

The Secret

by Shannon Compher

The sudden sound of his engine starting breaks the silence of the hot, summer, Florida night. As he drives away in his black Chevy truck he glances in the rear view mirror at his girlfriend's house. He tries to forget about the girl he is leaving behind. His heart begins to pound faster as he picks up his phone to dial a number he has just recently come to know so well. He stops at the front of the neighborhood, puts the truck in park and the phone begins to ring.

"Hello," seventeen year old Nikki Daniels yells over a crowd of people and loud music.

"Hey," he replies, "what are you up to?"

"Oh, hi James. I'm at the bonfire. What are you doing?"

Before he answers he pauses as his girlfriend crosses his mind. He knows what will happen if she ever finds out about his secret and for a second he almost reconsiders what he is about to do. He loves his girlfriend but he can't resist the thrill of doing what is not allowed. The second of almost reconsidering passes and with the blink of an eye James's girlfriend is shoved out of his mind and the thought of what the night might bring with Nikki takes its place.

"I'm not doing anything," he finally blurts out, "Lets hang out?"

"Hang out? Right now? How 'bout you just come to the bonfire," she suggests, "everyone's here."

James considers the consequences. He told his girlfriend he was going home; if he goes to the bonfire there's a chance someone at the party might tell her he was there. His girlfriend will get mad, an argument will start and a breakup may be the result. But James is confident in himself. He knows if his girlfriend breaks up with him he can bullshit his way out of trouble and get her back.

"Alright," James gives in, "I'm on my way. Be there in fifteen."

He hangs up the phone and pulls out of his girlfriend's neighborhood. As he drives along state road 434 James' mind begins

to wonder. He has done this kind of thing plenty of times before but this time he can't shake that guilty feeling inside. He turns on the radio to relax his mind and Carrie Underwood's Before He Cheats blares from the speakers.

"Fuck this," he says under his breath as he shuts the radio off.

He opens his center console and looks for his Copenhagen. James could always count on a fat dip to calm his nerves. Unable to find it he pulls over to the Seven-Eleven on the corner of Chapman to buy a can.

As James pulls into the parking lot he sees Shaffer and Futch on their tailgates at the usual spot in the side parking lot where all the boys go to waste away uneventful nights. James parks next to the boys, jumps out of his truck and takes a seat on the tailgate next to Shaffer.

"Bro, what's up?" Shaffer says after shoving a hand full of sunflower seeds into his mouth.

"Nothin much man, just stopped to get a can. What are y'all doin tonight?"

"You're lookin at it," Futch lazily replies, "What about you?"

"I'm thinkin about heading over to the bonfire, you guys should go."

"No way bro," Shaffer scoffs, "I don't feel like dealing with any drunken drama tonight."

"Yeah man," Futch agrees, "tonight's not the night for that shit."

"Yeah, alright," James exclaims as he jumps off the tailgate, "I'm just gonna stop by for a few. Hit me up tomorrow though; we can go fishing or somethin."

"Alright man, see ya later," Futch yells as James heads toward the doors of Seven-Eleven.

The front window of the gas station comes into view and James sees that Sketch is working the register tonight. Sketch is always high out of his mind and never cards anyone so James checks his wallet for a few extra bucks for some Bud Light.

"Damn it," he utters to himself.

All James finds in his wallet is a five and two singles which is not enough for his Copenhagen *and* a case of Bud Light but James isn't too bothered by this because the night is young and there should still be plenty of beer at the bonfire.

Inside Seven-Eleven James walks straight over to the register and gets in line behind a frumpy trailer trash mom and her three wild, barefooted children. As the mom pays for her gallon of milk James watches the oldest wild child shove a chocolate candy bar into his pants pocket. James laughs to himself and steps up to the counter.

"What's up Sketch? Can I get a can of Copenhagen long cut?"

"Sure thing boss," Sketch answers in a mellow tone.

While Sketch searches the back wall of tobacco products James replays the conversation he had with his two buddies outside. James and his group of boys never worry about drunken drama and Futch and Shaffer are always down for a bon fire. James doesn't understand why tonight is any different and why all of the sudden they are worried about drama.

"Here you go man," Sketch hands James his Cope, "that'll be \$5.29."

James places the five dollar bill and one of the singles on the counter and picks up his can.

"Keep the change man," he tells Sketch as he heads toward the doors leading to the parking lot.

Outside James says one more goodbye to his buddies, climbs in his truck and whips out his camo pocket knife to cut the seal on his Cope. After shoving one huge pinch into his bottom lip James finally feels at ease and continues on his drive to the bonfire.

He makes it down 434, a right onto Mitchell Hammock, a left on Lockwood and finally a right on 419, the long dark road that leads to the open country of Chuluota. James' mind begins to wander again and he fantasizes about Nikki and her long tan legs in cut off blue jean shorts. The last time James and Nikki hung out James was

wasted and only remembers half of what really happened. But from what is buddies tell him he had a pretty wild night and James was eager to make this night just as wild.

As he pulls up to a dirt road with trucks on either side, James's phone begins to vibrate in his pocket.

"Shit," he mumbles to himself. He sees it is his girlfriend calling him and glances at the time. It's a quarter past midnight and he remembers she told him she would call to say goodnight before she went to bed. James hesitates to answer but figures if he doesn't answer she will just continue to call until he picks up. James answers the phone.

"Hey, babe."

"Hey," she replies, "what are you up to?"

James slightly hesitates to answer but not long enough for his girlfriend to notice. "Nothin much...just about to get ready for bed," he lies.

"Okay, well I'm going to sleep now. I'll call you when I wake up."

"Sounds good."

"Okay, I love you," she says sleepily after a yawn.

At the sound of those three words James heart skips a beat. Something clicks in his head and he realizes at that moment he does not want to be at the bonfire; he does not want to see Nikki Daniels tonight and he does not want to cheat on the girl he loves anymore.

"I love you too babe, goodnight."

James hangs up the phone and pulls behind a white Chevy S10 on the side of the dirt road. Sitting in the dark truck James contemplates what to do. The drive out to Chuluota was long enough and since James has gotten rid of the idea of hooking up with Nikki he decides there is no harm in staying at the bonfire for a little while. James spits his dip into his styrofoam cup, takes a swig of a water bottle from the floor board and turns the truck off. As he gets out of the truck he makes out a figure walking toward him from the other end of the dirt road. As the figure approaches he recognizes it is Nikki.

"I knew I heard your truck!" she yells at James as she gets closer, "What took you so long? I thought you weren't going to show." Nikki stumbles a little then hands James an unopened can of beer. "Let's get out of here," she slurs obnoxiously as she tries to open the door to James' truck.

"Woah there, I just got here I don't want to leave *yet!*" James takes Nikki by the hand and tries to pull her back to the bonfire.

"Stop James! I don't wanna go back there! You called me to hang out tonight so let's hang out!"

Nikki pulls away from James and kicks his front tire out of anger, crosses her arms and pouts. James stares in amazement and shakes his head. He does not want to spend the rest of the night alone with this girl, at least not while he is sober. He quickly thinks up an excuse to get her to go back to the bonfire.

"Nikki I haven't even gotten a drink yet. One is not enough for me. Let's go back and after I've had a couple we'll get out of here."

Again, James takes Nikki by the hand and drags her back to the bonfire. As the two finally reach the group of kids around the fire James sees that everyone is already as drunk as Nikki. To the left of him there is a circle of boys smoking it up and to the right of him James watches a kid play his guitar and sing a random made up song about hunting and fishing. He finds an empty seat on the tailgate of some truck and sits with Nikki.

"Awesome," he sarcastically says to himself.

James cracks open the beer Nikki gave him and takes a drawn out gulp of the cheap alcohol in a can. Across from James a couple sits on a fallen tree trunk kissing which brings James to think about his girlfriend again. He thinks about her smile and the way her nose scrunches when she laughs. James' mind wanders back to the day he first saw her and remembers how nervous he got whenever her eyes met his from across a room.

James is shaken from his daydream by a loud thud. Nikki has officially passed out next to him in the bed of the truck. James jumps off the bed and heads over to a cooler to get another beer. On the way over James is stopped by Ricky.

"James! Take a shot with me!"

"Nah man I'm straight," James replies.

Ignoring James, Ricky shoves a shot glass into his hand and begins pouring away before James can stop him. Ricky is known for being an angry drunk so James decides to take the shot instead of risking a fight. Once the glass is full to the rim with clear liquid, Ricky makes a toast.

"To senior year and gettin wasted!"

James downs the shot and walks away before Ricky has the chance to pour him another one. An empty chair sits next to one of the coolers. James takes a seat and opens his second beer. He sits alone for a while, drinking beer after beer, engaging in some small talk here and there with drunk friends that occasionally stop by the cooler. James is now on his sixth or seventh beer; he thinks about leaving the bonfire but ends up at the end of a picnic table with a ping pong ball in his hand. All recollection of the night and his thoughts are mixed up and James suddenly finds himself next to Nikki again.

Nikki is no longer passed out. She sits on a bench by the fire with a dazed look on her face. The alcohol is flowing in James' blood and he looks at Nikki as if she were naked standing in front of him. James moves closer to her and whispers in her ear.

"Let's go."

Nikki turns to him with a grin and slowly gets up from the bench. With everyone either passed out or wasted beyond belief no one notices the two stumbling away from the bonfire and off into the night.

They make it to the bed of the black Chevy where James lifts Nikki's shirt over her head and throws it off to the side. James tastes her bubblegum lip gloss and presses her warm body against his. He next finds himself behind the wheel of his truck. Nikki is caressing his neck with her mouth and the two are headed for his parents' lake house.

They make it to the bridge over the lake and the moonlight reflecting off the water gives James chills down his spine. He can't

wait any longer and he anxiously turns to Nikki. He places his hand on her leg and slowly moves it back and forth against her silky smooth skin. Nikki smiles and turns her head to look out the window at the lake.

As they drive on James imagines them together inside the lake house. He imagines grabbing hold of her and pulling her closer to him. Emotions run wild inside James' head, and then suddenly it all disappears. James' girlfriend emerges again and with the alcohol wearing off and reality setting in, his face turns pale. James realizes what he is about to do and abruptly turns to his passenger.

"That's it. Nikki, we have to stop."

Her face turns to horror as she stares out of the windshield of the truck. James follows her eyes and realizes the truck is drifting into the next lane. James is jolted by her scream and frantically tries to take control of the truck again. He sharply turns the wheel to avoid hitting the guard rail of the bridge. James slams on the brakes and the truck skids across the bridge, screeching loudly, until it smashes against the guard rails on the other side. His body is violently jerked forward and his head is slammed against the steering wheel. Nikki is thrown forward hitting her head on the dash. The smell of burning rubber fills the air and the night is silent again.

"Oh my God," Nikki says, holding her forehead in pain. "James, that was so close. We could've been done for right there."

"You have no idea," James adds. He throws the truck in reverse, eases out the clutch and is relieved when he feels it lurch backwards. His truck is still running and the damage done is not permanent. A small glimmer of hope is born and James knows he still has time to fix everything.

