

They'd reached the twenty-third floor.

*We're going to make it!*

Next came the twenty-second floor. The stairs were clear.

Pasquale had kept careful count of the floors and knew there were only twenty-one left between them and safety. He turned to check on the others. "Twenty-second!" he shouted back at them, reassuring himself along with the others.

He was going to say something else and had opened his mouth to do so, but before the words could tumble out, the stairs gave a huge, growing shiver. The metal shook with a loud clamor beneath his feet. Everything around them—the floors, the walls, the stairs—began to shake with seemingly monstrous tremors. They were caught in a huge shaking machine, their bodies being mercilessly thrown back and forth. Everyone crouched low, bending as they hung on desperately to the railing that was trying to shake them free. Terrified and not knowing what else to do, they kept their white-knuckled hold, as if being connected to the building could save them. For a brief moment, they all froze. Around them, the walls heaved with gigantic tremors. Overhead, a loud and growing pounding came, as if heavy objects were being dropped directly above them: a mountain of concrete, stone, brick, steel, all grinding downward. The noise reverberated through the stairwell, growing until there was only noise and nothing else. The air filled with dust. A loud *crash* echoed everywhere as the stairs tore away from the wall and the world began to crumble around them.

Without thinking, Pasquale dived into a corner of the stairwell, beneath the landing above. He laid his hands on the shaking wall and buried his head between them, anything to protect himself from what was falling toward them. The roar grew louder. There were screams and shouts of terror as the noise grew far beyond anything the human ear could tolerate.

Pasquale held on, his hands flat against the wall. *This corner will hold*, he told himself. *If I stay right here, in this little place, I will survive whatever is coming, whatever is falling.* His fingers became a part of the surface he clung to.

His back was turned to the things falling around him, hunched to take blows. *If I can just hold on long enough, I'll be safe. I'll get out. I'll see Louise again...*

The wall next to his head began a slow, rending crack and sprang open at the top. The crack widened and jaggedly worked its way down through the block and plaster until it reached his hands and buckled there, beneath his fingers. Everything crumbled, falling around and away from him. There was dust in every molecule of air. Debris pummeled his head and body from every direction. His skin was strafed with falling pieces of the upper floors.

*The building is...coming down! My God! I can't believe this is how I'm going to die!* Pasquale thought as he stayed tucked in the fetal position, but the building shattered, and the wall fell away. There was nothing to cling to, nothing to grab.

*Louise...Hope...*

Terrible screams seemed to merge with the thunderous roar, a choir of horror as the floors above and around him fell into pieces.

He pulled himself in tighter, into a ball. *Maybe it will all pass me by. Maybe there will be something left to cling to when the dust settles.* He pulled his head down to his knees and prayed again and again. "Take me quickly, God. Please! Quickly!" He pulled in a last, desperate breath as the floor gave way beneath his feet and the wall he'd clung to disappeared in a shower of dust.

Pasquale Buzzelli then fell into space, his body turning and twisting as he wafted, seemingly weightless, on a terrible wind. He became one with the walls cascading down around him, another piece of debris, like the metal, block, and paper—everything, all of it together, a part of the thick, choking dust. As if caught in a nightmarish never-ending theme park ride, he flew, gasping hard, his throat burning. He couldn't catch his breath as he hung in air, suspended, then plummeted down into a free fall, his body tossed by gusts of hellish breath.