

Summer, Interrupted

by Kelli Christiansen

1976

The crackling fire was burning high, orange flames reaching skyward, glowing embers dancing erratically before floating away, dying before they reached the dangling leaves of the large maple that towered above.

It was hot. Too hot, even for July. But they wanted to make s'mores. So they ignored the soaring temperatures and roasted marshmallows anyway, the dry heat of the fire pushing against the thick humidity of the blazing summer day, turning their faces red.

Lindsay never heard her mother calling her name. Over the popping fire and the chatter of her friends, every other sound was lost to the evening. She didn't realize she wasn't paying attention to the time. At nine years old, on summer break, wearing a watch was not on her list of priorities. Making s'mores around a neighbor's bonfire seemed like a better idea.

So there she was, her long brown hair pulled off her neck into a high ponytail, hanging out with some friends from around the block. A bunch of them had gathered in Mark's backyard, pulling up lawn chairs around the fire pit his family used all summer and deep into autumn. Lindsay had a small crush on Mark, but his family intimidated her with their abundant religiosity. She didn't understand why they were always saying grace. Not a churchgoer, she didn't really understand what grace was, but she had learned to bow her head and clasp her hands and mutter "amen" when Mark's father was finished thanking God for the s'mores.

About a dozen of them had gathered around the fire. Converged by some unspoken invitation. Greg and Julie from next door. Anna and Rosa from across the street were there, too,

and so was Steve from the other end of the block. He was a few years older than the rest of the kids. Sometimes they helped him fold copies of the local weekly newspaper for his delivery route. In exchange, he thrilled them with ghost stories that kept them awake all night.

Two of the neighbors had already left, dashing off when they heard their mother ring their dinner bell, a large, cast-iron bell attached to a post off their back porch. Her hands sticky with marshmallows, her attention focused on licking the sweetness from her fingers, it never dawned on Lindsay that if it was dinnertime at her neighbors' house, it was probably close to dinnertime at her own house as well.

Once they finished the marshmallows, Mark's mom brought out a shiny blue tin of butter cookies. Lindsay took three, placing them around her fingers like crispy golden rings. She nibbled at them, trying to keep them from breaking so they wouldn't fall off her fingers and on to the dirty ground below.

She was eating her last cookie when she looked up to see her older sister, Lisa, walking down the little hill toward the bonfire. Lisa was two years older than Lindsay, less adventurous, and didn't like to be outdoors as much as Lindsay did. More Barbie than tomboy.

"Mom has been calling you for a half hour," she barked, her hands on her hips. "You'd better get home."

Only then did Lindsay notice that the sun had dipped below the tops of the trees, that it was getting late. Her heart clutched, knowing she'd be in deep trouble with her parents. After a long day at the office and an even longer commute from city to suburbs, her father did not like to have to wait for dinner.

Lindsay tossed a half-nibbled cookie into the fire pit and scrambled up the little hill toward Lisa, knocking over the picnic chair she had been sitting in. She left the gathering without

saying “good-bye” or “thank you,” focused only on trying to figure a way out of what had suddenly become a mess before she made it home, just three doors down.

She threw open the screen door to the kitchen and could immediately see that her parents were already seated at the table. Dinner was set. Everyone was waiting. For her.

“I didn’t hear you,” Lindsay stammered, walking toward her usual chair. “I’m sorry.”

Her father’s face was a picture of severe disappointment: lips curled, brow furrowed.

“She was at Mark’s,” Lisa threw in, “eating cookies around the fire.”

Lindsay glared at her sister, a silent “shut up.”

Her mother looked at her. “Well?” she said, a cigarette burning in her right hand, the smoke swirling toward the ceiling. “Is that true?”

“Yes,” Lindsay said, her eyes straight ahead, looking at no one. “Mark’s mom lit a fire so we could all have s’mores.”

“So you already ate.”

“I guess so.”

“Cookies and s’mores.”

“I guess so.”

Lindsay’s mother stamped out the cigarette, adding it to the pile of lipstick-ringed butts in the ceramic ashtray. “Then I guess you don’t need any dinner,” she said. “Upstairs. To your room. And don’t come out until we say so.”

An eternity passed before her parents entered her bedroom, the last at the end of the hall. Lindsay had only had her own room since Memorial Day. Before that, she and Lisa shared a room. Lindsay had taken over her brother’s room when he moved out after college.

“Well, young lady,” Lindsay’s mom said. “What do you think we should do about this?”

Lindsay shrugged, afraid to say anything.

Her parents looked at each other, confirming a punishment they had discussed earlier: extra chores for a week and no leaving the house for two days.

“And,” Lindsay’s mom said, “I want you to apologize to your father for making him wait for dinner.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” Lindsay said, looking at the floor.

Lindsay awoke early the next morning, hungry. She tiptoed down the quiet hall, down the stairs to the kitchen. She poured herself a bowl of Trix and carried it into the family room to watch cartoons, spilling colorful balls of sugary cereal along the way. Mid-way into *Pink Panther*, Lisa came downstairs, still in her nightgown.

“So,” she asked, “what happened? Are you in trouble?”

Lindsay shrugged, her mouth full. “Extra chores,” she crunched. “And I can’t leave the house.”

“Ohmigosh!” Lisa squealed. “You’re grounded? Holy crap.”

Lindsay hadn’t thought of the punishment in those turns. “I guess so,” she said. “Yeah. I’m grounded.”

“For how long?”

“Two days.”

“Wow,” Lisa said, turning toward the TV. “Grounded for two days.”

“Yep,” Lindsay said. “Grounded.”

“Nothing happened,” she said, bursting through the door, breathless, her feet tired from running home nearly four miles, under the hot sun, in her penny loafers.

Her family stared at her, including Lisa, who was supposed to be her alibi. Her mother didn’t look too upset, but her father: “upset” wasn’t quite right. He gave her the look. More than just a simple glare, he somehow managed to contort his face into furrowed brow, downturned lips, and reddened neck, veins bulging, a mixture that instantly conveyed both deep disappointment and deep anger.

“I just—” Lindsay said, tossing her book bag on the foyer floor. “I lost track of time.”

Her mother sighed heavily. “Lisa,” she said, “go to your room.”

“What?” Lisa blurted. “Why should I have to go to my room? I’m not the one who—”

“Lisa!”

“Fine,” Lisa huffed, stomping up the stairs to her bedroom. Lindsay glared at her, a silent “thanks for nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” Lindsay repeated. “I just lost track of the time.”

“Where were you?” her mother demanded, as if she didn’t already know. As if Lisa hadn’t already told her.

“I went out with Lisa and some friends after swim practice. We bought some records and went over to Tom’s to listen to them, and I wasn’t watching the time.”

Her parents stared at her. Her father’s arms were crossed, although the frown had softened. Slightly. But he still wasn’t talking.

“Why didn’t you come home with Lisa like you were supposed to?” her mother asked.

Lindsay had no good answer for that. Or, at least, no answer good enough for her parents. She didn't want to come home with Lisa. Lisa was always being such a goody-goody. It was embarrassing. Lindsay wanted—needed—to show everyone that she wasn't like that. She wanted to stay with Tom and his friends and listen to the new Pink Floyd album.

“I don't know,” Lindsay said.

“You don't know,” her mother said, frowning, pinching her face. “That's it?”

Lindsay shrugged. Her father scowled.

“Young lady,” her mother said with a sigh, “you'll have to do better than that.”

Lindsay had nothing to say. Out loud, at least.

Lindsay's parents looked at each other, silently communicating, coming to an agreement on the terms of her punishment.

“You are not to leave this house except for babysitting and practice,” her mother said.

“You will come home straight after swim. No phone, no friends over, no going out.”

“Mom ...”

Her mother raised an eyebrow, warning Lindsay to say nothing more. “That's final. For one week.”

Lindsay knew that arguing would only make it worse. She picked up her book bag and headed upstairs toward her bedroom. As she climbed the stairs, she could hear her parents whispering behind her. She hissed at Lisa as she passed her bedroom door. “Jerk!”

Once in her own room at the end of the hall, she quietly closed the door. Plopped on her twin bed, rumpling the pastel, rainbow-striped bedspread. Staring at the Pat Benatar poster on the ceiling, she bemoaned the injustice of it all. Somehow, Lindsay had been tainted as a bad seed. The black sheep. The troublemaker. And she was only thirteen. But her crimes were mere

misdemeanors, largely the result of losing track of time and getting home late. She wasn't breaking any laws, wasn't getting into any serious trouble, wasn't hurting anyone. But it happened often enough that each new time made things that much worse. She wondered what it was that Lisa told her parents on occasions like this. What stories, what exaggerations were floating around, tainting the picture before Lindsay could tell her side of the story?

Of course, her side usually boiled down to the mundane fact that she wasn't paying attention to the time. Which was never enough for her parents. Lindsay wasn't sure if it was because her parents suspected something more devilish going on or that she was lying. But she was starting to suspect that Lisa's renditions were causing her a good bit of trouble.

It wasn't long before Lisa slipped into Lindsay's bedroom, dying to know what happened.

"So," she whispered, shutting the door behind her. "What'd they say?"

"What did you tell them?" Lindsay asked, closing a copy of the latest Stephen King.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Lindsay said, leaning back against some pillows, "what did you tell them that they were so mad before I even could say anything to them myself?"

"Lindsay!" Lisa shouted in a whisper. "I didn't say anything."

"Nothing?"

"Well," Lisa said, "all I said was that we all went to the record store after the pool and then you guys went over to Tom's to listen to them."

"And?"

"And that I thought the stereo was in Tom's bedroom, so that you'd all be listening there."

Lindsay rolled her eyes. “Great.” She could have throttled her big sister. “Thanks for the alibi.”

“Well,” Lisa protested. “What was I supposed to tell them?”

“Well, whatever you told them did the trick,” Lindsay said, grabbing her book. “I’m grounded.”

“Again? For how long?”

“A week.”

“A whole week?” Lisa asked, shaking her head. “Grounded?”

Lindsay opened her novel and resumed reading, all but dismissing Lisa. “Yep,” she said. “Grounded.”

1986

Lindsay was confined to her bedroom—again—knowing she was missing yet another great party: her latest incarceration, not over for another two days yet. She couldn’t stop imagining the fun that was taking place at her friend Judy’s. The music, the dancing, the beer. Not that the drinking was the best part: She much preferred watching her friends get bombed than getting bombed herself. But, still. She was missing yet another party, and it was all but killing her.

Even Lisa was out. It was Saturday night after all, one of the last weekends of the summer. Lindsay knew Lisa wouldn't be at Judy's party; she rarely hung out with that crowd. Plus, she was older, a senior to Lindsay's sophomore. They hung in different circles.

Lindsay's latest infraction was, yet again, time related. She completely blew curfew two weeks ago, coming home at nearly two in the morning when she was supposed to be home before midnight. As usual, it was an accident. As usual, it didn't matter, and for the past two weeks, she'd been holed up in her bedroom every night after her summer babysitting gig. No phone, no TV, no friends.

The only good thing that came out of this near-constant state of imprisonment was that Lindsay was always current on her homework, always ahead of the summer reading lists. As if to completely confound her parents, she was a straight-A student. She had plenty of time to study, locked in her bedroom so often. Not that reading all night, every night, was any kind of real punishment, but she did get stir crazy. This time, especially. Two weeks was just too long.

Thankfully, Lindsay's frequent groundings had yet to completely ruin her social life. Instead, it had turned her into something of a hero at school. She was the most-grounded girl anyone knew, and she was in the top five percent of her class. A troublemaker and a kick-ass student. It was the perfect combination. The stuff of legends. It made her a standout, and for that, Lindsay was grateful. Otherwise, her friends would have completely given up on her, considering all the parties, dances, and football games she missed.

Lindsay was reading the latest Jackie Collins novel when she heard something at her window. She looked up from her paperback. Listened. Nothing. She went back to reading. She laughed at herself for reading such trash, but it was light and easy and quick to read. Plus, after reading Hemingway and Fitzgerald for English Lit, she needed something silly.

The tap at the window came again. Then some laughter. Lindsay crawled off her bed and peered out the window to investigate, but all she could see was her own reflection. She turned off the lights, just in time to see pebbles rain against the window.

“Oh, Jesus,” she laughed, pushing the window open. “What are you guys doing?”

In the side yard were Judy and their friends Abby and Bill. They were cracking up, tipsy from too much Miller Lite. Lindsay could hear them shushing each other, giggling.

“Lindsay!” they whispered, loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. “Lindsay! Come out!”

“You guys!” Lindsay hissed back. “Shut up! You’re going to get me in deep shit.”

“You’re already in deep shit,” Judy hollered. “Come out!”

“I can’t,” Lindsay said, checking her bedroom door to make sure her parents weren’t about to burst in.

“Come on, Lindsay!”

“Climb through the window, Lindsay!”

“Come to the party, Lindsay!”

The chorus was so tempting. She so wanted out of the house. She so wanted to go to this party. She so would be busted if her folks walked in and found her gone.

“Come on!” Judy called up. “Tom’s at the party, and he really wants to see you.”

Lindsay laughed, rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right,” she said, but hoped it was true.

“Come on,” Bill shouted. “We’ll help you get down. And we’ll get you back before anyone knows you’re gone.”

Lindsay thought about it. Lisa was gone, so she'd never know if she slipped out. Her parents were probably watching TV or something, and the family room was on the opposite side of the house. They'd never know. Escape was possible.

"Hang on," she whispered down to them. "And shut up."

Lindsay crept over to her bedroom door, quietly opened it, and peered down the hallway. Most of the lights in the house were out, which more than likely meant her folks were in the family room watching reruns on TV.

"Oh, shit," she muttered to herself. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

She turned off her bedroom lights and fluffed her bed pillows in a half-baked attempt to make it look like she was sleeping. Then she threw her parents a red herring.

"Good night!" she yelled down the hall.

After a moment her mother called back. "Are you going to bed?"

"Yeah, I'm sleepy. G'night."

"G'night, dear," her mother called back.

Lindsay shut the door. Tiptoed to the open window. Looked down to her friends, who were nearly dancing with delight at the prospect of launching Lindsay to freedom for the night.

Lindsay looked out. Looked down. Realized she had no idea how to climb out the window and down the side of the house. There were no trees or shrubs to grab on to. No trellises. No awnings.

"Jump!" Bill called. "We'll catch you."

"Jump?" Lindsay said, leaning out the window. "Are you crazy?"

"There's no other way," Judy whispered. "Come on!"

"Oh, Jesus," Lindsay muttered to herself.

The snap of her shin bone echoed through the summer night, silencing the crickets and cicadas.

Lindsay had to wear the cast for six weeks. She missed the first week of the new school year. The story made the rounds, sealing her reputation.

Lisa was the first to write on Lindsay's cast. "What were you thinking?" she asked her little sister as she signed her name with a black Sharpie.

Lindsay had no good answer. "I was dying to get out of here."

"Well, you're stuck here now," Lisa said, putting the cap back on the black marker.

"How long this time?"

"A month."

"Grounded again," Lisa said, shaking her head. "A whole month?"

"Yep," Lindsay said. "Grounded."