

Sample Chapters from
When The Gods Wish To Punish
By
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The Eighties

I think I need to tell you about Dean's escape, before I forget it all. I can feel the fog drifting through my mind as time goes by, eroding the edges of my memory, and I need to remember that night. I'm not the smartest girl in the world, or even the smartest one here, but I'm sure we all need to remember it.

A gorgeous sky, supernatural. Clouds stacked all the way to space and the light of the full moon making them glow brighter than the city around us. From our floor you can't really hear the cars and people normally anyway, but tonight it was especially quiet out there. Like the city knew what was happening.

We were sitting around chatting in the atrium, not about anything in particular. I was just happy to be staying up, listening in on the adult conversations. I'd tried arguing that it didn't make sense for me to go to bed early anymore – no school – but it had never worked before. For some reason though, when I snuck out that night and edged my way closer to the group, nobody said a thing. I listened to the nothing they all said, the pointless conversations about anything but...

They let me. They accepted me.

When Stanley slammed his apartment door open and dashed into the hall I squealed – like a baby – but everyone jumped a little.

'Dean,' he said, breathless. Stanley is overweight, still, and never was very fit. He'd run from his balcony and was already sweating. 'He's going to jump.'

Everyone turned back to their conversations, ready to ignore the ridiculousness. Dean was a junky, and crazy, violent and irrational sometimes, but he wasn't going to jump. Even I knew he wasn't going to jump, and they'd tried to shield me from the resident's last few attempts.

'He's on the edge.' Stanley stepped into the group, his eyes darting around, trying to find someone interested in his news. 'He's going over.'

'He won't jump,' Asako said. She had her cigarette dangling from her lips – still unlit and looking a bit battered – and she barely managed enough interest to look at him as she dismissed his excitement. 'He can't.'

'He's asleep. He's sleep walking.' Stanley's words finally had the impact he was looking for. Every eye was on him now, and everyone's heart beat a little faster. This was new, this was different. Could it mean something? Could it change things?

We formed an orderly stampede on the way to Stanley's balcony. I remember the silliest things sometimes, and I remember Asako letting the Indian guy go ahead of her. They were both smiling, excited, and I was confused. I get it now – I'm older, wiser to the ways of this strange world – but I didn't understand their reactions at the time.

In the Atrium we'd had a circle of sky in the roof above us, enough to feel like you were outside and to see those glorious clouds a little. On the balcony you could take in the majesty of them, hanging over the world, looking down on the city, stretching to the horizon. I stared at them for a while, standing still and silent with everyone else, but they weren't watching the clouds. They'd stopped at the door, pushing gently, jostling each other until everyone there could see.

Dean stood on the balcony ledge, his head hanging and his arms at his sides. He was dressed in his only clothes, the faded black jeans and tattered grey shirt blending with the darkness of the sky.

After a minute of silence, Asako stepped forward, turned her back on the man on the edge, and took the cigarette from her mouth. 'So what do we do?' She said it softly, barely loud enough for us all to hear.

'If two of us move slowly behind him we can each take an arm and pull him back,' Stanley said.

'That's one option.' Asako scanned the crowd. Not everyone had stayed up that night, but there were about ten people there. Nobody else said anything, so I did.

'We have to help him quick, or he'll fall.' My voice sounded stupid in my ears, childish and out of place

in the conversation. I was fourteen and very sure of my maturity, but something about that situation had me off balance.

‘That’s the other option,’ Asako said.

I didn’t understand at first, but when nobody would look me in the eye I worked it out. ‘You’re saying you want to let him go?’ There was a quiver in my voice.

‘If he can fall, if he can leave, then it means something,’ someone said from the back of the group. A man, I think. The memory is a little fuzzy.

‘If he fell,’ this one was a woman, but again, I can’t tell you who, ‘Would someone find him? They’d know we were here.’

The adults started murmuring but I was tuning them out. I remember the world wobbling, like something unreal springing a glitch, or a video tape with a stretched bit. They wanted to let him fall! We weren’t the tallest building in the city, but he’d die all the same. Thirteen floors is a long way down.

‘You can’t be serious.’ Stanley took a step away from the door, a step closer to Dean and the edge. ‘We can’t.’

‘He isn’t a good man,’ the Indian guy said. ‘But can we do this?’

‘We can,’ Asako said. ‘We don’t have to do anything to make this happen. The real question is should we? If he goes over then they can’t ignore us anymore.’

‘That’s not good enough,’ Stanley said, loud. After all the soft voices and whispering, his was thunder, jerking us all awake. ‘We’re not going to let him die.’

I don’t remember much about Asako from before that night, but it felt like she’d prepared for something like this. From the way she’d stepped out in front of everyone and suggested letting Dean go, to the sharp kitchen knife she pulled on Stanley when he tried to walk to the edge.

‘This isn’t just your decision, Stanley.’ She was in front of him, easily quicker than he was, and quiet too. She showed him the knife and pointed back to the door.

‘You can’t kill me,’ Stanley said, tripping over his words.

‘I can hurt you.’

Whatever had been about to happen didn’t get a chance to. Dean mumbled something in his sleep, raised an arm to scratch his head, and took a step forward.

Normally when we try to leave we find it impossible. We can’t even get to the edge of the balcony, can’t even touch the door handle to the fire escape. Seeing someone leave the confines of that balcony, knowing he was on his way out, was enough to still even my confused mind.

We can’t leave the thirteenth floor. If we want to leave we fail. If someone tries to throw us out they are interrupted. This is why, as Dean shifted his weight to the leg hanging over the edge, a fire truck siren blasted into that silent night. The world conspired to wake him up before he could plummet to his death, and freedom.

That isn’t why I need to remember that night though. I need to remember that night because everyone was going to let him go. They were going to let him die, just to see if it could be done. In Asako’s case, I think it might have been even simpler: I think she just wanted something unusual to happen, something she hadn’t already tried.

None of these people are bad people, but they don’t have to be. That’s what I want you to remember, future me. These are perfectly normal adults, and they were all – except Stanley of course – willing to let Dean take that step.

I sometimes think I remember a tinkling sound in the moment it happened, like a fairy in a cartoon flew by. Other times I think I remember feeling the world wobble, like that night on the balcony. I’m pretty sure it’s all crap though.

I don’t know if I’ll remember this, or if it will fade away like so much else. So, future me, adult Sandra, read and be filled with knowledge. I’m sorry if I’m wasting your paper.

We were on my bed, cutting school and making out. Dean had a light buzz on, of course. Heroin made him happy, so it made me happy. Also, he was a bad boy, and my parents hated him.

He wanted sex. It was all he talked about. I touched him and tried to act grown-up, but I couldn’t do it. This would have become a problem in time, I’m sure, but then the world went all weird. Who knows how long I would have held out? Probably not much longer; he was seventeen and experienced. A catch, and I would have had to hold on to him somehow.

After quite a bit of begging and a little anger, he settled down. He told me everything was fine, that he

didn't mind really. He was just backed up. He held me, spooning me on my bed, some electric drivel on the cheap plastic radio. When my parents got me the radio I don't think they had any idea I'd use it to drown out my druggy boyfriend begging me for a blowjob. I remember thinking, as I lay in his arms, in love, that I just wished they'd stay away, that everyone would stay away. I wished we could stay there forever, together.

I fell asleep in his arms, his hand on my tiny breast, under my shirt. It was the most erotic thing...

My parents normally come home around six, so when I woke up and saw that it was already twenty minutes past I freaked. I spent a moment just staring at the alarm clock, but its stupid green digits wouldn't resolve into other numbers no matter how hard I willed it.

'Get up,' I said, trying to disentangle myself from him. Dean gripped tighter and moaned, but I fought back, jerking and dragging myself toward the edge of the bed, slipping out of his grasp with an involuntary squeal that made him smile.

'You need to get back here,' he said, reaching out to grab me.

'It's six-thirty,' I said. I repeated myself when he didn't seem to understand the urgency.

'Fuck.' He rolled away, toward the other side of the bed and fell off. 'Fuck,' he yelled. I shushed him and he said sorry, then dragged himself up and began hunting for his shoes.

I was at the door, opening it a crack to peek out. They weren't home, somehow. From my room you can see the front door and if either of them had come back they'd have left their keys in the bowl on the little table. The bowl was empty.

'Hurry,' I said, afraid to look back into the room and see him stumbling around. I didn't want to lose sight of the door. They could be home at any moment.

'I'm done.' He grabbed the door and pulled it open, sticking his head out to check the short hall himself. When he was satisfied we were still alone he pulled the door all the way open, grabbed my arm, and pushed me against the wall. He kissed me and at first I fought it, still thinking about the front door opening and my parents walking in. Then I wasn't thinking about them, and then I wasn't thinking much at all.

I gave him a far more chaste kiss at the front door and watched him walk backwards down the hall to the elevators, watching me with that cocky smile of his. I grinned back and closed the door, then stood on my toes and watched him through the peephole.

He stopped at the elevator, staring at the button. I thought he must know I was there, watching him, and so he was messing around. I waited for almost a minute before opening the door and calling out to him.

'You have to go,' I said, using one of those whispers that are louder than if you'd just spoken normally. He kept staring at the button, oblivious. 'This isn't funny, Dean. They could be in the lift already.'

My dad would wait for my mom at work, in the lobby of her building, and they'd catch the bus back together. He complained about it from time to time, but he kept doing it, and they always came home smiling and laughing.

Remember that: your parents were happy, with each other and with you. Don't forget.

When Dean wouldn't move, wouldn't acknowledge me at all, I grabbed my key from the hook beside the door and ran down the hall. The door closed by itself behind me.

'Stop messing around. You have to go.'

'I can't...'. He spaced out for a moment, as though lost in some errant thought. 'I can't hit the button.'

'Stop being an idiot.' I grabbed his hand. 'If they catch you here they'll freak.' He made no move to do as I was asking, so I went to press the damn button myself.

This was the first time I felt the fog in my brain, felt the way the world goes kind of blurry. We'd experiment later, and everyone quickly learned how to avoid it, but this was the first time it happened to me. It was like I forgot what I was doing, or at least why. I knew the button was important but I couldn't remember why. It waited there, a white plastic square with a down arrow beneath it, faded from years of people doing what I suddenly could not.

Then I remembered why I had needed to press the button, but it suddenly didn't matter anymore. Whatever I had been anxious about went away. I stood there for ages. It felt like hours but it was only a minute or two. There were times, later on, when one of us would stand for hours, staring at the button, unable to move. That was the first time though and it scared me enough that I broke away by myself.

I stepped away from the lift and from Dean, the world reeling around me as though I'd been spinning in place and suddenly stopped. I stumbled to one of the small couches the building placed along the walls and collapsed onto it, lying down and waiting for everything to stop spinning. Dean stayed where he was,

trapped in the spell of the elevator button.

When I had my senses back and felt steady on my feet I moved back to him. I kept my eyes away from the elevators entirely and grabbed Dean's arm, pulling him a few steps away and turning him around. He kept staring straight ahead for a few seconds, directly at my forehead, before his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell down.

I must have called out his name, or cried, or – knowing me at the time – squealed, because I had barely started shaking Dean when Mr Turner opened his door and came over to see what the problem was. I looked up at him and saw the disapproval in his eyes that all adults had when they saw Dean, but I didn't care. I was so happy to have an adult there, to have someone who might be able to help.

Mr Turner knelt on the other side of Dean and began gently slapping his face. He felt for a pulse on his neck, then went back to slapping.

When Dean opened his eyes I lost it. I must have been crying before but I bawled my eyes out when he pushed himself up and looked around.

'What happened?' Dean and Mr Turner said at the same time.

'You're alright,' I said through my tears. I hugged him and didn't let go until I felt his hands on my back.

'Are you kids on something?' Mr Turner said. I couldn't see his face but the tone of his voice was enough to get my back up.

'Call the elevator,' I said to him, a little more sharply than I would have liked. He stepped back at the raised voice, but didn't move. Another door opened behind me but I kept my eyes on Mr Turner. 'Press the button.'

'You calm down,' he said, stepping back further, heading for his door. 'If you don't I'll call the police.'

'Please, Mr Turner,' I tried, begging in my most "little girl" voice. 'Please call the elevator for us.'

He watched me, holding my recently unconscious, out of place boyfriend on the expensive carpets of the expensive floor of a not cheap apartment building. He frowned, expecting some trick, sure that if I was with Dean I must be up to something. But he moved to the button and reached his hand out.

It has been my experience, mostly recently, that time can do whatever the hell it wants. If you're having fun it can slip away too fast. If life sucks it can drag, and drag you slowly through whatever is bothering you. Mr Turner's hand reaching for the button was one of those moments when time went wonky, slowing down, his movement barely perceptible.

And then he stopped, his hand outstretched and the button un-pressed. The fog had him and I realised I wasn't going crazy.

The adults pretty much ignored us after that. I had to save Mr Turner, pulling him roughly away from the mesmerising button, and I answered his questions when he got his senses back. After that he took charge, first trying to call building maintenance.

I'd love to know how that conversation would have gone, had he been able to get through:

Mr Turner: 'Hi. We have a hypnotic elevator button we'd like looking at.'

Maintenance guy: 'What? Get lost, weirdo.'

He couldn't get through though. Didn't even get a dial tone. He left us sitting in the hall and went banging on doors.

'Are you alright?' Dean asked me. His arm was around me and I had his other hand in mine. I was scared and confused but he seemed to be taking it in stride. He wasn't reacting as much as you'd think a person would, given the situation. I saw it as strength and leaned into him to get some for myself, to be protected by him.

'I'm fine, I guess.' I risked a glance at the button and quickly looked away, but nothing weird happened. So I did something stupid, trusting in Dean to save me if things went wrong. I looked at the button again and held my eyes there. It's amazing how frightening something so innocuous can be. Nothing happened, no fog, no confusion.

'What are you doing?' Dean said. His hand pulled from mine and forced my eyes away from the elevator. 'You want it to happen again?'

'I think it's over,' I said, pulling away from him and smiling. 'Look at it, Dean.'

'You're crazy.'

'Just try.' I stood and faced the elevator, staring at the button. Nothing happened. I spun in place, giggling like a child. 'It's over.'

Dean shook his head slowly, his own eyes locked on the mysterious button, a frown on his face. I laughed again and went to press the button—

Dean rescued me from the fog this time, pulling me away and sitting me down on the couch before the fog finished lifting. I came back to my senses in his arms, safe.

‘I think it’s about intention,’ Dean said a few minutes later. I was staring at the button again, unhappy, confused. I spent a lot of time those first few days confused.

‘What?’

‘We can look at it all we want, but if we want to push it we go spacey. It isn’t the button that’s the problem, it’s the intent behind pressing it.’

‘And the difference is? The stupid button is still the problem.’

He turned on the couch and forced me to face him. ‘It’s bigger than that San. If the problem is intent then this is bigger...’ He faded away and I thought he’d been caught by the fog again. I shook him, but he leapt off the couch and ran down the hall without saying anything. I followed, annoyed that he’d leave me behind. I caught up to him at the emergency stairs.

‘What the hell?’

‘I’m going to take the stairs,’ Dean said, overly loud, like he was telling everyone in the apartments around us. ‘Wish me luck.’ He grinned, kissed me, and reached for the bar across the emergency exit. He froze in place and I could practically see that foginess slam into place in his eyes.

I pulled him away and helped him sit on the floor opposite the door. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, but seemed fine otherwise.

‘What’s going on?’ I said, my eyes threatening to tear up again.

‘We’re stuck.’ I could feel his heart beating fast against my shoulder as I curled up in his arms. ‘The button isn’t the problem, the whole floor is.’

‘We can’t leave?’

‘I bet I could touch the stupid button, or the bar on the door and be fine.’

‘Don’t,’ I said quickly.

‘As long as I didn’t want to leave. As long as I didn’t think about actually using it.’

He was up and moving again without warning and I was rolled away and dumped on the floor. When I looked up he had his hand on the bar and he was staring at me.

‘As long as we don’t want to leave, we’re fine.’ He stroked the bar, fondling it with both hands, touching every inch of it almost lovingly. Then he was gone again, spacing out, standing still with his mouth open like he’d had a stroke.

I pulled him away again and he came out of it straight away. The more he exposed himself to the effect the less it affected him, it seemed.

‘What does it mean?’ I asked him, trusting that he’d have a better idea than me.

‘I only thought it,’ he said, looking at the door but focussing on somewhere else. ‘I showed no intention. I didn’t say anything. It got me anyway.’

We stood for a while in silence outside the emergency exit, holding hands. I think we were in shock. When we heard the commotion back at the elevators it snapped us out of it.

Mr Turner had managed to drag four people out of their apartments. He stood in the hall, as anxious as he ever got – which wasn’t very – as he tried to explain the problem. He wouldn’t look at the button but he didn’t notice that the others were staring right at it. He hadn’t made that connection yet.

‘What are you talking about?’ Asako said. I hadn’t really met her before, beyond saying hello in passing in the hall. It was the same with everyone really; nobody who stayed in the penthouse apartments really wanted to know their neighbours.

‘There’s something wrong with the lift,’ Mr Turner said, waving his hands in the air as though this would somehow get the idea across. ‘We can’t get out.’

‘You’re a deeply strange dude,’ Sky said. He was a surfer, though we were an hour from a surfing beach. I discovered later that he didn’t own a surfboard.

‘Try it,’ Dean said, leaving my side and walking into the group. Everyone gave him a skew look, which was normal, but they were listening. ‘Someone call the lift.’

‘I have nowhere to be,’ Asako said, and the others agreed with her. Mrs Morgan, my next-door neighbour, nodded, but she seemed distracted, as though she needed to be somewhere else. The last person in the hall, Phil, an old man I hadn’t seen before, turned and started walking away.

‘Just press the button,’ Mr Turner said.

‘You’re all crazy,’ Sky replied, but he stepped up to the elevator. He raised his index finger in the air,

made a show of swinging it in an arch toward the button, and then froze. The fog had him.

We sat in the atrium that night, almost all of those trapped on thirteen. Nobody was interested in what I thought, which suited me fine at the time. I listened to the discussion, hoping at first that someone would come up with a solution, then just listening because I didn't want to be alone.

Dean got more involved, explaining his experiment to the group. There were fifteen of us on the thirteenth floor, with only Phil and his wife staying in their apartment.

'That's impossible,' Mr Turner said. He was standing against one of the pillars that held the upper floor in place.

'Then try it yourself,' Dean said. 'Any of you. Go to the emergency exit and see if you can get the door open.'

Nobody did, but I'm guessing most of them had tried it before we convened the meeting. The discussions continued but I spent the time watching the people rather than listening. The atrium was the central hub of the thirteenth floor and there was plenty of room for everyone to spread out. They didn't, choosing instead to huddle together even as they fought over the reality of the problem.

The thirteenth floor was really two floors, but all the apartments had an upper and a lower floor of their own, with balconies and private terraces. Everyone's front doors pointed to the atrium, a roughly circular open space with a glass roof. I stared up at the night sky outside and thought I could see a star.

Is that the first time I wondered if it was somehow my fault, if I'd trapped us all in there with a stupid, childish wish. I remember it that way, as though I'd had an epiphany staring at that single star, but it probably came later.

'We just have to wait,' a man said. 'Everyone has to come home from work at some point.'

'Have you checked the time?' Dean said. 'How late is everyone supposed to be working tonight?'

'Maybe there was an emergency,' Asako said. She was smoking inside – a big no-no – but nobody seemed to mind. A few others had joined her, anxiously puffing away as they watched the discussion unfold.

'Go outside,' Dean replied. 'Walk to the edge and look down. I've done it and you know what I saw? Nothing special. People going on about their lives. So, unless all your family members are playing a weird joke on you, they aren't coming home.'

'You sound like you're into this,' Sky said from his spot leaning against the wall. 'You sound like you like it. Like you want to be stuck here.'

'Trust me, buddy, I need to leave more than any of you.' They dismissed his comment, but I knew what he meant. Dean never brought drugs to my house when we hung out, so he was about to get desperate to leave.

'Where would they go?' Mr Turner said softly, to himself.

'It doesn't matter,' a woman said from the crowd.

'Of course it does,' Mr Turner replied. 'I've got a wife and kid out there somewhere.' His voice rose as he spoke, cutting through the other conversations going on. 'They should be home by now, so if they can't get in, and there isn't some commotion going on downstairs to explain it, then where the hell are they?'

'Maybe they've been taken,' Dean said, his eyes whipping about in their sockets. He was getting manic and it made him look more crazy than he normally did when he started on some weird theory. 'This is an experiment, something the government is pulling. They've been taken to a camp somewhere, to keep them from blowing the whistle.'

'You're a nutjob,' Asako said, lighting a fresh cigarette and ignoring Dean.

'Do you have a better idea?'

I listened to their debate for a little while longer, but when I walked away nobody noticed I was gone. I stumbled back to my place and went into the lounge, turning on the TV as I collapsed onto the couch.

I can't explain what I was thinking, but I needed to get away from the craziness. There's only so much weirdness a person can handle in a single day, and there's a far lower threshold on how much discussion on the topic of that weirdness I can put up with. Ever.

So I watched the news, where normal people were doing normal things, and then I watched something else. I don't remember what, Dallas or something, but I fell asleep on the couch. I dreamed of the fog, and the crowd in the atrium, and my parents.

Now that I've begun these stories I find that I can't stop. I don't think all of this is necessary, future me, but I'm going to tell it anyway. There's a council going on outside right now and I don't think I can take another one. The last one devolved into using a ruler to measure wafers. It's driving me nuts.

Besides, this is therapy for me. Nobody really wants to deal with me out there, even after all this time. It's like they don't see me unless I'm with Dean. Dean's doing well though.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The next day was a bad day.

Dean was pacing around the lounge, muttering to himself. He'd kicked the glass coffee table over and he wouldn't stop walking through the glass as I tried to clean it up.

'Maybe if I climbed down the trash chute,' he said to himself, muttering as he stomped by. I quickly picked up the bigger pieces of glass before he came back. He'd crushed some to a fine, dangerous powder already. 'No, stupid. That'll be like the fire escape. You'll turn into a zombie and stare at it.'

I put the shards of glass into a bag and waited for him to pass by again, then tried to use the little broom to get some of the smaller bits.

'The power company will notice there's something wrong if we don't turn up to pay the bill. But that won't help now. That'll get us out in a few months. And the government could just pay the bill.'

'You don't actually think it's the government?' I said, loud enough to get his attention.

'It could be. Could be.' He stopped pacing and grinned. 'We could write a note and drop it down the chute.' He headed for my room to get some paper, but his next train of thought stopped him. 'What if we ran the water, flooded a bathroom? When the water leaked into the place downstairs someone would have to come up and fix it.' He laughed at his plan as he left the room.

I chased after him, worried what he might do. I couldn't let him flood the apartment; my parents would kill me.

He'd pulled the showerhead away from the bath by the time I got there. It's one of those ones on a long silver pipe you use to wash your back when you're in the bath. He left it dangling down the side and turned the taps as far as they would go.

'Don't,' I said. He ignored me, grabbing the small bin from beneath the sink and turning it upside down over the drain in the floor. Water began to pool immediately.

'This'll work. No fog so far.' He cackled, like a witch from some kid's story. 'I've got you now,' he said to the ceiling. 'I've worked it out.'

I grabbed his arm and tried to push him out of the way so I could get to the bath and turn off the taps. He shoved me away without looking. I slipped, falling to the tiles and hitting my head. The world went a little foggy, this time without needing to look at a button. When I could think straight again he was gone. He'd created a barrier out of towels at the edge of the bathroom and water had already soaked through it. I was lying, face down in the rising puddle, a halo of blood in the water around my head.

I turned off the taps and kicked the bin over. The water drained quickly and I stepped carefully into the hall. I first checked the lounge for Dean, then my room, then my parent's room. He wasn't in any of them, but the sliding door in my parent's room was open and when I stepped through the fluttering curtains I found him.

Dean stood at the railing at the edge of the large balcony. His hands gripped it so hard his knuckles had turned white. I couldn't make out what he was mumbling until I stood beside him.

'Not going to jump. Not going to jump. Not going to jump.' He said it as a mantra, over and over until the words couldn't have meant anything to him. I waited, scared to interfere, terrified of what he was trying to do.

He repeated the words for a minute longer before lifting his leg to swing it over the railing. I jumped to try and stop him but I didn't need to worry. The fog got him and he fell away and to the floor, cracking his head the way I had cracked mine. I checked for blood and when I was sure there wasn't any I decided to let him lie down for a bit.

The view from the balcony was one of the reasons my parents bought the apartment and I spent a bit of time admiring it. Dean had been right the night before; as long as I had no thoughts of going over the edge I could lean over and watch the street below without a problem. I could easily make out the people walking by and I examined them closely, in case my parents were out there, waiting.

To the right of the balcony and across a small street was a tall glass building. A lift lowered down from

a rig on the roof made its way to the same level as me and I started yelling and waving my arms. The wind picked up and seemed to steal my voice for a moment but I persevered. I yelled and screamed until I couldn't any more, then fetched one of the metal chairs and banged it on the railing. The sound was easily loud enough to get their attention, normally, but they finished cleaning a window and moved on.

What the hell was happening? How was it even possible? Dean kept mentioning that he thought the government was behind it, running some kind of experiment on us. As though we were important enough to warrant something like that.

Dean groaned and rolled into my leg. I crouched and helped him up, walking him back to the lounge and listening as his rambling started up again.

By that night he was somebody else, no longer manic and pacing, no longer coming up with ever more elaborate conspiracy theories. No, now he was a straight up crazy person, screaming at me and at the unseen observers of the experiment. The government, aliens, God, he tried them all. Begging for release from the aching need he felt, the hunger he couldn't do anything about.

Dean had never been a heavy user, but even so he was an addict. I can't imagine what it must be like for people who live on heroin to go through withdrawals, but for him it was pretty bad. During one of his quieter periods I managed to walk him to the spare room and lock him in. It was the smartest thing I could have done as that was when he really freaked out. The sound of breaking furniture and smashing glass had me crying again as someone knocked on the front door.

I tried to clean my face before opening the door. I mustn't have done a good job of it as Mr Turner's angry face fell when he saw me.

'Is everything alright in there?' he said, reaching his hand to touch my arm as though it was an alien movement and I was something he shouldn't be touching.

'Dean is just...'

'Going through withdrawal.' He pulled me toward him with more confidence and gave me a hug. I had a passing thought that this was inappropriate before his arms wrapped around me and I let myself go. I cried into his shirt and he let me, my sobs drowned out by the rage coming from the spare room.

'I'm sorry,' I said, pulling away. 'I'm just a little scared. I'll get it together.'

He kept his hands on my shoulders and held eye contact. 'I'm terrified, and there's nothing wrong with it. This is very strange, and you're dealing with something I can't imagine.'

The silence from the spare room was louder than the screaming and Mr Turner and I both turned to it immediately. He followed me as I ran back to the door and fumbled with the key, missing the hole twice before managing to unlock and open the door. Having an adult man with me as the door swung open gave me more confidence than I'd like to admit.

Dean lay on the ground, coughing blood from both his mouth and the gash in his throat. I froze in the doorway, unable to think as Mr Turner moved by me and dropped to Dean's side. He carefully pulled the jagged glass from Dean's hand and grabbed a blanket lying on the floor to hold against the wound.

'Get Mr Mammoth,' he said. When I didn't move he tried again. 'Go get Phil, now!'

I turned and sprinted for the door. It had closed behind us and I couldn't get my fingers to turn the lock and let me out. I fumbled with it as Mr Turner's voice floated down the hall, telling Dean to "hold on" over and over. He sounded a little hysterical.

I finally managed to turn the lock and drag the door open. I pulled the little table into the doorway to stop the door from closing behind me and rushed down the hall to Phil's door. I tried knocking first, but having to wait for him to answer was too much for me and I was banging on it and yelling when he finally opened up.

'What is this all about?' he said in his oh-so-British accent.

'Dean. He's hurt. Mr Turner said to get you.' The words all melded into one and I'm surprised he understood me. He didn't move right away, standing in the doorway while his head whipped back and forth between me and the darkness within. I don't think he wanted to help, but – I discovered that night – he's a doctor and his ethics finally got the better of him. He held up a finger and hurried back into his apartment.

I waited on the doorstep, tapping my foot and glancing back down the hall while he took his time inside. It was so quiet I could hear the blood racing through my ears, and a sound like a groan coming from Phil's apartment. I didn't get a chance to think about it as he rushed past me, a gym bag over his shoulder.

When we got back to the room Mr Turner stood in the door and wouldn't let me in. Phil the doctor dashed inside and went to work, but all I could see around Mr Turner was blood.

'Let me in,' I said, trying to push him out of the way. I shrugged his hands off my shoulders and tried to push through.

'You don't want to go in there,' he said, a hitch in his voice. He was faster than me, and stronger, and he kept me in the hall.

'He needs me. Let me in.'

'It doesn't look good.' My head jerked up and I stared at his face. He looked like he was about to cry. 'I don't think he'll make it. I'm sorry.'

'Fuck you,' I said, and punched him in the balls. He fell away and I leapt his groaning body and went to Dean's side.

'I'm sorry,' Phil said as he closed Dean's eyes, just like they do in the movies. 'There was too much blood loss.'

'Save him,' I said, pleading. 'Bring him back.'

'I can't.'

'Please.'

'Maybe if we could call an ambulance, or if I had more equipment.' His hands were shaking as he pulled off gloves I hadn't seen him put on. 'He's gone.'

Dean always strove for the theatrical when dealing with strangers, trying to come off more mysterious, more important, more adult than he really was. That day, with blood everywhere and three people crying over him, he achieved more theatre than he could have hoped for.

Dean coughed. Phil and I sat in his blood and watched as Dean raised his hand to his throat and pressed on the wound. Blood had stopped flowing from his neck but there was a little still seeping from the cuts on his hand.

'What the hell?' Phil said, grabbing his stethoscope and trying to listen for a heartbeat. Dean knocked his hands away and sat bolt upright, his eyes roaming the room like he was looking for whoever had hurt him.

'You're alright,' I said, trying to hug him. He shrugged me off and slowly stood, his eyes still checking the room.

'Let me die,' he said to nobody, to the walls. He pulled his hand away from his neck and I heard Phil gasp before I saw it myself; Dean's neck was healing. The wound was closing by itself. Even the gashes in his hand were closing up. The blood hadn't stopped flowing because he was dead, it had stopped because he was healing.