

A Quick Smoke Before Bed

A young woman looking for a quiet respite finds herself six floors from death and must fight to survive the night.

Charlotte woke up when a Barbie head smacked her just under the right eye.

“Hey Boogertoes,” a little voice said. “You fell asleep on the fire escape again.”

Wiping her eyes, Charlotte sat up on the thin mattress she had placed on the metal grates. There were several loose rusty bars, and the padding protected her from a lovely bit of tetanus. In her neighbor’s window, a little girl yawned into a wide smile.

“Hey, Chloe,” Charlotte said. “Aren’t you supposed to be asleep?” Charlotte said. “It’s 2 a.m.”

“It’s hot, and you were snoring out there,” the little girl replied. It was indeed a hot night, which meant nearly all the building’s windows were open. “Plus I wanted to say hi. How was work?”

“Busy.”

“How much did you make?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Why not?”

“For one, it’s rude to talk about the money you make. For two, you shouldn’t be asking me about my job.”

“You’re a stripper. What’s the big deal?”

“You’re eight years old. Now go to bed, Fartball. If your Mom catches you, we’ll both be in trouble.”

“You should go to bed too,” Chloe climbed back on her purple unicorn bed. “And not out there, Poopyknees.”

Charlotte stuck out her tongue as Chloe giggled. Within a few minutes, the girl was out cold. Charlotte lit a cigarette and went back to unwinding.

The sixth floor fire escape was her favorite place to relax, and even though the night was hot, she preferred sitting outside. Each floor had two units and sometime the tenants would leave on some lovely sleeping music. Charlotte even appreciated Mr. Carlton's snores from the fifth floor. The old man was out of town, though, so it was all music tonight. Some jazz from the second floor, and Beethoven from the fourth.

A car horn interrupted the mood a block away and seconds later, something emerged from a nearby alley. The figure was thick and sluggish, but it walked directly toward her. Charlotte leaned over the rail and watched the man enter the building.

Two minutes later, she heard the first scream.

Charlotte glanced to Chloe's window. She was still sleeping. Looking back down, Charlotte expected to see an attacker running away, having accomplished his mission, but no one left the building. Instead, Charlotte heard more screams from the open windows. Terror seemed to be moving in a methodical pattern from the first floor upward. The second floor had been caught off guard, but the residents on the third fought back. Charlotte could hear furniture tumbling, glass breaking, and terrified cautions to other tenants.

"RUN! GET OUT OF THE—" The warnings were cut short.

The fire escape gave Charlotte a chance to get away, but she looked back at the sleeping girl. She decided to stay put, because it was unlikely the attack would go much farther than the fourth floor.

Jason was new to the building, and shortly after moving into his fourth floor unit, he personally visited the rest of the tenants. More than just being a good neighbor, he was also letting everyone know he was a police officer.

"Jason!" Charlotte whisper-shouted down to his apartment. He looked up from his window.

“Stay there,” Jason said. “I’ve got this.”

Charlotte moved away from the rail, waiting for the carnage to end. Jason began shouting in his apartment.

“Don’t move! I will shoot you!”

Jason unloaded his pistol. Charlotte heard gurgling noises and she pictured the large man bleeding out and gasping his final breath. But a strangled scream reignited her horror as Jason’s body flew from the fourth story. She turned away just before the impact on the pavement.

That was it. The fifth floor was empty and with no one left below her, the killer was free to continue his spree with Charlotte and...

She couldn’t bring herself to think it.

Heavy footsteps reached the sixth story and Charlotte had to make a decision. One look at Chloe made the choice simple. Charlotte climbed back inside her unit and ran to the front door. She unlocked the chain and opened the door wide, then ran back to the open window. No matter what, she had to keep this maniac from finding Chloe.

A shadow appeared in her doorway. The body of the man barely fit the opening and she saw why Jason was no match for him. Bullet holes dotted the heavy armor that covered his torso, and the riot helmet on his head was merely nicked in a few spots.

“Come and get me, asshole,” Charlotte said as she scrambled back out to the fire escape. She made it outside easily and held her ground as the attacker followed.

The grates whined under his weight, and Charlotte worried that the worn metal may not hold both of them anyway. He lumbered toward her and she ducked out of the way, spinning him around. As she knelt on the walkway, she noticed Chloe sitting straight up in bed and staring out the window, frozen with fear.

She drove a knee into his groin. It was padded, but not enough to prevent a sufficient amount of pain. He let go and she fell to the mattress, clanging against the loose metal and forming a plan. In one motion, she reached under the bedding and sprung up wielding a rusty bar. She took a swing at the killer's face and he didn't fall, but he revealed his undoing. Charlotte plunged the jagged, metal bar into his exposed neck, but the killer continued to stalk her.

"LEAVE HER ALONE!" Chloe yelled from her now open window.

The killer turned toward the screaming child, which gave Charlotte enough time to lunge at him and push him over the railing as she grabbed the metal bar, pulling it from his neck. Blood sprayed as he fell just feet away from the fallen officer.

"Holy SHIT!" Chloe said as Charlotte collapsed on the mattress.

"You said it, kid."