

# THE COMPASS

A dramatic landscape painting. A two-lane road with a yellow center line and white edge lines stretches from the bottom center towards the horizon. The road is flanked by dark green fields. In the distance, a massive, dark, and turbulent storm cloud formation looms over the horizon. The base of the clouds is illuminated with a bright orange and yellow glow, suggesting a fire or a very intense sunset/sunrise. The sky above the clouds is a deep, dark blue with some lighter, wispy clouds.

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# The Compass

**By I. Purple**

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“If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there.”

— [George Harrison](#)

## Chapter 1: A view from above.

My name is HattenXenter and I am about to share the last three weeks of my existence. What led me on the road I've taken, what choices I was forced to take, in fact it all comes down to one reason: the moment you lose charge over your life, you decide to go with the flow and see where it leads you, you realize the thrill and value of every moment you have. You can't be certain of being still here tomorrow and so, you want to try out every crazy experience life can offer. Well, this is my story, when one day I've set my mind on one thing and that is "*throw caution to the wind*"

The view of the ocean that spread before my eyes as I stood on top of a high hill was indescribably exceptional. It is pretty common to wander at such beauty of open nature but for me, it was more than that; it brought a sense of ...freedom. It did not leave me curious of what lies ahead but picturing that view expanded over the face of the earth, I only wished to see it all, from above.

The article I held in my hand started to draw back my attention. Who would have thought this thing would catch my eye at an antique shop? A shop that usually gives the creeps to most people and very few (mostly the fearless) go into. One day I passed by it and the fancy of going in ate at me like a fast spreading poison...and so I did.

Nothing appealed to my eyes except this strange Compass that kept changing point every three seconds. "How could it be possible?" I asked myself, perhaps it was broken but it captivated my interest like no ornate object has before. The strangest thing is; the moment I paid for it and stepped out of the shop, the pointer stilled at one direction: the west. Stranger still, I sensed a change in the wind, as though a major occurring fact would give impact and transform things around.

Let me get this straight, I was never one who believed in the supernatural. As odd as it sounded in my head, I truly felt that this compass was abnormally unusual.

I pocketed the thing swiftly, refusing to admit how freaked out it got me. It certainly was not a reason enough to ditch it, not after I've just paid a handful of bucks for it.

Ten days since that day had passed and, now, my thoughts started to take different shapes. A new rush of emotions grew in me; I felt a need to go on the road, to get in my car, start the engine and take off for whatever place awaits me.

It was all a mere thought at first than it swelled into something obsessive and alluring, becoming too soon as needful as oxygen. I couldn't help relate this odd rollercoaster sensation to the Compass I've bought. How strange... I, who had never been but speculative in life, always thinking things through, was ready to leave everything behind simply to

appease an irrational will for unplanned adventure. No matter how pointless I found it, I was enthralled to go for it, and nothing was going to stop me from that.

Born and raised in Cane of Oregon, I got acquainted with every route and roadway of this state. Driving around was a routine that got old, but I must say it wasn't easy to even consider never coming back here; country home is most the time a safe haven. At least, it was so for me, so with one last gaze at the ocean, one deep inhale of the fresh air, I turned to leave...for good.

## Chapter 2: An unplanned encounter.

The black suitcase rested still on the passenger seat to my sight. Inside was something I had never thought I would carry along but on this day, possible incoming danger was something I had to take into consideration. I was heading towards the unknown; I thought of it as an inescapable necessity to take along my licensed gun.

A spare stock of green I needed also, and figured that the same money I was hiding away for some faithful day would be most useful now. As I was minutes away of leaving my shelter, I stared back at my white two-story house, which mended perfectly with the neighborhood architectural design, now felt unwelcoming and unfamiliar completely to my eyes. Seeing the reality of my actions, it dawned on me that I was truly walking away from everything and everyone I ever knew. And the worst part is that it left me numb as a rock, no bad feeling, no premature regrets, nothing but an indescribable sense of anticipation. With that, I shut the door and scattered to my vehicle.

As odd as it looks, I spent the first night in the back seat of my car, unwilling to crash at some cheap motel in Oregon. Yet the idea looked favorable in the morning as I couldn't turn my head without feeling a sharp pain in my neck. Nonetheless, I was driving again first thing in the morning, unable to stop my unexplainable impulse. Like the day before, the drive was uneventful until I saw some chick signaling for a lift. I had no intention to stop but the startle she caused me by the rock she threw at my car made me hit the brakes hard. She came running when I halted.

"Hey!" My voice left me before I knew it, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Hi." She said with nervousness, "Sorry...I need a ride...Please?"

"And this makes it okay to just throw a rock at my vehicle?!"

“You didn’t stop!” She retorted. “And have every right not to...” She added more calmly. “Look. I’m sorry...I need to get out of here and I’m in a hurry.”

I sighed. She looked a real piece of work and would stay on my back till I accepted, especially in this deserted road out here.

After a mere minute I reluctantly nodded, “hop in.” I mumbled and she cheerfully ran to the passenger seat.

Not a mile was yet passed when I decided to speak since she didn’t utter a word. I didn’t mind but I still needed to know where she wanted to get to.

“So, where do you need to be?” I asked as casually as I could, concealing my light irritation about the unexpected task. And here a man seeking adventure becomes a chauffeur over night of an eighteen or twenty year old.

She looked pensive and, in the few seconds I observed her, I couldn’t help but notice the quirky intriguing style of this passenger; lightly gothic clothes, grey bag hanging over a shoulder, black chubby short hair...Her words snapped my attention back to the wheel and I frowned in disbelief at her question: “Where are you headed?”

“Does it matter? Just tell me where you want to go and I’ll drive you.”

“Keep driving. I’ll tell you when we get there...As long as you’re getting out of the county, we’re cool.” I shook my head at her obscure words and fell quiet. It looked like I got stuck with her anyway, for at least another twenty four hours.

It did not take long before she started grabbing hold of my stuff in front of her, curiously asking what they were for. Despite my reluctance I didn’t restrain her from doing that. But the moment she poked the Compass, pointing out that it seemed broken, I couldn’t help reacting, “Don’t...Would you leave that, please.” I snatched it back from her hand and set it at its place. “It’s important to me,” I finished a little uncomfortably.

“What, is it like a family heirloom or something?” Her mocking tone got me upset instantly and I preferred to change the subject. “What’s a girl like you doing out here anyway? Where are you running to?”

“I’m visiting my uncle; he promised we’d spend the holiday together...” She explained.

I detected a lie in her words, so I pointed, “You were in quite a hurry for just a holiday destination...No folks to give you a drive over to your uncle’s?”

She froze for a moment. “My folks don’t know I’m gone...I’ll phone them once there.”

I didn’t attempt to know more about her reasons; my questions were out of place anyways.

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Sitting behind the wheel, driving would make you think there is nothing easier. Well, it took me no longer than twenty four hours to remember how tired driving could make me.

The fact that I had a passenger along kept me holding on and going faster. But at some point I couldn't keep my eyes open, exhausted half from the road and half from the rattled words of the chick by my side.

Tanya was her name, a college girl no doubt. It was no surprise hearing that in her own words.

It lightened the atmosphere to make conversation though, and after a couple of hours I found myself even enjoying it. No matter how distinctively quirky she was, I had to admit it was in a positive way.

"So, Hatten... where did you say you were going?" She asked finally.

"I didn't," I told her then cast a look at her slightly disappointed face. I sighed, "For the record, I didn't have... any destination."

"You just took off on the road... to go nowhere in particular?" She retorted humorously.

"Yeah... I like to be a bit of a daredevil every now and then," I joked back.

Night was falling fast and the idea to crash somewhere became more and more alluring to me. I can't say the same for Tanya, whose unease at the mention of stopping showed up on her face so fast there was no way you could miss it. I was flustered at her insistence on keeping me driving for the night. "Look, I'm sorry but if you have a problem with that, you could always take a night bus or have somebody else give you a drive."

Her silent resentment compelled me to explain, "I'm not willing to risk getting into a car crash just to keep going... I'm truly worn out." I pulled over a mile away from a motel, turning to face her.

"Fine," she snapped through gritted teeth, "but I'm sleeping in the car."

As stunned as her decision made me, I accepted without objection. I started the car again, driving to the parking lot. Then, I made sure to leave my car parked near the rooms, at a lighted spot, fearing a little for Tanya's safety.

## Chapter 3: Shocking Discovery

Another gulp or two of that coffee and I was ready to go. After a quarter of an hour sitting at the bar of the motel café, I remembered the girl that had slept in my car the previous night and was probably waiting on me for another drive. I felt dope not to have taken any precaution at all and had left a stranger inside my vehicle, who could have easily stolen it and sneaked off in the dark.

I moved to leave, reluctantly shifting my eyes from the TV screen I was watching since the minute I got here. I threw my cup in the trash but then froze in shock when my glance went to the picture posted on the glass door.

It was a photo of a wanted fugitive: young female Caucasian, hazel eyes, long hair...

For a moment, I wished time stopped and made this shocking news vanish from my life because my guts sincerely couldn't take this.

Despite her present superfluous change in appearance, I still recognized that face perfectly. There was no mistake about it; that person was no other than... Tanya...

The wind... the morning silence outside... I was left with the dull sound of my thumping heartbeat.

One look around and my shock turned to panic then anger. I looked back towards my car she was still there, curled up in the passenger seat, looking as innocent as a teenage girl could be.

Outraged, I snatched the picture off the glass and walked directly to her. Everything around me felt like a blind spot. Not bothering to even think, I acted on sheer instinct.

As soon as I pulled the door open, she straightened up with startle.

"Get out of the car!"

Confused and seeming scared she stepped down in silence. "What...what's going on?"

I showed up the picture I held furiously then threw it to her. "You wanna explain this...*Judy*?"

Distraught and freaking out, she started, "It's really not what you think."

"What are you wanted for? Robbery? Abuse?... Murder?" I questioned coldly.

"I am not a murderer! I just jumped bail, okay?" Her ominous pause didn't last more than a minute. "They were gonna lock me up for good."



Lamentably shaken by this news, I started walking to the driver's side. She followed as I hurriedly got in. "Hathen! Hear me out...Please!" She held on to my arm, babbling, "All I did was agreeing to a stupid bet! I lit up a fire at what I thought was an abandoned house- but there was an old man in there- I swear I didn't know... You can't leave me out here!"

I got in my vehicle and started the engine, snapping at her simultaneously, "Stay away from me. You're lucky I didn't go running to the cops."

I took off and scoffed at the sight of her in the rear view mirror, running after my car and trying to catch up before she slowed down and collapsed slowly on her knees. I exhaled with anger. How could I let her into my car and travelled with a careless arsonist?! If that's all she was!

My eyes flickered to the Compass that started pointing to different directions. How ironic; now of all moments, it happened to settle on South. Ifrowned; I couldn't believe it was pointing to the road I left behind, and to the person I willingly and gladly parted from.

I could still see her in the middle of the road, looking desperate and treacherously vulnerable...I cursed the pang of pity inside me- that hateful sense of protection and responsibility over her that kept swelling inside me the longer I stared.

The further I drove, the guiltier I felt of leaving her there... My willpower suddenly cracked. Denying it now was useless; I *did* care for her damn safety while I shouldn't. What is she to me? A complete stranger... yet I found myself slowing down, nearly stopping. The sight of her was nearly gone by now. My palm hit the wheel in rage. "Damn it!"

A moment lapsed in silence as I emptied my mind from any thought and just followed my crazy instinct. Putting on my sun-glasses, I turned around, driving slowly back to where she sat motionless. She swiftly stood up at the sight of my car.

"You came back," she began cheerfully and I cut her off by raising a silencing hand and glaring ahead. "Don't even... Just get in."

She obliged rapidly and I instantly made sure that things got cleared out by informing her, "I'll get you out of Oregon and that's it... After that, you're on your own... Understood?"

She nodded with grateful thanks. From this angle, she truly appeared harmless, anything but a murderer.

The reminder of her arsonist deed sent a shiver down my spine and I shoved the thought away. My attention was suddenly driven to the raindrops that splattered against the windshield. No need for the sunglasses now, not even to cover my bared emotions that always get mirrored in my eyes. The sky had turned dark and cloudy, announcing a storm coming ahead as the rain hit harder with a clap of thunder. It was going to be a trying drive.

## Chapter 4: Unconscious Bond

What an awkwardness it was to keep driving, motionless in the silence that reigned in the car, only the sound of the rain and windshield wipers breaking it. I could have blamed this on the passenger but, in truth, my persistent anger was what was weighting heavy in the air and the choice was in my hands to break this silence.

“My guess is there is no uncle living out of Oregon, huh?” I said after a while.

Tanya-or should I say Judy- looked at me for the first time in hours. “If you’re gonna complain about me trying to keep out of trouble, maybe it’s better if you leave me on the road again.” I didn’t say anything, keeping my thoughts to myself this time.

“Let’s face it; you would never have helped if I had told you the truth,” she added matter-of-factly.

“You’re wanted; what was I supposed to think?!” My words burst out before I could stop them.

“Can’t I catch a break? I told you- it was an unintentional kill!” She retorted. “I have no idea what my life is gonna be or where to run to but there is one thing I’m certain of: I don’t deserve to be in prison.”

I only shook my head in reaction, astonished at my own sense of pity towards her case. That inner dilemma of whether to aid her or not was having its toll on me, adding to the fact that I was pissed off at myself even more for caring that much. What was it about this girl that kept me hanging around?

I was glad to see a gas station at last as the car was running out of fuel, and happier still at the sight of a diner nearby; I was seriously in need of a hot meal. It was way passed midday and we hadn’t had anything for almost twenty four hours.

I pulled over, turning to her uncomfortably. “You want anything specific...to eat?”

I observed her fidgety hands diving in her bag and out again with a few bucks which she started counting. “Uh...I don’t know. What can you get me?” She handed them to me and I stared at them blankly for a second. How could a girl travel with so little in her pocket?

“Keep it; you might need that later on.” I sighed then added, “How about cheese fries...and coke?” She nodded in a silent thank you and I got out of the car.

A chill ran over my body from the heavy rain and I pulled up my collar swiftly, jogging towards the nearest roof.

I walked calmly towards the diner, making sure to be quick. I ordered and stood waiting. Lucky for me it was nearly empty so this shouldn't take long. I kept thinking about what I was looking at here: why was I helping a fugitive escape. It didn't matter if what she had done was unintentional. Judy was guilty, and getting her out of the country was against the law and every principle I had.

The feel of a hand gripping at my arm lightly shifted my attention and I was a little stunned to see her at my right. "I need to use the bathroom," she whispered lowly.

I walked with her halfway there and advised, "You can't let people see you. What if they recognized you?"

Astonished by my own concern, I saw a similar surprise on her face as well. Her getting caught was none of my business. I had chosen to give her a drive, not to keep her hidden.

I bit my lip bitterly; suddenly aware I was in this neck deep. I did care that much and that feeling wasn't about to subside.

"Your order's ready, sir." I turned to the middle aged blonde calling to me from across the counter. Camouflaging with a light smile my disturbed emotions to the nice lady handing me the food, I went to pick up my order.

After taking care of the gas, I decided to stretch my legs a bit, avoiding the girl's presence for the little time I could.

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Finishing the last bite, I got rid of the paper bags, grabbing the roads' map along. Finally an upside for the day: if we kept driving, we would be out of the state by dawn and I would be able to go on with my plans, *alone*.

"Thank you,,, for the meal." Judy's voice suddenly broke the momentary silence.

I looked up at her and nodded lightly. "Don't mention it." With a bit of relief, I informed her, "So, if we leave now, we'll get to go our separate ways at sunrise."

Folding the map, my brows furrowed at her attempt to clean up her hands with a piece of tissue.

"I could really use a shower," she started in a mumble, "I feel like a- gypsy in borrowed clothes," she added, causing me to chuckle.

Her masked demand meant we would linger and that was not to my liking. I was a few hours away from washing my hands off this chick. Getting delayed equaled more risks of getting in trouble with Law enforcement.

Speak of the devil;a policeman, clearly on a break, passed by Judy's side of the car. Taken by surprise, she quickly put on my cap that rested on the dashboard cover, then lowered it down to cover her face.

I shook my head and she crossed her arms and whispered snappily, "What?"

"Cautiousness is overrated." I cleared my throat, starting the engine. I felt a little iffy about my proceeding advice which was so unlike me. "You would immediately raise suspicion if you were on foot." She ignored my claim and looked out the window as I drove off.

I wondered if my drive could wait. With this weather, it'd be a drag anyhow and I still needed to find a way for her to be safe. To leave this kid on the side of the road once outside Oregon felt too heartless to me.

I sighed deeply. "There should be a motel a couple of hours drive from the gas station. If you'd like, we can stop to get cleaned up and a rest."

"Fine by me." Her voice came out quietly.

With mild hesitation which I overcame right away I asked, "I mean no offense, but why didn't you try to fight for freedom? Or get your folks' help in disappearing? Not that it's the best thing to do."

She scoffed, still drawn by the scenery outside. "Folks? My adoptive parents you mean. Last favor they ever promised to do me is paying my bill, and then I was on my own."

It struck me speechless but I was glad to have some answers. I just hoped they weren't more lies piling up over the old ones.

"I can't say I blame them. I've messed up pretty bad more than once." She turned to face me. "Not law breaking mess or such-I could never. I guess this time they got sick of getting me out of the gutter..."

"Sorry," was all I managed to form.

She shrugged. "Big deal... desperate times call for desperate measures; it's how I manage," she said coolly. "You look after yourself the only way you know how..."

My entire childhood and adult life had been blissfully peaceful, yet I had never felt more grateful for that until that minute. When I started thinking over what other people's lives are like, it made me reconsider canceling my careless deed of leaving every good thing I had behind. And over what? A meaningless spiritual crave?

"So I'm not used to throwing rocks at cars or go on the road with perfect strangers if you were wondering." She smiled a bit. "I just had this intuition about you from the start."

"Yeah? What's that?" I asked with interest.

“That you were not some twisted psycho or thug that could eventually harm me.”

Right then and there, I was confused about whether to be offended or just take it as a compliment.

She got a point though; she could have gotten in a disastrous situation if she had been so unlucky as to meet a monster out there. I couldn't help but smile, deciding to play her a bit.

“There could be no guarantee over your safety little lady. You know nothing about me.” My fake dark threatening tone didn't make her twitch but only brought a bigger smile to lighten her face.

“I take a leap of Faith.” She spoke confidently, “While you're at it, you could say you are a fugitive too and wouldn't like to get caught with a fellow criminal on the run.”

The described image truly repulsed me but I shook it off right away. “Anyway,” I sighed out. “I advise you to be prudent once out there. From this angle, starting over for you is gonna be a long shot: you'll be constantly looking over your shoulder.”

“Gosh, I will never know peace with the cops in every corner,” she mumbled worriedly.

I turned to her with a smirk, attempting to rid her of over-stress. “Give them hell.” Mirroring my humorous mood, she gave a nod.

Had these feelings and behavior from my part been reported to me a year ago, I wouldn't have believed a word of it.

I was willingly embarking in a reckless matter, giving illogical advice to a girl who was in sheer inner panic. She was irrationally trying to fix an irreparable mistake, and the worst part was: it seemed so right, I didn't think twice of aiding her.

## Chapter 5: Off Kilter

Disturbingly plunged in the song playing on the radio, my brain was momentarily oblivious to the world. Muse was by far one of my favorite bands but this one song was chilling my blood right then and there. I never did too well with dread, so deep breaths were doing no good to my nerves.

A sudden tap on my closed windshield was a wake-up call, bringing my attention back to what was around. A homeless man stood out there with a ragged piece of clothing and some

detergent, offering to wipe up the car glass. I shook my head slightly in refusal and accelerated, freaked out by how familiar he looked, but I couldn't place his face just yet. It took me a couple more minutes to sense the icy temperature in the air, why was it so cold in here?

The change in weather was oddly brisk, just like the roaring thunder I heard loud and clear. Before I could cast a look to the sky, the synchronically slowing vehicles caught my stare. I found this strange; why were the drivers' empty stares dead on me!

I gulped at the uncomfortable sensation; as though this was a zoned pathway where I should not be.

I was not alone. I looked to my right where Judy sat; she held a perplexed look that mirrored my worries, only there was more comprehension in her wide hazel eyes. I could decipher every word in her warning whisper, "vultures are circling".

It struck in me a keen desire for more mysterious answers. As fast as my eyes lifted to the sky, an instant tidal wave of terror crushed into me at the paralyzing blood-dark color spread up there; there were no words that could describe the hideous nature of it.

My foot slammed on the brakes so hard, I felt my lungs collapse at the sudden deadly grip on my arm.

As quick as a power jolt, my eyes pried open. I was shaken, quickly processing my surroundings. I faced a ceiling... lounged on a small couch. I sat up in a start at the sound of the running shower.

Whirling in my seat, my eyes fell on two antique beds, drawn shut curtains and a half closed bathroom door. I breathed in relief, wiping my hand over my face to fully wake up.

Everything was coming back fast to my memory now. We had stopped at a motel.

The tight clutch of my hand loosened and I looked to find the compass resting in my palm, signaling controversially to different directions. I chose to ignore the obvious, or what I believed to be so. That nightmare had felt too real to be meaningless and no fickle nightmare of mine had ever been so intense.

The idea to dispose of this compass started to feel like an option to me, sensing at last my prudence winning over my subconscious power.

Fixing another past mistake was necessary. Going M.I.A and not calling my folks probably was the worst idea I had. It took me a dozen minutes to listen to all my voice mails. Feeling a little guilty, I managed to make a few calls to ease their concerns, saying I was touring Oregon these days.

“You O.K? You look a little on edge.” My breath hitched at Judy’s sudden intruding voice. Just in the nick of time as I hung up. She passed the small towel she held over her damp hair. Her new set of clothes got me wondering how many things she had shoved into the bag pack she dragged along.

“Swell” I told her gruffly, as if by saying it, would be it true. An unmistakable smirk lifted her lips as though she figured out my hair-raising dream.

“You know what, for a minute in there,” she started, her thumb pointing to the bathroom “I thought you were gonna ditch me here and leave...but you didn’t.”

“it’s not my type...to run away after giving my word.” I answered her a little dryly, then was surprised at her request.

“There is a train station thirty miles away from here. I thought of going alone from there early in the morning...I mean, if you don’t mind giving me a lift to said place.”

In less than half an hour, we were on the road again. It was gonna be my last day of playing the taxi driver to a fugitive. I tried not to think of how I would feel afterwards. “Look, Judy...I don’t think starting your trip by train is a good idea. There is a bigger risk to be recognized there.”

“Well, I’m a little out of options so...” her voice faded away and I fell silent. Whatever her choice was going to be, I had to respect it.

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One look at the crowding masses circulating through the station and I knew the risk for Judy to get caught was heavier than I had thought. My festering concern, pushing me to react and prevent her from leaving made my skin crawl as I helplessly watched her exit the car. But I fought it regardless, keeping quiet and leaving the car as well.

“Here we are,” she sighed out with a light smile, digging her hands in her jeans’ pockets. She shrugged lightly “I guess I owe you, a lot.”

I smiled back reassuringly, nudging the crown of her head playfully “nah...just be careful, and be safe.”

“Anyway, thank you...for everything.” With a silent nod from me, she turned to leave walking swiftly away.

My eyes shifted to the vending machine nearby. Making my way to it, I took a look around; Judy was nowhere to be seen now. I found myself experiencing a mild petty melancholy resulting from her departure. Putting a coin in the machine, I pushed the soda button and stood rigidly for a minute. Where on earth was I headed now that I abandoned that compass



in the last motel room we stopped at? How come that feeling of continuing forward was still as vivid as before?

I took my drink and headed for the car. Turning on the radio seemed like a good idea for a minute though no station drew my attention. All I could hear were noises that sounded way too far. My thoughts were elsewhere and I was going to need a couple of days on my own to readjust.

The sudden two struggling figures that appeared close by a deserted track caused my foot to slam hard on the brakes. I can't tell if it was adrenaline rush, some innate instinct or just a subconscious protective reaction but before I knew it, my car was pulled over, and I was rapidly reaching for my suitcase, pulling out my gun.

I saw Judy struggling to escape the strangle hold of a middle aged man who had pinned her to a pillar wall, his hands fisting at her jacket collar.

The ensuing instant, I had that same man at gunpoint. "Let her go!" My voice came out deadly. Opposed to my collected demeanor, my thoughts were running wild simultaneously, the same question running over and over again: *since when did I become a gunslinger?*

His tight hold loosened immediately and he stepped back reluctantly. I could see his shock that reflected perfectly my inner nauseating one. My mind suddenly took notice of the girl's mingle of surprise and relief as she jumped to my side. Petrified in place, the man's glare followed our swift move as we bolted for the car.

"You get around, don't you?" Judy's joy was hardly masked as I rushed her into the passenger seat.

There was absolutely no doubt about the eyes and trouble we drew to the vehicle as its wheels squealed off as fast as a flash.

Yes, I had to be realistic about this one thing; I had become in that instant some thug who threatened to take somebody's life. The look I found in my eyes as I stared into the rearview mirror didn't assuage my sickening guilt. Hell, I wasn't gonna let her down on my watch, that at least was one motive that justified my actions.

I could feel the girl's hectic eyes on my weapon, seeming petrified by the danger it could drag her into. "Hathen, where did you get that?" Her fearful tone proved her full awareness of what had just occurred, the joy of being saved slowly swept away by her sheer insecurity.

"It's mine, I've got a license." I forced myself to speak. Raging anger initiated inside me at how stupidly I let myself down by acting like I did, because of some lost girl that hitchhiked me on the road. "What the hell happened back there?!" I snapped, enraged, "you were supposed to lay low and keep away from people!"

I could feel the effect of my outburst on her when she retorted right away “It was the case! I did what I was supposed to.”

“Better hope we pull through this,” I sneered through gritted teeth.

“It’s not my fault that freak got suspicious. It was as if he’d known me from somewhere. He followed me around...” A sudden sob sounded in her tone and it crushed my furiousness down in a flash.

Taken aback by her emotional break, I glanced her way, catching sight of her newly shed tears. Yet the moment my glance moved to the car’s dashboard, my eyes widened in stinging dread.

On impulse, I stopped the car at the turn of Mountain Road, too freaked to care if anyone was on our track.

My lips shut. I stared frozen. The object set there in front of me was the same compass I had left far behind back in a motel room.

“You have that creepy look again. What’s wrong? you’re scaring me,” she voiced.

I made an effort to drift my eyes to her face again. “Judy...did you bring that along?” I nodded towards the compass. With bewilderment, she cast a look at it, shaking her head negatively.

“I left it at the motel.” I murmured and eyed her in disbelief.

“I didn’t. Didn’t even know you ditched it,” she babbled instantly.

“This doesn’t make any damn sense,” I spoke my thought then gulped in slight dread, exiting the car. I leaned against the side of it, breathing deeply.

There was no time to wonder at how it got there now, although it was the kind of crazy stuff that scared me shitless. I had to think of a way for us to be untraceable. The only way I could find to make that happen was to change the car plate.

In silent determination, I opened the trunk and pulled out my long forgotten screw-driver. I started removing the plate swiftly, ignoring the nearing steps of the girl as she observed, hovering over me.

My silence carried on as we took the road again, and on impulse I took a turn, too precautions to show my face around city people for the moment. It was totally natural for Judy to ask where we were going or what we’d do now but I could answer none of them since I had no clue myself.

The more stressed out I felt, the faster I drove, passing in a flash across the village road where several small houses lined in rows. With perfunctory calmness, I pulled over at the

sight of a bar not two meters away. I spoke my thoughts unashamedly, "I need a drink." Grabbing some money, I headed to it completely oblivious to the distressed girl accompanying me. It was fairly crowded for a weekday. It reminded me that this was probably the sole bar in this abandoned- like land.

Making a deal in my own mind to kill this feeling of confusion with alcohol, I took a seat and ordered.

The barman flashed a smirk to Judy saying; "what about you pretty?"

Without awareness I blurted out with a pitch of upset I couldn't understand, "She doesn't drink."

He stepped away to get my whiskey and I turned self consciously to her presently blank face "I'm right, aren't I?" She shrugged without a word and I puffed out "suit yourself."

I gulped down the strong beverage neat with a grimace. It's been a while since I had any drop of alcohol. It happened in rarer times when I'd been really under the weather. My chest and stomach warmed at the burning sensation passing down quickly. I took three others, watching Judy slip away to the slot machine, a bit distraught by my newly surging odd behavior.

The sixth then seventh tumbler did the job, my nerves swooshed to the ground as my brain went dazed. The glass-shelves of bottles facing me swirled unnaturally before my eyes, making me stand up in alert. The blurred image turned worse as I took a look at how much money I got. Smashed, unable to count I put the few bucks on the counter and took a few steps.

Humiliation wasn't truly an aspect of my personality but at that second, it crept on me like a jolt of power as I stumbled, nearly falling. But I escaped that fate by bracing my arm against another client beside me. He threw a dirty look at me and the apology I intended to make came out in a nonsense slur.

I felt a slender hand grab my shoulder lightly, lifting my numb arm to wrap around the shoulders I found to be Judy's. Her distant seeming words reached me slowly, "Great, come on." I tried to utter some words of protest to stand on my own two feet but all that I could get out were low mumbled grunts. The unsteady image of the bar blurred further as she quickly led me out.

The next image I registered was of a small cottage house. I was being taken there without my consent. No matter how long my mind attempted to formulate a no, no word would leave my lips.

"You're a long way from home, missy," the fading deep voice of a dark figure I could hardly see sounded in my ears.

A Sofa? How the hell did I get from the door to that deformed couch? I was laid down, my head dropped on Judy's lap exhaustedly. The unclear image of her face was the only comfort that gave me a tiny pitch of peace. My eyes closed automatically, and I drifted to sleep.

## Chapter 6: Blind Spot

What an effort it was to force my heavy lids open, feeling a dizzying headache already initiate as soon as I woke up. Every little sound around me felt like an annoying loud noise that I wished would stop.

Analyzing my surroundings, I started to remember the dazed images of the unfamiliar cottage house I was brought in.

A man sat across from me, braced against a cane that served him as a pillar. A bit uneasy by his observing stare, I cleared my throat with a nod his way. I looked around for Judy but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Your friend is resting. You're not from around here, lad." I heard the old man address me.

"Nope...uh, I apologize for intruding like this. Dunno what came onto her-bringing me to the nearest place like this," I stated uncomfortably.

"Don't be sorry. Most people leave their sobriety in that bar and stroll out spent. You sure look like you had a reason to."

I stood up drowsily from the sofa, intending to leave the next minute and about to ask where the girl was but he beat me to it.

"The missy is in that room over there," he motioned with his head, a scrutinizing gleam lighting his eyes, "I could swear I've seen her face somewhere..."

His thoughtful tone made me gulp with shadowy panic and I answered nonchalantly, "Yeah? Maybe a look-alike....She's my little sister and we've never come this far before."

His eyes narrowed for a second before he threw some aspirin my way. Thankful that he could guess I suffered from migraine, I swallowed a couple and treaded towards where Judy lay sleeping.

A bit out of patience, I shook her up and she jumped to a sitting position, her hands flying to her face in startle. "Sorry," I mumbled, "Wegotta leave." Her head still drowsy with sleep, she nodded confusedly and grabbed her back pack.

I walked back to the stranger, intending to break the awkward silence hanging in the air. I dug my hand in my pocket, pulling out a hundred bucks then offered it with a handshake. He glared rudely, a slight look of offence donning his dark face. Suddenly, I regretted the action. A little embarrassed, I said ashamedly, "Thank you for your hospitality. No offence, this is for your trouble."

"None taken," he spoke straightforwardly, shaking my hand yet not taking the money, "I ain't havin' that."

I hid the money back with a lowered head. I strode for the door, feeling Judy's steps following mine.

His strange tone sounded from behind us, long after we stepped outside his door, "Be careful out there-world's full of murderous encounters."

At the word murderous, I peaked at him over my shoulder, doubtful about his thoughts over Judy. What if he'd recognized her identity and didn't say a word?

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There we were, on the road again. As weird as it seemed, I felt like I was on the run as well. Thinking everything through now, I decided to take a new road. It was obviously deserted, and that meant safe for us to drive by.

Judy found her comfort in sleep again as she cuddled against her seat and drifted off, letting utter silence fill the air.

At seeing this road, a funny thought flashed through my mind: this spot would be the perfect place to hide. The line of trees surrounding us reminded me of my need for some fresh air. So I pulled over, quietly exiting the car, careful not to wake the girl inside.

I strolled along the empty path, inhaling deeply and feeling the hollowness in my chest fill up with serenity. I came to realize right then and there that no liquor could replace the solace nature brings me. And so I walked further and went into the shadowed path of the woods.

I was confident of the fact that no one was around; therefore, it was safe to leave Judy on her own for a while. I just hoped she wouldn't panic if she woke up and found me absent... I could have left her a note... I thought. I carried on walking all the same, choosing to take everything off my mind for the moment.

It was peaceful, relaxing and heavenly for a couple of minutes but noises coming from behind me disturbed my calmness all of a sudden. Honestly speaking, I nearly freaked out because I couldn't see anybody around and sounds were unmistakably human steps.

"Who's there?!" I spoke out unsteadily then gulped in shame. Great...I was talking to the forest like a madman.

Relief washed through me when a frame appeared; the familiar face of my passenger almost brought out the reassurance in me. Camouflaging it quickly, I spoke, "You spooked me. Why did you follow me here?"

"I can't believe you did it to me again!" She as much yelled at me.

"Did what?" I questioned, puzzled by her furiousness.

"You abandoned me in the middle of nowhere! Again." Her tears took me off guard I gotta say.

I scuffed, "Why would I just leave my stuff and car behind if I wanted to leave?" Stepping a bit closer to her, I finished, "Besides, if I had that intention, I would've left you back in that station."

"Well, nobody asked you to come to the rescue," she retorted coldly, "What are you doing out here anyway?"

"Getting fresh air. Isn't it obvious?" I tried to keep calm and not react to her outburst, a bit sympathetic to her constant fear of finding herself left behind.

The sound of thunder breaking over our heads didn't help smoothen the atmosphere as she narrowed her reddened eyes at me, "You know what, this can't go on. Don't think I'm too distracted to see how burdened you feel by having me around. I'll take my mess off your hands from now on."

It was an understatement to say I didn't know Judy well enough, but the little I knew let me think that I had never seen her more depressed and equally angry than at that hour. She turned to leave with determination and I reflexively grabbed her arm. Her stare bore daggers as she turned to face to me then snapped, "What?!"

"Look here. I didn't risk my butt and safety as a good citizen-who never broke any law-for you to get thrown back behind bars in no less than two days and, I assure you, you would if you go solo. It might sound weird but I care of what'd happen to you. It's why I'm trying to help, in the most insane way there could be, but....least you could do is be a little less hostile."

My brows knit at her breaking expression as it got swiftly tearful. Her quivering lips let out a sob before she crushed her frame to mine in a hug.

My body froze, quite unacquainted with such happenings. Last hug I could remember was on the previous year's Christmas party at my sister's house when I was wrapped in my folks' arms in warm happy welcome. To say the least, this was different...and weird.

I patted her back in awkward attempt to bring some sort of comfort. I cleared my throat in discomfort at her whined words, "I'm sorry. I just wanna go home. I wish none of this has ever happened. I don't stand a chance to be free out there."

"Don't say that. We'll find a way...I promise." I gave her another pat, gently trying to pull her away, "Come on, kiddo. Let's get back to the car, shall we?"

She nodded with a snivel and walked beside me. The drops of rain started to come down faster and harder on us as we tried to hurry our steps. Judy kept close, completely putting her trust in me, I believed. This perhaps was scarier than dealing with the cops since I had no clue of what we were gonna do next.

## Chapter 7: The Last Straw

"There is something not right about the bet you had... the whole incident could have been a set up," I remarked. Judy looked at me in astonishment, drops of rain that clang to her short stubby hair descended slowly to her face.

"I'm just saying those pals could have known about the old man in there when you started that fire," I added, finalizing my thought.

The more miles we drove through the mountain, the more my willingness to help Judy grew stronger. This triggered my memory of a distant relative I had long forgotten since I had only spoken to him twice in my life. How could I not have thought about seeking his help before now? If there was one person who could aid us now, it would be no other than the famous Judge Carl Piton.

"They did testify on my trial, but if they're implicated in any way, it's too late," she spoke in response to my words. "Why, there is nothing we can do about it now, adding to the fact that my escape worsened everything."

"Maybe there is a way around all this," I whispered hesitatingly. "There is an old acquaintance of mine, a kin actually who could help. But, it could be risky to contact him."



"I wouldn't like you to get into more trouble because of me,Hathen. You're doing more than enough." She said gratefully and I turned to her for a second.

"If there is a way to get your case cleaned, I would want to try it no matter what," I told her sternly. "There is no going back."

She fell silent and I took that as a sign of approval, giving me the green light to give it a shot.

We didn't follow the deserted road for long before deciding to go down to town. There, I could make a phone call from a cabin in all safety. However, it did not take me long to realize that the place was strangely empty: there was no soul around...

Judy was sitting quietly in the car, still looking fearful after her last adrenaline rush.

I breathed in relief when indeed the judge picked up the phone. "Carl, my man! It's been a long time," I said, trying to sound casual.

Against all odds, he sounded happy with my call. Apparently,there was no news flash about my implication with Judy's escape.It took me few minutes before gathering my courage and start talking of the matter at hand. His thoughtful voice scared me a little, my guts telling me he was hesitating to help. I attempted a few begging words forCarl, I had to say, represented our last hope.

"I am going to look into this case, but I can't promise you anything, Hathen. You got yourself in some pretty bad waters my friend. If it's not too bold to say, what the hell has gotten into you?"

"She needed my help. I couldn't leave her behind now, could I?" He fell silent.

"Alright, I know you don't wanna risk using your phone but you should keep it on for me to reach you in the coming days. I'll do my best to help you out but if this ends in a failure..."

I smiled a bit, "We truly appreciate the effort.Thank you, Carl."

"Don't thank me yet.This won't be an easy task." With these last words, our conversation ended and I walked back to the car, to drive off further.

We passed by the empty streets, a little alarmed when we saw no one outside. The whole town appeared ghostly.

"It's funny how this place seems empty; there isn't a soul in sight," Judy remarked.

I looked around in reaction to her words. Have all the people moved out or what? I drove on regardless. I stopped in astonishment when I saw one of the houses'doors wide open. The place looked abandoned, although pretty new and flawless.

I gave in to my curiosity and went inside the property despite Judy's protests. I stepped in and took a look around. The two- stories house was empty just like the streets outside. I took a look at the photographs on the wall; the same faces smiled joyfully in different holiday spots: a black man with a blond companion, a kid apparent in every picture...

"Where is everybody?" Judy noted. "You think something fishy happened here?"

"Probably...yeah," I whispered.

Frighteningly, the door slammed shut and Judy jumped in fear. Her sounding shaky breaths mingled with the whistling wind coming through the window.

The rain had stopped but the darkness outside with the accompanying wind were enough to creep the hell out of both of us.

I looked upstairs. Oddly, I was willing to crash here. It would be nice to rest for a few hours. We were out of danger for now.

"I believe it's safe to stay here for a while. I mean, we have nowhere to go so we should sit tight and maybe figure out what happened in this town."

"We do need the rest," she agreed and trailed off to the kitchen. I watched her open the fridge, and pull out the food she found in there.

"Yeah, make yourself feel at home," I mumbled sarcastically.

I cautiously went up the stairs, looking out for any kind of movement there could be in the house. The rooms' doors were shut, except for one. I strolled in, taking quick glances at the modern furniture that was smartly positioned.

I smirked helplessly when I saw an old radio, just the kind I liked to play with when I was a kid. Some flashes of my past kicked in; when dad used to chase me out of the garage after finding me with a screwdriver in hand, and his favorite radio serving as my experimental victim.

Now, standing there, I walked toward it and turned it on, trying to find some frequency. At last, I could hear cut off sounds of music and adjusted it until the song was loud and clear. It's been so long since I heard jazz. I relished in it for a couple of minutes before walking to the bed and lying down exhaustedly. A thud of thunder and lightning caused my eyes to snap back open.

I looked to the window. Heavy rain drops hit hard against the glass, looking like they'd break right through it, but I knew better. We were safe from the storm as long as we stayed inside the house.

Shortly after, I went back downstairs and to my great stun I found the girl sewing her jacket. "Well, you really did take my words literally."

“I can’t go out there with my hood torn,” she said in defense. I smiled at her reassuringly.

“I’m not judging,” I reassured her.

“Hathen, I think the family owning this house left in a hurry. So many essential things were left behind.” Judy voiced her concerns. “What’s more intriguing is that there is a grocery bag left on the counter; the food in it is fresh. What if all the town’s families left everything in the same state?”

My worries mirrored hers and I shared, “What concerns me is why. I hope there is no infection or virus that made its way here.”

The heavy rain sounded stronger followed by a bomb-like thunder sound that felt like an earthquake.

“I don’t think it’s safe here anymore;” she spoke fearfully.

“Shouldn’t drive through the storm; it could be risky,” I told her but then suggested, “we’ll leave as soon as the rain stops.”

I let her go back to her task and stood facing the bigger window near the door. What odd scenery it was. I have never seen any storm like it; the wind added to the gloom of it, initiating an acute fear of the unknown that was cloaked behind the raging rain. I sat down quietly, observing it all, pensive about what was to come...

## Chapter 8: destined arrival

You would think a raging storm would scare you from going forward and stay sheltered until it passes instead but it wasn’t the case for me. I could not stand staying in that worryingly quiet property more than half the night. So as soon as the rain lessened, I talked Judy out of staying the night and convinced her to take the road again.

“Keep moving forward, right? That’s what kept us safe... till now I guess,” she told me with doubt.

“Don’t worry. I’ll drive safely,” I spoke in nonchalance but frowned at her judging stare when she saw the small whisky bottle I was holding. “I’m not drunk,” I said in defense. “The stuff keeps me warm.”

She sniggered, “we ain’t in Alaska. Lose the alcohol habit, Hathen.”

I tossed the liquor into the nearest trash bin and gestured for her to walk out first. "After you."

Some provisions were necessary to take along and so we gathered some before going. But as I looked back at the house I felt a nostalgic sensation about this place. It had felt nice to be inside a house again for a while. It reminded me of what it was like back home, to relax in the evenings after a hard day's work, having friends over or just spending quality time with family.

I got in the car with a knot twist in the stomach at the sight of my compass again. I had suppressed the memory of it showing up after I had ditched it back at the hotel. And, now, it was still in my vehicle, its pointer moving in half circles without a specific direction.

I took a deep breath, pissed by my own fearful reaction. I grabbed the damned object and tossed it out with every bit of strength in me. There, now it sure was gone.

Judy, eyeing me, didn't steer any answer from me about what I just did.

"Buckle up," I said shortly.

Only the sound of the rain along with the wheels rolling were audible now. I knew I had to keep going, but where to really...out of here for sure but what then?

The spooky isolated town wasn't empty for nothing. A reasonable explanation, I was hoping, we would figure out soon enough. I intended to ask around as soon as I'd see somebody.

The storm was crushing down on us again in less than ten minutes and, I feared, driving was getting truly unsafe right at that moment.

"Say, what will you do if you get caught after saving me?" Judy said as an alarming flash of lightening caught our attention. A loud clap of thunder followed, reminding me that I shouldn't be behind the wheel.

"Why would you think that'll happen?" I retorted, a bit agitated by the sound of the blowing wind.

"Can't shake it off actually. You won't let them get us, will you?" She spoke, asking for reassurance.

I turned to glance her way, nagged by the cheeky smile on her face as she suddenly pulled up a camera.

"What's with the camera?" I quickly reacted.

She grinned nonchalantly, holding it up and flashing it on my face. She shrugged, pulling out the small photo and staring at it. "Found it back in the house; thought of making some souvenirs," she smiled up at me. "It's not every day I see that angst look on your face."

She was about to take another one when I ordered, "cut it out, will you?"

I wish to say our talk had gone further but it didn't...

The shocking turn out of the raging storm had gotten us both deadly silent.

The bombarding thunder strikes, the torrential rain with the wind turning into a hurricane as we advanced left me with no vision of what was ahead.

As I nearly stopped the car, I felt my heart drop to my stomach; the vehicle began to move to the side of the road in seconds.

All the panic of Judy's screams and the high pitched screech of the tyres were not as frightening as the monstrous image we witnessed before us at the flash of lightening above.

No words could describe it; the worst calamity I had ever come to see.

The blackened sky, as if come down to the ground, twisted wildly in destructive circles and erased everything in its path.

The gigantic tornado was drawing the car faster towards it and we sat, hopeless. I looked at Judy; what could someone do in such a disastrous second?

Broken fences flew our way, bearing down on us and crashed against the windshield.

On instinct we both threw our doors open; only...it was too late. The ensuing minute, the car violently flipped over, tossing us agonizingly like ragdolls despite the tenacious seatbelts.

Closer now to the twister, my eyes took their last look of it before a total black out...

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A thick curtain of fog in the deep silence was what I faced when my eyes opened. Five seconds were enough to draw out of the fuzzy confusion of what had happened. My first thought went to Judy. In premature turmoil, I started to stir; was she okay or, at least, alive as I was?

Expecting to feel the agony in every bone, I moved carefully. Surprisingly, there was no pain. Relieved, I stood up and looked around me in that mist.

The storm was over, and the car lay right there in front of me - a total ruin, utterly wrecked and damaged. I began to wonder how on earth I had found myself out of the vehicle.

I half tottered towards it, calling for the girl I had failed to protect. I walked around to her side of the car and found her there on the ground just about to sit up. "Oh my god!" She whispered, looking up at me.

"Are you hurt?" I asked in worry.

"I...I don't think so. I'm all right," she stuttered in a shuddery voice.

I helped her up and began to walk away from the car, drawing her with me. I sank lower in distress at all the destruction I saw around me. Anyone could mistake what was a nice little town a day ago for a terrible war zone now.

Guilt rushed in as I risked a look to my scared companion, who seemed on the verge of tears. "I'm sorry... I've brought us this way," I let out.

She shook her head, staring back at me. "You couldn't have known. We survived, by some miracle," she spoke, a little hysterical.

I sighed heavily, roughly running my hand down my face. To be clueless of our whereabouts or our destination paralyzed me and the blinding fog made it all worse.

"It answers the question why this town was empty," Judy muttered slowly. "People must have gotten an emergency warning."

I nodded. "They knew and I should have known better than to go on this road," I said, filled with regret.

We walked on, conscious that there was no going backwards for the moment. Call this over-reaction but I didn't dare take another step when I found, only a foot away from me, the last thing that would have come to my mind. There was no way that object was there, so close, again.

My eyes bore into the mysterious unusual compass, lying innocently there on the ground. A witness to my shock and also to my disposal of it hours ago, Judy moved to pick it up.

"Creepy," she murmured as we looked down at the swiftly turning pointer, going in circles nonstop.

"We're not keeping it," I told her gruffly. "It's not normal."

I looked up at the sound of footsteps, overjoyed by the sight of a living soul at last.

The figure moved closer and as I stepped on, my voice came out on its own, "Excuse me, sir!"

The man passed right by me and I could swear my whole body shrieked in dread. It was the man from my dream: the homeless that scared the life out of me days ago.

His eyes kept dead on me even as he came close to Judy now. He turned to look her way for mere seconds before disappearing into the mist.

“Come on, ask him for help,” she told me urgently.

I felt as a mute, unable to answer her or give any explanation. Instead, I kept moving forward.

Perhaps ignoring all the weirdness and fleeing it was a coward way out but it was the only way to push this insanity off my head.

Judy chose to follow me, addressing me in slight anger, “What is wrong with you?”

“I’ve seen that man before.”

She stopped me by pulling my arm and I faced her upset expression. “So? All the more reason to speak to him.”

“I saw him...in a nightmare. I know it sounds crazy...” I managed to confess.

“Okay,” she started in a tone of disbelief. “You think I’m not freaked out enough? Get real,Hathen.”

“What, you think I’m just fooling around?” I snapped. “I’ve never believed in this stupid unnatural stuff, all right?” I looked away. “But something is definitely off: first that Compass which keeps showing up and now that ghost like figure...”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms. “I’m not gonna stay here and wait. Either we go back to find help or we don’t stop until we’re out of this town.”

The deafening silence around us,which I thoughtunbreakable,finally brokeas we heard a musical instrument in the distance ahead. At first,it sounded too far,then it became more acute as I listened harder:a sound of a clarinet accompanied in symphony with flute melody.

Judy ran instantly, and I did the same. The further we went, the nearer we got to the source of the music. Amidst the ruin that the hurricane left and the blurring fog, we finally spotted two dark frames sitting one next to the other. Joy overtook me and I almost laughed at sight of normal people at last.

“Hi, thank God we found someone out here. Can you help us?” Judy spoke breathily. The two middle aged men didn’t stir and played on their music as though we weren’t there. “We’re from out of town, please if you could...” She carried on yet,it seemed useless.

We both waited for a minute before Judy stepped closer to me whispering, “Don’t hold your breath; how rude can they get?” She judged with a look of disgust.



Their piece finally over, the one holding the clarinet looked up suddenly at me. His icy blue eyes, daring and piercing, read right through me as if to divulge my entire life right then and there.

“You lost, birdies?” He spoke in a deep voice that reminded me of one of those rangers that come straight out of Texas farms. His friend’s burst out laughter threw me in a sense of disdain and I glared back at him, pissed off and about to do something I felt I’d regret.

“Oh, don’t mind Mikey. He’s not used to having strangers around here.” The bossy man stood up and offered a handshake. “I’m Jared...at your service.” I shook his hand, still a bit confused and I introduced Judy.

No matter how ordinary this man looked, there was something in his tone and stare that told me he knew more about our situation than we thought.

“Tell me lad, you remember how you got here?” He asked mysteriously and the girl with me replied in a flash before I could, “Of course he does. We drove all the way here and last night...” She stopped in dread, obviously recalling the horrors before the accident.

So I carried on her unfinished telling, “Something happened on the road. We were caught up right in the middle of a hurricane; a tornado that caused our accident. My car is back there. We regained consciousness just a while ago and with all this mist, we couldn’t see our way out of here.”

“Can you help us?” Judy begged in last resort.

“Help you!” The guy named Mikey spoke, getting to his feet. His repulsive smile, flashed at us, made me hate him a little more. “No one can help you now, deary. You are-“

“Mikey!” The friendly man snapped loudly at his partner with a conspiratory look.

More suspicious than ever, I looked to Judy and was relieved to see the same mistrust on her face. I took a minute to think; maybe they’d recognized her or just wanted to rob us of whatever valuable things we possessed.

What could they do to us? Surely, they were hiding something. But I knew what to do; I’d need to go back to my vehicle and make sure to get my weapon just in case.

“We left some things in the car we’re gonna need,” I started.

“You want us to go back?” Judy let out in frustration.

Jared commented unexpectedly, “Great option, yes. Return to where your accident took place, this will help you,”

“Help us how?” I couldn’t help question.

“You’ll see.” He tapped me on the shoulder and walked by my side. I didn’t attempt to retain him from tagging along but I kept a close eye on Judy, making sure she was safely away from Mikey who came along as well.

We got there in less than five minutes and I arched a brow at Mike’s dramatized whistle at the sight of my wrecked car. “Jesus!”

“Must have been hard getting out of it,” he said, speaking to Judy.

“I wasn’t inside when I woke up,” she answered simply.

“Didn’t you have the seatbelt on?” His words profoundly confused both of us, bringing the memory back to me. *How the hell did I end up out of my car?*

“Do yourself a favor, deary, and go look inside,” he told her gravely.

I felt the breath leave my body when I thought of his insinuations. An obsessive mad but tiny idea fought its way into my brain but I defiantly fought back the delirium. Yet, the look on Judy’s face, her dread and crawl away from the car said it all.

I sensed Jared’s hand on my shoulder a second, and the next, I was crouched next to my upside down vehicle, witnessing what my mind or sanity couldn’t possibly swallow.

“This can’t...be. How am I there? I’m here!” Judy’s cut out tearful voice came out delusional and I sat there hollow, unable to make my brain function. A part of me, a silent one was screaming a no. There was no possible way I could accept what was in front of me. My body was there, lifeless, bloody and damaged beyond repair, just like Judy’s dead corpse...And there it was; that compass that had brought me so far, right to my doom.

Whatever plans I had for the future or a way to save the girl that lay there motionless were now gone forever, because we were both dead.

## **The End**

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