

KICKING OUT

It happens so suddenly.

The explosion rips through the office behind me, lifting me off my feet and into the meeting room I was walking towards. The abrupt feeling of helplessness is as crushing as the shockwave of air that blasts into my back. I feel small and insignificant as I fly through the air in terror.

I land in a sprawling heap. Pieces of debris shower over and around me. Shredded paper mingled with shattered glass, ash and fabric fills the air. As I try to reconcile my position, I find myself staring at a large black leather shoe. The world around me has become strangely silent and I lie unmoving, watching as fragments settle on the carpet nearby. With my heart hammering in my chest I try to rise, but can't. My entire body just trembles.

I don't understand what has just happened.

Only moments before I'd been wading through seemingly endless paperwork at my desk – and now I'm face down on the carpet, deafened, and I think I'm bleeding.

Without warning, the shoe before me moves abruptly and slams into my face. I cringe with the pain. With blurry vision I shift away instinctively, and something sharp pokes into my upper arm. Then a hand settles on my shoulder, roughly shaking me, rolling me over. I suddenly realise I can hear something, but it's only a loud rushing sound, a sort of a high-pitched hum.

The hand rolls me carefully onto my back and a face eventually comes into focus above. Steve Cassidy. His lips are moving. He's speaking but I can't make out the words. He coughs and I notice he's bleeding. A steady stream of blood runs down his face from a cut just below his eye. It reaches his mouth and I watch as he silently tastes it, then wipes at his face with his sleeve. He frowns in annoyance and coughs again.

My vision is still a little blurry and I have to blink to regain focus. Pulling myself up onto an elbow, I try to avoid leaning into the glass and debris beneath me. My face hurts where Steve accidentally kicked me, but I don't think he even realises what he did. I begin to cough too, my throat tasting like burnt toast. I turn to stare back out the doorway I've just flown through to see a thick bank of smoke billowing slowly towards us.

I panic, sitting up quickly and trying to scramble back – away from the smoke – and bowl Steve over in my haste. He topples over me, landing on his side between my scrambling legs. He cries out, probably swearing, but I can't hear properly and I just see his lips move in a snarl of obscenity. Instinctively I draw my legs together and press down on my skirt, hazily wishing I'd worn something longer, or trousers, today. Steve is unceremoniously pushed away and rolls towards the doorway, towards the rapidly encroaching smoke.

The hum in my ears finally recedes, only to be replaced by a low buzzing. Through it I hear Steve's curse this time, his voice distant and muffled, and I become aware of a siren howling somewhere nearby. It pulses insistently, demanding attention. My throat constricts as the smoke reaches us and we both resume coughing.

Then, thankfully, it starts to rain.

Cold water sprays down onto us from above, like an urgent storm-shower blowing in an open window. In moments everything is wet, dripping, and the smoke begins to dissipate. Almost immediately, drifting through the clamor of the siren, I hear the unnaturally faint but unmistakable sound of screaming. Voices are shouting, calling out names, some screaming for help, others just wailing.

I shudder. The high-pitched hum had been infinitely better.

Shaking my head, I try to clear the sounds away and to focus. Steve manages to right himself and turn to me. His coughing has eased and he speaks again. His voice is muffled and seems to swirl down a long tunnel. This time I understand his intent if not his actual words. He reaches out a hand, offering to help me up. He wants me to get up and go with him.

I just stare at his hand. I'm desperately confused and too overwhelmed to move, yet he seems oddly calm and composed. He leans closer and I finally reach out and take his hand. Pulling me to my feet, he adjusts his grip and turns, beginning to lead me directly towards the dissipating smoke. I follow reluctantly. My low-heeled shoes crunch on the broken glass with each step and I'm instantly thankful that they didn't come off as I'd flown through the air.

Looking up I finally understand that sprinklers set into the ceiling are providing the unusual effect of indoor rain. Everything is now becoming completely drenched, but at least the smoke is quickly clearing.

What I see next, as Steve steps aside at the door, will haunt me forever. The scene of devastation that had so recently been my workplace is almost unrecognisable. I freeze on the spot, my hand slipping from his grasp.

My workplace was on the far side of the room from where I now stand. But it is no longer there. The area around and beyond my desk is now nothing more than a smouldering black space. There has been a massive explosion and clearly it happened somewhere very close to where I normally sit. A sickening feeling overcomes me as I realise that if I'd been at my desk, as I had been only moments before the blast flung me across the room, I would probably not be alive to see this. My knees almost give out. If Steve hadn't called a few minutes before and demanded an urgent meeting I would have been sitting right there, right next to my friend Janet.

Dread consumes me and I have to grab the doorframe for support. Where is Janet? Disoriented, I look back into the meeting room, and then to my right and left. Yes, my workplace should be directly ahead – right where the blackened space now smoulders. Janet's desk is the next one along from mine, closer to where I stand, further from the centre of the blast, and it's empty. It's also burned, blackened and smouldering too. There is no sign of Janet.

I scream, shout Janet's name and start towards the desk as I feel a hand grab me forcibly around the wrist. Steve again. He's saying something, and shaking his head at me. He tries to pull me back, away from the charred central area. He hangs on tightly as I fight to free myself. His eyes are blank, emotionless, as he pulls me towards him and motions towards a blackened lump on the floor over to the right of Janet's desk. The lump has wisps of blonde hair and appears to be wrapped in the remains of a tattered pink blouse.

Janet is face down and she isn't moving.

Steve pulls on my wrist again, trying firmly – yet relatively gently – to draw me away from the grim sight. He still seems so calm. I shudder and feel the floor waver beneath me. Struggling for breath I feel myself slide towards a deep, gnawing horror. I manage only one more, very brief, look around the devastated office area, which only minutes ago had been quietly humming with activity before my senses become completely overwhelmed and I succumb to darkness.

The jarring revives me. That and Steve's warm breath on my neck. Each step he takes down the stairs bounces and jolts me gently as my head lolls against his chest. He carries me in the classic bride-through-the-doorway hold, so that my arms wrap naturally around his neck and my face lies on his shoulder. His cheek is soaked with blood, but his arms around me are like an iron cradle and the unusual image of being abducted by a bear forms dimly in my mind. Steve is a big guy, your classic tall-dark-and-handsome, and he is carrying me easily.

Becoming suddenly and irrationally embarrassed I struggle in his arms and he falters on the step, having to lean against the wall of the stairwell to stop us from falling. Still I push at him and he releases my legs, setting me on my feet lightly.

'I can walk,' I insist, but quickly realise he can't hear me. He has to be suffering the same buzzing in his ears that I am. I can't actually hear myself speak. Still embarrassed, I try to smile my thanks and speak louder, 'I'm okay, I can walk.' He nods assent and carefully releases his hold.

When I immediately stumble he catches my arm, keeping me from falling. Someone is trying to push past. It takes me a moment to realise that the stairwell is actually crowded. Hordes of panicked people are trying to escape the building. Steve pulls me closer and lets a few of the frenzied crowd flow past, and then we start moving downwards again, together.

My mind is spinning. I feel unbalanced, lost. Everything around me seems so unreal. That damn siren is definitely still howling away somewhere nearby and, although I'm dripping wet, my throat is unbearably dry. I start to cough again, desperate for a cold drink of any kind.

The stairwell is only semi-lit, but I'm relieved at the absence of smoke and rain.

We keep moving downwards. People jostle and cry. Meredith, from legal, keeps staring back over her shoulder at us. It takes me some time to realise that we are both filthy, and Steve is still bleeding. Everyone else around us appears a bit damp, but otherwise fine.

Steve continues to hold my arm, which definitely helps, now that I've overcome my embarrassment. I'm forced to accept that I'd most likely just stumble again if he wasn't guiding me.

We had only been on the third floor, but the stairwell seems endless as we trudge along with the other escaping office workers. I watch my feet most of the way, fearful of tripping; only occasionally looking up at the other frightened faces around us. Then, abruptly, the stairwell ends and we are in a long, dark concrete passageway. There is light up ahead.

Salvation.

We step out into the mid-morning daylight. It's warm and sunny, a lovely day outside, but I shiver from the dampness of my clothes. People are milling about everywhere. They seem muddled and directionless. Steve leads me to a bench in the open courtyard and we both sit down. I no longer resist him.

The scene around us is chaotic.

While my ears buzz annoyingly I spot a man I recognise as Jason from IT. He's normally a bit smooth, but right now he looks absurd in a bright fluorescent-orange vest. He's standing motionless, clasping a clipboard to his chest and staring vacantly around the courtyard. Clearly he never expected this when he volunteered to be a fire warden.

To his right I spot my friend Nikki looking wide-eyed amongst a cluster of ladies from Customer Services. They're talking feverishly across each other and anxiously gesturing this way and that, while another small group from IT huddle protectively together nearer to where I sit with Steve. Their manager, Don, is trying to keep them calm, and together.

I'm struck by the incongruity of the familiarity of the faces and the abnormality of the situation.

Hector, a guy who works in Sales with Steve, is staring blankly up at the windows above us, an odd look on his face. He appears more deeply affected than the fluorescent-vested Jason and I notice that he's bleeding too, from a gash on his arm where his shirt is sliced open.

Brendan, our Marketing Manager, is babbling away into his cell-phone, his back to both the building and a group of his staff. His behaviour seems out-of-place, but it's the most natural thing I've seen since sitting down.

The new girl from Finance stumbles past – I can't remember her name. She's soaking wet, covered in dripping ash and crying. A man I've seen in Legal – Dennis, I think – takes her arm and guides her away, comforting her.

A girl named Tiffany, from Marketing, points at me and Steve and I become aware that he is still holding my arm. I gently try to slip it out of his grasp. He's been surveying the crowd too and when he turns his face towards me I'm shocked at how much blood is on it now. No wonder Tiffany is pointing – we're a mess. I silently gesture at his face. He raises a hand and touches his own cheek. It comes away slick with blood and he frowns again. He just seems irritated, not frightened.

I think he says, 'Stay here,' but it's hard to tell. He gets up and wanders off into the bustling crowd. Quite a few eyes follow his movement in awe.

I look down at myself. I'm bleeding too, but only a little. My bare legs and arms are scratched and dirty. My clothes ruined. I remember the charred black lump that I'd seen lying on the floor of the office upstairs. The patches of blonde hair and the pink blouse.

Janet is dead, surely. But I am alive.

Anguish overwhelms me and I start to cry. Sobbing uncontrollably, I curl up into a ball on the bench and try to convince myself that this is just a bad dream.

Events at the hospital are a blur as grief and denial overcome me. Later I am unable to remember how I got there, or much of my interaction with any of the doctors or nurses. Faces come and go. People scurry around, rushing from one emergency to the next.

The police try to talk with me, but I'm too confused and deafened to understand what it is they want to know.

Eventually I'm cleared for discharge and someone helps me outside and into a taxi. I don't recall giving the driver my address, but soon I find myself being dropped off at home and I shuffle mindlessly towards the front door.

It is late Friday afternoon now, school is out and Rosie – my ten-year-old cousin who lives next door – calls out to say hello. I think I manage to wave back, but I'm in no mood or condition to be sociable. As expected, no one else is home so I take myself off to bed without a thought for food and cry myself to sleep.

I awaken mildly disoriented – and very hungry – the next morning. I still can hear little more than a constant buzz, my throat is dry and my body aches all over. I sit up in bed and look myself up and down. I'm still wearing my ruined clothing from yesterday and I have dressings and bandages all over my legs and arms. A number of dark bruises leer at me from the exposed skin between them, and then I discover a wider bandage wrapped around my left upper arm, which I can't bring myself to look beneath. Feeling anxious, I gingerly ease my way across my bedroom to survey my face in the mirror.

There is no real damage, thank God. Just a couple of light scratches and a darkening bruise beside my left eye. I quickly realise that I've been very lucky as the blackened and smouldering image of Janet suddenly springs up in my mind. I'm immediately overwhelmed with both grief and anger and sink to the floor before my bedroom mirror, sobbing.

Eventually I compose myself enough to lurch stiffly through to the bathroom. I strip off my clothes, ignoring the multitude of dressings and step under the hot shower. The water is scalding and stings my battered body but I stay under the steady flow for what seems like hours. Maybe if I stay here long enough the downpour will wash away not only the grime from my horrific experience but also the ache in my heart.

After what seems like an eternity, I drag myself away from the cleansing waters as I succumb to my stomach's growls of hunger.

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