

BUBBLE AND SQUEAK

David Gerrold & Ctein

David Gerrold has been writing professionally for half a century. He created the tribbles for *Star Trek* and the Sleestaks for *Land of the Lost*. His most famous novel is *The Man Who Folded Himself*. His semi-autobiographical tale of his son's adoption, "The Martian Child," won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards and was the basis for the 2007 movie starring John Cusack and Amanda Peet. Ctein and David met through the machinations of John and Bjo Trimble's *Save Star Trek* campaign in 1968 and have been friends ever since—although this is the first time they've written a story together. An active member of the science fiction community for almost half a century, Ctein is the coauthor (with John Sandford) of the New York *Times* bestselling science fiction thriller, *Saturn Run*. He is also the author of several books on photographic techniques as well as many hundreds of articles and columns on photography, computers, and other nonessentials. Ctein's photographic work can be seen at <http://ctein.com>. David and Ctein's thrilling story about the struggle to survive during the onslaught of an overwhelming force of nature enthralls from beginning to end.

Hu Son ran.

He ran for the joy of it, for the exhilaration—for that moment of hitting the wall and breaking through into the zone, that personal nirvana of physical delight. What others called "runner's high." A sensation like flight—Hu's feet didn't pound the ground, they tapped it as he soared through the early morning air.

A bright blue cloudless sky foretold a beautiful day. A sky so clear and deep you could fall into it and never come back. Later, the day would heat up, glowing with a summery yellow haze, but right now—at this special moment—the beachfront basked in its own perfect promise.

Hu usually started early, when Venice Beach was mostly deserted, all sand and

palm trees and stone benches, all the storefronts sleeping behind steel shutters. It was the best time to run. Hu liked the crisp air of dawn, the solitude of the moment, the feeling that the day was still clean, still waiting to be invented—before the owners could ruin it with their displays of tacky, tasteless, and vulgar kitsch.

Some of the cafés were open early though, and by the time Hu reached the Santa Monica pier, run its length, and then headed back toward home, the morning air was flavored with the smells of a dozen different kinds of breakfast, the spices of all the various cuisines that flourished here.

Heading home, Hu passed other morning joggers. This was a favorite track. Nods were exchanged, or not—some of the runners were lost in hidden music, others in their personal reveries. He recognized most; he'd been running this track for more than a year. He was probably regarded as a regular by now.

The final leg. He trotted past the last of the brash touristy areas. Later this strand would teem with summer crowds, exploring the souvenir stands, the ranks of T-shirts printed with single entendres, the displays of dreadful art, all the different fortune tellers and street performers, but right now, this community was still lazily awakening, coming back to life at its own pace. There were still the occasional shapeless lumps on the stone benches—the homeless, wrapped up against the chill of the night, waiting for the heat of the day to revive them. Even in July, the morning air had a bite, with a salty flavor from the grumbling sea.

Hu turned and jogged up the narrow way that pretended to be a street, a block and a half, slowing down only in the last few meters. He hated to stop, hated to drop back into that other pace of life—the faster more frenetic life, where you weren't allowed to run, you had to walk, walk, walk everywhere.

He glanced at his wristband, looking to see where his numbers were today. Not bad. Not his personal best, but good enough. "Probably still stuck on the plateau," he muttered. "Gonna have to push to get off. Just not today."

Hu opened the back gate and started peeling off his T-shirt. He liked the feeling of the cold morning air cooling the sweat off his skin. He took a moment to slow down, to let himself ease down into this world, then finally stepped through the door and called affectionately, "Honey, I'm homo—" then headed straight for the shower.

Hu Son didn't just appreciate hot water, he loved the luxury of it. In eighteen months, he'd have his master's degree in cultural anthropology, and after that, he'd go for his doctorate, but already his studies had given him a clear sense of how lucky he was to be living in an age where clean water was taken for granted—and hot water available on demand.

California's drought had officially ended some years before, but Hu rarely lingered in the shower. Even at this remove, he could still hear his mother banging on the door, shouting, "Leave some for the rest of us!" Old habits endured. Today, however—today was special. So he took his time, soaping up and rinsing, three times over. He closed his eyes, paced his breathing, and allowed himself to sink into his personal contract with himself.

"I am powerful," he whispered. "I am vulnerable," he continued. And smiling, he concluded, "And I am loving." He repeated it a few times, a personal mantra, until it was no longer a declaration, only his renewed experience of himself. And then, one more phrase. "Especially today!" Opening his eyes, Hu nearly shouted that last. "Because today, I am getting married!"

An electric screech interrupted him—alarm sirens outside. It sounded like the whole city was howling. Like any other Angeleno, anyone who'd lived in the city more than six months, Hu ignored it. It was meaningless noise. Everything was noise, from the daily growl of motorcycles and Asian "rice-rockets" to the nightly screams of drunks and junkies.

Hu turned off the water and heard James calling from the kitchen. “Hu, you need to get in here!” Something was wrong, James only called him Hu when he was upset. He grabbed a fresh towel and wrapped it around himself. A second towel for his hair and he headed toward the kitchen where James was standing, leaning with his back against the counter, a mug of tea in his hand—but focusing intensely on a small television on the end of the kitchen table. Without looking up, James held out the usual mug of tea for Hu.

Hu took it and pecked his fiancé on the cheek. “What’s up, Bubble? What are all the sirens for? Some kind of test?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but took his first sip. Chai. . . . “Ahh.” He glanced toward the television. The president was talking.

“Now what? Are we at war?”

“It’s Hawaii,” said James.

“We’re at war with Hawaii?”

“There’s been a quake—”

Hu’s buoyant mood evaporated. “Oh no. How bad?”

“Both Honolulu and Hilo were hit by tsunamis. Really big—the biggest ever.” James turned to Hu. “When did your folks fly out?”

“They didn’t. Dad needed an extra day. So they’re flying out this evening, they’ll catch up with us tomorrow at the hotel.”

“No, they won’t. And we won’t be there either. Honolulu airport is gone.”

“Wait. What?” At first, Hu didn’t understand. How could an airport be gone? Then he realized what James was telling him. “That’s not possible. A whole airport—?”

“And half the city—”

“Oh, shit,” Hu said, his mug of tea suddenly forgotten in his hand. “That’s—just bad.”

On the TV, the president was still talking, a row of grim-faced people stood behind him. Or maybe it was a repeat. The scroll-bar across the bottom of the screen was filled with incomprehensible words. They moved too fast for him to make sense of them. And outside, the sirens still screamed.

“Shit!” said Hu. “All I wanted was one little honeymoon—” He became aware of the sirens again. “And what’s all that noise about—? We’re not— Shit! What’s going on?”

James put down his coffee. He turned to Hu. He took Hu’s mug from him. “Squeak. Sweetheart—” His expression was grim. “It’s not just Hawaii. It’s the whole California coast. The tsunami is headed for us now. We’ve got maybe three hours before it hits—”

“A tsunami? Here—?”

“A tsunami. Here. A mega-tsunami. Just like the movie, only bigger—”

“But that was only a movie—” Hu stopped in mid-sentence, remembering that movie, that scene.

James Liddle had been SCUBA diving since his teens. After college, he’d set up his own small company, specializing in SCUBA services to local studios. “Underwater? Let it be a Liddle thing. Call us!” Because of his skill, his professionalism, his dependability, and his charming good looks, he was on speed dial for several stunt coordinators.

More than once, James had been called in to teach various film and television actors how to dive safely—or at least look like they knew how to dive safely. More than once, he’d doubled for actors who were too valuable to the studios to be allowed to do their own diving, but he couldn’t say who. Most of the bigger shoots involved nondisclosure agreements.

Hu’s family had moved from Hong Kong to Vancouver when he was eight, where his father opened a consulting service/business school, where he taught westerners how to do business in China and occasionally set up deals himself.

When Hu was twelve, an aunt he’d never met died of cancer, so his mother came

south to Los Angeles to manage her brother's large unruly family; she brought Hu with. As the new kid, as the Chinese kid, and also as the smallest and the smartest in his class, Hu was a target for bullies of all sizes—so his uncle enrolled him into a series of physical activities to build up not only his body, not only his ability to defend himself, but also his self-esteem. Eventually Hu studied karate, judo, Tae Kwon Do, and modern dance. By the time he was nineteen, Hu was earning extra money doing stunts in occasional action films. Though he never doubled for any of the major actors, he was often somewhere in the background—and in a memorable comedy, he'd been featured as one of the dancing ninjas.

James and Hu had met at Culver Studios. A massive team of stunt doubles had been assembled for a disaster picture, another overblown disaster picture, a fantasy of multiple simultaneous disasters—hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanoes, tidal waves, and the return of disco. Everyone knew the picture was going to be awful; it was assumed (though never spoken aloud) that nobody upstairs knew how bad it was—either that, or it was actually intended from the beginning to be a flop, a tax write-off, or perhaps even some bizarre kind of money-laundering. Who knew? The only people who understood Hollywood financing were alchemists, and few of them were ever allowed out of their dungeon laboratories into the light of day.

But on the ground, the money was good. A lot of people had a profitable summer working on the film. As with any big effort, there were sexual relationships, babies started, babies stopped, babies born, and of course, a few divorces and emotional breakdowns, plus a number of lifelong feuds begun and exorcised, some in private, others in public.

James had worked for seven weeks on various underwater sequences. Hu had come aboard in the last week as a stunt player, running from the onrushing water. The first few days, there was no actual water. All that was to be added later by a team of talented CGI artists in Hong Kong or New Delhi. Anyone whose name came before the credits would be taking home seven figures and points on the gross, but domestic jobs were shipped overseas in cost-cutting acts of dubious economy. But there was still work to be done locally.

They had to shoot one key scene on a stretch of Wilshire Boulevard—from Rodeo Drive to the Beverly Wilshire Hotel—and they had exactly seven minutes out of every thirty when the Beverly Hills Police Department would block off traffic for the director to capture his carefully orchestrated panic, a frenzied evacuation from unseen waves.

Hu's job was to be part of the crowd, running down the street, running through the cars, until he finally hit a specific mark, where he would fall to the ground as if he was being swept under the killing wave—except one of the assistant directors liked his look and gave him a different role where he got to be a featured kill.

The camera started at a high angle, looking up the row of stopped cars, with the distant wave roaring toward the foreground. Hu ran toward the camera, running between the line of vehicles. The camera lowered, promising a closeup, but just as Hu arrived at that spot, a panicky driver—another stunt player—opened his driver-side door so Hu slammed into it—and then the wave overtook them both. The unseen side of the car door was carefully padded, so Hu could hit it hard without injuring himself.

The director liked the shot so much that he decided to add a follow-up bit, giving Hu two additional days of work. Finished with the devastation of Wilshire Boulevard, the film moved to a Hollywood backlot for specific closeups of death and destruction.

For these shots, the director needed real water, not virtual, and the production relocated to the Paramount lot, the site of the city's second-largest outdoor tank—the Blue Sky Tank, so called because its towering back wall could be painted to represent any kind of sky, stormy to cloudless, that a director might need. Although the

Falls Lake tank at Universal was noticeably larger, it was also more expensive to fill, filter, and heat.

The filmmakers needed a variety of shots with Asian men and women as background players. This was so their Chinese co-financers could edit a somewhat different version of the film for the Asian markets. The Chinese version would include several characters and subplots not in the American version. The joke had initially been whispered in the front office, but of course it eventually filtered down to the production crew as well—the picture would do well on that side of the Pacific, because Asian audiences like to see white people die. But to be fair, a few Chinese extras had to go down too.

Hu didn't care, he was just happy to work. Because of his marvelously startled expression when he'd slammed into the car door, the American director wanted to follow up by showing Hu struggling for a while in real waves before finally (fake) drowning. So Hu spent a hot August morning in the tank, pretending to die—"On this next take, could you look a little more terrified, please?" Dutifully, Hu struggled, gasped, and waved his arms for help that would never come, until finally disappearing obediently beneath the surface of the foaming water.

The tank was barely four feet at the center, the waves were machine-produced, and the foam was a specific detergent. Floating across the entire surface of the water was an assortment of Styrofoam flotsam, representing the debris stirred up by the tsunami. The shot didn't seem very dangerous—at least that's what Hu believed until he was caught unprepared by a sudden sideways push of prop debris, hard enough to punch the air out of his lungs and leave him gasping for air, involuntarily sucking in a mouthful of water, coughing, and choking desperately as he flailed.

James was one of the safety coordinators. He'd dived into the water, swam under the crapberg, grabbed Hu, and pulled him off to the side of the tank, hanging him on the sloping surface and staying with him until he regained his breath. Neither noticed when the director shouted, "Cut! That's the best one yet, we'll use that one! All right, let's get the camera in the water for the dead body shot—"

The director hadn't noticed what had happened, but one of the assistant directors had seen, and on James' direct recommendation, quietly added an additional stunt-fee to Hu's paycheck. No one said anything to the film's director—a man notorious for arguing with stunt players about the cost of each gag. He had a bad reputation in the stunt players' community.

After that, James kept an eye on Hu. In the last shot of the morning, Hu had to pretend to be dead, floating face down in the water while a camera crew in dive gear photographed him from beneath. James had been there to coach the camera crew, showing them how to keep their bubbles out of the shot. And that was when Hu, not knowing James' name, had jokingly called him the bubble-wrangler.

Later on, at lunch, they sat opposite each other—the group shared a table under a large craft-service tent that dominated the parking lot next to the commissary.

Hu had a smile. James had a grumpy charm—it was enough.

The two began that long careful dance of curiosity that would eventually, though not immediately, lead to James' little house in Venice Beach. Hu had gotten his nickname—Squeak—from the sound his running shoes made on James' tile floor.

It began as a physical thing, but eventually grew into a relationship. Bed-buddies became roommates. Roommates became lovers. And lovers became—

One strange stormy night, while the two of them were lying side-by-side, staring at the ceiling and listening to the rain, the usually taciturn James had said, "What do you think—"

"About what?"

"About *us*, about stuff—"

Hu was still learning how to listen to James, but this time he heard more than the words. He heard the intention.

"I think . . ." he began. He rolled onto his side to face James. "I think yes."
"Yes?"

"Yes, you big bubble-wrangler. Yes, I will marry you."

"Oh," said James. "I was going to ask you if we should get a cat."

"Huh—?"

James grinned. "But getting married—that's a good idea too." He pulled Hu close, and kissed him intensely.

The rest was details.

After a few weeks of dithering about plans and schedules, and how much neither of them wanted the gaudy circus of an actual wedding ceremony, they decided to just go down to City Hall, do the deed, and then fly to Hawaii for a week. Hu's parents, now together again, were initially more concerned about Hu marrying a Caucasian than a man—but finally decided to show their acceptance by joining them on the island.

The plane tickets were sitting on the kitchen table—and the president's voice was still droning on—now repeating the original broadcast. Outside, the sirens abruptly fell silent. "I suppose—" said Hu, staring at the travel folder, "I suppose—we can get a refund."

And then, it hit him.

The grim expression on James' face said it all.

"Shit! We're going to lose the house, aren't we? Jimmy—?"

"We're gonna lose everything. Everything we can't carry on our backs."

* * *

There were only three people in the world who had ever called James Liddle "Jimmy."

The first had been his mother, right up until the day he came out to her. From that moment on, to express her disappointment, he was "James." The second had been Nate Lem, his arrogant, overweight fraternity brother—he'd called him "Liddle Jimmy" once too often and gotten a bloody nose for it. After that, he didn't call James anything at all, he left the room whenever James entered.

The third was Hu Son. When he said "Jimmy" it was either affectionate—or important.

James said, "They don't know how big it's going to be, but we've only got three hours to get out of here." He took a breath, his mind racing. "Let's not panic. Let's take a moment and think. It's all about the prep. We gotta get all our cash, all our IDs, all our cards. Um, I have a go-bag, you'll have to pack one. We'll need bottled water and protein bars and—and whatever else is important. Tablets, laptops. All our legal paperwork, especially the insurance stuff—"

Hu Son stood frozen for a moment, his heart racing. "You're serious—oh my god, you are. Oh, god, Jimmy—"

James grabbed him, held him close. "It's okay, it's okay—we're going to be okay. Let's just take it one step at a time. First step, think—what's important? What are we going to need? What can we leave behind? What do we absolutely need—?"

Hu said, "Um—I don't know. Um—" He looked around the kitchen, mentally sorting through everything, his favorite mug, the pictures on the wall, the beautifully sculpted merman figurine they'd bought on a trip to New Orleans. None of that really mattered. He realized he was naked. He headed toward the room they had christened as "the badroom"—the place where it was good to be bad.

"Um, clothes. I'll grab clothes—"

"Not the big suitcase," James called after him. The one they had packed last night

for Hawaii. “Only what can fit in the carry-on. Jeans, hoodies, T-shirts, underwear, socks—”

Hu was already pulling things out of drawers. “Toothbrushes, deodorant, first-aid kit—”

“Right, good.” James realized he was still holding a mug of hot tea. He took one last swallow, poured the rest into the sink, and opened the dishwasher to put the mug on the rack. It didn’t matter now, did it? But he put the mug on the rack anyway.

“Okay, Jimmy-boy,” he said, talking aloud to himself. “What else? The camera, for sure. Eight thousand dollars for an underwater camera rig—I’m not leaving that behind. And the memory cards and batteries. Oh—” He turned to the shelf, grabbed a nearly full box of Ziploc plastic bags and followed Hu into the bedroom. “Here. Triple bag everything that isn’t waterproof.”

“You think—?”

“I think we’re going to plan for the worst, hope for the best, and prepare for anything. We’ll stuff it into dry bags at the office.” While Hu pulled on shorts and shirt, James continued sorting through drawers, throwing stuff onto the bed. “Fuck—”

“What?”

“The motorcycle is in the shop—”

“No prob. We’ll take the van—”

James had gone to the nightstand. He grabbed a large folding knife from the bottom drawer, and the travel-safe, then the travel bag from the closet shelf. He shook his head. “Bad idea.”

“Huh?” Hu stopped, shirt halfway down over his head. His voice came muffled.

“Squeak, you didn’t grow up in this city.”

“Yes, I did—”

“Not as a driver. We are not gonna be traffic today—”

Hu finished pulling his shirt down. “Then, how—?”

“My SCUBA gear is at the office. I can’t leave that behind—” James tossed the travel-safe into the carry-on. He shoved the knife into the pocket of his jeans. “I don’t know how bad it’s going to be, but I’m thinking there’s gonna be a big need for divers after this thing hits. I don’t know, but I’ll need to be prepared. We can bike to the office, grab whatever gear, and from there, we can head inland. Are you ready—?”

“Half a minute—” Hu stopped, looked around. “Last minute check—”

“I don’t want to scare you, but we need to get moving.”

Hu debated with himself, finally lost the argument, grabbed his running shoes and shoved them into the carry-on. “I paid too much for these shoes. They’re coming.” He stopped, looked uncertainly to James. “You think it’s gonna be that bad—”

James looked grim. “You know all those safety courses I had to take, the fire and rescue courses, the Red Cross courses, lifeguard, all the paramedic stuff?”

“Yeah. You did that for the licenses, so you’d be more valuable to the studios—”

“It was part of the job. Stunt safety. Water safety. Everything.” He gave the bedroom one last check of his own, still talking. “We had to learn about disasters, all kinds, and prepping for survival too. That’s why I keep a go-bag under the bed, and why I’m always nagging you to keep one too.” He stopped, he took a breath. “I got to see the pictures from the Christmas Tsunami and Fukushima as well, the ones they didn’t show on TV. I never told you—but it was . . . ugly. So we are walking out of here right now and we are heading for the highest ground we can get to the fastest way we can. Is that it? You got everything?” James moved to close the carry-on—

Hu stopped him long enough to toss in two more items, a fist-sized bronze Buddha that he grabbed from the top of the dresser, a wooden cross with a naked Jesus pulled from the wall—and one more, a small resin replica of Mickey Mouse in red robe and blue sorcerer’s hat. “Gotta take the household gods, Bubble. Bad luck to leave ’em.”

The television was no longer replaying the president. Now, the Mayor of Los Angeles, backed up by a phalanx of city councilmen and police, and confronted by a forest of microphones, stood behind a podium, trying to look calm as he laid out the first attempts at emergency evacuation plans. His voice was shaking.

James and Hu stopped long enough to listen, long enough to realize that whatever the mayor was saying, none of it was going to help them. "Wait," asked James, "Have you eaten? Grab those boxes of protein bars. Eat two of them now. And the water bottles, drink one now. Don't scarf, don't guzzle, bring it along. Come on, let's go."

They almost made it to the door, James with the knapsack holding his expensive new underwater camera, and his go-bag in his left hand—Hu with a knapsack holding water and travel-rations, his carry-on in his right hand.

Hu stopped abruptly. "No! Wait!"

"Now what?"

Hu dropped the carry-on, ran back to the bedroom, came out a moment later, carrying a small black box. "I almost forgot the rings! The wedding rings!" He held the jewelry box high for James to see, then shoved it into his pocket. "Hell or high water, we're getting married."

"Probably high water, but yeah. Hell or high water."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Now let's go—"

* * *

James pulled the plastic tarp off the bikes and unlocked them. Despite the high wooden fence around the tiny yard, he still didn't trust the neighborhood's population of permanent transients.

"I'm gonna miss this place," Hu said.

James didn't answer. He just shook his head and led them out to the bike path. They took a moment to pull on their helmets and double-check the bungee cords around their bags, holding them firmly to the racks on the back of the bikes.

"You ready?"

"No. But let's go anyway."

It wasn't a long ride to the office. The beachfront had gone curiously empty—few of the stores were open, several looked abandoned. There were still people here but not the usual slurry of ambling shoppers and tourists. They saw a few speed skaters with backpacks, several people puffing and pulling oversized wheeled luggage, a scramble of surfers running for their van, and more bicyclists than usual. Most had backpacks and other luggage strapped to their bikes and handlebars. But everyone was moving with purpose. Most were walking fast, trotting, a few were even running. It wasn't a panic—not yet, but the clock was running.

James' company, their company now—Liddle Things—was set in a small white building, three blocks up from the beach. James didn't rent to casual tourists, too much risk, so there was little need to be on the beachfront where rents were noticeably higher. He unlocked the heavy front door; they wheeled their bikes inside and locked the door behind them. James went behind the desk and unlocked the back room where he kept the tanks and masks, the diving rigs, tool belts, and assorted other paraphernalia.

"Shit!" he said, looking around, taking stock, realizing how little he could save. He blew out his cheeks. "We're gonna lose it all, Squeak. More than fifty thousand dollars invested in this stuff—all gone."

Hu wasn't sure if he should say anything. He recognized the mood—the same growling darkness that always came over James when dealing with money, especially a shortage of it. "The insurance—?"

"Won't cover the half of it—" James shook his head. "No—there's just no way to

save it, no fucking way.” He sighed in resignation. “All right, let’s get the bike trailers. You take the new one, it’s lighter. You attach, I’ll do triage.” He began pulling things off the wall and out of lockers.

Hu knew the drill. The bike trailers were convenient ways for cyclists to carry surfboards, SCUBA gear, camping gear, or even a few bags of groceries. They attached easily. He and James used them a lot, for almost any trip less than three miles. Hu didn’t mind driving, he could listen to his music, but James hated getting behind the wheel, because he found urban traffic frustrating—the poor behavior of other drivers made even the shortest outing feel like a death-defying exercise.

James talked as he worked, annotating every decision with a justification. “I’m gonna want my wet suit and my new dive computer—that thing cost fifteen hundred dollars. It does everything but make coffee, and I still haven’t had a chance to use it. I’m gonna need it if there’s rescue work. You grab those spare tanks and put them on your trailer. And the camping bag. I’m afraid we’re gonna need it. I’ll take the main tanks and the portable compressor. I might have to wear the rig. Hmm, harness, backplate, maybe I should wear a couple of tanks, too? What else? A pro-grade mask—the new one with the dual lamps, fins, tool belt—I can hang the belt on the handlebars, anything that isn’t waterproof goes into the dry bags, we can put those in our knapsacks, everything else in the travel case, that’ll go on the trailer. Oh, and grab those new headlamps too—”

Hu laughed. “We’re gonna look like a couple of underwater bag ladies—and you with the SCUBA gear on your back—”

“Not gonna leave it—”

“Jimmy—? Isn’t it all too much to carry? All this weight?”

“If it is, then we’ve both wasted a fortune at the gym. And all that damn healthy eating.” James paused, got serious. “Squeak, this is my career. Just like your new expensive laptop. I need this.”

“You don’t have to convince me, Bubble. Give me whatever you need me to carry. We’ll do it.”

They finished quickly. Less than fifteen minutes.

“Is that it?”

“It’s gonna have to be.” James looked to his partner, his tone abruptly thoughtful. “We’ll take the bikeway—that’ll be the fastest. The only traffic will be other cyclists. But only to Twenty-sixth Street, or Bundy if we can, then we’ll turn north. I think if we can get to Sunset, we can go up one of the canyons to Mulholland, maybe take it to Topanga, get down into the valley that way—”

“And from there?”

“I dunno. Who do we know in the valley with a guesthouse? Or a backyard big enough for the tent?”

“Whatsisname—that writer who’s always calling you?”

“Mr. Source Material? Maybe. What about your cousin?”

“Maybe. If you’re willing to put up with my uncle—”

“Yeah, there’s that.”

“Maybe if we can get to Pasadena, there’s Chris and Mark—”

“Melinda has a guest house—”

“So does—never mind. We have options. First thing, let’s get out of here.” James pointed to the bikes. “Okay, safety check on the bikes. Is everything secure?”

Three minutes to double-check all the tie-downs and bungee cords, and they were ready to leave, but at the door, they paused. James put his hand on Hu’s arm. “Okay, Squeak, we’ve got two and a half hours. We can do this. Ten miles an hour, easy-peasy. We could get all the way to Union Station if we had to. All we have to do is pace ourselves. The idiots are going to ride like crazy and exhaust themselves before

they even get to the 405. Just keep thinking of Mike Sloan's teddy bear—"

"Huh?"

"Don't you remember? Sloan's teddy wins the race—"

"Oof. Remind me again why I agreed to marry you?"

"Because I'm the daddy, that's why." James grinned.

"Except when it's my turn."

They pushed the bikes outside, first Hu, then James behind him. Hu started to plug in his headphones, but James stopped him. "You don't want to do that—"

"Shouldn't we listen to the news—?"

"Aren't you scared enough already?"

"Oh." Hu shoved the earphones back into his knapsack, glanced at his wristband, looked west toward the beach. Beyond a lonely palm tree, the horizon looked peaceful and bright. Hard to believe a disaster was rising somewhere beyond. "It's gonna be hot today," he said. "Especially inland."

"Yeah," James agreed, behind him. "Gonna need the extra water."

Hu turned back to him. "All right. I'm ready."

With the trailer attached, his bike was loaded heavier than he expected. He had to take a running start to catch up to James, but they were on their way, heading east.

It wasn't far to the bikeway, less than a mile, but they weren't the only ones who'd had this idea. The bikeway wasn't crowded, not at first, but the farther they rode, the more cyclists joined them—a steady stream of riders pedaling inland with a grim determination. Every few minutes, a light-rail train passed them, howling east on elevated tracks that paralleled the bikeway. Despite himself, Hu looked up—the railcars were already crowded. James had guessed right.

"Sloan's teddy," called James. "Just like one of your marathons."

"Ha ha," said Hu. He focused on his pace, using the same steady counting exercise he used when he ran in the morning. Occasionally, other cyclists passed them at a furious pace, almost panicky. Not wise—but their choice.

Two miles in, and the bikeway was filled. Most of the traffic was other cyclists in professional gear, helmets and backpacks, but sometimes just ordinary people on bicycles—sometimes whole families pedaling in a group. Most were wearing knapsacks, or had cases strapped to the backs of their bikes or hanging from their handlebars. A few, like James and Hu, had well-loaded bike trailers.

Occasionally people passed them, a few speed-skaters, and motorized skateboards as well. Once a couple of assholes on motorcycles came roaring past. Hu stood up on his pedals to look ahead. If the bikeway kept filling up, kept getting more and more crowded, those motorcyclists weren't going to have much of an advantage.

By the time they reached Twenty-sixth Street, traffic on the bikeway had slowed to a sluggish crawl—and east of the avenue, there were so many cyclists ahead of them riding was impossible. People had to dismount and walk their bikes. A few groaned in annoyance, a couple others shouted angrily, some muttered to themselves, but most just kept pushing along. Hu and James dismounted and walked their loaded bikes side-by-side.

More frustrated riders piled up behind them, but no fights had broken out. There was still plenty of time. Most people were helping each other. One woman was holding another's bike while the first one changed her baby's diaper. Elsewhere, a professional-looking rider had stopped to patch a flat tire for a crying teenage girl. Another was helping an uncertain middle-aged man put a loose chain back on his bicycle's gears.

It wasn't a panic, not yet. It was still an exodus. Not disorderly, but it wasn't moving fast enough. At this pace . . . James looked to Hu, shook his head, leaned over and whispered, "Time for an alternate route."

It took them nearly ten minutes to work their way to the next opportunity to exit

the bikeway, Cloverfield Avenue. They weren't the only ones abandoning the narrow route. Some of the cyclists were turning south, most were turning north.

James and Hu went north. Just on the other side of Colorado Boulevard, there was a good-sized parking lot. The lot was already emptying of cars, the last few people driving away frantically. James pointed, and Hu followed.

They pulled themselves out of the steady stream of people remounting their bikes. Hu pulled out the first water bottle, took two swallows and passed it to James, who did the same, then passed it back. A familiar ritual. Having done that, they both pulled out their phones. Hu checked the Weather Channel—the temperature was already above eighty and still rising. Okay, not unexpected.

James went to Google Maps, then he tapped for Waze. Both were bad news. Red lines showing heavy traffic everywhere, some routes already painted with stretches of black. Absolute gridlock was beginning. But at least the bikes were moving here—in the bike lanes and on the sidewalks, and even between the long rows of cars. The automobile lanes were barely inching forward.

"It's crowding up faster than I expected. Apparently people are taking this thing seriously. All right, we'll head north here—" James started to push his bike forward again.

Hu said, "Wait."

"What?"

"I've got a text."

"Forget it—"

"It's from Karen—" A series of messages rolled up the screen. Hu looked to James. "She's at work. She needs someone to pick up Pearl."

"Can't she do it?"

"She's doing triage in the E.R. She couldn't get out, even if she wanted to. The streets there are gridlocked."

"Pearl can't get a ride?"

"The neighbor who promised left without her." Hu read the next text. "What an asshole. Apparently, her cats were more important."

"There's no one else?"

Hu kept scrolling through Karen's frantic notes, his expression darkening. "Doesn't look like it. Karen says it's desperate. Pearl is trapped. She can't get an Uber or a Lyft, Ride-Share is down, Access isn't picking up. The Fire Department is moving all their equipment eastward. She tried calling for an ambulance, but—" Hu lowered his phone. "James, we can't leave her there. We gotta get her."

James made a raspberry of disgust. "Fuck. The problem is . . . that damn wheelchair."

"Can we pull her—?"

"I'm thinking—" A heartbeat. "The wheelchair is light enough—it's Pearl. She's not exactly a spring potato. Fuck."

"James—"

"I know, I know—" He puffed his cheeks, blew out his breath, exasperated. "Yeah, we have to try. Uh . . . all right, lemme think." He went to scratch his head, fingers fumbling across his helmet instead. "Fastest way there—"

James made a decision. "Okay. Forget Sunset. Forget the mountains. We'll go up to Santa Monica, it's the next one after Broadway. Then . . ." His voice tailed off as he plotted a route. He turned to Hu. "It's a long slog. If Pearl can get herself down to the street, we'll figure something out. We might have to lose one of the trailers, I dunno, I'll do the math in my head while we ride."

"Can we make it in time?"

James looked at his watch. "Yeah, I think so."

"Can we get her to high ground? Can we get us to high ground—?"

"Straight north up Fairfax would take us to Laurel Canyon. Might be high enough. I don't know. That's not a great route, but . . . fuck, I don't know." James shook his head. "Worst comes to worst, I don't know, we might be far enough inland. Even a ten-story building might be tall enough. Maybe. I don't know. This is fucked. Let's just do it. Come on, we've been through worse—"

"No we haven't," said Hu. "*This is the worst.*" But he was already tapping a message into his phone. "We're on our way." He sent it to both Karen and Pearl, shoved his phone back into his pocket and grabbed his handlebars. "Okay, let's go."

* * *

James and Hu pedaled east on Santa Monica Boulevard, weaving their way through a slow-moving mass of cars and people. But at least it was moving. Both sides of the avenue were headed inland. There was no westbound traffic. It helped—a little.

It was a business district here, but none of the stores were open. There were a few broken windows, but not many. People were determinedly walking east, most of them turning north at suitable intersections. Some of the cyclists were walking their bikes because there wasn't enough room to ride. James and Hu had dismounted as well and were now walking their bikes side-by-side.

The exodus was serious now. Even the motorcyclists were having trouble maneuvering through the impatient lines of automobiles. It was turning into a crush. The inevitable speed-skaters darted everywhere, sometimes nearly colliding with unwary pedestrians. Occasionally, they saw an ambulatory bundle of rags doggedly pushing an overloaded shopping cart. Even the homeless were leaving. And once a pair of hipsters rode by on hoverboards.

A woman behind them started complaining loudly—making pointed remarks about their overloaded bikes and bike trailers. James muttered a curse under his breath, but shook his head and kept pushing forward. Hu looked over to him. "Are you okay?"

"I will be. Are you?"

"I'm . . . not complaining," said Hu. He had a thought. "I'm wondering. Do you think maybe Pearl's building might be tall enough? If we could get her to the roof—"

James went silent, thinking about it. Finally, "I wouldn't want to risk it, would you? It's an old building, wood frame, it might not survive the impact. It's not just the water, it's all the crap being pushed by the water. It'll hit like a horizontal avalanche. And even if the building survives the impact, she could be stuck up there for days before anyone could get to her. And the damn wheelchair is another problem. So, no."

"It was just a thought. I was worried about the time."

James looked at his watch. "We're okay." He pointed. "We're almost to the freeway. Once we get to the other side, it should be easier going. Well, could be. We'll burn that bridge when we get to it." James pushed his bike ahead, effectively ending the conversation.

The 405 freeway divides the L.A. Basin. It separates the western and southern communities from the rest of the megalopolis, as it winds south, vaguely paralleling the coast. Parts are elevated highway, parts are sunken, but all of it is a ten-laned barrier to traffic trying to move to and from the coast. The inadequate and infrequent underpasses and bridges that cross the 405, its on- and off-ramps, are bottlenecks that can back up traffic for blocks even on a good day.

This was not a good day. Gridlock spread outward from every crowded access ramp and crossover. In a few hours the entire length of freeway—from the Sepulveda Pass all the way to the Mexican border—would be gone. But right now it was a major obstacle.

Where Santa Monica Boulevard crossed under the 405, several LAPD motorcycle officers were calmly working to unravel the chaos at the underpass. Surrounded by frantic and desperate drivers, they were doing their best. They were scheduled to

withdraw at least twenty minutes before impact—if they could get out. That wasn't certain anymore.

At the mayor's desperate orders, both sides of all major surface streets were now mandated for eastbound and northbound vehicles, especially through the underpasses and across the bridges. Both sides of the 110 and the 405 were now handling northbound traffic.

It wasn't enough.

Police and news helicopters circled overhead. Other choppers, all kinds, were shuttling east and west, their own small contributions to the evacuation. The apocalypse was being televised. Further south, at LAX, every plane that could get off the ground was heading inland, some with passengers sitting in the aisles.

James and Hu came to a stop on the sidewalk just past the Nu-Art theater—an ancient movie house that had survived for more than nine decades. For most of its history, it had been a cinematic sanctuary, unspooling an assortment of independent films, obscure foreign dramas, various cult classics, assorted Hollywood treasures, a variety of otherwise forgotten and questionable efforts, occasional themed festivals, and the inevitable midnight screenings of crowd-pleasers like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and other film-fads of the moment. In a few hours, it would be closed forever.

James pointed ahead—the underpass was gridlocked. The officers had blocked off the northbound on-ramps with their motorcycles, and were now directing traffic to use the southbound off-ramp instead, their only remaining access to a northbound escape, but even that was moving slowly. Too slowly. Even with cars crawling along the shoulders of the freeway, the 405 just couldn't accept any more traffic.

Los Angeles had not been designed for an evacuation—not on this scale. No city had ever been designed for such a massive torrent of people, an exodus of unprecedented size, a titanic crush of desperate humanity.

And yet, somehow, it moved.

Not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough. But it moved.

Some of these people would survive—if they could just get over the hill into the San Fernando Valley, or even halfway up the Sepulveda Pass. There was time.

Except—

—except for the angry shouting.

Which was why James had stopped.

An old green van, a decrepit-looking Ford Windstar, hastily overloaded, had collided with a silver Lexus, a fairly new model. Both vehicles were in the middle of the road, blocking three separate lanes. A frightened woman sat in the passenger seat of the Lexus.

Two desperate drivers had left their vehicles to confront each other—neither had given way, both had tried to force their way forward, only to demonstrate that specific law of physics that two objects cannot occupy the same space—so now they were screaming at each other in near-incoherent rage.

A crowd of other drivers surrounded them, also screaming, demanding that they move their fender-crunched vehicles out of the way. Snippets of conversation echoed off the underpass walls—

“Get your fucking cars out of the way—”

“Not until I get this asshole's insurance—”

“It's your goddamn fault, I want your insurance—”

“There's no time for that, you assholes—”

“Will both you idiots move your goddamn cars—”

“Daddy, I wanna go home—”

“The police are right there—”

"Good! They can arrest this jerk—"

"Just please move it to the side, so the rest of us can get by—"

"Move it where?! We're boxed in by the rest of you—"

"I don't back up for assholes—"

"It's okay, I do—"

"I'm not moving till he gives me his insurance information—"

"We don't have time for that, and your piece of shit Ford isn't worth it anyway.

You're just trying to hold me up, and I won't stand for it—"

"That's just the attitude I'd expect from a spoiled brat manbaby—"

"Guys, please! This isn't helping anyone—"

"Daddy, I gotta pee—"

"If you won't move it, I will—"

"Touch my car and you'll regret it—"

"Why don't the police do something—"

"Okay, enough is enough. You're gonna move this shit outta the way now—"

That last was a burly member of the sasquatch family—red-faced, longhaired, scruffy-bearded, flannel shirt, and the kind of expression that usually stopped all conversation.

"You gonna make me—?"

"Officer, over here! Please!" That was a woman shouting.

Two of the officers were busy trying to stop impatient drivers from backing up onto the southbound on-ramp, intending to join the northbound exodus that way. Two more were struggling to keep the evacuation orderly—one had to dodge sideways as an impatient driver forced his way around the sluggish line of cars ahead of him. They had more immediate priorities than the argument in the underpass. But the backup of cars was growing, and so was the angry crowd.

From his position at the ramp, one of the officers waved furiously at the drivers of the two vehicles, urging them to get back into their vehicles and move, but the two men were too angry, each so focused on winning this argument they couldn't see past their own rage. It looked like violence was inevitable.

"Can we get past that?" asked Hu.

"I don't know," said James. "I'm wondering if we should try to go around it." He pulled out his phone to study the map again. Where was the next closest underpass? Half a block north. Ohio Avenue.

The immediate problem would be just getting across the street. Santa Monica Boulevard was gridlocked. The closest cross street was Sawtelle, just on the other side of the Nu-Art theatre. Maybe they could thread their way around the stalled cars—

A sudden shift in sound, a scream of incoherent rage. Both James and Hu whirled to see—

Sasquatch was now waving an aluminum baseball bat. "You gonna move it—?" This was followed by a well-aimed blow. The right-front headlight of the Lexus shattered in the impact. "You gonna move it now—?"

"What the fuck are you doing—?"

"Giving you a reason to move it—"

"Fuck you! You're gonna pay for that—"

"Let's make it two—" Another swing of the bat, it bounced off the left headlight. A second swing shattered it. "And three—" The windshield shattered next. The woman inside flinched and tried to scramble across the seat.

"Stop it, goddammit! Stop it!"

"Move it and I will!"

The driver of the Lexus scrambled into the car, but instead of starting the engine, he came out waving a—

“Gun! He’s got a gun—!” The crowd scattered. The panic rippled outward. At its spreading edges, people ran or ducked, hiding behind the most convenient cars.

And just as quickly, three of the police positioned themselves, flattened across the hoods of several stalled vehicles, guns drawn, and pointed, held steady in both hands, red laser dots wavering on the Lexus driver. The lead officer shouted, his voice electrically amplified—“Drop it! Drop the gun! Now!”

Confused, the Lexus driver turned, staring from one officer to the next. “But he . . . he smashed my car.” He waved the gun around, as if to point it, but Sasquatch had conveniently disappeared.

“Drop the fucking gun! Now, goddammit!” Not exactly standard LAPD procedure, but the pressures of the situation were getting out of hand.

“I just want to get out of here!” the Lexus driver wailed.

“Drop the gun and move your car!”

“No, no, no!” The man insisted. “I didn’t do anything! He hit me! He has to move!” Sensing that he was blocked in, he turned around and around, pointing the gun from one driver to the next. “Everybody get out of my way! Let me out of here—” He looked desperate, he was shredding into incoherency—

“Last warning! Drop the gun. Drop it. Now.”

“Please! Just let me out of here—”

“Oh fuck,” said James, quietly. “They’re gonna shoot him.”

Hu put his hand on James’ shoulder and pushed. The two of them flattened to the sidewalk together, their bikes falling beside them.

Three quick gunshots, followed by a beat of silence—and then the screaming started. “Oh my god, my god!” And: “You didn’t have to do that—!” Followed by orders from the cops. “You, move that Lexus. Move it now! You, back up! You, follow him!”

But there was no organization. There were too many voices. There was too much screaming, and too many people pulling in too many directions at once—

And a couple more gunshots, coming from another direction—

James half rose up to look, then quickly lowered himself back to the sidewalk. Once, a long time ago, he’d seen a riot start. It was ugly.

This was worse.

James looked to Hu. “Let’s go back.”

Tentatively, they levered themselves back to their feet, both a little shaken. Hu touched James’ arm and pointed. The building behind them had a fresh hole in one of its windows.

James smiled weakly, nodded, pointed west.

Hu hesitated. “Shouldn’t we see if anyone needs help?”

“Pearl needs us more. Let’s get out of here.”

Hu hesitated, uncertain.

James touched his elbow and said quietly, “Triage.”

Hu didn’t like the thought. But James was right. He followed.

Somehow, despite the narrow sidewalk, despite the people around them, they got their bikes turned around and headed a half block west to Sawtelle.

They weren’t the only ones. Drivers who had gotten out of their cars to see what the blockage was at the underpass were now climbing back into their vehicles and turning north onto Sawtelle. James and Hu threaded their way across the intersection and remounted. There was just enough room on the sidewalk to pedal north.

It wasn’t far to Ohio Avenue, a block and a half. But when they reached the intersection and looked right, they came to a stop, both at the same time.

This underpass was blocked even worse. It was narrower and too many cars were trying to get through it. The avenue was backed up with cars arriving from the west, but adding to the gridlock, traffic from Sawtelle was also trying to merge into the

sluggish flow.

"Can we get through there?" asked Hu.

James considered it. There was a cluster of motorcyclists blocking the sidewalk that went through the underpass. It didn't look like they were getting by. Something blocking them on the other side, maybe—?

"No," said James. "Too narrow." That was the most convenient excuse, but he was still thinking about the violence they'd just escaped. This was another potential disaster—another riot looking for a place to happen. He pointed north instead. "Let's see if we can get across. We'll take Wilshire." There weren't any other options.

They pushed their bikes forward. Most of the going was single-file, but there was still room to make it through. Despite their urgency, most of the drivers here were leaving almost enough space for the two cyclists to navigate carefully across the intersection. Their bike trailers bumped a few fenders where they had to push between the lanes, but aside from one red-faced future stroke victim who shouted at them for blocking his nonexistent way forward, most drivers pretended to ignore them.

And then they were on Sawtelle again, pedaling into the Veterans Administration Healthcare Center. Where Sawtelle dead-ended inside the campus, before a cluster of shining white buildings, there was a concrete path cutting directly north, and it was wide enough for them to pedal. They weren't the only cyclists with this idea; a few others raced past them. But James and Hu stopped to walk their bikes because of the foot traffic—the old men in bathrobes and pajamas and shapeless sagging trousers.

In the rising heat of the July day, these ancient men trudged steadily north. They were clusters of fragile age, old but determined. Most of them were using canes or struggling with walkers, a few pushed others in wheelchairs, a few were coming with their IV stands, but all of them were heading slowly and deliberately toward Wilshire. They smelled of old age and soap.

These were the leftovers, the forgotten warriors, the heroes of yesterday—the abandoned ones, abandoned one more time. No one had remembered they were here. There was no evacuation plan for them. The buses had never arrived, they'd been commandeered for the schoolchildren and for anyone else who could scramble aboard.

Maybe, when they reached the boulevard, someone would give them a ride. Or maybe they would just end up as a few more bodies in the long line of hopeful old men gathering along the side of the road, more zombies for the frightened drivers to ignore.

James and Hu passed them as quickly as they could—they tried hard not to meet their eyes, tried hard not to see their frail bodies and watery expressions. But one of the men stopped James with an outstretched hand. "You go. You go on, get out of here. Go and live. Find someone to love and live a glorious life." Another added, "But tell them about us. Tell them to remember. Please—" And a third, "Tell them how we were forgotten, betrayed, abandoned—" And a fourth, "And tell them to go fuck themselves too—"

Both James and Hu nodded and promised. "We will, we will."

They nodded and said yes to everything, they shook the trembling hands of those who reached out to them—and then they pushed on, a hard lump in their throats. They wanted to do more, but what could they do?

And then one of the old men called, "Jimmy, is that you?" Hearing his name, James stopped. Force of habit. He turned and looked.

A frail specter, dragging an IV stand, came wobbling, hobbling across the grass. "Jimmy, it's Grampa."

No, it wasn't. All of James' grandparents had passed a decade earlier. But still, he was startled enough to stop and stare.

Another old soldier came shuffling up. "It's all right, pay him no mind. He's—he doesn't know who anyone is anymore."

But Grampa had grabbed Jimmy's arm. "I knew you'd come," he said. "I told them, I told them you would come to see me—"

The other man shook his head. "Jimmy died. A long time ago. But he doesn't believe it. Or he forgets."

James said, "Hu, hold my bike." He dismounted, put his arms around the self-appointed Grampa. "I love you, Grampa. I'm sorry I waited so long to come and see you. I missed you so much. I have to go now. Your friends will take care of you. But I have to go. They need me at the . . . at the station, okay?"

The old man didn't want to let go. His frail hands trembled as he tried to hang onto his long-lost grandson, but Jimmy pulled away anyway, and finally Grampa said, "Okay, Jimmy. Okay. You be a good boy now. You tell your ma you saw me, okay?"

"Okay, Grampa." Jimmy gave the old man a quick hug, then pulled away just as quickly. He took hold of his bike again—

James mounted and they pedaled on.

"That was . . . that was a good thing you did."

"Triage," said James. "Goddammit."

Hu didn't answer.

They traveled past the line of old men, castoffs in a younger world, all of them struggling in the rising heat. As they turned right to go up the ramp to Wilshire Boulevard, even more old and frail men were gathering in a crowd. Some of them were weeping. Others were stepping into the traffic lanes, knocking on the windows of slow-moving vehicles. Others stood silently on the sidewalk, sunken in despair, gaunt and resigned in the heat of the day. Two looked like they were unconscious on the sidewalk. Here and there, car doors were opened for them—but not enough.

It was a nightmare.

They pushed past. Most of the old men ignored them. They were just two more bodies in the passing parade of people who couldn't or wouldn't help them.

A couple of the old men were shouting obscenities—mostly at the cars, but a few directed their streams of abuse at James and Hu. One hollered at Hu, "That's right, you dirty Jap, run away, run away—or we'll get you again like we did at Pearl Harbor—"

"I'm Chinese," said Hu, but the old man didn't care, or didn't hear. Hu followed James; they pushed on.

There were officers working the underpass here too, but without the same frustration and confusion that they had seen a mile further south at Santa Monica Boulevard. The officers here were also directing traffic up onto the southbound lanes of the 405, pointing cars up the off-ramp, shouting and waving them forward, even demanding they use that side of the highway as an additional northbound escape. Some drivers looked reluctant, this felt *wrong*, but they followed the officers' directions and headed up the off-ramp anyway.

The traffic inched along slowly, jerking spasmodically, filling every spare foot of space—but it moved—only a little at a time, but it *moved* with a single-minded purpose. If these vehicles could get far enough north, far enough up the Sepulveda Pass, these drivers would likely survive.

James and Hu lowered their heads and pushed themselves forward as quickly as they could. They blinded themselves to the naked desperation and pushed east, somehow getting through the traffic at the ramps and into the cooling shadow of the underpass. They didn't linger, the place smelled of fumes. Finally, they were out to the other side and across Sepulveda. They threaded their way through the cars on this side.

When they came to the giant Federal building on the south side of the boulevard, a massive white monolith, Hu looked to James, an unspoken question in his glance. They looked to the crowds gathering at the structure, surrounding its entrances, in-

cluding another legion of old men. James shook his head, an unspoken reply. Bad idea. Not gonna be enough room for everyone . . . and still too close to the shoreline.

They pushed on.

A long row of tall buildings lay ahead of them, not quite skyscrapers in the modern sense, but tall enough to be imposing—tall enough to look like safety. Already, the foot traffic was getting thick—businessmen, residents, students from the UCLA campus a mile north—the buildings were filling up. The top floors would be crowded.

When James and Hu finally got to the intersection of Westwood and Wilshire Boulevards, they hit a new obstacle—a huge gaping hole in the ground that was the excavation for the Westwood terminus of the Purple Line, the latest extension to the Los Angeles subway system.

If it had been completed, if the tracks had been laid and energized, the city could have evacuated another half-million people. But today, it was a gaping promise. Unfinished. Empty. And shortly to be flooded, inundated, and scraped away by a bulldozer of debris—

James stopped himself.

Don't go there. Just don't.

He checked Google Maps, nodded, pointed to the right. "We'll take the side streets."

A block south, along Wellworth Avenue, they could easily pedal east again. It was a residential area, mostly one- or two-story houses. Traffic was thick here, but not impossible—just a steady stream of cars, pushing slowly east. James and Hu kept to the sidewalks; there weren't many other riders here, and they made the best progress since leaving Venice.

James glanced at his watch. They were behind schedule, but there was still time. They were going to make it.

If there were no more shootings.

* * *

They followed the side streets—Wellworth, Warner, Ashton, Holmby—past the worst of the jams, and then they were back on Wilshire. It cut easily through the golf courses, but it was an uphill slog, and the bikes and trailers were heavily loaded.

Halfway up the hill, Hu called for a stop. He opened a fresh water bottle, drank half of it, and passed it to James, who finished it . . . and tossed the bottle over the fence onto the green. "Always wanted to do that."

"Jimmy—?"

"Yeah?"

"It's awfully hot."

"Yeah—" But he knew that wasn't what Hu meant. Their shirts were sweat-stained, they were both damp with the effort of pedaling with the extra weight. The uphill part was just an excuse to stop.

"The bike-trailers," said Hu. "The tanks—"

"I know—"

"They're holding us back—"

James fell silent. He took a deep breath, then another, tried to compose himself. Hu was frustrated. And when Hu was frustrated, then James got frustrated, because he had to talk Hu down. But this was different.

"I think we can make it."

"I don't think I can."

"We have to try." James pointed. "This part is all uphill. Once we get to the top, it'll be an easy ride down the other side."

Hu looked past James, up toward the crest. It really wasn't that far. He knew he could make it—but it wasn't the top of the hill he was worried about. It was the rest of the distance, to Pearl's house and then to safety. He felt overwhelmed, almost to

the point of tears.

“Jimmy, you know I’d never ask you to—”

James leaned his bike against the fence, went quickly back to Hu. “Squeak, I know, you wouldn’t ask unless there was no other way. And it’s the same for me. I wouldn’t ask you if I could see any other way. But I don’t think we can leave any of this behind.” He stopped himself. “Wait—”

Beside them, the traffic chugged slowly past. James ignored the curious stares of several small children leaning out the open windows of a passing SUV.

“Okay, look,” James said. “Let’s put only our must-haves into our backpacks, okay? All our paperwork, money, phones, your computer, all the stuff we can’t leave behind. The stuff in the dry bags, right? And then let’s see how much farther we can get with the rest. Is that okay?”

Hu nodded reluctantly. It was a concession. Not the one he wanted, but he had to trust James—James was the better planner. He started thinking what he could repack. It wasn’t much. He’d already put the most important things in his knapsack. Some of the weight was water bottles. He felt damp and sweaty all over. For a moment, he dreamt of the long luxurious shower he could take when they got back home.

Then he realized he would never see that shower again. Abruptly he realized he had to pee.

Hu looked around. They were at least a mile from anything that might serve as a rest stop—the hell with it—he turned to the chain-link fence, lifted up the left side of his shorts and let loose a personal torrent, splashing at the fence. James joined him, yanked down his own shorts, and for a moment, their two streams arced toward the silent green of the golf course.

Hu giggled.

“What?”

“Don’t cross the streams—”

“You see too many movies.”

“You watch ’em with me.”

“Hey!” a distant voice called. “Stop that!”

They looked through the fence. Three middle-aged men in bright-colored shirts and pants were playing golf, totally oblivious to the evacuation. One of them was waving his golf club angrily at them.

“Didn’t you hear the news?” James called. “There’s a tsunami coming in.”

“Don’t you believe it,” one of them called back. “Just another drill.”

“Fake news,” muttered the second.

The third said, “I’d rather die golfing than running—”

“Have it your way,” said James, pulling up his pants, and suddenly doubting. What if they were right—?

No. They were wrong, he wished he could believe them, but they were wrong—and in a couple hours, they’d find out how wrong. He wondered if they’d make it to the eighteenth hole in time, shook his head in disbelief, turned back to Hu. “Idiots.”

Hu smiled weakly. “Suddenly, I don’t feel so stupid.”

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

Refreshed by their rest, rehydrated by the water, they made it to the crest of the hill, then half-coasted, half-pedaled down the other side.

They continued east on Wilshire Boulevard, past the Beverly Hilton Hotel to where it crisscrossed Santa Monica Boulevard. Navigating the wide diagonal intersection with Santa Monica wasn’t as hard as James feared. Traffic was inching along here, but there was still room to thread the bikes between the ranks of cars.

Wilshire was a straight line east from there, a gilded belt around the waist of Bever-

ly Hills, lined with elegant palm trees. Much of the traffic here was turning north at every opportunity, aiming for Benedict Canyon, Coldwater Canyon, any higher ground at all. A lesser but steady stream of vehicles pushed eastward and inland. At an average speed of ten miles per hour, there was still a chance for most of them to survive.

Overhead, the sky was filled with more helicopters than either James or Hu had ever seen. Police, news, rescue, fire, military, and private services as well. Some were monitoring, others were evacuating.

Here, the sidewalks were wide enough, they had room to ride—they were an incongruous sight pedaling through the most elegant district in Los Angeles. Elegant—and doomed. All the surrounding communities that kept these businesses thriving would be gone in less than two hours.

* * *

As James and Hu pedaled steadily east, they heard a continuous drone of chattering voices leaking from the radios of the vehicles they passed, bits of audio flotsam that refused to assemble into any kind of coherent narrative.

Here the pedestrian traffic was lighter. There were other cyclists on the road and on the sidewalk, but not a lot. Motorcycles growled between the rows of cars. Three people on Segways rolled past them. And surprisingly—for this neighborhood, anyway—they even saw a pair of homeless women, determinedly pushing their overloaded shopping carts eastward. There were buses too, all kinds, packed and overloaded, some with people even riding on the roofs, something Hu had never expected to see in America.

If anyone had expected last-minute desperate looting of Wilshire Boulevard's elegant storefronts, they would have been disappointed. Even those who might have been tempted were seeing survival as a much more useful priority.

The day was growing hotter, and this far inland, the hot yellow sun was shaded by a smoggy brown haze—a rising cloud of dust, stirred up by a million vehicles.

For some reason, James was reminded of a scene from Disney's *Fantasia*. The "Rite of Spring" segment. All those thirsty dinosaurs, plodding slowly east across an orange desert, toward a sanctuary that didn't exist, eventually dropping to the dirt and dying, leaving only their whitened bones as evidence they had ever existed. He wondered what future archaeologists would be digging up here, a thousand, ten thousand years in some unimaginable future.

"James?"

"Huh?"

"Are you all right?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm fine."

"It's time to stop. Drink some more water."

James shook his head to clear it. He rolled to a stop. Hu was right.

But they'd made it down the hill, past the golf course, past the Hilton, past the intersection, even past the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. What was that—two miles? Three? Whatever. He was starting to feel the exertion—not tired, not exhausted, but definitely, his muscles were tightening. He hoped Hu wouldn't mention the trailers again. He might be tempted to give in.

But Hu said nothing. He passed James a water bottle. James had to resist the temptation to gulp it all down. Instead, he sipped carefully, once, twice, a third time. "Where are we?" he asked, looking around.

"We just passed Robertson. We've still got another couple miles." Hu burrowed into his pack. "Do you want a protein bar?"

James nodded, held out his hand. He unwrapped the little granola brick and hesitated with the wrapper—then he realized how little difference it would make if he found a trash can here in Beverly Hills or not and let it fall to the sidewalk. He chewed and swallowed slowly.

Hu grabbed a water bottle and a protein bar for himself as well. “Do you think the tsunami is going to get this far?”

James didn’t answer immediately. He chewed thoughtfully. “Well . . . if this wave is as big as the president said, a hundred feet high, it’ll certainly get as far as the 405, but how much farther, I dunno, that’s a lot of water. If it was less, then the 405 would be a pretty good breakwater—except around LAX, of course. The airport’s just gonna disappear. But—” James frowned, picturing the geographical layout of the basin in his head. “But I don’t think the 405 will stop it. Might slow it down a bit, but a lot of water is still going to get over it, under it, through it.” He took another bite, still thinking. “Y-know, those underpasses are bottlenecks, they’re going to generate a lot of pressure, all that water trying to force through. Anything directly east of any of them is probably gonna take a hit, and if the pressure is strong enough, the overpasses will certainly blow off. So yeah—it’s gonna get this far. A hundred feet—it’s just too much water.”

Hu looked west, toward the beach, as if he could already see the onrushing catastrophe. He looked at his watch. “How far east do we have to get?”

James shrugged. “It’s not just one wave. It could be several waves. You haven’t seen the footage I’ve seen, from Sumatra and Fukushima. It’s not what you think. It’s not like a wave at the seashore, just bigger. It’s like the whole ocean rises up in a flash flood that comes in for . . . I don’t know, an hour? Maybe more? All that water pushing in behind. It has to go someplace, the path of least resistance.

“It’s gonna hit hard, really hard. It’s gonna knock loose, knock down, knock out everything it hits, pushing it all forward, like a horizontal avalanche. Everything loose, cars, boats, buses, everything that breaks free, trees and billboards and lamp posts, everything that collapses, houses, stores, buildings. All that water, it’s going to drive that in like the front end of a bulldozer.

“It’s gonna be bad. Real bad. Maybe those golfers had the right idea. Do what you love doing, right up to the end.” He took another bite and waited for Hu’s response.

Hu looked nervously to his watch, then back to James. “We’re not gonna make it, are we? I mean, with Pearl. Where she is, she’s awfully far from any hills—and we’re running out of time.”

“I know—” James said. He took another thoughtful bite, chewed for a moment, then spoke with his mouth half full. “But I’ve been thinking. There’s that big black building, less than two blocks from Pearl’s house. It’s what?—ten stories high. We can get there, easy-peasy. The top two floors should be high enough.”

“What about the bulldozer—?”

“There’s a big building just to the west of it that should catch the brunt of the wave and most of the crap it’s pushing.”

“It’ll be crowded—”

“Probably. But it’s our best hope.” James took another drink of water. Despite the grim conversation, he was still concentrating on energy and hydration. “Squeak. There has never been a mess like this before. It’s gonna be—well, a challenge.”

“We’re gonna be on our own for a bit, won’t we?”

“Yeah,” said James sourly. “It’s gonna be an adventure all right.” He looked to the street, at the desperate stream of cars filling the boulevard. A terrible thought was finally becoming real.

“That bad, huh?” Hu asked.

“Worse than that,” James said. “Worse than anyone can imagine. Hate to say it, but a lot of people are gonna die—”

And even as he said the words, he realized just how impossible an idea it was. He couldn’t comprehend that all this—the cars, the buildings, the people, everything—was about to be wiped away. And yet, he couldn’t deny it any longer. The magnitude of this thing—James couldn’t speak it, but he realized that somehow he was still

hoping that this was somehow all just a colossal mistake, a false alarm, and that maybe somehow—

He finished the last bite of his protein bar, took a last swallow of water, and tossed the empty bottle at a darkened storefront. It bounced harmlessly to the street.

“—But not us. Not today. Come on, let's go.”

* * *

Two blocks west of La Cienega, James and Hu turned right on South Stanley Drive. Halfway down the second block stood a white two-story building. Once, it had once been a private residence, but now it was subdivided into three Tetris-shaped apartments, with a handicapped access ramp cutting through what had once been a lush front lawn.

At the bottom of the ramp, underneath the inevitable palm tree, Pearl sat waiting in a lightweight folding wheelchair. She had a carpetbag on her lap and she held the leash of a large, sloppy-looking beast that might have had some pit-bull in its parentage, but probably dumpster dog as well. She waved happily when she saw “the boys,” James and Hu. They pedaled to a stop in front of her. Several cars passed them in the street, drivers looking for alternate routes.

James looked unhappily at the dog.

“Oh, don't mind Fluffy—he's just a big friendly goofball.”

“Fluffy?” Hu raised an eyebrow.

“That's what we call him. His real name is—never mind. He's Joey's dog, but Joey's off in Bakersfield or somewhere, so we keep Fluffy when he's traveling. Mrs. Petersen hates it, but she's afraid to complain or we'll tell the city about her cats.”

“Some people—”

“Tell me. She went screaming out of here with a dozen cat carriers the moment the president said tsunami. But the old bitch wouldn't take us. Didn't want to be in the same car with Fluffy. Selfish old bitch. And I just couldn't leave Fluffy behind. He's family.”

James sighed. “I admire your gumption, Pearl, but sometimes—”

Pearl's expression changed then. “Honey, where's your car?”

“We didn't bring it,” said Hu. He waved his hand to include the bicycles and the trailers. “This was faster.”

“Are we in trouble—?” Pearl asked.

“I don't think so—” James pointed. The top of the LFP building was visible even from here. “We'll go up there. It's high enough. If the wave is only a hundred feet high when it hits the shore, by the time it gets this far inland, it'll have lost most of its power—”

“James! What are you talking about?” Pearl half-rose out of her chair. “Not a hundred feet! Three hundred!”

Both James and Hu stopped in mid-word. “What—?”

“*Three hundred feet!* It's what the guy on the internet is saying! The one in Hawaii—the one who measured it!”

“Oh, fuck—” That was Hu.

James didn't say anything. His expression went ashen. When he finally did speak, it was almost automatic. “No, no, it can't be, the president—”

“Honey, that sumbitch is just plain wrong. Or stupid. The guy on the internet is an actual geologist. He's the director of the Volcano Lab. Now, who ya gonna believe? The politician or the scientist?”

Hu touched James' arm. “What are we going to do?”

James ignored it. He leaned in, grabbed Pearl's arms, stared into her face, and almost shouted, “Are you certain? There are a lot of cranks on the internet.”

She met his stare, unflinching. “James, honey—what do I do for a living? I do research, remember? For the studios. For that stupid movie where you two met. I

didn't just google him. I did the whole data-dive. This isn't bullshit. He's for real. *Three hundred feet.*"

James released her, whirled away, furious. "Fuck," he said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckity-fuck, fuck, fuck." He turned to Hu. "Remember that map I hung in the office? The one that showed the effects of global warming—what the coast line would look like if all the ice caps melted and the sea level rose two hundred and sixty feet?"

Hu nodded. "Yeah. Everything up to Boyle Heights would be underwater."

"Yeah. Well, if this guy's right, this is gonna be worse."

Hu said, "Okay, okay—but we're not dead yet. I've got an idea."

"It's too late—"

"No, it isn't." Hu pointed east. "The subway! The La Cienega station. It's across the street from the tower. Remember how excited Pearl got when it opened? If we can get onto a train, we can get all the way downtown in ten minutes, fifteen."

"And then what? We're still in the disaster zone."

"We'll do what you said. We'll figure something out." Hu rubbed his chin. "I dunno, maybe the Gold line out to Pasadena. Maybe Chris and Mark can put us up. They're always having those big sprawling house parties. If not—I dunno. Maybe Amtrak to my cousin in New Mexico? If we have to pitch the tent in some park, we can do that. But let's go."

"Oh, hell—if I'd known you boys didn't know, I'd have wheeled myself over—" Pearl's face crumpled. "Oh, boys, I'm so sorry. I'm so stupid, you could have gotten up into the hills by now—"

"Stop it, Pearl." That was James. "You're family. Shut up and let us rescue you!"

Just out of her field of vision, Hu tapped his watch meaningfully.

"Right," said James, as if the matter was finally settled. "So let's get out of here. Um—" He fumbled with one of the ropes on his bike trailer. "Here, tie this to—um, loop it around yourself—and we'll pull you."

In reply, Pearl handed him Fluffy's leash. "Here. Tie this around your handlebars. The monster-dog will help pull."

"Really?"

"Really. Let him lead. Don't worry, people will get out of his way. Real fast."

"We're gonna be a whole circus parade," said James, but he took the leash.

Fluffy led the way. He pulled his own weight, and half of Pearl's too—up the side streets back to Wilshire, a block east and the subway station was directly ahead. The station had only been open a few months, a promise for the future, but this would be its last day of operation. Even if the system survived, there would be nothing left above ground for anyone to come to.

James was right, they did look like a parade. But Pearl was right too. People saw them coming, saw Fluffy grunting and slobbering in the lead, and they moved fast to get out of the way.

They had to wait a few minutes to cross the street. James kept glancing at his watch. Hu put his hand on James' arm. "It's okay. We're gonna make it. We will."

"Cutting it close, too close," James muttered.

"Sloan's teddy . . ."

"Sloan looks terrible in a teddy," James said, then added. "Halloween. Before your time."

"Oh. Dear."

"Let's go. Light or no light—" They pushed their way into the street. The huge garbage truck waiting to turn north had left enough room for them to squeeze through. The next driver, a frightened-looking woman, had opened her car door and was standing in the street, still clutching the handle, looking confused and desperate. "There's not enough time, is there?"

"Come with us. The subway's still running—"

"The subway?" Her confusion increased. "Los Angeles has a subway—?"

Hu pointed past her. "It's right there—"

The woman grabbed her purse and hurried after them. A few others followed—a black woman dragging two small children, a portly man with his arms full of file folders, the driver of the garbage truck as well.

The elevator to the lower level wasn't working and even if it had been, neither James nor Hu wanted to risk getting stuck in it. The station's turnstiles were frozen open for the evacuation.

The escalators weren't working either, but there was a wide staircase and most of the travelers with baggage were hurrying down it. Hu waited with the bikes while James maneuvered Pearl's chair down the stairs. Pearl held Fluffy's leash, his stub of a tail wagged in excitement, he was having a great time. He looked around the platform eagerly—all these great new playmates—but even the nearest people were keeping a careful distance.

James came trotting back up the stairs, and he and Hu began working the bikes and the trailers down. A couple of people grumbled at them as they passed—but they were dragging their own bags down the steps, so James and Hu ignored the comments.

The bottom level was crowded, but not packed, not insane, not panicky. Most of the people who had thought to escape by subway had already gone. These were stragglers, people who had finally abandoned their vehicles. Many were carrying backpacks or dragging suitcases on rollers.

The overhead signs were promising trains arriving at this terminus every four minutes. Hu pointed. "See, we'll have time."

James started to say something, thought better of it, and shut up instead. He scanned the faces of the crowd, looking for signs of desperation or panic. He could still hear the screams and the gunshots from the Santa Monica underpass.

* * *

UNION STATION

The Red Line and Purple Line trains were arriving so fast, one after the other, that sometimes as many as three trains would have to wait in the tunnel while the first in line unloaded. As fast as each train unloaded, it was sent out again.

The outbound Red Line trains went directly to the Hollywood and Highland station, picking up passengers there and taking them out to the North Hollywood station on Lankershim Boulevard. The area surrounding the Universal City station had already reached overload capacity.

Inbound, all the trains were staggered to pick up passengers from the most overloaded stations. As soon as any train was packed to capacity, it went straight to Union Station. It was a frustrating experience for those waiting on the platforms, watching the densely packed trains screech by without stopping, but every available train was running, and most people were able to board a train in less than twenty minutes.

The Purple Line trains were on a similar schedule, with most going directly to the Wilshire/La Cienega station, picking up passengers from the most desperate locations first.

Several trains were running direct shuttle service to the Seventh Street station, the terminus of both the Expo Line and the Blue Line from Long Beach. While many evacuees assumed they would be relatively safe this far inland, most were taking advantage of the train service departing from Union Station.

At Union Station, every available train—both passenger and freight—was loaded to capacity. Most were heading north through Glendale and Burbank, all the way to the Burbank airport, where a tent city was being set up on the top level of the park-

ing structure. Others were heading west with stops in the San Fernando Valley and Simi Valley. Ventura County was an uncertain risk. Although parts of it were sheltered by the Santa Monica mountains, there wasn't a convenient train service. Other trains headed north to Santa Clarita, or as far east as Ontario. The closest returned for another trip as soon as they were unloaded.

Additional relocations would be necessary after the initial evacuation. Las Vegas, Phoenix, Tucson, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, and other cities were already making plans to receive refugees. But the initial goal was to get as many people as possible out of the disaster zone as fast as possible.

In the last half-hour before impact, police and fire rescue would withdraw their personnel and any vehicles still not evacuated. When further evacuation operations became too risky, the subway trains would also be removed to their safest locations.

The last train from Union Station was being held for emergency workers. As soon as the tsunami reached San Clemente Island, a five-minute alarm would sound and the train would pull out before the onrushing water overwhelmed the coastline. It would not wait for stragglers,

That was the plan, anyway.

Just one little glitch.

Roy Jeffers.

He did not look like a hero. He did not intend to be a hero.

He was a skinny little bastard (accident of birth), stuck behind thick glasses and a scowl. He was also a stubborn son of a bitch. He had issues with authority, and the surest way to get him to do anything was to tell him, "No, you can't."

Roy Jeffers had another bad habit as well. He was a rescuer.

He had a long history of opening his house in south-central Los Angeles to anyone needing a place to crash—cousins, friends, stray dogs, the occasional feral cat, and once in a while, even a girlfriend. (And once, as an experiment, a boyfriend.)

At the moment, however, he was single, about to be made homeless by the tsunami, and genuinely resentful that the evacuation was going to take a horrendous toll on those who could least afford it, his entire demographic. People of Color was the current euphemism. Among friends, he'd occasionally rant, "First we were Colored People. Then we were Negro, then we were Black, then African-American. Now we're People of Color. Progress my black ass!" But he didn't have a lot of friends, so it wasn't a rant that many had heard.

Adding to his annoyance was his realization that as a driver for the Purple Line, he was servicing many of the wealthier neighborhoods along Wilshire Boulevard, where if he had been working the Blue Line, he would have been rescuing his own neighbors. Even the knowledge that the Crenshaw connection directly served part of his community did not alleviate his smoldering anger.

But—

The knowledge that the Crenshaw connection directly served part of his community had somehow transformed his annoyance into a specific commitment. He wasn't going to abandon anybody, and he didn't care what color they were. He was going to do the job anyway.

So when he unloaded at Union Station and his supervisor, Molly Cantway, waved to him and said, "Okay, that's it, Roy. Take your train out to the service yard," Roy Jeffers said no.

"There are still people out there. My people—" he insisted. "*Our* people."

Cantway shook her head. "Roy, I am not sending any more trains out. There's no time."

"Then let's not waste it arguing," Roy said. "I'm going."

"You do and I'll fire you."

"Ain't gonna be no job after today anyway—"

Jeffers pushed the control lever forward. His train rolled west into the tube. Cantway didn't know whether to be annoyed at the inevitable loss of a Purple Line train—or admire Jeffers for his stupidity.

On the other hand, there probably wasn't going to be much of a subway system after this. After Hurricane Sandy, parts of the New York system were down for five years. This was going to be worse than that. Maybe Los Angeles would never have a subway again.

Cantway watched as the last car of Jeffers' train disappeared into the dark tunnel. If that damn fool was able to outrun the incoming flood, he'd be a hero. If not—well, he'd get a nice obituary. And maybe even a funeral, if they ever recovered a body.

Somebody called for her attention and she turned back to the more immediate problem—getting the last of these people upstairs and onto a train out of the city.

And very shortly, herself as well.

She crossed herself and went back to work.

* * *

The subway platform was filling up. More and more people were realizing that an eastbound train might be their only remaining hope of escape.

A steady stream of future refugees came down the stairs, or walking down the frozen escalator. As the crowd became ever more dense, people jostled for position, all wanting to make sure they'd be able to board the next train.

Most kept checking the overhead arrival signs, but even before the sign flashed, "Arriving now," they could feel the breeze of its approach, as it forced the air from the tunnel ahead of it, then a distant howl echoing out of the tube, a glimmer of light that ballooned into a glare, and finally the train came screeching into the station.

As soon as the doors slid open, the crowd pushed in. Hu held the bikes and James pushed Pearl forward. Fluffy grumbled at the people pushing past him. Abruptly, a female police officer blocked their way. She was short, all muscle, and she wore a don't-fuck-with-me expression. Her nametag identified her as Officer Reese.

"You can't take that dog on the train," she said.

Almost immediately Pearl began wailing loudly. James recognized the performance, he'd seen it before, an award-worthy rendition of Frightened Old Crippled Lady. It usually worked. "Oh no, no," cried Pearl, clutching her heart. "I can't leave him. He's my service dog. He doesn't bite. He's big and friendly. I don't know what I'd do without him!" She was loud, very loud, and people already aboard the train, or still trying to board, turned to look. Pearl was playing to the court of public opinion.

Reese was immovable. "Sorry, ma'am. That animal looks dangerous. We can't take any chances—"

James started to object. "You want to leave him here to die?"

But Pearl spoke first. "No, no, James, we must obey the officer. Officer—" She peered forward. "—Officer Reese." She shifted her performance from Frightened-Old-Lady to Frightened-Old-And-Confused-Lady. She held up the end of the leash, offering it to the officer. "Officer Reese, will you hold him till we get back?" Pearl patted the dog's head. "Here, Slobberchops, go with the nice lady."

Fluffy's posture changed dramatically. He was suddenly alert, suddenly eager—he curled back his upper lip, revealing enough teeth for a piano keyboard. He grunted and drooled and pulled at the leash as if someone had just announced fresh peasant for dinner.

Officer Reese put her hand on the hilt of her gun.

"No, no, don't do that! He's just being friendly. Honest. He just wants to play."

Officer Reese must have been painfully aware that all eyes were on her. And the clock was ticking. Fluffy grumbled impatiently. Reese blinked—and took a step back

and aside. “Oh, the hell with it. Just keep a tight leash on him.”

As James pushed Pearl into the already jammed subway car, those nearest squeezed back to make room, especially room for Fluffy. James bent to her ear and whispered, “Slobberchops?”

Pearl whispered back. “That’s his real name. When you say it, he gets ready to play. That was his smile. Works every time.”

“Nice.” James let go of the wheelchair, turned back to Hu. “Come on—”

Hu gestured. The bikes? “There’s no room—”

“Leave them. Grab your case. Come on—”

“You sure, James—?”

“Just do it!”

Hu let go of the bikes, grabbed his most important bag, and started to board, but Officer Reese stepped in ahead of him, into the last available space, blocking his way. “Sorry. This one’s full.”

James started to object. “But he’s my—”

She half-turned. “You got the dog, don’t push your luck. There’s one more train coming, he can get on that one.”

James made a decision. He leaned quickly down to Pearl. “Give ’em hell, sweetheart.” Then, “If he stays, I stay.” He pushed past Reese and stepped off the train.

As the subway doors closed, Officer Reese glared at them both. James didn’t care. He grabbed Hu. “Wedding or not, you’re my husband, and I’m not going anywhere without you.” Then he kissed Hu passionately.

Which surprised them both—because James had never kissed Hu in public anywhere before.

* * *

They weren’t alone on the subway platform. There were at least thirty or forty others, the last few stragglers. Several of them were screaming at the departing train they’d been unable to board. A couple had even been pushed out as the doors closed in front of them.

“You selfish bastards!” Somebody else yelled, “That was the last train.” Followed by, “Come on, upstairs. The roof of the—”

His words were drowned out, running for the stairs. There was still time to get to the roof of the tallest nearby buildings. It might be enough. But if Pearl was right—and Pearl was rarely wrong—it probably wouldn’t be.

James looked to Hu. “You want to follow them?”

“She said there was one more train coming.”

“Do you believe her?”

“She wasn’t Miss Congeniality, was she?”

“More like, I dunno, Miss Convenience Store.” James looked to the stairs, looked down the track, looked to the stairs again.

Hu said, “Are we fucked?”

James didn’t need to consider the question. The answer was obvious. “Well . . . yes. Probably.”

Hu looked at his watch. “The water is probably pulling away from the shore by now.”

“Uh, no,” James said. “It’s not gonna work like that. Not this one. That’s what they were explaining while you were in the shower. A big part of the island fell into the sea, it pushed an equivalent volume of water outward. The first thing that hits is the wave. Afterward, more waves. Like the whole Pacific is sloshing.”

“Should we wait here? Or . . . ?”

Before James could answer, a Korean woman came dragging a little girl, five or six, maybe seven, running down the stairs. “She was out playing, I couldn’t find her! Are we too late? Are the trains still running—?”

And as if in answer, they both felt a rising breeze.

"One more," Hu said to the woman. "The last one."

"Oh, thank God, thank God."

Down the tunnel, the distant light became an onrushing glare. The train's horn howled like an electric banshee. It came screeching into the station, the doors sliding open almost immediately.

James and Hu let the woman rush past them, the little girl almost flying like a rag doll, then they pushed their bikes into the subway car. The bikes and the attached trailers filled the space at the end of the car designed for bikes and wheelchairs and luggage on wheels. As soon as the doors slid closed and the train lurched into motion, James looked to Hu and smiled. For the first time today, since walking out of their small house in Venice Beach, James allowed himself the smallest bit of confidence. Finally, they were on their way. If they could beat the onrushing wave to Union Station, maybe.

Would there be a train waiting there? Maybe. Maybe. Otherwise . . .

Without stopping, the subway could get downtown in seven minutes, probably less. If they stopped for passengers, if there were people still waiting at each station, and there probably would be, then you'd have to add a minute for each station, maybe even two or three for braking, loading, accelerating again—okay, so figure maybe fifteen minutes at worst.

James wasn't certain about the speed of the onrushing water, somewhere between ten or twenty miles per hour, but that was an ordinary tsunami. A mega-tsunami? That was a whole different kettle of physics, but he had to believe they had a chance.

Union Station was sixteen miles inland from Santa Monica. The waters should be slowing that far inland, but—again, the physics on this were unknown. Okay, doing the math in his head, fifteen minutes to get downtown, maybe there's another ten or fifteen minutes margin at Union Station. If Pearl was right, there would be that one last train for evacuees and emergency workers. They'd probably have to abandon the bikes and take only what they could carry. James studied what they'd brought, already sorting it in his head.

The train stopped at the Fairfax station; there was a larger crowd here, everyone who couldn't fit into the previous train. But there was room. At least a dozen more people pushed into the car. James and Hu pulled themselves back against one side. The woman and her little girl stood across from them, the little girl staring curiously at their bicycles. The doors closed and the train lurched forward, quickly gaining speed and rushing eastward toward La Brea.

"What's that?" the little girl asked, pointing at the air tank on James' bike-trailer.

"It's my rocket-pack," said James. "For when I'm being rocket-man. Like in the song. Do you know the song?"

"No it isn't," the girl said. "It's an air tank. And you're being silly."

"Well, if you knew it was an air tank, why did you ask?" James pointed at her, as if catching her in a game of tag. She giggled and buried her face in her mother's side.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

That was enough. She stopped hiding and turned back. It was all a game. "Julia. What's yours?"

"I'm James." And then, for no reason he could understand, maybe because he just didn't care anymore, he added, "And this is my boyfriend. We're going to get married. His name is Hu."

Julia looked at Hu curiously. "Who?" she asked. "Like Doctor Who?"

"No," Hu said. "Just Hu. Like boo-hoo without the boo."

"Oh, okay." And then she said, "Could I be your flower girl? I did it for my cousin's wedding."

That's when Julia's mother put her hand on the little girl's shoulder, pulled her back. "That's enough, Julia. Don't bother those men."

Something about the way the woman said "those men"—James sensed her disapproval. Her expression had hardened.

"It's okay, ma'am. Just being friendly. We're all in this together." But he turned away anyway. Maybe another time, another place, he might have said something more. But not here, not now. There was still the problem of this time and this place.

Hu put his hand on James' arm. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing—"

"You should tell that to your face."

"I was just . . . doing the math in my head."

"Are we all right?"

"Should be."

Hu knew James too well. He recognized the lie. But he said nothing. Neither of them said anything until they reached the La Brea station.

This platform wasn't as crowded as the platforms had been at Fairfax and La Cienega stations. Fewer people here believed they were in danger. Maybe they were right. Or maybe they'd believed that they would find safety on their roofs.

The train was momentarily delayed in pulling out—there was a last minute rush, someone up ahead was holding a door and calling something to the motorman. The reason was quickly apparent. Nearly a dozen people, including several police officers, came charging down the stairs and across the platform—they pushed into the forward cars.

As the train pulled out again, Hu looked to his watch. "The wave, the first one. It just hit." He held up his phone for James to see. "No wi-fi down here, but I downloaded the sim while we were getting Pearl to the subway."

James studied the screen, a blue stain spreading inland. "You think it's accurate?"

"It's the one all the links pointed to. It's that scientist in Hawaii. It's supposed to be the most accurate geographic model. If his timeline is correct, our house is gone, the Third Street Mall—" Hu looked at the map. "Everything up to Bundy. Do you think the 405 might slow it down?"

James shook his head. "Not a chance, not if the wave is as high as that guy said."

"Well, Pearl said he passed the sniff test. And she is the research queen." Hu frowned at his phone. "I wish we had wi-fi down here."

"I don't."

"We could see what the news choppers are broadcasting—"

"I don't need to see it." James said. "I don't want those pictures in my head. Do you? Give me your phone—"

"Huh?"

"Give me your phone."

Hu handed it over. "Why?"

James didn't bother to answer. He pulled out his own phone and shoved both into a watertight bag, then slipped it into his backpack.

"Really?"

"Just a precaution."

"Uh-uh. You're thinking of something."

James lowered his voice. "When the wave hits, if it reaches the Purple Line before we're in the safe zone, that water's gonna go down into the stations and flood the tunnel. We may not be safe down here."

"How long till it catches up with us?"

James stopped. He hadn't considered the question. He'd been so focused on just getting to Pearl, just getting her to the subway, just getting everyone aboard a train, just outrunning the wave front—he hadn't thought much beyond that. He frowned

in thought, trying to decide what he could say—and whether or not he should say it.

“James. Answer me. Can this train outrun it?”

James didn't reply immediately. He took a deep breath. Finally, he reached across and put his hand on Hu's arm, sliding it all the way up to his partner's shoulder. “We're making good time, Squeak. A mile a minute. We're moving faster than the wave front—”

Hu reached over and put his hand on James's. Quietly he said, “I looked at the video—the simulation. It looks like the water comes in awfully fast. Fifty miles an hour, maybe even faster—”

James thought hard. Finally, he admitted, “It's plumbing. It's physics. It's everything. It's the depth of the water, how much volume on the surface, how big the tunnel is, and how much pressure—” He trailed off, trying to visualize the problem.

“If there's a hundred feet of water above us—” He was thinking aloud now. “I don't usually dive that deep. A hundred feet, maybe a hundred thirty, that's pretty much the limit. At a hundred feet, that's 3 atmospheres, 4 counting the weight of the air above the water, 44 PSI—pounds per square inch. That's a lot of pressure. If there's that much water, it'll be coming in fast, over the streets and through the tunnel. And if the water's higher, there'll be even more pressure. It'll move even faster.” Seeing the look on Hu's face, James stopped himself.

“We're gonna get hosed, aren't we?” Hu said. He kept his voice soft, trying not to attract the attention of the other passengers.

James realized his mistake then. He tried to cover quickly. “Only if it hits, only if it hits—” It wasn't enough.

Hu closed his eyes against the mental picture, against the rising turmoil of emotions that were suddenly flooding up inside him, fear and anger and something unidentifiable. His expression collapsed and suddenly, he was sobbing. “I'm sorry, Bubble.”

“What for—?”

“For . . . everything. For the subway. It was a stupid idea—”

“No, sweetheart, no. It was a good idea. A really good idea. You'll see. We'll be okay.”

But Hu refused to be reassured. The moment was reawakening his panic—that same panic he'd felt that day in the tank at Paramount. And this time, there wouldn't be anybody who could save either of them.

James slid his hand up Hu's shoulder, putting his palm on the back of Hu's neck—their own private gesture of reassurance. He pulled him into a hug and whispered, “Hell or high water, Squeak. I promise.”

Hu pulled back, just enough to smile at him.

The train screeched and rocketed through the dark tunnel, but James and Hu didn't notice, didn't care. They had retreated into a private space between their shining eyes, their own special world of connection.

After a moment, Hu pulled away, recovering enough to reach into the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out the small velvet-covered box, opened it, withdrew the larger ring and slid it onto James' finger. “This is not the way I wanted to do it, this is awful, but . . . I take thee, James D. Liddle, as my awfully wedded husband, forever and ever, and for all the days of my life.”

James took the box from Hu, took the second ring and likewise slid it onto Hu's finger. “I take thee, Hu Son, to be my husband, to be my lawfully bedded husband, forever and ever, and for all the days of my life.”

They looked into each other's eyes again, trying to make the moment last forever. Finally James leaned forward and gently kissed Hu. He wanted to kiss him more passionately, but it wasn't necessary, not here—not with so many strangers watching. He hadn't realized they had attracted an audience. Several people applauded and cheered, but not the uncertain Korean woman still clutching the little girl close to her.

There were tears forming in Hu's eyes. He said, “This is the real one, Bubble, but I

still want a ceremony.” He whispered, “After all, we’ve already got a flower girl. I mean, if her mother will let her.”

It was too much, all too much. James finally laughed. “We’re about to lose the house, the car, the motorcycle, our business—we still don’t know if we’re going to survive—” He couldn’t help himself, the words came tumbling out. “—And here we are, this is the happiest day of my life.”

“It’s certainly going to be one to remember—”

And that’s when the subway train lurched.

* * *

The train lurched as if it had gone over a speed bump. Someone gasped, someone else screamed. Then the train roared on, faster than before.

“What was that—?” Hu had to raise his voice to be heard.

James shook his head. “Dunno. Felt like a power glitch to me.”

“Do you think they’re shutting down the grid?”

“Makes sense they would—”

“But not the subway—”

“We’re still rolling—”

Hu opened his mouth, not quite a yawn, something else. “James—?”

“What?”

“My ears just popped.”

“Yeah.” James forced his own yawn as well. “Mine too.”

“What would—?” But Hu already knew the answer.

“Air pressure,” said James. “The water is definitely in the tunnel. It’s coming in fast, compressing the air—”

“It’s gonna hit us, isn’t it—”

James didn’t answer. He looked down to the rear end of the car, but there was no view out the back. Even if there had been, there were too many people in the way. He turned around to his bike, pulled his divebelt off the trailer, made sure his knife was in its sheath. He pulled Hu to his side. “Face your bike, now. If you have to, throw yourself over the tank. Hide it from view.”

“What? Why—?” And then understanding. “Oh.” And then, “Oh, shit—”

“Yeah,” James finished buckling his divebelt around his waist. “It’s gonna get ugly.”

“James—”

“There’s nothing we can do—”

Hu grabbed his arm. “We can do something. We’ve got two regulators on each rig. We can save Julia and her mom.”

James wanted to argue, but Hu was right. He stepped over to the Korean woman, looked directly into her terrified eyes. “Come stand next to us. Both of you. Please.” He reached out and touched her elbow. It was enough. Still clutching her daughter, she moved closer to the bikes.

“Listen to me,” said James. He lowered his voice, almost to a whisper. “I’m a SCUBA professional. The wave is coming, it’s going to flood this car. When the water hits, it’s going to get panicky in here, but each of the tanks has two mouthpieces and there’s enough air here for four people, Hu and myself—and both of you. You’ll be okay if you do what I say. Here’s what you need to know. Are you listening, Julia?”

The little girl nodded, her eyes wide.

“Okay, when it’s time, Hu’s going to give you a mouthpiece. We don’t have a mask for you, so you’re gonna want to close your eyes and just concentrate on breathing as slowly as you can. Take really long, really slow, breaths, in and out, only through the mouthpiece, really slow—okay?”

Julia nodded solemnly.

“Now, remember, I want you to keep your eyes closed and just concentrate on

breathing—” Julia looked confused. James leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Okay, here’s how to do it. You count a hundred breaths to yourself, because that’s how long it takes. And if the water still hasn’t gone down, then you start over and count to a hundred again. You might have to do that more than once, but that’s how Hu and I are gonna do it—” He straightened and turned to the mother. “Did you get all that? You and I will share the other tank—”

The woman started to say something, an objection—?

James held up his hand. “Don’t say anything. Just stand here. Turn away from anyone else. Both of you. Keep your backs to them. And—”

The subway lurched again. This time, the car bumped as if something had struck it from behind. Someone at the other end of the car screamed, several people screamed, both men and women—

Something lifted the rear of the car off the tracks, tilting them forward. Outside there were sparks—the train was slowing, there was no more power to the wheels—and then there was light outside, flickering light—the subway train was careening into the Wilshire/Western station and angry brown water flooded up onto the platform from the tracks. More water poured down the stairways and escalators, battering the walls and the train with debris, all of it rising rapidly and rocking the car with its force. The air smelled suddenly *wet*.

The other passengers, mostly men, began shouting and pushing, scrambling at and over each other. Muddy water was already flooding into the car from underneath. Men were shouting, several were trying to force open the doors, trying to escape. Others were demanding they stop, terrified because the darkness outside the train was already rising past the windows—

And then someone finally pushed the doors open and the flood—cold, salty, and gritty—came roaring in, pummeling and pounding, an inescapable torrent. People screamed and floundered, pushing at each other, climbing over each other, trampling anyone smaller, fighting their way through the current, desperate to get up the station stairs toward the air they imagined was waiting for them.

And then the last of the lights went out.

Green emergency lights flickered on, self-powered, but they weren’t enough. And they didn’t last. They were extinguished one by one by the rising muddy water.

James and Hu were already pulling the bungee cords off the bikes, off the tanks. They fumbled in the gloom, depending on experience and muscle memory.

Hu pushed the first regulator at Julia; the water was up to her chest. She grabbed the mouthpiece with both hands, pushed it into her mouth. James had already pulled Julia’s mother to the other bike—yanking the whole rig off the bike trailer, he shoved a regulator toward the terrified woman, then helped her get it into her mouth as the water rose to her neck. He looked to Hu, who gave him a quick thumbs-up, pushing his own regulator into his mouth.

Hu rummaged in his case, triumphantly pulled out two headlamps, and pulled one over his head. Right, James thought, we’re going to need those! His own facemask had a headlamp built in, but he felt around in his case for the other lamps. He slipped one of them over Julia’s mother’s head, started to hand her the second one for Julia—

“Please, sir—me too, please—”

James grabbed his facemask and pulled it down over his eyes just as the water came rising up over his chin. He turned and saw a frightened young teen, a black boy in a red T-shirt. The boy bobbed up desperately, his hand out for help. “Please—”

“We’ll have to share—”

“Okay, yes, okay—”

James held his mouthpiece to the boy, they were bumping up against the top of the car. “Long slow breaths, okay. Two, three breaths—into the mouthpiece, both in and

out. Then it's my turn. Okay?"

"Okay." The boy took the mouthpiece just as the water forced the last of the air out of the subway car. James put the last headlamp on him and switched it on. Then he turned to his left, looking to make sure Hu was all right.

He wasn't.

There was a struggle going on. James couldn't see far in the murky water, but one thing was clear. Someone was fighting Hu for the regulator. Someone else was trying to get to Julia. She was curled up in a ball, holding her regulator tightly in both hands.

James kicked off, directly head-butting into Julia's attacker, pushing him backward toward the open subway door. Outside the rushing water surged past the train, filling the station and pushing into the next bore. James head-butted the man again, forcing him into one side of the open door. The current grabbed him, yanked him away, and he went flailing into the turbulence, disappearing into the dark and muddy gloom. James had to grab a pole to keep from being pulled after him. Desperately, he grabbed the overhead bar and worked his way back to Hu.

Hu's eyes were wide, his mouth bubbling open. The stranger had gotten the regulator away from him. Hu was grabbing futilely for it—it was his drowning nightmare all over again, but there was no James at his side.

The stranger was holding Hu at arm's length, while sucking greedily for air. Hu saw the man pulling away into darkness—until one of James' arms came reaching around the stranger's chest and another hand sliced across his throat, releasing a cloud of red-brown darkness, expanding outward like inky smoke. The man stiffened, choked, gasped, struggled, and thrashed away in the dark, pummeled by the rushing water, but still held by the regulator tube.

James came around from behind the thrashing man, pulled the regulator from his mouth and as the body turned away into darkness, he pushed the regulator into his own mouth, grabbing a quick suck of air for himself—rule number one, take care of yourself first—but he was already swimming back to Hu. He met Hu's terrified eyes, then passed the regulator over, watching to make sure that Hu had it safely back in his mouth. James held firmly onto Hu, watching to see if all his careful training was paying off. Hu was scared, but somehow he remembered what to do. He choked past his panic—James watched to make sure that Hu was finally breathing again, breathing slowly and deliberately, before he gestured for the regulator. He'd waited almost too long—his own lungs were feeling tight.

Hu passed the regulator back to James, who took three hasty breaths, then turned. He headed back to his own tank. He had to take a moment to steady himself. This was all happening too fast. He was still feeling his own adrenaline-panic as he swam back to the teenager, still holding his knife—

He had vision, of a minimal sort. Paired fingers of light probed at the gloom, illuminating almost nothing.

The teen and the mother were equally visible, another small circle of brightness. James swam back to the teenager, still holding his knife, and turned the boy to face him. The water was cold and it was pounding at them, shoving them this way and that. The boy could barely focus in the dark, he didn't have a facemask, but he saw the lamps on James' mask and he could see enough to recognize the man who'd saved him. He gave James a thumbs-up and passed the mouthpiece over—

James was glad. One murder was already one murder too many. He knew that Hu had seen it, but he couldn't tell what Hu was thinking, how he was reacting. Probably he was still trying to calm himself. James hoped that both Julia and her mother had kept their eyes closed as instructed. This was going to be a long afternoon.

Now it was James' turn to manage his breathing—and his fear. If he didn't manage himself, he couldn't manage anyone. He took three long breaths, then passed the

mouthpiece back to the boy. Then, finally, he remembered to slide his knife back into its sheath.

The thrashing of the water was lessening. They were still being pummeled by surges of uneven pressure, why was that? Something up the tunnel must be blocking the flow of water, alternately blocking and opening. James imagined a giant pink heart valve, but it was probably a humongous piece of debris being pushed back and forth by the torrent. If it could settle, if it could block the worst of the flow, then maybe—but no, they shouldn't depend on it.

He had to convince himself that they could do this. He wasn't sure for how long. It depended on how much water they had above them, on how much pressure they could stand, on how long their air would hold out, and on how long they could last in the cold. Maybe the incoming coastal waters were warm enough they wouldn't be plunged into hypothermia. Maybe, just maybe, they had enough air to hold out for an hour, but probably less because they were sharing? He had to figure this out—

Then he remembered. His fifteen thousand dollar dive computer. He'd packed it, hadn't he? For a moment, he felt embarrassed, but then he realized, he hadn't had a chance to use it, so it wasn't part of his muscle memory. What bag was it in?

He went back to the boy, shared his three breaths, steadied his breathing, and visualized the morning. He usually talked to himself when he worked. Saying things out loud imprinted them in his memory. Ah, there—

He passed the regulator back, went straight to the case he'd almost left behind, and it was right where he remembered, right where he'd said when he packed it. It would have been easy to find anyway. It had switched itself on when the water hit it—its display was bright, even in this darkness, and now it was beeping an alarm. He slid it onto his left wrist and tried to focus on the dials.

The numbers flickered with confusing speed. The device kept beeping contradictory warnings. James was an expert in sport diving. At a hundred feet deep, a diver would use his air four times faster, but right now the dive computer was telling him that his current rate of air consumption might be ten times faster, might be twenty, might be five—the numbers kept changing, up and down, too fast to make any sense. They were either five hundred feet underwater or fifty. It was the fluctuating pressure of the water still pounding through the tunnel. The damn thing couldn't calibrate.

James tried to visualize what was happening. How much water? Too much and they wouldn't be able to stay down for long. If they needed to decompress, then the longer they spent under pressure, the longer decompression would take, and if they had limited air that would be a problem. They'd have to start up as soon as the flow of water ebbed. But how long could they wait for the current to slow? He had to balance time at this depth against time needed to ascend.

The tsunami was still pushing inland, what were the physics of that? Here in the tunnel, the rushing water was still battering at the car and stirring debris throughout the station. And all the things that should never have been debris—

Unless and until things equalized, they could be stuck here. How long until the water stopped flooding eastward? How long till it settled? How long till it started receding back into the sea? And how fast would it retreat? When would the next wave arrive? James had no idea.

He wondered if Pearl's train had made it safely to Union Station. Maybe. Probably. It had been packed full, so it wouldn't have made any stops. They would have gained a few minutes. And maybe with this train blocking part of the tunnel, maybe the flow would have been less, and maybe Pearl's train could have made it all the way downtown—?

And maybe that was all wishful thinking.

And maybe, despite everything, they weren't going to make it after all.

* * *

The churning slowed.

It didn't stop, but it slowed.

And they were still alive.

How did he know that?

Because they were still alive.

It didn't make sense.

They hadn't outrun the tsunami.

And they were under how many feet of water—

And yet . . . here they were, still alive, still breathing.

Still alive.

The water was brown and murky; where the headlamp beams pierced it for a few feet it looked like as much mud (and who knew what else) as water. If they hadn't had the headlamps . . .

Maybe that was what had attracted the attackers, maybe they saw the light as a beacon. He wasn't sure. It had all happened too fast, the subway car had flooded so quickly. James was wearing a professional-grade mask, it had extra-bright lamps, but down here, the advantage was minimal. He had only a small tunnel of vision, a gloom just a bit lighter than the darker gloom surrounding. He hung in place, thoughts trying to race, circling in confusion. He was a frozen moment of awareness in a shadowy underwater coffin.

He looked to the others. Julia was holding onto the regulator with both hands; her eyes were closed. She was fine, almost relaxed. Her mother too, though not as calm—she understood how precarious their situation was. Hu was floating close to Julia, watching her carefully. And the teenager—he was watching James as warily as a feral cat. He must have seen what James had done. James took his three breaths, then turned to look toward the raised end of the car. There were dark shapes floating in the water. He didn't look long; he didn't want to see them clearly. He already knew, and his gut churned.

He turned his attention to the dials on the tanks. They had air—just not enough. Nowhere near as much as he had hoped. The chaos, the exertion, they were sucking air faster than he had planned. And the pressure, more pressure meant each lungful sucked in more air. He had to assume they were under at least a hundred feet of water.

But how deep were they, really? How much water was pressing down on them?

It didn't matter. They were in trouble. They had to move.

James wanted to stay nice and safe. Underwater was always nice and safe—if you knew what you were doing. But if you knew what you were doing, then you'd also know you can't stay underwater. It's not just how much air—it's the *other* reason. At any serious pressure, they'd get wonky.

James knew what it felt like. It's a little like being drunk or stoned—except it isn't. It's the rapture of the deep. And if you succumb to it, you become a statistic of the deep. No, you have to focus. You have to concentrate on every single task. Each specific task, one careful moment after the next.

James focused. He took his next three breaths and passed the mouthpiece back to the boy. Options. He had to consider the options. They weren't good. But they were options. That was more than most people had—especially the ones now floating limp in the darkness. There were so many of them, and they couldn't escape them, could they? They were a silent gauntlet, guarding any exit.

In the chaos of the moment, James hadn't considered the panic, the terror, of those caught in the water, unable to escape, those last few desperate moments of grasping for possibility, gasping for air, choking on their own last screams of denial and rage.

James knew what it was like to drown. It had been one of the worst parts of his training. He'd never understood the necessity of the exercise—being pushed into that near-death moment—at least, not until afterward when he'd been painfully pulled out of the tank, choking and gasping and coughing up water, not until the medic checked his heart and listened to his lungs and nodded to the trainer. Not until the trainer had looked him straight in the eyes and said, “Now do you understand what you'll be dealing with when you try to rescue a drowning man?”

And James had somehow managed to get the words out, “Was that fucking necessary?”

“I hope to fucking God it never is. But if it saves one life—yours—then, yeah.” The trainer added, “Given a choice, I'd rather lose the idiot. His funeral I don't have to go to.”

James had made up his mind, there and then, never to repeat the experience. Not voluntarily. And definitely not involuntarily!

That had a lot to do with his relationship with Hu, as well. That first day, in the tank at Paramount, he'd been watching this beautiful young man with multiple overlays of awareness. At first, he'd thought him just a gangling teenager, then he realized not only was Hu older than he looked, but also how inexperienced he himself was at gauging ages, especially the ages of Asian men. He just didn't have enough history.

For a moment, he'd wondered if Hu were . . . what's a good word? Accessible? An interesting question, not one he usually considered, and not one he intended to pursue here. It was only a passing thought, quickly pushed aside by the necessities of the job.

Once in the tank, once the plastic and Styrofoam flotsam had been added, once the wind machines had been turned on and the mechanically produced waves had started churning, it became obvious—to James at least—that Hu did not have a lot of experience with this particular kind of stunt work. And even though plastic and Styrofoam looks and feels lightweight—if enough of it piles up against you, or on top of you, it can rapidly become an impenetrable mass. You can drown just as easily as if it were the real thing.

So James had watched Hu. He watched all the people in the water, but he watched Hu especially—because the beautiful young man wasn't watching out for himself, not the way a more experienced stunt player would have.

James hadn't waited for anyone to call “cut!” The rule was simple. Don't worry about ruining the shot. Get out of the way of the bus. Dodge the falling rocks. Don't get bitten by the mechanical dinosaur head. Don't. Get. Injured. Especially don't get killed. That costs money. It shuts the production down for two or three days. And it pisses off producers.

Rule Number One: Getting killed can ruin your whole day.

So James had dived into the tank, swum under the prop flotsam, grabbed Hu, and pulled him off to the side. He hadn't been thinking of anything more than just getting the poor dumb schmuck out of danger. It wasn't until later, over lunch, that he'd realized what an amazing smile shone on Hu Son's face.

And even then, he hesitated. He'd been burned enough in the relationship fire. He wasn't that eager to put his hand back into the flames—or any other part of his anatomy. But one thing led to another anyway—and now he had a ring on his finger.

It was an unfamiliar sensation. Hu's life was the other half of his now. His responsibility. And not just Hu. Three other lives were depending on his expertise.

So. Options. They could head up the nearest stairwell, head for the surface. Except, where was the surface? Right now, Wilshire was under water. James didn't know exactly how much, but it had to be a lot of fast-moving water. Ten mph, twenty mph, it didn't matter. It would be like stepping into a hurricane, except they'd be weightless with no footing. The waters would carry them away like balloons in a storm.

Wait for the waters to subside? That would work. If they subsided fast enough, be-

fore the five of them ran out of air or succumbed to cold. That was another problem. The temperature of the water. It was cold—not cold enough to produce hypothermia in an adult, not right away, but Julia’s smaller body put her at increased risk. And perhaps the skinny teenager as well. They had to get above the water.

The subway car lurched, distracting James. Not quite unseen, the drifting bodies lurched too.

James took an extra deep breath, then passed the mouthpiece back to the young man. He swam deeper into the car to investigate. His headlamp gave him some sense of the mess—one of the subway doors was jammed open—by a body. His internal conversation was deafening. *Please, God, no children. No children, please—*

God did not comply.

His beam illuminated an infant, blanket still unraveling around its lifeless body.

Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck—fuck you, God—

James retreated, his mind already postulating what must have happened. A mother rushing home from work, finding the baby sitter gone, grabbing the baby, rushing for the subway, but somehow getting to the station just a few minutes too late, getting on the last car, hoping to escape. Dying in cold dark terror.

He bumped into a floating cat carrier, a furry body within, the handle still gripped by an elderly woman, her white hair floating around her head like a cloud.

Another body, this one in a dark uniform, the garbage truck driver? James didn’t want to know. It was too much. He was starting to feel the horror—and painful pressure in his chest.

The subway lurched again—and all the separate bodies echoed the movement, a synchronized ballet, all the different dancers bumping sideways to the same unheard music. The moment passed and they resumed their slow deliberate gavotte. No longer panicked, in death they had become patient observers. The staring jetsam of disaster, their faces now relaxed and lifeless, they hung almost motionless, a silent jury—their fatal judgment dark and unspoken.

The dive computer was certain now, it beeped in alarm—they were too deep. They had to start ascending now. And as quickly as possible. Too much water, too little air—the bends would be inevitable.

James swam back to the others, back to the air tanks, still struggling with the math of their survival. He couldn’t sort it out, it was the pressure, the paralyzing effects of it. His thoughts wandered in a drunken haze—and if he was having trouble, then the others were probably faring worse.

He had to focus. He hadn’t expected to do this, not this soon, but there wasn’t any alternative. He had to switch the tanks now, before he got fuzzier.

Switching tanks underwater wasn’t hard. He’d done it before, but he hadn’t done it a lot, so—after the necessary three breaths—he took his time to make sure he was doing it right. He had to focus carefully on each part of the process. As soon as the connections were secure, as soon as the pressure gauges were good, he relaxed a little. Hu and Julia had a little more time. He’d switch their tanks in fifteen minutes, maybe ten.

What had he been thinking about? He concentrated—oh yeah, options. Can’t swim for the surface, can’t wait for the waters to subside. Could they get higher?

Maybe! The Wiltern—wasn’t there something? He tried to remember. There was a subway entrance in the building, wasn’t there? Part of some expansion project? A pedestrian tunnel under the street, from the lobby to the platform. That would get them up a couple of floors—that is, if the building was still there and if it was tall enough to stick out of the water, then maybe they could get to one of the upper floors before they ran out of air. So many ifs—

But the numbers didn’t leave any room for negotiation nor delays. They were too

deep and they had too many bodies breathing too little air. But maybe—

Everything was maybe. James shared another three breaths, passed the mouth-piece back, then fumbled in his bag of gear until he found what he was looking for—a plastic panel and a grease pencil on a leash. Another three breaths of air, then he wrote frantically. “Get out now. Tunnel to Wiltern.”

He didn't have time to write more. He wouldn't have anyway. But when the waters started to recede, when the worst of the flood finally started to flow back to the sea, he worried that the pressure in the station would also reverse and the subway train would be sucked back into the tunnel, where no escape would be possible. He wasn't sure about the physics, his mind wasn't focusing that far, but he couldn't chance it.

Three breaths, then he held the panel in the teen's headlamp beam. The boy's eyes were wide, bright in the gloom, he gave a thumbs-up response. James maneuvered himself over to Hu, held up the sign. Hu gave a thumbs-up too, then reached for the panel. He touched Julia's shoulder. She opened her eyes and then squinted them almost shut—this muck hurt! Hu tapped her shoulder again, holding the sign in front of her, his lights pointed at it. She nodded. She was tired, she was scared, but she was determined. James admired her spirit. She gave him hope.

James took the sign back, turned back to his own tank for another three breaths, then to hold the sign for Julia's mother to see. She was too frightened to respond with anything more than a half-nod of acknowledgment.

Another three breaths.

Stay focused, James told himself. One thing at a time.

Another tough decision. They were going to have to leave the bikes behind—and everything they'd so carefully packed. Abandoned. For a moment, he considered the impossible—could they carry any of this? None of them were wearing weight-belts, they had a buoyancy problem, they were all bobbing toward the roof of the subway car, the bikes might serve as ballast, and keep them from rising too fast—

No, it was too much to ask, too much effort. Not enough air. But at least, he and Hu had already transferred their most important belongings to their backpacks, they could take that much with them. Three more breaths. He waved to Hu, caught his attention, and pointed to his backpack. Hu nodded. He gave a double thumbs-up and checked his straps.

James turned back to the bikes and pulled the air tanks off the trailers, the ones they were using, and the last set of spares. Another three breaths and he gave the signal. He was in a small circle of light, fingers of illumination surrounded him. He gave a thumbs-up signal and the entire group began to move—Hu and Julia, the teen and Julia's mother.

They worked their way to the jammed-open door of the subway and somehow he managed to push the bodies out of the way. Two? Three? He wasn't sure and it didn't matter. The doors stayed open, one small piece of good luck.

Three more breaths.

The subway car was tilted. A wedge of debris had been thrust under its rear wheels, raising it at a lopsided angle—it leaned away from the platform, its upper frame jammed against the outer wall of the tunnel. The end of the car was more than a foot above the platform, wheels caught on the edge of it. Their door at the front of the car was almost a foot above the platform, and angled upward. Without the water, it would have been a hard leap. Here, this deep, under this much pressure, gravity was almost irrelevant. If anything, they were going to have a hard time staying down.

Three more breaths.

James swam to Julia's mom, patted her on the shoulder reassuringly, gave her a thumbs-up, then to the boy to reassure him as well—three more breaths—and then

back to look at the pressure gauge on Hu's tank.

Two and a half adults had drained his own tank, but Hu's tank, with only one and a half bodies draining it, still had a useful margin. James gestured to Hu, pointing at the mouthpiece. Hu understood; he passed it over, sharing his air.

James took four breaths, a luxury, but a necessary one, then passed the mouthpiece back. James went through the door first. Hu brought up the rear. He had learned from James, they'd spent time together underwater. Be slow. Be methodical. Keep the beginners between you. Do one thing only, then the next. There's no rush. Impatience kills. Panic kills. Count to three. Or four.

Once out the door, they bobbed upward, bumping into the ceiling. Hu shared his air with James again. He looked worried, but James refused to acknowledge it. He'd already made up his mind. They were going to live. They hadn't come this far to die.

Another few breaths from Hu's tank and James swam away for a quick reconnaissance of the flooded station. He had to find the pedestrian tunnel.

There were bodies here. Too many, most of them floating up toward the ceiling, bobbing there like dreadful balloons. He tried not to think about them, but some of them turned toward him as he passed, he couldn't ignore their faces.

And fish, there were fish here too! Not a lot, and nothing James could identify, but some struggled feebly in the muddy currents. They wouldn't survive.

It gave him pause. Maybe later he would think about it. Maybe later someone would be able to explain how they got there. Maybe there'd be "later." Too many maybes.

At the front of the train, where it had shuddered to a stop, James pulled himself down to look into the first car. His headlights found the motorman's booth, the driver still behind the controls, his face an angry expression of disbelief and rage. James' beams illuminated the badge on his chest. It said "Jeffers."

You stupid schmuck, thought James. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. You should have just run for home, we could have made it. But no! You had to stop, didn't you. One more station, one more heroic pickup. Instead of saving a few, you killed us all.*

That last thought startled James. He hadn't realized it, but he'd been identifying with the dead. Down among the dead men, he had no choice. Despite his conviction, he still had no certainty.

It didn't matter what he thought. He kept going. He pushed a little further into the gloom, now exploring along the walls—no, nothing here, nothing here, nothing here. The darkness refused to give up its secrets. The tunnel had to be in the other direction.

Feeling the pressure rising in his lungs, James headed back to Hu and sucked eagerly, much too eagerly, at the regulator. He had to take a minute to recalibrate himself. Slowly, dammit, slowly.

This time he headed around the escalator, feeling along the walls—but carefully. If he bobbed up that diagonal shaft he might not be able to get back—but there it was. The pedestrian tunnel, a darker dark in the dark. Maybe it was his brain playing tricks on his eyes, the way he could "see" the furniture at home when he got up in the middle of the night to pee. And maybe it was a hallucination from nitrogen narcosis. Too many maybes. But no—a little closer and he was sure. It was the tunnel. He turned around, and just as carefully, he worked his way back to the others.

Three more breaths.

Time to switch out the tank that Hu and Julia were using. It didn't take long, but he had to concentrate, had to be careful. He had to focus.

When he finished, all the headlights were pointed at him. He existed as an oasis of light in a dark universe. He passed his mouthpiece back to the boy and pointed. Time to go.

Everybody but Julia had to carry a tank. They had the two they were still breathing from—and the last two spares.

As a group, they moved, all five of them—James and Hu, Julia and her mother, and the unnamed teen. It was a tough swim; they bounced along the roof of the station, James herding them carefully away from the escalator shaft. Their headlights weaving in the dark.

They made their way slowly toward the promise of escape.

James didn't know what was at the end of the tunnel. He hoped it wasn't blocked by debris. Or worse—

* * *

There were bodies floating in the pedestrian tunnel. Their headlamps revealed a gauntlet of bobbing shapes. James tried not to think about the panic that must have happened in here, the water flooding in so fast, it would have been like trying to swim up a waterfall. Dark shapes bobbed everywhere. And the floor of the tunnel was littered with everything they'd tried to carry with them.

They paused several times for James to suck air. This was not what he had expected. Or hoped for. They had to push their way through a nightmare, faces coming out of the dark—all too close. It was a bumping gauntlet of horror, a gallery of silent accusations, each body turning in its own final orbit. James tried not to look, tried not to illuminate them, but he had no choice. They were passing through a tunnel of horror—a silent community, patiently waiting for James and the others to join them.

Three more breaths—

And at last, the end. Another set of steps. They half-swam, half-bobbed up the diagonal shaft. At the top—only darkness. James made them wait. He took three breaths and entered first, turning around slowly, looking to see if it was safe.

He could barely make out any details. It was still way too dark in here. But they were definitely in the foyer of the Wiltern tower, the part that had been carved out for a pedestrian entrance to the subway. That much he could recognize, but he was otherwise unfamiliar with the building. The lobby ceiling was high. He didn't want to get caught up there with no weight-belt to bring him down. There was a railing here, he held onto it against the eddies of current. He could feel himself being pushed this way and that—not a lot, but enough to make him uncomfortable. Outside, the water must still be moving, but he couldn't tell which way. The gloom was that complete.

James swam back into the tunnel. He took breaths from Hu, then from the boy. He didn't want to be selfish, but he didn't want to lose himself to the rapture either. He steadied his breathing and aimed his light around the group. He wasn't familiar with the layout of the building. This was the lobby of the theater. He grabbed his grease pencil and scrawled on the plastic slate. "Stairwell?"

Hu shrugged. He didn't know either.

But Julia's mother reached out and grabbed his arm. She pointed outward and then toward the left. Over there—

But they couldn't just swim over. The problem was buoyancy. They needed to get across the lobby without rising so high they couldn't get to the door.

James looked back into the tunnel. A weird thought—

Three more breaths.

He swam back into the pedestrian tunnel, searching. The bottom was littered with the abandoned belongings of the dead. James was looking for suitcases—the canvas ones with one handle on top and another on the side. Whoever these poor fools had been, they weren't smart enough to leave their lives behind. James tested several of the cases for weight, then pulled the two heaviest back to the end.

Three more breaths.

Hu understood immediately. He'd take one suitcase, holding it by the top handle. James would take the other. Julia's mom and the teen would hold on to the side han-

dles. Hu would hold Julia's hand. They should be able to make it.

Three more breaths—and James gave the thumbs-up signal.

As a group, they moved, a curious underwater tableau, a cluster of bobbing lights that revealed air tanks and baggage and faces tight against any further horrors in the dark. The Korean woman kept pointing and gesturing. James kept checking back with her, but in the darkness, it was impossible to know if they were actually heading in the right direction. He had to stop for breath again—and even a second time, until he realized they were paralleling a wall. But he wasn't sure if it was the outer wall of the lobby or the one they had been swimming toward. He didn't know this building, but maybe the lobby wasn't rectangular.

Left or right? James had to guess. He could make out vague shapes in the distance, but those could have been hallucinations. He took three breaths from the teen, then made a decision—the fire stairwell would be against an outer wall of the lobby. Okay, he'd lead them to the left and hope it wasn't a dead end.

It wasn't. Left was right. He realized with a start that he shouldn't be thinking word games now. That was dangerous.

But they were at the door. It had a wide emergency bar, the kind that pushed to open. For a moment, James felt fear. Without leverage, how could he push it?

Hu was already there, he batted the door with the heavy case he was holding. It bumped open enough for James to wedge his shoulder in. He pushed it further open, revealing only darkness.

James let go of the case he was dragging and entered the stairwell. He grabbed a railing and turned around slowly, looking to see if it was safe. Above, far above, did something glimmer? The surface?

It looked doable.

He gestured, a slow-motion wave.

Hu and the others pushed their way in. James shared three breaths and considered their circumstances. The stairwell was a silent column of dark water, but it was clearer water. They could actually see something. Their headlight beams penetrated for several yards. There wasn't a lot of debris here, and nowhere near as much mud and murk. The water must have filtered in instead of flooding, rising at its own rate.

James looked back. Hu had dropped his case to push the door closed. His own abandoned suitcase—the teen was pulling at its zipper, curious to see what was inside. James swam over and touched the boy's shoulder. The boy looked to him and he wagged his finger no. We're not grave robbers. Out of the water, the boy's gesture would have been a puzzled shrug, but he let go of the zipper.

Here inside the stairwell, with the fire door closed behind them, they should be safe from any rough currents. Even better, if all the fire doors above were closed, then this column of water would be a convenient chimney. They could ascend at their safest rate. Maybe . . . If the building hadn't been weakened, if it didn't collapse around them.

The dive computer was still beeping in annoyance. It said the water's surface was less than a hundred feet above them. It wanted to know how much air they had—but James couldn't tell it, he didn't know.

The surface might be reachable. If their air held out. If hypothermia didn't get them first.

If a second wave didn't arrive and destroy everything the first wave had already weakened.

James calculated in his head; it was still hard to focus down here, but the math wasn't impossible. One floor every five minutes. Maybe two—? No, they didn't have enough air. They had to get as high as they could as fast as they could. They might manage an extra

ten or twenty minutes of decompression nearer the surface. Maybe they could make it.

He took his three breaths, passed the regulator back, and pointed upward.

The light at the end of the tunnel was still a hundred feet above them, and it was still invisible.

* * *

It is not a good idea to laugh underwater.

You could drown.

But as James did the math in his head, as he computed the safest rate of ascent through the stairwell measured against his estimate of the amount of air they had left, he ended up reminding himself—

Sloan's teddy. . .

For a few dangerous seconds, he splurged bubbles. The more he tried to stop himself from laughing, the funnier it got. Hu looked at him, curious, then worried. James finally somehow managed to control himself. He held up a hand, then grabbed his board and wrote on it. "I'm fine. I'll tell you later."

Three breaths and he pointed upward. A single flight of stairs. Then another. Thirty feet. Sloan's teddy indeed.

Five minutes max, then they bobbed up a flight of stairs. Except the dive computer on his wrist beeped to let him know that they were still ascending anyway, even as they waited. The waters were receding and somewhere, the chimney must be leaking. Not good. If it leaked too fast and too much. If they "ascended" too rapidly, they were in serious trouble.

James had had the bends. Twice. Once was bad planning, once was stupidity—not his, the diver he'd had to rescue—but either way, it was not something he wanted to do a third time. Rashes, joint pain, headaches, even paralysis. But the bends are survivable—most of the time. Symptoms of decompression sickness can show up in the first hour, almost certainly in the first six hours, and if not in the first twenty-four hours, then probably not at all.

But if it was a choice between the bends and death?

Another joke occurred to him. "Death? Good choice. But first, Oompah!" He had to suppress a giggle. And then he wondered, what the fuck? Am I getting giddy? Nitrogen narcosis was playing at the edge of his brain.

Three breaths from Hu, then three breaths from the boy. He was going to have to start watching himself. All these people were depending on him. It was time. He pointed. Up the next flight of stairs. And the next. And the next.

The higher they rose, the brighter the stairwell, the brighter the promise above. The water here wasn't as murky as it was below, but now there was debris floating in their way—a lot of paper, and a large rubber trash can, someone's jacket, and when James looked up, he thought he saw a body caught under a railing.

He checked his goddamn beeping dive computer and frowned. There was nothing he could do. Maybe they should wait an extra two minutes here? He took three breaths from Hu, three from the boy, gestured for them to wait and swam halfway up to look.

Yes, a body. A woman, stocky, possibly in her fifties, hard to tell. Her hair floated like a cloud around her head, but her dress had floated up revealing thick legs and pale underpants, they had become translucent, revealing her nakedness before his light—one last embarrassment. The tsunami had not only taken her life, it had taken her dignity as well.

James came back down again, grabbed another six breaths, then gestured for the others to follow him—but he waved his hand down past his eyes to show Julia and her mother to close theirs. Up the stairwell, and James tried to push the woman's body into a corner while the others rose past. Her name badge identified her as Mrs. Hayes. She was entitled to this much consideration—he didn't want the others to in-

vade her privacy. Poor Mrs. Hayes.

Another flight up, another rubber trash can. And here was the cause of the decreasing pressure. The fire door was jammed open by another body, this one a janitor in a dark uniform. James could feel the current here—the water was being sucked away. Outside the broken tower, the current must have become too strong to resist. James felt himself being pulled—it was strong enough to be a challenge.

He pulled on the fire door, pushing it open enough for the poor man's body to be sucked through and away. He let go and the current pushed the door shut again, cutting off the water's escape.

He was surprised that he'd been able to pull the door open at all. The force of the water was less than he'd expected. This was both good news and bad news.

They were closer to the surface—but they were also more at risk of decompression sickness. He swam back down to the others. Three breaths from Hu, three breaths from the boy, and three more breaths from Hu. They were going to have to wait here ten minutes at least. Maybe more.

And they were already on their last tanks. He didn't remember when they had switched over, but apparently he had done so at some point going up the chimney of the stairwell. Maybe at the bottom, before they started up? Not a good sign that he didn't remember. He studied the dials on the last two tanks.

Good—

—Just not good enough.

He floated on his back so he could peer upward through the gap between the stairs. There was light up there, brighter than before. He watched his bubbles rise up through his headlamp beam toward it.

He did the numbers in his head. The math was not negotiable. The bends were no longer a risk, no longer a possibility. Now they were simply inevitable. The only question was how to manage the ascent to make them survivable.

They had maybe twenty minutes of air left in the tanks, maybe thirty. They had at least fifty feet still to ascend. That is, if the dive computer was correct. James sorted through his memories—his research, his training, and the experiences of other divers.

His instinct was to ascend slowly and safely. That was what his training demanded. But the math said no—not gonna make it. The alternative was to rise to a point maybe ten or fifteen feet just below the surface and wait there. At that depth, their air would last much longer, giving them more time to decompress before it ran out. From there, they could safely ascend the last short distance to the surface.

James would have preferred to stick with the advice of the nagging, beeping dive computer, but that wasn't his best option. The water was still receding, draining out of the building around them. Even if they waited here, they were still ascending—or rather, the surface was descending to meet them.

And in addition to everything else, he was starting to feel the cold as a painful presence. He was starting to shiver. That was okay. If he stopped shivering, that would be very not okay. It would mean his body was shutting down. He wasn't worried about that, he knew his tolerances. But what about the others?

He was reaching that point where he really wanted to get out of the water—he wanted to get out *now*. And if he was feeling this way, then it was probably a lot worse for the others. He turned his headlamps toward Julia and her mom, who was holding Julia close to her body, trying to share warmth. In this water, it was a futile effort.

James took his three breaths. He looked across at Hu, who looked back at him hopefully.

It was enough.

Fuck it. We are not going to die today.

He swam from one to the other, Julia, her mom, the boy, and finally Hu, checking

once again to make sure that each was all right. Later on, perhaps, he might be able to marvel at their endurance—but right now, they had no choice. Either they hung on, or they became like all those others they had passed below. Like poor Mrs. Hayes.

More breaths. And another flight of stairs. Another and another.

The surface was a lot closer than he realized. The stairwell must be leaking somewhere. Had they closed the door at the bottom? He didn't remember. Or maybe the fire doors weren't all that watertight. Or maybe there was enough structural damage that the whole building was as secure as a screen door.

The good news, the afternoon light flickered brightly above. He could see rippling light through the water's surface now, a promise of survival, and even though he still swam in a dirty murky world, filled with little floating things, the walls of the stairwell were no longer hidden behind a fog of gloom. But he wasn't ready to feel confident. Not yet. Overconfidence is just another way to die.

They had to wait here as long as possible. James took his three breaths and studied the dive computer. It had finally given up and stopped beeping, but it still insisted that the surface of the water was steadily descending to meet them.

A large rubber trash can drifted by. Was this the fourth or fifth? Why so many? Something else to wonder about. He began to imagine the episode of *Nova* that would examine these events.

Three breaths. Three breaths. Three more breaths.

He checked the gauges again. He studied the dive computer, blinking. It didn't make sense. No, it made sense. *He* wasn't making sense. It didn't matter what the gauges said, they were running out of air. There was no more time.

James fumbled for the plastic slate, felt along the leash for the grease pen, wrote on it frantically. "Drop tanks. Go up. My signal." He turned to the others, holding the slate so that each of them could see the words. He took three quick breaths, then pointed up. Waving his arm in a broad "Let's go, now!" motion.

He didn't have to push them. They were eager to go. They each took a last long suck of air, then dropped the regulators and scrambled up. Hu grabbed Julia by the waist and they half-swam, half-walked up the last flight of stairs. James pushed Julia's mom and the teen after them. He followed, the pressure in his lungs growing. He should have taken a last breath himself.

He looked back. The tanks were tumbling away, bouncing in slow-motion irretrievably down the stairwell, a lost opportunity. He pushed himself upward. He couldn't see. His vision was blurry, closing in, he needed one more breath, he couldn't hold it—

The top of the stairwell was open to the sky. The walls were broken here. A twisted doorframe remained where a fire door had been. James struggled to reach for it, he felt himself sinking back—

—and a pair of hands reached down and yanked him roughly out of the water.

A confusion of words, an unfamiliar voice, "Are there any more—?"

"No, no. Just the five of us—" That was Hu. His voice sounded strange, garbled by water. Someone else was choking, a small high voice. Julia?

He couldn't see. Everything was a glare. He was on his back, gasping, choking, coughing up water—how had that happened? His last strangled ascent? Everything here was blue, incongruously bright. Two faces abruptly blocked his view, dark silhouettes, he didn't know them. Where had they come from?

"Don't try to talk. Just concentrate on breathing, okay?"

There were hands all over him, pulling away the last of the rig on his back, pulling his mask away, loosening his shirt. Someone had their head to his chest, trying to listen to his heartbeat. James coughed, choked up more water, and the person pulled away. His lungs hurt badly.

"Hu—?" he called. "Hu?"

"I'm here. I'm okay." A hasty answer.

James concentrated on breathing now. A deep breath. Another. Stop to cough, spit up, cough, then breathe again.

Three deep breaths. Three more. Three more. Don't hyperventilate. Hold your breath a moment and appreciate that you can.

He was almost back when he suddenly remembered an old movie, a favorite. He called out, "Are we dead, mon?"

Hu called back, falsetto. "I'm not dead yet, I'm not."

James laughed. He laughed until he choked and coughed up even more water. His throat hurt, but he laughed anyway. He rolled over on his side and looked across at Hu. His husband was half up on his knees, also laughing.

James flailed helplessly, trying to sit up. Hands grabbed him from behind, someone helped him to a sitting position. James looked around. They were on a wide empty floor, slightly tilted, very broken. But his vision was still blurry, partly from the glare of the day, partly from the painful tears filling his eyes, an involuntary reaction to the overwhelming dazzle. The whole world looked overexposed, the people here were silhouettes, vague shapes in the glare. Maybe a dozen, he wasn't sure.

Hu scooted over to him, looked at him carefully, then scooted around to sit beside him. He bumped him affectionately with his shoulder. James looked at Hu, a weak grin on his face. Hu looked tired. But alive. Even smiling.

After a moment of silent acceptance, a moment of just surviving, James looked around at their rescuers. "Who are you people? How did you get up here? How did you get through?"

"We should ask you the same question," said one of the men. "I'm Scott Copeland. Who are you?"

"James Liddle. And that's Hu Son. And the little girl is Julia. I don't know her mother's name. Are they all right?"

"They will be, yes. Sophie's looking after them. And the teenager too. Looks like you had a rough ride."

James nodded. "The subway. The last train. Didn't make it."

"Yeah, we heard—" The man pointed. "We've been following the news. The cell-phone towers are down, but Jack's Walkman has FM. Three trains were lost."

"Three—?"

"Yeah. Real bad scene at Union Station."

James didn't say anything then, didn't want to say what he was thinking, didn't want to make the fear real. He realized he was weak. Exhausted. He looked around. They were on a sloping tile surface. The stairwell was a square opening with a few broken steps rising out of the water. "Is this the top floor?"

"No. This was the tenth floor. The top three floors were ripped away." Copeland's expression went grim. "That's where most of the people went. I suppose it seemed like a good idea. It was wall-to-wall crowded. Probably exceeded the structural limits. But, see, the top floors of a building are never the strongest. The lower floors are built to hold the weight of the floors above."

"You're a builder—?"

"Architect. I know this building. It's a good one. Well, it was. We started on the seventh floor, that's where our offices were. When the water started rising, we moved up to the eighth, eventually the ninth. Had to stop there. The people above wouldn't let us keep going, said there was no more room." Copeland sighed and shrugged—a gesture of both sadness and grim irony.

"We'd been shredding old blueprints. We had thirty or forty bins of paper we still hadn't emptied. When the water broke the windows and started rising inside the building, we emptied all the biggest trash cans, turned them upside down and stuck

our heads in to breathe. It was a gamble, but it worked. Each bin had enough air to last ten minutes, twenty if we were careful. And we had, I dunno, thirty bins. I saved my people. Most of them."

"But you lost a couple . . ." James glanced toward the broken stairwell, wondering if the bloated cadaver of poor Mrs. Hayes might suddenly bob up on the surface of the trapped water.

Copeland followed his glance. "Yeah. We had some panic. It was pretty bad. We did everything we could." Copeland was reluctant to explain. "What about you? Down in the subway—?"

James remembered the man who'd tried to take Hu's regulator. He could still see the man's startled expression, the sudden horrified realization that he was dying—dying twice, once by drowning, once by knife—and the crushing certainty that this was truly death. James shook his head, he didn't want to talk about it.

Copeland recognized the expression. "Yeah. Bad day all around." He straightened. "Let me see if there's any water left." He disappeared from James' field of view.

James concentrated on his breathing for a while. Open air. There was a delicious luxury. How had he ever taken breathing for granted? Finally, he looked around, searching for Julia and her mother. Spotting them, he crawled over on his hands and knees. He still didn't feel like standing. Julia was clutching her mother, her face buried in her mother's side, her shoulders rising and falling as if she was sobbing.

"Are you okay?"

"I prayed to God, and he sent you to save us."

"Well, I don't know about God, but—"

"No, it was God—"

"Okay. It was God. I'm just glad that you and Julia made it. You must have been scared."

"No. I knew that God sent you. So I wasn't scared. I just kept praying and thanking God for sending you to us."

"Ahh. Well, I guess it worked."

"Yes. And God will bless you for what you did."

"Not gonna argue that—I can use all the blessings I can get. I'm just glad you both made it." James patted her shoulder, patted Julia's shoulder, but the little girl didn't look up. James had seen this behavior before; Julia was going to have nightmares. She was going to have some serious post-traumatic stress. And she was going to need some serious therapy. Oh, hell—they all would.

He turned away, crawled back to Hu. The unnamed teenager was sitting next to him, sucking at a bottle of water. He passed the water bottle to Hu; the two of them had been talking, sharing, debriefing each other.

Hu looked to James. "This is Jesse. He's a student at LACC."

James held out his hand. "I'm James. I'm glad you made it."

"So am I, man! That was intense! I am never riding that subway again!"

"I don't think anybody will," James agreed.

Jesse waved his arm, indicating the world around them. "How long we gonna be up here, you know?"

James hadn't even considered the question. He put one hand against a fragment of wall. He raised himself half-up onto his knees—

The hot July sun blazed above. The landscape rippled and foamed below. Everything was too bright. It took a moment for James' vision to clear, for his eyes to focus all the way to the horizon. And then it took another moment for him to make sense of what he was seeing—all the devastation that surrounded them.

James levered himself to his feet, holding onto the spur of the broken wall. He

turned slowly, slowly, shaking his head, saying only, “Fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck.” And then, even more sadly, “Oh, fuck.”

They were alone in the middle of a vast brown sea. The water was receding—slowly. But more water was still trying to push in—uneven ripples of the reverberating shockwaves. Everywhere, the water foamed and surged, churning the debris. Things tumbled in the water, all kinds of things, broken signs, buses, cars, trees, the inevitable palm fronds, pieces of buildings, roofs and walls—and bodies. Too many bodies.

The sea of desolation extended north, all the way to the Hollywood Hills. A few buildings stuck their tops out of the water—but not many. To the west and the south, the view was much the same. There was a rise in the southern distance. Baldwin Hills was now Baldwin Island, probably nothing more than a naked lump. The ferocious power of the waves would have scraped everything away.

The rest was mud.

James saw the past as if it were still the present. The riot at the Santa Monica underpass, the old men at the VA Health Center, the carefree golfers, and all the people in all the cars they’d passed, the little boy staring from a car window on Wilshire Boulevard . . .

How many of them had escaped and how many more had been caught in the overwhelming wrath of the tsunami? It was all unknowable, all washed away too quickly to comprehend.

James tried to imagine—something, anything—a future.

He couldn’t.

It would take months just to catalog the devastation. The scale of this thing—there was nothing left. Nothing to rebuild. The city was gone.

“Fuck,” said James.

It was going to be a long uncomfortable afternoon.

Hu pulled him back down, pulled him next to him. “You okay?”

“No.”

Hu didn’t respond to that. He waited a bit before saying anything else.

Finally, “You kept your promise.”

“I did?”

“You said we weren’t going to die today.”

“The day’s not over.”

“Shut up.” Hu said it gently, affectionately. He took James’ left hand and held it up to admire the gold band on the third finger. He traced it with his own fingers. “But I will say this.” He paused.

“What?”

“This is the worst honeymoon I’ve ever been on—”

“Oh, really? How many others have you had—?”

“This is the first.”

“Then it’s also the *best* honeymoon you’ve ever been on.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Hu leaned his head on James’ shoulder. They were silent for a while. Just being together.

“Hey—” said Jesse, interrupting their silence.

“Yeah?”

“You guys are fags, aren’t you?”

James hadn’t heard that word in years. He was more surprised than offended. “Yeah, I am. I’m not so sure about my husband though. Is that a problem?”

Jesse pointed to James’ discarded facemask, as if looking for the lost regulator. “Yeah, man—! I had your—your thing in my mouth. Yuck—” He got up and moved away.

Hu and James looked at each other. Both started laughing.

"What an ungrateful little prick," Hu said. "Why did you save him, anyway?" James shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

* * *

Swarms of helicopters filled the air over the seething brown water that used to be Los Angeles. They were clattering dragonflies, darting here and there, exploring, recording, reporting. The afternoon was bright but ugly.

Some of the newer buildings, the ones designed to resist a massive earthquake, had survived. They stuck up out of the water like broken stumps.

Where there had been neighborhoods, there was now only mud and water and debris, occasionally patterned by the gridwork of streets that had survived. Mostly the terrain below was a vast sea of desolation. What remained of the 405 was a scar. The Federal Building looked like a fractured tooth. The Veterans' Health Care Center was gone, only a broken steel outline remained to mark its location.

Nevertheless, the choppers swarmed, relentlessly searching—and occasionally, improbably, also triumphantly rescuing. Here and there, despite impossible odds, some people had survived the onslaught of the tsunami. Soon or eventually, whenever they could get to safety, they would have the opportunity to tell their stories to the hungry cameras. Every survival was an improbable adventure—a delusion of luck and prayer, sometimes even a bit of good judgment and courage.

Several Air Force communications planes circled patiently overhead, coordinating the fleets of choppers. The army, the navy, the air force, the coast guard, and several civilian companies were patrolling, each in their assigned area. All other air traffic was forbidden. Even the news choppers were under military guidance now. The Goodyear and Fuji blimps as well.

Three navy choppers were assigned to an area formerly known as Little Korea. There were few landmarks left on the ground; they had to depend on GPS mapping to locate themselves.

"There—" said the copilot. "Two o'clock."

"What am I looking for?"

"Over there. It's a light, hard to see in the glare—"

The chopper pilot brought the machine around. "That green stump sticking out of the water—?"

"Yeah. See that flicker?"

"I see it." As they approached, the pilot said, "Holy shit. That used to be the Wiltern!"

"You recognize it?"

"My grandmother used to live in this area." He added, "Actually, it's the Pellissier building, but everyone calls it the Wiltern."

They came in lower for a closer view. The tsunami had ripped the top off the building. But it had left enough for several stories to remain sticking up out of the water. Open floor space was visible, enough for several people to gather. One was waving a light of some kind.

The copilot called to the divers in the back of the machine. "We've got survivors. More than a dozen."

"Any injuries?"

"Maybe. Some of them are down."

"We'll take the worst. Blue Team can pick up the rest."

"Copy that."

The chopper came in low and the people on the top of the building stood up to wave at them. One of them was aiming the headlamps of a diver's mask. He switched it off as the aircraft approached.

The heli hovered over the building, stirring up the waves in great rippling circles. Four lines dropped from the machine. Two figures in wetsuits came down two of the

lines, two rescue stretchers came down the others.

“Who’s the worst injured?” asked Seal Team Commander Wright.

The survivors looked around, uncertain, but a young Chinese man pointed. “Take the little girl. She’s got hypothermia and maybe the bends.”

“The bends?”

“Long story,” said the man next to him. “And her mom too.”

The other Seal was already pulling the rescue stretchers over to Julia and her mother. “Anyone else with the bends?” asked Wright.

The Chinese man pointed to an African-American teenager, held his own hand up, then pointed to the man next to himself, who tried to wave them away. “I’m okay—” But his hand trembled.

“Bullshit, you are.” Commander Wright peered from one to the other. He spoke to his microphone. “Gonna need two more stretchers. No, make it three.” He turned to the other survivors. “We’ve got another bird coming in behind us. We’ll have you all out of here as quickly as we can.” Back to the microphone. “We’ll need water and blankets. And maybe some protein.”

The first two stretchers lifted away, one after the other, Julia and her mother wrapped in heating blankets. Three more stretchers, all tied together, hanging in a cluster, came down another line—and another Seal Team member as well.

When they came for James, dragging a rescue stretcher with them, he shook his head. “No,” he said, pointing. “Hu Son first.”

“What?” asked Wright.

“He’s on second,” said James. But they were already wrapping him, lifting him into the stretcher, fastening the Velcro straps.

As they secured Hu into his own rescue stretcher, he looked over to James, a bemused expression on his face. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

James said, “It’s been a long day—” and passed out.

Wright signaled the chopper; the first stretcher with James lifted away. A moment later, Hu followed. Then Jesse. Wright followed them up, leaving two Seals behind with the remaining survivors. Even as they clattered away, the second chopper was moving in for the pickup.

“Where we taking them?” Wright asked.

“Wait a minute—” Copilot called back. He was talking to someone on one of the communication planes. “Getty isn’t taking anymore. And Dodger Stadium is full. The parking lot is tent city now.” Abruptly, he paused, listening. “Okay, copy that.” To the pilot, he said. “Griffith Observatory.”

The pilot nodded. The copilot turned back to Wright. “Did you hear that? Griffith Observatory. They’ve got an aid station there—and they’re running shuttles down into Burbank. They want to shorten our turnaround time.” Turning back to the pilot, he added, “They’re bringing a fuel truck up too.”

The pilot nodded, his only acknowledgment.

The Hollywood Hills were directly ahead. But below them, muddy water still churned across the flooded city.

The center of Los Angeles was gone—and so was its heart.

* * *

Griffith Observatory stands on one of the highest hills on the southern edge of the basin. It overlooks the entire city. It is a familiar landmark for both tourists and filmmakers.

Today, its wide lawn and parking lot served as a rescue station, a place for helicopters to bring survivors and refuel, a place for ambulances and buses to take survivors down the northern side of the hills to Burbank and North Hollywood and other places safely beyond the reach of the churning ocean.

James and Hu stood at a western railing, one of the better viewing positions, and looked out over what was now called the Bay of L.A. Or Bayla for short. On the hills to their right, the Hollywood sign survived untouched. It still declared the fabled town, but of Hollywood there was nothing left. Only a sea of mud. Already a smell of wet decay was rising from below. Despite the lingering heat of the day, they were both wrapped in blankets.

They held hands, but neither had anything to say. Despite their mutual joint pains, their headaches, and their blotchy patches of red skin, they had not been considered at severe risk. They'd been given oxygen. It had helped, but Julia's condition was much more serious, so was her mother's, so they were taken for immediate treatment. James and Hu would have to wait awhile for further attention. If at all.

"Triage," someone had explained, not understanding why Hu and James had exchanged a look.

But it was obvious now. Sooner or later, everybody is triage.

They both hurt all over. Hu had thought to dump the contents of their medicine cabinet into his backpack. They had ibuprofen and it helped—a little. Just not enough. They were going to have to walk this off and wait it out.

The wide lawns in front of the observatory were filled with tents, tables, and bustling emergency workers. The parking lot in front of that was filled with more tents and more crowds of people. The only open area was a space set aside for helicopters to land and take off. A fuel truck waited nearby. Several television vans were parked on the grass.

A Red Cross tent had been set up where people could get coffee and donuts and even some packaged meals, but despite their growing hunger, neither James nor Hu felt like eating. They were still too uncomfortable.

A young black woman came up to them, carrying a tablet. Her badge identified her as some kind of city official, James couldn't read it. He was still having trouble seeing clearly.

"Have you been logged in?" she asked, holding up the tablet.

James shook his head.

"We're trying to assemble a roster of survivors. You were in the Wiltern building?"

"No. We were in the subway. We came up the fire stairs of the Wiltern building—"

She looked puzzled. "How did you do that?"

"SCUBA," said James. He was still holding his facemask. He held it up as if that was the only explanation he needed.

"Um, okay," she said, not quite sure what he meant, but it didn't matter anyway. "Your names?"

"James Liddle. Hu Son."

The young woman was wearing a headset. She repeated their answers to her headset, checking that the tablet properly translated her speech to text.

"Address?"

"Nowhere now," said James.

"Venice Beach," said Hu. He told her their address, but it was meaningless now.

The woman asked a few more questions: Email addresses, cellphone numbers, Social Security numbers, birth dates, and preferred gender identification. Finally, "We're going to try to find you a place to stay. I can't promise that you'll be together—"

James held up Hu's hand in his own. "He's my husband. We stay together."

She didn't blink. She referred to her tablet. Apparently it was connected to some master database somewhere. She looked up. "Do you have any documentation?"

James held up his left hand, showing the ring. "Is this good enough?"

"Um, I'm sorry. No. We've had people trying to lie to us."

"Does it matter?"

“Yes, it does.” She looked annoyed. “The relief benefits are different for married couples—”

Hu interrupted. He was already fumbling in his backpack, pulling out a dry bag. “Does a marriage license count?” He had a sheaf of papers, all safe inside three concentric Ziploc bags. He sorted through the papers, passed one over.

She took it, looked at it, shook her head, and passed it back. “It’s not signed—”

“We were supposed to get married today. We would have been on our way to—to our honeymoon.”

James said, “Is there a judge up here? Or a minister? Someone who can sign this?”

“Uh—” She looked confused. “Let me check.” She walked away, already pulling her phone out of her pocket.

Hu said, “Well, that’s—”

“—fucked.” finished James.

It was all too much.

James turned away, leaned on the stone railing, not wanting to look at anyone or anything anymore. But there it was—the muddy sea of Bayla and its broken towers. He tried hard not to give in to his rage. But—it was all too much. Everything was gone. Everything. He had nothing. No words. No feeling. He was numb.

He had the clothes on his back, whatever was still attached to his tool belt, a diving watch that had stopped, an expensive dive computer he never wanted to see again, a half-empty backpack, and for some reason, he was still holding onto his face-mask, afraid to let it go, even up here.

And Hu.

He still had Hu.

But . . . he had nothing else. Nothing left to give. Nothing for Hu. Nothing for anyone. He was empty. Scraped raw. Numb.

He had finally hit bottom.

Hu stood next to him, silent. He put his hand on James’ shoulder, but James didn’t react, didn’t even acknowledge the touch. Finally, Hu reached out to take the face-mask from him, but James pulled it back.

“Jimmy—? Talk to me. Please?”

James didn’t respond. He looked at the mask—as if seeing it for the first time, an ugly reminder of everything he would never see again. It was a useless appendage. He might as well throw it away and have nothing left at all. Without thinking, he lifted his arm, poised to throw it over the edge of the railing and down to the rough hillside below.

But Hu grabbed his wrist and stopped him—

“Jimmy, no—”

As if startled awake, James looked to Hu. “What—?”

Hu took the mask, turned it around and held it up to show something to James. “Did you know your camera was on?”

“It’s automatic,” James said. He took the facemask from Hu. A pair of fisheye lenses were mounted above the glass, one on each side of the two headlamps. They were designed for capturing virtual-reality 3D video. James frowned at the readout on the left side of the mask. “Hmph,” he said. “Looks like it recorded everything from the moment the water hit—”

“Really?”

“I’d have to pull the card, but yeah—”

Hu cut him off. “Jimmy, maybe we could sell that footage to someone? Some news channel? Or maybe even *Nova*? Someone? It might be worth something—”

James shook his head. “I doubt it. Everybody will have footage. Every survivor with a phone. And probably a few thousand amateur drones as well. There’s going to

be more video than anybody will have time to review.”

“But nobody has underwater footage of the subway—”

James stopped in mid-sentence. Hu was right. He started to agree, then stopped abruptly. “No. We can’t.”

“Huh? Why not?”

James put his hand to his belt, touched his knife.

Hu’s eyes followed. “Oh,” he said, realizing what James meant.

“Squeak—I killed a man—”

“It was self-defense—”

“No. It wasn’t. It was deliberate—”

“We could talk to a lawyer—”

“Christine retired, remember the party—”

“She could recommend someone. Maybe Suzanne? Or Cindy?”

James didn’t answer immediately. “Yeah, maybe. But—”

“But—?”

“But—that’s not the point.”

“What is?”

“I killed a man, Hu. That’s murder. I committed a murder—”

“Jimmy—”

“And I did it without thinking. I did it so easy—”

“You didn’t have a choice. You did it to save me—”

“—and I’d do it again. In a heartbeat. But—”

Hu understood it—James was in pain. A lot of pain, and most of it wasn’t physical. Hu wanted to say something, but he didn’t know what. “Bubble—?”

“I don’t know who he was. I don’t want to know. What if he had a family? People waiting for him? Oh, God. What if they recover his body someday. They’ll see his throat. And someone will figure it out—”

“Jimmy! Stop it. Look out there. Look at that mess—nobody’s going to recover anything.”

“Squeak, you stop it! I know what I did! I have to live with it.”

Hu put his hand on James’ arm. “Bubble—listen to me. What we went through—it was horrible. It was all my worst fears, everything, all at once—but I made it because you were there—you. Just like the first time.”

James started to protest, but Hu grabbed him by both shoulders and poured out the rest of his words in a frantic rush. “Out of all the millions of people who died today—God knows how many, but we survived, you and I—and Julia and her mother, and that little prick Jesse too. We survived because survival is what you do. It’s who you are.”

“Who I am—?” James couldn’t stand it. “I know who I am now. I don’t want to be who I am—I couldn’t save him! I had to—had to—”

“No, listen! Listen to me—as much as I hate to say this, because it’s so fucking cruel and selfish to even think this way, but it’s still true anyway—that man was already dead when he boarded the subway. Every single one of them. We all were. We just didn’t know it. And if you and I had left the bike trailers behind, if we’d abandoned the tanks when we thought they were too heavy, we’d be dead too. All five of us. And your last thoughts would have been rage at yourself for listening to my whining—this is better! Isn’t it?”

But James was adamant in his pain. “I know what you’re trying to do, Squeak. And I love you for it. But—I know what I did—and it hurts me so much inside to know that I did it—that I’m even capable of it. This hurts like you can’t imagine—”

“Excuse me, guys—?” An interruption. A voice from behind them. They turned to see Seal Team Commander Wright. He was holding Jesse by the upper arm. “You the guys from the subway?”

“Yeah?”

Wright let go of Jesse, but not before saying to him. “Stay.” Then he held out his hand to James. “I heard what you did down there, heard it from the kid. It must have been rough, but I wanted you to know, it’s one of the best things I’ve heard today. I mean, you done good.” Wright shook James’ hand, then Hu’s. He nodded back toward the chopper. “We’re refueling, going back out in thirty, but I wanted to make sure you were good. And uh, the kid here has something to say to you too.” He poked Jesse. “Go ahead, mister.”

Jesse looked embarrassed. He swallowed hard and looked at his feet. When he looked up, his eyes were wet. “I’m sorry for what I said. I don’t know why I said it. It just fell out. But I wouldn’t have made it if it wasn’t for you guys. So . . . um, I guess, I want to say thank you, I owe you my life, and I hope you’ll forgive me for being such a dick.”

Hu’s smile came easier than James’. He said, “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I mean, why’d you do it? You didn’t have to. I mean, I saw what you did to that other guy and—”

James interrupted quickly, “You said ‘please.’”

“Huh? That’s it?”

“Yeah, that was it.”

“Whoa,” said Jesse. “Whoa.”

“Yeah, whoa.”

Jesse looked confused. “I don’t get it.”

James smiled sourly. “Neither do I, kid. Neither do I.”

Wright had watched the whole exchange. He spoke up now. “There’s nothing to get. You did what was in front of you.” To Jesse, he said, “He gave you a second chance. Now you gotta make the most of it. Make a difference.” He pushed the teen gently.

Jesse held out his hand. James took it, shook it. So did Hu.

“We’re good then?”

James and Hu nodded. Wright seemed satisfied. He lifted his hand in a salute of respect and headed back to his chopper.

Jesse stood there, still looking embarrassed, shifting from one foot to the other. Finally, he gave a nervous smile. “I’m gonna go get in line for the phone. Okay? Gotta call my grandma and let her know I made it. I hope you guys land on your feet.” And then he was gone, too.

“Well,” said Hu. “That was something.”

“Yeah,” agreed James. “He said please.”

But he was still in a funk so deep it was no longer blue, it had gone to indigo. He turned back to the railing and stared across at the Hollywood sign without really seeing it.

“Excuse me—?” Another interruption.

This time it was a man in a clerical collar. He looked like some casting director’s idea of the perfect priest—but one who is falsely accused of molesting little boys until exonerated in the third act denouement. “Are you the ones looking for a minister? I’m Father Feigenberg—”

“Father Feigenberg? Really? You’re kidding me.”

“I get that a lot, yes. Someone said you needed a priest.” He looked at them with puzzled curiosity. “Do you want me to pray with you?”

James and Hu looked at each other, then back to Father Feigenberg. Hu spoke first. “We need you to make us legal. We want you to say some nice words and then sign this—” He passed over the marriage license.

Father Feigenberg looked at their marriage license, looked from one to the other, back to the license, then back to the two of them again. “Um, I’m afraid I can’t—my

faith doesn't recognize same-sex unions."

"Oh, hell!" said James, frustrated. It was just too much. He said it loud enough that a few nearby people turned around to look. James turned angrily to the railing, glowered out at the landscape of mud and desolation and everything buried under it—then, just as abruptly, he whirled back. "Father? Will you hear my confession?"

Hu's eyes widened. "I didn't know you were Catholic—"

"Recovering," admitted James. "Father—?"

Father Feigenberg nodded. He led James a short distance away, to the best privacy they could find—a quiet space behind a pedestal with a bronze bust of James Dean. It had been installed as a commemoration of the famous observatory scenes in *Rebel Without A Cause*.

Hu watched from a distance as both James and the priest knelt together. First James crossed himself, then bent his head to whisper in Father Feigenberg's ear. He took a long time, and halfway through, the priest reached over to put his hand on James' shoulder, a gesture of solidarity and comfort. James kept talking—and then a little after that, he started weeping. Father Feigenberg pulled him close and let him cry into his shoulder.

Finally, James pulled back and Father Feigenberg made the sign of the cross over him, and said some words—some words that James so desperately needed to hear. His whole body relaxed. And even from a distance, Hu could see that James' pain had been lessened. Not released, not yet—but lessened. It was a start.

Finally, after a few more minutes, Father Feigenberg led James back to Hu and the two shared a look.

"Are you all right?"

"A little better. Yeah."

Feigenberg looked from one to the other. He hadn't met many same-sex couples, a side effect of his particular calling. But he felt there was more that he needed to say before this moment could be considered complete.

"The two of you—" He looked from James to Hu and back again. "You didn't get here by accident. You got here because . . . yes, I know it sounds presumptuous, and you don't have to believe me, but I'm certain that the two of you are here because you're supposed to be here. Together."

That last word from Father Feigenberg surprised both James and Hu. It wasn't the word so much as the man saying it.

Hu managed to speak first. "Thank you."

Feigenberg nodded an acknowledgment. "So how long have you two been together?"

"Three years."

Feigenberg was impressed. "Mm-hm. That's a commitment, isn't it?"

"Commitment, hell," said James. "It's a privilege." He put his arm around Hu's shoulder and pulled him close. "He's the one."

"Yep," agreed Hu, smiling. "Today was gonna be the day." He held up his hand to show his ring.

James held up his hand to show the matching ring. "We made a promise. Hell or high water, we're saying our vows today. It was high water. Really high water. So we said 'em. In the subway. Just before the water hit."

Hu said, "It was really romantic. And terrifying too. I spent the whole day afraid I was going to lose him—"

Feigenberg nodded gently. It seemed a polite acknowledgment, but then he said, "Listen to me. As a priest ordained in the Catholic Church, I cannot formally bless your union in the eyes of God. But . . . as a legally established authority in the state of California, empowered to recognize the union of two consenting adults—" He paused to clear his throat. "—I now pronounce you . . . married. Congratulations. Mazel Tov. Now,

May/June 2018

let me sign your document.” He held out his hand for the marriage license.
And now it was Hu’s turn to cry—but this time for joy.