

The bus rear-ended Tasha's car. The force thrust her forward, then back into the cracked vinyl cushion. She quickly regained control of the vehicle. Her swollen eyes checked the rearview mirror just as the jagged mouth of the bus took another bite, then another. Now that the bus was right up on her, Tasha could see that Mary was driving. She could tell by the way Mary's stiff body moved (like stop-motion) as she leaned back into the seat and hid her face behind the semi-walled booth in the driver's seat. Griff sat a few seats back. Tsun and Rainah took up the rear. They were leaning out the windows and taking shots at Tasha whenever she swayed into view.

Tasha could see that Griff was staring at her through his dreads. They sprouted from his head like thick, woven serpents and hung past his shoulders.

He flashed a sideways smile when their eyes met. Just then, the teeth snapped shut.

*Twisted muthafucka!* Tasha mouthed as she pressed her foot to the floor. She was planning to slalom the maze of stanchions that supported the elevated subway line to lose them. If she remembered correctly, they were under construction. *They always are*, she thought. *There's no way in hell that bus can follow me through.* She thought of the innocent people who would surely get caught up in the mix. It never failed. This was West Philly. So many of them would be dead in a year or two anyway.

Tasha spotted Mary in the rearview.

*Bitch!*

Mary stomped on the gas and rammed Tasha's car again. The impact sent the car tumbling out of control. Tasha closed her eyes and readily accepted that this was most likely the end of her life. She had reached this point many times in the last decade or so.

Each violent tumble seared itself into Tasha's memory. The windshield, like a cracked and dysfunctional television, flipped through the channels at top speed. Altogether, she tumbled seven times by her count.

"Whoa! Didju see that?" Tsun yelled with juvenile glee.

"Saw it," Rainah replied. "Kagen's gonna be upset that he missed that one."

"No doubt," Tsun chuckled.

"Sorry to spoil your fun," Griff said in his trademark, laid-back cadence. He was calm, cool, and deadly serious. Next to Mary, he was a bundle of joy. "But you might want to hold onto something. This is gonna be a big one."

All eyes shot to the front of the bus where Mary fought for control of the steering wheel. It was obvious that they were going to hit one of the El stanchions.

The bus folded and wrapped around the El stanchion just behind the driver's booth. The rear end swung around and into a second stanchion, jarring it from its mooring. The first crash sent them all to the floor. The second flung them up in the air. Rainah would've gone out the window if Griff hadn't coaxed them all frozen in midair as the bus warped and twisted around them.

The rusted stanchion shook the ground when it tumbled. It brought part of the track at the mouth of the subway tunnel down with it. The tunnel was set twenty-five feet

above the street like a giant worm wrapped in concrete and decorated with graffiti tags. A ghostly horn echoed out from the darkness, then the piercing shriek of brakes biting down. But it was too late.

The train tumbled toward the street in a downward arc as it exited the tunnel. The cars buckled as they fell before toppling into a shifting, crumpled pile.

Tasha winced at the thunderous sound and squeezed her eyes shut at the flecks of debris that flew at her in the warm gust. The shockwaves caused her overturned car to bounce. Tasha was still belted in. She cried out when the car landed and again as the seatbelts tugged her sore body.

Nothing seemed to be broken except maybe her spirit. That and yet another stolen car.

Tasha looked up at the floor and thanked God. Frankly, it was the first thing that came to mind. It didn't matter that she had her doubts about religion. She was lucky to be alive, and she knew it.

When the smoke cleared, Tasha heard wailing in the distance. The again, this *was* West Philly. She struggled for another inch and peeked out of the car window, which was now only about five or six inches high.

A pair of thin legs stepped drunkenly into view. Tsun squatted about twenty feet away and leaned his head down to get a look at her.

As the seconds marched on, it seemed more and more likely that Tasha would be there for a while. A few survivors from the train wreck banged and stomped on the windows to get out; inside, the lights flickered on and off. The effect was like a damned nightclub.

Tsun turned and glanced at the wreckage behind him, then crossed his legs and turned back to Tasha. When she finally locked eyes with him, he gave her a wave and a smile that made Tasha's blood pressure begin to climb.

She balled her fists as she considered what she might do to him. For a moment, Tasha let herself go. Surprisingly, it felt good to scream and flail, so she continued. She punctuated her feelings with a soothing expletive here and there.

A loud whistle interrupted Tasha's meltdown. When she looked back at Tsun, she saw a second set of legs behind him. Tsun's arrogant smirk disappeared as the second man slapped his head forward.

"Get off your ass!" Griff scolded. "We got *thinngsss* to do."

Tasha immediately recognized the voice. Griff's tone (easygoing yet malevolent) was unmistakable.

Tasha did not hear a third set of footsteps that circled to the rear of her overturned car.

"Mary!" Griff yelled.

Tasha couldn't see her yet, but she knew that Mary was close. The pungent stench of rot and the sound of flies swarming gave her away.

Tasha tugged ferociously at the latch of her seat belt.

"You bitch," she roared at the filthy black skirt that flowed into her sights right outside the driver's side window. It caressed the ground and hid Mary's rotten legs and her old, thick-soled shoes. Tasha still remembered how they tasted. About a year ago, Mary used them to stomp her to sleep.

Frustration brought Tasha to tears. Claustrophobia crept up on her.

“What’s the matter? You can’t face me like a real woman?” she yelled.

Tasha paused and pounded her fist through what was left of the shattered windshield.

A slight wind lifted Mary’s skirt to the left for a moment. It was her only response.

Tasha remembered the shotgun she found at Joe’s. It was hidden under the driver’s seat. In the time it took to realize that the floor was no longer below her, she noticed a shuffle in Mary’s stance, as if she braced herself to catch something heavy.

Tasha closed her eyes and groaned at the thought of Mary’s sawed-off shotgun (her favorite weapon) and how it could reshape her body in a bad way, like it did that security guard outside the Springfield Mall.

THUMP!

Tasha flinched at the pain in her hip. She waited but there was no blood, no fragmented bone or ripped clothing. Surely a blow from a sawed-off would have destroyed her leg completely. There was only a large bruise where she’d been hit. Her poor leg, though. With all the damage it had taken in the past few days, she wondered if it would have to be amputated.

THUMP!

The rusty axe bit clean through the door just short of Tasha’s floating rib. She remembered the shotgun beneath her seat and strained her back reaching for it. She groaned and willed her shoulder socket loose to allow for more distance. She fingered the tip of the barrel forward until it peeked over the edge of the seat.

THUMP!

The shock from the third swing shook the entire car and knocked the shotgun right into her bobbling grasp.

THUMP!

The fourth one sent it flying out the window, where it landed just out of Tasha's reach. She cursed it with her eyes as it lay there, mocking her plight. The hole from the axe had curved, metallic teeth that bit down on her leg. Strangely, there was no more pain, just a constant throbbing throughout her entire body and a dizzying static in her head.

Tasha closed her eyes and gave herself to the darkness that, for awhile, had been pleading to embrace her. The last thing she heard was the faint sound of sirens approaching.