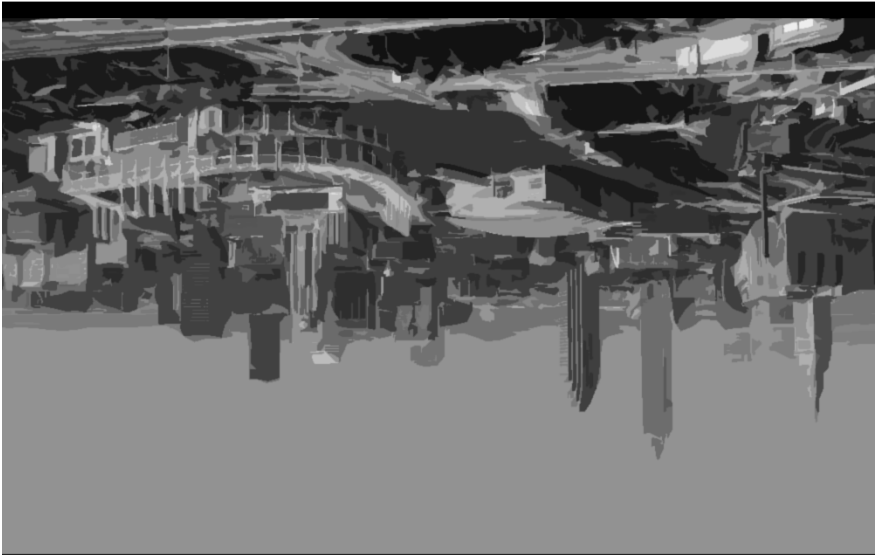

Ben Trube



The Sky Below

THE SKY BELOW

By Ben Trube

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CHAPTER ONE

Kammie leaned heavily against the supply closet door, catching her breath before pushing down the handle. She stumbled inside, letting the door close loudly behind her. The room was pitch-black and just as silent; the only noise was the faint blowing of the air conditioner. Lately she'd been taking all of her breaks in this closet. If she were on some racy doctor show she'd be having sex with a young resident in here, or popping drugs stolen from the pharmacy. But in real life this was the only place she could get some peace and quiet.

She reached down and pulled her leg up to her waist, leaning against one of the metal racks for support. She slipped off her right shoe and smiled at the thud of rubber against tile. Her right sock soon followed, then her left shoe and sock. The floor was cold, and the sweat of standing for 13 hours straight caused her feet to stick to the tiles. She flexed and stretched, pleased that she could still stand on her tiptoes, despite the worrisome cracking noise they made each time.

The other nurses spent their break time sitting and gossiping, the older ones reminiscing about the days when they could get a smoke break or when the vending machines were filled with something besides sunflower seeds and diet soda. The younger ones talked about the families they never saw, or the men they never had time to date. Kammie had never smoked, and the last time she was on a date was during Clinton's first term, so she never had much to contribute to either conversation.

The truth was they were all nice people, dedicated in one way or another to the service of nursing. They cared for people when doctors had already moved on to the next problem. Kammie sometimes resented the ease with which the newer nurses dealt with electronic medical records, or the seniority some of her peers had managed to snatch for themselves while leaving her in the same job for the better part of two decades.

But life hadn't been so bad to her; she had money enough to take care of herself and her cat, Alomar. After a night of sleeping alone in the apartment, "mari" would greet her at the door and leap onto her shoulder like a parrot. She would walk around Kammie's broad shoulders, tickling her face with her tail. Even if it was just a ploy for tuna, it felt nice to be wanted.

If she had that and the ground beneath her feet, then what did she really have to complain about?

Well, maybe Mr. Deckland Thomas, room 12 on the floor. He'd call her a damn n----- one minute, and the next be trying to pinch her ass. More than a couple of times she'd fantasized about smothering him with one of the pillows she fluffed behind his head, but that would be too quick. She used to read Edgar Allen Poe when she was in school and liked the idea of sealing someone in a tomb brick by brick. In Deckland's case it would be layer after thin layer of surgical bandages, the gauze slowly cutting off the flow of air. This thought made it easier to keep a smile on her face whenever she had to be near him.

Kammie flexed her toes again, hearing only two cracks this time. She pushed a button on her watch, her face illuminated in a blue glow. She had maybe six minutes to go to the restroom and get a cup of coffee before the last three hours of her shift. Reluctantly, she leaned against the shelf again, turning her socks inside out for the second time that day.

* * *

Reverend Marcado was startled into awareness by the heavy creak of the main doors of the Old Stone Church. Most mornings he liked to get into the building early, maybe six in the morning, sit in the front pew, and work on his sermon. Some people might find the empty silence of the place deafening, but Marcado believed that God was always talking to you, and that you needed to find somewhere quiet to really listen. If he woke up especially early, he might sing a few verses from "Of the father's love begotten" and enjoy the reverberation against the Romanesque columns.

This morning he had been absorbed in the words of the Apostle Paul in what was becoming a yearly series on the Corinthians. Mercado had always found Paul equal parts refreshing and exasperating, which if nothing else made for dynamic and challenging sermons. The reverend found Paul's attitude toward marriage and sex particularly amusing, especially considering the reverend was married and had two children. Mercado had often wondered if Paul ever burned with the desire he spoke of, or whether he was really content with his single life.

It helped to think of these saints, even the Apostles and Jesus himself, as people. There was an over two thousand year old connection between the Christians of that early church, and the people who came to this 200 year old building. All of them strived to be righteous men, to speak the truth of God, and to have a relationship with him. But they were all men, and most were sinners save Jesus. Some people spent their time emphasizing the wholly God part of Jesus, but Mercado had always been drawn more to the part that was wholly man. It's hard to have a relationship with a God who doesn't know anything about what life is really like. Jesus did know. And as for Paul, he surely knew what it was like to fall in love with a woman, even if he never chose to pursue it.

These thoughts, which had absorbed him for many hours through the morning, were momentarily scattered by the abrupt noise of the door, and the crowd that entered. One of the benefits and curses of pastoring a historic church was the throng of people who wanted to have a look around. Some were welcome old friends of marriages or baptisms past, but most were tourists, looking for the interesting and historic features of Cleveland before crossing the square to the Horseshoe Casino.

The reverend admitted that some of his grouchiness about the casino and the tourists had less to do with any particular righteous thoughts about gambling, and more to do with being sad that the old Higbee's of his childhood was gone. Still, there were better ways to spend your money than throwing it into a slot machine, like going to an Indians game or spending an afternoon at the West Side Market. Maybe if a few of these tourists were feeling generous

they would shoot a couple of bucks to the preservation of the building before asking him if he could show them how to get up into the bell-tower.

Marcado whispered a silent prayer, closed his Bible on the page of notes, and walked toward his office.

* * *

Bethany switched her phone to silent, feeling embarrassed that it had rung three times already since she'd been standing in the line at Dunkin Donuts. Her salary as a legal associate gave her enough to afford higher priced specialty coffee, not counting the espresso machine in her office, but something about the simple taste of couple buck hazelnut had never lost its charm for her.

Her leg vibrated, screaming for attention as she advanced another few steps closer to her daily indulgence. She knew who it was without even needing to look. It would be Grace, her sister, with a question about a new medication for her mother, or complaining about another nurse who gave her attitude. In theory her sister was supposed to be helping take care of their suddenly ill fifty-six year old mother. In actual fact Bethany might have had better luck getting her sister to file amicus briefs.

Grace had flown in from Indiana two weeks earlier and was staying at Bethany's apartment. Before that they hadn't seen or talked to each other in three years, when their parents told them they were getting a divorce. In retrospect, Bethany could see why Grace had thought she had been cold during the whole proceeding. They'd both been upset, and had the typical adult children reaction of being partly surprised, partly betrayed, and partly in denial. It was no small wonder that they had resumed their childhood roles, Bethany as the pragmatist wondering if both parents had a good lawyer, and Grace reacting emotionally, screaming at all of them and storming out.

This argument hadn't gotten any better when their mother fell ill. Their mother was an alcoholic, a chain smoker and had never cared about what

she put into her body. No one could exactly blame their father for leaving, but Grace had been getting particularly upset about the whole “in sickness” part of their parent’s now broken marriage vows. “He couldn’t have waited just a few years? He would’ve still had his freedom, and she wouldn’t have to die alone.”

It was true, if a bit over simplistic. For all her pragmatism, Bethany could be just as emotional as her sister. Her father hadn’t left because he could no longer tolerate their mother’s drinking, but because he didn’t want to see her die, or so Bethany suspected. Some people can hack it; they can sit at the bedside and hold their loved one’s hand until the end. And some can’t bear to watch, especially when that end could have been avoided.

If he had been spending his divorce cavorting with women, or buying sports cars, she might have felt differently, but all their father seemed to do was sit in an apartment reading his books or listening to classical music. Once a month or so, Bethany and her father got breakfast together at Big Al’s on the east side of town near Shaker Heights, and she’d tell him about the goings on in the firm, never once mentioning her mother. They had the next breakfast planned for the upcoming Saturday and Bethany still had no idea what she was going to tell him.

“Excuse me, miss?” A young Latino woman in her early twenties interjected from behind the counter.

Bethany’s thoughts refocused on the world around her, nearly causing her to stumble as she realized she was now at the front of the line.

“Are you alright?” the woman asked.

Bethany didn’t want to know what her face was saying that made someone ask that question. She merely answered, “Yes. I’ll have a large black hazelnut coffee.”

She paused a moment before adding, “And a maple donut.”

* * *

Eddie Williams shuffled his feet in the dirt, forestalling the inevitable. This pitcher had his number, just like the rest of them this season, or so it seemed anyway. Eddie could adjust his gloves, shuffle his bat up and down his hand, and arrange the dust in concentric circles, and it would do nothing to throw off this man's rhythm. The count was already 2-1 and the ball had been a gift.

He tried to remember what a privilege it was just to be standing on this field, to be playing the game he loved since the first time he hit a ball in that grassy field behind his house, some thirty years ago now. Now he was kicking the dirt on Jacob's field, or Progressive field, or whatever the owners were calling it today. He'd gotten to go to a World Series, a thrill even if it had ended like so many had for the Indians in the last 50 years. But those days felt long behind him.

If he had been some up and coming rookie, a .201 average would have been fine, especially if he played some valuable position like first base or shortstop, or even catcher. But Eddie was an outfielder watching the ball sail by on the other side of the field from the bats of more talented men.

He stepped onto the plate, bending his knees and putting his weight on his right foot. The pitcher tugged at his cap, signaling he didn't like the catcher's first call. At least they were showing him the respect of selecting exactly the pitch that would take him out. But Williams already knew what that pitch would be. In all his years at the plate he'd never quite gotten the knack of the breaking ball, and the man who faced him was something of a master. It was as if threw the ball on remote control, changing its trajectory and speed with a few nudges of a control stick, or even with his mind.

Eddie shook his head. This was no time to be thinking like that. He breathed in slowly, and exhaled, shifting his weight from foot to foot, and moving the bat around in tiny circles. He'd hit it this time, right over that smug son of a bitch's head. This time for sure.

"Strike three!" the umpire called from behind him.

It took Eddie a couple of seconds to realize it wasn't the breaking ball, but just a simple fast ball. He'd been waiting for the ball to slow down and by the time he saw it wasn't going to, it was too late to swing. Dejectedly, he walked back to the dugout. Alfonzo Orlandez, his teammate, ran past him as if he wasn't even there. Nobody wanted to sit with him on the bench anymore, for fear his slump would rub off on them. He walked past the rest of the lineup to sit at the far corner wishing the game was already over, even though it was only the fourth inning. He'd have two more times up at bat if he was lucky, maybe enough to finally dip him below the .200 mark.

He looked up from staring at the dirt when he heard the crack of a bat. Alfonso had connected off the first pitch, sending the ball soaring high to the left of center, an easy pop fly to end the inning. The outfielder was already under it, tracking the ball's progress in the sky. But as the ball reached what should have been its apex, it just kept going, up and up and up. If Eddie didn't know any better, he would have sworn the ball was actually getting faster.

Alfonso was tracking the ball too, and the first base coach was screaming at him to go. Still in a daze he dropped his bat and began running. Ten feet from the bag his next stride didn't hit the ground. The one after that sent him tumbling backward. As Eddie watched transfixed from the bench, Alfonso started floating, his feet swinging uselessly below him.

The fans gasped in astonishment, then shock as they realized they were floating out of their seats as well. The dull roar of the stands became a terrified scream. The air felt electric, every hair on the back of Eddie's arm was standing on end. It wasn't until he hit the top of the dugout that Eddie realized he was floating too. His right shoulder, sore from all those years of swinging, cracked against the cement ceiling. He closed his eyes in a moment of pain, then forced them open to see what was happening.

As Eddie watched, his shoulder throbbing from the impact, Alfonso stopped floating and fell into the sky.

CHAPTER TWO

Eddie fought the impulse to scramble for the edge of the dugout. Against all logic his mind was telling him that he would fall just like Alfonso if he went over that edge. The weightlessness had passed and gravity had reasserted itself, but in the wrong direction. This had to be some kind of sick dream. Maybe the last pitch hadn't sailed by him after all.

Yeah, that was it. He'd been hit in the skull and this was just a concussion induced nightmare. Eddie shook his head wildly, trying to shake reality back into something sensible.

But the pain in his shoulder was real; it felt like he'd come down with his full weight. He swung his left arm across his body and rolled onto his belly. Something about burying his face in the cement ceiling made this all a little less surreal. Sub-consciously he knew the bench was somewhere above his head, but he was trying not to think about it. The open air over the edge taunted him just a few inches away, and against the protests of his body he nudged himself forward.

The wind nearly blew the cap off Eddie's head as he inched his nose over the side. The ceiling was on a slight incline toward the back wall, so he was able to still any immediate thoughts of falling. He looked down cautiously, then snapped his head back violently at what he saw. The sky was maddeningly blue, the clouds moving perceptively but leisurely despite the gusting inside the stadium. It looked like any one of dozens of lazy summer afternoons spent lying on his back looking up; except now he was on his belly looking down.

Eddie eased backward, breathing out slowly as he moved. He rested his chin on his hands and looked across the stadium. The stands were mostly empty, though a few people were swinging precariously from railings or clinging to the backs of their seats. Most fell after a few seconds, falling quietly below his line of sight. A few were followed by a sickening thump, the sound of their bodies hitting the upper decks or the pavilion shell.

He watched helplessly as a mother reached out for her two children. The daughter had managed to weave herself through the bars at the edge of the field, but the son was too far away. In his right hand he wore a baseball glove and was trying to grip tightly to a chair, but Eddie could see his hand was slipping. He wanted to shout, to tell the kid to ditch the glove and get a better grip, but it was too late.

The glove slipped, and the kid's right arm hung uselessly at his side. The effort of trying to hold himself up had probably exhausted him. He dangled loosely for another few seconds before his left hand gave out. The mother tried to reach for him but he was already gone. She turned to look across the field and for a brief instant her eyes met Eddie's. Then, without a sound, she let go of the chair and dropped out of view.

Movement to his right drew Eddie's attention, and he turned to see a young man trying to shove his way past a middle-aged man and his wife. The older man was heavy, but strong, and was not about to yield an inch of ground. Eddie closed his eyes, and when he heard the thump a few seconds later he didn't look to see who'd won.

He buried his head in his hands and cried silently, not wanting to see any more.

"Eddie?" He felt a warm hand against his right calf. He bent his knees and rolled back onto his side. The speaker put a strong arm around his back and helped him toward the wall. The rear of the dugout was a mess, a pile of bats and helmets and other random bits of detritus.

Eddie opened his eyes to see his teammate, Manny, who up till this point hadn't said a word to him in weeks. *'Guess there's no reason to worry about my slump rubbing off anymore,'* he thought.

"Are you alright?" Manny asked.

"I'm fine. I just hit my shoulder. You okay?"

Manny nodded, "Banged my shoulder pretty good too."

The rest of the lineup were scattered against the back wall. Some hung their feet over the side, while others crouched down, pressing as close to the back wall as possible. The whole scene was playing out before them in panoramic view, but nobody wanted to look at it for very long, choosing instead to huddle together in groups of two or three.

Eddie looked over at Franklin, who was puking his guts out in the far corner. He'd been next at bat and would have been standing in the on deck circle if he hadn't had to re-lace his shoes. Their coach had been standing at the end of the steps, leaning against the pads on the railing and making his wishes known to the base coaches. Eddie hadn't seen him fall, but he didn't see him here either. It was ridiculous the difference a couple of steps made.

"This isn't some x-man thing, right?" Manny said, breaking the silence.

"Excuse me?" Eddie said.

"Like the end of that one movie. That magnetic dude picked up RFK stadium and dropped it next to the White House."

"What'd he do that for?" Eddie asked, relieved for any kind of distraction.

Manny shook his head. "I'm not sure. I mean it's impressive like, flying through the middle of DC carrying a big building. But then he just drops it to keep people out who might spoil his plans. If you need a wall, why don't you just make one out of metal?"

"I don't know," Eddie said, "I've never seen that movie."

"You think we're flying, Eddie?"

"I don't know."

'*God I hope so,*' he thought. At least if some telepathic force was picking them up, it could put them down again.

His thoughts were broken by the sound of wrenching metal from somewhere below. He'd been able to tune out the individual screams, but the collective wail beneath his feet was impossible to ignore. He scooted up from his crouch and looked over the edge again.

Below, the solar pavilion had torn itself away from its moorings and was curving outward like a long ribbon. All along its ridged surface people clung desperately, trying to climb as the metal tore away faster and faster. One would lose their grip, and knock down the three below them. They were all fighting a losing battle.

The noise went on for countless minutes, the tear growing longer, twisting in the wind and bucking savagely. The stadium below the dugout shook and for a moment Eddie was afraid their tiny perch would be pulled down as well.

But then, just as quickly as the noise had begun, it stopped.

* * *

Kammie looked up at her feet and wondered where the hell she had put her shoes. The rest of her was covered in boxes, and she felt thin metal cutting dully into her back and shoulders. Her head rested on top of something that felt like thick cork board that cracked as she turned her head.

At first she thought she had lost her balance and knocked over one of the shelves. She groaned at the thought of all the noise she must have made. There was no way she was going to get this mess cleaned up before one of her supervisors found her.

But as her memory returned her brain offered up another suggestion; one neither of them was too happy about. She remembered floating for the briefest of moments, and could recall her feet leaving the floor. What she couldn't remember was if she'd fallen back down again.

Suddenly Kammie was more thankful for the darkness than she had ever been in all those solitude seeking moments. Her back and shoulders were

telling her that what she was laying on felt a lot more like the ceiling frame than the tile floor.

'Alright,' she thought, 'the ceiling's collapsed. The building's only a few years old but maybe there were some material flaws.'

She slid one of the tiles aside with her hand and probed for the floor below, but instead felt textured metal. She wasn't certain, but it felt like the plating above the ceiling. If the ceiling had fallen on her, then the plating would be sitting on top, or still be hanging from the ceiling.

So what was hanging above her?

Her senses were feeding her information in small pieces, knowing that she needed time to comprehend the full reality of the situation. She pushed down, the tiles bending under her weight until they met the plating. She put her arms behind her and slid backward, moving her legs down carefully from where they'd been elevated. The frame had collapsed to the plating around her head and upper back, but the rest was still about a foot and half in the air.

Kammie pulled her knees up under her chin and breathed in slowly. She polled her hearing for information next, trying to recall if there had been any kind of rumbling or shaking that might account for this upside down closet. Northeast Ohio had been getting some minor earthquakes lately, supposedly due to fracking in Pennsylvania, but the worst of that hadn't registered above a 4 or a 5 on the Richter scale.

The floor, or ceiling, below her was perfectly level. If the building had collapsed or even toppled over she'd be on some kind of an angle. But the room had been flipped 180 degrees.

It was the sound of someone yelling that broke her out of her thoughts. Unless she was dreaming, and that was a real possibility, this room wasn't likely to be the only one that had gone topsy-turvy. She grunted as she pulled herself onto her feet, assuring herself that some of the cracks she was

hearing were coming from the tiles and not just her knees. She brushed off some of the accumulated dust, and ran a hand along her back where the metal had been pressing in. She felt no obvious cuts, at least where she could reach, though she was bruised in a couple of places.

She took a tentative first step, and nearly fell back onto her hands as the frame caught her below the knee. Most of the tiles had fallen out of the frame, but a few clung on stubbornly. It was almost like walking through a foot of snow. Sometimes the material was packed enough that Kammie could stand and pull herself forward, only for her next step to sink her down again. After a few minutes of this, Kammie reluctantly determined that the best way through was to crawl underneath the frame on her hands and knees.

After another couple of minutes of crawling like this, poking her head up every couple of feet to make sure she was still heading toward the door, Kammie reached the far wall. The handle of the door was a little above eye level. She reached up and pulled down, but the handle wouldn't move. Panic seeped in for a few fleeting seconds as Kammie thought she might be trapped in this room.

She pushed up on the handle and the door swung open.

Kammie crawled over the doorframe, the ridged metal pushing into her stomach. She hung half-way through for a couple of seconds before falling back below the tiles, like a fish diving below the surface of the water. She stood angrily, breaking through the tiles above her head and plastering her hair with dust and cobwebs. She cupped a hand to her mouth and shouted, "Anybody alive out there?"

"Over here!" a faint woman's shout came from about fifty feet down the hall. "I've got someone hurt!"

Kammie crouched down below the surface of the tiles, crawling for about thirty feet before bumping up against a wall. The voice was coming from the direction of the visitors lounge, and the ceiling abruptly changed to smooth, thick plaster. Kammie surfaced and crawled up slowly, spreading herself wide

to distribute her weight evenly. She moved forward a few feet at a time by alternately kicking with her feet and pulling with her shoulders, like someone crawling across a frozen lake.

The young woman was leaning against a pillar and pressing her sleeve against the forehead of a woman in her fifties. The older woman's face was obscured so that Kammie didn't recognize who it was until she was right in front of her.

Margaret Benson had been one of the nursing staff who had first interviewed her, and had been the one who gave Kammie that nick-name. Her full name was Kamyra, and for most of her life she'd been insistent that others pronounce it fully and correctly. But whenever Margaret had called her Kammie it had sounded warm and affectionate. When Kammie had tentatively called her Margie for the first time she'd been treated to a smile so wide it nearly made her giggle.

Margie's breathing was shallow, and she'd lost consciousness. Kammie felt for a pulse, but it was thin and weak.

She looked up to the young woman who was fighting back tears. She was cradling Margaret in her lap, her one arm pressing down, and the other lightly stroking her cheek. Kammie had remembered seeing the young woman around the floor for the past couple of weeks, mostly in room 3, mostly arguing with the other members of the nursing staff. It never ceased to amaze her how hard and how fervently people fought to control uncontrollable things.

"Can you lift your arm?" Kammie asked, putting a comforting hand on the woman's shoulder. She nodded, and Kammie tore the sleeve off her scrubs. Margaret was going to need antibiotics either way for the infection, and getting the bleeding contained had to be the priority.

"What's your name?" Kammie said as she started to work.

"Grace. I was trying to call my sister before..."

Kammie nodded, "I know. I'm not sure what to call it either."

Grace shook her head, "No, it's not that. My mother's sick."

Kammie tied off the dressing. The bleeding was starting to slow down, and Margie's breathing seemed a little better, but Kammie was still concerned. She looked up to see that Grace had started to cry.

"I just wanted her to hear Bethany's voice one last time," Grace said.

Kammie put an arm around Grace's shoulder, and the young woman buried her head in her chest.

CHAPTER THREE

Bethany woke to throbbing pain from her right hand. The skin was pink and wet, and had the faint aroma of the coffee she'd been holding moments before. The immediate scalding heat had subsided, leaving a dull ache and a slightly itchy sensation, making Bethany wonder exactly how long she'd been unconscious. Still, that question could wait until her more immediate needs were met: a fresh cup of coffee and something cool for her hand.

Bethany recalled a bathroom just around the corner and pushed down with her good hand to get herself up. The floor felt rough and dusty. She wondered idly if her donut was still on the counter or if it had fallen off during ... whatever had happened. Sure enough, there was a little paper wrapper on the floor with the edge of a maple donut creeping out of it. As she bent down to pick it up, she noticed that the counter was no longer in front of her.

The Latina woman and another teenage employee were sprawled out on the floor where the counter should have been. Bethany took a tentative step forward, then stepped back as the woman groaned.

"Are you alright?" Bethany asked.

The woman was still dazed, her eyes squinting as she regained focus. "I think so. What happened?"

"I don't know," Bethany replied. "Do you have any bottled water back there? I spilled coffee on my hand."

Bethany put out an arm which the woman waved off. Once the woman had righted herself she stood on her tiptoes to look inside the little refrigerator behind the counter, which was now above her head. "All I have is milk and orange juice."

"Probably the milk," Bethany said. "How much do I owe you?"

The woman fixed her with a look, then said flatly, “No charge.”

Bethany took the small carton and held it against her hand. It felt a little better, but the cardboard didn't feel very cold against her skin. She sighed and pushed the carton open, pouring out the liquid slowly over the back of her hand. She winced briefly from the cold, then relaxed as her fingers loosened and the skin felt less chapped.

“Throw on a little fresh cinnamon and I've basically made a latté on my hand,” Bethany said. The woman just stared at her. Finally Bethany said, “Thanks. That feels a lot better.”

The Latina woman nodded, then turned to wake up her co-worker, who was drooling into a pile of spilled cup-holders. Suddenly the thought of eating her donut in front of these people didn't seem so appealing. Bethany reached into her coat pocket to stash the wrapper when she noticed a familiar bump was missing.

“Dammit,” Bethany hissed softly. Looking down she saw nothing other than milk-stained shoes. She looked behind her and caught a glimpse of a purple phone case against the far wall. She took an unsteady step toward the phone, then froze as the floor creaked beneath her. Suddenly heels didn't feel like such a good idea.

Cautiously she slipped her feet out of her shoes, then knelt slowly to pick them up, dangling them from her left hand. Given the state of her hair and clothes she looked like a woman walking home from a one night stand, with the added humiliation of milk dripping from her hand and shoes. The floor creaked with every step but at least it didn't feel like it was going to buckle anymore. Within a few seconds she was across the alcove to where her phone had slid.

The protective case had broken open but the phone seemed relatively intact. She had a couple of missed calls from her sister but no messages. This was pretty typical; Grace was the kind of person to keep calling until you picked up rather than leave a message. When she wanted your attention she had to

get it right then, though the last call was from about ten minutes ago. Bethany frowned; it wasn't like Grace to give up like that.

Reluctantly, she pressed down the call button. The phone didn't even ring once before she got the three-tone alert message.

"We're sorry, but we cannot place your call as dialed. Our lines are over capacity at the moment. Please hang up and place your call again later."

"Probably everyone's calling each other trying to figure out what's going on," the donut woman shouted.

Bethany frowned again, "Even if there was some kind of accident in the mall it wouldn't have jammed up every line!"

"Lady, we're upside-down. I think that's enough."

Bethany looked up toward the "ceiling" and saw the familiar tile of the floor. The "floor" beneath her feet was completely flat, except for a couple of diamond shaped bumps that looked a hell of a lot like light fixtures.

"That's impossible," she gasped.

"You'd think so, but here we are." The woman shrugged. "Listen, can you help me with Jared here? I think he might have broken his ankle."

"I must have hit my head harder than I thought," Bethany said, not really hearing her.

"Hey, maybe so, but until you wake up I could really use a hand here."

Bethany shook her head clear and walked back over. Jared was still in a haze, which was probably just as well given the angle of his foot. Bethany put a hand under his arm, and grimaced at the moisture underneath. The woman shot her a grin, "Yeah, I know. Try standing next to him for 12 hours on end."

“Where do we put him?” Bethany asked, pulling upward. The two women linked their arms trying to put most of Jared’s weight on his back and under his thighs, though his feet still bumped into the floor every couple of steps.

“We’ve got a couple of chairs in the office in the back, assuming they weren’t bolted to the floor.”

The back area was dark, the floor littered with all sorts of dry ingredients, sugar and flour and cinnamon, floating a few inches off the floor in a thin mist. Bethany could already feel a coating forming around her ankles and feet.

They found a yellow plastic chair that looked like it had been taken from a 70s classroom and kicked it upright. Jared let out a little yelp as they dropped him down, then slumped slightly forward, threatening to fall back onto the floor. The woman shuffled over to the other side of the office and found another chair. She put it under Jared’s left leg and he leaned back, his head falling backwards to the right.

The woman leaned against the back wall to catch her breath and Bethany did the same, “What’s your name?” the woman asked.

“Bethany, and you’re ... Sofia, right?”

“Got that from my name tag and everything, right?”

Bethany blushed, “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Yeah, I guess so. It’s actually Claudia, but I got sick of people pronouncing it wrong. Clow-dia not Claw-dia.” Claudia breathed out heavily, “Hey. You still got that donut?”

Bethany chuckled, “It’s been on the floor.”

“Actually I think it’s the ceiling. How ‘bout you give me half in return for that milk?”

Bethany took out the paper she'd tucked in her jacket and tore the donut in two. "Deal."

* * *

"Grab my hand!" Reverend Marcado shouted as he leaned down toward the balcony railing.

Marcado had wrapped his legs around one of the wood paneled columns which suddenly felt a whole lot less solid with the weight of the balcony pulling on it instead of pushing down. Hymnals and Bibles were raining down around him as they slipped out of the pews, forming blue-bound piles on the high curved ceiling.

The young man below him was terrified, and had wrapped both arms and legs around the flat metal of the railing. Already Marcado could tell that railing wasn't going to hold his weight forever, despite the 200-year old craftsmanship of the sanctuary.

"It's alright," he said calmly. "I've got you, and the Lord's got us both."

The young man leaned as if to move, then whimpered and held the railing more tightly as his ball-cap fell off his head.

"Son," Marcado said more firmly, "I know it's scary, but you've got to climb."

The young man leaned out again, still leaving his legs wrapped around the railing. As he stretched he was able to get a few fingers under the curved inset of the panel above. Marcado stretched down and this time he could just barely brush the tips of his fingers against the young man's hand.

"Just a little bit more," Marcado encouraged. "You're doing fine."

The young man grabbed the U-shaped arch of the trim and pushed up, reaching with his left arm to grasp one of the small wooden balusters. He let his right hand go and pulled upward, swinging his legs out and hanging by one arm for a few terrifying seconds before Marcado grabbed him. The

baluster in his left hand pulled out from the railing and dropped out of his hand, making a low clattering as it hit the ceiling.

Marcado grunted as the man's full weight pulled down on his arm. He began tugging with his legs, hoping the weight wouldn't pull the column out like the baluster. The young man grabbed Marcado's arm with both hands, the weight easing as the kid got a hand up on the ceiling at the base of the balcony. Within another few seconds he had a leg up and soon was lying flat on his belly. Marcado dangled over the edge till the kid collected his wits enough to grab his arm and spin him around the column.

Both men lay flat for a few minutes catching their breath. The adrenaline was already starting to wear off, and Marcado was wishing he'd spent a few more evenings playing in the church basketball league. The young man looked to be in his late twenties, wearing a large and garish Chief Wahoo t-shirt. Most of the fans in the city had long ago abandoned wearing that mascot, at least in public, preferring the newer letter styled jersey, or if they liked the tradition at least keeping the Indian small and on their arm. It was the out of towners who still got a kick out of the grinning chief.

"Reverend, look!" the young man shouted, pointing downward. He'd crawled to the edge of the balcony and was looking toward the organ. Below them, pairs of curved wooden bracers stood atop a wooden floor, with circular vents in between each pair. Further down, stained glass windows glowed brightly from the sun outside.

'Whatever has happened hasn't spoiled the sky at least,' Marcado thought.

On the floor near the organ, a young woman lay sprawled over one of the curved bracers. She was breathing slowly, her long black hair fanning out behind her head like a halo. Her eyes were open but unfocused, looking at nothing in particular.

"We've got to do something," the young man said, already looking around for something to lower himself down.

From twenty-some feet above Mercado could see the small pool of blood forming behind her head. That she'd survived the fall was something of a miracle, if a cruel one. Her body was bent and broken, her breathing raspy and pained. Her face was a cloud, unable to speak even if her lungs would allow it, on the verge of seeing a divine mystery Mercado had only glimpsed from afar.

"Don't just sit there, we've got to help her," the young man's voice was growing all the more urgent. There was no rope to be found, nothing aside from a few domed glass hanging lights now lying flat on the ceiling floor. The cords might lower them down a few feet, assuming they could even hold their weight. Mercado put a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"We can't reach her, not without falling ourselves," he said gently.

"But you're a man of God, you're supposed to help people aren't you?" the young man said angrily, pushing Mercado's arm away.

"I am going to help her," Mercado said, "I'm going to pray."

"What's that going to do? We've got to get her up here!" The young man said, tears starting to form around his eyes. "We can just leave her!"

"Who is she, son?"

"What?"

"What's her name?" Mercado asked calmly.

"Stacey," the young man said, tears running down his face in earnest now.

"You care about her a great deal, don't you?"

The young man looked down at his feet, "She's my girlfriend, about six months now. We just moved in together about a month ago."

"Alright, you want to help her don't you?"

“Yes,” he said weakly.

“Just look at her.”

The young man took a tentative crawl toward the edge. His eagerness from a few moments prior replaced by fear, not of heights or the ceiling collapsing from beneath him, but of the reality he knew lay just below him.

“She’s dying, son, probably only a few minutes now.”

The young man backed slowly away from the edge. Marcado stopped him gently and the young man’s voice cracked as he spoke. “She was just a few feet in front of me. If only I’d been closer I’d...”

“I know,” Marcado said. “She’s in God’s hands now but we can still pray for her.”

“But we’re not believers, Reverend,” the young man said. “Doesn’t that mean you think she’s going to go to hell or something?”

Marcado shook his head. “You really think that’s how it works? I don’t think God is as cruel as men make him out to be. He’ll take care of her.”

The young man wiped his tears off with a sleeve and bowed his head. Marcado closed his eyes. After a brief prayer he opened them again and stared at the front of the sanctuary. Everything loose had fallen toward the ceiling, including a grand piano which had landed with its legs sticking in the air like a wounded animal. Somehow the organ had managed to maintain its shape, with just a few of the over three thousand pipes slipping out of their moorings. The chandeliers, on the other hand, had all swung toward the center of the room; the glass from each of the cylindrical lights shattered and strewn in a glistening carpet on the ceiling. The Bible he read from every Sunday morning and the candles he lit were all gone. All of the familiar rituals and objects that made this place his home as much as God’s were falling away.

The truth was he didn't know what God had in store for Stacey or for any of them. He'd seen people die before, around the world and right in front of him. But none of that had felt like God's doing, just man's nature at its most extreme and perverse. But flipping a church upside-down didn't feel like the work of man. God had killed all but a few people in a boat when he brought terrible floods. He said he'd never do it again, but maybe he only meant the rain.

Marcado turned back toward the young man who was still kneeling with his head bowed and eyes closed. "Come on. We've got to get moving. If we get into the basement, we might at least stand a chance."

The young man opened his eyes and nodded. The two men turned and crawled away from the edge, neither looking back.

CHAPTER FOUR

The world was fuzzy and out of focus; colors blended into each other like a watercolor painting. This trick of vision would have made sense to Eddie if he'd been crying or gotten a bit of sweat in his eye. The truth was he'd just been staring too long. His eyes were dry from the wind, and his face was cold. It was as if he wanted to burn an image into his brain, but his eyes couldn't or didn't want to focus, so his mind just took one blurry picture after another.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there. It felt like days, though it was probably only a couple of hours since the sun was still up. Still, there was no way to be sure. If gravity couldn't be counted on, maybe the sun couldn't either.

Someone finally spoke, Eddie didn't really hear who, but whoever it was had had their fill of sitting around moping and was trying to stir the others into some kind of action. None of them seemed to have the energy to object, but neither did they show any enthusiasm, choosing only to shuffle mechanically toward the far end of the dugout.

Eddie thought about ignoring the voice, continuing to sit there and stare until the sun went out or he lost his vision. Then there would be nothing to keep him from stepping over the edge, which seemed to be calling him with every passing second. That big open sky was getting inside him, goading him to permanent and maybe inevitable action. After all, how long did any of them really have?

It was Manny who finally broke him out of his stupor, tapping him on the upper arm. Eddie grunted, his muscles stiff from sitting on hard cement, and shuffled in the same direction as the rest of his teammates.

At the end of the dugout a door opened into a short corridor that led to a secondary locker room. The area mainly served the other events hosted on the field, though occasionally during long games the players would take advantage of the proximity to towel off or re-tape a foot. The locker room

was small, maybe twenty feet by thirty feet at the most. Along the right wall were a line of open lockers and above them in the center of the room was a set of long wooden benches.

A rack of bats hung near the door, most of which had surprisingly not fallen to the floor. Some had flipped and were hanging by their grip, while others had slid straight down and become stuck. Eddie reached an arm up and pulled a metal bat down, flipping it over so he could hold the grip in his right hand.

Slowly he ran his hands over the black and blue paint. There were a couple of dents and a few chips he could feel with his palm, but the balance was still good. There was no space to swing in this small room, so all he could do was turn the bat over again and again in his hand. He remembered the feeling of electricity, the power when the ball made contact with your swing in just the right spot. You could feel everything the pitcher had put behind that ball, and how it was fighting against the muscles in your arms and shoulders. When that momentum was pushed forward it felt like a release, like something almost spiritual. After every swing like that, Eddie could feel the light tap of his bat on his left shoulder, a reminder that maybe it was time to start running.

He was never going to have that feeling again, or so he imagined. Though if he was being honest it had been a while since he'd felt it anyway.

Everyone was still silent, even the young man who'd been shouting at them to move, who Eddie now recognized as Stankowsky, a rising star who'd come up from the Clippers just last year. Stankowsky was pacing back and forth across the ceiling floor until he tripped on something. He swore as he turned around to see the shower head sticking out of the floor. Some of the other guys chuckled for a second before the room was quiet again.

Stankowsky just stood and stared at the shower head. At first Eddie thought the kid was angry, but after looking closer he could tell that Stankowsky was trying to work something out. His features were sunken in, and he shaved his

head every couple of days. A thin growth of mustache hung above his upper lip, though it was usually hidden from view by Stan's pursed lips. His neck looked like he'd swallowed a baseball and with the way the kid mouthed off sometimes during practice, Eddie had thought about taking a swing at that ball more than once.

"We're gonna need water," Stankowsky said finally.

No one had really been paying attention except Eddie, but Manny was the first to reply, "What's that, Stan?"

"We need to raid every snack bar and vending machine in the stadium, all the way down to the upper decks," Stankowsky replied, ignoring Eddie's obvious scrutiny.

Manny raised an eyebrow and the rest of the team seemed to be largely ignoring the conversation. Franklin for his part seemed to be wondering how Stankowsky could be thinking of food at a time like this, which was understandable for a guy who'd spent the last half hour revisiting his lunch.

"All of you need to look around," Stankowsky said, raising his voice slightly but remaining calm. "This stadium is upside down, probably the whole city, maybe even the whole damn world. Lake Erie is now a cloud of mist floating up into space until it freezes. Same goes for the Cuyahoga River and every fountain, well and puddle. The only water there's going to be is what we've bottled."

Franklin smirked, "Haven't you always been a doomsday prepper, Stankowsky? Isn't the first thing you guys do is horde a stash of water?"

Stankowsky shook his head. "It's in my bunker out in Garfield Heights. Might as well be on the moon for all the good it's going to do us here."

"Well, I guess we're really screwed then," Franklin said dismissively.

"You guys don't get it do you?" Stankowsky said, "Whether this thing lasts another hour, or another year or a whole century everything's going to be

different. The only way we're going to survive is if we embrace the reality of our situation before anyone else does."

"Aww, you're full of crap, Stan," Franklin scoffed.

Eddie wasn't so sure. They'd survived the first wave of this thing basically on luck alone. But there was only so far luck was going to take them.

"You should listen to him," Eddie said. "We're probably not the only ones who survived. We were down 4-0 in the fourth inning. I'm betting people didn't wait for the seventh inning stretch to go for another beer. There's probably people right below us walking around trying to figure out what's going on."

"I guess our losing streak saved a few lives," Manny observed.

"Yeah," Franklin sneered, "If 'ol Eddie here had been able to keep a count alive longer than three pitches, maybe Alfonso would still be with us too."

"That's not funny, Franklin," Manny said.

"Just making an observation," Franklin said, leaning back on his elbows.

Eddie wondered how many of the men standing in that room had made the same "observation". Hell, he'd been thinking it too. If they'd had a choice between him and Alfonso, even Manny wouldn't have picked Eddie.

"Why do you want to go down to the upper decks anyway, Stan?" Their second baseman, Conesta, asked. "We've got no idea how long those levels are going to stay structurally sound. We should get what we can from this deck and head up into the sewers."

"Conesta's got a point," Manny observed, "We all saw what happened to the pavilion. It's only a matter of time before the rest of this place peels away."

Stankowsky shook his head again. "We're going to need more than just water. We're going to need a way to defend ourselves."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Manny asked, his voice growing colder.
“Defend ourselves from whom?”

“Everyone else,” Stankowsky replied flatly.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Manny fumed. He looked to Eddie like he was about to leap forward and shake Stankowsky by the shoulders.

Stankowsky continued, ignoring the question and any imminent threat, “I’m just expecting people to be people, in all their flawed, crazed and animal ways.”

“You’re the animal, Stankowsky!” Manny said, “There are hundreds, maybe thousands of people out there who could be hurt and suffering.”

Eddie’s blood should have been boiling at the same temperature as Manny’s but somehow he was remaining calm. It was possible that he was just numb after what he’d seen, but he suspected it was something else.

“You’re right,” Stankowsky said, “And I feel for all of them, really I do. But is there going to be enough water for all of us?”

“Fuck you!” Manny cursed.

Stankowsky for his part remained stoic. “Fuck you too, if it’ll make you feel better. I’m just being realistic. We’re going to need to cooperate to survive, but not with everyone. Do you know what we are, Manny? Do any of you?”

He scanned around a room full of blank or angry stares.

“We’re a tribe, and a tribe looks out for their own. We don’t know who we’re going to meet out there, in the stadium or anywhere else we go. We don’t know what they’ll become. But we know each other.”

Eddie didn’t like the man saying those words, even if he knew they needed to be said. But that was the problem with hard truth. The people who came to the hard conclusions were hard people.

He put a hand on Manny's shoulder, "Stan's right, Manny." Manny's muscles loosened slightly, but his face still bore a dangerous expression. Manny hadn't liked Stankowsky much when they'd been teammates, and he probably liked him less now that he was trying to be some kind of post-apocalyptic tribal chief.

Eddie turned to address the rest of the people in the room. "We are a team, even if there's some of us we can't stand. Now I want to try to help anyone we can, but part of being able to do that is being able to take care of ourselves."

"Is this the part of the movie where we all put our hands in the center and shout 'go tribe' or something?" Franklin's voice slithered out from where he was leaning against the lockers.

Eddie smiled, "You know what? You're right, Franklin. This is some kinda movie. Probably one of those crappy horror flicks they used to show on *Big Chuck and Lil John*."

"Yeah, like *The Ground Above* or *Topsy-Turvy-Terra*," Conesta offered.

Manny chuckled, his face softening, "What does that make Franklin, the Kielbasa kid?"

"That's good," Eddie laughed. "And I'd always had Stankowsky pegged as a certain ethnic."

The three men started laughing uncontrollably until Stankowsky cut them off. "What the hell are you guys talking about?"

"Oh, that's right, you're from down south," Eddie put his arm around Stankowsky. "If YouTube somehow survived this catastrophe you should watch the certain ethnic lays carpet."

"Or the certain ethnic movers," Conesta added.

Manny laughed, "Oh, I'd forgotten about that one."

“Anyway,” Eddie continued, “Stan’s right about one thing, there are supplies in this stadium we’re gonna regret losing to gravity if we sit around here all day.”

“Holy shit!” Conesta interrupted.

“What?” Eddie asked.

“All the cows and pigs, they’re probably floating in low earth orbit by now. No Kielbasa kid after all.”

“At least they’ll be well preserved,” Manny said, chuckling again.

Eddie grinned, “Probably, though I for one am grabbing a hot dog when we go downstairs.”

He grabbed a sports bag that had been crumpled in the corner and tossed it to Stankowsky. He tossed another at Franklin before handing a few more to Manny, Conesta and Belanchek, their pitcher.

“What if we run into trouble?” Conesta asked. “It’s a long way between here and the security office.”

Eddie looked down at the bat in his hand, then back up at the rack above him. He’d been in fights as a kid, but that was using your fists and feet, not a weapon. He’d seen the damage a gun could do, but that had felt cold, almost distant. Even as he contemplated their goal he found himself realizing he could fire a gun. That wasn’t personal. But beating someone with a bat, the electricity of impact of metal against bone ... that was taking something he had loved since he was a kid and perverting it.

“We’ll use these,” he tossed his bat to Manny, then started taking them down for the rest of the players. It was funny; as he watched them toss the bats from one hand to the other, adjusting their gloves and trying out the grip, they almost looked like ballplayers again. His eyes turned to Belanchek, who was pocketing a couple of balls and tossing a couple more in his pack. Who needs a bullet when you have a 97 mile per hour fastball?

Maybe Stankowsky was wrong, maybe they wouldn't need any of this. Maybe people would look in the face of this tragedy and decide to help each other out.

'Yeah, when pigs fly,' he thought, 'though come to think of it, I guess they are.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Kammie was beginning to wonder if she was the only nurse still alive on the floor. She could hear the groans of maybe half a dozen patients, but nobody answered them except her. She'd gotten Margie stabilized for the moment, and with Grace's help Kammie had been able to lay her out on one of the couches in the visitor's lounge. After crying on Kammie's shoulder for a couple of minutes, Grace had pulled herself together enough to actually be of some use, not that Kammie could be picky.

Kammie's brain had given up trying to provide a wider context for what was going on, choosing instead to focus only on what was in front of her. Kammie felt a familiar tension at the base of her skull, a combination of sleep deprivation, stress and too much caffeine. Still, she was happy to find that several of the nearby vending machines had spilled their contents all over the ceiling. She grabbed a couple of diet sodas and tossed one to Grace before resuming her crawl to the next room.

'There's no such thing as too much caffeine,' she thought to herself.

A rumble from behind her grabbed her attention and Grace blushed as she twisted the cap back on the bottle. "Must've been the building settling."

Kammie's smile lasted for the briefest of moments, vanishing completely as she opened the door to room five. A cheap hospital bed, like the ones used for patients receiving in-home care, weighs about 450 pounds. In a hospital like this one, the average bed could weigh upwards of 700 pounds. With the head tilted up and the railings raised, a patient might be trapped if the bed fell on top of them, but they wouldn't be crushed. But if one of the railings was lowered, or if the bed tilted to the side as it fell, then even a fall of only a few feet could be deadly.

The depression in the back of the old woman's skull indicated it had at least been quick. Grace had been hot on Kammie's heels, eager to help in any way she could, but Kammie held out a hand to stop her before she could get to

the door. Kammie did a five-second sweep of the room with her eyes to check for any visitors or nurses, and upon finding none, silently close the door and started toward room six.

The patient in room six had been in the bathroom when everything hit, and from the looks of him hadn't had the chance to flush away the morning's constitutional. This at least, was nothing new. Kammie sent Grace to the closet for a fresh gown and some towels. The man was in his fifties and kept insisting he could do it himself, despite the fact he'd probably been lying there for the better part of an hour. His right collar bone was obviously bruised or broken, as even a slight graze triggered a grimace of pain across his face.

When she'd gotten him as clean as she was able to, she sat him down in one of the chairs, figuring if gravity flipped again that the chair probably wouldn't crush him. She pressed his skin gently asking him to rate his pain from 1-10 with each touch. The bone felt solid, but the tissue around it had been badly banged up.

"I'm afraid the best I can offer you is a sling at the moment," Kammie said sympathetically, "Grace, can you take care of that while I check on room seven?"

Grace nodded and Kammie got back on her hands and knees, relaxing her face as soon as she was out of sight of the door. It was difficult enough to maintain a cheerful and professional demeanor after a long day without all of these added excitements. Kammie genuinely did want to help people, to care for them in some of the scariest moments of their lives. She tried to make the whole thing feel safe and comforting, like a stay at a luxury hotel where your every need and desire is met. But that level of charm takes energy, and she had very little in reserve.

This was why most of her time off was spent in silence; that and it's a bit weird to carry on a conversation with your cat.

The thought of Alomar alone in the apartment caused a brief pang of guilt in Kammie. There was plenty of dry food, but all of the water had probably spilled out onto the floor. And it was going to be a while till Kammie could spoil her with tuna again, assuming she could even get home. On the other hand, Alomar probably had landed on her feet, unlike her master, and could be pretty resourceful when she wanted to be. Several times Kammie had to replace one of the neighbor's fish when Alomar got the craving for raw sushi.

"Ow! Dammit!" Kammie swore as he slid her hand over something thin and sharp. She pulled back instinctively, but whatever it was had already dug in deep. In the flickering dull light she could see a thin shard of glass, maybe an inch on a side, sticking out from where it had embedded itself in the fatty part of her hand.

The muscles in her hand twitched uncontrollably, sending sharp pains down her fingers and into her wrist. She rolled over onto her side holding her hand above her head. She bit the bottom part of her lip and grabbed the shard carefully with two fingers, easing it out slowly so as not to make the cut any worse. The spasms seemed to trigger with every tiny movement, and she could feel every millimeter of the shard as it slid out. The last quarter-inch slid out quickly followed by a pulse of blood that began to run down her hand. She tossed the shard away angrily and began wrapping her hand with an ace bandage she'd found in room three.

The cut bled slowly. Somehow she'd managed to avoid the artery, but from the twitching she'd definitely done some muscular and possibly nerve damage. She looked in front of her to see dozens of tiny shards from one of the blown out ceiling lights. All things considered, Kammie was fortunate she'd only gotten stuck with one of them. Still, she was probably going to need stitches to properly close the wound, something she didn't particularly want to do herself.

'Where the hell are the other nurses?'

She stood tentatively, holding her throbbing hand above her chest to try to slow the bleeding. Each step was careful and deliberate, moving her past her original objective of room seven in favor of the nurses' lounge just around the corner. Even if they'd been knocked unconscious by the fall, someone should be awake by now.

'Maybe they just can't get out,' she thought.

It took an age to reach the door, and another to push up on the door handle and inch the door open. No sooner had she opened the door six inches when something tore the door out of her hand. Her face was struck by a cool breeze which kicked up the dust and debris around her in a low cloud.

The hospital had been surprisingly generous with its nursing staff. One of the few reasons Kammie spent any time in nurses' lounge at all was the sky light and floor-to-ceiling windows which featured a great view of downtown. Glass was a funny thing. This building was built to withstand the worst tornadoes and snowy conditions with barely a scratch. But drop a half dozen chairs and a couch on that ceiling, and you've got yourself a big gaping hole.

Kammie stared at the hole blankly for a few seconds, then picked up a length of metal framing from the ceiling, bent the end into a hook using her thigh, and pulled the door closed.

* * *

"I have half a mind to sue this place," Claudia said as she and Bethany dug through cabinets and drawers searching for a first aid kit. "I can understand not having the materials for a splint. I mean, who's going to break their ankle making donuts, but I can't even find a damn band-aid!"

Jared was still hazy. He obviously had some kind of a concussion but neither Bethany nor Claudia had any idea how to deal with it other than to try and keep him awake. This proved difficult as Jared seemed to be making every effort to disconnect from reality.

“There’s got to be something out in the mall,” Bethany offered. “They should have a first aid station somewhere.”

“You’re right, though if I remember correctly it’s on the first floor, which is a couple of levels above us now.”

The elevators, assuming they were even working at this point, were glass encased prisms with no floor. The escalators were out as well, unless Bethany could piton her way up through every groove. She vaguely remembered falling off halfway across the monkey bars as a kid. There the worst possible outcome was a few splinters. Here there was no telling how far she’d keep falling if she lost her grip.

Bethany shook her head, “Even if we could get up there, there’s no way we could get Jared up in his current state. What about service stairwells?”

Claudia shrugged, “Someone on the maintenance staff might know. Me, I go in and out the front door just like you. I don’t even use the employee parking, I take the RTA.”

Absently Bethany pressed the call button on her phone, hanging up and trying again as soon as she heard the three-tone alert message.

“You’re just going to drain the battery doing that. The system’ll probably be down for hours,” Claudia offered.

Even as she pressed the call button again, Bethany knew she was right. Why hadn’t she picked up the phone in the first place? What was so important about a damn cup of coffee?

Frustrated she slammed one of the cabinets shut, the force tearing the door off of one of its hinges, leaving it swinging loosely from the other. Claudia assessed the damage with a raised eyebrow.

“Good a solution as any I guess,” she said, tearing the rest of the door away from the cabinet. She put her foot on the seat of one of the plastic chairs and

slammed the board down hard against the back. The board cracked and split, and after a couple more whacks broke into two roughly even pieces.

“Hand me some of those uniforms from the back closet over there. We’ll wrap these so Jared doesn’t get tetanus, and use whatever fabric we’ve got left to tie them together.”

The splint was crude but succeeded in keeping Jared’s leg straight, though Bethany had to snap some loose shards of wood so he could put his foot down on the floor.

“He’s still not going anywhere for a little while,” Claudia said. “We might as well see what else we can...”

The sound of gunfire is distinctive. Most lower caliber hand guns don’t set off the loud boom that everyone expects. The real noise is closer to a balloon popping, which in some ways is more frightening. Gunfire sounds more innocuous than it is.

“What the hell is going on out there?” Claudia whispered angrily.

The shots were soon followed by the sound of smashed glass and angry yelling.

“C’mon,” Claudia gestured, crouching low.

With the counter above them, the front of the store offered little in the way of cover. Their only real protection was the fact that a donut shop wasn’t usually the first on anyone’s list when it came to looting.

The shouting was clearly coming from their floor. Claudia and Bethany moved slowly across the aisle and up to the corner. If they were caught, Bethany didn’t have much of a plan beyond screaming, as running back to the donut shop offered fleeting safety at best.

Bethany leaned her head around the corner, then quickly pulled it back, burying her head as close to the wall as possible.

“What do you see?”

Bethany didn't want to answer and just kept trying to bury herself in the wall. Claudia pushed her back gently and took her own quick look before pulling back as well.

Lying half out of the store window was a young man wearing a store manager's uniform. He had a thick mustache and was wearing a tie and a whistle like the high-school coaches in movies from the 80's and 90's. His eyes were open and glassy. Most of his forehead and temples were covered in blood from a deluge of small cuts from the window, and one or several large blows to the head. His chest was dark crimson, the material too wet with blood to show any wound.

Bethany had regained some of her composure just as Claudia was losing hers, “Did you know him?”

Claudia brushed a tear away with her hand and spoke in a whisper, “Not really. I saw him around. He usually liked Boston creams, though who doesn't like a bit of custard?”

Bethany shook her head, “Sporting goods store, that's surprisingly smart for a mob mentality. That place has the climbing equipment to get out of the mall and to anywhere else you might need to go. From their attitude toward the store manager I doubt they'll be too willing to share with us, though.”

“What do we do now?” Claudia asked.

“We've got to get out here before those goons start sweeping the rest of this floor. Maybe the emergency exits will work.”

“But what about Jared? There's no way we can bring him with us,” Claudia said.

Often Bethany suspected that the people around her knew the answers to their own questions, but needed her to say the answer anyway. Her parents were getting a divorce, but they looked to her to make sure they were doing

it right. Grace kept fighting with nurses and doctors, but all the while she was waiting for Bethany to say it was okay to let go.

“We have to leave him, at least for now,” Bethany said. “Maybe since he’s hurt they’ll leave him alone.”

Claudia clearly wanted to object. It was part of the social contract of being an uncaring heartless pragmatist that other people get to yell at you about it, before ultimately going along with your plan. Claudia seemed too drained at the moment to care.

“You’re probably right. We can come back down and check on him once we’ve found some supplies and these gangbangers have taken off.”

It was unlikely they were ever coming back to this store again, but if it helped the fiction of their reason for leaving, then that was alright.

Bethany dialed her sister one last time. When again she heard the three-tone message, she held the power button down to turn off the phone.

CHAPTER SIX

The basement was hardly as Reverend Mercado remembered it, to the point he hadn't been entirely sure it was there. Though he was at the church daily, most of his time was spent either in the sanctuary or his office. The AA meetings he attended once a week used to meet down there, but that was at least a decade before his time. This particular church basement was like any other, relics of decades of church plays scattered amongst old choir robes and stacks of retired hymnals and Bibles, all covered in a thin layer of dust. The unceremonious flipping of ceiling and floor had littered their path with all sorts of random fabric, torn pages, and broken props.

He had no idea where he should go next. The basement was a labyrinth, as most church basements are. Somewhere would be a service closet that should have the sewer access that was their next logical step, but Mercado suspected it would take hours of wandering randomly through these corridors to find it. Mercado and his young companion walked slowly and silently, the younger man shuffling in a daze, the older lost in thought. Disasters were like that. In the moment things are moving too quickly for you to do anything but act on instinct. But after the immediate moment of danger there is so much time and silence.

Mercado was thinking about his wife and daughters, something he hadn't had time to do while he was counseling this young man. The kid at least had the certainty that his girlfriend was dead and maybe in a little while the comfort that there was nothing he could have done about it. Mercado was not so fortunate. He didn't know if he should be mourning his family, or desperately trying to find them.

Like most professional men, Mercado saw the world and what was happening in it largely in terms of its relation to himself. He was going to be at the church until the late afternoon, so he didn't need to remember the movements of his wife or his children unless it directly affected him. What did it matter if his wife went to the store or the mall, or if she had just stayed home as long as he knew where they'd be when he got home?

His children's lives were fairly regimented between school and extra-curricular activities, but what if one of them had become sick during the night and stayed home? He hadn't seen them since about 9pm last night. In the early morning he'd made coffee for himself, eaten breakfast alone, and left without waking anyone, not even turning a light on in the kitchen, like a thief in the night.

If his wife hadn't left the house then she might already be dead. The foundations of this old church were already beginning to creak ominously. A two-story home, even one with a basement, wouldn't hold up long under these conditions. Even if she had wedged herself in the crawlspace, she would probably only have extended her life by a couple of hours.

His eye caught the open page of one of the fallen hymnals and he chuckled bitterly to himself. The foundations of faith may be built on the word of God, but even stone buried into bedrock wouldn't hold against these forces for long.

His children were probably in school and safe in the care of others. They might even have an easier time getting into the sewers than he was having in this maze of a basement. If his wife ... If Rachel ... had gone out she might be safe as well.

But what if they were dead and he was left alive? What was he supposed to do then? What were any of them supposed to do? Mercado had never contemplated suicide, but there were times in his life when he hadn't been particularly interested in living. There's a hole in everyone that needs to be filled with something for us to be complete. Mercado had tried the bottle first, and when that finally didn't work he tried God. God gave him a wife, a family and a purpose, and now he'd taken it all away.

Some people would consider it blasphemous to be angry with God. Everything that happens is part of his plan, meaning that everything terrible happens for a reason. Some people are comforted by the notion that bad things are either part of a divine plan, or punishment for sin. Mercado had a

different view. God doesn't cause bad things to happen in the world, he just makes the best of a lot of bad situations, starting with us. But sometimes it was okay to be pissed off at God for not stepping in sooner. God wanted to have a relationship with his creation, and people in relationships fight.

So how was God going to make the best of this bad situation? Was Mercado supposed to save this unbelieving kid, all while skirting around the issue of his girlfriend having died without faith? What kind of salvation did he exactly have to offer? The world seemed to be operating on Old Testament logic again.

"I thought only Catholics used the real thing," the young man said abruptly.

"Excuse me?" Mercado said, shaking his head out of a thick fog.

"This," the young man said, holding up a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Must've survived the fall by landing on someone's old vestments."

Mercado scanned the small pantry and found several other bottles and a jagged corkscrew dangling from the wall. Like everything else in the basement, this little corner had been long forgotten.

The young man frowned, "I probably can't drink any of these, can I?"

Mercado shook his head, "That'd only be a problem if the bottle was specifically blessed, which typically doesn't happen until shortly before the service. And we haven't used real wine for communion in all of the years I've been preaching here. They're probably older than you are."

"Hey, anything's good as long as it's not Manischewitz," the young man exclaimed.

Mercado chuckled, "People still drink that stuff?"

The young man nodded, "Mostly college students trying to show a sophisticated side on an unsophisticated dollar. Better than a 36 pack of Nattie light I suppose."

Marcado had been more of a whiskey man himself, but like all good alcoholics he'd known times of not being choosy. Without realizing it, he noticed he'd been holding one of the bottles in his left hand, finding the familiar weight an odd comfort.

"What d'ya say rev? A toast to the end of the world?"

Leaving aside the fact he hadn't had a drink in eight years, he didn't think it was the best idea to dull his senses when they were having a hard enough time finding solid ground. Even when the rest of the world was falling away, sobriety and faith were things he could hold onto.

"Yeah," Marcado nodded, "I could use a drink right about now."

* * *

"Ya think 'cause this jersey has my number on it, I'm entitled to it, right?" Franklin asked as he pulled hangers off a flipped circular rack.

"You want the child sizes," Conesta said. "They're in the corner behind the t-ball sets."

"Fuck you," Franklin said casually as he kept flipping through. "Hey, Eddie! I think I found one of yours."

He held the shirt up and examined the tag, "You're in luck, Eddie. It's marked down 95% clearance so it practically isn't even stealing."

"Knock it off, Franklin," Manny said impatiently. Franklin just kept chuckling at his own joke.

"We're not here to loot," Stankowsky interjected. "A souvenir shop is not a place to find food."

"Not unless you like big league chew," Conesta quipped.

Franklin stuck out his tongue, "That stuff's worse than chewing on toe-jam. Where do they get off claiming that stuff tastes like grape?"

“I’m sure there are trace amounts of grape, and 79% used shoe leather,” Conesta retorted.

Stankowsky just shook his head, “Come on, there’s a concession stand just around the bend.”

Franklin picked up the bat he’d leaned against the rack, but not before stuffing a couple of the jerseys into his bag. He tossed Eddie the jersey he’d found, laughing and patting him on the shoulder as he passed. Eddie rolled the jersey around his hand before letting it fall in a tight crumple.

The concession stand was a mess. Popcorn from oversized poppers had spilled all over the floor, mixing with a noxious looking yellow substance. Conesta picked his shoe up in disgust. “What the hell is this stuff?”

“Nacho cheese,” Eddie offered.

“Yuck! Better it’s on the floor. That stuff always tasted like warm jizz anyway,” Conesta said, scraping his shoe against the pricing board.

“And you know this from personal experience?” Franklin asked.

Eddie cracked a smile. He didn’t like vulgar humor especially, but right now it was just good to get a laugh from something.

The pricing sign was soon torn away from the ceiling and tossed casually on top of the layer of nacho cheese and popcorn. The plastic creaked with every step as they piled behind the counter. Most of the hot dogs had been in sealed steamer containers. Eddie wasn’t too sure how long the dogs had been soaking in their own juices, but he was too hungry to care. He cracked one of the latched doors, letting the juice and hot steam flow out onto the floor and mix with rest of the mysterious liquids at their feet.

Once the stream had stopped, he slid a dog out into his palm and latched the door shut again. The dog tasted thin and limp, but it sat somewhat satisfactorily inside his stomach. The rest of the guys started taking dogs out for themselves, finally dumping the contents into a flipped over baseball cap.

Everyone ate with abandon, with no thought to rationing or to the limits of their stomachs. With no refrigeration the dogs would spoil in half a day anyway, so it was better to eat what they could now. It was the best meal any of them were going to have for a while.

They hadn't given any particular thought to their surroundings, or to the noise they were making. Most of them had dropped their bats against the back wall, far out of reach. When a quiet voice asked them for a hot dog they didn't even hear it at first.

The gunshot that followed was heard by all.

A young teenager, not older than 15 or 16 was holding a pistol unsteadily in their direction. His first shot had embedded itself in the wall about six inches from Franklin's head. Rather than being scared, or grateful for being alive, Franklin was furious.

"You nearly killed me, you little shit!" Franklin spat.

The kid's aim was shaky; the gun was twitching to the side every few seconds from trembling hands. An unlucky spasm might cause the gun to go off again.

"I said I want a hot dog," the kid replied with surprising bravado, even for someone holding a gun.

"Where the fuck did you get the balls to fire that thing anyway, cause yours certainly haven't dropped!"

Franklin had more to say but Belanchek put up an arm to silence him. "It's alright, there's plenty for everyone."

"The hell there is!" Franklin said, "Who's he to threaten us?"

"He's not threatening," Belanchek said calmly, "he asked nicely before and just lost his patience a bit. Isn't that right son?"

The young man's grip was loosening slightly, but Eddie could see the tension in his shoulders. Unless the kid had somehow snuck the gun past security, there was only one way he could have his hands on one now. A closer glance at the kid's shirt and knuckles gave some hint as to how he had come by the weapon.

"My sister's hurt. She needs something to keep her strength up. I just need some food and maybe a little water so I can help her."

"Bullshit," Franklin said, "We're supposed to buy whatever sob story you make up just because you're waving a gun in our faces."

The kid lowered his gun a few inches, "I'm sorry about that. I just ... look she's really hurt."

"I bet you don't even have a sister. I bet you just want to stuff your face, you fat fuck," Franklin said.

The kid's grip tightened again, "Are you gonna help me or not?"

"You want a hot dog so bad? How about you suck my...." Franklin was cut-off mid-sentence by the top of his head splattering against the wall. He'd had more colorful things to say, but at least he'd gotten his general point across before sliding into a lifeless heap amidst the hot dog juices.

Conesta screamed in anger and grabbed the kid's arm. The gun fired wildly, ricocheting off the metal grill and refrigerator before striking Stankowsky in the arm. Belanchek stepped forward and chopped down hard with his right hand into the back of the kid's elbow, loosening his grip and sending the gun clattering to the ceiling.

Stankowsky was running on adrenaline, not even noticing the new hole in his arm as he picked up a bat. He held the bat by the middle and swung wildly at the boy's ribs. The young man crashed into Conesta under the force of the new onslaught. Conesta managed to roll out from under the kid while

Stankowsky took a few steps forward to stand over him. The boy lifted his left arm to protect himself, which Stankowsky swiftly broke with his next swing.

The blows fell quickly after that, alternating between the ribs, knees and any available soft tissue. Conesta had regained his feet and picked up his own bat, joining in on the festivities by shattering the boy's right collarbone before swinging the bat down hard on his throat.

Belanchek pushed Conesta back but the damage had been done. His last blow had collapsed the kid's windpipe. His eyes bulged from lack of air and he convulsed violently, each jolt of pain from his freshly broken bones sending him into a new fit of spasms.

Eddie picked up the gun, the grip sticky with yellow slime. He raised his arm calmly, and without a word fired three rounds into the kid's chest. With a final spasm the kid kicked up and collapsed back, dead.

Eddie handed the gun to Manny and quietly took the bat from Stankowsky. The ball in Stankowsky's throat looked like it was about to burst its way out. He just kept staring blankly at the slowly growing pool of blood as it started to mix and swirl with the yellow liquid on the floor. As he kept staring, Eddie pulled one of the jerseys out of Franklin's bag, tore a section out of the middle, and started to dress Stan's arm.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kammie's hand was going to be a problem. By the time she'd crawled to the supply closet for alcohol and some sterile gauze, the blood had run all the way down her arm and was dripping onto her scrubs. She bit down on a roll of gauze and held her hand out as far away from her as possible, hoping distance would somehow lessen the pain. As the alcohol flowed over the wound it was all she could do to keep from screaming. After pouring out about half the bottle, she wrapped her hand quickly and tightly.

The wound wouldn't close without stitches, but at least she might be able to contain the bleeding, hopefully without cutting off circulation to her fingers. She stood inside the dark supply closet, her former sanctuary, closing her eyes and hoping the faintest hope that when she opened them, all this would be back to normal. Her throbbing hand and the memory of that empty lounge grounded her too well in reality for that dream to last long.

When she rejoined Grace the young woman insisted on looking at Kammie's hand. Kammie had seen this kind of thing a lot with the daughters and sons of older patients. A fierce protective instinct kicks in, and sticks around for days, even weeks, after the parent has passed on. Kammie waved off Grace's offer gently with her good hand. She didn't want the young woman worrying more than she had to, given all they still had to do.

It took another hour to check the rest of the rooms on the floor, though at least twenty minutes of that had been taking abuse from Mr. Thomas and trying to resist the urge to knock him out. Out of the 30 patients on the ward she'd lost four: Grace's mother who'd likely passed just before the incident, two patients crushed beneath hospital beds including the woman in room five, and a man who'd suffocated after his respirator shut down. Maybe about half her patients could walk if the need arose, and another five might move with assistance, leaving seven confined to their beds, eight if you included Margie who still had not regained consciousness.

A few of the patients on oxygen would need new tanks in a couple of hours, but they could last a while without them until some kind of help arrived. Then again, she'd been wandering around for the better part of two hours and hadn't seen anyone from the other floors. She doubted they were the only people left alive, but if the other parts of the hospital were anything like hers they probably had enough of their own problems to deal with.

Grace suggested congregating the patients who were well enough to be moved into the lounge with Margie, while the two of them tried to come up with some way to move the others. Even the people who could walk did so with great difficulty, having to lift IV poles above the metal slats between ceiling tiles, all while shuffling in hospital booties. A few of the patients had managed to pull on clothes, though most were forced to wander around in thin hospital gowns. Kammie did her best to help the patients maintain a shred of dignity, though even she stifled a laugh when a particularly wide step exposed a plump 55 year old fanny.

A series of hastened footsteps followed by a loud bang caught her attention. It took her a few moments to realize the sound was coming from the stairwell. The loud bang was soon followed by a series of thumps against the door, punctuated by copious amounts of swearing. Through the small glass window she could see one of the part-time paramedics trying to jump for the door handle. The ceiling, which was now the floor, was about four feet below the door, with another couple of feet between the base of the door and the handle. It would have been a stretch for even one of the taller ride-alongs, and Frank was only five foot two.

Kammie pushed the door open gently and looked down.

"You rang?"

"Hey Kammie, can you give me a hand?" Frank said.

Kammie bent down and grabbed Frank's arm with her uninjured hand. As she pulled up she nearly fell backward as her calves grazed the ceiling slats. Frank

stumbled forward and caught them by grabbing the door frame. After righting them both, he grinned wildly.

“Somehow I knew you’d still be alive,” Frank said.

“About time you showed up,” Kammie shot back.

Frank was young, but already almost completely bald. Kammie had never seen his original hair color, but the bits that were left were dyed a dark red. The “part-time” paramedics usually worked the same shifts as the nursing staff, at least three 12 hour shifts a week, which usually amounted to more like 14-16 hours.

Despite pulling roughly the same hours, there was a definite pecking order between the nurses and the medics, with the medics at the bottom. Most were only asked to start an EEG, or maybe to put in an IV, while the nursing staff took care of the rest. Frank had never abided by this divide, and Kammie had never seen the need to build fences either. Mostly Frank was just happy to be away from the stress of riding in an ambulance, never knowing if you’ve saved a life or merely delayed the inevitable.

At the end of a long shift Frank would sometimes stand on his head, walking down the hall on his hands while balancing a tray of green Jello on his feet. The patients got a kick out of it, as did most of the nurses as long as their supervisor wasn’t around.

Frank looked around at the patients congregating in the lounge and the distinct lack of other nursing staff. “Are you alone down here?”

“Just me and a civilian, what’s happening on the other floors?”

“I’m not sure. It took me forever just to get up here from upstairs. I’ve only been to the floor below this one, but it looks like more of the same. At least now you’re all seeing the world the way I usually do.”

A tremor tipped the ceiling beneath their feet and Kammie stumbled into Frank, wincing as she hit her bad hand. The tremor shook the building for maybe five seconds, then stopped.

Frank shook his head, "I was wondering when that was going to start."

"What?" Kammie asked.

"We're essentially hanging upside-down from the foundation. Even the best engineered building isn't designed to withstand these kinds of stresses. Some of the floors might hold up a little longer since they have connections to other buildings, but we're going to start losing the upper floors soon."

"Assuming the whole building doesn't tear itself loose first," Kammie nodded grimly.

"I knew there was a reason I came up here. What would I do without your smiling outlook on life?"

They'd already been hanging for several hours, and there was no sign that gravity was suddenly going to snap back to normal. She'd had some hope that she could treat these patients in place until some kind of help arrived, but it looked like Frank was all she was going to get.

"We've got to get these people off this floor and into the basement levels, maybe the parking tunnel," Kammie said.

Frank nodded, "My thoughts exactly. Any ideas on how?"

Grace walked over from the lobby and Frank extended a hand. Grace shook it limply, then turned to Kammie. "I picked a hell of a day to wear sandals. I don't know how you guys can stand for all those hours."

"I'm not sure either," Kammie smiled. "How is everyone?"

"Wondering what the hell that tremor was. I told them it was nothing to worry about. I'm assuming I was lying?"

“Not really. Worrying isn’t going to change the outcome one way or another. Those tremors are only the building beginning to tear itself apart.”

Grace nodded, “I’m glad to hear it wasn’t as bad as I thought. It’s much much worse.”

Frank smiled, “A couple of hours with this one and you’re already Miss Sunshine and lollipops.”

Grace looked about to chuckle, but then her face fell. She looked down at the floor, then back up at Kammie. She looked more exhausted than just a moment ago if such a thing was possible. Then again, she had probably been at her mother’s side for days. Her hair was oily and pulled back, and her eyes were white from exhaustion.

“We can’t take her with us, can we?” She said quietly.

Frank looked about to say something, but Kammie brushed a hand against his side to quiet him. “I’m sorry, Grace.”

“Can I see her?” Grace said softly. “I don’t want to just leave her.”

Kammie looked at Frank who nodded. “I’ll see if I can round up some boards for the patients who’ll need to be carried. You guys take all the time you need.”

Grace and Kammie had skipped her mother’s room as made their sweep of the patients. By now they’d been back and forth across the hall so many times that stepping over the ceiling struts was something they could do almost by memory.

The world is such a small place at the end. Her mother had died in a room maybe 10 feet by 15 feet, with only her daughter for company. Was that going to be the way it was for the rest of them? They’d never be able to go outside, never feel the sun beating down on their faces again. They would have to huddle in small dark corners until they ran out of water, or food, or maybe even air.

The people who had fallen into the sky had died in an infinite expanse. It must have been so quiet and peaceful. Sure you might scream for the first few minutes or so, but then you're just falling without ever stopping. It'd get harder to breathe at some point, but the cold would shut your body down long before you'd have to worry about it. You would just float upward, rising toward heaven. How many of them would step into the sky at the end, just to feel the sun one more time?

They found Grace's mother lying flat on her stomach, cocooned under her deathbed. If she'd died half an hour earlier she'd be laying upside-down on a cold metal slab in a drawer waiting for a ride to a funeral home that would never come. Grace took a few tentative steps in the door, then hung back. She'd spent so much of the last few days in this tiny room, yet it still felt so cold and foreign to her.

Kammie knelt down gently, and slid the bars back on one side of the bed. It creaked, and moaned, and threatened but it didn't topple over. She reached over and grabbed under the body's thigh and shoulder. She pulled gently and slowly, taking care not to bump the bed. When she had Grace's mother out, Kammie turned her over slowly, taking care to reposition her gown and smooth out her hair. She grabbed a blanket that had been resting on the floor and pulled it up to the woman's chest. She didn't look all that much older than Kammie, maybe ten years at the most, and it was clear even from her sunken features that she had once been beautiful. Her daughter was evidence of that if nothing else.

Kammie turned and extended a hand toward Grace, who moved tentatively. Kammie beckoned gently until Grace sat down on the other side of her mother's body. Kammie discretely watched from the door as Grace stroked her mother's hair for the last time, kissed her softly on the cheek, then brought the sheet up over her face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eddie looked down at the dead young man and felt nothing. His act had been merciful, a hastening of the inevitable. And if not merciful, it had at least been just. Franklin still lay in a bloody heap behind Eddie, his blood and brain matter plastered all over the back wall. This young man had shot his teammate. It didn't really matter if he'd meant to do it, or if Franklin had goaded him into it, the young man had taken a life and so his was forfeit. Accounts were kept short at the end of the world.

If Eddie felt anything it was anger, but not toward the young man at his feet. Conesta had been the one to deliver the truly fatal blow. Rather than face his actions and take some share of the responsibility for what to do next, Conesta was curled up in a far corner of the concession stand, rocking back and forth with his head in his hands.

Stankowsky wasn't acting much better. He hadn't curled into a ball, but only because his body was frozen in place. His arm had been limp when Eddie dressed it, and now hung uselessly at Stan's side. Eddie knew the wound hadn't been that bad; Stan's arm worked. But Stankowsky didn't seem to think he had any use for it. He just kept staring at nothing, trapped several inches deep behind his eyes.

These two men had seen the lives of thousands, maybe tens of thousands, all snuffed out in an instant. What did one more matter?

Eddie shook his head. He couldn't believe the way he was thinking. He wondered if they all could see it on his face. Was that why Manny wouldn't look at him?

"What are we going to do with the bodies?"

The question had come from Belanchek. He'd been crouched next to Conesta trying to get him up, and had given that up to walk over to Eddie.

“Nothing we can do. We leave them,” Eddie answered flatly. His dead tone snapped Conesta out of his daze.

“What the hell, Eddie? What if that was you lying there?”

“I’d expect you to leave me too,” Eddie replied.

“You heartless...” Conesta had gone from being withdrawn to being on the verge of tears in a matter of seconds. Eddie hadn’t really realized before just how young Conesta was. He was maybe five or six years older than the kid.

“Hell of a time to be talking like that,” Eddie continued. “You and Stan didn’t seem to mind turning this kid into a human piñata. And don’t pretend that any of you would have gotten too sentimental over me if I’d been the one to buy it instead of Franklin.”

Conesta seemed about to protest, but instead looked down at his feet.

“What would you have us do, anyway? Do we drag Franklin and this kid back to the stands and toss them into the sky? We can’t bury them, and we can’t hide them. This stadium is a tomb, and we’re grave robbers trying to grab whatever we can before this place comes down around our heads. Franklin understood that much at least.”

Conesta had shut down, and Stankowsky just kept staring blindly forward. Eddie could feel Manny’s stare without turning around, but he suspected, hoped, even Manny knew he was right.

All of a sudden Belanchek got a wicked grin. “You’re wrong, Eddie. Franklin wouldn’t have left you. He probably would have eaten you.”

Eddie raised an eyebrow, “Excuse me?”

“Better WE eat you than somebody else,” Belanchek replied. “Meat’s not going to be easy to come by.”

Eddie chuckled, “When did you get such a sick mind, Bellie?”

“I’ve always had a sick mind; I just kept it to myself. And it’s Bella, not ‘Bellie’. Y’know, like Bella donna.”

“You’d rather we called you a beautiful woman?” Manny asked.

Belanchek shrugged, “Better than being called a stomach or a tiny bell.”

They all laughed. Eddie should have felt terrible, yet if felt good to get some kind of a release. If he couldn’t laugh he’d become bitter like Franklin, or broken like Stankowsky and Conesta.

He turned to Stankowsky and clapped him on the shoulder. Stan’s eyes refocused abruptly, like a room full of static resolving into a single note. “You okay?” Eddie asked.

Stankowsky swallowed. “Yeah,” He said hoarsely. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The ramps to the skybox seats were about fifty feet out and around from where they were. They had a gun but they were already down six bullets, and they still had little in the way of water or medical supplies. For those things they’d need to go down before they could climb up to whatever safety the sewers offered.

The ramp was smooth cement, lined on either side by tight meshes of rubber coated squares. Long electrical line pipes ran down the middle, broken up by evenly spaced bulbs in cages. The floor above them was rougher, designed for the slow shuffling of hundreds of pairs of feet on their way to the upper decks before making the rest of the schlep up to the nosebleed seats.

Eddie was surprised at how reluctant he was to take that first step down. They’d all felt relatively safe nestled in the cement hallways of the stadium, which looked largely the same right-side up as down. But now Eddie was convinced the floor could crack at any moment. Despite the ramp’s gentle slope, he took every step cautiously with both arms outstretched, and the rest of the team followed his example.

They climbed down three levels before Eddie suggested they take a break, stepping off the ramp and back into the catacombs of the stadium. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he leaned against a wall to try to focus on something solid. His mind was creating all sorts of nightmare scenarios. His hands were tingling, and he told himself it was just his own blood rushing through his palm and not the building beginning its death throes. What if he was right about this being a tomb, their tomb?

Belanchek shouted, and Eddie's eyes snapped open. Even though they were only a few levels down, the distance between the ramp and the seats was a lot smaller, and he found Belanchek standing right on the edge looking out. Eddie walked up beside him and Belanchek turned, a rueful smile on his face.

"Wives, girlfriends and mistresses," He muttered, shaking his head back and forth.

"What?" Eddie asked.

"Down there's the complimentary seats. Y'know, for our families. We couldn't see them from the dugout, never even saw them go."

Eddie frowned. He'd given his seat to a woman he'd been dating for three weeks, one of the few moves he had left to impress anyone. And for the life of him, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember her name.

* * *

The service hallway was dark, the only light cast by the exit signs in dim red flickering cones. Several 50 gallon trash cans had toppled over, spilling garbage everywhere. Each step brought another new sound and another unpleasant sensation on Bethany's stocking feet. She'd left her shoes behind in the donut shop. Heels weren't very good for climbing, but they were better than bare feet for stepping on half-eaten pizza. Claudia gave Bethany's hand a reassuring squeeze as they moved slowly down the hallway. Her hands were smooth and felt like they had a permanent thin layer of flour from hundreds of hours of baking.

The service stairwell was about 100 feet down the corridor, but it felt like it had taken hours to reach it. Bethany turned back to look at the small circle of light at the other end of the hall. She told herself that no one could see them even if they were looking, but she wasn't so sure. Claudia, meanwhile, was examining the double doors to the stairwell before letting out a snort in disgust.

"Locked," Claudia vented. "We can't go back out there and look for one of the maintenance guys with those maniacs running around."

Bethany replied calmly, "It's alright; let me give it a try."

"You hiding a crowbar under that skirt?" Claudia whispered, her voice tense and coming out in bursts.

"Not exactly," Bethany said as she produced two small pieces of metal. The first was slightly curved and flexible, the other firmer and straighter. "Never had to do this upside-down before, but I think the concept should be pretty much the same."

Bethany inserted the thin piece into the lock, and started probing gently. Claudia's face was a mixture of surprise and amusement. "That something they teach all lawyers?"

Bethany shook her head, "It's something you're expected to know before you go to law school. I learned from my mom, actually, or rather from her keeping a lock on the liquor cabinet. A determined teenager with an afternoon to kill can accomplish wonders in the face of such adversity."

She smiled as she remembered Grace taking the brute force approach, pulling on the lock until her hands were sore and sweaty. Bethany on the other hand, had been calm and methodical, and had the lock open in less than ten minutes with a couple of hairpins. The memory of what happened afterward was largely obliterated by the quantity of gin consumed, though she did remember her father trying to hold back both of their hair as one threw up in the bathtub and the other in the toilet.

A satisfying thunk indicated success. She pushed the door open triumphantly, only to take in a sharp breath of air as she looked down.

“That’s not a skylight down there, is it?” Bethany whispered.

Claudia looked over cautiously, “I don’t think they build skylights in maintenance stairwells.”

Bethany looked down, speaking almost absently. “Either the stairs are going to fall out from beneath our feet, or they won’t.”

Claudia frowned, her mouth pulling to the left in consideration, “I guess you’re right. Lawyers first.”

Bethany took a deep breath and sat down on the door jam. The ceiling was low in this part of the building so from a sitting position all she had to do was hop down about a foot. The cement was slick and she almost lost her balance when she hit the ground, but Claudia steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. When Bethany was sure of her footing she stepped to the right, leaned on the wall for support, and put out an arm to catch Claudia as she jumped down.

The floor was definitely moving. One of Bethany’s first temp jobs had been on the second floor of an office building. There was a passageway next to her cubicle and every few minutes when someone walked by, her monitor, the desk and the floor moved ever so slightly. By lunch her stomach was often queasy from all of the low-level earthquakes. This floor felt like a hundred people were running a marathon down that passageway.

She took a tentative step toward the stairs, then stepped back as she nearly lost her balance again. The stockings weren’t going to cut it. She’d never much liked going barefoot as a child, but even she could admit the evolutionary advantage bare feet gave her over slick nylon. She hiked her skirt up around her thighs and tried pushing the material down. She hadn’t realized until that moment how much she’d been sweating, and the nylons were stuck to her like a second skin.

Claudia let out another grunt of disgust and without any warning stuck one of her long fingernails about an inch down Bethany's thigh. She pointed her finger outward and pulled, the sharp nail tearing a hole about the size of a quarter. She took both hands and tore downward till the material split at Bethany's foot. Another tug upward and she tossed the stocking unceremoniously down the center of the stairwell.

"Bet Jared wishes he could see us now," Claudia smirked as she worked on the second nylon.

Still a little surprised, but grateful to be free from the clingy and slick material, Bethany flexed her toes and felt the cool metal and cement beneath her feet. The climb was much easier, her foot almost sticking to the stair with each step.

"Can I ask you something?" Claudia said as they climbed onto the next landing.

Bethany chuckled, doubting an answer of no would actually stop this woman. "Sure."

"Why donuts? I mean, you don't exactly have the figure of someone who eats the food of the common man."

Bethany smiled, "Just something my dad and I used to do when I was a kid. He worked long hours, 12-14 hour shifts to be able to provide for all of us. He'd get off work at one in the morning on a Friday, and be waking me up around 5am to go with him for a donut and coffee. He should have been exhausted, but he was always so excited for the opportunity to spend time with his girls. We'd sit in the donut shop and talk for hours, watching the sun come up."

"That's nice. All my dad ever did was sit on the couch in front of SportsCenter. My mom used to say that keeping a constant vigil wasn't going to give the Browns a Super Bowl."

“Or the Cavs a national title. I wonder if King LeBron is happy he came back,” Bethany said.

“Miami has too many open spaces. He’d have been a goner for sure,” Claudia answered.

Claudia and Bethany were nearly out of breath by the time they reached the top of the stairs. Bethany leaned against the wall for a moment, taking in air in big gulps before pushing tentatively on the double doors. To her surprise, the doors swung wide open, and she fell forward on her face.

Looking up she could see thick black boots mostly hidden underneath baggy jeans. A young man in his teens with a buzz cut and scraggly facial hair gave her a toothy grin. Flanking him on either side were two equally unappealing characters. One had a noticeable red stain over the whole front of his shirt, and the other was running his hands up and down a baseball bat like he was trying to rub it out.

“Well,” the young man said softly, crouching down so he could meet Bethany’s gaze directly. “What do we have here?”

CHAPTER NINE

“That’s surprisingly good,” Reverend Mercado said, biting his bottom lip after taking a sip from bottle number two. “I’m surprised this stuff lasted this long with all the boozers in this church.”

“Probably used to be a lot more where these came from,” the young man added, taking the bottle gratefully from Mercado. He took a long swig, brushed his lip and offered the bottle back to the father. Mercado accepted the outstretched bottle and took another long drink. He could feel the last little bit of liquid sloshing around in the end of the bottle and had to push down the temptation to finish it off. Even a drunk has a sense of fairness.

“I knew they were holding out on me,” he said, lowering the bottle and looking at it. “I mean, I did tell them I was an alcoholic, but you’d think they’d at least offer me a sip of the really good stuff. I mean, I can understand keeping a man from drinking the crap wines or Budweisers of the world. But this is some really good shit.”

“There’s no justice,” the young man said, “though I wouldn’t have pictured you for much of a drinker.”

“Well, isn’t that the way? We preachers are expected to know nothing about anything. It’s only the really pious bastards who say they know something about God without knowing anything of the world. Wouldn’t you think it’s the ones who’ve sinned a bit who’d have something to really say about sinning?”

“You’re probably right.”

“Of course I am. We all know that sin is bad even if all we say is that it doesn’t make us very happy. But we don’t listen to people who haven’t been through the same things we have, seen the world the way we see it. We want to, but we don’t. Only a man who knows what sin is can appreciate forgiveness.”

Marcado handed over the last sip, which the young man quickly knocked back before opening bottle number three.

“Take women for example. That’s something else we preachers are supposed to know nothing about right?”

“But aren’t you not supposed to have sex?”

“That’s a common misconception. That’s only certain denominations. My faith has always been okay with sex, since before I was preacher. I’ve got a wife and two kids, and I didn’t get them by immaculate conception if you catch my drift. I know a thing or two about women.”

“By my count at least two things,” the young man said, laughing and handing over the new bottle.

“People think I know nothing about sex just because I wear a collar and some baggy black robes. Those are just clothes. It’s you lot who make them holy. God doesn’t give a damn about the kind of stuff we wear. It’s not in the Bible that I’m supposed to dress a certain way, or keep myself from carnal knowledge. God made the pleasures of the world after all. It’s the uptight Christian assholes who make it a sin just to enjoy God’s design.”

“Is that how you met your wife, ‘by enjoying the pleasures of God’s design?’”

Marcado chuckled, “Sort of. I was in a bar near the seminary. The seminary was in a dry town, but there was a wet one just a couple of miles to the south. My friends and I used to go down there, trying to test our virtue against temptation as it were. The really wise man, he avoids temptation like the plague. God gives us the tools to combat sin if we ever actually encounter it, but you’re not supposed to go seeking it out. The devil is someone you can defeat if he happens upon you, but trying to go out and fight him yourself is still a pretty stupid idea.”

“Anyway, we were at this bar having a few when this really incredible woman walks through the door. I mean Eve to our Adam, like nothing we’d ever seen

before. She sits next to us because that's the safe place to be. I mean, who thinks a couple of divinity students are going to chat you up and try to take you back to the seminary, right? On the other hand some women like the forbidden fruit angle. They want to try and get us future priests to do something we're not supposed to do."

"Turns out the rest of my friends were better Christian soldiers than I was. I wanted to see exactly how far she'd go to try and take me off the straight and narrow. It might've looked like I was ignoring her, looking straight ahead while a beautiful woman straddles me and nibbles my neck. But she knew where it counted exactly what my priorities were. The body can't lie about the way it's feeling, no matter how much the mind might want it to."

"This whole dance takes nine, maybe ten rounds of drinks. At some point I black out and wake up back in the dormitories alone. Now I've got confessional that morning, and not a lot of time to ask questions, so I throw on my clothes and run to church. All the while my head is pounding, my stomach is threatening to empty its contents and my brain keeps giving me hazy flashes of images and sensations."

"I was sitting quietly in the box, hoping nobody would come by so I could be alone with my thoughts and my headache when I heard the door creaking. It didn't take long for me to realize it was her. My memory of the evening and its specifics may have been hazy, but no one could have forgotten that voice. She had no idea I was behind the screen, and it took me a while to really focus on what she was saying. When I did I realized she was relaying the events of the previous evening, in every exquisite and gruesome detail."

Marcado's hands went to his throat, "I could barely breathe. It felt like I was still deep-down drunk, where you can't feel anything but the faintest of sensations, and you have to press down extra hard to be sure you can even feel your own body. I don't know how long she talked, but suddenly she said something that grabbed my attention. I pulled the screen aside, leaned forward and exclaimed for all the empty church to hear, 'We did what?!'"

“What happened then?” the young man said, rapped with attention.

Marcado took a long sip and tilted his head back. “I think she slapped me. Or kissed me. Or both. Either way I got a second date, and then another. And the rest is history.”

* * *

One of the hardest things about being hit by a patient is resisting the urge to hit back. Patients hit you for a couple of reasons. Usually, it’s because something hurts, and the attack is an involuntary attempt to fight off that hurt. Occasionally, a patient becomes scared. There are so many tubes and wires connected to them that they just want them all out. Patients can even be scared by the bad things happening around them, like a whole building being upside down for instance.

But some patients are just assholes.

“Get your damn n----- hands off me!”

Kammie and Frank were struggling with an irate Mr. Deckland Thomas, trying to save his life despite his best efforts to convince them it wasn’t worth the trouble. The few stretchers they’d managed to round up didn’t have restraints, so they had to improvise. Patients were being wrapped tightly in sheets, then secured to the stretcher with duct tape. Right now Kammie was thinking about how much better the rest of her day would be if she put a piece of tape over Deckland’s mouth.

“Think about it this way, Mr. Thomas,” Frank said as he grabbed the squirming man by the forearms. “Most of your fellow racists lived in the southern states where there are a lot of open spaces. If you want to keep mindless bigotry alive you might want to stop struggling and let us help you.”

Whether it was Frank’s words or the fact that he’d slammed Deckland down hard enough to knock the wind out of him, the man had at least stopped struggling long enough for Kammie to do her job. Professionalism kept her

from wrapping him tight enough to cut off circulation, but not from allowing the duct tape to stick to the hair on Deckland's arms and legs.

With the stairwell inverted there were no guardrails to keep them from a careless step, only a thin lip of metal a couple of inches high. Grace had hopped down into the entryway to help the patients with IV's start the climb. In an ideal world these people would have been carried instead of being forced to climb, but Kammie simply didn't have enough hands.

Ten patients were able-bodied enough to help, though most had sustained some sort of shoulder or head injury when the world went topsy-turvy. Frank had stitched her hand up as best he could, but it was still going to hurt like ten hells to lift anybody. Counting herself and Frank they could carry six beds at a time, meaning they needed to leave two people behind for the next trip.

Frank had suggested they draw straws for the two people who would have to wait, but Kammie shook her head. This was a triage situation like any other. Kammie moved over to Margie's side where she was still laid out on a couch waiting for a stretcher. Her breathing was slow, but steadier. Pulse was still low, however, and she was unresponsive as Kammie took her hand.

Like it or not there were people with a better chance of survival than Margie. And the shaking seemed to have eased for the moment, so there was really no reason to believe they wouldn't be back for her. Kammie gave Margie's hand a squeeze, kissed her on the forehead, then moved on to the next patient.

With the help of the other patients they had eight mummies in the space of about twenty minutes. Margie and Mrs. Rosen, who was in a coma, were laid out in the lounge all set to travel. Frank put a reassuring hand on Kammie's shoulder. "We'll get the others up three flights then come back for these two."

He gestured to the two nearest helpers. "Barry and ... I'm sorry I didn't catch your name?"

A stocky woman in her mid-thirties replied, "Frieda."

"Frieda, right. You two up for coming back down with us?"

"Depends," Barry said, "Can you take it out of my bill?"

Frank laughed, "Friend, somehow I think this stay is on the house."

The patients who were carrying stretchers jumped down two at a time, grabbing people as Frank and Kammie slid them out. Movement was slow, as the people at the front of each pair were being asked to walk upside-down and backwards.

"Feel each step with the back of your heel and just move nice and easy," Frank called out from the back of the line. "You guys facing forward be careful not to push your partner backwards."

"Make sure you can make it the next floor before starting each flight of stairs," Kammie added. "If you need to take a break, wait till you are on flat ground and move off to the side. Don't be tough or in a hurry. It's better to take a five minute break then to get the rest of us stuck in the middle of a climb."

The stairwell was hot and everyone was breathing heavily. Several pairs heeded Kammie's instructions and moved over for a breather after the first set of stairs, though most were eager to press on. The rumble which had died down was starting up again. A couple of patients gasped as the floor began shaking beneath their feet. The only earthquakes Ohio had ever experienced in recent memory were due to hydraulic fracturing in Pennsylvania, and those had been pretty mild. This shaking on the other hand was getting everyone's complete attention.

"It's alright," Frank called out. "Let's just keep moving nice and easy."

But the rumbling wasn't stopping. It started as a small vibration, like your feet waking up after they've been asleep. Rumbling turned to shaking. Shaking turned to rocking. And rocking turned to thundering. Kammie caught

the flicker of a blue hospital gown before she heard the scream. It happened too fast for her to see who it was, or to do anything but watch.

“Hug the wall!” Frank shouted.

The world was falling around her. The building was shaking so violently that it was impossible to tell if they were even still attached to the ground above. Kammie tried to stay as far away from the edge, but the walls kept leaping out as if to knock her off balance. There were more screams, one of which was probably hers.

Miraculously the shaking stopped almost as quickly as it had begun. But something was wrong. The air was suddenly cooler than it had been a moment ago. The space that had been cramped and hot was now open and airy. Kammie was simultaneously grateful for the relief, and apprehensive about its cause. She didn't dare lean too far, for fear of spilling her charge over the side, but she had to know.

The stairs went down for a flight below them, then abruptly cut off into perfect blue sky. She imagined if she stared down she could see the shadow of the top of the building still tumbling down and away from them. The whole floor was gone, as well as the five floors above it. Grace's mother, Mrs. Rosen, Margie and countless others were right now falling to their final resting place out among the stars.

Some of the patients above her were starting to cry. All Kammie wanted to do was scream. She could have, nobody would judge her. She'd lost her friend, lost her nurses, lost her safe silent space and all the things that seemed to make life worthwhile. But she didn't scream. She mustered up the most cheerful voice she could manufacture and said, “Alright, let's keep moving.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Kiss your knees, bitch!” the skinhead with the baseball bat screamed at Bethany, while the man with the combat boots, presumably their leader, wrapped duct tape around her hands. Her fingers were interlocked under her knees, a position that forced her to lean forward, exposing the skin on her lower back and hiking the skirt halfway up her thigh. The boots wearing thug ran his hand down her leg, beginning along her thigh and moving slowly down to her calf. He smiled the whole time, his sweaty hands leaving behind a trail of moisture that made her shudder with disgust.

Already she could see he thought of himself as the charmer. Moments before he'd restrained baseball bat and bloody shirt from knocking her senseless after the stunt she pulled in the doorway. Claudia had been a couple of steps behind her when Bethany fell through the door. Bloody shirt had made a move to jump down into the stairwell, but Bethany had wrapped an arm around his ankle, sending his full weight tumbling on top of her. Claudia had taken advantage of those precious seconds and had practically flown up several flights of stairs until she was out of sight.

Bethany didn't blame Claudia; she would have done the same thing if she'd been in her place. If Claudia had tried to save her they'd both be sitting here tied up. She would come back, Bethany was almost sure of it. She was coming back.

Blood from the boy's shirt had stained Bethany's left shoulder, and the crush of his weight knocked the wind out of her. She felt like she'd bruised or broken most of her ribs. She coughed and wheezed for nearly half a minute, while the young man tried to kick his way off her. In the end, combat boots had pulled his compatriot off Bethany, even offering her a hand up, which she refused, even though it meant another half minute of the men watching as she struggled to stand.

Back in the present the leader was finishing his tape job. "There we are, my dear. Isn't that much better?" he said, the back of his fingers brushing her calf as he pulled away.

"Go to hell," Bethany spit out through clenched teeth.

"Quiet, whore!" Baseball bat hadn't settled on a favorite gender slur for her yet, but she was sure he'd get there.

"That's enough!" Boots said his voice deeper and more resonate than she would have expected from a kid his age. Just as quickly his affect shifted to a low warm whisper.

"You'll have to forgive him. We're new at this and are still a little rough on the protocol."

"Why are you doing this?" Bethany asked trying to sound less scared than she was.

"Because it doesn't matter anymore," the young man grinned. "You want me to go to hell? Lady, if we're not already there, then where do you think we are?"

"We're wasting our time," bloody shirt said, "Let's just kill her like we did the fucking little-league coach."

The young man shook his head, "There's such a thing as a sense of proportion. We killed the manager because he refused to give us the end of the world discount. He was holding on to the archaic notion that money or property still had value in this new world. But her," he took an appraising look at Bethany, "she still has quite a lot of value."

"She looks frigid to me," bat-boy observed.

"She's just getting to know us, that's all," combat boots answered, "She'll warm up to us once we've had a chance to get acquainted."

“Whatever man, we just need to get out of here,” bloody shirt scoffed.

The young man put a hand on his compatriot’s shoulder, “I assure you we will have time for all of our pharmacological errands. The hospital is only a few blocks from here. Even underground we should be able to get there in a few hours.”

‘The hospital,’ Bethany thought, ‘what the hell could they want there?’

“Your friend is right,” Bethany said. “There’s no point staying here. This building wasn’t designed to hang upside down.”

“Did anybody ask you?!” Bloody shirt’s tone had shifted from vague exasperation with his boss, to open and violent hostility.

Boots must have sensed the danger as well, but his tone remained calm. “If you want to move things along, why don’t you find that Latina our friend was climbing with? She can’t have gone far.”

Bat-boy chuckled and grinned back at boots, “You never know, man. Those wetbacks know how to get out of some tight spaces.”

Boots nodded, “Nothing the two of you can’t handle. I’ll take good care of our new arrival; keep her company until you find her friend.”

The two thugs split off in different directions looking for Claudia, leaving Bethany alone with boots. Bethany wasn’t sure if the situation had just become more or less dangerous. Boot’s hold on the brutality of other men seemed tenuous at best, so keeping them occupied was probably in her best interest. But every time he grinned at her, she felt a cold chill.

She needed to keep him talking, distract him long enough for Claudia to do something.

Evidently he was interested in breaking the ice as well. “Well my dear, we haven’t been formally introduced yet, and since it’s just the two of us we might as well be friendly. I’m Zane. What’s your name?”

She'd seen a lot of hostage situations on TV. The general consensus of all them seemed to be that the first thing you needed to do was get your captor to see you as a person. Tell them something personal about yourself, appeal to their humanity. And that started with your name. But even as she said it, the words tasted like ashes. He repeated it back to her, chewing on every syllable. This was a sound-bite that would remain in her memory long after this prick got what was coming to him.

"Bethany. You don't look like you work in a donut shop. What'd you used to do for a living?"

She hadn't thought about her job in the past tense yet, though the demand for lawyers had probably sharply declined following the events of the morning. Telling him her particular job wouldn't do much to humanize her, but she couldn't refuse to answer either. She had to keep him talking. He would slip up. She just had to give it time.

"I work for Culfe, Holter and Greenwald downtown."

"Y'know I knew you were a lawyer, Bethany," Zane said, sitting cross-legged on the ceiling a couple of feet away. From this position he looked like what he was, just a kid, leaning back on his hands without a care in the world. "That building's just a stone's throw away from my old church."

"You went to church?" Bethany couldn't help the question.

"What's that old saying, 'judge not, lest ye be judged'? I sit before you a hooligan, a hustler, a man of violence. Yet didn't Jesus spend his time with tax collectors and sinners? No, Bethany, I have strayed far from the flock of my redeemer, but I still remember the words that pompous old windbag Father Marcado used to say every Sunday. 'The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.' Or put another way, 'up is down and down is up.'"

"That's an awfully literal interpretation," she responded after a moment's pause. "You think God was always going to flip the world like a pancake?"

Zane grinned again, the longer hairs of his mustache hanging over his pursed lips. “That was the thing I always liked about the good Father. Sometimes he would go on and on about the spiritual meaning behind something, especially when he had a particular axe he wanted to grind. But mostly he just played it straight. The Bible isn’t a metaphorical book; beneath all the poetry there’s a lot of cold hard fact. If God or the Devil didn’t flip the world, then who did?”

“Maybe it was us,” Bethany replied, the quickness of her answer surprising her.

Zane laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. Phlegm rattled in the back of his throat, and he coughed several times as he regained his breath. “That’d be a hell of a thing, wouldn’t it? We didn’t bake ourselves to death, or nuke ourselves into oblivion, we just flipped ourselves off.”

Bethany wasn’t sure why, but she felt like defending her answer, “I read once that if every nuclear weapon ever created was detonated, we could knock the Earth off its axis by half a degree.”

Zane chuckled again, “Maybe, but you and I wouldn’t be sitting here talking about it. There was no explosion, no flash of light, no whoosh of air, nothing. One moment the world was right-side up, the next it was upside-down. Man can’t do anything that cleanly.”

“You see this?” he said pulling out a small joint. “This is natural, this is God given. Grows out of the Earth and is rolled and lit and brings you to another place. Man only knows how to create highs with chemicals and powders, dark crystals. Those are artificial sweeteners compared to this beauty. Sure we can make powders that knock you down twice as hard or twice as long, but it’s not clean. You worry about buildings pulling out of the ground, but what about plants? Maybe trees with deep roots can hang on, get water from somewhere, but this?” He pinched the tip of the joint between his fingers, “this will dry up and blow away, just like you and I.”

Bethany wasn’t sure if it was Zane’s ‘pharmacological regimen’ or just a delusional personality that was driving these ramblings. Was a man’s sanity

like gravity, something that should be solid and dependable, but that can apparently shift without warning? On a different day he'd be saying these things in a Case Western dorm room while getting high with his buddies. But he was saying them to her, and she couldn't even see him properly. Resting her head sideways on her knees felt too intimate, too relaxed. Yet it was an awful strain to try to hold her neck up. She could always bury her face, but that would be an invitation for him to come over and try to coax her out.

She was angry, not just at the threats and the violence, but that Zane had deprived her of a way to properly express her anger. She could thrash, she could scream, but she couldn't make him see her fury. She wanted to force him back to reality, not this juiced up pseudo post-apocalyptic fantasy, but to a world with hard truths and consequences for actions.

"She's long gone, Zane." Baseball bat said. Bethany looked up with a start. She hadn't heard either of them return. "Craig found a couple of crowbars in a toolbox. We should be able to get that sewer access open."

"That's excellent news, isn't it Bethany?" Zane said.

"So you've made friends then," baseball bat said, "guess that means she's coming with us?"

"I don't know," Zane said, considering. "You want to come with us, Bethany?"

The glare was worth the neck pain, "And how exactly do you expect me to walk tied-up like this?"

Baseball bat moved swiftly. The knife came out of nowhere and flicked open in a flash. She felt a light scrape and quick downward pressure as he cut the tape. He grabbed her left wrist roughly as he pulled her up, a little trickle of blood already running down her palm. Her other arm was contained and re-taped behind her back before she'd even regained her balance.

Then she was falling forward, the pressure on her wrists suddenly gone. She took a stutter-step and managed to plant her feet in front of her. She turned

slowly, expecting to see bat-boy laughing at shoving her forward, but he wasn't there.

Bethany suspected that even if she had learned his name she would have found a way to derive satisfaction from the sight before her. Names can only confer so much humanity. We give them to animals after all. Whatever his name was, he no longer had any need of it, not with an arrow sticking out of his chest.