

5 Darkness Visible

Ed breathed hard, his back pressed against a graffitied blast wall. Crouched like he was, Zoey was stifling a coughing fit, brought on by the acrid smoke of burning gasoline and tear gas, which was getting thicker and thicker the closer she and Ed got to the city center, where the tallest skyscraper stood, undamaged and pristine.

“Fucking hell, your brother isn’t making it easy, is he?”

Zoey was too busy trying not to cough and retch to swear back, but she moved enough to make him recoil from her an inch or two.

When they had crossed the bridge entering the city, a bombed out shell of a car that was still on fire met them. Hearing automatic gunfire only two blocks away from their initial position, Ed and Zoey ran for the nearest cover, which was difficult as most of the buildings were made of glass and metal. Fortunately, older buildings and parking garages were solidly encased in cement, although those places could only be reached via a crazy-quilt maze of blast walls, road blocks, and opposing gangs of armed people.

Most of those armed people, to Zoey’s dismay, were only children, young men in battered civilian survival gear, barely into their teens. Unlike the people of the river, the shantytown, and the club, they seemed to recognize Ed and Zoey as intruders and coldly decide to shoot rather than assess who they were.

The gang warfare was bad enough, but then an “official” looking occupying force – uniformed soldiers, or perhaps riot police, encased helmet to boot in red and black body armor – were engaging those armed gangs but also decided to shoot rather than assess who Zoey and Ed were. While Zoey had never experienced a hot battle zone, Ed had. But neither had experienced suicide bombers until they saw a “brown” detonate his vest before a road block of “reds” could get him.

Zoey had to bite hard on her lip until it bled, just to stop the scream that would alert the gangs and soldiers to their position, huddled behind the low, shot-through walls of a parking garage. Ed had winced, the image of the boy’s body shredded by the explosion seared into his memory, which got jumbled with the foreign memories of a handful of past human hosts who had also seen warfare, either as forced combatant or horrified witness, as well as his ancient memories of mangled angels in the first war of wars.

“Your brother ever served in the military?” he had asked then.

“I – I don’t know,” was Zoey’s shaky reply.

“Well, he either did, or he saw far too much ‘War on Terror’ news footage and has one hell of an imagination.” He had checked the overcast sky. “At least there’s no air support, and we have some cover of darkness with this dawn/ dusk light. Let’s check for an underground.”

After seeing the fourth barricaded entrance and getting heavy gunfire as they tried to check the fifth, Ed and Zoey gave up trying to travel via the city’s underground tunnels. Like rats or cockroaches, they scurried, hid, and ran from one spot to another, keeping their eyes out for hostiles as they meandered towards the city center.

Pausing at that blast wall, just one block from their main target, Zoey finally caught her breath, her lungs still burning as she rubbed her mouth on her now-grubby shirt sleeves. She had no idea how much time had passed since her arrival at the forest, as if time had any meaning in the surreal mental geography of Jamie’s brain. She didn’t feel sleepy, thirsty, or hungry, but she did feel pain. “Ed, what happens if I get seriously hurt in here?”

“What?” He frowned at the question as if it were a bothersome and distracting mosquito.

“What happens if I get mortally wounded? If I die in here, do I die, period?”

He chewed his lip before answering. “I don’t know. So don’t.”

“But --”

Ed put a silencing finger to his lips, and they heard a patrol slowly but efficiently move past above them. Once he was certain they were out of line of sight, he made a now-familiar motion with his hand: *run*.

They ran. Over rubble-strewn streets, cars and trash bins on fire, the sound of the patrol suddenly realizing something was going on as laser sights started roving towards them, Zoey and Ed sprinted their last length, seeing nothing but the glass doors of the skyscraper behind a bombed-out blast wall and trampled razor wire.

Too easy, Ed thought fleetingly, until he saw a small form uncurl from that broken blast wall, a little boy wearing a too-bulky jacket with dead eyes. In the space that it took for the bomb to activate and a sniper bullet to try to stop the activation, Ed grabbed Zoey and flew over the beginning bubble of the explosion, crashing through the skyscraper’s doors in a shower of broken glass, twisted metal, and concrete.

Zoey lay in a dark, painful space, barely able to breathe, until she felt shaky arms release her and what felt like a thick quilt lift away. Rolling out, her arms cut by the broken glass, she sat up blearily and then stared at Ed.

Ed was on his knees, his arms clutching his sides, his brown wings shredded, bloody, and collapsed behind him, as he retched dry heaves, his eyes streaming.

“Ed --” she started towards him.

“Don’t touch me!” He flung out an arm, palm facing out in the universal signal *stop*. “Just – wait,” he gasped.

Zoey sat and watched, amazed. His wings healed first, the blood ceasing its flow, the angry wounds sealing up, the flight feathers re-growing and lying flat and whole against the wings. Then they shimmered away as the rest of Ed’s wounds sealed up, leaving bright, silvery scars on his still-grubby skin and unseen healing underneath the skin and sinews. When his breathing became less labored and even in its cadence, he straightened up, his spine and neck audibly cracking as he stood up, wincing a bit as he walked.

“God almighty!” Zoey murmured softly.

“Maybe. It certainly wasn’t me.”

“What? No --”

“I know. You were swearing. It also happens to be appropriate.” He looked her over. “Any wounds?”

“What? I --” Zoey was about to show her minor cuts and scrapes, but then she noticed that they had healed as well, underneath all the sweat and grime. “How --?”

“Residual regeneration transfer,” he interrupted. He looked around. “What is this place?”

“Huh?” For the first time since crashing through the entrance doors, Zoey looked around. “Oh God,” she cried out, seeing her surroundings. “Jamie, why?”

“I take it that this is from a memory?”

“Yes,” Zoey stated. “The worst kind.”

While the outside had been a modern office skyscraper, the inside was another place: a little gravel path barely seen in the moonlight, which led downhill to a little odd structure, partially in ruins as seen by the half-collapsed carved roof and tall weeds. Zoey looked around, half-expecting to see the ghostly image of her twelve-year old self and ten-year old Jamie on bicycles, looking at the old church. But then she remembered that that memory was not in moonlight but sunset, and she closed her eyes as she recalled the only time she was there at moonlight. When she opened them, she saw Ed’s form, small in the distance down the main road. She was about to call after him when he disappeared, but then she heard him on the opposite side, walking from the far distance towards her, until he was next to her again.

“This place only goes as far as this immediate location,” he explained. “We try to go away, we’ll return right where we started.” He looked down the gravel path.

Zoey let out a deep breath. “But – this is my memory. How would Jamie – oh no.” She started running down the hill, towards the little deserted Quonset hut below. *Oh God please*, she thought, *oh please don’t let it be what I think this is*. She only stopped running when she realized she was sliding on something, something slick and oily and black.

Following the flowing stream of oil, she saw the source of it – the whole ruined church was covered in it, and it oozed the black liquid like a wound in the earth oozing black blood.

“Don’t you see it?” she remembered Jamie’s question from the first time they saw it years ago.

There was an odd trick of the light, for she both saw the black oil and not see it, a simple dilapidated Quonset hut that had served as a temporary mission once upon a time. But she started to see the dark ooze, almost willing the darkness to be made visible because it wasn’t a simple, harmless ruin, just as the priest who took away her childhood wasn’t a simple, harmless man.

“Jamie!” she called out, but the black ooze shut out her voice. She tried to open the door to the building, but the ooze made her hands and the door slick; it was impossible to gain a sure hold on anything. Panicked, she ran along the perimeter of the ruin, looking for a broken window or a weak spot, but everything was encased in darkness, except for one shattered window, where she found a ten-year old Jamie, his face twisted in agony, staring through the window.

“Is this your brother?” Ed asked quietly. He stood behind Jamie.

“Yes – thank God!”

Ed looked at her in surprise. “You’re relieved?”

“I was afraid that it was Jamie in there.” She reached out her hand to the little boy and wasn’t surprised when her hand flowed through him. She tried not to cry. “I didn’t know that Jamie was outside. I never knew that he had seen – until now.”

“Is that you... in there?”

“Yes.” She breathed deeply and looked inside.

It was like a silent black and white movie. Twelve-year old Zoey, as pale and still as Pearl Pureheart, thirty-year old Tony Macinas, the handsome, gregarious priest who would listen to her and read all of her silly, girlish stories and poems, which she had kept private and secret from everybody. But in that space, as he moved, he left behind him a trail of black oil, which flowed outward and along the floor, crept up the ruined walls, seeped out from the ruined roof and walls.

Zoey turned at the sound of Jamie’s choked sobs, as he ran away, running, falling, running again, until he disappeared from view. “When I came home, Jamie was already screaming in the kitchen. He had his first psychotic break that day.” She stared at her hands and arms, covered in black.

“What happened to *him*?” Ed gave a terse nod towards the window.

“Died. He drowned in the ocean as I was in a hospital bed, fighting the STDs that destroyed my uterus and fallopian tubes. As Jamie was in psychiatric treatment, hopped up on antipsychotics.”

“Suicide?”

“They said it was an accident.”

“Do you believe that?”

Zoey still stared at her hands and arms. “No.” She looked at Ed, her face blank and unreadable. “This is Jamie’s memory, not mine.” She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the ruined church was just a quiet Quonset hut, tranquil in the moonlight, and her skin was her own again. Noticing that odd trick of the light, she willed to see past the simulated moonlight and night sky of nearly thirty years ago, and the interior outlines of the steel and glass skyscraper faded into view.

Zoey and Ed stood in the center of the bottom of a seventy-two story skyscraper, but with no floors in between to obscure the view of the open rooftop, nearly a thousand feet above them. Where there should be broken glass, twisted metal, and cement rubble was a pristine, black marble floor, distorting the reflections of Zoey and Ed who stood upon it.

“Can you fly?” Zoey asked.

In reply, Ed wrapped his arms around Zoey’s waist. As she wrapped her arms around his neck, Zoey could feel the shifting of muscles and sinew in Ed’s shoulders, as the dark brown wings materialized, spreading outward, towering above both woman and angel.

“Are you afraid of heights?” he asked.

“Does it matter?” she replied to his chest. Up close, Zoey realized that Ed was rather tall.

He shrugged. “Thought I’d ask.” He looked up. “I don’t usually have passengers, so you might want to hold on tight.”

Before Zoey could reply, he leaped up, and the wings beat down, rapidly gaining height with each strong down stroke.

It was unlike anything Zoey had ever felt before.

In the long, upward spiral of their flight, the instantaneous and involuntary transfer of thought between Zoey and Ed, first discovered in the forest, restarted again, and they found that they didn’t have to speak to communicate.

Why couldn't you fly before?

Zoey could feel his sigh in her mind. *Because I was stupid.*

What?

Flight needs energy, more energy than I had, since keeping my existence separate from your brother's internal hell is exhausting enough as it is.

But you flew us into this building.

Yes.

So... you have more energy now?

Yes.

How?

You.

What?

You. I should've figured it out sooner, when you touched my arm in the forest and our thoughts got transferred. You're an additional entity, an added power source in this closed system.

Zoey stiffened. *What, so I'm a battery?*

No.

Well?

You're a Beatrice.

A... what?

A Beatrice. A human who guides a fallen creature to Heaven.

Zoey sent a confused jumble of emotions and images before settling on a reply. *Bullshit.*

Ed laughed, and feeling the genuine laughter of an angel was like a warm breeze on a hard, winter night.

I told you. I'm no saint, Zoey insisted.

So you keep saying. But you're a Beatrice, whether you like it or not. Even a fallen angel like me can see that.

Zoey fell silent, and then she shivered. *It got cold.*

It's about to get colder. Ed slowed down, his wings moving just enough to keep them stationary under the exposed ceiling of the skyscraper, like a person treading water. *You read Dante. What's the center of Hell like?*

A frozen lake. With Satan in the middle. Guarded by giants. Zoey's thoughts felt cold and brittle.

Exactly. Slow and quiet on this roof. Who knows what's waiting for us up there?

Ed shifted his arms and hands so that he could hoist Zoey up by her hips and then feet as she grabbed for the lip of the rooftop opening and pulled herself up, sliding onto the rooftop. Once she cleared the space, Ed also grabbed for the lip of the opening, quickly pulling himself up as his wings folded flat against his body.

On the rooftop, bare and slick from the constant drumbeat of freezing rain, huddled a man in rags, the back of a woman squatting next to him, whispering in his ear. Neither he nor the woman realized that they were not alone, a state that Zoey was about to interrupt until Ed held her back with a gentle but restraining hand.

Wait. Listen.

Standing quietly and still, they were able to hear the woman’s gentle whispers. “Aren’t you tired? Why keep fighting? It’s too late for me. You deserve a rest. Relax – just relax...” The man only moaned in reply, covering his head and face with his arms as he huddled even tighter. The woman stood up to circle to the other side of the man. Zoey stifled a gasp, surprised to see the young girl Lexa – but not Lexa, for the body language spoke not of a victimized girl but a pacing predator, regarding its prey. As she squatted down again, the image of Zoey’s mother sprouted before her eyes. “Your fault. Your fault. Sister damaged. Father gone. Mother dead. Your fault. Your fault. You don’t deserve to live. You should never have been born. Your fault. Your fault...” The words beat down upon the man like fists, causing him to twitch and shake.

Zoey pulled against Ed’s hand, but he held firm. *Wait. Listen.*

After a torturous space of time elapsed, the woman, still squatting like a toad against the man’s ear, shifted shape again, now taking on the appearance of the man’s sister. “You left me with him. You didn’t save me. You ruined my life. Why don’t you die, already?”

“NO!” Zoey exclaimed, pulling away from Ed.

The woman, startled, jumped up, the obnoxious Zoey-image gone as her own shape revealed itself. Even in her anger, Zoey stepped back in alarm. “Miranda!”

The other fallen angel stared at her, her pale skin stark against her iridescent blue-black wings. “How the hell did you get here? How the hell do you know me?” She suddenly saw the figure behind the human woman. “*You.*”

Ed stepped forward. “Me.”

For a second, Miranda stared at Ed as she once was – a companion at arms, a friend, a lover. But her violet eyes hardened as the eons of history crashed down between them, and her eyes flicked from

Ed to Zoey, to Ed again. “So – I get the brother, and you have the sister. How symmetric. But don’t be greedy. He’s *mine*.”

“NO!” Zoey yelled again, starting forward.

Miranda shot out to meet the woman with a back hand.

Ed darted between them, grabbing Miranda’s striking hand, and pulled her in close. The rain pelting them with icy needles, he launched high into the air, the two entangled angels soon becoming distant figures against a dark, stormy sky.

Zoey rushed to the huddled man’s side. “Jamie,” she said, gently. “Jamie, it’s me – it’s Zoey.”

The man whimpered, recoiling from the words. His body was covered in a growing sheen of ice.

“It’s Zoey, Jamie. It’s Zoey. The bad angel’s gone. I’m okay. Listen to me. I’m all right.” Zoey reached out, placing a protecting hand on Jamie’s cowed head.

He flinched, as if expecting to be hit.

Zoey closed her eyes, ignoring the ice and the cold. *I miss you, Jamie*, she sent, and then she sent even more.

#

Zoey was sitting in the very back of the church, her head cowed as she heard and felt the parishioners move to the front of the altar to take the communion bread and wine. For many Sundays she wasn’t one of them, not since the death of her mother, not since the two-year search for her brother led to nothing.

She wasn’t even sure why she was here.

The church she attended every Sunday was distinctly modern: high ceilings with stained glass in the clerestory windows, cushiony seats and kneelers, echoing gray wall-to-wall tiling, and air-conditioning that worked so well that it was a shock when parishioners left the refrigerated inside for the hot, humid early summer outside. It was a place where the sacristy’s doors always seemed to be half-opened with the hustle and bustle of harried altar boys and Eucharistic ministers, marching back and forth for candles or spare hosts or more wine to set up the altar, while the rag-tag choir and band quietly rehearsed their kumbaya-type liturgical music, which the youngish priest, Father Gary, preferred as it fit his pop-culture laced, trendy homilies.

She missed the old church that used to stand there, a tiny white-steepled basilica style with a choir loft overhead, the hidden singers’ music floating out like music from invisible spirits. She missed the kindly, old priest who reminded her of Saint Nicholas of the European Christmas stories and exuded tradition and safety. But like most things in the modern world, the small and personal seemed to give

way to excess and supersizing, even in places of worship that felt less and less sacred with every passing year.

But it wasn't the style of worship that kept her from taking part in communion, Sunday after Sunday.

A soft, dry hand touched her arm, and she looked up. A little wizened nun smiled back at her over half-moon glasses, her dark face framed by her white and blue habit. “Be not afraid,” she said in a soft oboe of a voice, “is easier to say than to do.” Her smile widened, her eyes disappearing in a constellation of soft wrinkles. “But try. Be not afraid to forgive. And live.”

“I --” Zoey tried to reply, but she found she couldn't as she felt the tell-tale prickling of tears, which she blinked back with great difficulty.

The old nun touched Zoey's forehead, as if in a blessing, and she moved down the pew, genuflected when she reached the center aisle, and joined the flow of believers in communion.

After that Sunday, Zoey never saw her again.

#

Miranda broke free from Ed's grip as she spun out, her wings catching air and beating him down, enraged. “You're helping her? Why? Don't you know who you are?”

He didn't answer as he deflected her blows, sliding past them but not straying too far.

Sharp-eyed, she spied the woman kneeling next to her quarry, and Miranda darted past Ed as she tried to return to the rooftop.

Ed intercepted her, and again they were fighting in close quarters, Miranda trying to beat him back, Ed trying to deflect yet restrain her.

“You think this'll put you all right with God?” she spat out. “You know the game rules – a fallen angel is forever.”

“I know.”

“So why are you aiding this human?” Her eyes widened. “Is she your *pet*?” she sneered.

“Miranda --”

“You can say my name, but you have no claim on me!” She again tried to make a break from this useless sparring, but he again blocked her way. “I have nothing, I owe nothing, I am nothing! Do you know what happened after than goddamn Reboot? Have you ever seen a woman and baby starve to death?”

Then, involuntarily, she sent before she could stop herself with a ragged cry, “No!”

Ed received as if stuck by a tidal wave. He stared at her. “I'm sorry.”

She shook in fear and rage before sneering again. “I don’t need your pity.” She flew above him and hovered, her darkly beautiful wings undulating at their maximum wingspan. “An officer in God’s army, reduced to being Lightbearer’s lackey, and for what – loving a human being. Safer to hate them.”

“Safer but not better.” He flew up so he could see her, eye-to-eye, even as the icy rain obscured his vision.

“Ah – so you *do* love this woman, eh?” she laughed with no humor.

“I don’t know.” Ed paused. “But I will always love you, Miranda.”

She screamed as she dove into him, wanting to knock him out of the sky.

He slipped past just enough to avoid full impact, but he held her in a tight grapple as they tumbled head over foot across the sky.

She broke free, circled around, and dive-bombed again.

#

The cemetery was tucked away in the outskirts of the main city, surrounded by quiet jungle held at bay by chain-link fences. Glancing at the slip of paper in her hand, twenty-five year old Zoey located the burial plot, unassuming among the simple worn headstones and low-lying weeds.

She had been saving for this, all of those years when she was a college student, working to make up the difference between tuition and financial aid. But even as a poor, full-time student on scholarships, grants, and loans, she had saved a little bit, every summer and winter break, for this.

A roundtrip ticket to her childhood home. Two days’ worth of car rental and motel lodging. A little bit of per diem for food and petty cash.

Now, in the brief summer between her graduation with both Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in English and her reporting to duty for her first full-time teaching position, she had cashed in that savings fund and – almost in an eye’s blink – she was in a lonely graveyard, standing before a neglected grave marker.

She kneeled down, pulling away the weeds, so she could read the simple markings: Rev. Anthony William Macinas, SJ. 11 June 1952 – 8 August 1982. RIP.

She remembered that first time. It was raining very hard, and the tile floor of the narthex was very slick with the wet footsteps of rushing parishioners. Her mother and brother were ahead of her, already late for Mass, and Zoey was falling behind them as she struggled to tug off her dripping raincoat. She didn’t even notice the altar boys, the deacon, and the priest, all queued to march down the center aisle with the crucifix and Bible aloft. In one heartbeat, she had slipped on one of the slick spots and, with

a sickening sensation of losing connection with the earth, had fallen down hard backwards and then suddenly saw, felt, and heard – nothing.

When she came to, she noticed that she was lying on carpet, her head propped on multiple, folded layers of fabric that – she would later find out – were spare cassocks and vestments. She immediately saw a young man – very handsome, even as he looked alarmed – peering down her face, saying something she didn’t understand. She didn’t even know who he was, as she squinted against the too-bright light of a ceiling lamp and asked him, “What?”

“What’s your name?”

“Huh? Uh – Zoey, Zoey Fitzpatrick.”

“What year is it?”

“Uh – 1981.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“Uh – in a church? With my mom and brother?”

He let out a sigh of relief. He looked up from her and said, “Do you need to have a doctor called?”

She heard her mother reply, “No, Father – thank you. It looks like just a little concussion. Can she rest here in the sacristy a little bit, as she recovers?”

“Of course – no problem. Whatever you need, just ask one of the lay ministers here. I’ll go check on you and Zoey after Mass.”

“I’m so sorry, for delaying the service like this.”

He shook his head and smiled. “Don’t be. God doesn’t follow clocks.”

“Thank you, Father.”

After he left, she heard Jamie next to their mother say in a low voice, “I don’t like him, Mom.”

“Jamie!”

“He’s all golden and bright on the outside, but something’s weird and shifty underneath.”

“Jamie – you need to give people a chance before you judge them like that. Especially a priest who’s being helpful. Zoey could’ve been seriously hurt. For the sake of your sister, at least. Please?”

She heard Jamie sigh. “Okay, Mom.”

That was the first time Zoey was aware of Father Tony Macinas, and he became aware of her. Jamie, of course, was right. But – as she realized with every passing year – so was her mother.

She exhaled deeply, only realizing then that she had been holding her breath. Without anger, she laid the slip of paper on top of the grave marker and then placed a rock that she had found, where the ruined church used to be, on top of the paper.

Zoey didn't need to read what was on the paper – she had long ago memorized it once she had read it in a college freshman class.

Good-night; ensured release,
Imperishable peace,
Have these for yours,
While sea abides, and land,
And earth's foundations stand,
And human endures.
When earth's foundations flee,
Nor sky nor land nor sea
At all is found,
Content you, let them burn:
It is not your concern;
Sleep on, sleep sound.¹

“Goodbye,” she whispered. Then she stood up and walked away.

#

Zoey? The voice was faint and far away, an echo of an echo.

Yes, Jamie, it's me. It's Zoey.

Seriously?

Have I ever lied to you?

A long pause, and then – “All right.”

Zoey opened her eyes at the sound of Jamie's voice – weaker and huskier than the younger Jamie, but undeniably still him. Her blue eyes met her brother's dark eyes, anguished and full of tears.

“Zoey, I'm so sorry, Zoey,” he cried out. “I should've been braver --”

“Shhhh, Jamie.” She cradled her little brother's head in her arms. “You're the bravest man I know.”

“NO!” The enraged scream filled the sky as Miranda felt the icy rain turn warm and gentle, as she spied below the sister holding tightly the man whom she had been needling and seducing and tempting for years, caged by his stubborn refusal. Her rage sent her wings aflame, and she propelled this fiery blast with one massive wing beat towards the rooftop below.

¹ Housman, A. E. “XLVIII: Parta Quies.”

Ed intercepted the blast, his wings outstretched to their fullest span, like a kingfisher in the sun, catching fire.

“You can let go, Jamie,” Zoey said, her voice breaking as her warm tears mingled with her brother’s. “Battle’s over. We’ve won. I’m happy – really I am – and I found you. I found you. You’re home. So it’s okay to let go, Jamie.” She hugged him tightly. “Let go, Jamie.”

#

This is for you, Zoey.

When Mom and Dad first moved to Guam, do you remember that typhoon that hit the island, right after they unpacked everything, which wasn’t much? We helped Mom and Dad tape up the windows, still dusty from disuse, and then watch them nail cheap plywood boards over them as protection against the looming gale force winds.

The neighbors were doing exactly the same thing – remember that? – taping up those windows so that any shattered glass stayed in the frame, nailing those boards against the windows. Everyone’s battery-operated radio seemed to be tuned to the same station, with the weatherman announcing, “The front end of the storm will make landfall in one hour. Make sure your preparations are done before then. Tape and board up your windows and doors. Make sure you have plenty of flashlights, matches, candles, and emergency supplies of food, water, blankets, and medicine.” All in unison, all together, all getting ready to bunker down and bear through the storm. You thought it so creepy and so scary, even though you didn’t say anything.

Mom even filled out the bathtub with water just in case there wasn’t any water after the storm, and you thought that was so creepy, too, having this tub filled with water, just sitting there. When we had to go to the bathroom under candlelight because the electricity had gone out, I tried not to look at the bathtub because I was scared too. Funny to think of that now.

Even before nightfall, we saw the change in the weather – the unearthly stagnant moist heat just before the storm, the high, climbing clouds, boiling upwards in the far horizon, boiling and rolling forward like a fast-moving high tide, and then a cold wind beginning, like the storm’s messenger announcing its arrival.

Even though Mom and Dad said we could sleep with them for the night, you said no because you were a big girl, and I said no because I didn’t want to look like a baby, too. But I couldn’t sleep because I kept staring out of the tiny sliver of the bedroom window which was still exposed through the curtains, the tape, and the bit of board that for some reason didn’t cover the window all the way. I saw the rain pounding the window as if someone were throwing rocks against the house. I saw the tall coconut tree in our front yard bend down nearly in half, the palm fronds whipped by the wind, which howled throughout the house like a mad ghost. As the night grew darker I saw the tree fronds turn into a dark witch, flying against the wind so she always remained in my sight, her black hair streaming behind her in net-like

strips. The howling ghost became the witch's howl, crying out for blood, and I remember feeling helpless as I lay there, in my big boy bed, trying to be brave.

And then I heard you, not out loud but in my head, as clearly as if you were right next to me, praying to God for strength, to protect you from that same witch who was calling our names in the wind, because there was nothing you could do but endure her.

I heard you, and that's why I left my big boy bed, padded over to your bedroom, and asked if I could sleep with you that night. I was scared, too, but your prayer made me brave for your sake. But I didn't want to make you feel foolish for fearing such things as witches, especially in the calm light of morning after a typhoon has passed – that's why I said the reason why I went over to you was that I was too scared to sleep alone. I was scared, but your fear scared me even more, Zoey. And both of us, holding each other as we tried to sleep, gave us just enough strength to endure that night of witches and ghosts.

If I'm the bravest man you know, it's because of you.

#

He reached up with a withered, old hand and touched her forehead, as if in a blessing. “I love you, Zoey.”

Zoey laughed into her tears as she nuzzled her forehead closer, trying to commit her brother's touch to her memory so that she would never forget. “I love you, too, Jamie.”

He smiled. “I'll tell Mom you said hi.”

And then the world exploded.