

In A Split-Second- Ashley's Big Trouble

Gabriella and I have been best friends for a long time. I think she was 3 and I was 4, and we had a big sandbox fight over a fruit-roll up that resulted somehow in a friendship. Growing up, it's not unusual for friends to go separate ways, but not Gabriella and I. If anything, as we got older, the better friends we became. We did everything together, protected each other, and had a ton of laughs and good memories on the way.

When I got the call from Gabriella on Saturday night that she needed help, it was no surprise then that I would go and get her, wherever the heck she even was.

"Ashley," her small voice had said over the sound of some very loud music, "I need to get out of here. I don't feel good, and there's some crazy stuff going down. Can you come and get me?"

Gabriella's boyfriend, Brad, was a very social kind of guy and had convinced her to go to a party on an acreage that night-- an acreage that was something like 25 kilometers out of town. I knew I could make it in about 20 minutes and wrote the directions down quickly, telling her I'd be there to pick her up as soon as I could. As I closed my cell phone and jammed it into my pocket, my stomach churned.

I was actually grounded from the car and leaving the house—both were off limits. I had just started serving my "time" on Friday and was lucky I even got to hold onto my phone. The grounding was a move that my parents knew would keep me indoors for the weekend, and with good reason, I have to admit.

A week earlier, I had missed curfew. Normally, they were pretty flexible about a few minutes over, but this had been more like 3 hours over. I knew I'd blown it when I saw what time it was after our movie night, but was more certain of the trouble I was in as soon as I crept into the living room and saw my Dad quietly sitting on the couch with his arms crossed. Nothing is worse than the quiet-Dad-doom at 2 a.m. And so I was grounded, for three weeks; one week for every hour I was over curfew...harsh.

I thought long and hard for a few seconds. It was 1 a.m., and everyone else was asleep. It was reasonable that I could probably sneak out and be back before anyone noticed. It was just my luck that it was warm outside and the car was not parked in the garage. I stole down the stairs in my sweats and a hoody and grabbed the keys out of the dish quietly. I slipped out of the house like a stealthy ninja, not even waking up the family dog. Or at least I wouldn't have woken up the dog, if we'd even had a dog. I was just that sneaky!

Feeling vaguely criminal, I slid into the driver's seat of the Camry and disengaged the parking brake so the car slowly and quietly rolled down the driveway. Once on the road, I fired up the engine and crept down the street. Looking back, I saw the house was dark and quiet and the door was still shut.

Twenty minutes later, I was on the highway and trying to figure out where the acreage was, fumbling around in the dark until I ended up on some Range Road in the middle of nowhere that seemed like it had gravel made of boulders. Finally, a brightly lit farmhouse in the distance appeared along with music

thumping faintly through the air. Even at the end of the long driveway the music was insanely loud. I pulled up behind a few cars before getting out and trudging up to the house. Picture me, in sweatpants, crocs, a hoody, and very messy hair -- I was way out of my element here.

Gabriella and I didn't really go to parties as a rule, and we didn't drink. Her boyfriend was older than us though and as I said, very social. I wasn't sure if Brad was into drinking, but his buddies were. A lot of people at this party looked *much* older, I thought, walking up the steps of the house nervously.

The inside of the house was a mess. People were everywhere and the furniture was all flipped over or destroyed. Gabriella was nowhere to be seen. I jostled my way through the crowds, keeping an eye out for her while making my way through the rooms on the main floor, but no luck. Stumbling outside, I looked around a huge backyard full of people and a roaring bonfire. I made my way around the fire, looking desperately into the darkness for a familiar face. Still no Gabriella. Getting to a quiet place on the side of the house, I dialed her cell and hoped she would pick up.

"Ashley?" Gabriella said. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," I said breathlessly, "where are you? It's crazy out here!"

"Tell me where you are," she replied, "I'll come to you. Oh hey, by the way, Brad and I broke up. We have to leave, like now. He's really mad."

She hung up and I suddenly realized maybe, just maybe, it wasn't a good idea to have left my house. I didn't regret coming to get Gabriella, but this suddenly seemed crazy.

Suddenly, Gabriella swooped in out of nowhere and grabbed my arm.

"Hi-nice-to-see-you but...RUN!" she said, "I'll explain later!"

Okay? We tore around the side of the house and back to where all the cars were parked in the driveway, throwing ourselves into the Camry like the Hazzard boys. I would love to say that we peeled on out of there into the sunrise (it was nearly 2:30 a.m. by this point), but as soon as I popped the car into reverse and hit the gas, I heard (felt, rather) a huge crunching and kind of exploding noise to the rear of the car. Looking back in horror, I saw that had I actually *used* the rearview mirror before reversing, I may have *actually noticed* the huge truck now wearing the family Camry like a silver badge of honour!

Gabriella's face paled.

"Hey Ash," she squeaked. "Do your parents actually know you're here? I thought you were grounded..."

A very quiet bumper-dragging half an hour later, I dropped off Gabriella, and debated my options. Push the car off a cliff, and claim a thief both stole and demolished it? Fess up? Run away to Mexico? Sneak back into the house, and feign innocence? I rubbed my eyes. Maybe I would think of the right answer after some sleep. If not, I was sure to have *years* of being grounded to think of one.