"Seven Years"

Jack and Danny ran through the trees as fast as they could. The two ten-year-old boys were playing a game of hide and seek with their other friend, Mikey. When Mikey had started to count, Jack had grabbed Danny's hand and started running.

"It's this way!" Jack said to Danny as he ran ahead towards the edge of the Crawfish River. Along the riverbank was a group of big rocks that leaned against each other. At the top of these rocks, was a large hole that was the perfect size for the two small boys to hide in. Jack led the way up the steep rock wall while Danny carefully followed behind. When they reached the top, Jack pointed to the opening.

"This is where we'll hide," he said, sitting down on the ledge.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Danny asked looking worried.

"Of course, it is! I've hidden here before, and I was never found. It's the best hiding spot ever!" Jack put his hands down and pushed himself off, dropping into the darkness below. He looked up to see Danny's head peaking over the edge, staring wide-eyed at him.

"See! It's fine. Now hurry, before Mikey sees you." Danny turned around and slowly started to slide down. When he was hanging by just his hands, he closed his eyes and let go. His feet hit the ground, and he stumbled backwards right into Jack. His dark hair whipped around as he turned and smiled.

"I did it!" He cheered, glad that he made it down without getting hurt.

"See, I told you it would be fine. Now Mikey will never find us."

The two boys sat down on the rock beneath them. They played rock-paper-scissors, did thumb wars, and talked about the Harry Potter book they were both reading. Soon, they heard Mikey's voice in the distance.

"Hey guys! Are you out there? It's getting dark, and I have to get home. You won the game, okay?" Mikey shouted as loud as he could. Jack and Danny smiled at each other.

"Told you we'd win. Let's get out of here and go catch Mikey," said Jack as he stood and dusted himself off. "You'll have to boost me up. Last time I tried getting out by myself and cut my hands. I'll reach down for you, okay?" Danny nodded and knelt on the ground for him. Jack stepped up on Danny's back and grabbed the top of the rock they had hidden in. He quickly pulled himself up and looked over the edge.

"Your turn now. Grab my hand," Jack reached down and grabbed Danny's outstretched hand. Jack tried to pull him up, but quickly realized it wasn't going to be as easy as he thought.

"Danny, I need you to try climbing up. I can't pull you up by myself," Jack said nervously. Danny shook his head.

"I can't! My hands are too slippery." Jack tried again, using all of his strength to pull Danny up.

"I need you to grab the ledge now," Jack said, face red and out of breath. Danny slowly let go with one hand and reached for the edge. But just as he reached to grab on, his hand that was still in Jack's, slipped. Danny fell back into the hole headfirst, landing with a loud crack.

"Danny!"

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Jack still remembered that day like it was yesterday. He remembered calling Danny's name with no response. He remembered a scared Mikey running up after hearing him scream, the piercing sound of sirens from the ambulances, and the loud cries from Danny's parents. He remembered when the doctor came out and told them all that Danny's head injury was too severe, and it was too late to save him.

Life for Jack changed after that. Danny's parents blamed him for their son's death after hearing the story of what happened and moved away. Jack stopped playing with his friends, including Mikey. His parents tried getting him into therapy, but all it did was make Jack feel worse having to constantly relive the events of that day. The guilt grew over the years and left Jack a shadow of the carefree boy he used to be. Now, seven years later, it was the end of August, and Jack was about to start his last year at Portland High School. He didn't know what the plan was after graduating, just that he wanted to get in and out as quickly as possible.

Jack walked up the stone steps of the school with his grey hood up and head down. His black hair hung in front of his eyes as he sat down in his first class, English. He pulled out his books as the bell rang and avoided any potential interactions with his classmates. The next three classes went the exact same way; go in, sit down, take notes, leave. The last bell before lunch rang signaling the end of fourth period.

Jack grabbed his science book and notes and headed to his locker at the end of the hall. He grabbed his lunch that he had brought from home and quickly disappeared to the opposite end of the hall towards the library. No one was in there during this hour, so it made it the perfect place to eat. At least, that's how it was the last few years.

Jack opened the double doors and disappeared into the stacks of books. His favorite chair was in the back right corner of the library. It was blue and faded but was still soft and warm. There were no windows nearby, and it was in a section of the library that no one used. Jack sat down, put his earbuds in, and began to eat. His favorite orchestra music played softly in his ears. When he was done eating, Jack set aside his trash and closed his eyes. He knew he ran the risk of falling asleep, but he was so at peace in his little corner that he didn't care.

Right as he started to drift off, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Jack's eyes flew open not expecting anyone in this part of the library. He took out his earbuds and looked up as a boy took a step back.

"Oh! I'm sorry," the boy mumbled. He was shorter than Jack, and his blonde hair was tucked behind his ears. "I saw you sitting here on my way out and figured I should let you know the bell rang. I didn't mean to startle you." Jack stared at the boy. There was something familiar about him. The light, shaggy hair and quiet demeaner. That's when it clicked.

"Mikey?" Jack whispered. The boy's eyes shot up from where they were staring at the ground.

"How do you-" Mikey's eyes got wide. "Jack?"

Jack nodded his head. He hadn't seen Mikey since he was ten. After the accident, he avoided Mikey at school and refused to come outside when he asked to play on the weekends. Jack felt guilty and couldn't imagine facing his friend. Jack was the reason Danny had died.

"I didn't realize you went to this school," Jack said quietly, not sure what else to say.

"I just transferred this year. Oakland High didn't have the music program I wanted to take. How have you been? I haven't seen you since-" His voice faded out.

"It's been fine, I guess," Jack looked back down unable to look at Mikey anymore. He didn't know what to say to the boy who used to be one of his best friends. Mikey looked closely at Jack.

"Now, why don't I believe that? I know I haven't been okay. At least, I wasn't until my mom finally had enough and got me some help. I wasn't even there when it happened, so I can't even imagine what's going on inside your head. Have you talked to anyone?"

Jack scoffed.

"Three therapists. My parents forced me to see three different therapists before finally giving up. All these so called professionals did was make me relive the event over and over again, saying things about closure and facing my guilt. A lot of good that did," Jack replied heatedly. Mikey nodded his head.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound great. It took us awhile too before we found someone who could actually help. I still have my moments, but it's better. However, I will say my biggest regret is letting you isolate yourself from me. I really needed my friend, but he wasn't there," Mikey crossed his arms and paused. "How about from now on, I join you for lunch. Maybe we could even get together after school sometime. Catch up, maybe? I always wondered why you stopped hanging out with me. We have seven years of catching up to do," he said with a smirk. Jack stared at Mikey. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You really want to hang out with me? Even after what I did?" he whispered. Mikey's smirk turned into a sad smile.

"I never blamed you for what happened. In fact, I was more upset about not seeing you anymore. You couldn't have known he was going to slip. No one would've." Jack felt his eyes start to water. He quickly looked down and blinked a few times. When he looked up again, a small smile of his own was on his face.

"I'd like that. Eating lunch with you, that is. And hanging out after school." Jack stood up and gathered his empty juice bottle and sandwich bag. Mikey walked with him out of the library and stopped.

"I have a piano lesson after school today, so I won't see you till tomorrow. Meet me at the front gate?" Jack nodded, and they split ways heading to their own classes. Maybe senior year wouldn't go as planned, and maybe, that was a good thing.