

Chapter 13

Mercy awoke feeling as if she'd been hibernating for six months in a bed made of clouds, delicately massaged by angels, with Kenny G. playing saxophone lullabies in the background. Judging from the bright halo of sunshine leaking around the edges of the curtains, she guessed she must've slept in way past her usual six-thirty. Mercy reached over and slid the alarm clock so that it faced her: *10:37*. Well, it was a Saturday, and she wasn't about to beat herself up after finally getting some good sleep (paradoxically good, given her dream, which had been anything but peaceful).

In the dream, too-fast calliope music urged her back-and-forth, back-and-forth as she struggled for footing on top of a lengthy wooden beam balanced on top of a rolling

barrel the diameter of a large hot tub. A circus-style tent was the venue for her performance, and the center ring of three, the stage. Looking on from rickety wooden bleachers, in place of the usual assortment of bored parents and children dripping ice cream, were clowns, midgets, acrobats, and lion tamers; bearded ladies, sword swallowers, and fortune-telling gypsies. Mercy got the distinct impression, that if she fell off the beam, the freakish audience would transform from merely pitiable to resentful—hostile even.

Why hasn't Cindy called to fill me in on Golden Boy yet? she wondered. The two had shared an informal Saturday morning ritual for the past six months or so, consisting of the weekends-only bagel-and-eggs-breakfast at the Sunset Café in Ocean Beach (with lots of coffee of course), followed by a walk out to the end of the pier and back.

Mercy sat up in bed and retrieved her cell phone from the nightstand. *Duh*. She'd forgotten turning it off after Cindy's last text message. *No wonder I didn't get a call*. She had a landline, but kept it reserved for the fax machine.

No new messages. Odd. Probably against her best interests in terms of privacy, Mercy had a "call-me-anytime" policy with her clients. Two-hundred and fifty dollar cell phone bills were not uncommon, but she could afford it, and the overage charges were worth the peace of mind. She'd known other therapists who suffered from terrible guilt because a client had committed suicide after being unable to reach them over a weekend, or when they'd taken a vacation from the office and forgotten to check messages. Especially on Halloween, she thought, *someone* would have gotten into some trouble.

She dialed Cindy's number and anticipated her groggy, gravel throated morning voice picking up. Instead she got her voicemail: *Cindy Hernandez, at your service! Leave a message—I'm in demand, baby!*

"Good mornin' hot-stuff. Haven't heard from you, so wondering if you're home yet. Looking forward to the details, give me a call as soon as you can."

Even to Mercy's own ears she sounded a little too worried, a little too "mother-hen-to-the-rescue," despite her attempt at sounding cool.

Guess I'm not the only one who slept in, Mercy consoled herself. She stood up to make the bed, embarrassed at how anxious she felt just because Cindy hadn't picked up.

Probably, it was the dream. It had been especially vivid this time, and the sinister clowns and circus freaks in the stands had seemed more...*deadly* somehow. A strange way to phrase it, but accurate. Behind their assortment of face paint and congenital deformities seemed to be the crudely masked visage of a baser form of primate—perhaps a chimp, or even a baboon—something capable of tearing limbs off, of biting through flesh.

"Geez, get a hold of yourself," she said out loud.

Mercy fluffed the pillows then slipped into her favorite red silk robe. She tied the curtains open, letting the reflected mid-morning rays distract her from last night's grim imagery.

She would not, repeat *not*, call and leave another message. But she decided a quick visit to Cindy's apartment in another hour or two wouldn't be out of order. She had to eat sooner or later, and Cindy lived on Voltaire, just a couple blocks up from the café.

She went to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee, and then retrieved the Saturday edition of the Union Tribune from outside her front door. The headlines shouted the same ol', same ol' about raging California wildfires and another broken ceasefire between Israel and its neighbors. It wasn't until she glanced at the *What's Happening* section that anything piqued her interest.

Pastor Henry Whitmore to give a talk at the La Jolla Public Library entitled: *We'll all be left behind. The scriptural truth about the Rapture of the Church.*

Mercy added the event to her long list of things she wouldn't be attending, though if Cindy didn't get in touch before this afternoon, or if she wasn't nursing a hangover at her apartment when Mercy stopped by, a call to Henry concerning her whereabouts wouldn't be *too* paranoid. She might even disguise the call as an apology for the awkward encounter at the youth center... And if she happened to let slip that Cindy had a date last night...no blood, no foul. For now, she'd quit worrying. Cindy wasn't a kid anymore. She was probably spooning with Golden Boy at his place.

Mercy dumped in a half-packet of sweetener into an empty mug and poured coffee over it, followed by a little lactose-free milk. She went back to the table and reread Henry's announcement, noting the play on words: ...all *be left behind*, a reference to the popular, series of Christian thrillers. She hadn't read past the first chapter of *see-spot-run* level writing featured in the over-hyped works, but she was glad to see someone—however despicable—confront the questionable myth the two authors were promoting to fellow Christians.

Of course Mercy had no way of knowing just how accurate Henry's End Times theories would turn out to be, or the role she would play in their unfolding.

Chapter 14

“*Run!*” someone screams. By the time my brain registers the command, I’m forty yards away from where I stood in front of the Council podium. Wind in my face like a deodorant commercial, I rush blind into the dark exit-way on my left, and keep sprinting.

If it’s a suitcase nuke, I’m already vapor.

Now the marble floor gives way to a large-diameter steel pipe and my boots clink inside its massive diameter like rat paws in a pipe organ. An even blacker circle of nothing fast approaches in front of me: the end of the tunnel, a nasty tumble at this speed.

The flash from the explosion is like a billion blazing suns.

And now I’m falling, flailing like a squirrel on ice-skates. I jamb my fingers into my ears—too late—and the sound is like a firecracker going off in a coffee can. A coffee can duct-taped to my head.

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.](#)

In English: You can share and copy this work as much as you’d like (I encourage you to) so long as you leave intact the attributions in this footer, make no changes or derivative works, and do not seek profit from this work.

www.theveingel.com & www.authorjeremyjames.com

And now the heat, a half-heart-beat after detonation. Simultaneous with the flame, above me like falling brimstone; gravity sparing me—sucking me down to the floor of this mini-chasm greedy to break my bones unless I can land just right.

I tuck and pivot midair, timing my forward-flip with the illumination of the fast-receding tendrils of flame above me. Feet first, I stick the landing, the knee-high runoff cushioning my fall just enough.

I can't see shit. I can only smell it. It's darker than the socket-side of Long John Silver's eye-patch down here. I listen. For moaning. For screams.

Nothing.

Not a nuke, but enough bomb to kill.

Smoke fills the crevice. I want to hack and cough and fill my lungs with less toxic air. I vomit instead. The burned bacon and singed-skin bouquet of charred flesh overpowers these other urges.

I know they're all dead but I won't believe it.

They wheeled their leather chairs out from underneath the podium. They stood. Then turned. They ran to the nearest exit. Nothing and no one was in the way to trip over.

Wishful thinking.

I heard the third clank of the metal briefcase toppling its way down the elevator shaft, the metallic *thud* when it hit the floor a finger-snap before detonation. My cousins heard it too, still in their seats.

But I'll save them all anyway.

Thirty-feet to get back up to the lip of the pipe, give-or-take.

I leap diagonally, as high as possible, planting my outside foot against the left wall, using the friction of its rough surface to spring further up the opposite wall—and again, twice more, zigzagging to ascend the gulf.

The bottom edge of the pipe hits me in the gut and I grunt. Ahead, barely visible through the fog of acrid smoke, embers glow orange inside the wasted auditorium.

It wasn't the type of bomb that destroys with concussive force. Guests of the hotel might have heard the explosion, barely, muffled as it was by three stories worth of solid rock. And maybe the blast dislodged a mote or two of dust from the bottles of single malt in the bar, but that would have been the extent of it. This bomb killed with heat and flame alone.

Just like that. *Boom*. Twenty-one of my people smolder out in the cold dark of New York City's underground; having tasted in death an avoidable, yet destined fire, even now tormenting their souls.

I have to get out of here, and yet, I hate myself for this urge to draw another breath, even as my cousins, my friends, my fucking duty...

I scream. A sound like every sorrowful curse ever hurled at God, from every poor son-of-a-bitch who never got to say goodbye to a brother, a father, a baby, a wife lost to His cruel whims; bottled-up and boiled; distilled, drank-down and wretched up at the feet of that smug bastard in the sky, grinning down at me one more time in my anguish.

Yesterday in Sarajevo they called me a "hero." I didn't believe it then, either.

NOTE: You can read, listen, download, and subscribe to more episodes of THE VEINGEL at: www.theveingel.com. You can also ask me questions, interact with other readers and listeners, and post feedback in the discussion forums. For more about the author, go to: www.authorjeremyjames.com.

If you enjoyed this episode of free, serialized, donor-supported fiction, I'd love to hear from you (authorjeremyjames@gmail.com). And please share THE VEINGEL with your friends.

Nor am I adverse to accepting your monetary tokens of appreciation. Because your donations keep THE VEINGEL free—*and*—free of advertising (not to mention that this is my livelihood).

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

In English: You can share and copy this work as much as you'd like (I encourage you to) so long as you leave intact the attributions in this footer, make no changes or derivative works, and do not seek profit from this work.

www.theveingel.com & www.authorjeremyjames.com