, considering what a drag her last one was.

In the backseat of the Royal chariot sat Gerald Noble and Jeremy Wright – Jesters, friends, and trusted advisors. In truth, both Gerald *and* Jeremy already had their own cars, but Jeremy's was chicken-crap, and Gerald had his license taken away by his father for coming home drunk one night.

A few nights.

At least once a week – he didn't keep track. He always saved room in his schedule for a little miller time, whether it was at a friend's house, or in the basement of his own. He didn't consider himself an alcoholic, but then, most alcoholics don't either. Gerald's Idea of a fun night always included booze and drugs, and that's why Jake liked keeping him around.

Jeremy, on the other hand, was a different sort of boy. At seventeen, not a drop of alcohol had touched his lips, nor cigarette, nor any sort of pill, (save Tylenol for his frequent headaches). He didn't believe in doing those kinds of things, yet Jake and

Gerald, and even Alexis *lived* for them. Jeremy was the sort of boy you could imagine still let his mother pick out his clothes. He wore fairly-large wire-rim glasses, and had the sort of freckles that made your head hurt if you looked at them for too long. A stiff at parties, and a drag whenever any mischief was to be made or fun to be had – that was Jeremy for you. But Jeremy had known Jake ever since the third grade, and that counted for something. Plus, Jeremy was actually useful; he was the safest boy in school, and a parent’s dream. He was polite, formal, and most importantly, *safe*. Every parent knew that nothing bad could happen in the company of a good boy.

Jake turned onto Matthias’ Creek Road very gently, as if caressing a satin kitten, as Alexis prepared to light another cigarette.

‘Could you please not do that in here?’ Jeremy pleaded from the back-seat. ‘Or can you open a window, or something?’

Alexis stared back at him, incredulously. ‘You’re kidding.’ She said.

‘I’ve got asthma!’ Jeremy whined.

Alexis rolled her eyes, and turned around to face the road ahead, putting her mom’s Virginia Slim back in it’s box. Jake heard her whisper ‘*prick*’ under her breath.

Alexis didn’t like Jeremy, but then again, she barely liked Jake, or anyone for that matter. She was like a sort of parasite – she took whatever she needed from people, and then was done with them for good, unless you had something else she coveted. In Jake’s case, it was the car, and the something-extra they tended to do on weekends. In Jeremy’s case, it was his brain. She would be failing most of her classes if it weren’t for him – and he asked for nothing in return.

Officially, Gerald, Alexis, and Jeremy rode home with Jake for the Convenience. That was true enough, but the sort of convenience Jake had in mind deviated somewhat from their parent’s naïve ideas. They probably thought they were getting coffee at Starbucks, or at the mall or something. Parents.

Jake pulled onto Regan Road, and then onto Knoll Street moments later.

He stopped when he got to the corner of Reagan and the Middle-of-freaking-nowhere – the name Jake gave to a big, secluded field at the end of Regan. He turned to Alexis, who, knowing where this was going, smiled and kissed him, then got out of the car.

Jake then unbuckled his own seatbelt, and turned to Gerald and Jeremy (Mostly to Gerald) and asked if they were ready.

'Hell yeah!' Gerald shouted.

Jake smiled, fondling the little packet of fun he had consealed within his jacket's pocket. It had cost him a pretty penny, and he was about to get his money's worth.

It was 3.01.

The Middle of Freaking Nowhere was a new discovery Jake had made while driving around after school one day. When he first laid eyes upon it, it was beautiful – more than beautiful – it was perfect. It was the Middle of Freaking nowhere – there would be no one would bother them there.

Jake led them to the one, lonely tree in the field, standing erect, watching over it's little paradise. They all sat down under the protection of the Old Oak, all of them waiting eagerly for Jake to share his fun.

All of them except Jeremy, but he didn't know what fun was . . .at least, not yet.

'Dude; you brought your homework with you?' Gerald asked him, pointing to Jeremy's messenger book-bag.

'I have a lot to do,' he explained, blushing. Gerald, Jeremy, and even Alexis sniggered.

'You're not gonna need all that *here*.' Jake assured him, with an undertone of menace in his voice.

'Whatever.' Jeremy ignored Jake, and pulled out his Civics book, and turned to chapter four. Fairly frustrated, Jake closed the book, and pulled the bag of fun out from his pocket. He held it out to Gerald first, who eyed it greedily, then to Alexis, who tried to look indifferent, but Jake could tell that she too lusted after it's power.

Then Jake held it out to Jeremy, who said nothing. He simply stared at the foreign substance, half confused, half knowing all too well what was to come.

'Ever try it?' he asked Jeremy. Jeremy shook his head.

'Let me rephrase that: do you *want* any?' Jeremy adamantly shook his head again.

'I have a headache.' He complained.

'I'm sure you do,' said Jake, arching his eyebrows. 'This'll take care of *that*.'

'I'll take his share!' Gerald offered. Jake held up his hand, as if to calm him. Presently, he addressed Jeremy again:

'You've been a good boy all your life, haven't you?' he asked. Jeremy said nothing, but Jake could see that he had hit something.

'You may say you don't mind being . . .the way you are, but I know, personally, that you don't really want to be that guy anymore. . . .When's the last time you went to a party and felt completely free? When's the last time you succumbed to sheer desire?'

Jake smiled to himself. He sounded like a freaking poet, but at least he had gotten Jeremy's attention. He was now staring at the bag, in wonder.

'This,' Jake continued, holding the little bag up higher, like some holy object 'Is your door. Your ticket. Your key to freedom.'

Jeremy eyed the bag curiously, mulling it over.

'Take the key, Jeremy.' Said Jake.

Freedom. That was what it was all about.

It was 5.00.

High as the stars themselves, Jake and his court clambered back into the chariot.

Jeremy had his homework done, Jake had Alexis done, and Gerald was just done – wasted.

He fell asleep, listless, only moments after Jake drove away from the Middle-of-Freaking-Nowhere.

Frustrated by his ever-persistent headache, Jeremy followed suit – off to dreamland for him as well.

Now, only Alexis remained awake for her King. She was smiling. Another good day.

'So . . . ' began Jake, trying to be casual. 'Was that good for you?' he turned to Alexis, who stared at him, bewildered that he would ask. Then he started to chuckle, and Alexis punched him on the shoulder, which only made Jake laugh harder.

'Just try and *tell* me that wasn't freaking awesome!'

'You weren't.' said Alexis, 'Not. Even. Close.' – that shut Jake up for a while, giving Alexis the opportunity to slip away for a quick nap.

A few minutes later, at the next stoplight, Jake looked back at his slumbering court, and could not help but smile. Again, the feeling of Absolute power surged through him. He also stole a glance at the car's built-in clock.

It was 5.08.

He was *supposed* to be driving Jeremy home – his house was only a few blocks away, and his parents were probably waiting for him.

Then again, there were a few things Jake wanted to take care of first.

He looked at the clock again.

It was 5.10.

He had plenty of time.

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It was 6.00.

Even Kings get lost.

They – all four of them – were in some neighbourhood in the southern side of town, miles away from home.

The sun was quickly setting, and darkness loomed, like an escaping prisoner waiting for it's chance to escape it's Twilight Prison.

It was 6.04.

Sure, Jake would get his head chewed off by his parents when he finally got home – his mother would on about how worried he had made her; his father would yell about how he should have at *least* called – but it was all worth it. An extra hour in his

chariot, and extra hour of uninhibited freedom.

It was 6.11.

Freedom from his mother, freedom from his little brother, freedom from his dad, his teachers, and everything else that held him firmly in place. That feeling, coupled with whatever was in that little bag of pleasure from earlier, left Jake to wade in a pool of Euphoria. He understood then, more than ever before how the Colonists felt when they separated from the English, after so many years of oppression – patriotic.

Yep, that was him. Jake the Patriot-King.

It was 6.21.

The hell that he had yet to catch from his parents was a small price to pay. Ever the rogue-adventurer, Jake was always the first to act, and the last to apologize – Jake took orders from no one, and he prided himself in this.

It was 6.27.

‘You should have gotten onto Forklift like, three hours ago.’ – This was Alexis.

She had woken up five minutes prior, and had ever since been yelling at Jake for deviating from their schedule.

‘I have a freaking chemistry test tomorrow, asshole!’

‘That’s nice.’ Said Jake.

Gerald and Jeremy were still fast asleep in the backseats, thankfully spared from the Dragons wrath.

It was 6.26.

‘Would you just let me drive?’

Silence.

‘Do you even give a crap about how *I* feel right now?’

‘Nope.’

Alexis sighed, and rolled her eyes in annoyance. *Jerk*. She wasn’t really planning on studying anyway, but it would be nice if

Jake would show he cared once in a while. . .

Suddenly, someone in the back seat stirred, sitting upright in a sort of drunken stupour.

'Where are we?' Gerald asked, scratching his head. Only a moment ago, it had been completely light outside.

'I dunno.' Jake answered.

'Cool.' Said Geral, and slumped back into his seat, complacent.

'Am I the only one who cares ab—'

'Yep.' Answered Gerald. Alexis swore under her breath, and pouted.

A minute later, Gerald spoke up again.

'Dude, pull over – I gotta take a piss!' he said.

Alexis wore a disgusted look, whereas Jake merely smiled.

'When a man's gotta go, he's gotta go!' he reasoned. He sped along until he reached another neighbourhood – Knightsbridge, the sign said – and parked the car in front of a small, dark house, deep therein.

'Thanks,' said Gerald, right before rushing out of the car to do his business. His pants were unzipped before he shut the car door. Jake saw him run around the dark house, and disappear into the night.

Moments later, Alexis got out of the car as well.

'You gotta go too?' Jake taunted. Alexis gave him the finger, and left, leaving Jake with a still-sleeping Jeremy. Disgusted, Jake followed Alexis' suit.

It was 6.45.

Darkness had finally escaped it's prison, now free to pervade the heavens and earth.

When Jake spied his queen, she was propping herself up on a mailbox that belonged to the house Gerald was peeing on. She was watching something across the street; Jake could see its flickering reflection in Alexis' eyes. When Jake turned and saw for

himself what it was, he was surprised that he missed it coming in.

Before them, in the backyard of one of the houses across the street, was a large bonfire – most certainly not sanctioned by the Homeowner’s Association. Jake could make out a figure or two, dancing around the fire almost as if performing a ritual, and couldn’t help but grin.

‘Here, we find the natives of this land in their natural habitat, performing their mating dance,’ commented Jake, in his a thoroughly abysmal impression of Steve Irwin.

Alexis chuckled, if involuntarily.

‘Shall we take a closer look?’ asked Jake, still sporting the accent.

It was 6.46.

Jake held out his arm, and Alexis, still giggling, took it. Together, arm-in-arm, they traipsed across the black street, and carefully hid themselves so that the ‘natives’ couldn’t see as they watched on.

The ‘Natives’ were actually indian, as both Jake and Alexis could see when they were close enough. There were two little children – a boy and a girl – running circles around the large fire, trying to catch each other in a rather dangerous game of tag, as a teenage girl, and an older-looking woman talked excitedly to each other in some sort of Indian dialect. Gossiping, perhaps.

Suddenly, Jake and Alexis heard the family’s back door open, and slam shut. Into the light of the fire stepped an Indian man – presumably the father of the house – carrying some sort of cloth-bundle in his hands.

The man then began to ramble – saying something to them in rapid tongue. The rest of the family laughed, and clapped at this. Then he held the cloth high over his head, and let it open – and that was when the cloth-bundle became clearly visible as the American flag, or, at least, the two pieces of it. The blue rectangle that held the flag’s fifty white stars had been cleanly severed from it’s red-and-white-striped counterpart. Presently, the father held these two pieces in separate hands, up high so that his family could see. He said something else to them in that devilish tongue of his, and then, one-after-the-other, tossed the two pieces of the American Flag into the fire.

It was 6.50.

Goodbye, freedom.

It was 6.51.

Jake and Alexis slipped away from the demonic festivities with bitter tastes in their mouths, and an uncomfortable sort of feeling in their stomachs.

‘Did you just see that? What they burned?’ Jake asked this of Alexis, as soon as they were out of the Family’s earshot.

‘Yeah’ said Alexis, solemnly. The night seemed all but quiet, now. There was no telling what those people could have done to her and Jake if they had caught them spying – it was this realization that presently caused her hands to start shaking. Jake’s hands were shaking too, but for an entirely different reason – his hands were shaking with rage. There they were, that family, living in the greatest country in the world, and they would *dare* . . . the thought of it was unbearable. He felt like punching something right then and there, but something told him Alexis wouldn’t appreciate a broken jaw. Still, he had to find some way to release the rage, and he needed to find that something five minutes ago. Like an enraged bull, Jake looked around angrily until he found it – there, across the street. His car. His chariot. His beauty, like a beacon in the night, ushering him in from a storm.

When Jake and Alexis got to the car, Gerald was already back from his trip to the bathroom, and was sitting in the front seat, smoking one of Alexis’ mom’s cigarettes. He looked sheepishly at Jake when he swung the door open to let himself in.

‘Took you long enough.’

Jake said nothing, but tore the cigarette from Gerald’s mouth, and threw it far behind him.

‘Whoa, whoa,’ Gerald apologized, ‘My bad.’

Jake stared at Gerald coldly, impatient to get in his car – his escape – to feel the power and freedom surge through his body as he pushed the gas pedal to its limit.

It was 7.02.

‘JAKE! Calm. Down. *Now.*’ Alexis hissed.

They were on the highway, traveling at a brisk pace of 70 miles per hour, and steadily accelerating, speeding past cars and trucks that were going much too slow for Jake's liking.

'*Slow. Down.*' Alexis echoed, nervously. A few tense seconds passed before Jake reluctantly lessened his grip on the steering wheel, as well as the force he exerted on the gas pedal.

'*What's up with him?*' Gerald whispered to Alexis. Jeremy was still fast asleep in back.

'We saw something back –'

'What would you do if you saw a bunch of *illegals* burning the flag,' Jake interrupted, 'What would you do?'

Gerald wasted no time in thinking about it; 'I'd kill 'em.' He said, without hesitation.

Alexis froze. What in the world was she doing there?

'We are *not* going to kill them! I don't care how angry you are or *whatever*, I'm not doing that.'

'Relax, Lexi,' soothed Jake in a voice so cool, butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth. 'We're not gonna kill them. Just gonna teach 'em a lesson is all . . .'

She wasn't entirely convinced, but Alexis allowed herself to sit back in her chair anyways. 'You promise?'

Jake took his eyes off the road for a moment, to face Alexis. She looked back at him with wide eyes. Even in the darkness, her skin shone, reflecting the pale moonlight.

'I promise.' He told her. Alexis exhaled a huge sigh of relief, and closed her eyes, thinking.

It was 7.20.

They reached Jeremy's house first.

He lived in a fairly quiet neighbourhood, situated well away from the main road, and plagued by classic suburbia. Here, the wives of the various Doctors, Lawyers, and Bankers that lived there congregated to gossip. Lawn-sprinklers worked like clockwork. The only downside to it was that aeroplanes flew overhead every five minutes, but in the twelve years of living in his house, he had grown used to it. He could sleep anywhere peacefully now, including through the very bumpy and angry ride in

Jake's car.

Gerald shoved Jeremy awake when Jake pulled into Jeremy's driveway. Both Jeremy's father and mother were home – there were already two cars in the driveway. The living room light was dimly lit as well, and you could see the erratic, multicoloured flashes that the television set upstairs made as it switched from image to image.

Jeremy murmured a breath of thanks before unsuccessfully attempting to let himself out – Jake locked the door right before he tried.

'Dude – I don't have time for this – open the door!'

Jake paused, and a sigh escaped his mouth as he struggle to find the safest words to use.

'Can I ask you a favour?' he asked.

'Depends.' Said Jeremy. 'If I say no, are you gonna let me out?'

'Maybe'

'What kind of favour?'

'I need you to meet me outside your house at about eleven tonight – I'm picking you up.'

'Where are we going?'

'It's a surprise – trust me.'

Trouble. That's exactly what it was, and Jeremy should have picked up on that.

'It's worth it.' Gerald spoke up.

Jeremy sighed, weighing his options. Even though his mind was slightly hazy because he had just woken up, he wasn't blind. He knew something was up, but he was too tired to care.

'Sure.' He told Jake. 'Eleven?'

'Yeah. Dress . . .dark.' Jake instructed. Another warning sign went right through Jeremy's ears.

'Dark. Right.' Said Jeremy, groggily, as he was leaving.

It was 11.21.

Jeremy's parents were sleeping peacefully in their beds, unaware that their son was somewhere miles away, about to change his life forever. So were Jake's and Alexis'. Gerald's dad, however, was wide-awake, knew that Gerald was gone, and wasn't worried in the slightest. Worst-case, the kid got himself killed, and even then, he deserved it.

The neighbourhood where the filthy flag-burners lived was quiet – surreally so. The houses, all dark, protruded from the earth like spires, distorted and unsettling.

It was 11.23.

Jake scanned the streets desperately, looking for his target.

'There's the house I peed on,' Gerald pointed out, helpfully.

'How can you tell?' Alexis wondered aloud. It was now pitch-black outside, and all the houses looked the same to her.

Gerald shrugged. 'It's like when a dog marks its territory.' He explained, 'You don't forget something like that.'

Jake parked the car on the curb in front of the house next to his target, and unlocked the doors. The mix of emotions pervading the car was tangible: Jeremy Wright – tumultuous ignorance. Gerald Noble – silken complacency. Alexis Goodman – bubbling anticipation. Jake Cross – Scarlet bloodlust.

'You guys ready?' Jake asked them – the same question he had posed in the Middle of Freaking Nowhere.

'Hell yeah!' cried Gerald.

It was 11.27.

They all got out of the car and stood around awhile, taking it all in. The silence. The billowing trees. The omniscient stars that hovered above.

Jake went to the trunk. Inside were several petrol-filled wine bottles, all stuffed with dirty rags – Molotov Cocktails.

Jake grabbed about six bottles out of the trunk. Alexis gasped when she saw what he had.

'I thought you said we *weren't* going to kill them!' She screamed.

'Keep it down!' Jake ordered. 'And I *told* you; we're *not* gonna kill them!' He hissed, angrily. 'Who the hell stays in a burning house, anyway?' She couldn't argue with that.

Alexis took a Molotov from Jake, bitterly.

'Trust me,' He assured her. 'Now hold the bottle out.'

Alexis hesitated a moment, then held it in front of her. Jake quickly whipped out a lighter from his Jacket's pocket, and lit the cloth sticking out from the bottle. Alexis gasped, and nearly dropped the bottle.

'Throw it!' Jake instructed.

Alexis squealed, and chucked the Cocktail as far as she could throw it. It fell short about five feet, and set a part of the lawn ablaze. Jake and Gerald laughed.

'What kind of throw was that?' Gerald taunted.

'You can do better?' Alexis challenged.

Without hesitation, Gerald took a lighter out of his own pocket, and set his own cocktail on fire. He chucked it, breaking a window. Through the glass, you could see a burst of flames appear.

'Now *that's* how you do it!' Jake congratulated, clapping for Gerald. Gerald took a mock-bow.

It appeared that the only one not having a good time was Jeremy.

'What's up?' Jake asked him.

'Nothing.'

'Want a cocktail?'

'No.'

'Come on. Take one.'

'No.' Said Jeremy, more forcefully than before.

Jake lit another cocktail, and tossed it to Jeremy, who thankfully caught it by the bottle.

'Hurry up! Toss it!' Jake ordered. Jeremy hesitated, then, upon realizing there was nothing else he could do with it, tossed it at the house. He had to admit: it felt good.

He asked for another.

They threw about fifteen Molotovs that night. After all of them were gone, and their fun had been had, Jake rounded up his court, and drove them home.

It was 11.45.

Goodbye, Bhudev Shah.

It was 11.48.

Goodbye, Hema and Allen Shah.

It was 12.04.

Goodbye, Marie Shah.

Goodbye Forever.

## **AFTERWORD**

The anchorwoman who was interviewing sixteen year old Erica Shah had been kind enough to begin with a series of easy questions, taking care to steer clear of the obviously sensitive subject concerning the severe burns that permanently scarred her face and eyes, but the heat from the overhead lights were a constant reminder that things could, and would get much worse.

It started with the question: 'What do you remember about that night?'

Erica's aunt grasped her hand's beside her, encouraging her. Erica nodded. It was a simple enough question, but one that

brought up the memories she was hoping to bury far underground. She could probably get away with feigning forgetfulness, (And that wouldn't be far from the truth – her memory *was* a little hazy) and the anchorwoman might just leave it at that, and, albeit the disappointment of the station manager, Erica could go home. Or rather, to her aunt's house. Her true home died along with everyone else that night.

But there was something inside of Erica that wanted to press on – the part of her that knew this would never end unless she did this – that the nightmares would go on until she confronted this.

'I . . . I remember waking up because I smelled something burning,' She began. Her aunt's eyes went glassy. 'For a moment, I thought that my mother had burned breakfast again . . . She still doesn't understand . . . she never understood how to use the toaster.' A nervous chuckle.

'Then I realized that it was still dark outside. I didn't know what to think until I went into the hallw . . .'

The first tear was the hardest for her to shed. After that, they flowed without hindrance from her blinded eyes as the images resurfaced – The door to her parent's room, blocked by fire. The doorknob to her little siblings' room, too hot to open. Why did she have to be selfish and demand a separate room?

The house was strangely quiet, save for the roar of the flames. She couldn't scream. No one would hear her, anyway. . .

When it was clear that Erica would not regain her composure to answer the question, the anchorwoman went on. Presently, she faced the camera to address the audience.

'About a month ago,' She started, as a montage of photos flashed for those watching at home, 'Days after the fire, a seventeen-year-old boy by the name of Jeremy Wright broke his silence, and confessed to perpetrating the arson with three of his classmates: Jacob Cross, Alexis Goodman, and Gerald Noble. The four high-schoolers are set to go to trial in two weeks for charges ranging from arson, to first-degree murder. We'd like to know if you were planning on attending the trial.'

Erica took only a moment to think. She told them that she had to. That she'd never get any peace if she went through life not knowing the faces of her family's murderers.

'One last question before we cut for a break, Erica,' Said the anchorwoman. Erica nodded in agreement. 'In a police statement

from Jacob Cross, he states that he planned the arson because he saw a man in your back-yard burning a flag. Is there any truth to that?’

She stifled a bittersweet laugh. What a reason.

‘It was the day my father finally became a citizen in this country. . . he was so happy . . .’ Erica sighed at the memory. ‘Papa planned to put the flag up on our roof that afternoon, but Ela, our dog was playing with it, and tore it. . . Papa got a little book he bought a year ago, and turned to a page with a picture of a flag on it. Flag Etiquette. He told us the respectful thing to do was to burn it . . . I *told* him it didn’t make any sense – I should have –’ Erica stopped. It was too late, now.

She couldn't do anything. She was hopeless. Helpless. Defenseless

The anchorwoman reached out to hug Erica, sympathetically, as she sobbed.

‘Such a brave girl . . . We’ll be back in a minute with more on this shocking story.’

Cut Sound.

Cut to black.