They failed the first time. The Hargreeves children swear they're not going to make the same mistakes this time - for the sake of the world and of each other.
Five

October 1st, 2003

Five stares at the pile of pancakes in front of him. The whip cream smile melts into a frown. He pokes at the stack with his fork, but his gut is knotted too tightly to stomach anything expect a strong, black coffee. Not that he’d ever get a cup. He can dream.

His siblings are smiling away. Diego is on his second stack. Vanya and Ben haven’t stopped talking all morning - they keep chatting away about the latest book they read. Luther and Allison are actually including Klaus in their conversation, and not just out of pity. Allison leans in, and Luther chuckles at his bizarre story.

Everything should be perfect.

Five rips a chunk of bread off and chews the rubbery pancake. It slides down his throat and sits like a rock in his gut.

Everything is better. They’re all happy - at least as happy as they can be - and they all have been working together. Diego had even started to teach Vanya some meditation techniques he’d learned.

Still. Five can’t shake the tinge of *something* that bites the edges of his head.

“How’s he doing?” Mom smiles and blinks.

Five nods. “Just peachy.” He shovels another forkful of pancakes into his mouth. “Delicious.”

“Good.” She pats his shoulder and moves to get Diego and Luther another plate. Their birthday is the only time they can indulge like this, and it seems that everyone else is making the most of it.

Birthday.

It’s an odd idea, when Five thinks about it — celebrating a year of not-dying. The last time he celebrated his birthday was when he turned thirteen, which was forty-five years ago (give or take a year), and now he’s turning fourteen for the first time.

Well, not the first time. He knows that physically, he turned fourteen at some point, but he never saw the sense in keeping track.

But despite everything that had happened, despite the future and the end of the world and Vietnam and the moon and time travelling assassins, here they were. A fifty-nine-year-old, a thirty-one-year-old, four thirty-year-olds, and an eighteen-year-old (not counting the time Ben spent dead, of course) all celebrating their fourteenth birthday.

*Time travel is a pain in the ass.*

They’re all a bunch of acorns, emerging from the icy waters of a frozen lake, but Five will be damned if they don’t save the world.
Allison

December 12, 2004

A grand tree sparkles in the foyer. Allison reaches for the branch just above her head; she shifts her weight to the tips of her toes and pushes her fingers as far as they go. She loops the delicate silver ball onto the green pine.

“It looks lovely,” Mom says with her usual bright smile.

“Thanks,” Allison says triumphantly.

She’d always dreamed of a proper Christmas, like the one in movies, with a real tree and presents and hot chocolate. A real Christmas with a real family.

This year, she’d decided it was up to her to make it happen. Reginald waved the idea off when she first brought it up, but that was no surprise. She’d given him an over exaggerated pitch - she asked for a dozen trees and the entire month off of training and piles of presents. As expected, he scoffed at her plan. Eventually, with the help of Mom, they settled on a water-down version of the original plan, the one that Allison had wanted all along.

The others were all for it.

In the past, their Christmases were mostly, well, not terrible, Allison supposed. Their father hadn’t cut off the tradition altogether, but there was normally only a wreath above the mantelpiece for decorations. Their gifts usually consisted of a combination of books and various new uniform pieces. They’d round off the night with carved ham and a slice of cake. Then they’d go to bed and return to the normal routine of everything by the next day.

It wasn’t the worst, but it isn’t what Allison has in mind, either.

She wants this to be special.

They’ve all made so much progress over the past year and a half, they deserve a break. Luther learned to meditate and has been teaching Vanya. Five’s bitter sarcasm has gone from an everyday annoyance to only a ‘sometimes’ annoyance. Ben’s taking up painting and Diego found an old collection of *Sherlock Holmes* novels he hasn’t put down. Klaus hasn’t used.

Allison hasn’t rumoured anyone. Well, anyone who wasn’t a criminal. And even with them, she kept it short: *I heard a rumour you turned yourself in.*

Even with her whole Christmas plan, she did it all herself. Yeah, she batted her eyelashes, but she came up with the entire plan herself and got the others all onboard.

It was no easy feat to get Klaus to agree to a proper Christmas tree, either. He wanted to impose a rule that any ornament they hung had to be found either at a thrift store or in the trash.

Allison sighs. *Maybe next year, Klaus.*

She steps back and admires the silver and blue glow of the tree. In the background, everyone laughs and giggles. Their hands are wrapped around ceramic mugs of hot chocolate. Ben, having already
done his shopping, slips a stack of roughly wrapped gifts under the tree, next to the stack Allison put down.

“Those are from both of us,” Klaus says.

“Actually, they’re from all three of us,” Diego adds.

Ben doesn’t even turn to his brothers. “No, they’re not.”

Allison snorts.

Klaus smiles and turns to Diego. Diego sighs. “I can drive us to the mall tomorrow.” Vanya and Luther jump in, asking for a ride.

Five walks up next to Allison. “Thanks for doing this,” he says. He tucks his hands in his pockets and smiles wistfully. “We could all use a little more joy.”

Allison only nods. Her voice suddenly feels caught in her throat, caught in that same horrifying way as when Vanya...

“Allright,” Diego says and claps his hands together, “mall tomorrow afternoon. Who’s in?”

Klaus, Vanya, and Luther want in.

Allison doesn’t have to go: she bought her presents for the others over the last few months. Still, she finds her voice again. “I’ll come too,” she says. “It’ll be a nice break.”

The mall is a break from the routine of the academy. Her life improved greatly when Dad started giving them all a few hours of free time on the weekend. Maybe not a nice break, though. Everyone person in the city must be out today, crammed into the mall, trying to find last-minute gifts. The busy crowd certainly doesn’t have time for any fifteen-year-old, much less a fifteen-year-old who isn’t buying anything. Before long, Allison finds herself jostled to the far wall.

She stares in the window displays. She watches the manikin children play with a new wooden train set. In the next shop, a pair of golden heels with a gaudy strap (it is 2004, she reminds herself) rest on a platform decorated with a garland of pine. The next showcased an elegant red ballgown with lace trim. It won't fit her, and she can't afford it, but Allison felt a sting of jealousy as she passed onto the next display - an array of televisions and radios.

She watched an ad for toothpaste flash on the television. It faded into one for a new teddy bear, then one for laundry detergent. An annoyed shopper clipped Allison’s shoulder as she stormed by, but Allison didn’t move. It is a small joy, just to stand here, and watch ads and listen to an instrumental version of Jingle Bells carry over the mall speakers.

The commercials snap back to the programme. Allison nearly yelps.

It’s an awful movie, really. A made-for-television Christmas special about a young school teacher who finds romance with a local baker, who just happens to be the uncle of one of her students. The sets are cheap, the costumes are plain, and the dialogue is cringe-worthy.
The scene flashes to the classroom, with the ‘plain-but-beautiful-once-she-removes-her-glasses’ teacher. She tries to assign the class an essay over the Christmas break. One girl stands up and protests. “There’s more to life than work, Miss Sommer,” she says.

Allison’s heart twitches. That girl was supposed to be her.

That was her first real role - the one that piqued the interest of agents and casting directors alike. She’d been in guest spots before, she’d done in a few guests spots and a few commercials, but in this terrible movie, she managed to steal every scene as the heart-earring niece. From there, her career blossomed and spiraled out of her control. There were things she couldn’t take back, and while she is glad to be out of the spotlight, she can’t shake the horrible reminder that her life, now, is concretely different.

“Hey, Allison,” Diego says, walking up beside her with a big shopping bag in hand. “D’you think Luther will be mad or think I’m hilarious when I give him a game of ‘jumping monkeys’?”

Diego is smiling wickedly, amused at his own joke. His face floaters when he realizes Allison’s not laughing with him. “You okay?”

She wipes at her eyes. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just a dumb movie.”

Diego’s eyes dart to the screen, but there’s no flash of recognition. “Why don’t we get a coffee?” He wraps his arm around her.

They sit silently in the corner of the shop and wait for the others. Allison sips at the sweet latte and stares out the frosty window into the grey parking lot. The Christmas music bangs against her ears.

Diego swirls another dash of milk into his coffee. He always does that - he puts in the milk drop by drop as he drinks the coffee down, instead of adding the full amount at the start. Allison suspects it’s him trying to look tough, especially in front of Five who would down an entire pot completely black if they let him.

“I didn’t mean to be a downer,” she says. “Sorry for ruining your day.”

Diego sets his drink on the oak table. “You don’t have to apologize for having emotions.”

She sighs. “I know, I know. I just wanted Christmas to be good. For all of us.”

Diego smiles at her. “This Christmas is good. You brought us all together.”

She smiles weakly. “Thanks.”

“Allison. I just bought a gift for Luther with my own money. And I actually want to give it to him.” She laughs - a strangled chuckle, but still a laugh. A gust of wind rattles against the window, but the coolness doesn’t touch them. The red and green tinsel across the windowsill glows.
Luther

November 17th, 2005

Luther crosses his arms over his broad chest and cocks his head. The foyer is silent.

“Did he just say...?” Ben turns to Klaus.

Klaus smirks at Ben. “He definitely did.”

“He didn’t say ‘go’?” Vanya looks at her siblings, her eyebrow raised.

“‘No’,” Allison echoes.

Their father looks at the seven of them. For everyone, save Luther, he still stares at them down the line of his nose. To meet Luther’s eyes, Reginald must look straight forward. “Number one,” he says, “my ears must deceive me. Surely you did not say ‘no’ to a mission?”

Luther nods his head, once, curtly. “I did say ‘no’. We’re not going.”

“Unacceptable. You have been trained—quite highly, I might add—to deal with situations exactly like this.”

“We have been trained, that’s true,” Luther says. The muscle in his jaw strains with tension. “But we are not going.”

“Number one.” Reginald (Luther can’t bear to think of him as ‘Dad’) steps toward him. Under the bristle of his mustache, his lip twists. “This insolences is unacceptable.”

“Well, you’re just going to have to accept it. We are not going. There are police, there are firefighters and paramedics and a whole slew of adults who do this as their job. The city got by for hundreds of years without us, they’ll get by today too.”

“Then return to your room. We will discuss this later.” Reginald turns on his heel and glares at the rest of the children. “The rest of you. Suit up.”

The other six hesitate. They toss each other strangled looks.

“Yeah, I think we’re gonna sit this one out too,” Klaus finally says.

“We really aren’t needed,” Allison joins in.

None of them make any move to find their uniforms.

Reginald’s face twitches, morphing from a smouldering fury to a cold mask. “Very well. Grace - send the children to their rooms. Bed without dinner.”

Grace’s bright smile falters. “Are you sure, sir?”

Reginald doesn’t respond. He rubs at the bridge of his nose and briskly steps out of the foyer, likely
to his office.

Luther lets out a breath and relaxes his jaw.

Grace turns to the group of them, her smile plastered back on. “Come on, children - off to bed,” she says as if it were a delight, not a punishment.

They all follow her without protest.

“Why’d you do it?” Diego whispers in Luther’s ear.

Luther turns to Deigo. “What do you mean?”

“I remember the mission. A fire set at city hall to try and distract the police while a prison break happened, well happens, across town.”

“I know. I remember it too.”

“So why refuse? It was pretty uneventful, after all.”

Luther smiles to himself, a fleeting hint of satisfaction. “Exactly. The criminals were idiots. If the authorities don’t stop them, their own sheer stupidity will. We weren’t necessary. We can’t stop everything.”

Diego presses his lips into a thin line. “Oh,” he says, understanding.

Luther watches Ben turn into his room. He waves at the rest of them from his doorway. “Nighty night,” he calls, too cheery for five-thirty in the evening, “don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

Luther chuckles before turning back to Diego. “We have to start somewhere if we want to really, and I mean really change things.”

“All the little things add up in the end,” Diego echoes.

“Exactly,” Luther says. He can’t help the edge of smugness that seeps into his voice.

Diego stops in front of his own room and claps Luther on the shoulder. “Don’t let it get to your head. God knows it’s big enough already.” As he turns to close his door, Luther catches Diego’s wistful smile.

“Diego wait,” Luther turns back. He lowers his voice and makes a promise. “We can save her too.”
Ben

May 1st, 2007

Ben wishes himself a happy seventeen-and-a-half birthday.

It’s not much. Most people would scoff. Seventeen is much too old to be celebrating half birthdays.

It’s more than he got the first time.

At least, he thinks it is. He’s not really sure how the whole ‘ageing when you’re dead’ thing works, but he’s a hair taller than he was before. The line of his jaw is also a bit stronger — the roundness of youth faded quickly. His eyes are the most notable change. Dark and empty.

It’s been a little over three weeks since the day he didn’t die. That morning, Luther told their father they wouldn’t be going on the mission. They didn’t go. Ben lived.

A policewoman died instead.

Ben shuts his eyes tight at that thought. Because he wanted to live, someone else died — another person, with a life just as brilliant as his own. A person with hopes and hobbies and friends and family and a future all planned out for herself. Is her room empty yet? Or did her family want to leave it untouched for a while longer?

He can’t keep dwelling on that — he knows it’s unhealthy. But as soon as the thought prickles the edge of his mind, he can’t stop the way he spirals into his own head. The world closes off, and he’s distant again. Alive, but still a shade.

Vaguely, he’s aware of his siblings talking around him as he sits down at the table for breakfast.

It’s a warm sunny day, the best kind he could hope for in May. Diego wants to go down to the park and play baseball — he promises that he won’t even cheat this time. Vanya wants to stake out a plot in the community garden. They’ve all agreed it will be a good time for everyone. Klaus even offered to pack a picnic. Ben hears them all bickering, making plans, pretending this is all normal.

“Can you all please stop,” Ben finally snaps.

They do. No one moves or speaks.

“Everything alright?” Klaus asks after a painful moment.

“Sure,” Ben grumbles, his face burning as they all stare at him. “It’s just loud.” He sets his spoon against the table, stands, and rushes out. The world is distant, and he’s sitting three feet back in his head.

“Hey.”

Ben turns to see Five, hands in his pockets, staring at him. “What?”

“I know you’re not alright.”

Ben leans against the hallway wall.
“The others... they don’t really get it. How could they? How strange it is to live a normal life after not having one the first time.”

Ben lets a soft breath ghost over his lips. “It’s not about me.”

Five quirks an eyebrow, not understanding.

“There was a policewoman who died in the — the incident.” Ben sinks until he’s sitting with his head turned toward the dust on the ceiling.

Five says nothing. He sits beside Ben, their shoulders touching. “Tell me about her,” he says finally.

Ben takes a shaky breath and holds in his anxiety. “Her name was Moira Brown. She was 32. She liked to paint. According to her friends and family, it was impossible to be in a bad mood when you were with her.”

“I’m sorry,” Five says.

Ben just nods, unsure what to say.

“I won’t pretend that her death isn’t a tragedy. The loss of someone so young is always a tragedy.” Five brushes his hand against his temple. “But people die. Good people. Young people. The world rarely is just when it comes to the ebb and flow of life. She was a police officer. She knew there would be risks.”

“It should’ve been me.” Ben presses his hands to his eyes. “It should’ve been me. And all everyone does is act like they’re so damn happy to have me around, while Moira’s family planned a funeral.”

“I’m sorry,” Five repeats. He puts his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

That night, Five finds his way into Ben’s room, a bottle of fine whiskey in one hand and glasses in the other. He pours them each a few fingers, and they raise their drinks together.

“For Moira,” Five says.

“For Moira,” Ben repeats, empty.

He knows the liquor should burn as it slides down his throat. All he feels is ice.

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