

# Volume II Summary

*Detective Damien Thompson is doing his best to contend with local gangs whose beliefs and superstitions are well beyond his comprehension. Despite the clear demands of his badge, he finds himself plagued with nightmares from his youth of lost friends and dangerous enemies. A hoodlum in his younger days, he is able to sympathize with those he enforces, but at what point does recklessness go too far?*

*As he questions who he's become as a man and detective, he relives the past that has forged his very being. The loss of the love of his life haunts him constantly despite his efforts to the contrary, a consequence of his darker life. Despite the sins of childhood will the man he has become redeem him or will the darkness swallow his convictions?*

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## 1. My Own Personal Hell

The world's an awful funny place, isn't it? The way society has things working, it's amazing that we all don't notice these things. What does it matter what I think or what I say? So, who am I? I'm Damien, Damien Thompson, long time outcast of society. The world is so damned complex, why try to understand? It's easier to just go with it, do what you have to from time to time, and live to each new day. It's been years since well, it's not important. Just a few days that forever changed my life. Maybe it was all predetermined and out of our grasp to begin with? Another day, another one of life's lessons. The events of those few days have been forgotten, erased, or have they? Time to look ahead instead of backwards, live for today, not yesterday. Tomorrow may never

come, especially in my line of work, so why depend on it?

Not only was it seven years since our lives were torn apart, but five years since I had entered into the world of policemen. Since then I've elevated amongst the ranks, become a detective. Seven years, five years, what's the big difference? Was it only that long? So much has happened since then, maybe I should enlighten you, or you wouldn't care? Nobody cares nowadays, so the real question isn't would you care, it's would I? Would it matter to me if the past had never happened, if the events of seven years ago never occurred? Where would I be? 25 years old leading around a gang of high school dropouts, teenagers? What a waste! Who knows? My life was a waste to begin with though, it would have only gotten worse.

Seven years ago, but why harp on it? Let's just say simply that seven years ago my life was forever changed. More like my life was suddenly disrupted and severely altered. So it goes, you learn to live on. Now, as I was saying, the world's a funny place. Society has a working that ...well, you know how it is. You've been there, seen it at work, why should I bother explaining? Still clueless? Look around! Every day has more and more examples of society's workings than the last. I would know above all, I've seen the world from so many different points of views. As a cop, or rather a detective, I'm supposed to take notice of all these things. But the hell with the observation bit, it's common sense really. The world is naturally a screwed up place, what are you to do about it? Nothing, there's not a damn thing that you can do.

Still want to worry yourself about the world's problems? Come now, let the world take care of its own problems, you should only worry about yourself. Sound familiar? I hate that damned bit of advice, I never saw a good person make any use of it. It's a selfish attitude, hell with that. What's the point of being selfish? It only screws your mind up, your morals and methods. I don't think so. I'd rather take ignorance over

selfishness. What about you? I suppose in my line of work I subconsciously form morals from what I see day to day, but don't let that stop you from thinking however you do. Hey, it's your life, live it as you wish, I can tell what I know; I'm paid to do just that, tell what I know.

Well, not exactly, tell what I think really. Form hypotheses, theories and so on. I never was much of a philosopher, so I'll keep things pure and simple. Like I said, I'm Damien, and in layman's terms, I'm a cop, a New York City law enforcement officer who's supposed to use his head a bit more than his gun. Maybe, who knows, why fight facts? Someone once told me that you can beat logic with enough imagination, another said with enough reason? Does either one make sense? I really didn't understand sayings, so I never passed them on. My favorite little saying always was "like the blind leading the deaf". Think about it both ways, the blind leading the deaf, the deaf leading the blind. I think the way I say it makes more sense. You form your own opinions, I'm sick of going with my gut.

Seven years since the bond of four friends was tested and shattered. Seven years ago it was when Seth, Eileen and I saw the cruel reality of life. To think of what we'd all been through together, to remember that one of the fateful four was no longer with us. It was like a chain reaction back then, dominoes. One after another, like pure clockwork, someone else would be in tears. The really odd thing is that well, we got over it. Contradictions were daily occurrences as friend and foe joined forces. To think of where we'd all be seven years later? I sure as hell would have bet that we'd have been more bothered about this. Maybe I'm just lying to you, that this whole ordeal is tearing me apart. After all that, can I honestly be expected to be unharmed? My gang, the good old gang. My line of work can't allow me to be seen associating with them but hey, I sneak by from time to time to say hello, keep them in line, you know. I never really adjusted to being

replaced, but I heard later on that the “replacement” never lived up to my example. I can’t remember the poor guy’s name that had followed in my shoes but it was his decision to attempt it. Good luck buddy.

To see me today, you wouldn’t recognize me. For the most part, the black is gone, though I sneak a little into each day. You can take the darkness out of the cop, but you’ll never take the cop out of the darkness. This line of work seems to strengthen my negative view on life, but, who gives a damn anymore besides me? I’m trying to clean up on language; you can’t kill a guy for trying to be a bit more respectable. One habit I was never able to really break was smoking – it came with the group. Maybe in later years I’d be able to quit, why worry about the future anyway?

To think, me, former gang leader and all around problem kid would be a policeman; I can’t keep from laughing. My “colleagues” have commonly asked me about the odd “smirk” or the misplaced laugh from time to time. My answer? It’s always the same, a simple shrug, a smile and a calm “just thought of something funny”. Usually they stand there to consider it, and I’ve walked off to find something to do. They have their own ideas of what I was thinking about, but that’s their business. Never let anybody say that you’ll never do something or that you can’t. Sure, everybody’s born with “talents” but that doesn’t mean that your future career has to be focused around it. Look at me! If I had a talent it had to be not getting arrested. A lot went down in that gang, a lot that I’m not at liberty to say, got my principals of trust and all. What can I say? “Wasn’t me”? “Ain’t my fault”? Nah, simply that what happened, happened, that’s it, the whole truth, nothing but, end of discussion on topic. Next question, if you please?

But I’m not alone in this world of chaos and evil. Seth Shortt; a faithful friend, loyal companion, and best friend for life. He went into the force with me; we stuck together, worked together. In terms of working together, we were

partners, but we were so much more than that. We'd been buddies since we were young, we grew up together in that little nowhere town. New York City, the complete opposite of everything I'd ever known. Good old Seth, I was going to meet him now. Seven years ago, there were four of us who had stood together as friends. We'd laughed and cried together, endured the good and bad times. We were down to three now. Well I'd be meeting Seth at the pub; Eileen would meet us both there.

Eileen Holmes, who was 25 like Seth and myself, the actress. It had always been her dream she told us, we used to laugh about it. We'd sit and laugh for hours on end about our dreams, dreams that would never come true. Hers did. She was with us through thick and thin, number three of the four. Eileen had a heart as good as gold, we grew up with her too. We were neighborhood friends since the time we could walk. Through elementary school and high school we'd made a reputation for ourselves. In other words, we got in a bit of trouble. I had a gang back then, but it was more of a mock gang, a gang of friends instead of troublemakers, except for me. We'd meet up, drink awhile, laugh about the good times; remember the bad.

The fourth of our group was Melissa, dear Melissa Riley. She was a Halloween baby, born October 31<sup>st</sup>. We used to kid that that's why she was so different, why she didn't quite fit in. We weren't perfect either, we all fit into molds specially created for us, but she was very different. None of us could really grasp it. She would have been 25 today; that must be why I keep thinking back. You see, seven years ago Melissa Riley took her life by way of hanging. I remember so vividly the imagery, the day, time, everything as if it were yesterday. Why? The answer; I was there.

Now, don't jump to conclusions, it was her choice, not mine. I just happened to be there. Course I tried to stop her, but sometimes it's just too late. Don't think I didn't care, I

did. I cared a lot but it just didn't matter. She was in a lot of pain, there was nothing any of us could have done, the choice was hers and she made it. What can I say? What's done is done and therefore cannot be undone. Nothing can change the past, we didn't know, or did we? Why does all this bother me now you ask? Because I did know, and I did nothing. No, I won't worry about this now, there's so much more to think about.

The streets always seem more crowded when you need to get somewhere fast. No matter the time or weather, there's always somebody in the way. It happened to be pouring rain today, why not? A day of all days, night of all nights; this would really spoil some little kids' evening when he looked outside to check his trick-or-treating environment. Hey, I don't control the weather, I can't fix it, I just have to deal with it. Sorry kids, maybe next year.

Like I said, pouring rain and stubborn crowds just like every other day. Cutting and weaving through, I made it to my destination. Seth was standing outside smoking; he couldn't quite break the habit either. Can't blame a man for being a bit stressed can you? I stood next to him, taking shelter under the doorway as he had. In silence we waited. Our friendship had grown to a point where we understood each other without speaking. I treasured times when he'd understand without me having to explain. We stood for a while, watching the various kinds of people pass. Our job was to defend them yet they didn't appreciate it most of the time. Oh well, comes with the job I guess.

We waited maybe ten minutes before we saw a recognizable figure emerge from the mess of people. Moving faster than the rest of the bustling crowd, Eileen cut through. Seth threw down his cigarette and stomped it out.

"You're late, you both were." He turned promptly and sulked inside. Something must be on his mind, but he wasn't grouchy.

I knew I was late, barely, but he would notice. Good old Seth, always looking out for everyone else, but at the same time, always wary. He held qualities I thought unimaginable in a person. We had gone through a lot of pain together, the four of us. Four, down to three, and what next? In our line of work, three could quickly turn to two or one. Eileen well, she was an actress, always traveling.

Who knows? We'd all be gone someday anyway, why worry now? I too had thrown down my cigarette and was about to move inside. Eileen pulled me over for a minute.

"It's the anniversary, maybe we should have gotten together some other time."

Could I blame her? She was just as shook up about everything as we were. None of us wanted to admit it, but it was tearing us apart over time, from the inside out. We shouldn't have met that night, should have all gone home and slept. The biggest night for mischief of the year, I wasn't allowed to take off. Seth and I were told to be on duty as soon as we left the bar. Who says Halloween is all fun and games?

Eileen was concerned; this had to have been bothering her like it was with me. I ducked down and whispered, "Don't worry, it had to happen sooner or later. We can't live afraid of a day." She nodded and we both stepped inside. Looking through the dimly lit room, we sought out Seth. We all sat at an old table and thought quietly for a moment. Who would shatter the silence first? What word spoken would turn us to speak?

"Weather sucks." Seth was staring absentmindedly out the window as the rain fell, pounding on the pavement. Eileen and I looked at each other. What kind of opening statement was that? Oh well, why worry, we went with it. Picking up from there, we stumbled through a nowhere conversation for what seemed like a lifetime. It was barely five minutes. Staring at the clock we sank down in our chairs. Time seems to go slower

when there is guilt to be had. Time to deal with it I suppose.

“How’s work Eileen?” I started searching my mind blindly for something to say. She too was staring out the window, and the mention of her name drew her back.

“Work? Oh yea, fine, great, love it, you know, and what about you two? Get your fair share of action being cops?”

We both smiled and laughed at her. When we were younger we had hated police, swore that we’d never even consider it and that cops were the lowest of low creatures. Well, what could we say now? Seth smiled and gave a little grin.

“What, are you too good to sit and have a drink with two lowly New York cops all of a sudden? Maybe we should roll out a red carpet for you Miss Holmes?” She hit him in the arm and he started laughing like a madman. We had all gone into careers we had hated as teenagers, swore that anyone involved in them deserved to go to Hell. Well, look at us now. We had a good laugh about our lives, how we’d mocked them in our “youth”. Time still dragged by, one grain of sand at a time.

The time by now wasn’t very late, roughly noon, but never too early for a drink. I grabbed someone walking by and ordered. Tonight was going to be a long one. There’s no such thing as a quiet and simple Halloween in New York, impossible. Maybe where we grew up, being we were the most trouble that town ever saw. They were sure as hell glad to be rid of us. They’d tell us that we were nothing and that we would never amount to anything. This one’s for you, Mr. Mayor.

We threw various topics into the discussion but none would really stick. We laughed and drank until an uneasy silence returned. Halloween 20—; it was seven years ago today that we all got together as a group – when we lost Melissa. It wasn’t we though; I lost her more than they had. I was only 18 but it felt like I’d known her my entire life. Losing a family member is completely different from losing a close friend. Everyday

for a split second my mind flashes back to that day, those distant memories. Who am I trying to kid? I can't forget and if I don't talk about it I'll go crazy.

Why harp on it? Because seven years ago my fate was determined, my course of life decided. You don't care do you? Do I? I'm supposed to give a damn about all this, for seven years I've been lying to myself. I've told myself I don't care, it's done and over with, get over it. The three of us haven't been together since then; it's been much too long. Eileen stayed away for the most part; I've been working with Seth since. She travels a lot, always seems to have an excuse to not be around. Took us this long to talk her into coming back, and I won't lose her now.

"Who are we kidding?" I looked over to Seth; his own voice seemed to have startled him. Eileen and I knew what he was talking about. She looked down a bit and her eyes began to get teary. He had a point; we were only kidding ourselves. I turned to look out the window to see the rain still pouring. What was there to say? I couldn't think of anything worth saying that would be...appropriate. We'd been there for a half-hour; it took that long for us to settle down to the facts.

"C'mon, seven years ago today, we all know it, why try and pretend that nothing ever happened? If we all don't vent a bit we'll end up in the nut house. Our lives are stressed as it is; we have to let go. You and me Damien, we got a line of work that keeps our minds occupied. Eileen, you travel so often and work so hard, you don't have time to worry about it either." He looked out the window with me. Eileen spoke next.

"I haven't been acting for years now." Her words hit like knives. I almost fell over in my already tipped back chair. Seth swallowed hard and coughed heavy. We stared at her wide-eyed. Years, that didn't make sense! She used to call and write us telling about her different "gigs" and the great times. I looked at her eyes and for the first time realized

how tired they looked. As a young child they were always bright and full of life, they had remained that way all through these years we thought. Now it seemed as if all the spirit and fire that had made them so interesting was gone. Eileen Holmes, we thought we'd known her.

As best friends we'd never hidden things from each other, we were truthful most of the time. Disbelief came immediately and struck hard, it was like a silent explosion. A time bomb had just gone off, but there was no sound. No, this couldn't be so; I refused to believe it. But it was, it was reality, the world, society, everything I loathed was standing over me, laughing. Why couldn't the world make sense! It was times like these that time itself stood still. It was as if the scene froze and only myself was allowed to stand up and move around, think aloud without anyone else hearing. Just like people did in the movies. If my life had been a movie, then a happy ending would be guaranteed.

It's almost time for a trip down memory lane. To go back and take a good look at the past. I can't put it behind me, I can't forget about the past, so I suppose I have to explain. Today is Halloween, the year 20— and I am now 25 years old, a respected policeman with a shady past. Background checks are common in the force, but in my case some strings were pulled. I can explain the present once the past is better understood.

None of this should concern anyone other than myself, so why do you care? You've been reading this story since I began telling it; maybe society isn't the way I picture it. Perhaps people aren't as ignorant as I would think. The beginning of my story has a title, as does each "chapter". In my life, there's a grief that can't be spoken. Why? Because the story behind it stretches far and wide, the emotional stress is too much to even consider talking about. Weakness cannot be expected of cops. I am Damien Thompson, New York police detective. I'm telling you this because, well, I have to.

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## 2. Nothing Ever Changed

A picture of today: October, year 20—. Today is a normal day for an average high school in a little town in a New York suburb. Who am I? Damien “Damn” Thompson, leader of the local “gang” of outcast troublemakers and problem starters. The nickname came from the beginning of my first name, and the fact that a lot of people were always saying, “Damn you” when I was around. I can’t say that I’m complaining; I do go around looking for trouble. The age of 18 only comes once in someone’s life, why waste it trying to act perfect? Eileen, Seth, Melissa and me aren’t perfect, never were, never will be. Why try?

People fear us; it’s just that simple. We’re not the model students the preppy kids are. The four of us grew up together and became what we are today together. What are we? The words used to describe us go on and on. My favorite out of them all is freaks, or Goths, shortened form of the term gothic. We weren’t Satanists, don’t get me wrong. For the most part we were Catholics, just lacking in our faith. Our term was Lax Caths to explain in shorthand what faith we followed.

Intimidation is a powerful tool, why waste it? By gang, I don’t mean we went and killed people for the hell of it. Sure, some people carried weapons, but never a gun; and what they carried they never used. So what did we do? We were a gang of friends who caused trouble to get back at society when it wronged us. Whether one of us or all of us got hit with the insult, we all stood up for revenge. Vengeance is bittersweet sometimes, and it was following that road that we lost one of our treasured members. Sure, when a group loses a member they all get pretty downcast, but it wasn’t just anybody.

It was Melissa. Her and I were like the crowning couple of the group, together we dreamed up the unimaginable. Seth and Eileen were always there, and we did nothing without them. Yet, she and I were beyond the normal, Seth and Eileen both would agree that we truly ran things. Our group wasn't much, just a bunch of ragtag wandering teens. Ages varied a bit, no older than 19, no younger than 15. One or two had been left back a year, and we refused most freshman. Anyway, back to the members that matter. Eileen, Seth, Melissa and I were the core of the group itself, responsible for everything. We were young; we didn't stop to consider the effect of our actions later on in our lives. Maybe we should have.

Eighteen years old, no time to worry, well, Melissa was still seventeen. We were counting the days with her when she'd qualify as one of the "Majors" of the group. We didn't have many requirements. The Majors were the main four, once we reached age 18 that is. Why did we have an age requirement for only four people? Just to show that Melissa was the baby of the group. There was a particular icon that identified us as a group that people wore different ways. I can't verbally describe it, but it was a sign that to us meant unity, honor, truth, respect and strength. We, the Majors, dreamed up everything.

So by October we had started our senior year together. Our "gang" had always existed since we were young; it just took a few years to mature, as we had. We were all similar but different. Everybody had their own little charm as well as that little glitch nobody can stand. Names were known by everyone and important decisions were discussed with the group. It was as if we ran our own society, made our own rules. We had a sort of government, laws, boundaries, and even income. We were like an independent nation. Was everything legal within our group? Of course not, but you didn't hear it from me.

Now, to make mention of a few important characters amongst the

bunch. There was Leo "Locke" Cross. His nickname came from the fact that he could pick any lock. Most of us had a very particular spelling to our names, hence why he liked the added "E". He was a good guy to have around, a junior, he was with us for a year or so now. Oldest of four, time outside the house Locke treasured. He had a sister maybe two years younger than himself, a brother a few years below her, and a new baby sister. He was a tall, lanky kid like myself, but strong nevertheless. He would protect any of those kids with his life; he loved them to death. Course if you tried to get away with a quick joke about him caring about his siblings he'd probably hit you. It's not that he had a short temper – he just had a lot of pride. I admit that I myself don't think I could stare at a baby for five minutes straight without smiling. It's just the fact that they're so innocent and all, you know what I mean.

Anyway, next winner. Gus Wolfe, or should I say, Gustave. He's some sort of French guy, like an exchange student. He fell in with us about as soon as he got here. Fit in perfectly, no doubt about that. Great guy, quiet a lot of the time. None of us know his life story, he'd never say. Call him Gustave and he'll break your face, he's very proud too, most of us are. So, Gus has been with the crew maybe two years now. Great to have around in a tough spot, he's never afraid. Maybe he is, but he hides it well. He knows just about everything we could ask of him about well...illegal operations. Great guy.

Next we have Christine Brant, one year older than the rest of us. Her and Shawn Miller were left back so they were 19 while we were still 18. The great thing about the two of them was that they didn't try and pull a fast one with the age issue; they sat back and watched, helping along the way. Great people, just like the rest. Both of them were geniuses, they could solve anything, together they were something fierce. Within our group were a few close couples; they had to be the closest. Both had a good sense of humor, an untouchable trust

barrier and enough knowledge about each other to hold information ransom. They didn't hide anything from us, they were proud to be who they were; they had overcome hard obstacles and stood upright.

By hard obstacles I don't just mean anything. Their families were seriously screwed up, and there were times when the group had gone over to help make sure that one or the other got out alright. Usually Christine, being she was outnumbered at home. Shawn was an only child, and loved it to death. But poor Christine, she had to deal with an alcoholic father, two older brothers that always obeyed dear ol' dad and a mother that was long dead. The story goes that her mother killed herself because she couldn't stand it any longer and Christine was left with relatives. Her father won a custody battle and dragged her back. The mental condition she was in shocked us all. Melissa and her talked a lot; being Melissa had similar troubles. Shawn was a lot of help to her, but how could he understand? I myself had a young sister and an older brother, I was the middle kid, so I can't really say I understand what Christine was going through.

Even though Shawn didn't have siblings, he had many fights with his parents and would commonly take off. His father was a military type; Shawn didn't give a damn for the army. Mr. Miller was always fighting with him, trying to get Shawn interested. It never happened, so sometimes we had to go pick him up too. It was part of the group; we were there for each other. If anything happened to one of us, vengeance was to be gotten. Such was our method, live and let live, unless they hurt one of your fellows.

It was a sort of policy that we maintained. Our group didn't have true rules; we just made up some standards along the way. There were maybe 15 of us total, all friends. The names went on and on, but why confuse you with them all now? The main crew of important people consists of Seth, Eileen, Melissa, Locke, Gus, Shawn, Christine and myself. We were truly a gang

of friends, nothing more, but the world didn't know that. Why try and explain? For the most part, people were too busy to listen anyway. Time's too precious to waste. So that's the crew, well, that's the main crew anyway, on with the story.

October I was saying? Things were as they always were, the usual day in and day out. School was a meeting ground for us; we attended classes that might prove useful. It was the beginning of October that year; the majority of the group was in classes, "learning" while we hung outside the building. Outside in October, we must've been crazy, but who wasn't? Everybody's a little crazy; they just hate to admit it. What about me you say? I don't give a damn what you think, you and the rest of society can go to hell with your twisted morals.

So we were outside in the brisk autumn air stealing a smoke, gaining a bit of sanity. The teachers had long given up on trying to stop us; perhaps they were afraid to? That's a good laugh. Looking around I saw a circle of familiar faces. Seth was sitting on the ground with Eileen beside him, staring off into space. Christine and Shawn were standing huddled together talking quietly. Locke and Gus stood close discussing God knows what. I leaned against the wall with Melissa, watching the cloud of smoke rise, our cloud. We were responsible for something, but nothing terribly important. Maybe someday...

Looking at Melissa I realized a mark that I had never seen before. Her father was a terrible man, a true to God bastard. He had lost his father when he was young, so he wasn't quite sure how to be one. He didn't know the first thing about having children and his wife was scared to death of him. Melissa wasn't the only one; she had a younger sister who knew her father's wrath. The man was intolerable. I had gone over there on several occasions to go get her, and time and time again she went back. I had to hand it to her, she had hope for a cruel man. Too bad all that hope was wasted; he was a lost cause.

School guidance counselors thought she was cutting herself. Never in her life did Melissa ever set a blade to herself willingly. *He* did it for her. They wouldn't believe her if she told them, so she never did. Her arms were a mess and on one side of her face everything seemed darker and sadder. I hugged her close and said what I could, but it was never enough. She was such a complex person, always fighting for the positive in the worst people. I swear – Melissa would find some way to say that Hitler had a bit of good in him, that the Caesars of Rome weren't too crazy and that the sinking of the Titanic had some good moral teachings. She was just that kind of person. It drove us crazy sometimes, but that's how I ended up with her I suppose. Two crazy people trying to make sense of each other.

I swore time and again that I would take care of that father of hers once and for all before he killed somebody, but she wouldn't let me. I told her I wouldn't let her stop me. She said that if I dared to she would never speak to me again; not even as much as look at me. To go through my life without a person such as her beside me would be pointless. So we were in agreement, I wouldn't hurt him and she wouldn't hurt me.

So why didn't I go and take care of it and blame someone else? Because I'm a better person than that, pride wouldn't allow it. Besides, Melissa was well known for her ability to see through a lie, no matter how skilled the liar. She had proved this on several occasions. It was one of her many talents that caused many to respect her. What can I say? I knew better than to try and go behind Melissa's back. Though loyal, the group made its own decisions without the "Majors", if that's what it came down to. We taught each other and preached to make sure everything was for the good of the group.

Standing outside we stared into a world that we survived in, yet within which nothing was quite ours. We belonged to the government; they controlled everything. Our lives were supposed to be in the hands of society and its corrupt teachings. That is where we broke free. Why try so hard to fit

into a crooked system of beliefs anyway? It's not worth the effort. So we didn't try. Instead, we stayed on the outside, looking in as if through an invisible window. We were the outcasts to them, but to us, they were the outcasts, the freaks. Reverse logic? Think about it.

They feel pity for us, well, some of them, because we don't fit in. We feel sorry for them because they'll always fit in. They'll always follow a blind leader, leading them to lives they are unprepared for. We, on the other hand, broke out of that system; ran free. We control our lives, our destinies, anything directly involving us. All of us had a harsh taste of reality. We were ready for it, had accepted it as part of life, and knew how to deal with it. When they, someday, are having nervous breakdowns, we'll be able to look back and laugh.

Well, perhaps we wouldn't laugh; we're not cruel. Scratch that, yes we are. Those pricks made our lives more difficult, harder to tolerate. Why should we go easy on them? They never showed mercy or compassion toward us, why return a forgotten favor? We won't, we wouldn't.

Back to what we were doing, which wasn't much. Melissa had been in another family brawl it seemed and Christine, well that was a story Shawn could explain to us later. He told us what he thought we should know, which was anything that might spark a thought of a possible solution. Like I said before, good people. We sat and laughed for a while outside the building, watching the cloud of smoke form and disappear into the air. A cool autumn breeze rushed through and sent that old October chill down our backs. A teacher passed by with half a glance. Recognizing us, he walked off shaking his head, muttering to himself. I knew what he was thinking. Why say anything; we weren't going to listen. People are so predictable.

Maybe ten minutes later we marched back into the school. The

halls were, for the most part, deserted. Anyone inhabiting them hurried a bit more than usual and took their route to class, usually opposite from us. Fear's a powerful weapon, and we had it in spades. Did we really mean to seem that way? Not really, but the true question is, were we really like that. Well, some of us were at times, some of us never were. The personalities varied like the colors of the rainbow. Such was the diversity we knew.

We were simply friends who believed in watching out for each other; that's what it boiled down to. But who knew that other than ourselves? Nobody – and it would stay that way. Everybody had different reactions; Melissa seemed to understand it so much better than myself. She said that it was in their eyes; that you could learn everything from staring into a person's eyes, if you knew what to look for. I never took her seriously, until one day her theory was proven. Right before *my* very eyes.

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### **3. The Scenario**

There was an old bridge not too far from where we'd grown up. It was made of old rickety wood that was slowly rotting away. The town should have torn it down ages ago. Why didn't they? Because it cost money, time, patience, effort, workers, all things that they claimed they didn't have. Fools! But how could they know how truly dangerous the bridge was? They said it was a landmark anyway, but they couldn't afford to buy some sort of stone to proclaim it as such a monument. So it became our bridge, our central office where we conducted business.

Wasn't it dangerous for us to hang out on a bridge that might collapse from under us? Of course, but that was half the fun.

The risk was part of everything. If there was no risk, there was no point, no purpose. It's not a challenge if you can't lose. Did anyone ever fall? Not from our clan, if anyone ever went off that bridge, they meant to. Did people jump? Of course they did, what else are you going to use an old, abandoned bridge for? Did we see them do it? From time to time we saw from afar the usual scene, policemen and all. Sometimes their battle was won; sometimes they lost. Hey, that's life, what else could be done? It all was in the hands of good fortune. Course they blocked off the bridge for a while, but eventually they gave up, went home, and we had it back.

It was our bridge and everyone knew it, young and old, everybody in town. Even tourists were alerted to it. Why in the hell a tourist would come through is beyond me, but hey, whatever. We didn't worry ourselves with it. There were dangers of course, that the bridge would collapse, that we'd carelessly light it on fire, who knows what else? Course, we were lucky. It was our meeting point to sit and do...whatever. We planned everything from there; it was our central headquarters. What happened if someone else just so happened to wander onto it? We kindly "escorted" the person off the property with the advice to never return. Did they always listen? Sometimes, if they didn't, we reminded them of our good advice.

Our beloved bridge had no name obvious to us. It was simply ours and that was all that mattered. Did any of our own get tempted by the bridge and its vast...height? Course, but we took care of it amongst our ranks and nobody ever got hurt. We were self sufficient in most cases, which I was very proud of. What's so important about this bridge? Everything of importance happened at or around it. A river ran under the bridge, hence why it was built. It connected our part of the country to a forest; there was nothing out there anymore. So it was never used, somewhat abandoned by the world. We fixed it up from time to time with our own funds, paint and such. It

was, for the most part, beyond repair and we were only kids.

We agreed that we'd use the bridge until the weather stopped us from safely perching ourselves upon its ancient rafting. Though the October winds were bitter we still met there. After school, sometimes during, we'd meet and discuss anything. Sometimes we'd just reminisce, laugh, cry, whatever. Today was different. Today there were people there when we arrived. We saw them from afar and ducked out of sight to plan. There was a guy and two girls wandering around on our bridge – we didn't recognize them. We agreed to go in calmly, try and talk them out and if they refused, we'd show them the way.

Melissa and I walked out side by side with Eileen and Seth behind us. The rest of the group watched from afar. The distance wasn't much. The guy was staring out at the water; one of the girls was beside him, looking behind him. The other had vanished.

"Are you aware that there's a fight going on down there?" His words were calm and even, he hadn't moved at all, his glance frozen in space. We had walked as quietly as possible; he'd heard us coming. A fight, what did he mean? We quickened our pace and stood on the bridge with him, staring down. A young girl was running from an older man. He was stumbling and babbling.

Melissa stumbled backwards, searching for words, as we looked closer. It was her father, drunk as death. He didn't know what he was doing. She started to talk, but I didn't stay to hear. Seth shouted some sort of warning about going alone, but I didn't stand around to listen. I ran down the hill to get to the river and tripped halfway down. Falling, rolling and cursing I hit rock bottom like a ton of bricks. My whole body ached, the rocks weren't helping, but I stood myself up. Glancing up I saw the whole gang standing on the bridge, frozen in time. Seth and Eileen were on the side trying to talk sense to Melissa; the three strangers still stood amongst

the crowd. I hurried to the river's bank and caught sight of the two.

He looked a frightful mess, but I didn't give a damn about his reasoning. All I knew was he was threatening to hurt a small child and not just any child. This was Melissa's sister. The man's voice was drowning on and continued to when I lunged at him. On the river's bank our fight began. He was mad as hell and drunk as anything I'd ever seen. We exchanged blows equally but I had the advantage. I was smaller, younger, faster. He was old, fat, slow and stupid. I was winning, until he pulled out a knife. I stepped back and watched the blade's gleam in the sunlight carefully. Its blade was red and covered with fresh blood that dripped down the edges. I stared at the child who had taken refuge behind a large rock. She was holding her arm close.

I understood then. For the most part Melissa was victim to her father's anger fits. Being unable to find her, he'd used the younger child to vent on. We circled each other, sizing up. Now he was armed, and more dangerous because he couldn't aim properly. We ducked and dodged advances from the other. There was a point where he must have made contact with me; I remember a sudden searing pain. Looking up at the bridge I saw the gang had taken to one side. The strangers had turned their backs; I was too busy to worry about them. Melissa was being held back by Seth and Eileen; I needed someone down here. Christine was trying to calm Melissa and Shawn was missing...

Mr. Radley dropped to his knees; the knife hit the ground. Time stood still, I froze. As his body lowered and dirt flew up, Shawn's figure emerged. A needle that still was clenched in his hand told me what had happened. Beyond him I saw Christine had rushed down to take care of the kid.

"He's not dead. We'll get him back to the house; we probably won't remember anything. The kid can stay with us. Help me carry him, okay?"

Together Shawn and I took the same route up the hill that I had taken going down. Pushing, shoving, tripping and cursing we made it to the top. Christine went up ahead of us. At the bridge Shawn and I collapsed, exhausted from hauling the body uphill. Instructions were given, and Locke and Gus led in carrying him off. The three strangers still stared out in various directions, ignorant to what happened. Melissa and her sister were reunited, as were Shawn and Christine. The two pairs stood a bit back from the rest of the group. I stood and leaned my back against the wall. Enough was enough. First these three fools appear on our bridge, stand there and watch, and don't do a damn thing?

"Who the hell are you and what do you think you're doing?" I was so angry I couldn't feel anything, my mind blanked out and I couldn't remember anything beyond the past ten minutes. The one guy continued to stare into space, he hadn't moved at all. One girl had been beside him the entire time; the other was more restless. I was fed up with being patient. I grabbed him by his back and threw him down; instead he flew into the other side of the bridge. It trembled with the power of the blow; I was surprised it stayed together. That old pile of wood was stubborn as hell.

The stranger's face remained neutral as he straightened up. None of them were from around here, that was a given. I grabbed him and pulled him fully upright, his expression never changed.

"I'm not going to say it again. Who the hell are you?" I let go and stood in front of him, blocking any path of escape. He cleared his throat and I turned my head for a moment. "And don't either of you dare to try anything." The quiet footsteps ceased and I returned to the frozen expression.

"My name is Justin, that there is Angela and over there is Jo. We're new around here, heard a bit about the area and decided to check things out." He didn't flinch, blink or stutter. He

was perfectly calm, and it was driving me crazy.

“Why the hell didn’t you go down there and do something?”

He put his head down and seemed to think about it. Before replying he looked out at the river and firmly said, “Because it didn’t concern us and we weren’t going to risk our lives for strangers.”

The whole experience, all the hate felt between that man, Melissa, the fear of the child, the varying emotions held within were packed into one hit. I pulled back as far as my arm could reach and let it go flat into his stomach. He coughed loudly and dropped to the ground. “Angela” and “Jo” ran to his side to see if he was all right. It was at that moment I realized my arm was bleeding.

“You arrogant bastard, rot in hell, and on the way, stay the hell off of our bridge.” He was sitting up when I turned on my heel and walked off. The Majors were waiting for me, Shawn and Christine had gone...well, we didn’t know where they went. The four of us headed for the school, caught Locke on the way, and burst into the nurse’s office. We took care of the cuts as best we could and stopped the bleeding. We wanted to get the kid to the hospital, but Melissa was uneasy about it. Instead of fighting the point, we let it rest there.

None of us particularly liked our homes, so we agreed to stay at the bridge that night. We’d done it on several occasions; our families were accustomed to it. They learned not to care or worry. It was growing dark when we started to head back. Christine and Shawn met up with us along the way. Locke had gone his own separate way. He liked the river more than the bridge. Seldom did anybody go against our advice, and when I personally handed it out it was serious. Seth had a longer fuse than I did, for the most part he convinced people to leave.

Returning to the bridge we saw three red lights burning in the

distance. We immediately recognized the familiar flame as cigarettes. Adapting a quicker pace we returned to our bridge to see the three strangers still standing there. Melissa pulled me back to try and tell me to calm down. I told her I would calmly ask that they leave, I wouldn't instigate. She seemed satisfied yet somewhat uneasy. I took point with the six of them behind me. Seth and Eileen were directly behind, Shawn and Christine after and finally Melissa with her sister behind them.

"Still here? I believe I told you earlier to get the hell off this bridge. The first time was a warning; this is the last time I remind you. Get out before we throw you out."

He stared at me with a sleepy glare, puffing away without a care. The two stood behind him, similarly careless. As I edged closer, the two edged back, he stood his ground. He took his cigarette and threw it into the water, careful of the bridge's frail frame.

"Why do you hate me so? We've done no wrong, committed no crime against you..." he never finished his statement.

"Did nothing? That's correct, with that child in danger, you stood by and did nothing. She might've died before we'd arrived and you have done nothing. To hell with the three of you! Again, off of our bridge before we assist you. Your answer?"

He went back to thoughtful silence. "I told you, we weren't going to get involved. The child wouldn't have been killed, I assure you, we would've stepped in had it gotten that serious." I shoved him back into the wall to cut him off.

"It only takes a split second to take a life, from here you wouldn't have known the difference between life and death. Idiot! You could have prevented her from getting injured, me falling down a damn hill, Shawn having to tempt fate, but no...only worried about yourselves! GO!"

Seth ran up behind me and pulled me back before I snapped again. He took Justin aside and they started to talk awhile. Melissa ran up and led me away so I could cool off. Shawn, Eileen and Christine talked to the two lost girls. Melissa's sister was beside her, so I smiled and let everything roll off my shoulder. I couldn't vent with her there, and I sure as hell couldn't curse. I went down to the river to wash my face. One thing we loved about the river was it was clean. I dipped my hands into the cool water to wash my hands and face. Looking up I saw a full moon high in the crisp autumn sky. Its shine glistened in the waters' waves.

I didn't want to, but I had to. I turned and looked up at the bridge. Bathed in moonlight, the faces were easy to make out. I saw our group form up against theirs and a fight break out. Running as fast as the terrain would allow, I reached the bridge in time to see a scuffle. Melissa was on one side with her sister; everyone else had lunged in headlong. I tripped and fell a few times, finally reaching Melissa to ask what happened. She said something about a challenge made by Justin about who was tougher, his trio or our group. We were too proud to turn down such a challenge. This day had been hectic enough; I waded in and tossed out whomever I grabbed.

I couldn't break them all up so I joined in when I could. We fought with everything we had. Seth made it a rule to never hit a girl, so he seemed to be teaming up with Shawn against Justin. Christine and Eileen were taking care of the other two. I wasn't really necessary, but I was mad as hell, it had to end. Time froze in my mind, I couldn't tell the difference between a minute and an hour. There was a point where Angela and Jo had stopped fighting; Eileen and Christine wouldn't let them up. They stood like British guards, their faces cold, expressionless, staring down with an eye of contempt. Justin was still fighting like a bear, but he was tiring fast. Three against one aren't the best odds in the world.

I was about to finish him off, when my arm was pulled back. I

turned and saw Melissa standing there. She pointed over in the distance. Her sister had gone to the other two and was helping them up.

We understood then. It had gotten personal early in the fight and things went too far. Shawn dropped the fool and we joined together. What was there to do now? We'd wait for them to leave and stay the night. Do you care? Probably not, do I? Nope. We waited patiently in the ceaseless night in a mutual silence. A chill blew through the air, running down our backs. The moon shone brightly down on the scene. The child returned and stood with us at her sister's side.

Looking over we saw the two helping Justin up. He leaned on the wall of the bridge, supported by Angela. Jo was doubled over. I was about to go over to finish this, when Melissa stepped forward. She walked over quietly in the night and approached the trio. We saw them talking, but we couldn't hear the words. Looking over my group I realized that there were little cuts obvious from the fight. I returned my glance to Melissa, who was motioning toward me. Through the chilled evening air I walked over.

"They want in." Her words echoed in my head, in the vastness of night. My mind failed, judgment ceased. Knowledge was forgotten, a deep darkness settled in. Who did they think they were? Could I refuse them, after all, they had challenged us and shown strength. Justin's stance was crooked; he was leaning on Angela. The other girl was still hunched over, clutching her abdomen. Words failed me. Staring up at the sky, I felt betrayed. I wanted to denounce this outrage. Melissa returned me to the world with a tap.

"Excuse me while I...discuss this with my associates." I walked back to the group; who were anxiously awaiting an answer. In as few words as I could find, an explanation was formed. Christine and Shawn moved off to a corner. Their opinion mattered of course, but they didn't feel that way. We

conferred about it. We didn't know who the hell these people were, but it was hard breaking into our tight knit circle. They had spirit and strength, and somewhere they must have had intelligence amongst them. Would it hurt to try them out? But what about what happened here tonight? They only cared about themselves, that attitude didn't fly with us. What to do?

We returned to them together, showing unity, peace and pride. Our decision had been made, now, to carry it out. Melissa stood beside me as I stepped forward. Fear was well hidden, an excellent quality. If you have to live in fear, stay the hell away from us. I stood right in his face. I could've spit on him and told them all to go home. Melissa knew all too well how I was; she kept her hand on my shoulder. I was a random person. He was standing straight and tall as we stood eye to eye. I narrowed my eyes to show contempt.

He never saw it coming. Grabbing him by the front of his shirt, I put his back against the rail. Leaning back, he thought I'd send him off the bridge – head first. I pushed as far back as I could without losing him. I heard everybody behind me freak out for a moment. Melissa was whispering my name, trying to get me to listen.

“Now listen here scumbag. Not every day this kind of thing occurs, just so happens we don't have a procedure for this one. You all pulled a swift one tonight, and I'll never forget the lot of you. Remember this night, this pain, this fear, and then think of how to deal with it. From now on, you protect the clan and its members, you care for them, they are your life, understood? If you can't do that, then be on your way. I don't particularly like what happened here tonight, but it did and we all lived. You think you can do that? If not, you'll go off this bridge for real.”

He stopped freaking out about the threat, smiled a wry smile and agreed. I let him up, dusted him off a bit and took a step back. Turning around I prepared to walk off, with the

concluding phrase, "Good, you're in."

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## 4. How It Began

Now to take a step to understand what just happened. On that night we accepted three more into our group. Should we have done it? I don't give a damn what you think, but you're welcome to your opinion anyway. So, who were these people that joined us that night and challenged our authority? Good question, let's run a bit of a background check. First up, Mr. Justin, Justin what?

Justin Connor was boyfriend to one Angela Martin, sister of one Josephine "Jo" Martin. They moved here from Mississippi or something like that, a small town similar to our own. They knew how it worked, and how to work it. They came from problem families like us. Angela and Jo had run away, Justin wandered. They stayed together as we did. Justin was 19 I believe, Angela was 18 and her sister was 15, going on 16. She was a bit young to be with them, but I guess they had their reasons. They were fearless and would march headlong into the depths of Hell, should it be necessary.

They didn't tell us much about their family lives, but hey, give it time. They were smart as anything, had a lot of street smarts. They were into the drugs and what not a bit, not Jo yet. Angela was very protective of her it seems. Jo was still young; we couldn't blame her for being overprotective. Some of us could relate, having siblings of our own, some that we could live without and some that we'd die for. We set aside differences as quickly and easily as possible, established peace, and stayed at the bridge that night. They had challenged us against bad odds, and I give them credit for

that.

Justin was just a little bashed in and bruised from our scuffle, just like most of us. Angela wasn't hurt too bad at all; she just didn't want to fight. Jo had never been in such a big fight and lost hard. Seems a few tough blows to the stomach had cracked some ribs, but she swore she was okay. Angela was concerned, but we convinced them to try and sleep. We stretched out and slept in little couples. Melissa stayed with me, hugging her sister close. Seth and Eileen found a corner, as did Shawn and Christine. Looking over at the trio I saw Justin and Angela hugging close with Jo sitting quietly on the side. She didn't belong here, but what was there to be done? The night wore on and one by one, we drifted into sleep.

The morning sun rose slowly; and there was that returning chill. My eyes were heavy with weariness; I rubbed them to awaken myself. Everybody was in the same place that they were when they fell asleep. Running through names and faces I realized Melissa wasn't where I thought she'd be. I got up carefully in the early morning hours and walked quietly to the railing of the bridge. Melissa was standing there with arms folded, staring out into space. Moving up behind her I followed her glance. Hugging her close, we rocked a bit in the dawn.

"Isn't it pretty? The sunrise, a new day is dawning, life goes on. What are our plans for today, if there are any?" She was still looking out at the distant horizon.

"Today I'll go with a few of the guys, straighten out your father. Then we can go and do whatever you want, this day is yours." Her father, his memory had faded, but was not forgotten. Under normal circumstances she'd never let me even think it. The rules were changed now; times were different. What did I expect her to say? What reaction did I want? I'd have to hope for the best. Her silence was disturbing.

"Fine, but on two conditions. One, you don't hurt him." She turned around to face me; I met her with a smile. "Two, I'm going with you." My smile disappeared in an instant. We couldn't take her; it was too much of a chance. But she'd already decided..

I hung my head down to show I was thinking, and moved a few steps away. I couldn't argue; she'd win hands down. Who would I take? Let's see, Gus, Locke, Seth and Shawn were musts. Eileen and Christine well, we'd see about that, it was up to them. Someone would have to stay with her sister, keep her away. I wasn't going to wake anybody up...wait a minute, forgetting three aren't I? I don't know about them, they're so new to the clan, well, time will tell. I wasn't going to wake people up. I nodded a somewhat disagreeable sign of agreement, which she responded to with a hug. We stood and watched the sun rise in its entirety.

The next to awake was Seth; he left Eileen to sleep. She needed it; lately there was a lot on her mind. I told him about our course of action, and he agreed to go along with me. Next after Seth was Christine. We asked her whether she wanted to go or not, to which she said she'd stay at the bridge with Melissa's sister, Andrea. In the meantime we each lit a cigarette and watched the smoke float up into the morning air. Next of our bunch was Jo. She seemed lost, dazed and confused; she was awake but wouldn't come over to us. Some of our youngest members weren't heavily involved; they had limits that we understood. Looking down from the bridge I saw Locke and Gus taking a stroll.

Seth and I threw stones out into the river to let them know we were there. They looked up, laughed, and returned a few to us. We signaled for them to be quiet, so they started up the hill. With a loud yawn we turned to see Shawn waking up, smiling about being so obvious. Justin was also rubbing sleep from his eyes, his movement set Angela into action, and Seth gently whispered to Eileen to wake her up. By ten we were all

perfectly awake and gone through at least two cigarettes apiece, with the exception of Jo. We made our plans and decided to carry them out as soon as possible.

Jo, Andrea, Christine and Eileen would stay on the bridge. Melissa, Gus, Shawn, Seth, Locke, Justin, Angela and myself would go to the house to settle the score. We set ourselves into motion, heading out for the house. The walk was quiet, rules and standards explained, the mood understood. The house itself had two doors, front and back, and we decided to wait outside of each. We decided Locke should go to the back door, in case the lock needed to be picked. With him went Shawn, Seth and Gus. With me went Melissa, Angela and Justin. Of course we rang the doorbell, to be polite. Also, to catch our "victim" by surprise. We waited momentarily for him to answer the door.

"Mind if we come in sir? We have to talk." His expression faded, his eyes dilated, color disappeared. He turned to run and we ran, cutting over furniture, after him. Shawn was there to meet him at the back door when Locke swung it open. He picked up the man and tossed him back, into us. We caught him and held him down in a chair. Our back door gang was sure to keep him there; Justin and Angela took seats to talk quietly. I stepped forward, Melissa in tow.

"Now, there seems to be a bit of a problem between you and me, understand? You don't seem to know what it means to be a proper father, and I don't like it. I see how you're treating these kids, and that's got to stop, hear me? Now, we aren't going to hurt you here today, we're giving you a second chance. Your daughter seems to believe you're a good person. Now, we're warning you, quit or we come back and have another little chat. Course, it'll be a bit more painful. You understand me scumbag?"

I smelt alcohol on his breath, figures. He woke up and started drinking without a pause; that would really mess him up for

awhile. Meaning? They, being Melissa and Andrea, couldn't go home until he was somewhat normal again. His eyes were wild and random, but he focused.

For a moment he stared at me, and from me to his daughter. He knew he was screwed, but he made a lunge anyway. He was pulled back down in the chair. He didn't understand. I cleared my throat to continue. Justin jumped up and stepped over.

"Listen here, you straighten out or we come back here and do it for you, get me?" I couldn't have said it better myself or in as few words. The man's eyes narrowed, but he understood. Melissa stepped forward to look at him up close. She whispered something we couldn't hear, gave him a quick hug and walked away. We let him go and followed her out the front door. Moving briskly we walked at a calm pace, straight back to the bridge, in complete silence. The few that had stayed behind saw us coming. Seeing everybody was present and looked unharmed they were happy.

"Well, what happened?" Christine got the question out before Eileen could. We smiled about it because we knew they each wanted to be the first to know. Shawn explained while we thought about what to do next in order to burn time. School was open, so we headed there. Might as well show the new kids round, right? Course, and so we did. We all went this time, lighting a smoke along the way. Can't have a good day without a few, right? Or you wouldn't know? Oh well, life goes on. The halls were free of the "busy bees" that were off in their classes, learning no doubt. What a waste of time, you can learn all you need to know to survive from life itself. No textbook ever told me about the important stuff, and they never will.

Our school wasn't big on security; sometimes they didn't even know we were there. The bell rang as we wandered around, but we didn't have a problem getting through. We had a reputation here too, just like everywhere else. The problem was, Justin,

Angela and Jo didn't quite fit into that rep, as well as Andrea. The crowd parted for our passing, we waited for the fools to run back to their ignorant teachers, like lapdogs always wanting to please. Suck ups, they wouldn't go too far in life. They'll all learn, the hard way. As for me, I want to be standing there right when they do. Why? So I can laugh and know that I'm better off, to see perfection falter, that's what I want to see.

Course there was a slim chance of ever seeing it, but what the hell – why not hope? We cut through for the hell of it, just to see what would happen. Seems we lost track of a few people. Turning around we scanned the area. The four that I just mentioned were elsewhere. The remaining six of us split up and took different halls. Less than five minutes later there was a yell, to which we responded as quickly as possible. Arriving on the scene we nearly knocked each other over, but instead tottered a bit. We ended up in the parking lot, where a circle was formed of kids staring at the center. Pushing and shoving our way through we saw a fight had begun. More like four fights at once, and the odds weren't too great.

We were the instigators? We knew them well, they tried to form a gang, but couldn't keep it together. They'd challenged us and failed miserably, seems they'd gotten back together while we were away. We each grabbed the closest ones and taught them a thing or two about respect. This was probably the biggest fight they'd ever seen, as well as the shortest. If we hung around more, this kind of thing wouldn't have happened at often. Oh well, so it goes? We had more important things to do than babysit. True the school was incompetent, but that was the parents' problem, not ours. We took the few that belonged with us and were on our way.

Justin was shook up about what happened, he just wouldn't calm down. Way too much energy, sleep was a must. I would've hit him just for a moment of silence, but...

I was better than that; we were better than that. We supported each other and that meant tolerance at all times. It sucked but that was the way it worked. After awhile it's rote, it goes with the whole "group" experience. He was babbling on and on about some sort of plan, who knows? We tuned him out for the most part; and I know I would continue to until he started making some sense. From here Shawn and Christine went their own way; Locke and Gus had left before we got to the school. We agreed to go to my house, being my family gave up on worrying about any of us, and my mother seemed nice. She really didn't make comment about whom I came home with; she didn't want to know. Can you really blame her?

The afternoon was wasted on nothing, and by the time we reached the house it remained the same. The peaceful yet disruptive silence gave an edge to the setting sun. We stopped for a while to watch it go down, and from there arrived at the Thompson household. There was a light left on by the front door, it was always on. When I was young my father came home late from work one night. He couldn't see, tripped over who knows what and broke his leg. I still think he was drunk, but I was young. All I remember was his yelling in the middle of the night; woke up half the neighborhood. Idiot...

The house was dark; meaning family was out or something. It was a Friday night, they could have been anywhere, didn't bother me any. Up the stairs was my room, and that's where we hung out, blasting music, talking, whatever. Justin, Angela and Jo were introduced around a bit more; we understood each other. They fit in perfectly. After awhile of small meaningless conversation, Justin spoke out.

"You just let them get away with that kind of thing? I mean, you don't do anything?" His voice was slow and cautious; the words well picked, thought out, careful. I wasn't sure of what he was talking about until...course. How could I be so blind? He meant like a "terrorist situation", another Columbine, if you will. Was he insane, or were we? Glances were exchanged; we

couldn't agree to something of this...risk. People could *die*; it was that simple. The scariest part of the conversation was that he was serious. Dead serious, as serious as a heart attack...

So what to do now? What would you do/say, how would you react? I turned to Melissa; her face was blank. I looked across, face to face; person to person, each held a similar stare. What could we do?

"Well?" He had a child's enthusiasm, eager to do and accomplish. What he was talking about was too much; it was suicide! We were kids, still very young, why throw our lives away? But he had a point, that school needed something to shake it up, help it wake up a bit, see more. That school could have that happen any day now. Innocent people would get caught in the crossfire. We couldn't let that happen any more then we could go in and do it ourselves. I had an idea. It wasn't a great one, there were a hundred and one bugs in it, but it was a plan nevertheless. As a group I think we could figure it out.

"Here's what I'm thinking. We go through with it, but carefully and well planned out. Nobody gets hurt. Unloaded weapons, masked faces, all that, whole nine yards. Basically we're just going to shake them up a bit, pretend to go through with it, then take off when we get our chance. Nobody gets hurt; they get a taste of reality and straighten up. If we're careful, we get off scot-free, they'll have learned their lesson, and things will be a bit more controlled round here. I know, there's a lot to risk, but we can plan in more depth tomorrow, but that's the main concept. Well, so we consider it?"

Nervous glances exchanged, we concluded with one spoken word, "Agreed".

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## 5. The Tomorrow...

Now hold on one damn minute, I know what's going through your mind, it went through ours repetitively, three times faster. We were serious, yet we weren't; the logic was twisted. We knew the consequences of our actions; we knew the worst-case scenario. The facts had been drilled into our minds by media, movies, books, society itself. Our worlds stood still and began to spin backwards. Logic was lost in the whirlwind that became our lives. What to do, what to say? Words failed us, but well, we had to speak.

We didn't sleep that night; it was all nonstop planning. What to do, how to do it. The main fact was we'd go into the school; pretend to make demands. The result would shake everybody up; help them realize what the world's really like. We'd plan how to get out unharmed. Weapons would hold blank ammunition; no real shots fired. Everything would be carefully thought through and considered. The main goal for us, besides making a point, was not losing lives. Everybody was meant to come out kicking. For hours we brought every point to the table, went through every single matter of importance. Positives and negatives were looked at evenly in a non-prejudice light.

The final decision? Being we'd gotten no sleep, we'd wait for the day after the one we had planned into. In other words, we were waiting for tomorrow. Our lives, our futures and destinies depended on a day that could never come. Fate was involved just as much as we were. Where'd we get the weaponry? Wherever we could, we double-checked the blank ammo time and again. We knew the school like the back of our hand. Our escape would cut through the woods, using foliage for cover. We'd reunite at the bridge. The entry point? The front door.

It was all very simple; it was just a matter of being careful and running fast. We walked through the plan over and over again until the school closed. We decided we'd stay inside the building until we saw any sort of special operations forces arrive. If they set up snipers, we'd be screwed. So the countdown began.

Noon, the day before we agreed to carry out the deed. We'd arrive at school in the morning; catch people off guard as they're walking up. It was still October. We'd agreed to all wear black and masks to conceal our identities. Also, we'd try and alter our voices as much as could be allowed. Who wouldn't be going with us? Andrea went home, accompanied by Melissa. She protested the idea from the beginning, but agreed to go with us. Angela didn't want Jo to go along, just in case, so Eileen agreed to stay behind with her. Seth, Shawn, Christine, Justin, Angela and myself would carry out the deed. Jo and Eileen would be waiting at the bridge for us. We exchanged warnings constantly, but the final lineup remained. Only time would determine things now. Just to sit and wait.

Many say patience is a virtue. I think it's damnation, but that's just me right? That night we all stuck together, thick as thieves. Thieves, but what were we going to steal? Ignorance, pure, inhumane ignorance; because it is its own damnation. Some of us had second thoughts that night. So how'd we stay strong? We got drunk, smoked a few and laughed awhile. It relieved stress, though we'd pay for it in the morning. By midnight the laughter slowed down, the alcohol's blinding effects wore off, and we were, for the most part, sane. Were we prepared for what tomorrow would hold? Of course not, but is anyone ever prepared to die? To risk their life for one great purpose or none at all – well?

No, they're not. We were soldiers, soldiers of society. Was there anything that would better prepare us for the day to come? Course not. We were left to wait it out. In the late hours we slowly drifted into sleep. Melissa and I were the

last two awake.

“Are you sure we’re doing the right thing?” Her voice was quiet and nervous in the darkness. I looked over at her and smiled.

“No, but I sure hope we are, because if we’re not there’s going to be one hell of a price to pay.”

Morning, our own personal D-Day, tomorrow had dawned. Time for all hell to break loose, the world to come undone. So what did we do first? Wake up; get reacquainted with the world. Each of us was trying to mentally psyche ourselves up. It was going to be a long day, so we tried to take as much time to rest up as we could. People would arrive in school at around 7:30. We’d be sure to mingle with the crowds. My house became the starting point; the bridge was the finish line. Looking around we mentally ran through things once more.

“Wait a minute!” We’d been double checking weapons when Christine spoke up. Everybody looked in her general direction, dropping anything they might have been working on. We waited for the continuation.

“How are we coming to communicate, we can’t use our names?” Now that was something to consider. Well, names or initials were out of the question. We could use numbers I suppose. So I assigned numbers. Angela was 1, Christine was 2, I was 3, Justin was 4, Melissa was 5, Seth was 6 and Shawn was 7. It went in alphabetical order according to our first names. This way, in case we were in a situation where we had to recall a number quickly, we wouldn’t have to struggle with last names. Besides, for the most part we’d forgotten Justin and Angela’s last names. So it goes, and so we went.

6 a.m. and we waited. The school wasn’t far, a brisk walk. We were dressed and armed. Time was dragging by slowly. Second thoughts were racing through our minds. It wasn’t too late to turn back; we didn’t have to go through with this. There was

nothing etched in stone, no proof of our plans except what we held in our minds. There was every possibility for turning back. We had every reason to. Our lives were at stake; there was no greater risk in the world. Were we ready for this? Course not, but it was do, or die.

We left the house by seven and began to walk. Silence had settled and we were all thinking. What about, as if you'd care? Me, I was thinking about tomorrow, the future, stupid stuff like that. I was considering how things would change after this, what it'd be like. If everything went as planned, this would work out perfectly. Were we crazy? Course, but isn't everybody these days? We were idealists who wanted to change a little town. It wasn't the world or society, but just show them how dangerous their ignorance really was. The plan was simple; we just had to keep our eyes open. It was a matter of being aware. Simple, well, it was supposed to be.

The school building itself was ancient. It was just waiting to be torn down, like our bridge. Yet, the town refused to spend money to fix it up, or even, heaven forbid, talk about building a new one. So it goes. We, as students and teenagers of the town, had to deal with it. It was a corrupt system of government, but there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it. The fact was accepted and we got on with our lives. Today we were going to do something, to make them see, to help them understand. We were actually doing them a big favor. Do you think they would care? About as much as you do.

We got there about 15 minutes before the first classes would start. It was time to take action. No turning back, no second thoughts – the time had come. We had entered the school with masks on, now it was time to pull out all the stops. In another minutes' time, havoc had broken loose in our halls. It had begun.

We had organized signs to signal each other to go onto the next phase. All eyes turned to me as I glanced around to make

sure everybody was in place. What was our purpose? To wake up this loser town to a bit of reality, make them less blind. I gave the signal for our operation to begin. The rules were simple, go in, cause a scare; get out. Nobody gets hurt. Everybody comes out alive. One by one we pulled out weapons and pretended to be threatening. The usual crowd let out a scream and hysteria spread like wildfire. We cut through and watched as people split. They scattered, taking cover in whatever unlocked rooms they could locate. Wasn't many.

From here we weren't sure what to do next. We were supposed to wait for someone to slip a cell phone, call the cops. Course we weren't *that* patient. I glanced across all the faces, filled with fear, anger and pure hatred. I recognized many of them from classes, around town, everywhere. They were my classmates, my peers, yet I stood above them today. They would never understand my reasoning. It was a large school, so we split up. I stayed in the main hall on the first floor while the rest of the clan spread out to sweep the building. I heard the familiar sound of blanks going off, but that was it. In a half-hour, we had the entire school herded into the auditorium.

Time ticked by slowly, we waited. When my group had scattered throughout the school, I had grabbed hold of a fellow senior. A young girl, she was in several of my classes. I remember her talking very poorly about me some time ago. For a moment I felt pity for her. If only she could see who was standing before her. Knowing she'd have a phone, I told her to call the police and report the incident. She looked confused, and I repeated the demand. Seeing she was going to live, she did as she was told quickly and efficiently. I couldn't allow personal vengeance to get in my way here and now.

Back to the auditorium. Nervousness was in the air; we breathed it in and exhaled it sevenfold. We were forced to live on someone else's schedule. I checked person to person; we each had our assigned numbers written in white on an arm.

Everybody was relatively calm, except for one. Number 4 kept on the move, constantly. I couldn't understand what would provoke Justin to keep moving like that. He'd stop time to time, check on his gun, fumble with it, and continue. I figured he was just a bit edgy, like the rest of us. Nothing to worry about. The police were late; but then again, this was new to them. This had never occurred before in our school's history.

We had positioned ourselves in the aisles, if there were teachers present, they blended in very well. Justin was at the front of the room, looking out at the crowd. Still I couldn't understand what he was looking for. I followed his gaze from a short distance away. Back and forth, back and forth, there. He stopped and I looked. It was the group we'd dealt with the day before. Justin was fumbling with the gun again, and I saw the magazine come out. In a moment I realized what he'd done and with a loud shout, I broke into a hard run. I would never make it, and none of us were any closer. In a moment, our well thought-out "simple" plan went straight to hell.

The shots rang out through the stifled speech of the crowd. Silence settled in a moment and gasps followed. I couldn't count how many shots went off, but I was angry. I threw all that anger into one lunge and put all my weight into it. Knocking him clear off his feet, the gun fell to the ground with a loud, defiant crash. It ended the chaos and the silence returned. Seth and Shawn ran up and held onto Justin, I got up and looked around. I couldn't see if anyone was dead or dying, but I wanted to disappear. I saw slumped bodies, blood, crying, everything imaginable. I wanted to just...walk away.

But I couldn't, we couldn't. It was too late. Now it was time to fix things. Turning around I saw the trio had broken up and one was running in the distance. I glanced at the two numbers before me and realized Justin had taken off. Where he went, I didn't care. I was prepared to shoot him myself, right then and there. Make him feel the pain he'd just caused. But

he'd run off like a scared cat and I didn't care. Now to make amends and get the hell out. Organizing our group we made a new plan. Any people that weren't hurt, we'd let out. As for those that were, we'd try and help as much as we could right now. I turned my back while the wounded were taken from the crowd. The remaining five of the group gave the order and helped sort things out.

We were left with a handful of people. Some weren't hurt, but wanted to help. We brought all wounded to the front and put them on stage. I walked person to person, remembering the faces, the names. Going down the line I recognized the girl from earlier who had called the police for us. Nobody was dead, but they had various injuries. We stopped bleeding best we could. This wasn't part of the original plan, and now we were wasting time we didn't have. Siren screams broke out from all over and people's voices came through the walls. I signaled for everybody to head out. I went back over the people face to face. I knelt down by the girl for a moment. I really felt bad now.

"Be a bit more careful who you talk about, it just might be a psycho." She looked at me with a confused glare, but understood. Soldiers would be inside shortly; I had to hurry. The rest of my group had already set out. Should we have looked for Justin? Hell no, he could've killed these people; I had no compassion in my heart for him. I took a last look around, and ran out. Cutting through halls I made my way to our exit point. Out the door I saw my whole clan waiting, but why the hell weren't they moving? We'd made a point to keep running no matter what happened, what made them stop?

I ran to them and tried to urge them on. They began to point to the top of the building. I looked up and saw there, right at the top, was Justin. He was standing tall and proud, brandishing his weapon like a drink, mask gone. He was holding a pistol, the one given to him by us, the one that wasn't loaded. The other one he himself had brought. What he was

doing was pure stupidity; he was vulnerable up there. I looked across my group again; Angela was starting to go back. Seth and Christine stopped her; Shawn stood there, frozen. Melissa was next to me, searching for words.

“You should go get him.” She whispered carefully in my ear so as to keep the rest calm, so hope wouldn’t be brought up. She was right, but he didn’t deserve it. It would make her happy; Angela happy, and we could deal with him in our own way later. I told her to stay put; I’d be right back. The cops no doubt had some sort of military forces set up, and soon snipers would be taking aim. I watched his movements carefully; he was walking around like a fool. I ran up to the school as fast as I could manage, keeping my eye on the idiot. Yet, for a moment there was a crack in the silence. The morning had long been corrupted by our incident, but we had run.

His body stopped with a sudden jerk. I froze, as did the figures behind me. He started laughing until blood burst out of his mouth. Dropping to his knees, blood flowed from his chest. His eyes widened as shock passed through like air; time ceased. To us, an eternity had ended. In reality, Justin was dead in a fraction of a second. It took another second for his body to tumble over the roof’s edge. We watched in horror as the body lurched and spun in the air, landing with a final thud on the hard ground. Justin Robert Connor, age 19, died at 9 a.m. on Friday, October 7<sup>th</sup>.

I was barely 2 feet away when the body dropped. I fell to my knees immediately, but there was nothing to be done. Now, what to do? If I brought him back, what would we do with him? I heard footsteps behind me, so I signaled to stay back. They kept coming. I turned to vocally repeat my order, but Angela was there. She crept up as carefully as a cat, yet as frightened as a kitten. She stepped up cautiously to look him in the face. His eyes were still open, full of shock and pain. Her eyes got teary and she started to snap. I tried to pull

her away, but...you can't rush these kinds of things.

The sirens grew louder; the body in front of us proved snipers were in place. We had to get moving, and fast. Footsteps grew closer and I saw a figure appear in the doorway. I dragged her as best I could and we turned to run. The rest of the group was in front of us by a long way. Shots rang out yet again and we took off. The entire run was downhill and we, for the most part, kept moving. We were halfway down, being careful of the shots that sprayed the trees. I saw Angela trip and roll for a while. I didn't have time to stop and concern myself; a searing pain went through my arm like a bolt of electricity. The world blacked out for a fraction of a second; I tripped and fell, got up, and kept going. I was running crooked, but the one thought on my mind was getting out of there. I helped Angela to her feet and we made it all the way.

The gang was all there waiting for us at the bottom of the hill. Once we were reunited we continued to the bridge. The pain wouldn't quit, but I couldn't worry now. We arrived at the bridge without anyone following us. We all but collapsed to the wooden surface of the bridge's ancient construction. Each of us were breathless, the authorities had more important things to worry about than following us. So we relaxed, we breathed, we blacked out. What had just happened would forever change our lives. So what was there to be done about it now? It was too late to go back and change.

I had fallen with the rest, exhausted from the run. My hands were covered with blood that had seeped through the black gloves. I peeled them off in disgust and stared at my hands. The blood was fresh on my right hand, yet the left hand bore dried blood. Looking up I realized my right arm was bleeding. The pain I had felt was from a gunshot. The bullet had grazed the skin but had still cut a bit of a hole. The feeling was awkward and unbearable, but I had to handle it. The basic idea was it was a burn.

Angela had also been hit with a random shot, in her left arm. The difference was that it didn't graze the skin. It had made impact. The problem now was that if we took her to a hospital, they'd know right away what happened. We'd have to get her to a hospital a safe distance away from here, and soon. She looked petrified; her soul was gone. Shawn tore some fabric off his shirt and stopped the blood as best he could. Christine and Seth tore off their masks and ran over to help; Melissa came to me. Eileen and Jo had been waiting at the bridge for us to return; they looked on with eyes full of terror.

"What happened?" the voice shook nervously, I didn't know who spoke. My mind raced, we needed a car, more of a van, a vehicle that could hold all eight of us. I said something about transport and Shawn jumped up. He'd left his car at the bridge. Christine and Seth escorted Angela over to his SUV; Melissa stayed beside me as I stumbled along. Eileen and Jo sort of followed the crowd in its general direction before stopping.

"Wait a minute, where's Justin?" For once, Jo had spoken up. I glanced at her.

"He didn't make it."

"What do you mean, he didn't make it?"

"I'm sorry Jo, Justin's dead."

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## 6. That Never Came

The nearest town was roughly two hours away, proving how desolate our town really was. Well, the nearest town that

wouldn't have already heard about the incident anyway. Besides, this town had a lot of shootings all the time, they wouldn't ask many questions; we'd say it was a hit and run on the street. Simple, it was very simple. Then again, as they say, "the plain and simple truth is seldom plain and simple." A two-hour drive we were determined to accomplish in one. The roads weren't too busy at this hour, but we'd just have to drive fast. None of us knew anything about medicine or doctoring, but what we did know is that the more blood that was lost, the worse things got. Shawn drove and the rest of us looked around – lost. There was nothing we could do to make the ride go faster, so we tried to calm each other down.

Usually cops aren't around when you need them, right? Of course, and the one thing we really didn't need right now was the police. So, being as they have that damned impeccable timing, guess what started following us? Cop on a bike, great right? What to do now, there were a few options this time. We could pull over, waste precious time, get a ticket and continue on our way. Or, we could pull over, put masks back on, beat up the cop, and run off. Third option? Keep going, non-stop and pray he gave up. None of us had the funds for a ticket, or the time to start a car chase. Then again, we really didn't want to go to prison immediately after the hospital for beating up a law enforcement officer. We discussed logic amongst ourselves while Shawn made the final decision.

He pulled over, shut the engine off and waited. We didn't say anything, just looked at each other. We didn't have time to waste, it wasn't even our own time, it was Angela's. The cop parked behind us and walked up as Shawn fumbled for the proper paperwork. At the proper signal he rolled down the window.

"License and registration please. By the way, do you have any idea how fast you were going, what's the big rush?" The officer's voice was calm and even, forceful and confident. Shawn handed over the proper papers and looked down at the

wheel.

"Well? You didn't answer my question kid, you going to tell me?" The officer's tone changed quickly as anger rose. Shawn didn't let people push him around and we waited for the backlash.

"Listen, we got to get somewhere fast, it's an emergency, can't you just let us get going and stop wasting time?" Shawn was bold, but still somewhat stupid. This cop could've been from anywhere, we had to be careful. Somehow he had to know what he was doing. His face was no longer sheepish and child-like. His jaw was set and his eyes narrowed to show the contempt in his heart.

"What's the big hurry boy? Come on, let me in on the secret." That cop was just asking to be punched. Shawn had strong tolerance but we'd never seen him in this kind of situation. He was asked to step out of the car. The cop seemed a bit surprised when Seth and I stepped out with him. Remember; Seth's the calm one.

"Listen here you prick, we got to get someone to the hospital. The longer you make us stand around like imbeciles, the more time she loses. Do you want to be responsible for a kid's death? I doubt it, so let us get to the damn hospital already!" He'd stepped up into the man's face with his hands clenched. He would have taken on Heaven above or Hell below just to get going. The cop took a step back, but faltered. He straightened up and cleared his throat.

Shoving Shawn's papers back at him, the officer murmured, "What are you all standing around for? Let's get moving, now!"

The three of us got into the car and started up again. The arrogant cop even gave us an escort, imagine that. To think, an officer blindly protecting criminals, isn't that something? But he did, and we made it to the hospital, right on time. He returned to wherever it was that he came from, and we got

Angela checked in. The doctor told us they'd have to do surgery and it could be awhile. We understood and left to walk around. That morning we'd stashed a lot in the car in case we'd needed to get away and stay away. Melissa was uneasy about leaving her sister behind, but we told her we'd go back as soon as we got Angela fixed. We each had a bit of money with us, so we walked around. The first priority was to find a place to stay that wasn't too expensive. Once there, we'd change clothes, burn the blood stained ones, and get on with life.

Did what just happened affect us? Course it did, and it will continue to all our lives. How can a person forget seeing someone's death? How can someone simply put behind them that scene, his eyes, God his eyes. They never closed, they remained wide open, shocked yet sinister. He was a walking contradiction, a paradox of human psychology. Could anyone have helped him? Probably not, perhaps just injustice was his fate. Even his name is a contradiction of his life. It was too late to help now, so now we had to help Angela. Justin died a fool's death, but he was proud till the end. Was it possible for any of us to ever understand what was going through his mind those last seconds? No, we never could, no matter what happened. The only who could've helped us understand Justin was Justin, and he's gone now.

We left the hospital by 10:30, maybe 11. Who can be sure? We all scattered around town agreeing that Melissa and I would find some sort of hotel. Small towns seldom have expensive places; they'd do anything just to have steady customers. It was even more rare that they'd turn you away. Prejudice didn't exist in a place where your dollar was as good as anybody else's. About five minutes from the hospital we found a little place that looked like our bridge, ready to be torn down. The group had agreed to scatter and reunite at the hospital in a few hours. This way as a group we'd know the lay of the land. The surgery could be...who knows how long?

The authorities didn't know who it was; they had no leads in the case. We were careful, nobody had any idea and we hadn't been identified. Now was the crucial point, to keep up being careful. We were the only ones that could screw ourselves over now. Around 1pm we all met at the hospital and drove to the hotel. We were all showered and re-dressed in roughly an hour and a half, bearing in mind the privacy codes of all others. By 3 we decided it was time to go back to the hospital, they had to be done by now. So yet again we piled into the car and took off. We were considering just going in one at a time but ruled out that decision quickly. The group never stepped back on a member, especially new ones. Yet, never before had our clan seen a situation such as this, it was new to us all.

We marched in with Melissa and I at the head, Seth and Eileen behind us, and the rest behind them. Reaching the admittance desk I cleared my throat to call attention to us. The nurse at the desk looked up sleepily with a sense of ignorant acknowledgement. The hospital was calm and quiet, like most others. I asked where we would find one Angela Radley. Using a nearby computer she put in a search for the patient and told us how to find her. We thanked her and continued to an elevator.

The town's inhabitants must've sensed we didn't fit in, that we were strangers. They treated us with a special kind of courtesy, had a bit of extra caution when addressing any of us or looking at us. Perhaps they had thoughts in their heads already about us, maybe not. We didn't care at that moment; we just wanted to check on Angela. Following the instructions given by the nurse we proceeded to the indicated room. Edging in we saw they'd given her a private room. She seemed to be sleeping, so we all entered and wandered a bit. Within a few minutes a man came in.

"Hello, I'm the doctor. It seems that Miss Radley suffered a gunshot wound in her left arm. I doubt she'll be able to use it properly for some time. Are any of you family?"

We looked around, resting our various gazes on Jo. She seemed lost amidst the insanity; I wish I'd had proper words to comfort her. Right there her sister lay on a bed unconscious with a hole in her arm. There was an infinite amount of apologies owed, but none that could be verbally stated. Why not you ask? We couldn't find the right words.

"Yes, she's my sister." Her voice was shaky; she looked ready to drop. Her eyes were tired and teary. We understood how she felt, to a certain degree.

"Well, we've removed the bullet but I do need some information. First of all, do you have parents that I might contact about this, as well as the medical bills themselves?"

We stared at him in confusion. That was something we hadn't thought about, medical bills. Sure we had money, but not that much money. And what about family, he was looking for parents. We couldn't rely on any of our families to bail us out; they'd sooner send us to prison. I searched my mind to bail her out, a solution somewhere.

"You can contact Mr. & Mrs. James in New York City. I have an address and phone number. I'll call them ahead of time and explain what happened, send any bills or paperwork to them. Thank you doctor, for all your patience. When will we be able to take my sister out of here?"

The man looked a bit surprised, as were we all. He cleared his throat and straightened up. "Well, we need someone to sign the release forms, I assume none of you are older than 18?" We all narrowed our eyes together. Shawn stepped forward.

"Excuse me sir, I'm the oldest here, Shawn Miller. I'm barely over 18, but I still make it. What do you need?"

For the second time in ten minutes the doctor was taken aback. We folded our arms and faced him with looks that showed how truly aggravated we were with his system. He needed a

signature of guardianship, which we couldn't provide.

"Usually we need someone to sign the release papers, but being her only family present is underage I'm not sure what to do. Well you call the...James' you said? Talk to them and I'll call them tomorrow to discuss details. Miss Radley won't be awake until then anyway, the sedatives are very strong to reduce pain. You can stay until the visiting hours end, but there's nothing you can do, she needs proper rest. You all look like you haven't slept for days. My advice is to find a place to stay, sleep for a while and don't worry. She's in good hands and will be up and around in no time. Now if you don't mind, I have to be going. Good afternoon kids."

With that the man promptly walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. I leaned against the wall as everybody found varying positions and got comfortable. The doctor was right, there was nothing we could do, but still we stayed. Jo found a chair and stayed at the bedside. Mr. & Mrs. James, who the hell were they, and how did Jo know them? If I recall, the Radleys had come from Mississippi or something like that.

"Who were those people you told the doctor about?" Christine piped up as we waited for an answer. Jo jumped up as if an electric shock went through her body.

"Oh yea, I have to call them, thanks for reminding me! I'll be right back, hold that thought." With that she shot out of the room in search of some sort of phone as well as a good place to talk. Seems the group thinks alike? I couldn't help from letting out a small grin. Funny to think that we were always together, we knew each other so well, but the group as a whole had no particular title. About time we found it one. I didn't realize I said anything when I suggested an overall name; that's how separate my mind was from my physical self. Everybody looked around for a bit before returning to peaceful personal solitude. We waited in silence for Jo to return.

Suddenly Seth started tossing out names, as did Eileen, Christine, Melissa and Shawn. We searched for a piece of paper and began writing them down. There were so many, we had twenty in no time. Many were great, they symbolized us well, but how to choose one? Melissa came over and whispered in my ear two words. Hopeless Martyrs. It was a contradiction in itself; just like us. What is a martyr? A person who dies for a cause, in most cases that cause is somehow religious. A person had died earlier today for our cause. How did hopeless apply to us? None of us possessed hope in the smallest degree, except perhaps Melissa. She was hopeful for everybody, no matter how evil. That was how she was, and we admired her for that.

I announced her suggestion in an instant and the group was stunned into silence. It was at that moment that Jo returned. We agreed on the name and were satisfied. She looked around thinking that she'd caused the sudden quiet. Seth went up to her and started a bit of a laugh to ease her up, calm her down. Finally we'd get an answer to the aforementioned questions. I waited until she was seated before saying, "Well?"

She zoned back in for a minute, realizing what we were waiting for. "Oh yes, the James', you wanted to know about them, right? Well, it's like this. We lived in the city for most of our lives but when problems started with our parents we moved to Mississippi with our mother. My father ended up in prison for who knows what? My mom was killed in a car crash. Angela had been with Justin awhile and he said he'd be moving and he asked us to go with him. Having nowhere else to go we agreed. The James' contacted us before we left. They'd heard about our mother and already knew about father, so they told us that we could always depend on them should we need them. Angela and I had our minds set to go with Justin, so we told them we'd be okay and we'd get in touch soon as we got there. We didn't get the chance to. I explained what happened and they said they'd take care of the medical bills. We're welcome to go stay with

them, they'd take care of transportation as well but I told them we'd see, one thing at a time."

To think all that talk came out of that small girl, it was a mind blow. She seemed to realize how surprised we were and shrank back into the chair, returning to her own shyness. So that's how things were, they were covered. I was glad they had someone else to turn to; it's hard to find people that care nowadays. That's the way society works, crooked and cruel. We have to accept it and learn to deal. Today had been one of insanity, pain, suffering and tragedy. Time had flown by faster than we'd expected so we decided to leave. We'd rented one room for all of us, we'd have to make due that way. It would work out, some how. Shawn had volunteered to sleep in his car if need be. We told him we wouldn't put him or anyone else out. We left the hospital the same way we'd come in but with spirits lightened. Tomorrow would be better, hopefully.

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## **7. Responsibility**

The proper calls were placed and we got Angela back three days after the incident. Observations had been made so they handed her a prescription and let her out. Today's date must've been the 10<sup>th</sup> then. We agreed to stay at the hotel until tomorrow morning then head back. Angela was fine, just a bit dopey. Some hospitals give out sedatives and pills more commonly than teachers handing out poor grades; they figured enough medication would eventually fix everything. Well there's no pill that could save someone's mentality or even help find it. Sorry doc, medicine's not always the answer.

So we got Angela back. She looked like some sort of train wreck, except the train had backed up and hit her again. Not

only did she have the physical pain to deal with, but the unbearable emotional anguish. Unfortunately, we had to make it bearable. For the most part she was really quiet, we picked her up in the afternoon. Jo stayed by her side trying to start up conversation, but the shock was too much. We couldn't blame her; I know I sure as hell couldn't. I was right there, I'd never forget should I live an eternity. The pain just wouldn't go away, and probably never would.

All day we sat in contemplative silence, thinking. There was so much that needed to be said – we all had to vent before someone snapped. Tomorrow we'd be back in the regular neighborhood. The problem now was that Angela and Jo had no place to go, with the exception of the city. My mistake, to us "the city" means New York City; I understand that there might be a different city close to you. Anyway, back to what I was saying. It's not every day that you're forced to watch a colleague die, right in front of you, and you can't do a thing to stop it. Life never was fair was it?

A pin drop would've echoed through the ceaseless empty halls of our speech. Eileen, Seth, Christine, Shawn, Jo, Angela, Melissa and myself wasted time to stop and think. We wouldn't get any closure from it, but maybe we'd be able to find the proper words to console each other. Everyone was affected differently, of course some more than most. Angela was the last of us to change out of her old clothes. Instead of waiting until we got back, Shawn and I decided we'd go and burn them. Seth was considering taking a walk and the girls could sit and talk uninterrupted.

Shawn mentioned knowing the town and a field a good distance away. We found a barrel on the way and carted it into the car. Next we went in search of gasoline as well as some newspaper. We found all we needed in no time and were on our way. Shawn said he'd try and filter the smog somehow so that people wouldn't get alarmed if they saw it. It didn't matter that we couldn't clean all the air, it was getting dark; who would

notice? Gathering the bundle together I dumped it into the upright barrel. Shawn poured gasoline in until we were sure everything was drenched. He'd lined the barrel itself with paper to help the fire burn. Obviously he knew what he was talking about. The moon had barely appeared when we returned to the car. He'd left a small gasoline trail and from a good distance away lit the fuse.

Why did he back up? Being the clothes were soaked with gasoline and flammable to begin with, we wanted to be a safe distance away in case there was some sort of explosion. It made logical sense if you thought about it. We watched as the flame jumped across the trail, absorbing the material, engulfing it into the whole. Sure enough there was a slight burst when the initial burning took place. The fire would take a long time to die down; we weren't going to wait for it. Staring at the flames dancing around in mischievous circles was something to remember. Why? I'd never seen fire in such a way before; it made an impression that I'd never forget because it was something special.

On the way back Shawn spoke up for a moment. "Are you okay? I mean, what happened...with Justin, it's okay if you're a bit shaken up, I'm a bit lost too but ...I'm 'round if you need a guy to talk to, understand?" He didn't want to say it openly, but he was there for me. He understood and wanted to help. Pride and basic male ego wouldn't allow him to say the exact words on his mind. I said I was fine, not to worry, thanks, and to worry about someone who deserved it, like Angela. The conversation ended.

We saw Seth on our way back so we picked him up. He didn't have much to say, but then again neither did we. The silence followed us to the room and seemed to vanish the moment our trio stepped through the door. It seems that they'd been waiting for us; maybe there was something on their mind. I stepped in and sat next to Melissa. Surprisingly, she was smiling a somewhat crooked grin, bittersweet happiness.

“Angela decided that it would be best for them to stay with the James’. Can we call when we get back tomorrow?” I considered what she said. Of course she could call, but had only Angela made the decision? What happened to Jo and did she agree? I looked across to where she was. She was standing in the corner with her back turned to us; head down. In a certain way I understood what she was going through. Well I wasn’t going to intervene in a fight that I didn’t belong in. When it came to family brawls we tried to keep out. Sometimes it helped, sometimes it didn’t.

“Sure, soon as we get back. We’ll meet up with Gus and Locke and hang out for a while after the call’s made. We’ll check over the bridge, make sure it’s clean. So, until tomorrow gang, I suggest sleep, what do you think?”

Glances were exchanged and we agreed on sleep. Tomorrow would be another day full of...who knows what? Why worry about it today? Tomorrow was a day away and that day might never come, stay focused on the present. Did you get that piece of advice? If not, re-read the aforementioned until you *do* understand it.

We all found places to sleep but stayed awake for a bit. We all talked back and forth for a while about all kinds of things. I think Shawn fell asleep first with Christine right beside him. Seth and Eileen were out next with Jo not far behind. Melissa stayed up for awhile with me, but in awhile she was sleeping soundly too. I myself was thinking about what had happened and a few past events when a soft voice from the darkness shook me up.

“I know what you’re thinking, but this is the best thing for Jo and I. I have a responsibility to her and I will take care of her. Of course we’re both grateful to you all for your aid, but we need to start over. No offense, but this is no life for us, for her. She would have no future. I want her to stay in school, succeed, do better than I ever did.”

In the night her eyes seemed to glow, I saw where she was. Maybe she did know what she was talking about, maybe the right choice had been made. Like I said, I never liked getting involved in family brawls, I wanted to remain neutral. Jo was young; she had more opportunities than her sister, why waste them?

“I understand, I’m really sorry about Justin, I’m sorry I couldn’t help more, that we couldn’t help. It’s been great and don’t worry, we’ll always be here if you need us. We never go back on one of our own whether they be a new or old member, no matter if they’ve lived around us forever or just moved in, even if they move away. Just remember we’re always here for you should you need us.”

She lowered her eyes and thought about a proper answer. Looking up for a moment she replied, “Thanks a lot, I mean it. As for Justin, well, he was ignorant. He was responsible for himself and he got himself killed. I’ve cried all I can; now I have Jo to worry about, on my own. Again, I can’t thank you all enough. Try to sleep, I’ll be okay.”

I nodded and attempted to return to my now shattered thoughts. I could’ve sat there for three hours, but I couldn’t remember what it was I had been thinking about. So what did I do, being the only one awake? I went to sleep.

Morning came, and went. We didn’t wake up until around noon. I think we had the right to sleep. We rolled out of slumber and stumbled groggily along until we had prepared everything. Reaching the car we all got in, still half asleep, but conscious enough to know what was going on. The stress of the incident had kept our minds off the hangovers we all had from the drinking the night before. We’d made a repeat of that when we waited for Angela, having nothing better to do. So by 1pm we were on the road again. Shawn wanted to get back, as did the rest of us, so he sped at some points to stay ahead.

By 3 we were in familiar territory, and glad to be there. Dropping by my house we had a brief change of plans. The call was put through without incident so afterward I called Gus and Locke. They explained a bit about what had happened with school and we agreed to meet at the bridge to discuss the final details. For the most part we were in the clear. Now just to sit back and make sure we were all singing the same tune. We'd all have the same story; we weren't there that day. Angela and Jo would probably be back in the city before police caught them for questioning so their stories didn't matter. So it was settled, we'd go to the bridge, spend the night and take care of travelling arrangements in the morning. Why rush, but why waste time also?

So we parted ways, at least a few of us did. Shawn and Christine felt that they'd had enough for one day. They went off to wherever it was that they went off to when they wanted to stop and think. I can't say I blame them, I was wishing I could do the same thing. But I couldn't, so I'd have to get over it for now, right? Seth said something about checking on family and he was on his way with Eileen close behind. They said they might show up at the bridge later though. So I got into my own car, got behind the wheel and Melissa, Angela and Jo jumped in. My family never asked questions or anything so we got off without a word.

Destination: our bridge. Time to travel from my house to bridge: 5-10 minutes. Plans? To cool off and basically get high, whatever happened. The conversation was light, nothing about what had happened. It was as if the day had never occurred, we'd put it behind us already. To you it may seem strange but that was what was necessary at the moment. It had to be done. By the time things were arranged it was getting dark already. The sun was setting lower into the sky and the night air livened up. When we were within visual range of the bridge we noticed something wrong. Instead of the dull brown and wretched catastrophe that it usually appeared to be, it

was alive, orange and jumping.

I thought back to the burning of the clothes earlier, the jumping flames. They were the same; the event repeated itself. It was like déjà vu except that this was real. Our bridge, how could this be? I gunned the engines and pulled up as close as I could to keep at a safe distance from the fire's hellish heat. Looking around I saw a man take off running through the woods. Searching around I saw Gus in the distance. He saw the man and took off full speed. I ran down and caught him before he was out of range.

"Where's Locke?" I searched around but our companion was missing. My voice was loud to go over the sound. Fire engines would take time; we didn't have it to waste.

"He was on the bridge, I couldn't get him out alone, try and get him, hurry!" With that he took off. I heard another car pull up and I saw Shawn and Christine jump out. I ran up and told them the scenario and they relayed the message to Melissa. She passed it on to the other two girls. Angela and Jo would take my car to get Seth and Eileen down here. Then they'd call the fire department to get a truck to take care of the main situation. Christine would keep watch and Shawn would go in with myself after Locke. The flames leaped, mocking us, daring us to enter. Searching around I found a hole to enter and once inside, we'd have to travel quickly. Grabbing rags we covered our mouths and dove into what could've been our deaths.

The smoke was impossible to see through and it didn't end. It was hiding a ghastly fate, the feared flame. We stumbled and crawled through the insanity, enduring the intense heat. Shawn started coughing heavily after awhile. It felt like we were searching an eternity with no result. The seconds were ticking by and if we didn't hurry the three of us would be dead. Time was something that wasn't in our favor at that moment and the flames inched closer and closer as we crept.

"I think I see something!" Shawn screamed through the mess. He pointed into the fog and I squinted my eyes to help things focus. In the darkness I saw a body collapsed on the bridge's weak frame. Searching around we realized that our entryway had been barricaded. Shawn picked up the frail body in his arms and searched. We would die in moments if we didn't hurry. I searched the ancient frame of the bridge and realized that it was collapsing underneath us. All we had to do was get to the water first. So we jumped. With every bit of strength in our bodies we jumped until the warped and stubborn boards finally gave way. We fell straight down into the river below. I can't remember much of what happened, simply that I saw people on my way down.

In the water I kicked and sputtered to survive. I hadn't done all that to die now. I remember the world getting dark and my vision blurring. For a split-second I saw Shawn emerge from beneath the surface, but I couldn't be sure. I thought that I was walking when I was in reality swimming. I couldn't see anything straight and I couldn't get my mind to adapt quick enough. I gagged and dove under and tried to dart further. I must have failed because my mind blanked out. I remember reaching out my arm to figure out what was ahead of me, reaching for my life. The thing was that I couldn't reach; I came up short.

Every muscle I had was stretched out, reaching for what I thought was salvation. My mind couldn't make the distinction of which person it was that would save me. I wouldn't know either. Stepping forward, I slipped on a round rock, spun and collapsed. I landed on my back on what must have been the shoreline. I felt the water splashing up on me, over my eyes, my face. I was dying for a breath, just one clean breath of simple fresh air. The sand was a surface that was unusual to land on. My eyes blinked and saw the orange-red blur of the fire, the misshapen silhouettes of possible comrades.

From there my eyes closed. I didn't know if I'd ever open them

again. I didn't know if I'd see my friends or family again. I didn't know if I'd see tomorrow. I kept telling myself that I was dead, it was all over, and I had failed as a leader. I had lost two as well as myself. Is this Hell? All this guilt, the dancing flames that will never go away, it had to be Hell. My mind's clashing colors formed one particular form. It was then that Justin appeared, reaching out as he had when he was shot. And he was laughing.

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## 8. Bittersweet Irony

When we're young, life seems infinite. Nobody wants to believe that they can die so early. Life is very cruel; delusions fade too late. I myself couldn't remember what had happened. When I awoke, things had changed; nothing was the same. Vision was blurry, try as I might, nothing would focus. I tried to sharpen my other senses to grab onto some proof of reality. Footsteps and voices echoed on and on, past me. In the silence I waited until the steps ceased. Imagine living in a world of darkness, void of all logic and reason. Nothing but continuous sound that drones on and on...like silence.

A person entered my peaceful vicinity, sneaking around checking things here and there. I was sick of games; I wanted answers.

"Where the hell am I?" My voice surprised me. It wasn't loud and solid as it always was. Instead, it was small and quavering as if it were afraid to shatter the semi-perfect surrealism. Again, I waited.

"You're in the hospital Mr. Thompson, you've been here for hours. Ash and smoke from the fire is responsible for your lack of vision. Also, we found drugs in your blood stream,

which are contributing. Smoke inhalation caused you to collapse shortly after going back into the flames. There are some people waiting for you." With that, the presumed "doctor" left me with my mind racing. It all came back, the bridge and the fire...Locke!

We had vowed to always be there for each other, risking it all. Our lives, our existence could've been taken from us. Reality doesn't quite sink in I suppose until it's too late. At the current time I didn't know a damn thing about what happened but I was in a bit of trouble. Least that's what my subconscious mind kept telling me. Drugs, can they keep you for that sort of thing? I know they can for treatment but...I don't know. Why worry now? I sat up a bit slowly; everything would become disoriented with the slightest motion. The questions didn't end, but the answers never came. I couldn't tell if the door was open or not, I don't remember if it was a knock or a voice, but people entered.

A large group of people entered. Groggily my vision searched for a point of focus, but none was clear. I wandered from one dark, shapeless form to the next, but I was unable to truly identify anyone. Immediately I assumed who they were and closed my eyes in a vain attempt to flush out the distortion. All at once voices shouted out from all sides and I recognized the old gang, as well as the two new members. Apart from them I heard my parents. What I couldn't catch was what they were all arguing about. I was growing accustomed to the yells when they suddenly stopped. I thought that the opposing sides had agreed to some sort of armistice and it was done. Staring straight ahead, I realized that the room had more people in it than previously.

Attempts to count the surrounding figures improved as I blinked my eyes furiously. Focus improved as I saw Melissa, Andrea, Eileen, Seth, Shawn, Christine, Gus, Angela and Jo standing around. In the back huddled to one side I recognized my parents. In the middle of the large group stood two more

adults I don't recall meeting before and my mind wouldn't allow me to assume their identities. The calm silence stayed and the two strangers' eyes glared at me. The room's dimensions became more obvious and I realized that the usual gang was missing one of the regulars.

"Where's Locke?" my voice cut through the uneasy silence and seemed to strike anger into the two adults in front of me. Their eyes narrowed as if my words were considered some sort of insult. There was a man and woman there, looking down at me.

"Locke, our son, is dead," the voice that spoke echoed off the walls and shot through my sanity. Logic failed as I searched for an explanation or some sort of reasoning. I wanted to disappear, to completely lose myself in another time, another place. But I was here, stuck in this wasted existence in a situation that I had no control over. What was it the doctor had told me? What was it that these people had told me? Everything swirled together at the same time, now what?

The first thing that crossed my mind was prison or that we'd been found out somehow and our lives were over. Then I remembered Justin, his death, the whole event itself. The bridge, the fire, Locke, it all happened so quick, and still so slowly. Arrested, no, cops would have been swarming around. I cleared my eyes the best I could and spoke in the boldest voice I could muster.

"Dead...how, what do you mean? I don't understand..." My voice joined the still echoing tones of Locke's father. His face was cold and stern; I'd never met him before today. The heat of the flames, the event, the memory, all returned full force. We'd been too late, that was the obvious answer. Answers were lacking but questions were infinite. Gus had gone running after someone when we dove into the inferno. Who was it he had been chasing?

“Gus, our bridge, who?” My voice was growing more calm and rigid as time crawled by. Gus stepped forward and whispered his answer in my ear.

“Melissa’s father, I caught him not too far away but he hit me hard a few times and I couldn’t get up quick enough to grab him. The cops say it’s his word against mine, and that’s a tough decision. Locke and I were waiting for you guys at the bridge when he arrived out of nowhere. He wanted a fight and we wouldn’t rise to the occasion. So he nailed Locke hard; lit the torch and took off. I lost a few paces waiting for you guys to show. If I’d known that you’d be too late, I never would’ve left...”

His voice joined the echoes in my head. Locke, not him, he was too good. He had siblings that he loved and they loved him, it wasn’t right. I got out of the bed and nearly fell over from the head rush. I had to see it, the proof; I wouldn’t take lies. I shoved my way through the small crowd and stumbled down hallways. The walls were all the same, blank, white and uniform, with the occasional helpful direction somewhere. I continued until I found the sign that assisted me to the morgue. The door said “Restricted” but warnings never stopped me before. I was about to enter when Melissa stepped in the way.

“Don’t, just take our word for it, please? You trust us, right? You trust me?” her voice was pleading and urgent, I had to shake it off. I needed to know the truth. I trusted them, but I still needed to know. Looking around I saw that for the most part, everybody pulled back, except the parents. I sidestepped past Melissa and stepped through the double doors. The room was like all the others, plain, except there were shelves covering all the walls. Tables holding one body each neatly tagged, the irony of it made me sick. I moved around the room, searching, until I found it. A black body bag, unopened, still slightly damp. I assume that the “rescuers” had been soaked after the fire had been extinguished, as had

the bag.

Have you ever gotten so completely lost within yourself that you don't know what's real and what isn't? How about when you dread something so much your mind refuses to face it? Now was one of those times, my mind raced, but I had to see. My mind spanned over every memory I'd ever known, from birth to present, every horrible moment. I had to end it and the only way to do that was to go through with it. I exhaled and grabbed hold of the small metal zipper. Slowly and cautiously I moved down to a point where I felt would be enough to be sure. I didn't look inside until I had let go of the zipper. All my expectations were lost in the midst of the moment.

In movies we see all kinds of ghastly scenes that life doesn't normally expose us to, but this was a sort of exception. I'd never actually seen a burn victim but this was much worse. The sight that met my eyes was a shock that sent me reeling backwards. Pain spread through my back as I stumbled into a table and halfway collapsed. I slowly rose up as the room started to spin, and eventually I fell back in blackness. Voices started again rapidly blending together. My mind was reeling; my memories shattered. That couldn't have been, no, not him, not the family man. He was too good to go, why couldn't the supposed "merciful" Lord have taken someone else from this world? Why him, why not me?

I awoke again back in my room in a daze. Looking around I found the only person present was Melissa. I assume that somehow she'd talked everybody out of killing me on the spot.

"How could this, I don't understand, do they know about...and, I'm confused, Locke, please, make it stop," my own voice scared me. It echoed in the confines of my mind, striking every painful chord time and again. Never could I recall such utter uselessness. Melissa smiled down at me, the first true smile in ages and replied.

"Don't worry about it, the hospital's been thrown into all kinds of disarray, they'd be more than happy to be rid of us. They want us to get you out of here as soon as possible. Police will be around asking questions, our whereabouts, but they don't know about the rest." She stopped abruptly, "the rest" was in reality someone's life; the phrase didn't seem appropriate to refer to it in such a plain way. She swallowed hard and continued, but I wasn't thinking about her words. They went past me and into the walls, then back to her again. I heard words like "my father" and "arson," later on I caught "disappeared" and something about how the police didn't trust her father's word or Gus'.

I got up and changed sometime during the soundless echoes, she seemed to understand and lost herself in thought. Some time later we both walked out, but where would we go? Our lives here were in ruin. She led me around the hospital to where the gang was waiting. We needed a plan, but it seemed she was one step ahead of me this time. I was proud, despite everything else.

Eileen cleared her throat, "Obviously we can't stay; somehow they'll trace us to the school. Unless any of you wants to spend your life in prison, we have to get out of here. I'm thinking we head for the city."

We all looked at each other; the main question on our minds was, "How?" The next question was, "When?" but we knew the answer: Now. I looked across every face, each as downcast as the rest. We would drive, but we needed shelter. My gaze rested on Angela.

"What about the James?"

She blinked, "What about them?"

"Would they help us out?"

She looked down at the floor, "I don't know, all of us, and

being that someone was killed, they'd want the truth, I don't think..."

"Well we're just going to have to convince them to help us," Shawn's voice was powerful and frightening as he spoke. We looked up to him before, but not usually. I was the normal leader, but today I didn't feel up to par to take care of anything. We nodded and left the hospital, piling into two vehicles. First stop would be our homes, grab anything of use and run out. First house to hit, mine. I told them to continue; I'd meet them at Melissa's. They left as quickly and quietly as they had come and I was left to sneak into my own home like a common thief. My parents were waiting for me when I opened the door. I blocked out their voices, my mother's pleas for me to listen, my father's demands at obedience. Upstairs I packed all I needed, which wasn't much, and set out again. Going out the door they pulled the same act. I kissed my mother and told her I'd be gone awhile and told my father I was sorry. With that, I left my parents standing stricken in the open doorway. I wondered for days how long it took them to actually shut that door and go on with their lives.

I walked to Melissa's and waited for the gang. Hearing movement inside I saw her father was home. I was surprised, being I could've sworn she'd said something about how he'd disappeared, but I couldn't tell. I ducked under a window so I wouldn't be noticed, but then I heard an all too familiar voice. It was Melissa and...her sister. I crept around back and found Seth, Christine, Eileen and Shawn waiting there. I asked for a quick update and they said Gus, Jo and Angela had gone ahead to arrange everything; we'd have to wait. I didn't like the change but it would have to do. There was an argument going on inside the small building, we waited on alert. Shawn stood up slowly and cracked the door open. It was slammed shut with immense force. Pushing with all our force, we crept in slowly, one by one. We found Melissa curled up on the floor; her enraged father had thrown her into it.

We looked around for the fool and found him sobbing hysterically. He was insane so we thought better to just sneak out unnoticed. Eileen found Andrea in a corner and said a few words to coax her out. I lifted Melissa myself and brought her outside to the car. She started moving around a bit and I turned around to make sure everybody was coming. We piled into the two cars again and drove off without as much as a response from the madman.

The problem with having to wait was we needed a location to wait at. We drove to a house I wasn't familiar with and picked up the remaining trio. They said we'd have to drive into the city and talk to the James' in person, so it began. From there we left behind everything we'd ever known, the lives that had taken years to establish. Were there any regrets among us? I suppose so, but I wasn't worried about it. I was only concerned with our future problems in the city. Hopefully someone had a plan; I sure as hell didn't.

Tomorrow we'd discover where our lives would head. The problem was that tomorrow was coming too quick, and none of us were prepared for the change. Change, it never comes when you need it to. I suppose that's all part of fate and chance, which I hate to believe in. Lives were being lost rapidly and we couldn't turn back now, we had to make it right, somehow. Locke was gone now and we were forced to make the best of it. His family was devastated and there was nothing we could do to apologize. We were responsible in some sort of way, what else could we do but run?

People hate to admit when they need help because it's a sign of weakness; we were like most people. By the time we left it was near midnight with the day ending fast. We entered the city early in the morning, searching for somewhere to sleep. We decided not to. Tomorrow would decide our fates and damn do I hate depending on a day that may never come. Especially how it's so conveniently a day away.

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## 9. Here's To Us

We were all still sane but haunted by our memories; sanity would betray our minds to misery. We were in a place that held no guarantees and we had no plans amongst ourselves. All we had was a name; a common name at that. We had no choice but to go through with it and try. We had funding from various sources, but still, we weren't sure how long it would hold out. Angela gave directions as we passed street to street. She said something about how her father and Mr. James knew each other from the military and each had done favors for the other. We stopped where she directed us to and she entered with her sister. We decided to drive around and get familiar with the area. The alleys were barely visible as the sun rose lazily in the October sky. As we continued we saw eyes in the morning light, eyes that had been there, staring into space all night. Eyes that never faded but glowed constant, staring; staring endlessly – at me.

We were all there; there was nothing I could do to save him! I think it is shrinks who talk about the whole guilt issue; well I wasn't going to prove them right. But those damn eyes, they burn through you, staring, glaring. They never stop, never blink, they are forever and always. I shut my eyes to escape them and still they remained. As paranoia set in I started to mistake every shadow for some sort of surreal demon stalking me, waiting for me to snap. I refused; looking over I saw the same bewildered look on Melissa's face. Life isn't fair, but it's not meant to be. Why does everything have to be so...criminally insane?

As we drove the shadows gained form and became people of all types. The streets flooded with businessmen, teachers, students, parents, gangsters – people of every kind; all

living together in one community. But that doesn't mean that they all get along perfectly. Cops and crooks aren't friends, etc. It's how society and people have it working; the most screwed up methods in the world all displayed in one place. Simple and complex all at once, we were in a universe of contradictions. By 6am we decided to head back, being Angela and her sister had quite a few hours to speak to the infamous "James" family. Patience is never abundant when necessary, pity really. I allowed my nightmares to wander for a few moments longer before attempting yet again to force them out. My failed effort added to the list as we returned to the house.

Waiting outside was a young child of perhaps 10, I couldn't be sure. A young girl that looked tired of standing was leaning against a wall to stay upright. She blinked as we pulled up and wiped sleep from her eyes. She beckoned us to follow her as she took point, never saying a word of any kind. We, in turn, thought that silence was wiser. Entering the house we found the kind of home none of us ever had. A home without violence, without pain, anger and frustration; a family that got along; we stared in wonder at the scene that surrounded us. It was like something out of a fairy tale, a dream that you wait to awaken from. Looking face to face we realized that it was a reality. Even the shadows of guilt disappeared, they refused to set foot into the bright sunlight streams that flooded in, brought by the new day.

There are times and places where you feel so alone that the world sinks back and leaves you to your own mind. This was one of those times. Everything I felt or heard went past me because I was in a zone where the only sound was my own consciousness. I remember being dragged into another room and pushed to the head of my group. I stood there motionless for some time until I finally blinked and realized that time hadn't stood still for me. Melissa was next to me, everyone else behind. Angela and Jo sat with the supposed James' though

only a man was present, their eyes full of conviction. The silence echoed as it had for days now, it refused to stop. We all stood frozen in a world of tranquility where only the weak dared to pass judgment. Like glass – the sphere of silence and calm shattered by one solitary word.

“Well,” the man said. He spoke as simply as if his own child stood before him instead of me. Angela looked calm and relieved; I was waiting for the police to dart out. He cleared his throat as he stared person to person and spoke again, “It appears that there is a sort of situation here. I refuse to give aid to murderers and troublemakers, but I will help lost kids without families. I can come up with lodging, but you must take care of yourselves from there. I will take care of Angela and Jo here, thank you, but I will do the little I can for the rest of you.”

He looked away from us in a kind of disgust and turned his back to hide his other emotions. When he faced us again, the stern calm was quavering, “Justin will have a proper funeral. He might not have had a death worth honoring, but he was human nevertheless.” A silent pause. “I suggest you all register in school to pass the time, make your lives and losses worth something. I’ll have lodging arrangements set in an hour, until then you may stay here as long as you all understand that you’re in someone else’s house. Respect it as you would respect me.”

With that still fresh in our minds, he turned and walked out with Jo behind him. Angela remained and tried to look happy. He spoke to us like convicts, “murderers” he called us. Murderers, who the hell did he think he was? My own group was still reviewing the session mentally I saw, I turned to run after the man who had insulted us so. Angela was there to stop me.

“Don’t bother, you can’t change a man, just let it be. He has his own family to worry about, you can understand, can’t you?”

I glared at her in anger. "Couldn't I?" What the hell was it with people today? I stormed out of the room and the house, leaving the group behind. I returned to the car to consider all that had just happened. The scene repeated consistently and each time the insults were louder. Aggravated I started to work up a speech for the lot of them. What the, damn, all of a sudden they all think they're so smart. You don't think they are, do you? You agree with me, if you don't, to hell with you! The shadows agree with me, they're always there and they always listen. They respond too, one way or another. They find a way, whether anybody gives a damn or not, they do. They absorb the hate and it makes them stronger. I wish I could find a way to work like the shadows do, feeding on negativity. Maybe someday I'll be so lucky as to be numb to it all.

Justin laughed at death like it was an old friend, why shouldn't I do the same? The shadows are so cold yet they feel; in their icy depths they feel the hate and cruelty. Justin's soul longed to avenge itself, but instead it stayed with me and kept me company. We'd sit and talk for a while, laugh about the nonsense in life. Always listening, always there; always watching...