



digging deep

by Norsebard

Janni grinned into the telephone as she scratched her tummy through her flannel shirt and her traditional, short-sleeved men's undershirt. She snuggled down in the couch and crossed her jeans-clad legs the other way. "So, you're still coming home at three or so, right?"

'That's right... I hope. No, I'll definitely be home by then. We wouldn't want to waste your day off, you know.'

"Mmmm!"

'Now, in the meantime, you can have some fun with Xena and Gabrielle. And think of me.'

"Oh, I'm always thinking of you, honey," Janni said and made a few kissy sounds into the telephone. "Happy birthday, Melanie-baby. Y'know, you don't look a day over thirty-eight to me."

'Janni Holbrooke, you are gonna get it by the short hairs tonight... thirty-three! I turned thirty-three today!'

"Thirty-three?! But who did I send that Happy Fortieth card to, then?" Janni said with a husky snicker.

'Just you wait, Janni... just you wait 'til I get home... oh, you're gonna get it tonight! Bye, honey... I have to leave now.'

"Bye-bye. Love you."

'Love you too. See you soon.'

"Not soon enough," Janni said and closed the connection. She had barely put the telephone on the table when the doorbell rang. Groaning, she pressed pause on the DVD and shuffled over to the door in her yellow socks.

Opening the door, she was assaulted by a squealing "Ba-ga-gyyyyyy!" from the toothless toddler on her brother's arm. The baby girl, who was wrapped in a warm terrycloth towel to protect her from the mid-February chill, squealed once more while her short arms and tiny hands flailed in the air like she was trying to conduct a fifty-strong brass big band.

"There's my little Peanut!" Janni said in a baby voice, tickling the small girl's hands. "And my big bro. Hiya, Patrick," she continued in her regular voice as her older brother - by three minutes - stepped into the living room. Grinning, she closed the door behind them.

Patrick Holbrooke went straight over to a high chair in a corner of the living room and dragged it over to the couch so the little girl could get a dose of the Warrior Princess. "Hi, Janni. Is Melanie home yet?" he said, carefully lowering his daughter into the plastic seat.

"Nope. We just talked... they're not done. She'll be here at three or so."

"Okay. That'll give us plenty of time to make the cake and things for her."

"Yeah." Janni grinned at her niece and shuffled over to the high chair on socked feet. "Goo-ba-goo-goo. Ba-ga-whee-whee," she said, flubbing her lips with her index finger.

"Don't do that! You'll scare her... she isn't used to old bats," Patrick said and accidentally gave his kid sister a shoulder bump to get her out of the way.

Patrick tended to Peanut so Janni couldn't retaliate at once, but she kept a mental score of the times he had given her grief - sooner or later, she'd pay him back with interest.

"Which episode are you watching?" Patrick said, looking at the paused image on the screen.

"Tsunami. The one where they capsize in a boat and sink to the bottom of the Mediterranean or whatever. I love it. They're so hot when they're wet, dontcha think?"

"I wouldn't know. Janni, that's just a little too intense... would you mind stopping? We can go on when Pea is sleeping."

"Uh... okay. Yeah, good point," Janni said and pressed Stop twice on the remote. When the disc stopped spinning, she ejected it from the player and put it back into the soft sleeve she kept her Xena DVDs in so she wouldn't wear out the hard boxes. "Hey, where's Steve? Did you forget your husband somewhere?"

"No, he's back home. He's got a runny nose," Patrick said and rolled his eyes. "Big baby. I'm telling you, he's worse than Pea here. And... of course... the other thing too."

Janni crinkled her nose in disappointment. She knew exactly what her brother meant - for some inexplicable reason, Steve and Melanie didn't get on. "Mmmm. Okay. I hope he knows that I care for Melanie very much. There's a pretty good chance she's gonna be a permanent fixture in our lives... sooner or later, Steve is gonna hafta swallow that odd behavior. Can't you pry a little so I can understand what's bugging him?"

"I'll try... I just think Steve's intimidated by her presence," Patrick said and ran his thumb across his daughter's forehead. The little girl let out a happy squeal and tried to reach for the huge hand above her.

"But she's the cuddliest thing since... since... since that ginormous panda soft toy I had when I was ten years old! I mean... intimidated?" Janni said and threw out her arms in the eternal gesture of not understanding a thing.

When her brother's only response was a shrug, she shook her head and shuffled off to the kitchen. "Anyway," she said, stopping at the portal between the living room and the short hallway that connected the various rooms of the one-storey bungalow she shared with Melanie, "thanks for coming over, Patrick. I can cook the basics, but you're the real pro."

"No problems, sis. It's my pleasure."

The moment Janni turned around to go into the kitchen, an odd tremor under her socked feet made her stop and look down at the floor and the small, wooden rail that acted as a separator between the carpet in the living room and the smooth tiles in the hallway. It was the kind of tremor that she knew well from her line of work - she was a crew foreman at Dillon Construction & Demolition - but what it was doing in her living room, she had no idea.

A split second later, the tremor grew into a noticeable tremble. A rumble was heard from the outside that sounded like a fully loaded freight train had just rolled onto the quiet street in front of the bungalow.

Janni scrunched up her face in confusion, but she didn't even have time to open her mouth before the tremble grew to a full-on earthquake that caught her completely by surprise. Everything shook and rumbled, and the first items were already falling off their shelves.

She cried out for her family and rushed over to the plastic high chair that had begun to wobble. Peanut broke out in a wild cry, but Janni grabbed her in her arms and held her close. "It's a fuckin' earthquake, Patrick! Get your ass over to the portal! Now!" she roared, protecting the child's head with her arms in case the ceiling would cave in.

Patrick cried out almost as loudly as his daughter, but he jumped to safety under the portal and helped Janni shield the small child from the dust and tiny pebbles that rained down upon them.

The light flickered twice before it went out for good. Outside, the imaginary freight train continued to rumble past, seemingly dragging a hundred wagons. Car alarms were activated up and down the street, and the shrill noises were quickly followed by the sounds of breaking glass and creaking wood.

The sideboard that carried the TV gave up the ghost with an agonizing creak, sending the black, flatscreen TV set onto the floor with a hard thump. As the sideboard fell apart, a stack of DVDs spilled out onto the carpet where they continued to dance around like they were being toyed with by an unseen hand.

In the kitchen, one of the cabinets opened and sent a tumbler and several plates onto the floor where they were smashed into a million pieces.

Little by little, the earthquake petered out and left Janni, Patrick and little Peanut gasping and panting from the shock. "Fuck me sideways," Janni croaked, looking at the sorry state of her living room. She cast a quick glance at the ceiling which seemed to hold for now, although two of the insulated tiles had lost nails and were drooping.

Thinking fast, she ran into the bedroom and snatched the thick winter duvet. "Here!" she shouted as she came back into the kitchen. "Put Little Pea under this... but stay under the portal in case there'll be aftershocks!"

"O- okay, sis," Patrick said and sat down on the floor while he held onto his daughter. Moving the duvet above their heads, he rocked back and forth to calm the little girl down, but her frantic cries continued unabated.

Janni wiped her sweaty brow and looked at the mess in her kitchen. "Jesus, that was a big one... one of the biggest we've had in years!"

With all the shards of glass and porcelain on the kitchen floor, walking around on socked feet was asking for trouble, so she strode back into the bedroom and sat down on the naked bed. She quickly put on her sturdy, steel-tipped workboots that could withstand anything short of a nuclear blast.

Sighing out loud, she ran a hand through her damp hair while she looked at the empty space that used to hold a picture frame on the wall opposite the bed. It had been one of Melanie's presents for her the past Christmas, but now it was on the floor in three pieces. The poster of the San Francisco skyline seemed unharmed.

Just to check if the power had been restored, she reached over and pulled the lamp on the beside table upright. Clicking on the switch, nothing happened. Peanut's crying was a constant background noise, but it didn't stop Janni from thinking about Melanie. "If it's this bad up here in the hilly 'burbs... I wonder how downtown looks...?" she mumbled, propping her head up on her arm to have something to do with her hands. When it wasn't enough, she started biting her fingernails.

She had a knot of fear in her gut that grew larger for each passing moment. Pressing her hand into her stomach, she got up from the bed and walked back into the living room to see how Patrick and Peanut were holding up.

The moment she got there, the tremors returned, though far weaker than before. "Fuck! Aftershock!" she said, holding onto the doorjamb while her bungalow shook all over again. Peanut exploded in a wild, unstoppable burst of crying that Patrick couldn't do anything to ease.

The aftershock only lasted for a few seconds, but it had been enough for the little girl to have an accident in her diaper. Patrick shook his head and swept aside the duvet. "Can't blame her," he croaked as the foul smell rose from the site of the accident. "I almost soiled my pants myself... I gotta..."

"Yeah," Janni said, wiping her damp brow. She tried another light switch, but the power was still out. She strode over to the carpet under the coffee table where her telephone had ended up next to a batch of dried flowers and the metal vase they had been in. The phone was still on, but there was no reception. "Shit... damn quake musta knocked out the relay towers," she mumbled while the telephone tried to roam for a service provider.

She hurried over to the nearest window and pulled aside the curtain. Out in the driveway, the hazard lights were still flashing on her bright yellow company truck from the alarm that had been

confused by the quake. Her neighbors all swarmed out of their bungalows to attempt to find safety on their front lawns.

Grunting, she moved back from the window and ran over to the door to the bathroom. "Patrick? Do we still have water?"

"Yeah, but there isn't much pressure," Patrick said, wiping his hands on a towel.

"The power still hasn't returned," Janni said, flicking a dead light switch one more time just to be sure. "All right. I'll check the perimeter... once you're done here, go out front, okay? The whole street is out there, you'll have someone to talk to. Don't go into the backyard... you hear what I'm saying, Patrick? Don't go into the backyard 'cos I'll bet the old oak tree has shed a bunch of branches and shit. Widowmakers."

"I hear you, sis," Patrick said with a nod. When Peanut started crying inside the bathroom, he offered his sister a quick smile before he went in to tend to his daughter.

Once the truck's alarm had been muted, Janni folded down the tailgate and jumped up onto the flatbed. Kneeling down on the dusty surface, she unlocked the equipment box that was welded onto the backside of the cab and grabbed a pair of powerful binoculars that she used at work when she had to check the upper floors of buildings that were under construction.

She found a pair of thick gloves as well, so she stuffed them down her rear pocket before she slammed the lid of the equipment box and worked the padlock. To save a second or two, she jumped over the railing instead of going by the tailgate. "Patrick!" she shouted once she was back inside. "Patrick?"

"Yeah! In the kitchen!" Patrick said, already sweeping the kitchen floor to get rid of the worst shards.

"I'm gonna check the perimeter now. If you don't hear from me, it's because there's nothing to report. Once that's done, I'm gonna hustle up to Spyglass Point to... well, to see if the city is still standing down in the valley."

"Okay..." Patrick said and chewed vigorously on his lip. "Isn't it typical that we're not with our loved ones when something like this happens? The phones aren't working... I can't get hold of Steve and I'm really worried..."

"He's fine, bro," Janni said and pulled her brother into a strong hug. "The grid is down and I'll bet everybody's trying to call at the same time. The apartment complex you're living at is almost new... it can take a stronger rattle than this."

"Still..."

"I know, Patrick," Janni said and kissed her brother on the brow. "Steve's fine. Hey, we only have kid-sized diapers, you know... don't crap yourself worrying about it. He's fine."

"Melanie is with her mother... in the old part of the city," Patrick said in a voice that had begun to tremble.

The corners of Janni's mouth twitched at the undeniable statement of fact, but she swallowed the bitter surge of fear and forced herself to smile. "She's fine too. Don't you worry 'bout it. Okay, I'll check the house now... like I said."

Patrick nodded and resumed sweeping up the shards.

Janni turned around so her brother wouldn't see the look of fear that was etched onto her face. The knot in her gut had grown to the size of a mountain, and everything inside her was quaking harder than the bungalow had done during the episode.

She took several deep breaths to calm down before she ran out the front door to check the perimeter like she had said she would.

Five minutes later, after having found no damage to the bungalow or the roof save for two broken windows and a few tiles that had been knocked out of place, Janni ran up the street to get to Spyglass Point some three hundred yards from her home.

A natural vantage point overlooking the city of McKendrick which was located three miles away to the south, Spyglass Point was a paved semi-enclosure that served as a picnic site in the summer, the spot where the Christmas tree was put up in the winter, and a year-round favorite for lovers of all ages and persuasions - Janni and Melanie had spent many a starry night there snuggling and smooching.

Spyglass Point was remarkably untouched by the tremors. The only signs the area had been hit by a strong quake came in the shape of piles of bare branches that had fallen off the many trees lining the enclosure. Several people had already found their way up there to take in the sights at what could be the safest spot in the area.

Janni nodded a brief hello to some of her neighbors before she used the powerful binoculars to sweep the horizon. She counted five columns of smoke rising above McKendrick down in the valley, although one of them appeared to be a large cloud of brown dust rather than the result of a fire.

The historic water tower in the eastern part of the city seemed unharmed, as did the baseball stadium further west. One of the three tall grain silos at the freight yard had lost parts of its hat, but it didn't look too bad. The new apartment high-rises on the far side of the city where Patrick lived with his husband Steve, Peanut and Peanut's biological mother didn't appear to have suffered any damage to speak of.

Zooming in on the oldest part of McKendrick, Janni furrowed her brow when she realized that most of downtown, including the blocks nearest to the home of Melanie's mother, was obscured by the vast cloud of dust that seemed reluctant to drift away.

One of Janni's neighbors, an elderly widower wearing a hastily assembled outfit, arrived at Spyglass Point and shuffled over to her to cast a worried glance down at the city. "Hello, Miss Holbrooke. My phone is down... do you have a connection?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rosenberg. I don't. All the phones are down."

"I knew we shouldn't have given up the landlines... all that electronic nonsense," the elderly man said, shielding his eyes from the low February sun. "I remember the big one back in '57... this felt just as bad as that time. What a mess we got out of that. Nearly a hundred fatalities. Of course, the houses were a lot less safe back then."

The wind carried faint sounds of emergency sirens, and it made Janni raise the binoculars and chew on her lips nervously. She caught a glimpse of a flashing red light somewhere close to downtown, but her name being called in a fair voice made her forget all about that and spin around instead.

A young boy from one of the neighboring houses was running towards her, waving his arms in the air. "Miss Holbrooke!" he cried in a voice that was a mix of awe and worry.

Even without knowing what the problem was, a bomb went off in Janni's stomach out of fear for Melanie's safety. Grimacing, she pressed a hand against her tummy as she intercepted the running boy that she suddenly couldn't remember the name of. "Yeah... you got news for me?"

"Yes! Mr. Holbrooke told me to get you at once. Someone from your company is trying to reach you on the radio..."

"All right... thank you. Mr. Rosenberg, I need to go," she said to the elderly widower who simply waved at her.

Janni tore past Patrick and Peanut who had moved out onto the front lawn while they waited for her to come back. With no time for a greeting, she skipped through the living room door and into the office at the end of the hallway. She bumped down into her swivel-chair and moved the CB base station up onto her desk that had been turned into a mess by the shaking. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke ready to receive, over," she said and released the button.

'*Chief, where the hell have you been?*' a male voice - belonging to her second in command Paul 'Buzz' Burczyk - said through a crackling connection. '*What's the status up there in the hills, over?*'

"Manageable. How's downtown, over?"

'Messed up. Chief, the Mayor's office has called us with an emergency request to provide heavy lifting equipment for the Sheriff while the fire boys are busy, over.'

"All right, Buzz. Get on it, over."

'We're already on our way, Chief. I sent the whole damn train at once, over.'

"Excellent. Where are they going, over?"

'Only two blocks away. Near the intersection of Kingston and Marlborough. An old apartment building has collapsed, or at least parts of it. There's a big-ass cloud of dust... you must be able to see it from up there. I'm riding on the mobile crane... we're almost there. We got debris and shit all over the street down there. A billion bricks everywhere, over.'

"Kingston and Marlborough?" Janni said in a voice that didn't seem to come from her. She realized she needed to let go of the button in order for Buzz to get back to her, so she did with a croaking "Over."

'Yeah. Just opposite the Korean convenience store. Man, that's been messed up. The storefront has been mashed in by the debris from across the street. We're just goin' past Johnson's Office Supplies now. That's where your girlfriend works, right? One of the windows has cracked, but it's fine otherwise. She should be safe. Listen, Chief, much as I like to pretend I'm a radio show host, we really need you down here to take charge, over.'

"I'll... I'll be there, Buzz. Chief Holbrooke out," Janni said and turned off the base station. She leaned back in the swivel-chair but kept a death-grip on the edge of the desk that turned her knuckles and fingers white. Without blinking even once, she stared at the wall opposite the desk with such intensity she nearly burned a hole in the large map of the city of McKendrick that had survived the earthquake far better than the city itself had done.

The knot of fear in her stomach turned vicious and became an animal that gnawed on her guts. Groaning, she got up from the swivel-chair and headed for the bedroom to get dressed for what would undoubtedly be a traumatic day at work - one way or the other.

Working in a trance, she unlaced and kicked off her workboots and traded her casual jeans for a pair of black, heavy-duty pants with pockets for everything under the sun. Her leather utility belt came next, and she tightened it a notch too far to make sure it wouldn't drop at an inopportune moment. She ran her hand around the back of the belt to feel if she had all the items she needed - she did.

After putting her workboots back on, she stomped into the office and snatched her yellow hard hat that rested atop a metal filing cabinet. She took a brief moment to look at the old hat with the many bumps, scrapes and bruises, and the humorous sticker of a cartoonish devil woman who

said *'Balls To The Walls, Boys!'* while straddling a black wrecking ball. Inside, a small picture of Melanie was attached to the sweatband.

Usually, construction chiefs would wear a pristine, white hat, but she had been a grunt long enough to know that the men only had derogatory nicknames for the kinds of chiefs who looked like they never left their desks. Sighing, she mashed the old hat down on her blond mop and went over to the desk to get her wristwatch.

It was an old watch on a broad leather band that had seen better days; in fact, it was a family heirloom. After the invention of clocks in the telephones, the watch was pretty much outdated, but she preferred to feel the weight on her wrist.

Fully equipped, she snatched her green bomber jacket off a hallstand and stomped out of the office. When she passed by the bedroom, she just caught a glimpse of her gloves on the bed where she had left them. "Fuck," she growled and made a quick detour into the bedroom. "Who the fuck put 'em there? Dammit, my brain's turned to mush!"

A cry of relief from the outside made her hurry into the living room. On the front lawns, a murmur among her neighbors said something about the power being back on, and she tried the nearest light switch to see if it was true. When the bulb lit up, she stomped over to the TV and knelt down.

The sideboard was beyond repair, but she swept the scattered DVDs into a pile she would sort later. With a heave-ho, she righted the TV and put the cables in good order. The plastic base hadn't been damaged by the ungraceful fall, so she put it down carefully on the carpet and found the remote. "With my luck, I'm gonna blow a fuse now..." she mumbled as she pressed the button.

The little LED on the front of the TV blinked a couple of times, but then the picture came to life. "Patrick!" she shouted to get her brother's attention. "Patrick, are you nearby?"

"Yes?" Patrick said, walking into the doorway. He held a much calmer Peanut in his arms, but the little girl was still whimpering now and then.

"I got the news on... c'mon in and watch. I gotta leave now, but I need an update first," Janni said and moved back from the TV to see the whole picture.

Patrick was reluctant to enter the bungalow, but the sound of the agitated newscaster was enough to convince him the roof wouldn't fall down at that exact moment.

'-oadcasting live from downtown McKendrick. This is Tiffani Kemp reporting live for KRPM-TV, a Fox News affiliate,' a visibly rattled, bottle-blonde female reporter said from the TV. She held a microphone with the station logo to confirm where she came from. 'We're at the park on McSwain Street where the fountain has toppled over. As you can see, water is spewing uncontrollably from the ground. A spokesperson for the Fire Department has confirmed they're struggling with low water pressure at the four major fires.'

"Get over to Kingston Street..." Janni mumbled, chewing on her lips.

'The United States Geological Survey confirms this earthquake was measured as a five point eight, possibly a six point oh on the moment magnitude scale. As we drove over here, people stopped us to relay stories of widespread damage throughout central McKendrick and several of the suburbs. There have been injuries, but from what we've seen so far, they've been minor. We haven't heard of any fatalities, although we obviously haven't been everywhere yet and the updates are still coming through to us. The worst affected area seems to be the historical buildings closest to downtown.'

Janni felt her brother's eyes on her. Knowing she wouldn't be able to maintain a steely facade if they locked eyes, she kept staring at the reporter on the TV.

'If we swing the camera around this way,' the reporter said and disappeared from view as the camera operator did as asked, 'the massive cloud of brown dust still hovering above downtown is easily seen. We're now looking towards the intersection of Marlborough and McSwain which is about a block away from the worst hit area. We'll try to get down there but it's not going to be easy. It might take us a while. Jack?'

As the reporter threw back to the studio where an anchor had already been joined by a professor of geology to explain the ins and outs of earthquakes, Janni shuffled over to Peanut and kissed the whimpering little girl on her forehead. "Shhh, everything's fine now, Little Pea. Patrick, the Towers look undamaged. Once the phones come back online, Steve's gonna call or text you... don't you worry 'bout that."

"And Melanie?"

"In the meanwhile," Janni continued, conveniently ignoring her brother's question, "I'm gonna head down there and see what I can do. Hey, I turned off the base station, but go in and turn it on again. I promise I'll radio home from time to time with updates."

"Thank you. Please be safe... or better yet, break a leg. I love you."

Janni let out a chuckle, but there was no humor behind the laughter. "I love you too, bro. And you, little Pea. Don't let the aftershocks bite, huh?" she said and pulled Patrick and Peanut in for a warm hug.

The street was awash with children and concerned adults who were milling around aimlessly. Some of the boys had already begun to play quake to get it out of their system, but it would take longer for their parents to get their confidence back. Someone had set up a play pen on a bright red rug in the middle of the street to keep the youngest children occupied while the parents spoke in hushed tones.

Janni waved to several of her friends and acquaintances as she hopped into the yellow truck and turned on the flashing bar of lights on the roof to tell the others she was about to reverse out of her driveway. She honked a couple of times to let everybody know they should look out, and her end of the street was quickly cleared of playing children.

Selecting Drive, she rumbled off down the street. As soon as she had made it past the row of bungalows, she mashed the gas. Next stop downtown.

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Judah Road, the main artery leading from the residential zones in the hills down to the city limits, didn't present too many signs of damage while Janni drove out in the open country, but as soon as she passed the sign welcoming everybody to '*McKendrick, the City of Smiles*,' it became clear the earthquake had rattled all parts of the city equally.

Several lamp posts had been toppled over, storefront windows had cracked or shattered and several parked cars had broken windows and dented panels from falling debris. Further down, a balcony had torn itself loose from a second floor apartment, roof tiles were lying in piles on the sidewalks, and large puddles on the street proved that water mains had been cracked deep underground.

As Janni drove at twenty miles an hour to steer clear of the debris, she went past an ambulance crew that tended to an elderly woman who appeared to have taken a tumble during the quake. The EMTs were helped by several onlookers so Janni didn't feel it was necessary to stop. Further down Judah Road, a motorcyclist sat on the curb with his head in his hands. His leather pants and jacket were littered with scuff marks, and his bike had been reduced to scrap metal. He also had help, so Janni drove on.

Similar to up in the hills, many people milled about with their children and pets, and Janni wished she had a siren to go with the bar of flashing lights as some of them strayed onto the street without considering traffic could come from behind.

Like all the vehicles owned by Dillon Construction & Demolition, the GMC truck had a CB radio bolted to the underside of the dashboard so it could be reached at all times. When the unit came to life with a squawk and a familiar whistle, Janni pulled over at the curb at once and grabbed the microphone. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke receiving on mobile unit, over," she said and released the button.

'*Chief Holbrooke*,' a female voice said at the other end of the line. Janni recognized the woman as one of the secretaries at the Dillon headquarters. '*Do not come to the offices. Please proceed to the corner of Kingston and Marlborough where Buzz Burczyk is already working with the team, over.*'

"Acknowledged. Corner of Kingston and Marlborough. I was already headed there. Any news from downtown, over?"

'I don't have that information, Chief. We've been busy liaising with the Mayor's office and the Sheriff, over.'

"Yeah, of course. All right, Chief Holbrooke proceeding to Kingston and Marlborough. Out."

Janni put the CB microphone back on its little hook and swung out onto Judah Road. She continued to drive slowly until she reached the first larger intersection - from there, the roads were more or less devoid of traffic. The lights were out at the intersection so she was able to drive onto the connecting boulevard without stopping.

Looking around, she could see the first of the fires the reporter had talked about on the news. It was an auto repair shop that had gone up in flames, but the Fire Department already had an engine at the site and were busy taking care of the conflagration. The black column of smoke that rose from the burning building drifted west, towards the center of McKendrick that was still shrouded in the cloud of brown dust.

The sight of the six-lane Conroy Boulevard being mostly empty of traffic sent a creepy chill down Janni's back, and she sat up straight and rolled down the window to take her mind off the worst case scenario that kept thundering around inside her. Emergency sirens cut through the crisp air and she thought she could hear a helicopter somewhere in the near distance - perhaps a news crew filming from above.

Being too pre-occupied by the damage all around her, she nearly missed the turning lane onto Marlborough Street, but since the traffic was practically non-existent, she was able to make the turn a little too late without bothering anyone.

Marlborough Street was as damaged as everything else in the city, and people were milling about on the sidewalks in front of the four and five storey apartment complexes that made up the housing stock on the busy street.

Sighing, she slowed down and gawked at the construction site she had worked at for Dillon Construction & Demolition for the past several months. It didn't appear too bad - they hadn't had time to wrap the metal and concrete skeleton yet - but she knew it would have to be checked thoroughly by the city council's building officials before they could continue working on it. With so much to inspect in McKendrick for the slight number of officials, that could take months.

It was odd to see the entire yard empty of equipment save for the Big Mama crane that stood bolted onto a firm foundation. Everything else had apparently been relocated to the disaster zone further up Marlborough.

She drove on, taking the CB microphone off its hook as she went out into the deserted slow lane. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz Burczyk, over."

When all she got back was static, she adjusted a knob and tried again. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz Burczyk. You got your ears on, good buddy?"

'Buzz present and accounted for, Chief. I had it turned down. Where are you, over?'

"Up at the construction site moving slowly towards Kingston. Jesus, it's a mess up here, over," Janni said, craning her neck to take in the vast piles of debris that littered the sidewalks. Many of the historical buildings in the district had lost at least parts of their facade, and tens of thousands of maroon and burnt yellow bricks had spilled onto the street like a tsunami.

'You ain't seen nothing yet, over.'

A chill crept down Janni's back as she looked ahead at the vast array of heavy equipment that was lined up and ready to go at the next intersection. A myriad of flashing lights from all sorts of machinery greeted her and made her want to mash the gas a little harder so she could get there faster. Unfortunately, the debris on the battered street prevented her from doing that - in fact, she had to weave through endless piles of bricks at a frustrating ten miles an hour. "I'm almost there, Buzz. Can you give me an update, over?"

'Bad and getting worse, Chief. We've got an apartment building hangin' on by a thread here. The stairwell at the corner of the building has collapsed... brought a couple of apartments down with it by the looks of it... not too sure, though. We've got the cranes standing by. The Sheriff came over a little while ago with sensitive audio equipment, but...'

"I know, Buzz, I know... I'm the only one who knows how to operate it. Fuck! I'm goin' as fast as I can, Goddammit! Stand by!"

'Buzz Burczyk standing by.'

Janni threw down the microphone and aimed for the easiest route through the debris. She sent a brief prayer to whomever was listening that she wouldn't kill anyone - then she really did mash the gas which made the GMC truck send out a roar. Lurching ahead, the large, yellow truck danced a frantic jitterbug as it bounced over the various bricks on its way down the street.

When she finally arrived at the intersection of Kingston and Marlborough, she jumped out of the truck and ran over to the side of the street to find the best vantage point. Everything around her was a diabolical cacophony of chaos, confusion, sirens, injured people, crying people, tumultuous people, a helicopter somewhere above, more people, evil brown dust that was so dense it made her nose itch, even more people, and the noisy and smelly heavy equipment operated by her crew.

The dust kicked up by the earthquake still hung in the air and made her cough - a nasty cough that tore through her lungs - but it slowly dissipated to reveal the extent of the damage to the property on the corner.

Janni saw the astonishing amount of destruction to the apartment complex where Melanie's mother lived and where Melanie had stayed for most of the day. She saw it, but she didn't believe

it. The horrific sight made her heart thump hard in her chest, and she had to swallow a bitter surge that threatened to drown her.

The entire corner of the building was gone, leaving behind a gaping, jagged hole that stretched from the ground and up to the flat roof that drooped dangerously. The staircase servicing the apartments at that end of the complex had collapsed and had fallen down on top of itself; unrecognizable slabs of concrete were piled up six or seven sections high at the spot that had been the ground floor of the stairwell.

The two apartments on the top floor had crumbled when their supports vanished, but the one where Melanie's mother lived - the fourth floor on the left - seemed to have gone through the carnage relatively unscathed save for the lack of a front door that made it appear like a prize fighter who was missing a few teeth.

Janni slowly took off her battered hard hat and let out a long, deep sigh as she stared with disbelief at the chaos and destruction. She cast a glance at the devastated convenience store across the street, and then at the oh-so-familiar blue stationwagon parked at the curb. Melanie's stationwagon would never drive again, as the back half was buried under a pile of debris. "I never pray," she mumbled although the confusion around her made it impossible for anyone to hear her, "but I do now. Please, let Melanie and her mom be safe. Trapped in their apartment is just fine by me. Trapped but safe. That's all I'm asking. You hear me up there?"

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CHAPTER 2

"Chief! Chief!" Buzz said, waving his yellow hard hat at his foreman. The burly, bearded man came around the corner of the self-propelled crane wearing a tan coverall and black steel-tipped boots. The grime that had painted an odd pattern around his mouth and eyes proved he had already seen some action of the dusty kind. In his mid-thirties, Paul 'Buzz' Burczyk proudly carried on the family traditions that had started when his great-grandfather had worked on the Empire State Building in New York City, and the next generation was already on the way with a five-year-old daughter back home that Janni had given a plastic hammer for Christmas to give her a head start.

"Buzz!" Janni shouted, waving her second-in-command over. Working as perfect mirrors of each other, the experienced construction workers both put their hard hats back on as they closed the distance between them. "Jesus, man... what a fuckin' mess!" she said, throwing her hands in the air.

"You're tellin' me? All right, status update," Buzz said and tried to wipe some grime off his face - the gesture only made it worse. "The Sheriff was by a little while ago with the audio gear, but we told him he might as well take it someplace else 'cos you weren't here yet... no offense."

Janni shook her head in frustration and stared accusingly at the collapsed building across the street. "Yeah, none taken. Fuckin' quake... the roads were pretty much blocked everywhere, man... 'cept down on Conroy."

"Have you been in touch with your girlfriend? I mean, the office supply store didn't look too bad-"

"No. It's her birthday. She had the day off. She's with her mother," Janni said and stared at the ruins.

"Oh... okay. Well, that's a load off."

Janni sighed and gave Buzz a long look. She didn't want to appear weak in front of her crew, so she kept everything bottled up inside her. If she had learned one thing in the two years she had been Chief, it was that any sign of weakness, however well-justified, would be a millstone around her neck. The crew's loyalty would perhaps not appear less on the surface, but the foundation would crumble and eventually break apart. "Yeah," she mumbled, wiping her brow.

"Anyway," Buzz continued, oblivious to his Chief's problems, "when we got here, a couple of people told us they heard screams and cries from the rubble. Female voices. The cloud of dust was so massive nobody could get close to it. I'm figurin' that even if anyone made it through the collapse in one piece under there, the dust would 've finished 'em off. Choked 'em to death in a minute or so."

The corners of Janni's mouth twitched at Buzz's casual retelling of the horrific events, but she knew he was just doing his job. Nodding, she patted him on the shoulder. "Okay. Try to get hold of the Sheriff and get him to come back with the audio gear. While we're waitin' for that, I'll go over there and scout out the best spots for clearing out the slabs. Dead or not, nobody deserves to be buried under a fuckin' staircase."

"Yes, Chief," Buzz said and ran back around the self-propelled crane.

Gulping, Janni hurried through the hellish maze of pandemonium and confusion and soon reached the first of the massive slabs. The large piece of concrete had spilled out onto the sidewalk where it had crushed the regular flagstones. A layer of grayish-brown dust coated everything, and her trained eye knew at once they would need to pacify it with atomized water before they could do anything.

She jumped up onto the lowest of the slabs and ran across it to see the other side. When it didn't yield much information, she climbed up onto the next slab, then the next after that. Soon, she found herself roughly fifteen feet off the ground without having seen as much as a single gap they could use for the heavy-duty chains or belts. Above her, there were only four more slabs to go, but at least the second one from the top showed a clear edge they would be able to exploit. "Fuck, we need to take it all the way from the fuckin' top... no short cuts here," she said and rubbed her brow.

Grunting in frustration, she continued the climb and was soon standing on the top slab. She couldn't help but look up at the gaping hole where the front door had been up in the apartment of Melanie's mother. When the door had fallen out, it had taken parts of the doorjamb with it, and the walls surrounding the hole didn't look too stable.

Janni resisted the urge to call Melanie's name and concentrated instead on finding edges they could use for the chains. It wasn't by far the first ruin she had to sift through in her career as a construction worker, but it was the first where they had a hard deadline - and the 'dead' was to be taken literally.

"Chief!" Buzz shouted from down on the ground, followed by something more that Janni couldn't make heads or tails of as her second-in-command's voice was drowned out by the chaos around him despite only being a good sixty feet away from her.

Instead of shouting until they would both turn blue, Janni reached for the portable radio she had on her utility belt and held it up for Buzz to see. The second-in-command gave her a thumbs-up and took his own radio.

'Chief, we've heard from the USGS... we may experience more aftershocks pretty soon, over.'

"Fuck!"

'That's what I said. Also, the Mayor's Office has told us that gas and water have been switched off for the entire block... but as always, we need to take that with a pinch of salt, over.'

"Yeah, no shit. All right. The top and number two slabs show good promise of retraction, but the rest have fused together like Barney Rubble's undershorts. When we lift the top two, we may trigger a cascade that could help us... or hinder us, over."

'Copy, Chief.'

"We also need the tanker truck with the atomizing nozzle, over. There's so much fuckin' dust all over the Goddamned place up here, over."

'Chief, if there are survivors down there... and I'm not sayin' anyone made it through that... but if we use water, is there a risk of seepage to wherever they're located? They might be pinned down and unable to move. We wouldn't wanna drown anyone, over.'

"Fuck... good point, Buzz. All right, scratch the tanker truck. But we probably still need to bind the dust once we get started. Over."

'Copy. Stand by, Chief,' Buzz said as he was approached by a man wearing a blue coverall typically used by the people working with electricity.

"Chief Holbrooke standing by." Putting the radio back on the belt, Janni took the opportunity to explore the top a bit further. The slabs formed a pyramid-shaped mountain with a steep drop at

the rear side that went all the way down to the ground floor. Down there, she could just barely make out the crushed remains of what appeared to be wood - possibly the doors that had gone missing from the apartments.

The news helicopter overhead came too close and began to stir up the evil brown dust that soon formed an impenetrable cloud. "Fuck it... those morons!" Janni croaked, trying to protect her eyes, nose and mouth from the dust that whipped around in a frenzy on the top slab. She fumbled and stumbled down from the slabs until she found a gap on the far side just big enough for her. It wasn't ideal, but it would provide shelter while she waited out the storm.

The helicopter eventually took off and the dust began to settle all over again. In her shelter, Janni coughed and spluttered a couple of times to get everything out of her lungs. When the dust had finally settled enough for her to see her feet, she noticed something else as well.

Her eyes fell on the only black spot in the entire world of gray - a triangular hole between two slabs further down and away from her. The dust that still swirled around moved erratically over the triangular hole, meaning there had to be an air pocket somewhere below.

'Chief! Are you still with us up there, over?' Buzz said over the radio in a concerned voice.

"Yeah... yeah, I'm here. Can't keep a tough gal down, ya know. Buzz, I think I've found a place to start the audio scan, over."

'Good 'cos one of the Sheriff's deputies just showed up with the equipment, over.'

"Excellent. Over."

'Chief, the power has been switched off in the entire block so we won't have to worry about playin' with wires, dontchaknow.'

"Also excellent," Janni said and wiped her eyes. Looking down on the ground, she could see a vehicle from the Sheriff's Department parked next to one of the dozers. "All right, Buzz, I'm coming down now. Catch me if I slip, yeah?"

'Will do, Chief. Out.'

"Over and out," Janni said and put the radio on the belt. After coughing up some dust, she proceeded to find a safe way down from the slabs.

Safely down on the ground, Janni coughed and spluttered on her way over to the dozer. She patted herself down and created a mini-sandstorm all of her own with the amounts of grayish-brown dust that came out of her hair and clothes.

One of the deputies from the Sheriff's Department - a young man in his early twenties who had barely begun to shave yet - dragged an electronic measuring instrument in the shape of a backpack out of the rear of the police SUV. Looking from the gruff Buzz to the even gruffer Janni, he clearly had no idea what to say to the experienced construction workers. "Uh... hello," he tried, carefully putting the sensitive equipment down on the ground.

"Hi, deputy," Janni said, wiping her brow with the back of her glove. "So, you have something for us?"

"That's right. We only have one of these. The Sheriff has told me to ask you to take great care of it, Sir," the deputy said to Buzz.

"Don't look at me, son. She's the big boss around here," Buzz said with a chuckle as he pointed at the exceedingly dusty Janni.

"Oh... beg' pardon. I didn't think- never mind."

Janni rolled her eyes but let it go at once - she had more important things on her mind. "Forget about it... and I already know how the machine works so you won't have to show me. Buzz, on the far side of the slabs, roughly below the third one, there's a triangular hole that could be the vent of an air pocket. I'm gonna start there."

"All right," Buzz said and pushed his hard hat back from his face to wipe his sweaty brow.

"Yeah. The top and number two slabs look ready for the pickin'. Too bad we can't have Big Mama down here-

The odd nickname made the young deputy furrow his brow and look confused.

"-but Little Jack oughtta do the trick," Janni continued, pointing at the self-propelled crane that was rolling on caterpillar treads. "Once I've had my ears to the ground, get 'im up close. We need eight-inch chains for this job."

"We have a mile of eight-inchers, Chief. No problem," Buzz said, nodding in the direction of a flatbed trailer that was parked off to the side loaded with chains and belts of all sizes.

Janni nodded with a satisfied look on her face. "All right. Get the biggest dump truck ready to take the load so we don't have to waste time changin' rigs halfway through. Oh, and it's an old house so we may need to have the rubble examined for various toxic shit."

"Noted, Chief."

"All right," Janni said and slapped her hands together. "Are we on the same page? Deputy, we need barriers put up so people won't get too close when we start truckin' the big vehicles around. Will you take care of that?"

The young deputy looked up in a hurry when he realized he had been spoken to. For the first second, he stared wide-eyed at Janni, but he soon snapped out of it and nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! Yes, Miss... Ma'am. Uh, Chief. I'll get on the radio and have Traffic over here in a hurry with the necessary equipment."

Janni was able to hide the smirk that wanted to break free, but it was tough going. "That's fine, son. Okay, let me get that thing on my shoulders," she said and reached for the audio gear.

With a heave-ho, the advanced equipment - which was heavier than it appeared - was firmly on Janni's back. She tightened the shoulder straps and moved her torso a couple of times to make sure she wouldn't be restricted if she had to move in a hurry. "Works for me. Buzz, get the dump truck and Little Jack on the move... slowly. We don't want any accidents, you hear?"

"Loud and clear, Chief," Buzz said with a firm nod.

"All right. While the gang gets over there, I'll crawl back to the hole I found. Jesus, I hope we won't be too late." Janni's voice petered off into nothing as she thought of the possibility of perhaps finding mutilated bodies in the hole if it was deep enough. Despite her earlier prayer, there was even a risk that she would find Melanie somewhere down there. She gulped and forced herself to come back to the real world. "So... are we clear, gentlemen?"

Buzz and the deputy nodded. Janni grunted and shuffled over to the slabs of concrete to crawl back up to the triangular hole.

"This day is goin' from bad to worse... now I gotta schlep this fuckin' thing across half the fuckin' Gobi desert," she mumbled as the square, heavy equipment on her back upset her center of gravity and made the ascent far more difficult than it had been before.

Several times, her boots slipped on the dusty rubble, but she eventually made it to the same spot where she had found the dark hole between the slabs of concrete. Kneeling down on the uneven surface, she panted and wiped her sweaty face. The triangular hole was still in the same place, and specs of dust were still being disturbed by the air that escaped it.

She cleared her throat and took the radio. Down on the ground, the Sheriff's Department had arrived with the barriers, and although the people on the sidewalk displayed their vocal dissatisfaction about being moved back from the action, the ruin had turned quiet - except for the diesel engines humming in the back of the many heavy vehicles from the company. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz Burczyk, over."

'Buzz with his ears on. Go ahead, Chief, over.'

"Kill the diesels. All of them. I'm turning on the equipment now and I need complete silence, over."

'Roger that, Chief. Over.'

"Also, ask the deputy if he can get the news chopper to move away so we won't have a repeat of the earlier fuck-up. Over and out."

'Ten-Roger, Chief. Over and out.'

"Let's hope it won't be down and out," Janni said as she attached the radio to her belt. One after the other, the diesel engines were shut off down on the ground which created an eerie silence only broken by occasional creaks and groans from the concrete ruins below her. The news helicopter could still be heard somewhere above, but it moved away before long.

Licking her lips, Janni took off the advanced piece of electronics she had hauled up the mountain and put it down a safe distance from the triangular hole. She pressed the On/Off button on the square box to turn it on, and watched how its dials and displays came alive. It soon sent out a sequence of beeps to let the operator know it was ready.

Janni took the odd-looking metal probe off the hook and uncoiled the spiral cable. She stared at it while she tried to remember the things she had learned at the two-day course. "How the hell a computer can discern human breathing from background hisses and static, I'll never know... Jesus, what a gizmo," she mumbled as she finished uncoiling the cable.

Once everything was ready, she inched over to the hole, constantly testing the edges with the toe of her boot to feel if it would hold her weight. It was tough going, and she could feel her fingers and hands getting increasingly sweaty inside her thick gloves.

The edges seemed to hold up, and she scooted into place and knelt down at the broadest side of the triangular hole. Keeping an eye on the pale green display on the side of the apparatus, she lowered the metal probe into the hole, hoping she would see something definitive on the readout.

The only thing that happened was that the metal probe snagged on something just below the surface of the hole. "Oh, fuck me sideways," Janni mumbled, inching closer to the hole to guide the probe past the obstacle. The second and third attempts failed as badly as the first had done.

"Aw, hell... maybe it's a load of bull hickey after all," she grumbled, yanking the probe out of the hole. Once the advanced piece of hardware was clear of the edge, she shuffled around and took off her yellow hard hat. Mouthing yet another prayer, she stuck her entire head down the hole to see what the probe kept getting snagged on.

A twisted, jagged piece of metal that had most likely been a baluster on the stairwell was the culprit. It blocked the entrance to the hole and would make it impossible for the probe to go deeper than five inches - beyond that, she had been right in guessing it could be an air pocket. Despite the sunlight from above, she was unable to see the bottom of the chasm that seemed to grow wider the further down it went.

"Crap," she mumbled, reaching in to test the twisted metal's solidity. After jerking it around for half a minute or so, she was able to get it loose and pull it free. She extracted it carefully so the sharp points of the jagged edges wouldn't nick her clothes or her skin. Once she had the grotesquely twisted metal free, she leaned back on her thighs and stared at it. The way the thick metal bar had been twisted beyond recognition proved how great the forces at work had been.

Trying the probe again, she uncoiled the spiral cable and lowered the sensitive hardware into the hole. This time, she was able to get it at least six feet down; in fact, she reached the end of the cable before the probe had found the floor of the cavern.

She licked her lips nervously as she stared at the readout. She moved the spiral cable around like she had been taught to make the probe perform a circular sweep down below. At first, the readout didn't show anything, but at a certain angle, three blips showed up - one weak and two strong - indicating the microphone had picked up three disturbances in the air. The machine automatically started recording everything that went on down there for later analysis.

Janni nearly let out a whoop but remembered to keep it all inside so she wouldn't disturb the apparatus. Moving the spiral cable again, she reacquired the direction from which she had seen the three blips. This time, only two blips showed up on the readout. She furrowed her brow and tried another angle, but she could still only get two blips to show up.

A green LED started flashing on the machine, so she released her two-hand grip on the spiral cable to adjust the knob. She clicked through a sequence menu to activate the noise reduction of whatever the microphone picked up, but suddenly lost all the blips from the readout. "Oh... fuck it!" she grumbled, moving her hand back to resume the two-hand grip. It took her a while, but she managed to get back to whatever it was that had triggered the machine's activity sensor.

When two strong blips showed up on the readout, she let the probe record it for nearly a full minute before she pulled it back up and coiled the spiral cable. She went back to the sequence menu and found Advanced Playback. Leaning back on her thighs, she played the recording at maximum volume and immediately realized she had struck gold.

A female voice could be heard crying and moaning in pain. Another, very similar, female voice was crying as well, though quieter.

Janni stared straight ahead with eyes as wide as saucers. An icy chill that sent goosebumps all over and left every single hair standing on edge raced across her entire body. Gulping, she reached for the radio on her belt. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke... Buzz, do you read me, over?" she said in a croaky voice.

'Loud and clear, Chief. Go on.'

"The machine has picked up two survivors, repeat, the machine has picked up two survivors. Two women. They're somewhere beyond the triangular hole on the far side of the slabs, over."

The air was filled with crackling static before Buzz came back with an emphatic *'Son of a bitch! Well done, Chief! All right, we'll get Little Jack on the move, over.'*

"I think we need to hurry, Buzz. At first, I had three contacts, but I lost one and was unable to reacquire it, over," Janni said and got on her feet. The icy chill had been replaced by a hot flash that threatened to set fire to her skin. She stumbled away from the hole and forgot all about the expensive equipment. When she realized she was far lighter than when she had stumbled up there, she grunted and turned back around.

'We'll be quick and efficient. You just made the six o'clock news, Chief. Over!'

"Yeah, all right. Whatever," Janni said and stuck her free arm inside the machine's shoulder straps. "Number one priority is to get the survivors out while they're still that... survivors. Over and out."

The gravity of the situation caught up with her, and she stood up straight to try to get a grip on the madness surrounding her. Her head was spinning from the scores of impressions that had occurred in the brief time since the earthquake, but she knew it was far from over - in fact, it had only just begun.

Looking up, she could see the shadow of Little Jack's giant hook and the massive chains and belts coming down towards the top of the slabs some fifteen feet above her position. All of a sudden, the slabs were swamped by tough men wearing Dillon gear, and they were all looking to her for guidance.

She shook off the confusion and put down the expensive machine - that would have to wait. "All right, boys!" she roared, slapping her gloved hands together. "Let's get these damn things out of the way so we can get those poor people... and ourselves... home in time for supper!"

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Janni climbed up to the top of the pile of concrete slabs with the agility of a mountain goat - well, almost. By the time she had made it there, the chains and belts attached to the crane affectionately known as Little Jack were hovering a few feet above the slab that formed the peak of the pyramid.

Taking a long final step, Janni jumped up onto the uppermost slab and used her boots to draw lines in the dust to indicate where she wanted the men to attach the heavy-duty belts. "We obviously start with this sonovabitch right here. Put 'em here, fellas. Two feet... no, better make that three feet in from the edges on either end of the rectangle," she said, creating a similar shape with her gloved hands to underline her words. "All right?"

A chorus of grunts and affirmative answers reached her ears, and she jumped off the top slab to watch the proceedings from the next one.

At first, the slab was moved up an inch at a time by hand - or rather, by crowbar and hand-held pneumatic lifts - to make room for the belts. The operator down in Little Jack's cab lowered the giant hook to make the chains slack in order for the men to move the belts in under the slab they were working on.

Janni sent a thumbs-up down at the driver, but the sun glaring off the cab's Plexiglas windows meant she couldn't see who was behind the joystick. Since she didn't have much to do once the men were busy attaching the belts, she took her radio and pressed the button. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz Burczyk, over."

'*Buzz here, go on,*' the familiar voice said. The second-in-command came over from the other side of the street where he had been speaking to the roving bottle-blonde reporter from KRPM-TV who had finally made it over to the corner of Kingston and Marlborough.

"Buzz, who we got working Little Jack today, over?"

'*That would be Sir Frank, over.*'

Janni chuckled and felt relieved that one of their best and most precise men had his hands on the controls. She couldn't help but remember back to the time when he had arrived at the Dillon offices looking for a job. For some strange reason, the secretary accepting his application form had mistakenly written his name as 'Sir Frank' in the personnel file instead of his real name, Frank Sirk - and when Old Man Dillon had seen it, he had laughed his ass off and had hired Sir Frank on the spot.

They all had nicknames. It was an integrated part of the profession and it provided some much-needed relief for the times when they had to work their butts off under floodlights on the tenth floor of an open-sided structure because the building schedule had been too optimistic.

Janni's nickname was The World's Baddest Giant - sometimes shortened to The Giant - because of her height, her pride and her tenacious nature, although it was rarely used when they were away from the base. At construction or demolition jobs, she was always known as the Chief.

Over the years, she had been called a variety of four-letter words as well. She took most of it on the chin except for the one time someone had called her a fuckin' bulldyke. On that occasion, the man saying it had ended up taking it on the chin instead of her.

The old memories faded away and Janni came back to the present. "That's great news, Buzz. Looks like we're almost ready to crack the whip up here. Is Sir Frank wired up, over?"

'*Can't say, Chief. Stand by.*'

"Chief Holbrooke standing by," Janni said and lowered the radio. While she waited, she kept a firm eye on the belts that had been attached in accordance with her exact wishes. One of them was perhaps half a foot off the mark, but even before she could raise the issue, two men shoved the belt into place.

'Buzz Burczyk for Chief Holbrooke, over.'

"I'm here, Buzz. Go on."

'Sir Frank can't operate a radio while he's got his hands on the controls, but I'll stay right here and keep my own radio open to relay any messages you have for him, over.'

"Works for me. All right... Sir Frank, on my mark, let's do a practice lift. Just a fraction, and easy does it. You understand, over?"

'He understands, Chief, over,' Buzz said, working as a living relay station.

Janni nodded and raised her arms in the air to get the attention of her men. "Listen up!" she said in a strong voice. "We're gonna do a tiny lift to see if the fuckin' thing holds up. Everyone, stand clear! All right, Sir Frank, the stage's all yours, over."

Down below, the engine in Little Jack changed key from an easy-going humming to a feral roar. Foul-smelling, black smoke belched up from the smokestack as the self-propelled crane on caterpillar treads started pulling up the first slab.

The heavy slab creaked and groaned as it was lifted off the top of the others. It didn't take long for it to droop down in the center like Charlie Brown on bad acid.

"Break, break, break!" Janni said into the radio. "Lower it at once! The concrete is too soft or too damaged for the belts, over."

'Ten-Roger, Chief,' Buzz said.

After the slab had been brought back down into position, Janni rubbed her brow and jumped up onto the dusty slab. Kneeling down, she inspected the breaking point at the center of the concrete. Her trained eye quickly discovered they wouldn't be able to get it down in one piece - it would break up and send a shower of concrete rubble all over the street. "Fuck it!" she growled, slapping her gloved hand down onto the reluctant piece of the stairwell.

Looking up, she could see all the men waiting for her to make a call. She chewed on her cheeks and tried to come up with the perfect plan that would get the damn slab off the pile so they could move on, but her head was swimming so much hardly anything would come to her. "What would Xena do...?" she mumbled out of sheer frustration - and then it struck her. "An X! Hell yeah... boys, we're gonna reset the belts to form an X! Like a pair o' fuckin' suspenders underneath the fat belly of this turd."

The men grunted and went to work at once.

Five minutes later, Janni keyed the radio without taking her eyes off the belts or the slab. "Sir Frank, let's try that again. Easy does it. If it holds, keep going downwards until you can dump it into the truck. You understand, over?"

'*We copy, Chief,*' Buzz said, standing in for the driver.

"Go ahead... now," Janni said and moved back in case either the belts or the slab would give up the ghost. When the giant hook began to glide up, the slab creaked and groaned almost like being separated from its kin caused it physical grief - but everything held. The heavy piece of concrete released its grip in all four corners without drooping too much in the center. The big X appeared to have saved the day.

Little by little, Sir Frank hauled the slab away from the top of the ruins and out over Marlborough Street. To a resounding cheer from the spectators, the first slab of concrete was lowered onto the dump truck where other men from Dillon Construction & Demolition stood ready to release the belts.

Up top, Janni felt a brief moment of elation when she glanced down at the dump truck. The moment faded when she looked at the amount of work that was left. "One down... six to go," she said with a sigh before she rubbed her brow and got ready to go to war all over again.

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The second slab caused a few more problems and they had to work hard to get the reluctant piece of concrete off the pile. One corner kept crumbling no matter how they arranged the belts, so they had to chop it into smaller pieces by hand using crowbars and iron spikes designed to penetrate concrete.

When it finally came off and they reached the third slab - which was the one acting as the lid of the triangular hole - Janni took a wobbling step back and put down the spike she had used side by side with her men. The hard, intense labor had set the muscles on fire in her neck, shoulders and back, and she sweated like a pig on the way to the slaughter. She didn't even need to sniff her pits to know the shower she had taken after breakfast had lost its effect.

The dust and grime painted ugly patterns on her face, and they weren't aided by her trying to wipe off the sweat that constantly trickled into her eyes. Panting, she leaned forward to put her hands on her knees. She noticed several of her crewmembers doing the same and suddenly realized they had worked too hard for too long without a break or even water.

Trying to clear her throat, she reached for the radio on her belt. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz Burczyk, over," she said and released the button.

'*Buzz here. Go ahead, Chief, over.*'

"We need bottled water up here, over."

'Ten-roger. I'll have logistics bring up a few, over.'

"Excellent. The next slab is the important one," Janni said and glanced down at the triangular hole at the far side of the rubble. The edges of the hole had perhaps begun to shift from the heavy work that had gone on near it, but specs of dust were still flowing erratically around it proving that air was being served from somewhere. "That's the one that partially covers the hole I told you about, over," she continued when she realized she had left Buzz hanging with her finger on the button.

'Ten-roger, Chief. Do you need anything special from us, over?'

"No, I don't think so... on second thoughts," Janni said, studying the thickness of the third slab compared to the two they had already moved away. "the next one looks heavier. Perhaps you could give us six points instead of four, over."

'Two more chains, over?'

"Yes, on the nose, Buzz. Over."

'That's gonna take us five minutes. The water will be up in the meantime. Stand by, Chief.'

"Chief Holbrooke standing by," Janni said and put the radio back on her belt.

Soon, one of the junior employees came stumbling up the long, rocky path with a trekking backpack filled to the brim with cool, bottled water. The young man's clothes and hair were inappropriately clean since he hadn't been anywhere near the dust, but the dirty men at the slabs threw enough of the evil brown stuff at him to make him fit right in.

Janni chuckled as she unscrewed the cap of her plastic water bottle and drained all of it in a single gulp. Calling the now filthy young man over, she took a second bottle that she used to clean her eyes, her neck and her hands. "Don't forget to collect all the spent bottles. We're not here to litter," she told the young man as she stuffed both empty bottles back into his backpack.

"I won't, Chief," the young man said, still spitting out the grains of concrete dust that had become lodged between his teeth from his colleague's display of tough love.

"That's a good boy," Janni said and patted the young man's shoulder. While the junior employee did as he had been told, Janni shuffled over to the third slab and knelt down a brief distance from the triangular hole. Scrunching up her face, she tried to make an educated guess how much the hole would suffer from the shifting of its lid, but everything was fused together so hard it was impossible to predict how it would react when one piece of the jigsaw puzzle was removed.

'Buzz Burczyk to Chief Holbrooke, over,' the radio said, and Janni reached for it at once.

"Chief Holbrooke ready to receive, over," she said, releasing the button.

'Little Jack is hot to trot. Six points on the nose, over.'

"Excellent, Buzz. All right, let's get back to work. Chief Holbrooke over and out." Putting the radio back on her belt, she got up and shuffled away from the hole. Up above them, the crane's giant hook came down towards the ruins with the six eight-inch chains dangling gently in the air.

"Easy does it... easy does it," Janni said into the radio as Sir Frank slowly retracted Little Jack's giant hook with the third slab attached to the six-point, double-X-shaped harness underneath.

It was clear to see by the black smoke that belched out of the smokestack and by the grinding, groaning metallic noises that came from the chains that this slab was heavier than the previous two. Even Sir Frank's precise hand couldn't keep the self-propelled crane from trembling and moving as it swung around and out over Marlborough Street.

A fair amount of dust was kicked up by the removal of the third slab, but Janni shielded her eyes while the storm was at its worst. When the dust settled, she wished it had lasted longer: the triangular hole was far smaller than it had appeared. Instead of stretching in under the lid like Janni had predicted - and hoped for - another hitherto unseen pile of loose rubble blocked off the entire far end of the hole leaving it no larger than three by four feet.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Janni roared, thumping her fist into her open palm. "Look at that motherfucker right there! Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, can't we ever catch a break?!"

She hurried over to the blocked hole and scooped up a glove-ful of the loose rubble. Even that simple gesture released a cloud of evil, brown dust into the air that slowly drifted away. "Nobody can breathe in that... but I saw two blips... I heard two voices! I know I did... there must be an air pocket underneath... somehow. Dammit!"

Whipping off her hard hat, she dove down and stuck her entire head into the triangular hole. It was pitch black and filled with dust from the recent action, but it was far larger on the inside than the outside alluded to. "I'll eat my fuckin' shorts raw if this isn't it!" she said once she withdrew her head and put her hat back on. "It is... I know it is. It's gotta be!"

The knot of fear she carried inside her from the fact that Melanie hadn't been in contact yet began to gnaw on her guts. She leaned back on her thighs while she tried to get her brain back into working condition. With all the racket they had made, it was out of the question that Melanie and her mother hadn't heard them if they were still up in the apartment - even if they were afraid to move because of a crumbling floor, Melanie would have tried to establish contact by shouting at the rescue workers. The gaping hole up on the fourth floor had been quiet as a tomb.

Janni looked up at the spot where the front door had been. She could just about make out a few details inside the hallway - a mirror had fallen onto the floor, and the lamp in the ceiling was hanging crooked - but it didn't give her any clues either way as to Melanie's whereabouts.

Sighing deeply, Janni swallowed the bitter surge that threatened to crawl up her windpipe. *'If my honey made it over to the Korean convenience store before the earthquake hit, she could either be trapped in there, or under the huge pile of bricks that's distributed all over the Goddamned sidewalk down there... or she could have made it back out onto the street scot-free. No... if Melanie is unharmed, she would be down among the spectators watching us.'*

"Or she could be down there," Janni mumbled, staring at the triangular hole in front of her. A wave of panic rose inside her that blossomed into a wild, unrestrained hurricane of emotions in a matter of heartbeats. Jumping up, she began to pace around furiously with her gloved hands behind her head to try to combat the negative emotions, but she was unable to do much about the storm that raged through her body. Every muscle, every vein, every fiber inside her trembled and shook harder than the quake itself had done.

It would take far too long to remove the slabs one at a time. The solution was simple: somebody needed to go down into the hole to search for survivors. Looking at herself and her men, she understood she was the only one small enough to fit into the hole the way it was shaped. Cracking it larger was simply too dangerous for the two women trapped down there. The realization that saving Melanie - or retrieving her remains - was entirely up to her hit her like the proverbial ton of bricks.

Staring into thin air without seeing much of anything, she let out a nervous gasp and reached for the radio on the back of her belt. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz Burczyk, over," she said in a voice that didn't just tremble - it shook.

'Buzz got his ears on, Chief. I think something's wrong with your radio. You sound weird-'

"Buzz, we've hit a snag up here. A big one," Janni said and looked at the pile of loose rubble that covered most of the triangular hole. "We need a plan B... and I have it. I am plan B. You're not gonna like it, buddy, but here's what we're gonna do..."

*

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CHAPTER 3

The look and shape of Buzz Burczyk's face told Janni everything she needed to know about how her second-in-command felt about her proposed plan B. To call it gobsmacked or flabbergasted would be an understatement - so would calling it spit-flying furious.

After their radio conversation, Buzz had left Sir Frank and Little Jack behind in a hurry to get the lowdown face to face. "You're nuts, Chief," he said flatly while they were standing near the edge of the triangular hole.

Janni chuckled and pushed her hard hat back to scratch her sweaty brow. "Oh c'mon, Buzz... I know you're more eloquent than that."

"All right... you gotta be out of your fuckin' mind, Chief! Attempting to climb down that hole without knowing jack shit about what you'll find down there is just plum crazy, safety wire or no safety wire!"

"Oh, I know what I'll find down there, Buzz, 'cos the machine told me so. I'll find a couple of survivors."

"A couple a' complete strangers, Chief! Jesus, woman, let the FEMA boys take care of that part... look, we were asked to act as a first intervention team, and we did our part. We took the top off the pyramid and found a hole that others can explore. Now it's time for the golden boys to make the six o'clock news and take the credit for finding the survivors. What the hell's turned you so damn idealistic all of a sudden?"

Janni attempted a smile but it never grew beyond a listless creasing of her lips. She put her gloves back on and pulled them tight. "Melanie may be down there," she said quietly, staring at the black hole beyond Buzz's shoulder.

"What? Your girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you said it was her day off 'cos it was her birthday or some shit?"

"It was. And she spent the first half of it here... where her mother lives. Or lived. Up there, Buzz," Janni said and pointed up at the gaping hole on the fourth floor where the front door used to be. "I spoke to her on the phone not two fuckin' minutes before the fuckin' quake rattled us. The last thing she said was that she was about to head over to the Korean across the street for some cream."

"Jesus... but couldn't she have-"

"No, Buzz. If she had made it out of the stairwell before it collapsed, she would have come up to the barriers by now. She would have contacted us for sure. She would have seen the Dillon logo on the heavy vehicles and... yeah." Sighing, Janni locked eyes with her second-in-command.

Buzz drew his lips back in a worried grimace. His eyes became distant for a while, and Janni knew he had to be thinking about his own wife and daughter. "Yeah... all right," he said, coming back to the present. "I get the urgency on your part. But, Chief... Janni... have you considered you may only find dead bodies? Are you ready to expose yourse-"

"Oh, the thought has crossed my mind, Buzz," Janni said in a steely voice.

"Yeah, I'm sorry for being so blunt... but I'm trying to tell you that you should turn this whole thing over a couple more times before you commit to it, dammit!"

"I wouldn't arrive at a different conclusion, my friend."

"Nah, I guess you wouldn't," Buzz said and rubbed his brow. "All right, but watch your ass down there, ya hear? If the shit goes down while you're there, you're gonna get squashed like a bug... and we're gonna be up to our eyeballs in legal shit for the rest of the decade!"

"I know," Janni said with a chuckle that came out perhaps a bit too screechy. "I'll try not to get squashed. If I do, you'll be the new Chief."

"Hell, Janni, don't even joke about that," Buzz said and rubbed his mouth. "You know how big Lady Fortune's ears are! She might be listening to this very conversation..."

Janni nodded and let out a deep sigh. "I know that too. Conversation is a good cue, Buzz... before I can go down there, I need to make a radio call home. My brother's at my house with his baby daughter and I promised I'd call him with an update. I'll use the CB in the truck."

"All right," Buzz said and patted his Chief's shoulder. "Maybe if we're lucky, you'll trip and break an ankle on your way down so you won't have to go through with this cockamamie plan of yours!"

"Let's see, Buzz... let's see," Janni said and began the descent.

Down on the street, she opened the door of the yellow GMC truck and swung herself up into the cab. Sighing, she took off the hard hat and fluffed her filthy hair. The CB microphone beckoned, and she took it off the hook and leaned back in the seat. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for little Pea and big Patrick. Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for little Pea and big Patrick. Bro, are you on this frequency, over?"

Static filled the truck's cab, and Janni adjusted a few knobs on the radio to get a clear connection. Moments later, the happy babbling of little Peanut was heard loud and clear over the airwaves. Janni had always loved that sound, and usually, it prompted a big, old grin on her face. In the situation she was in at present - and the one she was about to face - the babbling only sent a cold chill down her back as she rued the real danger of never getting to hear that life-affirming sound again. "There's my little Peanut, over," she said, but the regular luster wasn't present in her voice.

'*H- hello? Hello, Janni?*' Patrick's voice said from the other end of the connection which was the base station in the office in Janni's bungalow.

When nothing more came, Janni pressed the button and moved the microphone up to her mouth. "You need to say over when ya don't have anything more to say... over."

'*Oh... sorry. Over.*'

"It's all right. Hello, Patrick. I just wanted to give you an update. Well..." she said but soon fell quiet. She stared out of the truck's windshield at the ruins at the corner of Kingston and Marlborough.

A woman dear to her heart could be somewhere underneath the horrific mess of crushed concrete. Melanie could be in the pocket of air, but it wasn't certain. She could have been killed instantly when she hurtled down to the bottom of the stairwell with tens of thousands of pounds of concrete all around her - or perhaps she was still alive. The two strong blips on the sensitive listening device clearly showed someone had survived. The only way to know for sure if Melanie was one of them was to risk another life going down there in the pitch black hole. "I haven't found Melanie yet, but I'm still looking, over," she continued in a croaky voice.

'I'm so sorry to hear that, sis... I've been watching some of it on the news. It doesn't look good down there. Uh... over.'

"No it doesn't, Patrick. It really doesn't... over."

'You've been on camera a couple of times. Each time you're on the TV, little Pea lights up and tries to reach for you. She can't understand that her aunt isn't really here. Over.'

"That's so sweet," Janni said, followed by a deep sigh. "Have you been in touch with your husband yet, over?"

'Yes! Yes, the phones are back and he texted me, oh, ten minutes ago! He was all right, just frazzled... the big sissy. He wanted to drive out here... he had been watching you on the TV too, by the way... but I said he shouldn't. The streets look really bad from the helicopter.'

Janni waited for the 'over' that she knew would arrive at any moment. Sure enough, it came after waiting for a few seconds.

'Over. Sorry. Uh... over.'

Chuckling, Janni keyed the microphone. "This is a crash course in the proper use of a Citizen Band Radio, huh? You're right, the streets are pretty bad. You'll just have to kiss him twice the next time you meet him. So... anyway. I need to go, Patrick."

A stray tear suddenly leaked from her left eye, but she hurriedly wiped it away with her glove. She couldn't do anything about the clean line it left behind on her filthy cheek. Checking the rear-view mirror, she just knew Buzz would make a comment about it. "Okay? Give little Pea a string of kisses from her ol' battle-ax aunt. I'll... I'll see you... later. Okay? Over."

'Okay, sis. I'll be watching on the news. If you hear the helicopter near you, give little Pea a wave. She would love that so much, over.'

Janni nodded although Patrick wouldn't be able to see it. She made a mental note of asking Buzz to relay a message to the news crew to stay away while she made her descent into the pitch black hole. "I'll see what I can do, Patrick. Bye... love you both. Over and out."

Looking at the mirror again, she was disappointed to see the earlier tear had been joined by many more. "Damn dust... gets everywhere," she mumbled as she wiped her cheeks and stepped out of the truck.

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The procedure to put on all the safety equipment went by in nervous silence. Buzz wrapped a second, heavy-duty utility belt around Janni's waist equipped with a new and stronger radio that could punch through the concrete, a metal canteen with water, and a snaphook on the back that had the strength to pull a truck up a hill if it had to. In addition to that, a powerful LED lamp had been attached to her trusty hard hat on a strong elastic band.

As Buzz attached the quadruple-core safety wire to the snaphook, he let out a constant series of grunts that were accompanied by curt shakes of the head.

By the seventh time he shook his head, Janni chuckled out loud and put a hand on her second-in-command's arm to calm him down. "Buzz, man... I'm nervous enough as it is. Enough with the grunting, okay?"

"I'm tellin' you, this is nuts, Chief... look, I understand why you're doing it, but... it's just nuts! If we called the FEMA team, they would be here in-

"Let me tell you about FEMA, man. First, the governor needs to declare it a state of emergency, then he needs to call the Prez, then the Prez is gonna call the FEMA boys, then they need to pull a team together, then they need to gas up their trucks or whatever the fuck it is they're doing. Three to five hours if we're lucky. Seven if they're eating when they get the call. I can be down there in two minutes. Yeah?"

"You could be fuckin' chunky tomato soup in two minutes, Chief!" Buzz said and yanked the wire to show it had been attached safely to the snaphook. The yank had perhaps been a little too hard for what was needed, but it helped serve his point.

Janni turned around and observed the concerned look on Buzz's face. While they were watching each other in silence, one of the junior employees handed her a leather satchel with two first aid kits. "I need to be sure, Buzz," she said quietly as she put the satchel around her neck and her left shoulder. "All right. I'm done."

"Jesus, isn't there anything I could say that would make you change your mind?"

"No. Okay, buddy, I gotta go. You're in charge now. Slap it there and wish me luck," Janni said and put out her gloved hand.

Buzz stared at it like he didn't know whether to shake Janni's hand or punch her lights out so she wouldn't go ahead with her suicidal plan. In the end, he shook her hand and pulled her into a brief hug. "Good luck, Chief. Listen, you better get your ass back in one piece... I don't have the stomach for calling your family and telling them you're gone."

"I'll try. Let's see what happens," Janni said and moved the rarely-used chin strap down on her hard hat. After tightening it around her jaw, she went over to the advanced listening apparatus and checked that its own safety wire was taut. "I'll call you when I'm ready to receive the gizmo," she said and stepped up to the edge of the triangular hole.

Buzz gave her a thumbs-up but uttered a few mumbled words that sounded suspiciously like "This is fuckin' nuts!" Continuing to mouth various obscenities, he signaled the group of construction workers near them holding the two safety wires that they should tighten up so Janni could begin the descent.

Janni looked down into the pitch black hole and swallowed the bitter taste of nervousness that filled her throat. For the briefest of moments, her mind was trying to tell her that going down there was indeed nuts, but the thought of Melanie needing her was stronger than her own fears. Turning on the LED lamp on the hard hat, she gave Buzz a thumbs-up and began the slow process of climbing down into the hole.

It was deeper than it had appeared. From up top, she thought it may have been four or five feet deep, but it was closer to six, although the ground was rocky and uneven. The randomly created cavern only stretched out a few yards in each direction, but what appeared to be a narrow path went off on the left. The path looked no wider than thirty inches, but it was plenty for her to squeeze through if she had to, even with the canteen and the satchel.

She moved her head around in a steady sweep so the LED lamp could illuminate everything there was to see - which wasn't anything at all. Licking her lips, she reached for the radio on her new utility belt. "Chief Holbrooke for Buzz... I'm ready for the gizmo now. Careful, not too quick... the ground's got jagged edges everywhere, over." As she spoke, the cavern gave her voice an odd, muted quality.

'Ten-roger, Chief. Here it comes now, over,' Buzz answered on the radio though they were less than ten feet apart.

Soon, the advanced piece of electronics was lowered into the ground on the safety wire. Janni grabbed it to hold it steady while she clicked the On/Off button and took the metal probe off the hook. This time, a headset had been attached to the machine so it wouldn't contaminate the soundscape through its own output noises. "Chief Holbrooke for Buzz... you need to hold it where it is now. It won't fit on the ground, over."

'Roger that, Chief, over.'

"And kill the diesels. I got my really big ears on now, over and out."

'Kill the diesels, copy, Chief. Out.'

The faint tremor in the ground from the heavy machinery outside disappeared and left Janni seemingly in another world. Drawing a deep breath, she took off her gloves and stuffed them

down her rear pocket before she donned the headphones and began to swing the metal probe around like she had done previously.

This time, the machine picked up two clear signals at once. Two blips showed up on the readout when she held the probe at the entry to the narrow path that led away from the opening cavern. Nodding in satisfaction, she twisted a few knobs to maximize the recording volume for the later playback.

It didn't improve the strength of the blips, so she inched towards the crevice in the cavern wall. Holding the probe into the opening of the path, she was suddenly able to pick up first one, then a second female voice. They were faint, but they were there. Both were whimpering and moaning in pain.

Janni shook her head in disgust as she tried to concentrate on listening to what the machine picked up. The way the sound became muted from the tons of concrete all around her made it impossible for her to determine whether or not one of the voices belonged to Melanie.

"Just gimme a little more... Goddammit... just a little more... say something. Perhaps if I shouted, they would react," she mumbled, trying to poke the probe even further into the crevice.

Lowering the probe, she drew a deep breath. "Hello!" she shouted strongly. "Hello! Help is near! Can you hear me? Help is near!"

She quickly moved aside the headphones to pick up a response, but nothing came. Growling, she hurriedly put the headset back on and held up the probe. Then she noticed the readout had blanked out and was flashing red, undoubtedly a sign that she had exposed it to an overload of some kind through her shouting.

"Aw crap!" she said, thumping the expensive apparatus with her knuckles. "Fuck it... worthless piece of-"

She shook her head and reached for the radio. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz, over."

'I'm here, Chief. Was that you shouting, over?'

"Yeah, and I broke the fuckin' machine. Pull it up. It needs to be reset or something, but I don't got time for such fuckery now, over."

'All right, we'll pull you up, ov-'

"The fuck you will! I got two strong blips and I heard voices down here before the damn thing conked out. I'm moving further in. And don't say a Goddamned word, Buzz. If you try to pull me up, I'll rip you a new one. Over!"

The airwaves were filled by static for a few seconds before Buzz came back online. *'Ten-roger, Chief. Don't need a new one... we'll only pull up the machine. Over and out.'*

Moments later, the expensive listening device was pulled up through the triangular hole, leaving Janni behind to fight her battle the old-fashioned way. "It's time to suck in your gut, Janni," she mumbled as she put her gloves back on and inched over to the opening of the narrow path off to her left. It was only faintly lit up by the cone of light from her LED lamp which didn't help her nervousness at all.

Six feet into the narrow passage, a concrete boulder reached down from the ceiling and acted as an insurmountable obstacle. Janni let out a strong sigh of disappointment as she let the cone of light glide down the side of the boulder. The sigh turned to a surprised grunt when she saw it didn't reach all the way down - there was a twenty-inch gap down by the uneven floor.

Grunting again, she carefully went down onto her stomach and began to probe the gap with a gloved hand. There didn't seem to be any further obstacles beyond that boulder, a theory confirmed by the cone of light that was able to penetrate the darkness and illuminate the continuation of the narrow path on the other side when she held her head crooked.

"All right... now fuckin' what? I need to think," she mumbled, sitting back on her thighs. The metal canteen on her hip got in the way and she shoved it aside with a growl. A second later, she took it off her belt altogether. Working on autopilot while she was thinking, she unscrewed the cap and took a sip though she had only just started her journey.

The floor was uneven but not jagged which meant she should be able to slide under without risking too much. There were trapped survivors somewhere ahead of her, she was sure of that, but it was plain as day there was no way she would be able to drag two injured women back under that boulder.

Shaking her head, she reattached the canteen to her belt and reached for the radio. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz, over."

'Go ahead, Chief, over.'

"Do you have an approximate fix on my position? There's a big-ass boulder down here that I can get under all right, but others won't be able to, over."

'Roughly, Chief... unless the wire has snagged on something, over.'

Janni reached behind her and yanked the safety wire a couple of times. "Did you feel that, over?"

'We did, over.'

"Then the wire is clear. Where do you think I am, over?"

'About fifteen feet in from the hole, and you're going towards the street. I'm guessing you're getting close to where the apartment doors were, but... shit... which floor is anyone's guess, over.'

"Which floor I'm on isn't important now. All right. Keep tracking me. I'm depending on you to know where I am when the time comes to get back with the survivors. How much wire do I have left, over?"

'Two hundred feet, over.'

"Okay, that should be enough... I hope," Janni said with a hoarse chuckle. "I'll squeeze my ass under the boulder now. Over and out."

Putting the radio back on the belt, Janni licked her lips and rolled her shoulders to be ready for the next stage of her rescue mission. After taking the first aid satchel off and pushing it under the boulder, she drew a deep breath and began the slow, painstaking process of sliding under the massive boulder one frustrating inch at a time.

She chose to slide in on her back so she would be able to sit up almost at once instead of having to wait for her legs to come through as well. The ground wasn't too bad, but she still received numerous bumps, bangs and scrapes on her shoulders and butt. The coarse material of her pants withstood the punishment better than her flannel shirt did, and she could hear the soft fabric being torn a couple of times.

A different, and far worse, problem was the snaphook for the safety wire. The solid steel gnawed into her back right at her spine giving her all sorts of grief, but there was nothing she could do about it but clench her jaw and go on.

The underside of the boulder was only a few inches above her nose, and the way the LED lamp was angled meant the light was glaring into her eyes instead of showing her the way ahead. Halfway through, she came to an abrupt stop when her eyes fell on a *Keep Smilin'* sticker that flashed a manic grin right in her face.

"What the fuck?" she mumbled, moving her head to let the cone of light shine onto the surface of the boulder. She suddenly realized she was looking at a step from the staircase, only the wrong side up - or rather, the wrong side down.

A couple of neurons in her tired brain started talking to each other, and the memory of seeing the *Keep Smilin'* sticker on the upper side of a section of the staircase once upon a time when she had visited Melanie's mother flashed through her mind. "I'll be a son of a bitch," she mumbled. "Even when the world falls apart, Mr. Smiley lives on. Sheesh."

She chuckled briefly but the need for laughter soon left her. Drawing a deep breath, she resumed inching underneath the boulder that had turned out to be a section of the old staircase.

It seemed to take ages but only a few minutes went by during her crawl. The top of her hard hat eventually bumped against the first aid satchel and pushed it aside. From one moment to the next, the light stopped glaring in her eyes, and her first thought was that the LED lamp had given up the ghost - but then she realized the boulder-shaped section of the staircase she'd had in her face the whole time had given way to a new cavern.

She quickly pushed herself the rest of the way and moved up into a sitting position with her legs still suspended under the old staircase. She wanted to explore the cave but couldn't turn her head that much. Instead, she loosened the chin strap and turned the hard hat around to make the LED lamp do the work for her.

The new cave appeared to be similar to the first one that had been directly below the triangular hole, although it was not as tall. One major difference was the complete lack of natural light. The LED lamp had a hard time illuminating the opposite wall of the cavern, mostly because of the dust she had kicked up when she had come through the narrow gap, but also because of the fact that crushed concrete didn't reflect any light too well.

Grabbing the first aid satchel and putting it around her neck, she pulled her legs back and shuffled around so she could give the LED lamp the best chance to do its job. The cave wasn't tall enough for her to stand up straight which meant it had to be a shade over five feet.

Another black, L-shaped crevice moved off from the right of the cave. Sighing, Janni rubbed her weary face and took a step towards it. "Traipsin' around the Goddamned Underworld... fuck..." she mumbled while her trusty, old hard hat scraped along the roof of the cavern. "Like Goddamned Xena and Gabr-"

'Help!'

"-ielle..." Janni whispered in a voice that trailed off. She stared around the dark cave in a panic, trying to figure out where the voice could have come from. She whipped her head around this way and that to make the LED lamp shine on every surface, but no clue was presented to her. "Hello! Can you hear me? Help is near!" she shouted, but the concrete muted her voice to the point where it didn't carry further than her nose.

'Help! Is anyone there? Help!'

"I'm here!" Janni cried, but the sound still didn't carry far. "Oh, for fuck's sake!"

She opened her mouth to add another curse, but the sound of crying made her slam it shut. She cocked her head to listen in every direction and came to the conclusion that it had to come from further into the next, pitch black, L-shaped crevice. When the crying continued, she tried to recognize the voice. It could be Melanie's, she wasn't sure. "But there's only one voice now... not two," she croaked, clenching her fists nervously.

Her heart began to thump even harder in her chest as she inched towards the narrow crevice. Gulping hard, she squeezed herself past the first of the jagged edges.

The further Janni went into the L-shaped crevice, the narrower it got. The satchel with the first aid kits snagged constantly on the jagged edges of the wall, then the canteen on her hip got stuck on the wrong side of a crack and nearly caused her to lose her balance. Grunting, she took the canteen off her hip and relocated it to the front of the belt near the buckle.

By looking down at her feet, she could see that pebbles and small clumps of concrete rolled forward, indicating she was on a slope. Where it took her, she had no idea, but she knew the building didn't have a basement. At one point or another, she was certain to reach the ground floor which was at level with the sidewalk outside on the street.

The ceiling covering the next ten feet of the trail was so low she needed to crouch down and waddle through the gap like a pregnant guinea pig. At the exact wrong moment, her radio crackled to life on her belt. With the radio behind her and with the crevice so narrow, she couldn't put an arm back to answer it.

'Buzz Burczyk for the Chief. Buzz Burczyk for the Chief, over.'

"Not now, Goddammit! Buzz, you gotta work on your timing, man!" Janni croaked with her head held in a funny angle and her eyes firmly fixed on the back edge of the low ceiling. The odd walk was hard on her knees, and she counted the steps with labored breath until she was clear of the latest obstacle.

'Buzz Burczyk for the Chief, over!' Buzz said again with a clear panic creeping into his voice.

As soon as Janni was through the low, narrow part, she reached for her radio and stood up straight - but she had misjudged the height of the next cave. With an echoing CLANK, she whacked the top of her yellow hard hat against the jagged underside of the concrete above her. "Oh, for fuck's sake!" she roared, adjusting the chin strap that had been pulled askew.

'Buzz Burczyk for the Chief, over! Chief Holbrooke, can you hear me, over?'

Janni finally had the time and opportunity to press the button on the radio. "I hear you just fine, Goddammit... fuck, man, I'm kinda busy down here, ya know! Over!" she said angrily. While she spoke, she moved her head around to let the LED lamp illuminate the cave she had found herself in.

Like the others, it wasn't much to write home about. Concrete everywhere. Here and there, she could see twisted, jagged metal beams sticking out of the rubble that had undoubtedly been balusters like the one she had removed from the first hole.

'Sorry 'bout that, Chief. You have used eighty feet of the safety wire. How's your progress, over?'

"Slow and difficult. I'm on a down-slope tho' I got no clue where I'll end up. It's kinda dark and lonely down here, Buzz. Over."

On the floor, something reflected the cone from the LED lamp. Janni took in a sharp breath and inched towards whatever the item was. "Stand by... I may have found something," she said and put the radio back on the belt.

'Buzz standing by.'

Moving her head around, she soon found the item that had reflected the light. A lady's shoe. A bloody lady's shoe where a shiny brass buckle was the source of the reflection. With trembling hands, Janni reached for the shoe, but froze in place an inch away from it when the cone of light reflected something far more chilling.

Three inches from the shoe, a bloody foot wearing a torn pantyhose poked out of the loose rubble that formed the floor at that part of the cave. "Oh fuck," Janni breathed, moving the LED lamp up to reveal a lower leg covered in reams of blood and grime. Everything from the knee-joint up was crushed under a large piece of concrete. "Oh fuck me sideways... not what I wanted to find... not what I wanted to find at all," she croaked, wiping her brow with a trembling hand.

Taking a step back from the dead body, she clenched her teeth hard to stop them from chattering. Her stomach performed a series of ungraceful flip-flops, but she pressed a hand against it to take her mind off vomiting. Moving the light down, she picked up the shoe and began to study it. She didn't recognize it, and she was sure it wasn't one of Melanie's.

She put the shoe down and inched ahead though parts of her courage had deserted her and other parts were still debating whether or not to pack their bags and leave for a friendlier climate. It wasn't the first time she had seen a dead body - years before, someone had committed suicide at the construction site she had been working at by throwing himself off the ninth floor. The next morning, she had been the one to find the shattered corpse - but it was the first time there was a risk it could be someone she knew.

The gall slowly rose in her throat as she inched past the bloody leg and around the boulder that had crushed the person. At the far side, she came to an abrupt stop and tried to keep it all down - but she couldn't. Jerking back from the bloodied head whose eyes stared at Janni like getting killed had been her fault, she emptied the meager contents of her stomach all over the nearest boulder.

It wasn't long before the familiar, sour stench spread through the cavern adding to the already inhospitable conditions. "Aw, crap," she croaked, patting her entire belt for the canteen before she remembered she had moved it around to her buckle. Snatching it off the belt, she rinsed her mouth carefully and spit it out in the mess she had made. Once her mouth was fresh, she drank several long swigs to rinse her throat.

She sighed deeply as she took the radio off her belt. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz, over."

'Buzz on the line, Chief. Any news, over?'

"Yeah. Bad news. I've found a dead woman," Janni said and inched around the corner. The bloodied head was obviously still in the same place, but Janni felt she owed it to the unknown woman. Clenching her jaw, she studied the remains more carefully. "It's an older woman. Maybe late sixties. Over," she croaked through her teeth.

'Roger that, Chief. The Sheriff says there are four people unaccounted for from this block. Miss Melanie Sinclair, thirty-three. Mrs. Angela Sinclair, fifty-nine. Mrs. Abigail Matzon, sixty-seven. Mr.- well, that doesn't matter since you've found a woman. Over.'

The corners of Janni's mouth twitched hard upon hearing Buzz casually relaying Melanie's name and age, and she had to wipe her sweaty brow to keep the beads of perspiration away from her eyes. "It must be Mrs. Matzon, over," she croaked, moving further on from the dead body.

'I'll make a note of it and inform the Sheriff, over.'

Janni keyed the radio again, but lost her train of thought. She blinked a few times before she decided it hadn't been important. "That's it for now, Buzz. Over and out."

After she had put away the radio, she grimaced but decided to move on from the body. "I wonder if she was the blip that went missing... no. She must have died instantly," she mumbled as she went along the wall.

Four feet later, she came to a stop and let out a long sigh. Moving around, she tore off her right shirtsleeve up to her elbow and placed it tenderly across the late Abigail Matzon's open, accusing eyes.

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Janni continued moving forward through the pitch black mess she found herself in, though it was with heavy steps and a heavier heart. She was running low on courage and spirit, and not even the frequent sips she took from her canteen could replenish her tank. For each sliding inch she moved ahead, the image of finding Melanie in a similar - or worse - state to the old woman grew larger and larger in her mind's eye.

It didn't help she needed to navigate a concrete maze with jagged edges that were just waiting for her to get too close. She had already done so several times, and her shoulders and elbows stung from the unwanted contact. She could feel blood trickling down her right forearm that had become unprotected after she had sacrificed her shirt, but even though she was still carrying the satchel with the first aid kits, she didn't want to waste any of it on her own needs.

Her internal compass told her she was still moving downwards but perhaps less so than before. When she tried to kick at a pebble, it moved ahead a few feet but stopped on its own unlike the first time she had tried it.

Coming to a halt, she let the cone of light sweep across a few surfaces ahead of her. Everything was the same as it had been the whole time - concrete, concrete and more concrete. And dust.

"And death," she whispered, revisiting the gruesome sight of Mrs. Matzon's face that had been twisted in death, and her eyes that had shone with unbridled fear. "Ain't dead people supposed to look relaxed? Like they're sleeping?" she mumbled, stumbling forward.

"Melanie is so beautiful when she's sleeping. Not a line on her face. Oh God, those gently parted, kissable lips... and when she wakes up and smiles at me... that gorgeous way she narrows her eyes when she sees me watching her... tell me, what the fuck do I have to live for if I find her dead body down here?!"

Janni came to a stop and let out a deep sigh. "And now I'm talking to myself. Great. I've lost it. Janni Holbrooke, keep this up and you'll be explorin' a rubber cell pretty fuckin' soon. Ain't this going craptastically well?!"

Shaking her head in frustration over herself, she carried on her rescue mission that looked more pointless by the minute. Every square inch of the walls, floor and ceiling around her was the same, dark-gray concrete. Ever since she had run across the *Keep Smilin'* sticker, there hadn't been a splash of color anywhere - save for the crimson blood that pooled around Mrs. Matzon.

A minuscule tremor trickled through the floor of the passage directly under the soles of her workboots. She stopped with a jerk and bent down to put her hand on the crushed concrete she was walking on in the feeble attempt to analyze something that had already left her behind. Furrowing her brow, she reached for the radio. "Chief Holbrooke, Chief Holbrooke for Buzz, over."

'Buzz reading you loud and clear. Have... have you found-'

"No. I have a question. I felt a small tremor just now... was that you guys? Did you move one of the heavy vehicles, over?"

'Not that I know of, but I'm up at the entry hole. Let me check. Stand by.'

"Chief Holbrooke standing by," Janni said and lowered the radio. While she waited for a reply, she turned her head slowly to let the LED lamp shine its light onto the walls of the hellhole she found herself in. Everything still looked the same with yet another dark crevice leading off to the left. "Why do I get the feeling I'm walkin' around in a big, fat, fuckin' circle down here?" she mumbled, pushing her hard hat back so she could wipe her brow.

'Buzz for Chief Holbrooke, over,' her second-in-command's voice said from the radio.

"Go ahead, Buzz, over."

'It wasn't us, Chief. We've just had an update from the USGS. We may be in for some aftershocks, over.'

Janni slammed her eyes shut and let out a long groan. "Yippie!" she said with her eyes closed. Keying the radio, she moved it up to her mouth. "Just what I've always wanted, Buzz! I've been missing a little excitement in my life! Chief Holbrooke, out!"

Shaking her head, she put the radio on the belt and tried to zoom in on the newest dark crevice she had discovered. It appeared to have a flat floor, almost like it was one of the slabs of concrete that had come down on its belly.

There was something odd about the flat floor, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was until she took a tumble down a tall, unsighted step and landed on her hands and knees on the very piece of concrete she had wanted to explore. "Oh, you... motherfuckin'... piece of... owch! My fuckin' knees..." she groaned, rubbing her wrists and her legs.

There was a very distinctive black and white pattern on the floor - not quite a checkerboard, but closer to a mosaic; whatever the name, it was a pattern typically found on the ground floor of many stairwells in older buildings. "Holy fuck," she mumbled, wiping away the evil brown dust and running her hand over the surface that was far smoother than the rest of the concrete had been until that point. "This is the original floor... at the foot of the stairwell... Jesus, that's a piece of glass from one of the double doors right there," she continued, snatching up a glass fragment that sparkled like a diamond in the light from the LED lamp.

'Chief! Chief! The seismograph is going apeshit up here! Get your ass out of there now!' Buzz's voice cried from the radio, spooking Janni so badly she dropped the fragment.

A split second later, two things happened at once. First, the entire zone she was in started to rumble; then, she heard a woman screaming not fifteen feet from her position - but she had no idea from which direction the scream came. Groaning out loud, Janni snatched the radio and pressed the button.

Before she could establish contact with Buzz or the screaming woman, the first real aftershock rolled over the downtown area of McKendrick and sent a smattering of debris down upon Janni's hard hat. Above, the massive slabs of concrete groaned out loud like a pack of wounded animals. One of them crumbled and shifted down towards her.

"Oh, fuck!" was all she had time to say before the smattering of debris turned into a hailstorm. Crying out her terror of being smack-bang in the middle of a strong aftershock, she dove for cover and rolled up next to the tall step she had fallen off before. Pointy debris poked her in the chest and the gut, but she didn't have time to sweep them away.

The ground shook and trembled to such a degree underneath her stomach that she felt like she had fallen into a meat grinder. Panting in shock, she forgot she wore the hard hat and instinctively reached up to cover her head with her arms.

As the aftershock rumbled on and on, her lower back and legs were covered in concrete pebbles from the ceiling that crumbled more and more. Larger fragments rained down upon her, tore

holes in her flannel shirt and drew blood from her skin. Insane amounts of the evil brown dust was kicked up all around her, creating an inescapable cloud of death.

A bad case of rolling thunder came closer and ended with the loudest thunderclap she had ever experienced. It sounded like it had been created right next to her head, and it had - it was a slab of concrete breaking in two which permanently sealed the dark crevice she had only just come through. Her left elbow was a mere eight inches from being crushed.

Little by little, the rumbling dissipated. When silence returned to the cavern, the brown dust gave up the frenzied dance and fell limply down onto the ground. A ghostly light shone up from the LED lamp which had been buried in several inches of concrete pebbles. Next to the light, a pair of immobile, bleeding fingers stuck out between the jagged debris.

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CHAPTER 4

The hands of time moved on relentlessly. An hour could have gone by, or an eon, but in reality it was only a few minutes before the pile of debris began to shift. First a little, then a lot - and then Janni let out a gasping cry and jerked around, sending scores of little pebbles flying all over.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, I'm still alive," she croaked, trying to shove the debris off her. She was aching all over from the rude treatment. Her lungs and throat were sore and raspy from the dust, her joints ached like there was no tomorrow, and her face was contorted in pain as she tried to sit up underneath the quarry she had found herself snoozing in.

She shoved more pebbles away from her legs, but the gestures sent up strong spikes of pain from her bleeding fingers. "Ouch, fuck that," she croaked, looking down at her hands. She still wore the sturdy glove on her right hand, but the left had gone missing somewhere in the gravel, leaving behind five bloody, evil-looking fingers and a whole row of skinned knuckles.

"At least my LED lamp is still working, but... but..." - she patted her belt all the way around - "I've lost my radio. Unbe-fuckin'-lievable. Great. And now I'm talking to myself again. Man..."

Hissing from the pain that shot up from her injured hand, she moved the satchel with the first aid kits over her shoulder and unzipped it. The thick glove made it impossible for her to find the proper items in the satchel so she took it off and put it down next to her. After finding a disinfectant spray, a stack of bandages and a safety clamp, she put them in her lap and zipped the satchel again.

She looked around in the dusty darkness that surrounded her. Two of the walls had shifted closer to her, the ceiling had developed a long, snaking crack that was just dying to dump its contents on her head, and a thick layer of concrete pebbles had covered the black-and-white mosaic on the

floor. "Just great," she said despondently as she took the cap off the spray and gave it a little shake to prepare it.

Almost as an afterthought, she reached for her canteen to rinse her wounds and her mouth of the dust she had inhaled. She knew at once something was wrong. Her fingers were coated in a cool substance that her tired mind identified as blood for the first two seconds. But blood should be warm, not cool, which meant the canteen had suffered a fatal impact.

She groaned out loud and took the metal tool off her belt. Sure enough, it had a large dent in it that had caused the lower end to separate, which in turn had caused the water to splash all over her pants and the floor. She had worn it near her buckle, so it had to have been her own weight that had caused the canteen to be crushed against the concrete floor. "Fuckin' typical," she said and threw it into the furthest corner to get the miserable thing out of her sight.

Instead of continuing with the first aid kit, she took her hard hat off with her good hand and shone the LED lamp down at herself to see what else had been ruined by the aftershock. Beyond her injured hand, her flannel shirt had been torn to shreds, and her torso and limbs were covered in what appeared to be a hundred-and-one cuts and scrapes. Her undershirt still held up surprisingly well, even if it did have a jagged cut diagonally across her stomach. The vintage wristwatch on the leather band on her left arm had been painted red by a few drops of blood from her hand, but it was still tick-tocking merrily.

Some of the cuts and scrapes were bleeding, but most were not. She found one abrasion on her left shoulder that bled more than others - she had mashed it against the coarse side of the step while she had been exposed to the aftershock. "Aw fuck it... if it's scarred my Chakram tattoo, I'm gonna be so pissed... really fuckin' pissed off!" she grumbled, gently lifting the remains of the shirt to look inside.

Just to be on the safe side, she tested all her joints to see if they would still work. Her knees ached, but that came from whacking them against the hard surface twice in rapid succession. Her injured hand hurt like hell no matter what she did or how she held it. She had a crimp in her neck from tensing up so badly, but she was pleased she even had a neck after all she had been through.

Around her, the silence was deafening. When a sound did finally come, she wished it had stayed away, because it was typically produced by one of the slabs of concrete moaning, or a pebble falling down from the nasty crack in the ceiling. All in all, the signs indicated she could be living on borrowed time.

She put the hard hat on her knees so the LED lamp would shine on her hands. With great care - and a clenched jaw - she dealt with the disinfectant spray and the clean bandages. When she attached the safety clamp to finish the procedure, she realized it was on perhaps a bit too tight, but she didn't want to start over. It was better the bandage was too tight than too loose.

Sighing, she put the hard hat on and tightened the chin strap with her good hand. She moved her head around and followed the interior of the cave she was in. Solid ceiling apart from the crack,

solid floor, solid wall, solid wall, solid wall - and suddenly a dark gap that hadn't been there before.

Janni cocked her head and tried to remember if she had explored that crevice yet. She couldn't remember a damn thing apart from her name, so she took a deep breath and made to get up.

She was stuck.

"What the fuck?" she croaked, looking behind her. Trying again, she came to the same conclusion - she was stuck fast. "What the fuck?! I'm trapped... fuck no, I'm trapped! Fuck-fuck-fuck, I'm trapped... how the fuck can I be trapped?!" she cried, trying to yank herself free from the unseen enemy that held her tight with the strength of a pre-historic monster.

She tore and tore and tore at whatever it was that was pinning her down. She tore so hard she lost her breath and fell down on her aching knees which caused her to let out a pained groan. For each time she tried to pull away, something cut into her gut with such force she couldn't even get a lungful of the polluted air.

Gasping and moaning, she tried to twist away from the wall behind her but she had no success whatsoever. "What kind of sick fuckery is this!? One hand... two hands... one leg... other leg!" she cried, moving all her limbs to find the culprit. "I'm not trapped... but I am! Oh... fuck... oh, wait a fuckin' minute! The safety wire! The fuckin' safety wire! Oh fuck it, the fuckin' safety wire!"

With only one hand available for the job, it was almost impossible for her to get the buckle of the heavy-duty utility belt to release. She may have had more success if she'd had long fingernails, but long fingernails had been in short supply with her ever since she had been a tomboy tyke.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" she roared, giving up the impossible task. Instead, she moved her good hand behind her back and began to fumble with the snaphook. She nicked, bumped and scraped every single digit more than once, but she was finally able to get the snaphook holding the quadruple-core safety wire to release.

When she was free, she spun around to let the LED lamp shine its cone of dusty light onto the wire. It was pinned down under what had to be a ton of concrete, not far from where she had rested her left elbow during the aftershock.

Janni drew her lips back in a grimace and instinctively pulled her elbow closer to her. "Fuck me sideways," she croaked, watching the shiny snaphook reflect the light. She moved her head up to let the cone of light glide up the wall ahead of her. The path was blocked for good - now she really was trapped.

Sighing, she rubbed her brow and moved away from the impenetrable obstacle. Her rescue mission wasn't over, and it wouldn't be as long as she stood there doing nothing. The moment she shone the light at the dark crevice on the opposite wall of the tiny cave, a pair of blue diamonds several feet off the ground reflected the light.

Janni furrowed her brow. Although she wasn't an expert on precious gems, she knew for a fact that diamonds had no business being down there. For one thing, the little, glittery rocks needed incredible pressure to be formed. It also took thousands of years - so what was a pair of diamonds doing looking straight back at her? And why did they appear to be blinking?

All that had taken place in the first second. When the blue diamonds blinked again and moved towards her, Janni let out a crying, incoherent "Fu-buh...!" and took a jerking step back. She didn't have time to see where she put her feet with the inevitable result that she ended up flat on her butt on the uneven floor.

The blue diamonds kept going and even reached out for her. Janni covered her head in her hands and rolled herself up into a terrified, little ball to get away from the terror. "Go away! Go away! You're not real! I musta bumped my head! You're just... go away!" she cried, jerking back from the hideous creature that stood above her.

"But, honey..." a familiar, though croaky, voice said. A sound akin to sobbing came from the hideous creature that tried to hobble closer to the fallen woman.

Down on the ground, Janni jerked around and stared wide-eyed at the supposed cave monster. The cone of light from the LED lamp started from a bare, swollen foot and moved up past a pair of torn, bloodied blue jeans, further up past a torn sweater in an Icelandic design, and finally up to an indescribably filthy face that was the home of a bruised chin, a scraped cheek and a pair of gorgeous blue eyes that shone with equal measures of pain and sublime confusion.

"Melanie?" Janni croaked, wiping her eyes with her good hand. When the creature above just sobbed incoherently, she got on her feet - ignoring the ache that shot up from her abused knees and butt - and put out her arms. "Oh... oh... Melanie, you... you're alive... God, you're alive!"

A strong wave of dizziness brought on by the emotional and physical exhaustion swept over Janni and nearly made her lose her balance all over again. Jerking forward before it was too late, she swept her arms around the other woman and pulled her in for a tight hug. Up close, there was no doubt it was her Melanie, and she buried her face in the filthy sweater that despite the dust, the blood and the perspiration still held Melanie's unique scent. "Oh, God... Melanie... you're alive..." she croaked as she felt Melanie's longer arms hug her back.

Melanie let out a sob and snuggled into Janni's strong arms. "Just barely... I've nev- never... been so scared in my life. We fell and fell and fell... I c- can't believe you're h- here... I love you so much... I love you so much, Janni... don't leave me now."

"I won't. I love you too. I love you with all my heart," Janni croaked, once more feeling endless tears running down her cheeks. They were filthy, they were tired, they were battered and bruised, but her heart screamed at her to connect with Melanie in a far more intimate way. Moving on instinct alone, she got up on tip-toes and claimed the taller woman's lips in a strong, stormy kiss that left them bruised and winded - but relieved they had finally found each other.

"Oh, Janni... I was so afraid I'd never get to kiss you again... or even see you again," Melanie croaked, coming back down towards her partner's mouth for a second helping of the succulent lips. The second kiss was an easier affair meant to smooth out their frazzled nerves. It didn't quite do the trick, but it was a good start.

"It needed a bigger quake to keep us apart, honey," Janni croaked, but the joke fell flat. A lightheadedness swept over her from the strain, the shock and the kissing, and she began to sway. "Oh, I... I better sit down before I fall. God, what a day this has been," she continued, moving closer to the nearest wall although she never let go of Melanie.

"Oh, w- wait! I c- can't move so fast, Janni," Melanie croaked through clenched teeth. "I think I broke my h- heel... or my... my ankle... in the f- fall."

"I'm so sorry, honey," Janni said and slowed down at once. She helped Melanie over to the wall, but the tall woman was reluctant to go over there. "Are... are you all right beyond that? Your ribs? Your spine? Fingers and wrists? Have you bumped your head at all?"

Melanie let out a deep sigh and ran a hand through her filthy hair that had turned an ungainly brownish-gray from the dust she had been exposed to. "I d- don't know. I think I'm fine... I just hurt all over..."

"Just hang on to life, baby... help is near. My men will... I hope they'll come looking for us. No... I'm sure they will," Janni said and gave Melanie's sides a loving squeeze.

Melanie nodded and leaned down to kiss Janni's lips again. "Let's hope so. I'm so tired and thirsty. My mom is hurt worse than I am. She's in the next-"

"Your- your mom?!" Janni said and jerked upright just as she had found a spot that wasn't too uneven. She grabbed hold of Melanie's arms and once more held her tight. "You were with your mom... and she made it?"

"Yes, but she's hurting really badly. She's through there," Melanie said and pointed at the dark crevice in the wall.

"I need to see her," Janni said and turned around. She tried to help Melanie walk into the next cave by hooking a hand under the taller woman's arm, but their injuries were mirrored so her bad hand was at Melanie's bad side and thus not much use to either of them. "Aw, shit," she croaked, moving behind Melanie instead.

Melanie furrowed her filthy brow in puzzlement. "Now what are we doing?" she said, trying to look over her shoulder.

"Just lean on me, baby... just lean on me," Janni said and wrapped her good arm around Melanie's midsection. It looked clumsy, but Janni didn't mind too much. Not only could she have a firm grip on her partner, she could bury her face into the long back in front of her and inhale the natural scent she loved so much.

The next cave had a far lower ceiling and Melanie needed to crouch down to fit. Because of her lesser height, there was still plenty of space above Janni's yellow hard hat, and she made a mental note of giving Melanie her hat as soon as her hands were free.

Melanie's mother, Angela Sinclair, was lying flat on her back on a jacket to stop the cold from seeping into her bones. Another rolled-up jacket protected the back of her head, but it didn't stop the older woman from trying to focus on the two younger people who hobbled into the cavern.

"Mom, you'll never guess who I ran into out there," Melanie said, patting Janni's arm around her waist.

Angela chuckled but it led to a cough that seemed to rip through her. "Oh, I can guess, all right... I heard Janni cuss and swear before. Hello, Janni. I can't tell you how glad I am to see you." The older woman spoke in a voice that didn't sound like it usually did. Instead of the vibrant tones Angela had always shared with her daughter, her voice had a flatter, almost strained quality to it.

Janni stepped out from behind Melanie with a worried look on her face. Ever since she had started dating Melanie, Angela had had a needle in her for not being quite good enough for her daughter. That she swore too much, made inappropriate jokes at inappropriate times and generally behaved like an uneducated, permanently adolescent hick. None of that came across in Angela's voice now.

The cone of light from the LED lamp revealed a face that was as dirty as her daughter's, and a still body wearing clothes littered with minor cuts and abrasions like they all were. Angela was wearing pantyhose, a gray skirt and a blouse that had been green once upon a time.

"Hello, Mrs. Sinclair. I wish we could have met under better circumstances," Janni said and reached up to loosen her chin strap. Once it was free, she took off her hard hat and handed it to Melanie. "Here, baby... so you won't scrape your beautiful head on the ceiling."

"Oh... thank you," Melanie said and put it on at once.

"You're welcome. Hey... I've stuck a little picture of you inside the sweatband so I always have you close," Janni said with a tired grin.

"Awww... I didn't know that. That's so sweet of you," Melanie said quietly. She hobbled over to an outcrop and sat down. Turning her head back towards her mother and Janni, it was clear to see she was unaccustomed to wearing a hat with an integrated light.

"Yikes, girl!" Janni cried, shielding her eyes from the cone of light. Melanie quickly moved it away, but Janni saw golden bars and glittery stars for several seconds afterwards. Chuckling, she shuffled over to her partner once she could see enough. "You can keep the hat, but perhaps I should hold the light...?" she said and pulled the elastic band with the LED lamp off the hard hat.

Down on the floor, Angela coughed again, but when the small fit was over, she let out a tired chuckle. "I'll say. That's quite an accessory. Should work wonders on the runways in Milan or Paris..."

Janni grinned at the joke while she tried to wrap the band around her mop of hair. It worked to a certain extent, but it was too tight and gave her a headache almost at once. She slipped it off and held it in her hand instead.

The tension in the air was tangible. The initial elation of hooking up had been replaced by a growing worry it might have been for naught. At no time had Janni heard Buzz Burczyk and the men working on digging further into the concrete pyramid. Why, she didn't know, but she didn't like it a bit. *'Perhaps they think we all got squashed before?'* she thought, moving the cone of light across the ceiling. Unlike the slab in the previous room she had been in, the roof was in one piece and looking fairly solid - that was something at least.

'Perhaps they've all packed up and headed for home. I did say we would be ready in time for supper,' Janni thought, aiming the light down at her trusty, old wristwatch. The hands had moved around to nearly three o'clock, the time when Melanie had said she would be out at the bungalow. She sighed, for once lost for words.

Melanie picked up on her partner's uncertainty and rose from the outcrop. She hobbled over to Janni and pulled her into a warm hug. "Baby," she whispered, caressing Janni's ear with a filthy, battered index finger, "if this is where it ends... please know that I love you. I h- had... I had big plans... for us, you know."

Janni sighed even deeper and reciprocated the hug. "This isn't the end, Melanie. It doesn't end here... you hear me? It doesn't end here. We've got years ahead of us... I wanna grow old with you."

"I wish we could. We're going to die down here," Melanie said quietly. She let out a sigh that turned into a sob, but she did nothing to stop it. Leaning down, she rested her forehead on Janni's strong shoulder and began to cry. Their cheeks touched tenderly while they held each other's hands tight.

A strange gasp from down on the ground made Melanie and Janni separate and look at Angela. The older woman had raised a hand and pressed it down on her chest.

"Mom?" Melanie said hobbled toward the prone woman. "Mom, are you all right?"

"I w- I couldn't breathe... I stopped br- breathing for a little while... I d- didn't breathe!" Angela croaked, prompting Janni to hurry over there with the light.

Crouching down, Janni began a thorough inspection of Angela's limbs. "Pardon me, Mrs. Sinclair, but it's necessary," she said when her patient hissed from the unexpected contact.

Angela's left side was far more bruised and bloodied than the rest of her, and the older woman moaned in pain when Janni patted every last limb she could find. There was some blood on the skirt and the blouse that didn't appear to stem from abrasions, but all in all, it was consistent with the injuries Janni and Melanie had suffered.

"I feel dizzy," Angela said in a voice that had turned markedly slurred since the last time she had spoken.

Melanie let out a shocked gasp and knelt down to be close to her mother. She cried out when her own injured ankle sent a tendril of fiery pain up through her leg, and she had to shuffle around to sit on her rear instead.

Janni rubbed her face repeatedly. "It's not an external injury that's causing this... it's gotta be an internal one. Internal bleeding. Maybe you're hemorrhaging in your abdominal cavity? Or maybe you've busted your spleen or liver... Mrs. Sinclair, do you have trouble breathing now?"

"N- no..." Angela said in a strained voice that made Melanie reach out and grab her hand. "No, I d- don't really feel any p- pain now... just a little dizziness. It's getting better, b- but... but I feel... sometimes, I get... oh, hot stabs from my lower chest... or st- stomach. I d- don't know... which."

"Oh God, mom..." Melanie said and clutched her mother's hand to her cheek.

"Hot stabs?" Janni said and moved the light up so she could get a look at Angela's face. It had always struck her how strong the family resemblance was between Angela and her daughter. She was twenty-six years older and thirty pounds heavier, but they shared so many features it was uncanny at times. They had the same brow, the same blue eyes, the same cheekbones, the same nose. The only major difference was that Angela's hair had turned salt-and-pepper in recent times.

The thought that Melanie would still be gorgeous when she reached her mother's age flashed through Janni's mind and made her smirk. Now wasn't the time for making grand plans for the future. "Honey, has your mother had episodes like this while you've been here?"

"No," Melanie croaked, shaking her head which made her dusty hair sweep into the cone of light and create an odd pattern on the wall behind them. She clutched her mother's hand to her face like she was afraid she would lose her if she let go.

"Mrs. Sinclair, do you know if you've hit your head?"

"I d- don't think so... no," Angela said and furrowed her brow.

Janni sighed. "If only we had some water," she said and rubbed her brow again.

"Don't w- worry about me, dear... I f- feel better now," Angela croaked and gave her daughter's hand a little squeeze. "I d- don't know what that was... but... I feel better now."

"Thank God," Melanie said and kissed the back of her mother's hand. A brief smile flashed across her lips when she looked over at Janni, but it didn't last long as her injured ankle sent another tendril of fire up her leg. She hissed in pain and tried to find a better position for the throbbing limb.

"Baby, sit still," Janni said and unzipped the first aid satchel. "I'll try to wrap your ankle. I'm... I'm afraid it's gotta hurt like a motherf- uh... like a really bad thing."

Melanie chuckled through clenched teeth at Janni's quick save. Nodding, she moved her ankle out and swept aside her torn, bloodied jeans to make room for the bandage.

While Janni shook the disinfectant spray and delivered a healthy dose of the cooling fluid onto the crimson ankle to clean it, Melanie closed her eyes and leaned her head back. "Mom, remember when we got lost at sea once?" she said to take her mind off what went on below. "When I was a little girl and we borrowed uncle Bill's sailing boat for a Sunday adventure? You, me and Dad."

"I remember," Angela said and let out a small cough. "Your father... bless him... boasted about having skills like the Captain of the Love Boat... and then he misread the compass and got us all lost in the Pacific..."

"Hopelessly lost," Melanie added quietly.

Janni looked up from her job of wrapping the ankle. She smiled at her brave patient who had barely hissed despite the evil-looking, swollen limb.

"Mmmm", Angela continued, "and we had to call the coast guard. When we finally came back to port, my brother William almost threw up from laughing so much... and I never saw your father more embarrassed."

"I had nightmares for years. I've never set foot on a sailing boat again. But we made it home in one piece, didn't we?" Melanie looked down at Janni and allowed a small smile to crease her lips. The two women reached out for each other and gave the offered hand a squeeze.

Janni finished wrapping the ankle. She understood that Melanie was fishing for moral support, but she couldn't get herself to fib and say they would be just peachy when the evidence pointed to an end result that could, potentially, be a tragic one. Attaching the safety clamp, she caressed the filthy foot and leaned back on her thighs. "So... how's that?" she said, offering her partner a smile.

"Much better... thank you so much."

"You're welcome. I have a horror story from my childhood too," she said and gave Melanie's hand another squeeze. "It involves a rocking chair and the middle finger on my right hand. When I had just turned eight, I decided that I wanted to see if my granddad's rocking chair could crack a walnut. It could. It could also crack a bone in my middle finger that I didn't get out of the way

fast enough. It was one of those long, hot summers, you know, and I had to wear a cast for weeks. I couldn't climb trees or anything. And... well... I guess not much has changed, eh?" she said and held up her bandaged hand.

"You always were a big kid," Melanie said with a trembling chin. "I guess that's why we're such a great team. You lift me up, and... and I try to temper your exuberance."

Janni slid over and placed a tiny kiss on Melanie's lips. "Yeah, huh? And we always meet in the middle. You're right."

Melanie's chin began to tremble for real, but it was clear she tried to keep a firm grip on the last straws of hope and optimism. Reaching out, she pulled Janni in for a stronger kiss while she held onto her mother's hand. "We're not going to get out of this one, are we?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Janni said in a matching, sincere whisper. "I honestly don't know. I'm not gonna roll over and let the Reaper claim me, that's a Goddamned fact!"

"Language, dear," Angela said.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sinclair. But it's still a fact."

When they separated from the hug and the kiss, Janni reached up to wipe away a few tears that trickled down Melanie's cheeks - not that it helped much with all the filth and grime they wore as involuntary makeup. "Honey, what actually happened here? I mean, after we spoke over the phone...?"

Melanie cleared her throat and moved her mother's hand down into her lap. "Well, what actually happened? After we spoke, I put on my jacket and got ready to leave. Mom and I wanted to make a special pastry for my birthday but the carton of cream we had had turned sour."

"And I... I..." Angela started to say, but had to break off to cough a few times. "I asked if I could come along. The c- convenience store has an illogical layout, but I knew exactly where the cream is... was..."

Melanie nodded in the darkness. "We tumbled end over end all the way down from the fourth floor. We had only just made it out onto the landing when the earthquake hit. We tried... God, we really tried to get back inside, but the staircase had already begun to oscillate so hard we couldn't stay erect. Then ev- everything collapsed and w- we ended up here. W- we actually rode the top of the landing like a surf board... if we hadn't, we would have been crushed underneath it." Revisiting the chilling events was visibly too much for Melanie who broke out in a strong shiver that rippled through her body.

"It's all right, baby," Janni said and ran her hand up and down Melanie's long back to comfort her.

"We ended up h- here... and we've been here the whole time," Melanie continued, looking back at her partner.

"Where are we, anyway?" Angela asked from the floor.

"Well," Janni said, shifting her position to push away a pebble that had begun to gnaw into her butt, "we're actually down near the glass double doors. The cavern where Melanie found me before is what's left of the entrance itself. The mosaic's on the floor."

"The writing's on the wall," Melanie mumbled and broke out into another shiver.

"Whassat, honey?" Janni said, but didn't get an answer. "So... you fell down the entire stairwell... and somehow, you must have slipped through gaps and cracks in the sections of the staircase before they were fused together, because... well, they're all on top of you. We're at the bottom of a big-ass pyramid. Pardon my French, Mrs. Sinclair."

Angela coughed a few times, but turned her head towards Janni. "D- do you know what's happened to my apartment? Is it all gone?"

"Not as such, Mrs. Sinclair, but your front door is history. I think I found it near the foot of the pile when I was upstairs. I got a glimpse inside the hallway, and... well, for starters, the mirror has fallen down."

"That mirror belonged to my mother," Angela said in a downcast voice.

"I'm sorry. And I'm really, really sorry to say this, but I'm a hundred percent certain the building will be red-tagged... that means it's to be torn down."

"Oh, no!" Melanie said, giving her mother's hand a squeeze.

"Uh... after the apartments have been emptied, of course," Janni added in a hurry. "It's just far too risky to even contemplate rebuilding the stairwell alone. Everything has been shaken loose, and it's unstable and there must be structural damage all over the place... no."

Angela coughed again and let out a deep sigh. "Homeless. Not the way I wanted to spend my later years. Oh... what does it matter, anyway. Look at us... we're caught in a death trap. How long do we have before the air runs out?"

Melanie leaned down to give her mother a kiss on the forehead. "At least we're still together. All three of us," she whispered.

"I know this isn't the best time," Janni said, wiping her brow with a hand that had suddenly begun to tremble from listening to the depressing topic, "but who was Mrs. Matzon?"

"Has Mrs. Matzon been rescued?" Melanie said and looked up in a hurry.

"No. I found her... she was dead. Crushed."

Melanie bared her teeth in a horrified grimace, and she gave her mother's hand an extra squeeze. "Oh, God... she was on the stairs the same time as us. Except she was d- down here... she had just come in. You... you found her?"

"Mmmm," Janni said, nodding. The ghastly sight of Mrs. Matzon's wide open eyes came to her, and she broke out in a shiver. "For a moment, I thought she was you. I... aw, shit. I've never been so frightened. I puked all over the floor back there when I saw her bloody face."

"Oh, honey," Melanie said and pulled her partner in for a sideways hug.

A minuscule tremble was felt in the rocky, uneven floor. It hardly topped the tremors created by the garbage truck driving by their bungalow on Tuesday mornings, but it was enough to make the three women utter a collective gasp and clam up. They stared at each other with bated breath while Janni let the cone of light from the LED lamp sweep across the roof to see if any cracks had been formed.

Just when Janni opened her mouth to call off the alarm, a stronger tremble rolled through the cavern, creating the same rumble they had all heard earlier in the day - akin to a loaded freight train rolling past.

"Oh God, we're gonna die now," Melanie croaked and grabbed Janni's good hand so hard she nearly crushed it between her longer fingers.

The rumble came and went within a matter of seconds, but it was more than enough for Janni, Melanie and Angela. When it left their area for good, their breathing came in hard, explosive bursts that touched on hyperventilating.

One or two pebbles fell out of the ceiling and dropped down onto the hard hat that Melanie still wore over her grayish-brown locks. Other pebbles rained down upon Janni and gave her injured hand a fair whack, causing her to wince and hiss in pain. "Oh, fuck it... I think we made it through another one," she said hoarsely, clenching her jaw to fight the throbbing pain that shot up into her lower arm.

"Well, I'm still here," Angela said, reaching for her daughter's hands.

Melanie took them at once and gave them a little shake. "Oh, Mom, what are we gonna do... how long will our luck hold up?"

The despondency in Melanie's voice was so thick it could almost be cut with a knife. Janni felt the same knife being buried hilt-deep into her back over the frustrating fact that she was utterly helpless. There was nothing she wouldn't do, but there was nothing she could do that would help her partner and Mrs. Sinclair. "My men will get us out of here... I know they will," she said through clenched teeth. "They're good men. Buzz Burczyk will beat 'em into shape... they'll come."

"But will we be alive then?" Melanie said.

"Listen to me, they'll come!" Janni said strongly. The words had barely left her lips before she knew she had acted like a douchebag. The last thing she wanted to do was to hurt Melanie, but that was exactly what she had done speaking so vehemently. Closing her eyes, she felt a strong sense of guilt sweep over her. "Oh, baby, I'm... I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be a bitch," she croaked.

A few seconds went by before Melanie answered, but she did so by reaching over and taking Janni's good hand in her own. "I never think of you as a bitch... I always love you no matter what. But I just don't share your view of the mess we're in. Whatever happens to us, we'll be together... won't we?"

"I'll be right by your side, honey. You know I will."

"That's all I can ask for."

"Yeah..." Janni said before falling into a brooding silence.

Several minutes went by without further activity, except for Janni and Melanie holding hands. The increasingly gloomy silence was broken by Angela coughing a couple of times. "Janni," the older woman said, "what happened to the rest of McKendrick in the quake? How much is still standing?"

"Most of it, actually," Janni said and shifted on the hard floor. "Downtown and McKendrick West got the worst of it. Judah Road was a mess... Marlborough Street was even worse. There were fires here and there... four or five from what I heard on the news. I only saw one, though. Oh yeah, and one of the grain silos over at the freight yard lost parts of its top."

"A grain silo... that would have been something you would have rebuilt working for Dillon Construction, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah," Janni said with a quiet nod and a faint smile creasing her lips. She was pleased with the peace offering. Angela Sinclair had always been of the opinion that women shouldn't be working in such a physical field. Hard labor was for men; women should stick to office work and rearing babies. From personal experience with little Peanut, Janni reckoned that rearing just one baby was ten times as much work as erecting a six-storey building, foundation and all.

Thinking of Patrick and little Peanut waiting for her at the bungalow made the smile fade from her lips. Peanut probably wouldn't even remember her crazy aunt, but Patrick would be devastated for months if not years if the equation of air versus the time they had to wait before the rescue didn't match up. "Patrick and Little Peanut are back home getting the dinner delights ready," she said and gave Melanie's hands a little squeeze. "You know how Little Pea can be sometimes, but she was in a really good mood today. She babbled and squealed. Patrick is going to make his world famous casserole and I bought some wine and-"

"What did you get me for my birthday?" Melanie said in a downcast voice.

"Now... wait a minute. That would spoil the surprise!"

The long, trembling sigh Melanie let out proved that none of it mattered anymore to her. "Janni, we're... we're not gonna... oh, forget it."

"Baby, please listen to me," Janni said and shuffled up close to her partner. She wrapped her bad hand around Melanie's waist just to show that she wasn't merely a little serious, she was deathly serious. When the taller woman's body didn't speak the language she had hoped for, she squeezed herself up close to at least make it a one-way connection. "I know the situation sucks donkey balls right now... pardon my French, Mrs. Sinclair... but if we give up hope we're already dead... in *here* ." - Janni put her hand on Melanie's heart to underline her point, secretly marveling at the way her touch made it beat stronger.

The heartfelt plea didn't yield much apart from a shrug. Janni sighed and leaned her head against Melanie's shoulder. "I bought you a ticket for a modern dance show," she said quietly.

"Wh- what?"

"The Odeon over on Dylan Street is gonna broadcast a performance of the world famous Jeremiah Shaw Dance Company on Saturday the twenty-eighth... if it's still standing. I didn't have time to go over there. Mmmm... anyway, I forget the name of the show, but it's live from the Met in New York City. I didn't get us front row seats 'cos they got such a huge-ass silver screen. You'd get a crimp in your lovely neck. I got the seventh row so we can actually see the whole thing..."

"You can't stand modern dance..."

"But you love it... and it's your birthday. It doesn't matter jack shit if I like it or not."

Tears began to stream unhindered down Melanie's cheeks. Her body was racked by sobs that she was powerless to stop. Gasping for air between the sobs, she reached out for Janni and pulled her into a strong, rocking hug. "Thank you for that amazing present," she whispered hoarsely. "I would have loved to see that. I love you."

"I love you too, baby. And happy birthday," Janni said with her face buried in the crook of her partner's neck. The sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach was the last hope slipping away, she knew that.

Since the latest aftershock, there hadn't been any seismic activity at all, but that also meant nobody was working on digging into the pile, or even continuing to remove the upper slabs of concrete. She couldn't hear a single thing from the outside, and it worried her. Why weren't Buzz Burczyk and the men trying to reach them? Had they been ordered to stand down and pack up? Had the last aftershock caused so much destruction to the rest of the unstable building that it was too dangerous to work on the site?

The trembling body in her arms didn't provide answers to any of that, but it provided something far more important in the situation they were in - warmth, support and that special brand of boundless intimacy that only two people in love could share.

Janni sighed deeply and snuggled up closer to Melanie while she could.

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CHAPTER 5

They sat like that for a while. A creepy silence spread through the small cavern they were in as a precursor of how it could all end. When the oppressive mood threatened to get to her, Janni patted Melanie's leg and shuffled back from the taller woman. "Honey, I need to do something. I'll explore the other cave. Just sit here with your mother, okay?" she whispered so she wouldn't stir Angela who was taking a nap.

"Be careful," Melanie said and held on tight a few seconds longer than necessary.

"I always am."

"Oh, no you're not..."

Janni chuckled and leaned in to steal a kiss on Melanie's filthy cheek. "You know me too well. Listen, I need to take the LED lamp. Is it okay for you gals to sit in the dark for a while?"

"Yeah... that's how we were the entire time until you came. Do you want your hard hat back?" Melanie said and reached for the chin strap, but Janni intercepted her hand.

"No. Keep it. I promise I'll do it quickly," Janni said and got up.

She shuffled back through the narrow crevice from where she had initially seen the two blue diamonds that had turned out to be Melanie's eyes. Holding the light up, she let it sweep across the concrete surfaces that formed the borders of the cave.

The crack in the ceiling hadn't become worse since she had been in there last, but the growing amount of concrete pebbles on the ground proved that it was still shifting, though less than before. Moving the light away from the crack, she swept it across the floor and over to the step she had fallen off when she had first entered the cave. The edge of the step was darker than the rest of the gray concrete - blood; the lasting legacy of scraping her shoulder against it.

After shuffling over there, she tried to yank at the safety wire a few times. Needless to say, it was still pinned down underneath the boulder that had collapsed in the bigger of the two aftershocks they had experienced so far. She couldn't move it an inch, no matter how hard she tried.

Something reflected the light next to the pile of rubble that had buried her. Bending down to retrieve it, Janni realized it was the sorry remains of her radio. It hadn't merely been busted, it had been crushed. Cracked open and thoroughly smashed by a piece of falling concrete the size of a bowling ball.

She gave the piece of concrete a fair nudge with her boot and found she could hardly move it. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if she'd had her head down that end, her skull would have been crushed like a rotten egg by the falling debris.

Turning her back on the chilling subject, she went on a painstaking journey around the entire perimeter to check the concrete surfaces for small cracks that would allow in air or light. There were none to be found, not even the tiniest glimmer of hope anywhere.

They were at ground level so there was no chance to do anything about the floor. Janni sighed and turned her focus on the ceiling. If the walls wouldn't budge, perhaps the ceiling would. The crack presented the biggest problem in their vast collection of critical issues - it went diagonally all the way from one corner of the cave to the other.

If help came from that direction, everybody waiting in that part of the cave would instantly be buried in debris as the slab wouldn't be able to be moved as a single unit. It would have to be removed piece by piece which would increase the risk of a cave-in exponentially.

Janni grunted and shone the light at the sections of the ceiling next to the crack. Tiny, but growing, fracture-lines had formed leading away from the big one, thus supporting her theory of the ceiling not supporting her life. "Crap," she mumbled, moving back to the walls.

She tried to come up with an alternative plan, but her tired brain was all out of fresh ideas. As a last resort, she pressed an ear against the concrete walls for every two feet in the hope she'd be able to pick up sounds of activity from the outside. It took her a little while, but she eventually made it all the way around - and she hadn't heard a thing. "Goddammit," she growled, thumping her good fist into the concrete. "I wish I was wearin' my fuckin' hard hat 'cos I feel like usin' my fuckin' head as a fuckin' ramrod against the fuckin' walls!"

'Maybe it would work...' Melanie said from the dark part of the cave, adding a despondent, little chuckle.

Janni let out a sigh and put her hands on her hips. "Maybe it would. We're cooped up in here like a buncha fuckin' sardines in a tin can. 'Cept that we're not sardines and it isn't a tin can."

'Was... was that a tremor?' Angela said.

Drawing a deep breath, Janni stood stock still and tried to extend her senses to the farthest they'd go. She couldn't feel anything, but since Angela was lying down, perhaps she was able to sense the tremors through a larger area compared to Janni's rubber soles.

'I didn't feel anything, Mom. Janni?' Melanie said from somewhere in the darkness.

"Me neither." Grunting, Janni shuffled back into the darker part of the cave where she folded her legs and sat down next to Melanie. Although she kept the light off their faces, she thought that Angela looked worse than she had done only minutes earlier. "Are you all right, Mrs. Sinclair? You don't look too good."

"I d- don't know, Janni," Angela said and tried to shift her position. She could, but she let out a protracted, pained moan in the process that made Janni and Melanie's nape hairs stand on edge. "The hot stabs... the hot stabs are back... I think they're in my gut... not my chest."

"Oh, Mom!" Melanie cried and immediately took her mother's hands in her own.

"I'm sh- shaking inside... trembling... are you girls sure it's not a new aftershock?" Angela croaked, moaning in pain as soon as she stopped speaking.

Melanie opened her mouth to reply, but she could only produce a frightened squeak.

Janni chewed hard on her cheeks. She grabbed the first aid satchel and unzipped it. More bandages, the disinfectant spray, a few clamps, band-aids, tweezers, a tiny light to check pupil response and a vial containing iodine. In short, there was nothing there that could ease Angela's pains. She did have a plastic jar with hospital strength painkillers, but no water to help ease them down, and with all the dust they had inhaled, their throats were dry as sandpaper. "Fuck... nothing. Crap... no, the trembling is definitely inside you, Mrs. Sinclair," she said and rubbed her brow.

When Angela tried to shift again, she let out a cry that made Melanie cry along with her. The two Sinclairs held on to each other like they never wanted to let go.

"Mrs. Sinclair," Janni said and rubbed her brow again. "I know this is gonna sound really inappropriate, but I gotta look up your blouse. There must be something wrong with your stomach."

Angela wasn't in a state to complain, but Melanie was. "What for?" she said, reaching out to still Janni's hand before she could go too far. "You know Mom doesn't like being touched by strang- I mean... I mean..."

"I know what you mean, honey," Janni said and patted Melanie's hand. "I'm worried that she has internal hemorrhaging. If we could see and feel her stomach, we could perhaps... oh, Jeez... I'm not a doc... but I just thought we may be able to get a clue!"

"I understand," Melanie said and looked at her mother whose face was contorted in pain. "All right. I'll do it," she continued, shuffling around. The pain that shot up from her ankle made her hiss, but she clenched her jaw and focused on her mother instead.

She tried to sit on her thighs to get the best angle, but her injury made it impossible for her. Her hisses turned to moans as she tried to twist her leg around. It didn't take long for her to

understand she couldn't do it, and she bumped back down on her butt. "Fuck," she mumbled under her breath.

"Careful," Janni whispered into Melanie's ear, "I'm beginning to rub off on you. Perhaps I could persuade you to watch a Xena episode with me one day?"

Melanie shook her head and lifted her mother's blouse instead. The expensive garment was filthy and torn like every other piece of fabric they wore.

"Wh- what are you doing?" Angela said in a shaky voice.

"Shhh, Mom... I just need to see your tummy. We're looking for injuries," Melanie said, caressing her mother's arm. She pulled the blouse up to the underside of the brassiere and tried to put her hand on the skin.

Melanie had barely touched it before Angela let out a tormented cry and tried to twist away from her daughter's hand.

"Mom! Mom, please, we need to see... we need to help you," Melanie said, stroking Angela's arm while she spoke. "Janni... come... come shine the light down here..." she continued while she moved her hand back to the skin on her mother's belly.

Janni did as asked and moved the LED lamp down towards the skin. She took in a sharp breath when the light revealed the skin on Angela's belly was fire-engine red and distended. "Ouch, no wonder she's in pain... Jesus... that looks fuckin' awful. Is it warm?"

"It's burning hot!" Melanie said through clenched teeth. Even the briefest of touches made Angela cry out in pain, so Melanie pulled her hand back at once.

The light revealed that the entire left side of Angela's midsection from her hip bone to the underside of her rib cage was glowing red and on the brink of bursting. The faded scar of the Caesarian that brought Melanie into the world thirty-three years earlier to the day was noticeable as a gray line in a sea of angry red.

"Fuck me sideways," Janni mumbled, rubbing her mouth. "That's internal bleeding, all right. She must have slammed into something on her way down... baby, was your mother unconscious when you came to?"

Melanie shook her head, staring wide-eyed at her mother's throbbing injury. "N- no... no, I don't think so... I c- can't remember. It's all a blur now."

"What's on the left side? Well, the guts... but the liver? Is the liver on the left? Fuck me, I know diddly squat about anatomy! The kidneys are on the right... on the back. I know that much."

"Janni, wh- what the hell are you talking about?"

"Sweet fuck almighty, I got no clue what the fuck I'm talking about!" Janni said and threw her hands in the air out of sheer frustration. "Maybe she's ruptured a gut? Or another part of her gastric- something? Could that lead to... well, to that?"

"You're asking me? How the hell should I know?" Melanie said hoarsely. When her mother let out another pained cry, she lowered the blouse as carefully as she could and shuffled away so she wouldn't bump into her by accident.

Down on the ground, Angela tensed up and a visible shiver trickled across her body. "I'm- I'm cold... cold. It's so cold in here..." she croaked, reaching for Melanie's hands.

"It's not cold, Mom," Melanie said through clenched teeth. "It's not cold... we don't have anything to cover you with..."

"I'm t- trembling inside..." Angela said, sending Melanie and Janni looks of pure horror. Her breathing came in shallow bursts, and it was clear to see from the contorted look on her face that even the simple, necessary act of letting the air flow in and out of her lungs caused her severe problems.

Melanie moved around and grabbed her partner's arms. "Janni... wh- what are we gonna do? We gotta do something! You hear me?! There must be something we can do!"

"Baby, I- I- Jesus... I don't know..." Janni said in a thick voice.

Down on the ground, Angela's fit slowly receded and she became quieter. Moving more easily, she shook her head and reached for the hands of the two women that were near her. "Please... don't argue. Not now," she said as her breathing leveled out and became more regular.

"We won't, Mrs. Sinclair," Janni said and held onto Angela's outstretched hand. She looked over at Melanie who was crying with her eyes closed. Her tall, graceful body was racked with sobs that she was too brave to make public. Her head hung in sorrow and desperation, but she maintained a dignified posture - all in all, she was the perfect picture of the woman Janni had fallen in love with.

Their initial meeting hadn't been one that would be retold in fairy tales. They met for the first time in Cal Johnson's Office Supplies store a rainy Wednesday afternoon when Janni came into the shop to ask if they sold a particular kind of pencil lead, or better still a particular kind of pencil designed to write on blueprints. They didn't, and Janni left without buying anything.

What she took with her was the mental image of a tall, gorgeous sales clerk in a red turtleneck and a gray skirt who had looked indescribably cute and attractive as she had found the item in a catalog, called the central storage and even offered to ship it in overnight.

For weeks, Janni had to live off the memories of that first encounter. The next time they met would be under far more intimate circumstances - in a bar, although they both had a date on the arm. Janni had barely been able to hide her excitement when she realized that Melanie's date was

a woman too. The date turned into a double date that later turned back into a single date when Melanie and Janni were left by their respective gals to chat the night away. Everyone got something out of it as the other two women hooked up as well. Win-win for all involved.

Janni sighed and came back to the present. Win-win couldn't be used to describe the situation they were in now.

On the floor, Angela suddenly moved with a start. "Oh... how strange... I- I feel like I'm... I'm floating," she breathed in a weak voice. "Melanie... Melanie, are we... what's happ-"

A slow gasp left Angela and she became still.

"Mom?" Melanie said, furrowing her brow. "Mom? Mom! Mom?! No! No... Janni!"

"Jesus!" Janni croaked and jumped up. Moving fast, she put an ear to Angela's chest to listen if she had suffered a cardiac arrest. The heart was still beating strongly, though in an erratic rhythm that seemed to bounce along like an old polka. "She's got a heartbeat... it's not that... what the fuck just happened?"

"She isn't breathing!" Melanie said in a voice that crept further and further into hysteria as she carried on.

"We got no time for panic, baby... mouth-to-mouth! Now!"

Melanie whipped her head around and stared wide-eyed at her partner. She seemed to snap out of the twilight zone in a hurry and moved around to she could tend to her mother, injured leg be damned. Her pretty face was twisted into an ugly mask from the burning hot pain that set her ankle alight, but she drew a deep breath and leaned down towards Angela who was simply lying there with her lips parted.

"Clear her throat for foreign objects first, baby," Janni said, pointing the light directly down at Angela's face. The older woman's eyes were glassy and staring vacantly at the ceiling. Ten million ants marched down Janni's back as a direct result of the ghastly sight, but she shimmied them away and gave all she had on keeping the light steady.

Melanie's face was given another twist as she opened her mother's jaw and poked two fingers into her mouth. "All clear," she said in a strangled voice. "Can I continue?"

"Yes!"

A deep breath later, Melanie blew the air into Angela's lungs while pinching her nostrils so it wouldn't just escape that way.

"One... two... again!" Janni said, putting a warm hand on Melanie's back to support her.

Melanie drew another deep breath and repeated the procedure. "Again?" she said when she moved up for the second time.

"Keep going until... until she breathes on her own... or... or I tell you to stop."

Melanie's chin began to tremble as the reality of what she was doing caught up with her. The next deep breath was lost before it could be used when she broke out in a sob. Shaking her head in anger, she drew yet another breath and used it in an attempt to resuscitate her mother; then another, and another after that.

From one breath to the next, Angela gasped out loud and jerked around. The movement was enough to hurt her tender stomach. It made her cry out loud and press a hand against her chest. "Oh... God..." she croaked, reaching out for anyone who was close enough.

"Melanie, stop! You got her back... fuckin'-A, honey! You saved her!" Janni cried, rubbing Melanie's long back with great vigor.

Melanie fell back on the floor with a vacant look in her eyes. She just stared and stared and stared at her mother, eventually taking the hand that was offered. Moments later, she broke out in a howling sob.

Later, their frazzled nerves were collectively standing on edge in the dark cave. Janni grumbled under her breath over the bewildering inefficiency of her men topsides. It appeared they weren't able to do a thing without her being there to guide them, and it puzzled her to no end. She picked up a pebble and threw it into the farthest corner with a great deal of force to let out some of her frustrations.

Melanie was as jumpy as an annoyed bee, holding her mother's hands and watching over the older woman to such an extent she almost forgot to breathe herself - and Angela was gasping and moaning with alarming regularity. Her face was still contorted in pain, but an acute fear of dying brought on from the horrendous experience had made its mark on her as well.

Now and then, Janni let the cone of light from the LED lamp sweep across the walls and the ceiling to see how their involuntary prison camp held up. She had heard the occasional pebble drop onto the floor, and even a cracking noise or two from the diagonal fracture in the roof of the cave next door. Their own private corner of hell seemed to hold up for the time being. *'Fuck, it'll probably last longer than we will,'* she thought, shifting around on the hard floor. *'Slowly suffocating as the air runs out... crap, not the way I would have wanted to go.'*

Sighing, she shuffled closer to Melanie and leaned her head against the tall back to offer all the moral support she could. Melanie's muscles were taut from the tension, and Janni absentmindedly ran her good hand across the long torso to help ease the pains.

"Thank you, love," Melanie whispered, reaching behind her to put a hand on Janni's knee. She gave it a little squeeze and stroked the thigh for a short while. "I'm sorry that you're trapped down here... but I'm grateful that you're here with me..."

"Yeah... some rescue, huh? The rescuer ends up in the same fuckin' trap..." Janni said and let out a bitter laugh.

Melanie smiled wistfully and gave her partner's thigh another little stroke. "Maybe it's fate? I would have gone insane if... if you weren't here."

"No, you wouldn't. You're the strongest of us, honey... look at how I freaked out when you found me... remember?" Janni said with a dead-tired chuckle. "God, that was just pathetic. Boc-boc-boc, I'm such a chicken."

"I guess I'm in love with a chicken, then," Melanie said and turned around. They gazed at each other for a few seconds before they leaned in to kiss.

"And I love you," Janni whispered once they separated. They kept close but fell silent - there was nothing left to be said.

A couple of minutes later, Janni cocked her head and tried to extend her hearing to stretch out beyond their little cave. She had heard something; a noise that didn't sound like it had come from either a pebble falling onto the floor, or the crack in the ceiling expanding or shifting. Neither of her companions seemed to have heard the sound, but Angela was busy breathing and Melanie was busy looking after her mother, so they wouldn't have had the mental capacity to notice.

Janni shrugged and leaned back against Melanie's shoulder. Two seconds later, the sound was repeated, and Janni jerked her head away from her partner. "You heard that? Sorta like a... a... a metallic clonk?" she whispered so she wouldn't frighten the older woman on the ground.

"No," Melanie said, shaking her head slowly.

"I did. Weird. It's not there now. I feel like I oughtta recognize it, but..."

"Maybe it's all in your mind, Janni."

"Maybe it is. Huh."

They fell silent, but the silence didn't last long. Not half a minute later, a tremor rolled through the ground that made the walls and ceiling shake. "Not again!" Melanie cried, diving down to grab hold of her mother who had already started whimpering.

Janni's emotions ran the other way, and she jumped to her feet to roar out her pent-up anger. "This ain't funny no more, you motherfucker!" she cried, swinging her fists at the roof. "Either you save us or you fuckin' kill us... it's time to make up your motherfuckin' mind!"

The wall at the far end of the cave began to oscillate, and Janni bared her teeth in a frightened grimace. It seemed she was about to get her wish fulfilled, but it was the wrong one of the two options. A cloud of the evil, brown dust was released from the wall and the ceiling of the other cave as the entire far end of the cracked roof disappeared in a cacophony of creaks and groans - but it disappeared up, not down.

Sunlight streamed down into the cave, followed by half a quarry's worth of rocky debris. Loud noises from powerful diesel engines swept in from the outside. Talking, some shouting, a constant chatter from radios, more shouting.

Janni just stood there with her fists clenched and her mouth all agape. As the cone of sunlight hit her, it was revealed just how filthy and dusty she was. There wasn't a square inch on her entire body that wasn't caked with crud from her insane trek through the Underworld. She was battered and bruised, her flannel shirt hung in shreds, and her sturdy pants had turned gray instead of the black they had been when she had put them on. The streaks of grime around her eyes and mouth made her resemble an alley cat on the prowl.

"Melanie," she croaked, but her throat had gone bone dry from the amounts of dust that had been kicked up and from the shock of seeing daylight for the first time in hours. Coughing and spluttering, she staggered back to the other cave and tried again. "Melanie... Melanie! Help is here... they came... I said they would... it took 'em a fuckin' while... but they came..." she said, grabbing hold of her partner's shoulders.

Melanie's only response was to break down in heartfelt crying. Her long, elegant body was racked by a series of hard sobs that ripped through her time and time again.

Janni did the only thing she could. She knelt down next to her partner and pulled her into a sideways hug. "I said they'd come," she croaked in a thick voice. Large, salty tears began to stream down her cheeks, but for once, she didn't mind.

A powerful cone of light swept across the dark wall ahead of them; a flashlight. Janni wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and turned around. "Down here! Down here! Help!" she cried, waving her arms like crazy.

More shouting and radio chatter was heard from the outside before a group of four men wearing blue coveralls and red helmets crawled down into the hole holding a single stretcher between them.

Janni got on her feet and staggered back into the first cave. "We are three survivors in here... one is critically injured. We need two stretchers! Two!" she shouted, holding up two fingers just to be on the safe side.

The men at the rear of the group on their way down the rocky slope turned around and disappeared out of sight, but they were soon back with a second stretcher. The man closest to Janni made it safely down onto the flat part of the floor and shone his flashlight in Janni's face. "Janni Holbrooke? Chief Holbrooke?"

"That's me... hey, keep that damn thing outta my eyes, buddy! It's been kinda dark down here!" Janni said, shielding her face from the powerful LED lights. "Jeez... who are you guys, anyway?"

"We're from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The Urban Search and Rescue unit," he said before he swept it into the second cave.

"Huh. FEMA-USAR... okay. Well, we've got two more survivors down there... an older woman who's in a really bad shape and a younger woman. You need to treat the older woman first. We believe she's suffering from severe internal bleeding."

"All right," the man with the flashlight said before he and his colleagues moved into the deepest part of the cave to begin the next part of their search and rescue operation.

"And watch your heads, fellas! The ceiling is really fuckin' low in there!" Janni shouted, but the words had barely left her mouth before she heard the familiar sound of a hard hat scraping against the ceiling.

The outer part of the cave turned into a three-ring circus within a few moments. Men wearing blue coveralls and red helmets swarmed down the rocky slope to help the survivors. It didn't take long for the first stretcher to come out from the darkest part of the cave - it was Angela. As the older woman was carried past Janni, her injuries looked even worse in daylight. A medic was already injecting some kind of fluid into her arm, but she just had time to reach out for the younger woman. They touched fingers, and Janni flashed Melanie's mother a relieved smile.

'*Get outta my way, chump,*' a familiar male voice said from somewhere up top. A pair of steel-tipped black boots hurried down the slope, and soon, a tan Dillon Construction & Demolition coverall came into view. The rest of Paul 'Buzz' Burczyk followed, and the large, burly man let out a roar the second he saw Janni. He wrapped his arms around the shorter woman and lifted her off the ground in a swinging, crushing hug. "Chief! Oh, fuck it, Chief! We thought we had lost you!"

"Uh... ah... well, I... uff... naw, it's... ah... gonna take more... uff... than a little... oy, will ya... let me... down so I... can breathe...?" Janni croaked with her legs swinging this way and that.

Buzz did as told but kept a firm grip on Janni's arms. "Man, Chief," he said once he'd had time to take a good look at Janni's myriad of cuts and bruises. "You look like shit! You're bleeding all over the Goddamned place... your hand... and your shoulder... you need a stretcher! Hey, can we get a-"

"Hold it right there, fella," Janni said and shook her head vehemently. "I walked in. I'm walkin' out. End of discussion."

"Chief, you're one tough cookie..."

"An' don't you forget it!" Janni said and poked Buzz in the gut with a tough look on her face. She couldn't hold it for long, and she fell back into his arms for another hug, though less swinging and crushing. "Damn, Buzz... it's good to see ya, man. This didn't go the way I had planned it... but I said I'd do it... and I did."

"You sure did... Jesus, Old Man Dillon is gonna blow his top with pride when he sees all this on the news," Buzz said and made a gesture at the mess. "Dillon Construction delivers. You couldn't have made an ad campaign like this. You're gonna be his very own poster girl from now on, Chief. He kinda likes you already, ya know... but this is gonna make your reputation soar!"

"Old Man Dillon? Get the fuck outta here..."

"Naw, I'm tellin' ya-"

The moment between the old friends was interrupted when Melanie was carried out of the second part of the cave on the other stretcher holding the two jackets they had used as pillows. Janni was at her side in an instant and grabbed her hand. In daylight, the foot and the ankle looked positively evil, but the bandages that had been set in the semi-darkness had done their job well.

"Baby, I... I love you. Welcome back to life... and happy birthday," Janni said and squeezed Melanie's hand as she was moved along on the stretcher. She kissed it tenderly despite the filth and grime. When kissing the hand wasn't enough, she moved up and tried to aim for Melanie's lips. It wasn't easy with the stretcher moving around, and she growled out loud. "Fellas, can we have a second here? Please!"

The men in the blue coveralls reluctantly came to a halt just as they reached the foot of the slope; it was only a brief stop, but it was long enough for Melanie and Janni to share a glorious kiss. "Hey... we made it," Janni whispered for her partner's ears only.

"We made it," Melanie whispered back and kissed Janni again. Smiling, she reached up and loosened the hard hat's chin strap. She took it off and handed it back to its rightful owner. "I love you so much. Thanks for everything you did for mom and me down there... I-"

"Shhh, we can talk about that later... in bed," Janni whispered with a wink.

They grinned at each other before the men from the FEMA carried on and moved the stretcher further away from the cave that had so nearly become a tomb for the three women.

Janni waited for the stretcher to clear the slope before she donned her beloved hard hat and began her own ascent. The loose pebbles under her boots kept holding her back like they didn't want to give up their cuddly play-thing, but she finally made it to the top of the pile.

She had come back out into the world roughly half a storey up from where the building's main entrance had been. Moving to the right, she climbed up on another large slab of concrete to get a better picture of the surroundings. The cracked slab she had been monitoring the underside of for a while was lying in five pieces not far from the spot it had been dragged away from, thus proving her theory that it wouldn't have been able to withstand another aftershock.

"Ho- ly fuck!" she croaked at the sight of the utter chaos down on the street below her.

The FEMA crew had built four staircase-like chutes that reached down onto the sidewalk, and men in blue coveralls were swarming all over them. The two stretchers carrying Melanie and her mother were already being loaded into an ambulance.

That ambulance and nine others were lined up across Marlborough Street, and they had been joined by several black vans and trucks from the FEMA Rapid Response team. The heavy vehicles from Dillon Construction & Demolition were still parked where they had been the last time Janni had seen them which added yet another layer to the confusion.

High above it all, the news helicopter was hovering in the air providing non-stop coverage of the rescue operation for the TV-stations - not to mention providing a constant, deafening soundtrack from the flapping rotors. White vans carrying all kinds of odd acronyms on the sides and huge satellite dishes on the roofs were lined up in an orderly cluster a short distance down the street. Reporters were standing in a neat row in front of them, giving their view of the situation.

If that wasn't chaotic enough already, there were at least five police cars and SUVs lined up at the far side of the intersection of Kingston and Marlborough. The deputies from the Sheriff's Department had set up enclosures that were crammed full of interested spectators. Some were waving, a great deal were cheering, and all were filming the events on their phones.

"Well fuck me sideways!" Janni said, throwing her arms in the air to wave back at the crowd - creating a huge cheer that rose from the spectators.

Two men wearing the blue FEMA coveralls came over to her and grabbed hold of her arms to guide her down the chutes, but she growled out loud and yanked her arms free. "Fellas... do I look weak to you? Do I? Thank you," she said and walked down under her own power like she had said she would.

Down on the street, she made a beeline for Little Jack, the crane that had lifted off the part of the roof that mattered. She flashed a thumbs-up to Sir Frank who repeated the gesture in kind. Sitting down on Little Jack's caterpillar treads, she let out a long sigh and rubbed her aching limbs.

When she spotted the junior employee who carried the backpack with the bottled water, she waved him over and snatched two bottles with a grin. Even while she was downing the first bottle whole, Buzz came over to her with a relieved smile on his face.

"Hey, Chief... I do think there's a cute paramedic who'd really like to get your phone number," he said with a lopsided grin as he pointed over his shoulder. Behind him, a twenty-something woman in a dark-blue EMT uniform offered Janni a shy smile while she held up a medical kit.

"She's shit outta luck on that one 'cos I already got all I can handle," Janni said and put the first empty bottle on the treads. "Anyhow, I better get this damn hand looked at before it falls off."

She, Buzz, and the young EMT shuffled over to the nearest ambulance - kindly refusing Buzz's hand under her arm - and sat down on the aluminum step at the back. While the skilled EMT began cleaning the numerous cuts and scrapes, and unwrapped the makeshift bandage, Janni stared into the ambulance next door that Melanie and Angela had been led to. Several EMTs and paramedics were working on the older woman while Melanie was sitting on her own stretcher, explaining what had happened in the cave.

"Huh?" Janni said when she realized someone had spoken to her.

Buzz grinned and pushed his hard hat back from his brow. "I said, we wanted to get to you sooner, but the FEMA team ordered us to stop until they had made a risk assessment or some shit. We told 'em to fuck off, but they were adamant. They even threatened us with the Sheriff."

"Assholes."

"That's what we said," Buzz said with a grin. "Anyhoo, at the end, we got our wish and we started digging deep for ya. I think Old Man Dillon called the Mayor's Office who called the... you can probably guess the rest. And then we found ya."

"Yeah. I like that part best."

The young paramedic chuckled at the exchange between the old friends as she finished re-wrapping Janni's hand. "Did you do that yourself down there? It was really well made," she said and attached a clean safety clamp.

"I did, yeah," Janni said with a proud grin. "Hey, wouldya mind taking a look at my left shoulder? I scraped it kinda bad on something I stumbled over."

"Sure." The young woman swept aside the tattered remains of the flannel shirt and began cleaning the wound on Janni's shoulder with a swab of absorbent cotton. "Oh! That's a Chakram tattoo! I got the staff and sais symbols on my calf!"

"No shit? How's that for a co-inky-dink? Battle On, Sister," Janni said with an impossibly broad grin.

Buzz rolled his eyes - all in good humor, of course, and Janni duly laughed. "Chief, before I forget... someone's been calling at regular intervals. I think there's a little girl back home anxious to hear from her aunt... or something."

"Yeah? I better get in touch at once. Are the phones still up?"

"Oh yeah, Chief. They were on and off at first, but they've been steady for a while now."

"Okay... anyone seen my bomber jacket with my tele-"

Buzz produced it from behind his back.

"-phone. Gee, thanks, Buzz. You know, shouldn't you be at home with your good little wife, too? I'll bet the pork chops are getting cold."

"In other words, shoo," Buzz said and reached out for Janni's good hand. Shaking hands, they held onto each other for longer than they really needed to. "It's great to have you back, Chief. Man, when the big aftershock hit... we reckoned you'd been turned into meatballs and chunky tomato sauce for sure," he said and added another squeeze.

"Thanks, Buzz. For a moment there, I was headin' down that path. I'll tell you all about it at work tomorrow. Okay?"

"I better find my really big ears, then," Buzz said and waved at his chief before he walked back to the other members of the Dillon Construction crew to supervise the winding down of the operation - for starters, all the heavy equipment needed to return to the construction site further up the street.

The EMT finished up her work at Janni's shoulder and found a small vial of iodine. "The wound is a simple one that doesn't require stitches. This may sting a little... Chief," she said before she moved the swab in towards the wound.

"My name is- ooooooooh! Sting. A. Little?!" Janni croaked, staring down at the nicely prepared shoulder.

After dabbing it with the iodine, the EMT applied a neat band-aid that covered the gash completely.

"Janni Holbrooke," Janni added once she had regained her breath.

"Jacqueline Olsson, hi," the EMT said, giving Janni a shy smile. She put the spent swabs, q-tips and her pale-gray surgical gloves into a plastic bag labeled Contaminated Waste before closing the medical kit. "Battle on," she said with a cute smile.

"Battle on. Thanks for your help, Jacqueline," Janni said and jumped off the back of the ambulance with her extra bottle of water. She waved her thanks at the young EMT who stepped up and closed the double doors.

Shuffling away from the ambulance, Janni stuffed the bottle down her rear pocket, put her bomber jacket over her good shoulder and turned on her telephone. She soon found her brother's number in the registry and waited for it to be picked up.

'It's Patrick Holbrooke,' a frayed voice said at the other end of the line.

"Hey bro, it's me. Your kid sister, fresh back from the Underworld." The joyful scream that came back through the connection made Janni jerk the telephone away from her ear. Chuckling out loud, she strolled over to the other ambulance where Angela Sinclair was still being treated by a group of paramedics.

The wild cry of *'Ba-ga-gyyyyyyy!'* that followed made Janni put the phone back to her ear and let out an emphatic "There's my little Peanut!" The sound of Peanut's voice babbling away at full speed sent a wave of relief through her and made her realize how tired she actually was. Every pound of meat on her bones suddenly felt like a ton of lead, and she had to lean against the door of the ambulance to regain her balance.

She felt someone watching her and looked up into the ambulance. When she saw Melanie grinning back at her from her spot up on the stretcher, she moved the telephone out so everyone could hear the babbling.

'Janni! Oh, Janni, are you all right?' Patrick said after a bit of fumbling.

"Yeah... mostly. Bumps and scrapes, you know. Nothing major. Fresh as a daisy or whatever the fuck the term is. Easy peasy. Just an afternoon trip to the mall..."

'Don't you dare lie to me, sis! I can see the bandage on your hand clear as day!'

"What!?! How the fuck-"

'I'm watching you live on TV as we speak! Look up!'

Janni took a step back and realized the ball camera underneath the news helicopter was pointing straight at her. She suddenly remembered Patrick's request from before she had journeyed to the Underworld - to give Peanut a little wave. Grinning, she stepped out into the open and waved with her entire arm. Seconds later, she got her reward when Peanut squealed wildly through the phone.

'Oh, we saw that! We saw that, sis! Thank you... you remembered!'

"No problem. Hey, I made the local news, huh?"

'Local? They've gone national! There's breaking news on all the major news networks! Maybe you've even gone global!'

"Holy Fuck! Had I known that, I woulda washed my face..." Janni said and waved once more at the camera helicopter with similar results from little Peanut. "Hey, Patrick, I gotta go now. I'll be back before you know it. Have you finished cleaning up the house?"

'Yes, I have. Earlier, I found two planks of wood in the garden shed for the broken windows. They'll hold for now. Life's getting back to normal up here in the hills.'

"Glad to hear it. Melanie suffered a sprained or broken ankle... or maybe it's her heel, I don't know... but it's nothing a little TLC won't ease. Her mother is worse, though," Janni said and looked up at Melanie. "I'll keep you updated on that front."

'Thank you... and thank God you're safe. I'm so happy... Little Pea just drooled on me so you know she's happy too... bye-bye!'

"Yeah? I love it when I make the girls drool... bye, bro!" Janni said and closed the connection. Sighing, she stepped back to the ambulance and watched the paramedics and the EMTs finish their work on Melanie's mother.

One of the two paramedics - a distinguished-looking man in his late forties wearing a white lab coat over a blue outfit of some kind - took off his surgical gloves and put them into a plastic bag labeled Contaminated Waste like Janni's EMT had done earlier. "All right, Miss Sinclair. We have drained a large amount of blood from your mother's abdominal cavity and performed initial endoscopic surgery, but we were unable to stop the bleeding. We'll take her to the hospital and continue the treatment there."

"Okay," Melanie said in a dead-tired voice.

"Also, your own injury needs immediate treatment," the paramedic continued, looking down at Melanie's tightly wrapped ankle. "The risk of infection is simply too great to ignore. So please lie down and I'll fasten you to the stretcher."

Sighing, Melanie looked down at Janni who was still standing at the double doors. She nodded and swung her sore legs up onto the stretcher.

Janni sent her partner a supportive smile and stepped up into the back of the ambulance. "Hey Doc, you got room for me? Melanie and me go together like Xena and Gabrielle," she said and took the bottle of water out of her rear pocket. She handed it to Melanie, but the prone woman shook her head and pointed at an empty bottle next to the stretcher that she had already drained. Janni smiled and unscrewed the cap herself.

The paramedic eyed Janni with a furrowed brow. He quickly evaluated her injuries and found them too light to warrant a trip in the ambulance. "I'm sorry, Miss. I cannot-"

"Yeah well," Melanie said and swung her legs back down from the stretcher. "If Janni can't come with us, I'll go with her. Like she said, we go together."

Janni broke out in a broad, smart-alec smirk that she couldn't have held back even if she had wanted to. "What she said, Doc," she said, pointing her thumb at her partner before she took a long swig of the water.

The sour look on the paramedic's face was unmistakable, but he eventually relented and stepped aside so Janni could climb aboard the ambulance. Without speaking a word, he folded down and pointed at an extra seat near the top end of Melanie's stretcher. Huffing, he turned around and stepped down onto the street.

"Why thank you, Doc," Janni said loudly as she sat down with a bump. Grinning, she reached up and grabbed hold of Melanie's hand. "Together again, huh? You, me and your Mom." She looked at the other stretcher where Angela was sleeping soundly after being anaesthetized in connection with the emergency surgery. She wore an oxygen mask on her face as a chilling reminder of her brush with death down below in the cave. "I can't tell you how glad I am that she made it this far. For a while there, it looked really bad... but you pulled her back to life. Ain't that something?"

"I don't wanna do it again anytime soon, honey... none of it. That's a fact," Melanie said, stifling a yawn.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Once your mom gets out of hospital, she can come stay with us for a while until the insurance and all that crap is settled. Not sure I wanna make it a habit though..." Janni continued with a wink. "There are things moms shouldn't hear... an' I kinda like being alone with you..."

Melanie smiled and squeezed Janni's good hand. "Do you?"

"Awwww, yeah."

"You better get used to it, Janni... after this nightmare, I'll..." - the yawn finally broke through and cracked her face wide open. Once it was done, she sighed and rubbed her tired face - "I'm gonna stick to you like glue."

Soon, two EMTs closed the rear doors and stepped into the cab of the ambulance. One of them came into the back to monitor Angela Sinclair. The young man looked at the three horrendously filthy women and gave Melanie and Janni a shy smile.

Janni grinned back at him and gave Melanie's hand another squeeze. "Like glue? I could live with that, honey. Mmmm... yeah... 'cos I kinda love you, you know."

"I love you too, Janni. Would you mind if I took a nap now?" Melanie said and swung her legs up into the stretcher. The young EMT came over and clicked the four safety belts shut so the patient wouldn't fall off the stretcher in the turns.

"Of course not, honey. My only peeve is that I can't join ya up there," Janni said with a cheeky grin that made the EMT break out in a pink, double-sided blush.

Up front, the driver started the engine and the siren. Soon, the ambulance went on a quick, weaving journey through the battered streets of McKendrick to get to the hospital. And Janni never let go of Melanie's hand.

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THE END.

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