

LOST:FAITH

EPISODE TWO
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"Leave them. They are already damned."

I opened my eyes, completely aware. Normally, I'd be both disoriented and in awe, there were a million stars in an aqua blue sky, the color of false dawn during the summer back home in Kentucky. When I was younger, there were stars like this in the skies over Shelby County, but that was before the 24/7 Walmarts with their glaring white lights announcing their location for Interstate truckers and vacationers.

The whispers started again. From the jungle? The flaming pile of tree branches—our signal flare for help—was burning low. Shadowed piles of sand disappeared into complete darkness inches from me. Far as I could tell, no one else was awake. Though it had taken a long while for us to settle down, each dealing with the acceptance of the crash in their own ways. Most of us were still strangers. I heard a voice or I didn't, hell, one of us could be sleepwalking or taking a piss.

Embers crackled, a branch fell. A soft echo.

This was what I had heard. Nothing else.

Regardless, I was fully awake now. No crick in my neck where, if I turned my head a certain way, I'd start feeling relaxed right off and drift into REM. No, my body was tense and it was going to stay that way. Even if it was just embers and the wind, the word *damned* echoed in my head like a broken bell.

I sat up and brushed sand from the back of my shirt,

knocking it onto the balled-up sports jacket that had been my pillow. I didn't much care; it wasn't mine. It was neatly folded with what else I could find of my belongings. My night vision clicked in, the Svobodas were nearest to me. They had been taken a trip for their 25th anniversary. How strange that amidst all the strangers, a husband and wife survive. More than a few of the bodies we buried in a gully wore matching wedding bands.

Strangers. Well, Cooper and Quinn knew each other, and had been a bit furtive about why they had gone to Bali. But they had known the best place to make camp and had even scouted the area to find the area of the mass gravesite. We floated up on an outcropping of land, more of an isthmus than a peninsula, it seems. It will take the coming day's explorations. But I do know that the ground rises on either side of the barren valley, jungle to the east, the sun eventually setting over large boulders and barren earth in the opposite direction.

A have to wonder if these two were working out of the same office together, if they are indeed retired. Cooper is older and Quinn wears black plastic frame prescription glasses, but the two seem more like a Martin & Lewis routine when they get to talking to each other. And Cooper holds tight to some type of blue book, smaller than a pack of cigarettes. Quinn struck up a conversation with me in an attempt to shield anyone else from

seeing Cooper flipping through the book. The younger guy tried engaging me with tales of his girlfriend Celine back in Nova Scotia, but he did letter to settle my curiosity about the book. Did it contain information about the attacks at the Trade Center? Was this the reason for their presence on the plane? Could other countries have been targeted?

Another branch fell away from the fire, embers went up like fireflies. I was less paranoid now. Being retrospective does this, helps me in such a manner. With some people, the more they thought about something, the more conspiracy theories they found layered within circumstance.

I reached into my jean pocket, thinking I had picked up a pack of matches at some point during my bar-hopping. Always good for writing down a girl's phone number before it could leave my memory. I wanted to relight the fire, even though there had been no activity, no flyovers, no ore carriers or aircraft carriers, for that matter. If the world was at war, I think we'd have seen the contrails of missiles and/or jets, even here in the middle of God knew where.

My fingers latched on a matchbook. I grinned, it was the exact shade of blue as Cooper's mystery book. *La Maison Des Nombres, 17 Phuket Boulevard, Bali*. I checked the inside cover to see if I had gotten lucky and had been to drunk to remember, but that wasn't the case. As if there were cell phone towers

here to make a call...

It had been a difficult day, and another one was soon to start. Jase Brennan, the Texan, was just down the beach from where I sat. He seemed distraught at times; he kept busy throughout the long afternoon as if driven to forget something...a past memory that somehow overlain the events of the crash. He'd found ragged blankets for the women, towels for the rest of us who wanted them. At times, when others were drinking bottled water or just plain digging in for the eventual rescue, I'd look at Jase and it was like he wanted to pull every hair from his head.

We argued amongst us. Not so much that we had allowed people to drown, more like a group placing blame on who gave the wrong directions to whom. Photos had been saved on Jill Svoboda's cell, she and Al had been the ones who kept us informed, and, unfortunately, agitated. The debate always went back to the photos. The fireball in the second tower.

The flights had originated in Boston. I would bet that both planes were going cross-country. Those planes had to carry a huge amount of fuel to go up like that. There was no way our plane was going to be hijacked, and deep down, I believe the realization had sunk in to all involved. We had used up quite a bit of fuel, and what were we truly going to target? Yes, Pearl Harbor was an insane, though plausible, theory. But unless

there were explosives in the cargo hold, I don't know what kind of terror event was expected.

Groups were formed. A few, like that guy with the black cloth folded in his pocket, or that Donnithorne fellow, just sat in delayed shock. In the end, everyone realized that we would just have to move past things and get ready for the coming night.

The sun had not yet risen, but I made my way around the camp, needing to urinate, then find a bottle of water. I passed a small palm tree and almost tripped across something hard. I looked down at the open eyes of Everson. His hand were gripped around plastic binding tape, probably from the cardboard box Jase had found the blankets in.

And the binding tape was wrapped around his discolored neck.

Was the guilt that bad for him? No one had truly laid blame on any one individual's actions.

The sky lightened a little. I noticed Everson's shirt was discolored. There was a small knife wedged into the corpse's rib cage. I didn't know what to make of it.

"What have you done?" It wasn't me addressing the dead man.

I turned and looked into Joe Poet's accusing eyes. He had the black cloth gripped tight, like a weapon.



Photo By Dan Szotak (www.danszotak.com)

Wayne Allen Sallee, a Chicago native, has been professionally published since 1986. He is a five time finalist for the Bram Stoker award and has over 200 stories in markets ranging from WRITER'S DIGEST, PENTHOUSE, CEMETERY DANCE, GRUE, LOVE IN VEIN, SEED OF FEAR and NIGHTMARES ON ELM STREET. His work has been reprinted in the UK, as well as in Spanish, German, French, Italian and Danish. Sallee has a border collie and no social life to speak of. His most recent story, "Mitch," in the form of a podcast, can be found at www.TwilightTales.com