

Crawl

by Michael Bray, 1978–n

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One

She remembered the explosion, and then there was silence. For a while, she was sure she was dead, and her mind was only changed when she felt the pain in her legs and chest. She tried to recall what had happened, but her memory was fuzzy and her ears were ringing. She could taste dust and blood in her throat and wasn't sure why. Above her, a tiny pinprick of light illuminated her surroundings just enough for her to see. As her eyes adjusted to the low light, she remembered what had happened. They had been visiting the museum, and were on the third floor when they heard the rattle of gunfire from outside followed by screaming, and then... nothing. She looked around her surroundings, trying to piece it all together. There was an explosion, then the floor fell from under them, the walls

and ceiling coming down too, then silence. A bomb. Surely it had to be a bomb that had brought the building down around them.

Kevin.

Her husband's name exploded into her mind and she looked around, frantic, trying to see through the swirling dust. She was on a ledge of what used to be the floor, a huge concrete pillar across her legs. Below here, a further six feet below was more rubble. There were bodies, limbs poking out from under concrete, others speared with steel framework. Directly below her was Kevin. He was on his back, a giant section of concrete floor across his chest. His face was covered in blood and dust and he wasn't moving.

"Kevin! Kevin wake up," she shouted, her voice echoing around the tomb-like structure. And that is exactly what it was. Somehow, against all odds, as the building came down around them, the floors had pancaked down into the basement, the upper structures falling around them and burying them under tons of rubble, however somehow, by some miracle, an interior wall had fallen in and protected them from the certain death of being pulverized by falling steel and concrete. Instead, they were in an enclosed tomb of concrete. Above them, a tiny pinprick of light filtered through. It was a miracle.

"Is someone there?"

She looked around, searching for the source of the voice.

"Down here."

She looked beyond Kevin to another pile of rubble a few feet away. There was a man looking at her. He was face down on the floor, his back and legs covered in rubble. The man's legs were shattered and bloody, and twisted at an odd angle. His face was also bloody, his sandy hair stuck to his head. His eyes were alive, though, and he even managed a smile.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded, then looked back at Kevin. "My husband, I think... I think he's dead." She couldn't believe the words as they came out. It all seemed so unreal, so incredibly surreal. She watched as the man looked at Kevin, who was just a few feet away.

"No, he's breathing. He's not dead." The man said. He looked at Becky as he peered over the ledge. "Can you move? We need some help."

She looked back at her legs and tried to move, then realized that the concrete that trapped her was a corner piece of wall. She turned back and looked back below. "No, I'm trapped. I can't move."

"Me either. I can't feel my legs. Can you see them? Do they look okay?"

She looked again at his mangled appendages and decided that keeping him calm was the best option. "They look fine. Don't worry."

"Alright, thanks. Do you see anyone else alive in here with us?"

She looked around the room again. There were other people in there with them, but there were no doubts about them being dead. She couldn't look anymore and turned back to the man. "I think it's just us."

He nodded. "What's your name?"

"Becky."

"I'm Frank."

"Frank, can you see if my husband is okay? Can you reach him from there?"

"Hang on, give me a second."

She watched as Frank tried to reach Kevin, but even at full stretch there was at least, two feet between them. He looked up at her and shook his head. "Sorry, I can't get to him. He's breathing, though. I can see a cut on his head. Could be that he's just knocked silly. Were you here with anyone else?"

She shook her head. "No, just the two of us. You?"

He half laughed. "No, I work here. I'm a security guard. Wrong place at the wrong time I guess."

"Or right place," Becky said. "We're still alive after all."

Frank nodded. "I'm sure help will be coming. The whole damn building must have come down."

"Do you think it was a bomb?" Becky asked.

Frank looked away, then met her gaze. "We had a threat this morning but didn't take it seriously. We... looks like we were wrong."

"Do you think someone will come and help us?" Becky asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure they will, though it might take some time. We were lucky. Really lucky."

Becky was about to answer when she heard Kevin moan and open his eyes. He looked blankly at the collapsed roof.

"Kevin, Kevin, up here. Look up here."

He did as she asked, the relief she felt replaced by concern. "Something's happened, we... the building collapsed. We think it was a bomb."

Kevin tried to shift, but his arms were pinned to his side under the rubble. "I can't move," he grunted. His nose was bloody and his eyes wide.

"Just stay still. Try not to move position until help comes."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. We'll all be fine. Help will be coming." Becky said.

"Not soon, though." Frank cut in.

"What do you mean?" Becky asked, not liking the tone in his voice.

"I mean we have to assume this whole building came down. That's nine floors worth of rubble on top of us. It could take a while to dig us out."

"But I can see the light," Becky said, staring at the pinprick of daylight filtering through from above.

"I get that, but that doesn't mean we're close to the surface. Like it or not, we're pretty much buried alive in here."

Kevin flicked his eyes towards his wife on the higher ledge.

"It's alright," Becky said, forcing a smile. "Don't panic."

"You okay man?" Frank said. Kevin, however, didn't answer. His eyes were flicking around their makeshift tomb, looking for a way out.

"One of his biggest fears is being buried alive," Becky said, hating that she was trapped and could do nothing to help."

"Hey man, don't worry," Frank said, managing a smile. "We should be dead already by now. The fact we survived this means someone is looking out for us. Just take it easy, we'll be fine as soon as they dig us out."

Kevin calmed a little, but still squirmed under the huge section of concrete that pinned him in place. "Are we the only ones alive?" he asked.

"In here, at least, buddy," Frank said, trying his best to see around the chamber. "Looks like we're in a little pocket of space. Actually, this looks like the basement."

"It can't be. Kevin and I were on the third floor."

"I can't tell from here, but I think you still are," Frank said, twisting his head to get a better look. "Yeah, it looks like the third floor pancaked down into the second, then the middle of both floors broke through into the basement. We happened to be in the right place at the right time to live. It looks like you're essentially in the lobby but on the combined floors one and two. Your husband and me are in the basement."

"This is insane. The odds of surviving this..." Becky let her words trail off. Somehow she was calm, remarkably so. She supposed it was a combination of shock and adrenaline keeping her from experiencing the true extent of the terror she felt.

"It kinda makes sense," Frank said. "This whole building is old, sturdy. The upper levels had been extensively renovated and modernized in recent years, but the first few floors are the original building first put up in the late eighteen hundreds."

"Wouldn't that make it more fragile to something like this?"

Frank shook his head. "No, you'd be surprised how flimsy modern building materials are compared to the Victorian stuff. They used good quality stone and didn't cut corners in the building process. We survived only because of the quality of a hundred-plus-year-old construction."

"Are there any other ways in or out of the basement?" Kevin asked, lifting his head to try and see around the chamber.

"No, and even if there were, we're all pinned down pretty tight. Even if one of us could move, it would be too risky to start moving rubble around down here."

"Why?" Kevin asked.

"Think of it like Jenga. You pull the wrong piece out, and this whole thing could come falling in on us."

"Game over," Becky mumbled.

"Exactly. Game over."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Kevin said, the panic in his voice impossible to ignore.

"We wait," Frank said. "We lie here, be quiet and listen for the rescuers."

"Should we shout now or make noise?" Becky asked.

"I wouldn't yet. Save your energy for when it matters. Right now we could all scream our lungs out and nobody would hear a thing."

Becky let her head fall back against the floor as Kevin's words sank in. She wondered why she was so calm, and how long that feeling might last before panic set in.

Two

The passage of time was impossible to gauge. Becky's wristwatch was smashed and not working. The hands had stopped at a little after ten in the morning. The only way to tell that time was actually moving was by watching the tiny shaft of light as it moved around the chamber. It had moved around half a foot across towards where Kevin and Frank were in the basement. They hadn't heard a single sound from outside in all the time they had been there. She looked down at Kevin, so close but impossibly out of reach. He had his eyes closed and was mouthing words under his breath. She knew how much he hated enclosed spaces. Like a lot of people, one of his biggest fears was of premature burial. She couldn't imagine the kind of hell he must be going through. She looked at the slab of concrete on his chest. Only his head and shoulders were exposed at one end, his legs from the knees down on the other. Somehow he had lost a shoe during the building collapse, and as a result, one dusty, bloody sock hung half off one foot. It would have been almost comical if not for the gravity of the situation. She wondered if he was badly hurt; if underneath the concrete slab he had internal injuries. Broken bones were a real possibility, as was internal bleeding. She looked at the concrete pillar across her own legs and had no doubt that they were broken. The agony throbbed like a dull toothache. She traced the pillar with her eyes where it disappeared into the rubble beside her. The other end was broken and hanging over the short drop to the basement levels. She tried to move, but the sharp jolt of agony that came with it encouraged her to hold still. For all the doubts about how injured Kevin may be, she was fairly certain that both her legs were broken.

She looked around at the expanse of pulverized concrete and realized that she couldn't recall the last time she had heard such utter silence. She was used to the noise of the world, the drone of traffic, the wind in the trees. Not such utter and complete silence. She held her breath and listened. She couldn't even hear Kevin or Frank breathing from her position. She felt very alone, very isolated.

She caught Frank's eye as she scanned the room. "You doing okay?" she asked.

"It's cold. I can't feel anything below my chest. That can't be normal, can it?"

"Like you said, help will be coming. We just have to wait it out."

"I thought they would be here by now. How long do you think we've been down here?"

"I don't know. My watch is broken."

"Four hours," Kevin said. Both of them looked at him.

"How do you know that?" Becky asked.

Kevin nodded towards the top of the chamber. "Clock up there is still running."

"I can't see it," Frank said, unable to shift position enough to see. Becky followed Kevin's gaze, and wondered just how she had been able to miss seeing it. There above them, in what remained of the lobby, was a wall clock. Its face was covered in dust and it was cracked, but it was still working. She stared at it, unable to believe so little time had passed.

"We can't have only been here for a few hours, we can't," she said. "It feels like..."

"Forever," Kevin said. "I know. I'm trying not to look at it but I can't help it."

Becky wished she could hold him, or just be there to comfort him, but all she could do was watch him go through his private torture.

"I'll be fine, we'll be fine," he said, the words convincing nobody in the chamber. Once again, silence filled the chamber.

Becky looked at Frank, her eyes drawn to his mangled legs. He was obviously in shock, and she supposed the fact that he couldn't feel the extent of the damage couldn't be a good sign. He caught her looking and she smiled.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Fine, just... thinking."

"You know, I know I'm in a bad way. I can't feel a thing. I know that's not good." Frank said. He seemed close to the edge of panic, and Becky couldn't decide if it was best to lie to him or tell the truth.

"I'm sorry," she said, cutting him off. "I didn't mean to be dishonest with you."

"My legs, they're in a bad way, aren't they?"

She nodded.

"Then why can't I feel them?"

"Could be the pressure of the rubble on you, it could be depressing your veins and arteries, keeping the area numb."

"Oh," he said, calming a little.

Becky didn't tell him that the pressure of the rubble could also cause problems if and when rescue came. The build-up of pressure in his lower limbs could cause the blood to rush up his system when the rubble was removed and stop his heart. She saw no sense in worrying him any more than necessary. He was close to panic, though, and she wanted to do something to distract him.

"Hey, Frank, you got any family? Kids?" she asked.

He looked up at her, his eyes tired and heavy. "I have two ex-wives and three kids. They're all grown up now, though. I don't see them anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said, wishing she had never raised the subject.

"It was amicable, and it was never love. Both of us counted it as a lucky escape."

She was struggling to think of a response when he spoke again.

"Hey look at that. It looks like we're not alone in here after all."

She looked at Frank who was grinning, then to where he was looking. At the furthest end of the chamber, a medium sized rat had appeared. It was by a hole in the natural foundations of the basement. It was watching them, black eyes staring at them, nose twitching. Becky looked at Kevin, who was staring at it, eyes wide. She knew he hated rats and mice. He was afraid of them.

He looked at her, then at Frank. With male pride taking over, he managed a smile. "It's just a rat."

She understood his reasons. He didn't want to acknowledge his fear in front of a stranger. The three of them stared at the rat. It seemed uncertain. It inched forward, paused, then turned and went back the way it had come, squeezing its body back through the hole.

"Then there were three," Frank muttered.

It was meant as a joke, but nobody responded. Instead, they settled back to wait for help to come.

Four more hours passed and the dim light of their chamber was starting to wane as daylight in the outside world gave way to night. It was this absence of

light that tipped Kevin over the edge. He started to rock back and forth and pull himself free.

"I need to get out of here, I need to get out of here. I can't stand it," he repeated over and over again.

"Hey, take it easy, buddy. Try to relax," Frank said, but if Kevin heard he made no effort to respond. Even Becky couldn't get through to him.

"Kevin, Kevin, relax, calm down. Help is coming. They must have been clearing the site for some time now. Just try to hold it together.

"I can't breathe, I can't move. I need to be able to move my arms. I need to get out of here," he said, his voice shrill.

She knew there was nothing she could do to help him. If she could, she would go to him and comfort him, but she was as trapped as he was, although she at least still had the use of her arms.

Either through exhaustion or knowledge that nobody could do anything to help, Kevin grew silent. He lay in place, staring at the roof of their tomb as the shadows deepened ever darker, snatching away the little light they had. The clock on the wall read 6:23 pm.

"Maybe they'll put light rigs up outside to help with the rescue operation," Frank said to nobody in particular. Neither Becky nor Kevin responded.

She tried not to think about how the night would be. To be shrouded in absolute black of night, to not be able to hear or see anything. It would be total sensory deprivation. Something caught her eye, and she looked towards the edge of the chamber. The rat that had visited them earlier had returned, only, this time, it wasn't alone. Two other rats were with it, their gray bodies plump, fur grimy. They stood in a line, black eyes watching, noses twitching.

"Look who came back," she whispered. Kevin didn't respond. He was still staring at the roof. Frank saw, though. He looked at them, then looked up at Becky. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"Like I said, this is an old building. Rats are part of it. I don't like them being in here with us, not when we're so... vulnerable."

"They wouldn't attack us. We're too big."

"The rats here are used to people. They're not afraid," Frank said. He picked up a loose stone from the debris field around him and threw it at the rats. His aim was wide and the stone bounced harmlessly off the wall. The rats didn't move. He repeated the process, this time, the stone landing just above the watching trio. The rats skittered away, then regrouped, retaking their initial positions. Three sets of black eyes watched, and two sets of human eyes returned the stare. Even from the relative safety of the upper ledge, Becky was afraid. She glanced at Kevin, his face lost in shadows. He seemed to be paying no attention. He was staring blankly at the ceiling, his lips moving in silent language. She wondered what he was saying, then turned back towards the rats. One of them scampered forward a few steps, testing the waters.

"Get the fuck back," Frank said, tossing another stone of rubble. This time, his aim was good, and it hit the rat on its side. It squealed and ran for the hole where it had come from, its kin following.

Becky and Frank exchanged glances.

"Hopefully, that should scare them off," Becky said.

Frank looked back towards the hole. "I hope so. Either way, I'd feel better if that damn hole was blocked up."

With nothing else to say, silence filled the chamber. They watched and waited. By 7:05, it was too dark to see the clock anymore. Half an hour later, complete darkness filled the chamber.

Three

It was every bit as awful as she had expected. Sensory deprivation was the word she had in her head for how it would feel, but having never experienced it before, couldn't imagine just how terrifying it was. The dark was total, the silence heavy like a living thing. She held her hand up to her nose and focused as best she could, but could see nothing. She was fighting the urge to call out and check that the others were still there but didn't want to start a panic. She thought about Kevin and how he might be coping. He hadn't spoken since he lost it earlier, and the last thing she saw of him as the light faded away was him staring at the ceiling and mouthing whatever it was that was in his head. She wondered what was taking so long, how it could be that nobody had made contact with them yet or tried to rescue them. She realized how bad it must be on the surface for them not to have come to their aid yet. Another thought entered her head that she didn't want to acknowledge. Maybe they weren't even looking. The notion of anyone surviving a building collapse was implausible at best. The very real thought of them dying there one by one, slowly fading away as life ebbed from them wasn't one she was comfortable with. It frightened her. Up until that point, she had always assumed escape was coming; it was just a case of waiting. Now, the idea that it might not be was consuming her. It was all she could think about. She heard a sound, a sound she identified and utterly terrified her. It was the vocalization of a rat. A low squeak. Goosebumps rippled down her arms as she strained her ears. This time, she didn't care about causing panic.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, her voice echoing around their tomb.

"Yeah, I hear them," Frank said. "Looks like our little friends have come back for another little investigation."

"What do we do?" she asked.

"Hang on," Frank said. "I'll throw another stone across the room. The sound should scare them off again."

"How do you expect to hit them in the dark?"

"I don't, I just want to deter them from coming any closer. Be ready for it, I'm about to throw."

She listened as the stone hit the wall. In the utter dark and silence, it sounded incredibly loud. There was no angry squeak this time. Both Frank and Becky held their breath and listened.

Utter silence.

"Kevin, are you okay down there?" she asked.

"He's fine, I can still hear him murmuring to himself," Frank said.

"What's he saying?"

"I don't know. I can't make it out. I think he's struggling to handle this."

"He's not the only one."

Another squeak from across the room followed by displaced grains of rubble.

"Son of a bitch is still out there and moving. You hear that?" Frank said.

"Yeah, I hear it," Becky replied. "Any idea what to do?" She was terrified. The idea of the rats moving around in the dark frightened her. She couldn't imagine how it would feel, suspended in utter black silence to then feel the touch of rat whiskers on her skin as they sniffed and probed. She swallowed a scream.

"Looks like we do what we can to deter them. Can you feel any loose debris around you? Anything palm-sized?"

Becky reached around her, then pulled her hands back. She saw in her mind's eye reaching out and grabbing on to one of their hairy plump bodies. She didn't think she could handle that. Not when she couldn't move. "No, I can't find anything up here." She said, hating herself for lying but unsure if Frank would understand why she was so afraid.

"It's okay, don't worry, I have plenty of loose debris down here. I'll keep throwing it at the walls. With luck, they'll go elsewhere and leave us be."

Seconds later, another rock clattered off the wall, followed by more sounds of the rats moving. Even though she couldn't see them, Becky knew what they would be doing. They would be standing by the hole, black eyes watching, noses twitching as they tried to decide if the risks were worthwhile in exploring the new visitors to the basement.

For what felt like an eternity, the process went on. Frank would throw a rock; the rats would scatter, but not go away. Time had no meaning. She couldn't decide if it had been hours or minutes since it started. All she knew for sure was that not being able to see them as they scurried around the chamber was the most utterly frightening thing she had ever experienced. She squeezed her eyes closed and wished for it to be all over. In the back of her mind, she wondered why the rescue effort was taking so long and why nobody was coming to help them.

Four

On the surface, Fire Chief Justin Clink surveyed the damage. He stood by the remains of the museum, which had been reduced to a pile of smoldering, pulverized concrete. In addition to the museum, the opera house had also been blown up, as had a train of morning commuters. A group of terrorists had also been at street level, gunning down civilians without mercy. Four had been killed by the police; two were still on the run. For Clink, the job in hand was monumental. Dozens of ambulances and fire trucks lined the streets, their blue beacons revolving and throwing lights off the surrounding structures. With his resources spread thin due to the sheer volume of incidents, he was working with limited resources. Although he expected to find no survivors, he knew well enough that miracles did happen. If people were pulled out of the collapsed World Trade Center and survived, then he was determined not to give up until there was no hope left. A firefighter ran towards him, face streaked with dust and dirt. Justin

knew him. His name was Mike Rose, and they had been friends for almost fifteen years since they both joined the service.

"It's a goddamn mess, Justin," the man said.

"Tell me about it, Mike. We're stretched too thin. This is a nightmare."

Mike looked at the rubble pile. "Are we looking for survivors or is this a recovery mission?"

"Hoping for the former, expecting the latter. How are those light rigs coming along? I need light so we can continue the rescue operation."

"They're almost done," Mike said, taking off his helmet. "There are a lot of dead, Justin. At least a hundred at the train crash site. Maybe four hundred or more at the opera house. What are you thinking here?"

Justin shrugged. "We've already pulled out twenty bodies from the rubble and we've barely scratched the surface. This is going to be a mess. Two of them still on the run too, the sons of bitches."

"They got them," Mike said. "One of them dead, one wounded but critical."

"I hope the bastards suffered for what they did," Justin said as he watched crews carry in the huge lighting rigs and set them up around the rubble.

"Are they ready?" Justin said to one of the men as he walked past him.

"Yes, Chief. Ready to fire them up when you are."

"Then get it done. Sooner we can move on this, the sooner we can carry on helping people."

The officer ran back the way he had come to pass on the message, leaving the two old friends together.

"Do you ever wish you retired, Justin?" Mike asked as he put his helmet back on.

"Every damn day."

The two men shook hands. "I better get back to it," Mike said. "Good luck with the search. I'll get my men over to help as soon as I can spare some."

"I appreciate it. You take care, you hear me?"

Mike waved absently as he ran back up the street and pushed through the growing crowds. Justin turned back towards the crews setting up the lighting rigs who were standing around the generators for them. "Any chance I can get some damn lights tonight so we can save some lives?"

The men complied, activating the diesel generators which coughed to life. Seconds later, the high wattage lighting rigs illuminated the pile of rubble, enabling the crews to work through the night.

Five

The chamber was suddenly illuminated as if someone had switched on the sun. The artificial light, much more intense than the diffused natural light of earlier, banished the darkness, melting it away so that they could see once more. Becky squinted at the sudden change, then screamed, unleashing the sound that she had been holding onto for hours.

The chamber was alive with rats. Hundreds of them scurrying around the room. She stared, unable to believe what she was seeing. Frank was also staring at the pulsating mass which covered every surface of the chamber. He had a stone in his hand and had been poised to throw it when the lights had come back on. Becky stared past him at his legs, wondering how it was possible that he hadn't felt it as the rats had eaten them. Only bloody stumps remained below the knees as masses of rats gnawed and ate at his flesh.

She watched from the safety of her ledge as they swarmed him, covering him and drowning out his screams as they ate him. She watched him struggle for an impossibly long time, but every time he pulled some of them away from his face, more filled the gap. Eventually, the fight went out of him, and he stopped moving. It was only then that she realized Kevin was screaming too. The rats were chewing on his toes, and unlike Frank who had been numb from the chest down, Kevin could feel everything as they stripped the skin from his feet. As she watched, one rat sheared away his toenail, exposing the wet, pink flesh beneath.

"I can't move, help me, it hurts." He was screaming and staring at her. Becky couldn't do anything but stare. She had become detached from the scene, unable to comprehend what was happening. Something came out of the hole where the first rats had appeared. It looked like some kind of magic trick, as the huge hairy body managed to push itself through a hole that looked far too small to accommodate it. It was at least four times as big as the next nearest of its kind. It was the size of a small dog. It sat on its haunches, surveying the scene. It was only then that she realized how noisy it was. The once silent chamber was now alive with the high-pitched squeal of hundreds of rats. She looked at Kevin, who was still screaming. Some of the rats were gnawing on his ears, tearing lumps of flesh from the lobes. She pulled against the pillar across her legs, then screamed in agony. There was nothing she could do. The large rat looked at her, eyes the deepest, darkest black. She saw nothing in those eyes but hatred and the instinct to survive.

She reached down towards Kevin, only then realizing that she was screaming, the back of her throat raw and hoarse. Kevin was screaming too. Blood dripped from his ravaged feet and soaked into the dust and pulverized concrete. She looked again at the large rat and watched as it sauntered across the room, its brethren parting to allow it access. It hopped up onto the concrete pinning Kevin in place. It was just inches from his unprotected face now. It leaned close and sniffed him, whiskers twitching, yellow teeth visible. Kevin stared back, his own eyes wide as he looked at the giant rat.

For a moment, everything seemed to freeze. Becky stared at Kevin, and then at the rat, which once again looked towards her, turning its black gaze on her. She knew what was about to happen. She could see the intent. The rat turned back to Kevin and thrust forward, biting at his face, plucking out his eye, which burst onto his cheek and ran down into his ear. The rat continued to feed, devouring Kevin's face as he thrashed and squirmed.

Becky screamed, throat filling with the taste of blood as she watched the rats devour her husband. It was around that time that something in her mind snapped, and any semblance of sanity or reality left her.

Six

The fire crews worked into the night. Mike had managed to relocate some of his men to help Chief Clink, and they were now nearing the bottom of the rubble pile that was once the museum. The light of pre-dawn had come and brought with it some hope. They had already pulled six survivors from the rubble, which drove them on despite the forty plus dead so far. Mike was on his stomach, crawling into a space beneath a twisted cross section of wall. Some of the men had heard screaming coming from the area in the night, but for a while, it had been silent. Now he was close to breaking through. He moved a large brick of rubble to one side, knowing that in doing so the whole chamber could come crashing down.

"Give me a flashlight," he said to the men behind him, reaching his arm back. Someone placed it in his hand and he wriggled forward, switching on the light and around the dust filled chamber.

It looked like part of the lobby had crashed down into the basement, making a natural tomb of sorts. Mike had seen some horrible things during his years in the fire service. Mostly severe burns or falls from buildings when people's need for oxygen drove them to jump to certain death. This, though, was worse. There were three people in the chamber. A woman lay on a ledge less than five feet from him at his level. He could reach her but knew there was no point. Her eyes stared unblinkingly at the ceiling, a light layer of dust on them, mouth agape. Mike knew dead when he saw it and knew this woman was beyond saving. Down below, in what would be the basement, there were two other bodies, and Mike wasn't entirely sure what had happened to them. One man was face down covered in rubble, the top of his head devoid of skin, the skull open. The brain was missing and in the hole were several small blood covered stones which looked as if they had been placed there deliberately. Next to him, were the remains of another man, this one on his back and also quite dead. All the flesh was missing from his face, leaving a bloody, grinning skull behind, the eyes missing. Mike stared, unable to figure out what had happened when the woman made a sound. He looked at her and saw her moving, a barely audible moan escaping from her.

"We've got a live one in here, get a stretcher!" Mike called to the men at his back. With no thought for his own safety, he started to crawl into the hole, when something stopped him. He stared at the woman and watched as she opened her mouth and kept opening it so that it was impossibly wide. As Mike watched, something crawled out. It was a rat, the biggest rat he had ever seen. It pushed against the stretched edges of the woman's mouth, its fur slick and bloody. The rat clambered out of the woman's mouth and stood on her chest. Mike looked at the woman; the one he had wrongly assumed was alive but was quite dead. He realized then that it wasn't her that was moving, but the rat. It looked at Mike, and Mike stared back. The rat then hopped off the woman's chest and ran across the edge of the ledge, leaving bloody footprints in its wake. Mike could only watch as it scurried down the wall to the lower chamber and paused by a hole in the wall. It looked up at him, and Mike was sure there was some kind of intelligence in its eyes. The rat let out a single shrill squeal, then squeezed itself through the

hole, pushing the excess blood out of its fur and leaving a rim on the edge of the hole. It reminded Mike of when he was painting his kitchen and he removed the excess paint from the brush on the edge of the tin. He watched until the rat had gone, unable to breathe, unable to think.

"How many alive in there?" one of the men said from behind him.

He looked around the room again, then at the bloody smear on the edge of the hole.

"None. False alarm. Everyone in here is dead. I'm coming out."

Mike started to crawl backward away from the hole, letting his men help him out. On his way, he pulled the concrete slab back into place and sealed off the chamber again. He didn't want anything that was in there to get out.

