

A person is seen from behind, wearing a bright orange jumpsuit. The words "COUNTY JAIL" are printed in black, bold, sans-serif capital letters on the back of the jacket. The person's hands are clasped behind their back. They are standing in a dark, textured environment that looks like a wall or a door made of heavy, weathered material. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong orange glow from the jumpsuit and some highlights on the surrounding surface.

COUNTY
JAIL

SELF.
DESTRUCTED.

EVAN JACOBS

ASHLEY

Nice shirt.” Ashley Walters smiled as she passed Michael Ellis. She was paying a compliment to his T-shirt for the band the Who. It was the one where the *O* in the name had an arrow coming out of it, and there was a red, white, and blue bull’s-eye behind it.

“You want it?” Michael replied looking up from his *MacWorld* magazine. Ashley laughed. Her smile was enough to let him know she thought he was okay; that he could keep talking to her.

“I’ll give it you, seriously.” Michael started to lift his shirt up, ignoring the fact

that he was wearing a jacket. Realizing it would be impossible to take off, Michael stopped trying.

“Come on, keep going.” Ashley’s smile became a stern expression. “You *did* offer.”

Michael stared at her. Ashley had really inviting hazel eyes. They went well with her dark complexion and thick brown hair. She wore a pair of white tennis shoes, white shorts, and a red T-shirt.

“Okay, I’ll let you off the hook.” She smiled. “I can see by your jacket that you run for the school. Running’s cool.”

“You like to run?” Michael asked.

Ashley nodded her head.

“You want to run together sometime?” He asked the question before he realized what he was saying.

“You think you can keep up with me?” She jogged in place. “I’m pretty fast.”

“I run the hundred-yard dash.”

“Wow, that’s a humble brag.” She smiled.

Michael liked how she teased him and seemed interested at the same time.

“You’re new here,” Michael stated.

“Do I stand out that much?”

“In a good way.”

Michael had no idea why he was saying all these things. There was something about Ashley. He felt drawn to her. She didn’t seem like the other girls at Willmore High School. He felt like it was okay to talk with her like this.

“Well, I’ve gotta run. Not literally.” She smiled again. Dazzling. “But you better stay in training. Especially if you’re gonna keep up when you take me running.”

“Okay.”

“I’m Ashley.”

“Michael.”

He wanted to set up a time for their run but she was gone.

Michael thought about going after her but he didn't. He had a feeling he would be talking to her again. He just didn't know when, which kind of bothered him.

John walked up. He was wearing the same Willmore High School track jacket that Michael was wearing. It said Willmore across the back and had a runner in the center.

"Who was that girl you were talking to?" John asked.

"That was Ashley."

"She's cute."

Michael continued to watch Ashley as she walked away. Eventually, she blended into the crowd of students.

The school year had basically just started, and Michael thought it was gonna be a great one.

MICHAEL

Michael jogged home after track practice. There was a bus he could've taken with a group of other students, but Michael preferred running.

"I like running to school and running home," he told people. "It helps me clear my head."

He'd been running to and from Willmore since he started there as a freshman. He was a junior now.

The area that he and the other students were bused from was just outside the town of Willmore. It was called Porterville. It was also considered the "poorer" section.

(Some of the rich Willmore students called it “Poorerville.”) The homes, parks, and stores were all older. The high school that had initially been there was torn down, so all the students in the area went to the newer one in Willmore.

Michael’s friends John and Kevin were also from Porterville, but they took the bus unless John got to use his parents’ car.

Michael’s thoughts turned to his homework. He had seven classes. The first week of school was over, and the teachers were starting to pile it on. Michael didn’t mind; he just wished he was better at English. It wasn’t that he didn’t like the subject; it just wasn’t concrete and simple to him like math and science. Too many gray areas.

“There are so many ways to look at this stuff,” he once told a teacher. “It confuses me because I never know if I’m looking at it the right way.”

Michael wanted to be a pediatrician.

He had two older brothers, Erik and Jason. They were both married with kids. Michael got along well with all of them. Jason had a girl, Ally, who was six. Erik had two boys, Kyle and Sebastian, who were seven and nine.

One time Michael was watching all the kids. Sebastian fell. He skinned his knee and it bled a lot. Michael patched Sebastian up. Sebastian was crying, and Michael made him feel better. He liked how that felt. That's what made him want to help children.

As he neared his home, he ran past Otis Park. It was really run-down. There were two rusty swings and one sorry slide. Next to that was a basketball court with rusted hoops and a large patch of brown grass. When Michael was younger, he'd loved going there. For a while.

One time when he was six, his brothers were babysitting him. They thought it

would be funny to take him to the park and leave him there. Michael tried to find his way home, but he got lost. The farther he walked, the more scared and lost he got.

Eventually, a neighbor spotted him wandering around crying, and they helped him find his way home.

His mom comforted him like she always did.

“It’s okay now,” she said as she kissed his forehead. “Everything’s going to be fine, sweetie.”

His dad yelled at his brothers, but he seemed disappointed in Michael. As if he, at six years old, should have known how to get home on his own.

SELF. DESTRUCTED.

"I like you because you're different."

That's what she had said. And he
thought she was different too.
Different was better than being normal.
But she was a fraud. And she was done
dating him. That's when he started to
self-destruct. When he became obsessed.
When he forgot about his dreams.
When he became a criminal.



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