

Twenty Two

For many, a sunrise was a beautiful thing. For June, who had seen hundreds, it meant little.

There was only one customer in DeeDee Diner's small dining area. He was an older man wearing a dark suit with the top two buttons undone. A black coffee in a white mug sat untouched on the counter near his hand. He mused silently over a crossword puzzle. He came in here every day at the same time, five in the morning. He always sat in the same place. He always tipped well. Although he rarely engaged in conversation, June got the impression he worked for a respectable law firm in the city.

The cook slammed a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon into the serving window. The rough skin of his swarthy arms were bright red from the stove. His night was almost over. It was supposed to have ended five minutes earlier, but the morning guy was always late. Nobody at DeeDee's, Hank knew, worked as hard as he did. Sometimes he would glance across the kitchen at Peter, the dishwasher. The kid would always be scrolling through his phone or reading a comic book, even if he still had work to do in his pit. It always fell to Hank to pull this place together.

“Hank, can I get the sausages on this?” June asked, thankful for the wall between her and the cook. Hank glared through the window as he pulled a handful of sausages from his steam table and slapped it across the plate. He grimaced as June took the plate away and placed it before the man in the dark suit. Hank knew June was snitching on him to the kitchen manager, informing about his frequent smoke breaks or trying to put the blame for botched orders on his shoulders. Anybody would need a smoke if they were working here twelve hours a night.

He picked up a spatula from between the flattops. It was covered in grease, so he tossed it behind him towards the pit. It bounced off the rack next to Peter and landed in the sink. Peter looked up from his phone long enough to give a curt nod of approval. Only another fifty-five minutes left before Peter got to go home. This last stretch was always the easiest, since only a few people ever came in. No better time to catch up with what had gone on the night before. Biggest problem with these overnight gigs was that he never got to hit the bars anymore. Peter could not remember the last time he had been laid. Hank seemed to have the same problem, but for different reasons. Guy was always creeping up on June, and she was just not interested in the slightest. Might have had something to do with how angry he looked all the time. Or maybe it was just because he was a jerk.

Kyle, though, was a cool guy. Peter liked Kyle. Most of the bussers were phoning it in, but Kyle always went the extra mile to make sure he was getting the job done right, which definitely made Peter's life easier. Poor guy was always shooting himself in the foot on that point, though. He was scrubbing the washrooms right now, and Peter could be pretty certain nobody else ever did it. Such pain was why Peter was very careful to be perfectly average in every way. He was getting his minimum wage whether he excelled or not.

Kyle came out of the washroom now. It had not been as bad in there as he was expecting. Some of the other bussers, he knew, sometimes got called out for not cleaning up in there often enough. Since the washrooms were not horrifying gulags, Kyle figured that assessment was not entirely fair. June was

at the coffee machine, pouring her own final cup of the day.

“Go home, Kyle,” she said. “Thanks for everything.”

Kyle smiled sheepishly, clocked himself out at a terminal near the cash register, and made his way through the kitchen to the rear exit. Hank gave him a grimace from the line, making Kyle grateful for the barrier between them. The morning cook, Brian, came through the back door as Kyle was putting his jacket on. Brian was a tall, well-muscled, extremely imposing man. This is why Hank never gave him trouble about being late all the time. For all his fearsomeness, however, Brian was the friendliest guy who worked at DeeDee's, at least as far as Kyle could tell from the thirty seconds he spent with him at the end of each shift.

“See ya later, Kyle,” Brian said, tracing the steps of their age-old ritual. He held the door open for the busboy.

“Bye, Brian,” Kyle replied, stepping through. He was digging through his jacket pockets trying to find his cigarettes.

DeeDee's Diner shook for less than a second. Ketchup bottles rattled, framed vintage movie posters wobbled on the walls, stacks of plates clattered. The untouched coffee on the bar spun in its mug, firing a single black drop to freedom. The man in the dark suit watched as it soared almost to the ceiling. In that brief, wrenching moment, everybody felt nauseatingly light, as though all the air was being ripped from their lungs. Then the single drop of coffee shot straight back down, landing squarely in the man's eye. June nearly lost her balance as the floor beneath her became unsteady. Hank barely dodged out of the way as the deep fryer spewed its contents over the rim, soaking the concrete with hot grease. Peter nearly tore the sink's spray nozzle from its plumbing as he tried to use it to keep from falling. His phone bounced underneath the washing machine. His hand squeezed the nozzle, spraying hot water all over the kitchen. Brian grabbed onto a rack of bread, which wheeled down the kitchen and deposited him onto the hot, wet, floor.

Out back, on the small strip of sidewalk along the exterior of the building, Kyle sat against the wall. His pack of cigarettes had fallen from his hand and had deposited its contents over the asphalt. One of them rolled right off the edge, to where the parking lot should have been. There was no parking lot.

As far as Kyle could see, there was nothing around DeeDee's Diner but a massive dead drop on all sides. Crawling towards the edge, he could see no bottom. There was just an endless void, the colour of the sky. Kyle screamed, but there was nobody out there to hear.

It took perhaps an hour to fully take stock of the situation. The Diner, as far as those inside could tell, was now floating in the sky. The altitude did not *feel* any higher. Outside, there was a gentle breeze, just as before. Looking up, little could be seen except for the sun and the clouds. Below, DeeDee's employees could not see the ground.

The man in the dark suit remained silent. He had moved to a corner booth and was now dabbing at his eye with a handful of napkins. Peter, too, said little. He was in the dishpit trying to call emergency services on his phone, but he was getting no service.

Everybody else was gathered at the bar. Brian had some vicious burns where he had landed on his forearms, and was now running cold tap water over it as June had told him to do. She had taken a first aid course when she was sixteen, and though she had forgotten most of what she had learned, she was now the closest thing the night shift had to a first aid officer.

“What the fuck are we supposed to do?” Hank asked. He sat at the end of the bar, slightly apart from the others. “Where the fuck is everything?”

Nobody had an answer for him. Kyle trembled. June looked very interested in Brian's burns. After a long silence, Hank got to his feet, grunting as he straightened out his body. There was a fire in his eyes, which nobody but the man in the dark suit noticed.

“Here's what's gonna happen,” Hank said. His voice was full of conviction, but something about it wavered. “We've gotta start getting ready for the long haul. We've gotta set up beds for ourselves. We've gotta start rationing what we've got, to make sure we're able to live for a good long time until help can get here.”

“Do you think help is actually coming?” Peter had entered from the kitchen. “If you ask me, we're dead or everybody else is.”

“Shut up, Peter,” Hank said. “Help is fucking coming, but we just don't know when. Lucky for us that we're in a restaurant. There's food. But first thing's first, we've gotta start conserving our water before we run out.”

He reached over the bar and twisted off the tap. Brian made to argue, but then stopped himself. Maybe he had rinsed his burns enough, now. No point in causing any unnecessary conflict. Peter had other ideas.

“That's not how plumbing works,” Peter said. There was just the slightest hint of condescension. It wormed into Hank's brain. His vision began to fog. “I think there's something magic. This place was pulled right out of its foundation. Without a connection to the town's plumbing, ours doesn't run. Pretty sure that's how it works.”

“What do you know, asshole?” Hank roared. Everybody except Peter jumped. Even the man in the dark suit was roused in his corner. “If you know so much about plumbing, why the fuck are you a dishwasher and not a fucking plumber? I wish you *were* a fucking plumber so you wouldn't be in here with us right now.”

“Hank, please,” June began, trying to calm the cook.

“The time for being fucking politically correct is over, Junie,” Hank said, swinging a chubby arm through the air. June recoiled. “It's survival time. So get your ass back behind the bar and start putting all these ketchup bottles in the fridge.”

“Ketchup bottles?” June asked.

“Too much out here for us to eat fast. We're gonna keep it fresh.”

“But ketchup?” June asked.

“My God, woman,” Hank roared. He was beet red. “If you're too fucking lazy to use your brain or do a job, I'll put somebody else on it. Kyle.”

Kyle got up and started collecting ketchup bottles. Brian considered saying something, but he thought better of it. Maybe Hank was right. Getting into this fight now would just lead to further conflict, and somebody might start to get violent. Hank, especially. Hank was a tough guy, and when he got on edge he was always chomping at the bit to go to blows. Now was no different.

“Peter, you start gathering all the chemicals from behind the machine. Put them up on the rack. Instead of dishes, that rack now holds chemical jugs. You got it?”

“Man, Hank, that just seems like busywork,” Peter said.

“It fucking is busywork, asshole,” Hank replied. “To keep you out of my hair. Brian, you and me are going to go into the office and see what we can dig up in there.”

So everybody went to their places. Peter went to the dishpit. Kyle wandered around, collecting ketchup bottles (he even took initiative and grabbed the mustard). June went to the back corner to take a look at the man in the dark suit's eye. Hank and Brian took care of the office.

DeeDee Diner's office was a little alcove behind the dishpit, blocked off from the kitchen by a flimsy wooden door. Hank kicked it open before Brian could suggest they use June's key. The floor and walls in here were concrete. The restaurant's owner kept a desktop computer and a printer on a wall-mounted desk. Straddled above the desk were mementos from the owner's past – pictures of his kids, a newspaper clipping from when DeeDee's had opened twenty years ago. A bin beneath the desk had a number of tools – a nailgun, a power drill, a saw. The sort of things any handyman would be happy to have. Hank seemed most interested in the nailgun, to the exclusion of everything else in there.

The first night was hard. Hank kept everybody awake for a long time after the void turned black, putting them through meaningless tasks. The man in the dark suit was spared most of it – Hank was timid about giving him orders. The nailgun gave him the courage to put pressure on the others. It was cordless, and, as far as anybody could tell, capable of hurting them badly. Brian considered doing something about Hank at this point, but he did not want to risk a confrontation with his arms all burned up the way they were.

Peter bore the brunt of it. He continued to question Hank's logic about their situation. He voiced everybody's concerns about the uselessness of all the busywork they were doing. He tried to convince Hank to let everybody rest, but Hank would have none of it. When Peter eventually gave up and turned to his comic book, Hank reached over the chemical jugs he had ordered placed on the rack, tore the book from Peter's grasp, and nailed it to the wall.

“No more fucking slacking,” Hank said. “This isn't minimum wage anymore. It's survival.”

He ordered Peter to search beneath the kitchen counters for any silverware that may have slipped underneath. Peter decided not to argue anymore. He got on his hands and knees and began his token search.

The entire next day was similar. The sky turned blue, and then black again. Hank was a tyrant, and he was getting braver. June spent much of her time tending to the man in the dark suit's eye. The man in the dark suit had not moved from his booth except to use the washroom. Hank was not letting people eat much – they were all confined to crackers for the time being. It was, as he claimed, because they needed to ration.

Shortly after the sky turned blue on the third day, Hank approached the corner table where June and the man in the dark suit sat. Hank's stubble had transformed into a beard now, and he was filled with more fierceness and vitriol than ever before. Kyle was nearby, polishing tables as Hank had ordered him, too. Even Kyle had almost argued the senselessness of that action, but he had stopped himself after a look from Brian. It was no good fighting Hank.

“Junie,” Hank said, cocking the nailgun back in forth in his hand. It had hardly left his grasp these past three days. “This isn't the best use of your time.”

“His eye is injured, Hank,” June replied. It was true. The man in the dark suit's eye was bloodshot, a tangle of red vipers wrapped around the iris. “We need to keep an eye on it.”

“Fuck him,” Hank roared.

“Hank,” the man in the dark suit spoke for the first time. His voice was silk. Even Hank paused for a moment at its sound. “Everybody is hungry. It is hard for them to work. Maybe we should start eating full meals?”

Hank paused to think about it for a moment. Something about the man in the dark suit made him very persuasive.

“No,” he finally said. “No full meals. Or if we do, it's for people who work. As far as I'm concerned, you're dead weight. We've got no fucking reason to give you anything.”

“We're all in this together, Hank,” the man in the dark suit said. “June told me. She is a very intelligent young woman.”

“Fuck you,” said Hank. “What, you want to bone her now? Just fuck off.”

The nailgun went off in his hand, shattering a glass sugar container on the table. June caught a shriek. White powder avalanched out over the linoleum. Hank sucked in his breath and turned to leave.

“Hank,” the man in the dark suit said. “Maybe we should rethink our plumbing situation. I've noticed Peter uses the sink at his station to wash his shoes, and we have not run out of water yet.”

Hank's vision fogged. Blood pounded through his ears. Rage began to burrow out of his pores. Without responding, he stormed across the dining room and threw open the kitchen door so hard that

the glass cracked against the wall. Peter was sitting on the rim of his sink, tinkering with his phone. He looked up now with a mix of fear and confusion. Hank walked up to him and punched him in the face. Peter fell back into the sink.

“What the hell?” he said through a mouthful of blood, climbing out of the sink to stand with both immaculately clean workshoes firmly rooted on the floor.

“You've been washing your fucking *shoes*?”

“Yeah,” Peter spit the blood from his mouth into the sink. There was a tooth in there. “Yeah, because there's unlimited water. It's fucking *magic*, Hank. The electricity works fine, too.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You never stopped to think for a minute about why the lights are all on, or why the fridges and stoves work? Fuck, Hank, you watched me plug my phone in last night. The water is the same way.”

“For how long, asshole? For how fucking long?”

“Forever, probably. We're probably already dead. In Purgatory or Hell or something. Or maybe it's just the apocalypse. Either way, we've got all the electricity and water we need, and swearing at me like an idiot isn't going to-”

Hank punched Peter across the jaw again. He could hear the audible snap as the bone broke. Peter staggered back, reached toward the sink, and grabbed a large kitchen knife as Hank pushed forward and fired a nail into Peter's chest. Peter screamed through his broken jaw, sinking the knife into Hank's shoulder with one hand, reaching for something to grab with the other. They both fell to the concrete floor. Peter could see Brian watching from the other side of the rack, but Brian was just standing there looking shocked.

Hank began roaring, a breathless, guttural, never-ending roar. He pulled the knife out of his shoulder and tossed it aside. Then he brought his nail gun down to fire again. Peter tried to cover his face with the object he had grabbed during his fall – a jug of bleach. The nail pierced it and a gush of pungent clear liquid gushed out and struck Hank in the face. Peter began to club Hank in the side of the head with the jug. Bleach poured over both of them, stinging their eyes. Peter's vision melted away. Hank dropped the nail gun and stood up, staggering back. Peter reached blindly for it. As his fingers gripped around it, he felt Hank's foot slam down on them, shattering each joint.

Peter tried to stand, but in his pain and blindness slammed into the dishrack. The entire thing collapsed, bringing the chemicals down with them. Hank leaped on top of the jagged pile, bringing his fist down on Peter's mangled face again and again. Peter flailed madly, throwing sanitizer and detergent every which way. It burned Hank's skin wherever it made contact. Noxious gases filled his lungs. He recoiled for just a moment before returning for another punch, the one that would finish the dishwasher for good. Something sharp split his throat. The kid had somehow grabbed hold of the knife again. Hank went silent and collapsed on top of him.

The roaring had stopped. Kyle peeked into the kitchen from where he had been hiding behind

the bar. Hank and Peter lay atop each other in a pile of metal, plastic, and wisps of white steam. Brian was on the other side, sitting against the bread rack, his eyes wide.

“Brian,” the man in the dark suit said. He was standing next to Kyle now. He seemed calm, even in the face of this crisis. “It is not safe there. Go stand behind the back door. June, can you prop the front open?”

June began to do so.

“Kyle,” the man in the dark suit continued. “Do we have any fans? Something to move the air? There are a lot of dangerous fumes in there which we will need to get rid of.”

“There's a fan in the back. On the other side.”

“Brian,” the man in the dark suit called. “You need to get the fan from the back and push it through the window here. Use a cloth to cover your face and try not to breathe until you get back. Can you handle that?”

“Yeah,” Brian called back. “Yeah. I can do that.”

And he did, though he lost his breath before he could get back and the fumes made him nauseous. The man in the dark suit had Kyle use the fan to blow all the fumes out of the open back door. Afterwards, Brian made some burgers for the four of them. Nobody was particularly hungry, but the man in the dark suit was able to finish his.

“We will not be able to leave them there,” he said, untucking the napkin from his collar. His eye was looking worse now, completely red save for the irises and pupils. “When we think it is safe, Brian and Kyle should bring them to the back. We can't bury them, so we will have to drop them over the side.”

“Isn't that a bit disrespectful?” Kyle asked.

“A bit. But it is the only funeral arrangement possible to us. The only other option is to leave them where they are. Junie, can you get me a wet cloth for my eye? And then come chat with me at our booth.”

Moving the bodies was the worst experience of Kyle's life. He and Brian pulled the mangled corpses from their spot on the wreckage. Peter was in worse shape than Hank was – his face had been demolished, his eyes were gone, broken pieces of dishrack had punctured his back. Worst of all, perhaps, he had been doused in Hank's blood, which got on their hands, arms, and clothing when they carried him to the back door. They lay the bodies next to each other head-to-toe at the edge of the sidewalk.

June and the man in the dark suit joined them outside. A soft breeze licked at their brows as they stood in a semi-circle around Hank and Peter.

“Does anybody have anything they would like to say?” said the man in the dark suit.

Nobody did. Brian used his foot to roll first Peter, then Hank, over the edge. They spun slowly as they fell, getting smaller and smaller until they were completely swallowed by the void. Everybody watched them go, none speaking a word or shedding a tear. Finally, the man in the dark suit turned to go back inside.

“Kyle, Brian,” he said, motioning at the bloody dishrack. “Will you be able to handle this mess?”

“Yeah,” Brian answered. “We'll get started right now.”

So it was that Brian and Kyle pulled the fractured pieces of plastic and metal from the kitchen and began tossing them into the void. They had to wear rubber gloves since everything was awash in detergent and blood. The man in the dark suit sat with June at the bar while she dabbed at his red eye with a wet cloth. He was drinking another cup of coffee.

“How come that guy doesn't help us out?” Kyle asked while he and Brian were tossing a large piece off the side.

“He's hurt.”

“No he's not,” Kyle said. “Just his eye. You're worse off than he is.”

“Well he's a lot smarter than we are, Kyle,” Brian replied. “He'll probably get us through all this. Don't go stirring up conflict.”

“I don't know if I trust him, though,” Kyle said, peeking through the open door at him and June.

“There's something off about him.”

“Ah, I get it, kid,” Brian said, following his gaze. “You've got a crush on Junie, is that it?”

“What? No. It's not about her. It's about him.”

“Don't worry about it, kid. She's a couple years too old for you anyway.”

Brian went back in, and Kyle had no choice but to follow. There was still a lot of blood on the floor, which they gingerly stepped over.

“We will have to clean that up as well,” said the man in the dark suit with his silky voice. “Kyle, can you take care of that? Brian can cook us all some dinner. How about some of the caesar salad and a grilled cheese, Brian?”

Brian head obediently to the line. Kyle paused a moment, as if to say something. He could see that Junie's milk white hands were clasped on one of the man in the dark suit's. He head back to the kitchen to fill a mop bucket.

It was a long time before he had finished mopping all the blood. The others sat at the bar to eat, but Kyle was far from hungry. As the contents of the bucket got thicker and redder, all Kyle could think of was the man in the dark suit eating his grilled cheese while Junie waited on him. By the time the floor was clean and the bucket was putrid, the other three had all moved to the corner booth and were

setting up some sort of tent using the tablecloths. Brian and Junie were dilligently tying the cloths together, propping them up, and the man in the dark suit was sitting on a chair watching with his coffee.

To Kyle, it looked all the world like a throne.

They turned the booths into makeshift beds that night. The man in the dark suit had the most elaborate, and he shared it with Junie. Brian and Kyle both slept on booths and covered themselves with tablecloths. Hank had denied them the use of tablecloths as blankets, though it had never been clear why. Just a part of his ego, perhaps.

The next several days were peaceful, if difficult. Brian and Kyle spent a lot of time outside. The man in the dark suit had suggested they start farming on the roof. The guy was smart, they had to give him that, though his plans were risky – they collected soil from the underside of the restaurant. Brian lowered Kyle down on a rope made out of aprons they had sewn together. He could feel it strain the whole time he was scraping dirt into a small red washing bucket, hanging precariously over the void. Meanwhile, the man in the dark suit drank his coffee in the dining room.

Then they had to get up to the roof. There was an overhang which prevented them from placing a ladder against the wall and climbing up that way. Instead, Kyle climbed up by into the ventilation and made his way up. He dropped the apron-rope over the side so Brian could tie the buckets of soil and tools to it. It was becoming clear that farming was going to be Kyle's job. Brian would cook meals for the man in the dark suit while Kyle was building a soil bed. Junie would serve the man in the dark suit his meals and his coffee. In a sense, it was as if nothing had changed – just another slow day at DeeDee's Diner.

Yet Kyle knew something was wrong. He knew the man in the dark suit was playing them all for fools. He was careful not to let that slip out, of course – Kyle always ended up with more difficult, more dangerous jobs whenever the man in the dark suit seemed to suspect there was tension between them. His activities late at night with Junie would be more vibrant on those nights, as well. Kyle turned to Brian. Always, Kyle's muscles ached from crawling through the vents.

“I don't get the problem,” Brian told him while they were smoking on the back sidewalk. Cigarettes were running low. “This place needs a leader. He's a good leader. Better than Hank, at any rate. There's no reason to start a conflict.”

“But he never does anything himself,” said Kyle. “He asks us to take risks and do hard jobs and generally serve him. He's set up a whole system where we're essentially his slaves.”

“I'm nobody's slave,” Brian protested. “You're just jealous because of Junie. Face it, Kyle. Junie's with him now. It sucks that we'll never get our rocks off, but we have to consign ourselves to the fact that this restaurant is where we'll always be. Don't try to fight it.”

“You really believe this is the best way for everybody?”

“Yeah. I do. You're not fighting for everybody. You're fighting for you. If you don't admit that, you're going to blow up. And if you blow up, I'll be there to stop you before you wind up like Peter.”

Kyle had to wonder at that. Why Peter, specifically? Peter had been defending himself, from what Kyle had been able to tell. It was Hank who had been causing trouble, trying to throw his weight around. Kyle considered the possibility that Brian had worded the situation the way he did because Hank had technically been in charge at the time. Could Brian have been blindly submitting to authority? After all, Peter was almost certainly not going to get out of that fight in one piece, but Brian had just stood there and watched.

He went to Junie next, while the man in the dark suit was in the washroom. She was the most well-kept of all of them, except perhaps their patriarch. There were plenty of spare waitress uniforms in the office, and she had been able to keep herself comfortable and clean. This was in stark contrast to Brian and Kyle, whose clothes were still covered in blood and grime. Fortunately, they had at least gotten used to their own stench.

“Do you think there is something off about that guy?” Kyle asked. Junie looked surprised.

“No! He's been good to us. We will be able to survive because of him.”

“But he doesn't work.”

“Sure he does. He thinks about things. He comes up with plans that keep us alive. Without him in here, we will die.”

“Are you sure that's true?”

“Yes, of course I do, sweetie. Don't you have some work to do?”

“Yes, work that has been assigned to me by that man. That man who feels he is entitled to use us as slaves.”

“Don't be dramatic.”

“I'm not being dramatic. What gives any man the right to treat us that way? To feel so entitled?”

“Maybe he is entitled. He did, after all, clean us up after Hank and Peter had their thing.”

“Maybe he is entitled? Entitled to take you as his concubine?”

Kyle knew immediately he had made a mistake. Junie grimaced and looked away, her hands balling into fists under the bar. The man in the dark suit was emerging from the washroom.

“You should get back to work, Kyle,” she said. “You've got farming to do.”

Kyle went back into the kitchen and climbed the ladder into the vents, and up onto the roof. He looked at the tools next to the soilbed. The nailgun that Hank had used as his totem of fear was here – Kyle had been using it to keep his soilbed in place. The thought dawned on Kyle that, perhaps, he should sacrifice himself for the betterment of the group. Even if Junie and Brian ended up hating him, he could remove the man in the dark suit. Make things a bit more fair for everybody. Kyle would not

mind having to do all the work if it was on his own terms.

He slipped back down into the kitchen, nailgun in hand. Brian stopped him before he could go into the dining area.

“What did you say to Junie, kid?” Brian asked. “She was pissed off when you went upstairs. Crying even.”

“I, uh, I don't know,” Kyle replied. “Are you sure it's not something he said?”

Brian's eyes fell to the nailgun in Kyle's hand.

“Don't do anything stupid, Kyle,” he said. “If he thinks you're dangerous, we might have to throw you over the edge. That's not a threat. It goes for any of us who tries to cause harm.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“He didn't have to. I can just tell he's the kind of guy who would do that to protect everyone else. Go ahead and give that to me.”

Kyle complied, and Brian wordlessly walked out to the back sidewalk. He placed the nailgun on the pavement, then pulled out a cigarette.

“We're almost at the last one,” he said, staring out across the void. “What do you think we're going to do when we finally run out?”

The door slammed shut behind him. Brian swore loudly, realizing he was now locked out. The kid was going to do something stupid. He had to act soon. The cigarette flew from his fingers and towards the void. Picking up the nail gun, he gripped the wall at the corner and began inching out. There was the smallest sliver of pavement sticking out from the wall, just enough for him to balance on his toes. If he could make it to the side door near the washrooms, he might be able to get back inside in time.

Kyle grabbed a kitchen knife from the line and burst through the kitchen door. Junie and the man in the dark suit were both at their corner booth, the canopy draping them in a light shadow. The busboy slid over the bar, never hesitating even as a set of glasses were swept off to smash on the floor. He knew he did not have long before the man in the dark suit thought of something to save himself. His quarry tried to circle away, but Kyle cut him off. The man in the dark suit pushed his back against the front doors of the Diner. Junie stood in front of him, arms spread wide.

“Don't touch him, Kyle,” she said.

“Get out of my way, Junie,” he cried. “I'm trying to help us. He's a monster.”

“He's not brandishing a knife!”

Brian was getting to the side door now. Naturally, it was locked. He considered using the nail

gun to break the glass, but the recoil would have thrown him into the void. Instead, he began to use its bottom to strike it.

Kyle locked eyes with the man in the dark suit, who gave him a small, almost imperceptible smirk over Junie's shoulder. Kyle shot forward, and Junie reached forward to intercept him. She grabbed his wrist and pushed him back into one of the tables. It collapsed under their weight, and they separated, rolling to their feet. Junie lunged forward to grab Kyle's hand again and he slashed out, catching her across the gut. He slashed again in the opposite direction, and she clawed at her collar and slumped against the bar.

Brian smashed his way through the side door and crawled through. Kyle turned and tackled the man in the dark suit. They each tumbled through the glass entryway, rolling towards the edge in a gust of glass and violent wind. The dark void screamed into the Diner, sending napkins, broken glass, and other detritus billowing around the dining room. The lights flickered as the man in the dark suit pushed Kyle off of him. His suit had been pierced twice, and he grabbed his side with one hand as he gripped the doorframe with the other. Outside, a black fog enveloped all, straining at the windows and reaching its tendrils through the shattered openings to coil around the two men.

“Is this how you're going to help the others, Kyle?” the man in the dark suit had to yell to be heard above the roar. Red had overtaken his eye, swallowing the pupil. The other, Kyle could now see, had been torn out entirely by the glass. “Was poor Junie's life a worthwhile sacrifice if it meant putting me in my place?”

“No,” Kyle whispered, but even he could not hear his own voice over the cry of the void.

“You must think yourself quite the pragmatist, Kyle,” the man in the dark suit went on. Crimson tears ran down his smiling visage. Wind pulled them away before they could reach his laughing mouth. “You did it! You freed yourself from me! You freed your future! Reap the shame and disappointment, and hope it lasts long enough to matter.”

The man in the dark suit released his grip from the doorframe and let the void take him without another word. He was gone from sight in an instant, the same instant in which all the lights flared and all the building trembled. The windows cracked. The stove burst into flames in the kitchen. The jukebox exploded, raining sparks down on Kyle. He turned away from it, trying to cover his face, and came face to face with Brian. The cook was weeping, and he held the nailgun to Kyle's head.

“Why, Kyle?”

The sink behind the bar ruptured, spraying ice cold water across the walls. Kyle fell to his knees before the cook.

“Kill me,” He begged, wrapping his hands around Brian's. The fog was coiling its tendrils around Kyle's waist, urging him towards the void. June's body, drenched in blood, was staring at him. “I deserve to die.”

“No you don't,” Brian answered, pulling free from Kyle's grasp and backing towards the flaming kitchen. “Dying is a gift now. You deserve to live.”

Burdened by shame, he walked into the kitchen, and the flames lapped around his body. Kyle ran forward to catch up, but the tendrils held him back before he could get over the bar. He reached a hand out and called out to Brian again.

“Please, Brian. I tried to help everybody. I was only trying to help.”

But it was too late. Brian had gone into the inferno and was never coming out. Kyle cursed the man's pacifism. Junie would never have had to die if Brian had assisted him in the first place. Nobody would have had to die. They could have found a peaceful way of making everything fair just like the bastard had wanted. The smoke began to sting his eyes.

There was a pitcher of coffee sloshing back and forth on the machine. The floor was unsteady as Kyle walked over and poured himself a cup. All of the mugs were broken, but his only appeared to have a chip. When he returned to the bar and sat above Junie, however, coffee began oozing out of a hairline crack in the side. He brought the cup to his lips, letting the hot black ooze bubble out over his wrist.

With a sudden lurch, DeeDee's Diner crashed back down to Earth, shattering the windows and toppling the furniture. The flames flared strong enough to blow the back door off its hinges, strong enough to fill the entire dining room. Kyle's skin burned, and he got his chance to die.

When he stepped outside, he saw a beautiful sunrise.