

An Occurrence at Elevator 5

When Elevator 5 went into freefall, Ozzy Ramos knew he was going to die. It was just short of forty stories from the start of the ride to the useless recoil springs at the bottom of the shaft. Before thoughts of family or moments from his life, before questions or revelations, just stark terror, unaware that he had stopped breathing and had such a tight grip on the decorative rail along the back of the car that he'd bent it.

It was a Friday morning, long before dawn. He'd let himself into a service entrance off the loading dock shortly after 2:00 a.m. It was such an unusual time that the security guard responding to the entry hadn't recognized him, and was embarrassed after insisting on seeing his I.D.

"Don't be, Mr. Malcolm," Ozzy had said, catching the name from the tag above the man's shirt pocket. "You're doing your job."

Ozzy had ridden to his window office near the top. The Board of Directors' meeting would be starting in less than six hours. He hadn't been able to sleep. Almost a week since his last full night.

Ozzy had stood by the windows behind his desk looking out over the city and into the blackness beyond. It always fascinated him to see the city after dark from above. The lights and hustle would temper as the night got deeper, but there was always that sharp edge, that distinctive line that separated them from the water of Lake Michigan.

He had often thought it ironic that he ended up on this shore. He'd grown up on the New England coast. He remembered standing on the rocks looking out into the Atlantic knowing that the water touched every continent, that he could wade into the surf and swim to

anywhere on the planet. Lakes were different. Contained. Even when you couldn't see the opposite shore, you knew they were finite. Just one big pond.

He turned from the window, and headed into the hall, back to the elevator.

There were five elevators. Four servicing the general building population, and a fifth reserved for the Alphas and a select group of Betas. It was an express that could be summoned by a keycard. He waved his over the call panel.

The door slid open, he stepped inside.

He would miss his privilege. The board meeting that morning would end all of it. Halt his phenomenal rise toward the top. Revoke his all-access-pass. Dissolve the myth of his invincibility.

The door closed, and with an unusual shudder, the car began to descend. It was only a few seconds before a loud bang above him rattled the walls and obliterated any thoughts of future. The car accelerated. He grabbed the rail to steady himself. He felt almost weightless, and the drop seemed a dream as he fought to keep his balance. In the moments that followed, just before he hit the floor, the one thing he thought of was that he should have returned Megan Hopeland's phone call.

* * * * *

He was stunned. The dim emergency light reminded him he was on the floor of Elevator 5. He struggled to sit. Whatever the mechanism that braked and stopped the car had left him shaken and bruised, but still in the present.

An alarm, distant above him, echoed in the shaft.

Then a voice from the control panel.

"Elevator 5? Hello?"

Ozzy shook his head.

"Hello?" the voice said again. "Anyone there?"

"Yeah," said Ozzy. "Yeah. I'm here."

"You okay? Anyone hurt?"

"I think I'm okay."

"Anyone with you?"

"No. No. Just me."

"Help's on the way. You're at the fifth level. We'll have you outta there soon."

Ozzy had no idea how much time had passed before the doors were pried apart revealing a three-foot opening into the hall. He exited feet first onto a step ladder.

"Thank you," he said to the man holding his arm.

"No problem."

Ozzy realized he was shaking.

"You sure you're okay?" the man said.

"Yeah," said Ozzy. "Yeah. That was close."

The man smiled. "I'm sure it feels that way," he said holding out a water bottle. "But these things have so many back-ups to back-ups, it always stops."

Ozzy looked at him and took the bottle.

Then he ran.

He ran toward the exit at the end of the hall, banged through the door, then down the stairs, skipping some, grabbing the rail to swing around the landings, past the door marked with a foot-tall number "4," then "3," then "2. At "G" he burst into the empty lobby, across the marble floor, then exploded out of the fire door onto the building sidewalk.

He ran into the street, then as fast as he could toward the flashing traffic lights at the corner. By the time he got to them, he was winded, and slowed to a walk before dropping to his knees and sobbing. He wiped his eyes on his sleeves, then opened the water bottle and drained it.

"Fuck," he said out loud. Then, opening his arms to the night sky, repeated it as if a prayer, followed by a boisterous laugh that would have turned heads if anyone else had been on that street.

He started toward his apartment. Four miles. It would give him time to sort it out. Figure how to take this gift and save himself again.

* * * * *

It had been an unusual couple of weeks, including an email several days earlier from a high-school girlfriend with whom he'd had no contact since they'd graduated half a dozen years before. A woman he had dated when they were seniors. Divorced for a year, Megan Hopeland had found him on social media, then took a month before reaching out for fear it might seem a desperate gesture in a life newly damaged.

"You may not remember me," she began. "But I do remember you. And have often wondered how you've been since we set off on our separate adventures. So sorry about your mom."

He thought about how long she had spent crafting those lines, knowing that of course he'd remember her. Then alluding to the words she'd often heard him say, that people would remember him. He thought about her choosing "adventures" instead of a more conventional "paths." And then the decision to include the reference to his mother dying almost five years earlier.

He'd responded immediately, giving her his cell, then feared she might misinterpret his enthusiastic reply as more than just nostalgia, even though he felt her note a lifeline in the middle of his chaos.

Her response was equally as enthusiastic. A voicemail that she was in the city, staying for a while with friends, and describing a coffee shop he recognized where she had been beginning her days. How lovely it would be to buy him a morning cup. Catch up. A chance to laugh at their different lives.

He didn't return her call.

Megan Hopeland had stayed behind when he went off to school a thousand miles away. A year later, she married. Ozzy's mother had sent him the wedding notice cut from the local paper. He remembered contemplating sending a congratulatory note, but his mother reminded him their breakup had not been pretty, and questioned why he would intrude.

"Intrude?" he had said. "I'm just wishing her well."

"Would you be?"

Ozzy Ramos had been raised by a single mom, his father disappearing before Ozzy was old enough to know him. The only memories Ozzy had of the man were fashioned by living-room photos. Images in which his father never changed, while Ozzy watched his mother age. He hadn't been there to see her fail the year after he left. She had died suddenly of the chronic heart disease she had kept hidden until it was too late.

Ozzy had spent much of high-school feeling trapped in a town from which few of his classmates would escape. He was a bright kid. Confident. And with an instinctual ability to find the advantage when working with others. It was easy for him to play the leader and persuade people that he knew the way, whether he did or not.

But while many of his fellow students never thought beyond high-school, Ozzy fantasized about leaving it all behind. How he would go to college far enough away that he wouldn't have to come home on weekends or even holidays. How he would build his own life without the fetters he imagined were holding him back. How he would create a life where people *would* remember his name.

It's what led to the breakup with Megan Hopeland. He couldn't understand why she, too, didn't want to escape. Start anew. Why would she choose to stay where her future would be so limited? So predictable. So restricted to the imaginary high-school glory days and the friends she had loved or hated since kindergarten.

"But I like it here," their last argument had begun. "Why would I want to leave?"

It had ended with him making a lame snap about her name. "Hopeless," is what he muttered.

And so, she was among the things he left behind when he made his escape.

On his way to Chicago, he changed flights in New York. The difference between his small, hometown airport and the metropolis of JFK was almost too much to take in. The world suddenly felt much bigger as he noted familiar and foreign destinations displayed by the gates.

Choose one. Walk through the portal. Discover yourself in another galaxy.

He found the waiting area for his flight, then sat to watch others scurrying to find their own.

On board, Ozzy was by a window. The seat next to him stayed empty until the flight attendants started their last patrol closing the overhead bins. He looked up when he heard one reopen. A young woman, not much older than he, excused herself as she squeezed by the aisle passenger and sat next to him.

Her name was Angela Shelley. And the first thing she did after they reached altitude was order a vodka. "Hate flying," she said after downing it like a shot. "Had one in the bar just before we boarded."

He hadn't thought her old enough to be served, but as they talked he discovered she had him by a good five years.

"I miss New York," she said. "I'll find my way back. But for now, Chicago's a good placeholder."

She worked for an advertising agency on Michigan Avenue, the Magnificent Mile. "I don't have a view of the lake," she said, "But my boss does. When she's out for lunch, I sit by her window and figure how long it'll take for me to have her job."

The honesty of her ambition surprised him. She ordered another drink.

"How about you?" she said. "What window do you sit by?"

It took a moment for him to realize what she was asking. She was amused when he tried to fumble his way through an answer.

"I'll bet you're going to major in psych," she said, then laughed when he confirmed he was thinking about it.

"A couple of psych classes won't hurt," Angela said. "But if you really want a buzz, Advertising."

At the end of the flight, taxiing to the terminal she handed him her card, but not before writing a number on the back. "Don't call me at the office," she said. "Use this one. It's not my cell, so don't try to text."

One of the first things he did after checking into the dorm was sign on to the campus network and look up "Careers in Advertising."

Ozzy's first semester was a head spinner. It wasn't until after midterm exams that he called the number Angela had given him. The first time he'd gotten her voicemail, and wasn't sure what to say, so hung up. The second time someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Angela?"

"She's not here. This is Linda. Her roommate."

"Oh."

"You want to leave a message?"

"Yes," he said. "Tell her Ozzy Ramos called." Then spelled it for her.

"She'll know you?"

"We met on a plane a couple of months back."

"Well that narrows it down."

"Good."

"I'm being sarcastic."

"Oh."

"She travels a lot."

"Ah," he said, trying to sound as if he knew what that implied. "We met on a plane from New York. I was coming here for school. She said I should call her."

"Okay, what's your number?"

He gave it to her.

"She might not call, you know."

"That's okay," he said. "I just wanted to say hi."

But she did call. A week later. He was about to head to class, books in backpack, coat zipped, gloves on.

"Hello?" he said, fumbling with his phone.

"Ozzy?"

"Yes?"

"It's Angela Shelley. Wanted to know if you've found your window yet."

They talked for almost twenty minutes, Angela poking him about his first semester.

"They ever let you off your fancy campus?" she asked, then invited him to a weekend party in the city.

It had taken a while to find her apartment. He took the El as she instructed, but got off at the wrong stop, and had to follow the tracks on foot another three blocks. It was a boisterous gathering, a mix of young professionals, professionals-in-training, and those who defied classification. Alcohol flowed, along with a variety of stimulants and depressants. The music was loud, and Ozzy realized he could get used to spending weekends like this.

Angela rescued him three times.

The first from an overly-friendly female colleague named Chris who kept telling Ozzy how he reminded her of an ex as she tried to entice him to her apartment on the floor above. The second from an overly-friendly male colleague named Chris who kept telling Ozzy how he reminded him of an ex as he tried to entice him to his apartment on the floor below. And the third when both Chris and Chris sat on either side of him and suggested he choose the apartment to which the three of them could retreat.

"So," said Angela as things wound down sometime after 2:00. "You seem to have made good impressions. It's pretty rare the Chrises double team someone."

She invited him to stay the night, and when he volunteered to sleep on the couch, she laughed, took his hand, and led him down the hall.

Ozzy spent several weekends at Angela's before the end of that first semester. And he found a focus when he declared himself an Advertising and Marketing major.

During the winter break Angela arranged an internship at her agency, and he stayed with her while his dorm was closed for the holidays. At the office, she kept her distance, and made sure no one saw them together coming or going.

"People seem to like you," she told him late one afternoon when they caught up to each other on The El. "And you're actually pretty good at what you do. My boss's boss even thanked me for finding you. She wants to know if you'd be interested in coming in a couple of hours a week this spring."

Ozzy was surprised.

"I don't need to worry, do I?" said Angela looking at him. "You're not going to be a threat, are you?"

The question was unexpected. He laughed and reminded her he had just started college. She smiled, but several times that evening he caught her watching him. The next morning, she left without waking him. He was more than an hour late.

Angela's boss's boss was so pleased with his work that spring, that she hired him as a full-time paid intern for the summer. And it was that summer when Ozzy realized he had lied to Angela Shelley about being a threat. Angela had been promoted and now had an office with her own window. It was a Tuesday afternoon when she came back early from a lunch meeting and caught him eating a sandwich at her desk while looking at the city below.

That evening she told him it was time he found his own place.

* * * * *

"So, when did you realize you were so good at what you did?" a reporter had once asked Ozzy.

He smiled at her, relaxed in his chair, and said, "The same time I realized that college was a waste of my time."

It was a story he enjoyed sharing.

"My Marketing prof gave me an 'F' on a proposal I wrote for a final paper. Said it was 'unrealistic and devoid of common sense.' A couple of weeks after the end of the semester, I pitched the idea to a Fortune Five Hundred who hired me to implement it."

It was an exaggeration, but it helped the flow of the personal narrative Ozzy had been creating about his "extraordinary intuition and visionary value to the field," the narrative he wanted people to remember.

The longer, more truthful version would have to include him telling his idea to Angela, who found it "unrealistic and devoid of common sense," but placated him by running it past her boss. It was clear to her boss that Ozzy-the-Paid-Intern was only an intern and hadn't considered what it would take to implement such a scheme or to mitigate the risk of failure. But the approach Ozzy had proposed for repositioning a client was just naive enough to promise a big payoff if somehow it did not immediately explode and crash in a ball of flame.

The boss's boss, impressed by Ozzy's enthusiasm and self-assurance, thought there was little harm in including it as a throw-away among a variety of strategies they were presenting to one of their clients from. She even let Ozzy sit in on the pitch meeting.

Not surprisingly, the client took a pass thinking it too rough in its conception, and too convoluted in its application. But a few days later, they took a second look, asking how they

might file off the burrs in a way that would let them blindside their competitors. By the middle of that summer, Ozzy was a part of the team that set it in motion.

There was a lot of risk. And his more experienced teammates manipulated his enthusiasm and self-assurance so if it failed, he would be the one to own it, while, if it succeeded, Ozzy would just have been one lucky mascot.

It took much more effort than he expected, but the unusual campaign had some real success. Ozzy crafted his version of the story as having created a revolutionary strategy that could reserve him a place in the pantheon of advertising mythology.

"Did your professor change the grade?" the reporter asked

"Never told him. Had better things to do. Just didn't go back."

What Ozzy also left out of the narrative was that he had failed every class that semester and didn't have the option to return. Instead, he had moved in with Angela's boss's boss.

"You're remarkably intuitive," Angela's boss's boss had said to him one Friday afternoon. "But you need a strong mentor. Someone, like me." She had asked him to come by her office that day after a spirited client meeting.

"I watched you this afternoon," she had said. "You've got a great deal of raw talent. A lot of maturity. No one in the room would guess you're still in school. I bet we could go for a drink, and you wouldn't even get carded."

She had taken him to a private club two blocks from the office. After sharing a bottle of champagne, she invited him back to her townhouse.

By the end of the summer, she had offered him a fulltime job.

The reporter flipped a page on her pad. "You're remarkably intuitive," she said and asked if Ozzy had had a strong mentor.

"No," he said. "Didn't need one. I'm smart. I've always been able to trust my own judgement."

She asked how he had adjusted to his quick rise.

"It wasn't a matter of me adjusting," Ozzy had said. "It was a matter of others accepting the inevitable."

The reporter made her notes, and the inevitable word she used to describe him was, "Arrogant." At first, it had irritated Ozzy when he saw the article on-line, but he knew it had often been an asset in keeping others off balance.

"You're an arrogant bastard," Angela had spit at him following one team meeting. They were the last in the room, erasing whiteboards and gathering folders.

"I'm not arrogant," he had said. "Just really good at what I do."

"Just really good at swirling the fog and taking credit for ideas that aren't yours. You're loathsome," she said, then grabbed her iPad and left him alone to finish up.

In less than a month, Angela jumped, leaving both her position and her office empty. She'd planned to leave without notice, a strategy that would give her a few days head start. But Ozzy stumbled on her plan. It was a midweek midnight when she packed up her desk and slipped into Elevator 5 rolling a suitcase behind her.

A hand sliced through the opening as the doors were closing, reversing their movement.

"Oh," Ozzy said. "Working late?"

She moved to the side without a word.

"Hmm." He eyed the suitcase. "Off to placate some cranky client?"

"You do know your time as her little pet is coming to an end, right?"

He looked at her.

"You're not the first puppy she's had on the payroll."

"I'm earning my keep."

Angela smiled. "Oh, I'm sure you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She shook her head. "Not everything's a metaphor." She turned to look at him.

"Everyone you work with knows you're short-listed. There's even an office pool guessing the date she'll toss you out on your ass. I've got twenty bucks says it's Friday."

"Wait," he said. "This week?"

"Yeah," she said. "You're not as slick as you think. You're not even a joke anymore. Just a punchline."

Elevator 5 stopped at the lobby. Angela stepped out, but Ozzy hung behind. She turned around. "By the way, this is goodbye. I'm quitting."

"What?"

"Yeah."

"Jeez. When?"

"Now. Tonight."

"Why?"

"An offer too good to ignore."

"Where?"

"Back in New York. Bigger office. Better view."

"Wow," he said. "Didn't see that coming."

"No, of course you didn't," she said.

The door started to close. He blocked it. "Well," he said, "maybe we'll cross paths."

"Oh yes," she said. "We most certainly will. And I'll be looking forward to it. It's a small world, Ozzy. Everyone in this business knows the players."

"Do they know me?"

Angela laughed as the doors closed between them.

It hadn't taken Ozzy long to figure how to play it. Before dawn, he'd reported Angela's defection to her boss's boss. He framed it as a betrayal, then surprised her with his knowledge about the projects on which Angela had been working, and how he could prevent any poaching of accounts. Before the end of the next day, Ozzy Ramos was moving into Angela's office. He'd already started reaching out to her clients, implying she'd been fired, and that he'd be their new contact, someone they could truly trust to look out for their best interests.

It bought him time.

"You've surprised many of us," said Angela's boss's boss late that Friday. "That's why this is going to be so difficult."

"Wait," he had said, "I have something to tell you first." He explained how he was rescuing the jeopardized accounts. Then he thanked her for her faith in him. For being such a strong mentor. For helping him thrive. And he explained why he thought he should find his own place.

He moved into a studio. Expensive. Especially after living rent-free. But, it was worth it to project the illusion of success and independence to those with whom he worked. And to know that none of them now had any idea where he lived.

From his new vantage point, Ozzy maneuvered his way among a variety of projects, and inserted his way into the ones with the most potential to make him look good. Despite the misgivings of some, Ozzy proved himself to be a passionate front man and liaison. He had a

penchant for projecting an energy that fostered the promise of successful outcomes, and he had a growing social media presence. He was an effective salesman both outside and inside the building.

And he was also a fraud.

He became adept at blurring his failures by exaggerating the focus on the successes. He knew he was in over his head and it was only a matter of time before everything would collapse. He would be fired and left with no way forward.

And that's what he found himself thinking on the long walk home following his near death, how he could hit re-set.

What had occurred that morning in Elevator 5 had given him the courage to make this all just disappear. Create an opportunity for a do-over. It was the clearest of signs that he could let go of all he had worked for during these past six years. He could retrace his steps. Go back to a simpler time and choose a different adventure. A different path.

At his kitchen counter, Ozzy Ramos reached for his phone and found the voicemail Megan Hopeland had left earlier that week.

He knew her coffee shop. It was less than a mile away. He would walk there. Find her. Talk with her. She, too, had reached out searching for answers. Although they once had wanted different things, he had always admired—and envied—how she saw the best in the world around her, while he was busy trying to leave that world behind.

Reconnecting with Megan Hopeland was his chance to create a different outcome.

There was a dawn chill. Humid. Wind from the lake. The brisk walk invigorated him. It took twenty minutes but seemed fewer. He felt so energized it was like walking downhill.

The coffee shop was already busy. Young professionals starting their day. He recognized no one among the tables and counters. It had been a long time since he and Megan had seen one another. How different they might appear.

He sat on a stool near the back with a large coffee, and thought of what he would say. Of how she could save him.

The shop was crowded now. Customers backed up for orders. He stood to get a refill when he saw her through the window. She looked exactly as he remembered. He was holding his breath, gripping the back of the stool so hard he felt it bend.

She spotted him. A familiar and glorious smile crossed her face. She waved, then pushed toward him against the crowd. Her smile was a blessing that flushed him with hope.

For a moment he lost her within the throng. But there she was again, still smiling, still waving. He let go of the stool and tried to move toward her. But he couldn't push through the bodies that separated them.

She was closer now, her hand threading past those in the lines, stretching toward him. He reached for it, almost brushing the tips of her fingers when he fell, slamming face down into the unforgiving floor.

* * * * *

Elevator 5 hit the bottom of the shaft with the force of a head-on collision. Any chance of survival was lost when seconds later a part of the hoist assembly penetrated the top of the car.

It had taken emergency responders almost four hours to free what was left of Ozzy Ramos. Elevator technicians had to secure and stabilize broken supports at the top of the shaft before it was safe to enter the bottom. It was a messy procedure.

The accident was a fluke. It had never happened before. A structural failure at the top of the hoistway had separated the car from the safety systems. Governors and brakes that should have halted the runaway were never triggered. The result was as if Ozzy had simply stepped off the edge of the roof and dropped to the street.

The Board meeting was cancelled.

Over that day the accident led local news. But by the following afternoon, it had sunk beneath the surface as other shiny objects caught the media's attention.

Ozzy Ramos had no next of kin.

Without a funeral, the company paid for his remains to be cremated with no promise to claim them.

It was almost a week before the Board reassembled to assess the effect of Ozzy's abrupt departure. One member joked that it would make their job easier as they wouldn't have to watch a perp-walk. He was met with embarrassed silence until he explained that if they had publicly fired him, the story would be about a lack of trust and the ethical lapses of the agency. Instead, the chaos diverted attention to something more benign; an accidental death.

Others were quick with strategies where agency failures could die with Ozzy. In the process, the Board would erode the mythology Ozzy had tried to create about his "extraordinary intuition and visionary value." No one would think him a candidate for any advertising pantheon. All vestiges of Ozzy and the havoc he had created would be eradicated. In time, no one, except one saddened former high-school girlfriend, and one bitter former rival would think of Ozzy Ramos at all.