

JENNA RECKTENWALD

# Just A Little Further Down

Until you can't remember up anymore

“Oh-ho, no!” Garrett protested as I gently tugged his arm. He really could put up a stubborn front, but that never stopped me. “We only went down half the street! There’s the whole other part of vendors there! C’mon, please.”

“I wouldn’t mind walking further, but I see you eyeing that table. Don’t play. You know we don’t have room for more.” I held his arm fast but turned to follow his gaze. There was indeed an interesting table further down, across from the BBQ food truck. A sly smile graced my lips.

“Wow. You’re good.” I replied, catching his eyes, not bothering to hide my amusement. He tilted his head and pulled his ballcap a little snugger. “I know you, Kate. Inside and out.” He grinned. A laugh escaped me. “I don’t know why you think you’re winning! I actually didn’t see that table yet, so I was thinking I trained you well. You spotted what I wanted before I did, which means you must want to make your wife happy, right?”

He rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. Before I could beg any more, he grabbed my shoulders from behind and playfully steered me towards the food truck. “If we’re going to shop more, I need to replenish strength. Pulled pork first, then your wind chime table.”

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I wouldn't argue with that. I breathed in deep and took in the warm summer breeze through the Spanish moss draped oaks lining the street sides. It was a gorgeous day. My wind chime collection could wait 30 minutes for a new piece.

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After the last sweet, tangy bite, I jumped up from the bench and threw the remaining clean napkins at Garrett. "You gotta keep your end of the bargain now! Let's look at that table before the vendors close up!"

He shook his head at me but didn't drop his smile. "You're like a little kid when you see something shiny. The street fair doesn't close until 8 o'clock, I checked the local Charleston events page before we came this morning."

"That means I only have five hours to shop?" I mocked a gasp of horror which succeeded in making him laugh. "Ugh, I can't compete with your energy. Fine, drag me around. But I want to stop at a few too. I saw an antiques van that might have watches in my style."

We went to the table across from us first, and after careful deliberation I didn't find a worthy new item for my wind chime collection. Their selection was too bulky for my tastes. The chimes sounded more baritone than whimsical.

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The next few tables were mixed bags. The jewelry was pretty, but the prices were sky-high. Finally, we came to the van Garrett had requested we stop at.

“This looks more 60s retro than antique.” I remarked as I looked over the green and blue Volkswagen camper. Garrett shrugged. “The sign said antiques, so let’s just see.”

“Whoa!” Garrett exclaimed, stopping suddenly as we neared the camper’s side door. “Look at this! That’s crazy lucky we came today!” I peeked around his broad shoulders and read the small sign stuck to the side of the van: “Free! Everything must go. Closing up after today.”

“That’s cool! I bet it’s picked over already, but let’s get looking for watches!” Garrett had to stoop ahead of me to enter, and I followed behind, brushing the red velvet curtain aside as I ducked inside.

The scent hit me first, a nostalgic warmth I couldn’t place. It made me close my eyes and inhale a few times to try and grasp it. Scents have always brought memories for me, but this one didn’t find a home. It left a longing which made me want to follow it all the more.

Garrett didn’t appear to take notice. Instead he was already several feet ahead, riffling gleefully through cardboard boxes stacked in the center and on countertops towards the other side. I didn’t want to interrupt his hunt since he let me have my fun earlier, so I took my time strolling to the boxes in front.

To my surprise, they were filled to the brim! I looked towards the driver seat of the camper to ask a question to the owner, but no one

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was there. I idly wondered how well off, or desperate for space, they would have to be to leave all this for free.

But I wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. If they wanted it empty, I'd be happy to pick some things out. On the top of the first box I immediately saw old World War II medals, bronze locket, jewelry chains, and leather straps. I gingerly lifted a few handfuls to dig deeper, hoping to find some watches to present to Garrett.

Underneath was costume jewelry rings, pearl bracelets, and old coin purses. A particular ring caught my eye with a green gemstone. It was mildly tarnished, but I imagined it could clean up beautifully. I slipped it on and grinned.

"I can't believe this! They have Bell & Ross watches in here! A few are broken, but even broken ones of this age fetch hundreds online! I can sell one and use the money to fix the other to keep." Garrett held two up to show off, and I held my hand up to show the ring. "They have some pretty nice jewelry over here! I don't want to be greedy, but let's grab one of those bags and start getting our final picks."

Garrett grabbed a cloth bag off the counter from a stack and slid the two watches in. "Take your time over there. I see some boxes towards the back I want to see too." I happily nodded and moved to the next box to start sifting through.

This one contained hand-stitched purses and checkbook-style wallets. I lifted a leather one to smell, hoping to find the source of the van's prominent aroma. It did have a leather scent, but I was left wanting for the source still.

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I looked up to ask Garrett what he thought the smell was, but he was no longer in view. “Honey! Did you leave already?” I called, turning towards the van’s left curtain where we had entered. The reply came from below. “There’s more! Tons more further down! Come here!”

Unease started in the back of my neck and spread down my leg muscles as I tried to reconcile where he had replied from. I looked left and right, seeing both sides of the street fair outside the van’s slightly dusty windows. It was parked just off the street in the grass, but there was no building nearby.

I slowly put the items in my hands down in their box and crept towards the back of the vehicle. There were high stacks of boxes here, and behind one line of items there was darkness descending down. That is where I heard my Garrett reply again. “Oh my God! I think some of this is real gold! It’s hefty even! You have to see this, Kate!”

I wanted to turn away and leave on instinct, but I couldn’t without him. I leaned over the stack and could see a little more clearly. There was a metal ladder leading down a door in the bottom of the back of the van. I could barely make out the outline of Garrett against a few gleams of light below.

“Honey, come back up here.” I didn’t shout, but my voice had a firmness I hope worked. I saw him shift towards another pile, but he did not answer me. “This isn’t normal. Garrett, please. These people have a murder dungeon below their van. I don’t even know how they made this basement and ladder here, but it’s creepy. Please come leave with me.”

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Again, I saw his figure move about the basement, but he did not come up to me. That man could be so stubborn. I resolved myself to drag him up by the arm and leave this place before the owner returned. My hand gripped the protruding handle of the metal ladder, and I began to descend.

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In the basement, it was larger than the van had been. I thought it would be excessively dark, but there was a glow from an unknown light source.

I could clearly see Garrett several feet away, hunched over a pile of metal cups, candle holders, and lamps. He would pick two up, compare the weight in each hand, put one in a separate pile, and then repeat the steps.

“These are the ones I suspect are gold.” He patted one pile and didn’t turn to look at me or wait for a reply before going back to his task. I glanced around the floor, which actually appeared to be a gray, flat rock surface, before stepping forward.

“Garrett, we’re leaving. We have to go...” I wanted to say another word here, but I couldn’t remember the one to use. I reached out to put my hand on his shoulder, but he turned and put a heavy metal object in my hand before I could.

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“Feel this! Heavier than expected for the size, right? That’s how you can tell the metals apart.” He was right about the weight. It made me lower my arm to accommodate it, but that was beside the point. We had to... do something? I turned the object over and noticed the shine even in the dim lighting.

As I stared, I tried to remember what I was going to get Garrett to do. He was happy sorting these items, and they did appear valuable. Why was I trying to dissuade him again? The feeling of not knowing annoyed me. I stayed still for a few moments, turning the item over and grasping at lingering feelings that no longer held concrete thoughts behind them.

“These are the ones! Help me carry them!” Garrett turned to look at me, arms full of heavy valuables. I picked up several more from the pile and studied his face in the dim lighting. He had a dreamy grin, and I found it contagious. “Where are we taking these?” I asked.

As soon as the words had left my mouth, I felt a small jolt in my spine. I had to go... somewhere. A direction. It was important. I whipped my head around to look. There was a ladder behind me, but I couldn’t figure out what direction it was going. In front there was a carved out portion of wall that went off to the right and down. I knew down; that made sense.

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“That way?” I pointed down, and Garrett nodded without questioning. We walked, heavily burdened with our items, towards the back wall. Once there, we saw a staircase in the stone twisting down and to the right. We continued walking down.

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This room was also stone, but it had been smoothed more than the previous rough floor. It extended a good 30 feet in each direction. The middle was filled with a maze of rows. Each row was comprised of ornate wooden tables with crates, jewelry boxes, and silk-lined chests placed on top.

After peering into one crate, Garrett unceremoniously dropped his armful of items and began looking through the new, better ones. No longer did he have to wonder if they were real gold. The vibrant sheen told you immediately of their value.

I began opening jewelry boxes and putting on new pieces. I took the old green gemstone ring off my finger and let it drop to the floor, replaced with a real emerald ring.



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We continued until our arms were full, then once again looked at each other. A haze danced in front of my vision, but the smell was intoxicating. I followed it to a far wall, and there was a marble staircase going down. We went down.

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I don't know how long we have been here. It seems like we were always here, always descending. The latest room was at least a quarter mile in depth and width. My shoes echoed on the polished silver floor. We picked up a new item, only to drop it the next time for something even better.

The treasures here rivaled anything dreamt up in a movie, crowns encrusted with the purest quality diamonds almost too heavy to lift, platinum settings, books bound with gold thread and teasing knowledge lost to antiquity.

We walked on, and people appeared in our view. They are here too, picking up items and walking. I saw Caucasian men and women in Victorian dress, American Indian men in full headdress, Egyptians in colorful robes. Every time and nation passed us by, walking forward and walking down, same as us.

The haze here had a visible quality, a green glowing mist, hung in the air and illuminating the vast room. I now knew it was the scent

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itself. I no longer had to look for the source. I only followed where it led.

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Each descent took an increasingly long time. We stepped down, stair by stair, for days before reaching the next room. Occasionally we passed someone, but they only ever mumbled in their stupor. Whether they spoke modern English or a language from long ago, it didn't matter. We couldn't meaningfully communicate in the haze.

We reached the next room and could not see the ends of it despite the glow lighting the way. The room could be too big to fit on the whole of Earth.

The man I've always been with stepped on the floor first. The sound it made chimed through the air, as though stepping on pure crystal. I stepped after him and followed. We winded through intricate displays and picked up and dropped items as we went. The ecstasy of the next find remained around the corner.

I dropped two items for the next one. It made me feel... different. It had diamond cylinders, carved with flowers and birds the whole way around. At the top it had rose gold fixtures tying each cylinder in a circle and providing a hook at the end.

I held it by the hook, and it swung gently from my hands. The cylinders moved freely and collided as it swung. The sound was

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somewhere in my memories, a sweet chime in the wind. Garrett. A name, his name. He bought me one of these before, a long time ago.

I clutched the wind chime to my chest and continued walking after his back, not wanting to lose him. I had to do something with him. We were going to go... somewhere.

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We arrived at an elevator at the end of the room. It had glass on all four sides and was only big enough for two people to stand in at once. Beside it there was an enormous wheel, spooled with wire.

After we entered, the door shut, the wheel turned, and the wire unspooled as we were lowered further down.

We went below the floor of the current level and saw above the next level. It once again extended beyond our capable sight. We waited as we descend further, further, and further down.

We don't sleep here, but we gazed down and lost more time. Much time was gone, and we saw parts of the floor. A titan-sized colosseum came into view ahead. People appeared as only specks of sand at this distance, and we saw them pour forward into the structure as though of one mind.

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After more lost time, the elevator dropped to a stop and opened. We walked out. The floor here was jet black with white light emanating through pinholes. It gave the effect of walking on a sky of stars.

We were shoulder to shoulder with people now, walking straight ahead. There were no items on this level, nothing for us to sort through or pick up. Our previous items remained with us for now.

As we walked, the floor tilted down at an almost imperceivable rate. If one were to set a marble on the floor, it would follow the predestined path down, but your eyes would not catch why.

The colosseum was in view. The floor here was the same, but a wetness was heard with each step. We moved much slower, as we had to wait for those ahead to enter first. We stood and waited our turn. The wetness grew deeper as we moved closer.

We spent so long picking up treasures, that the change to standing near still without new items clawed at my brain. I began to wonder if I was hallucinating the ruby red tint to the liquid pooling around our ankles. Perhaps liquid rubies was the new treasure.

It was near our turn. I could not see inside the colosseum, but the tall man ahead of me could. He stared with an open mouth and unblinking eyes, a green glow reflected off his pupils. I hoped the awe he had could be my own soon. I went to step forward again, but he had not stepped forward first.

I hit his back, and what was clutched in my hands chimed loudly in front of me. I blinked and looked again. Wind chimes. Garrett, my love. A... direction. Somewhere we were going. My head spun, and I

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thrashed my hands to hear the chime again. Blood from the floor splashed further up my legs as I thrashed my arms and kept the wind chimes going.

UP! UP! UP! I was going up! I was going to take Garrett with me and leave, to leave UP! I nearly vomited from the flood of memories, from knowing how far we had gone down, from that damnable van's basement!

I didn't risk losing myself again to the haze. I swung my arm wildly to chime as loudly as I could. "Garrett! GARRETT! Honey, we have to go! WE NEED TO LEAVE, NOW!"

With my free left arm, I grabbed his and vigorously shook him. "PLEASE! Please, we need to leave! I can't leave without you!" His eyes remained glazed over with glowing green. He stepped forward with the next wave of people, and I clutched his sleeve tightly. I pulled and dug my heels in. I cursed our size difference as I gathered all my strength to fight for him.

He didn't budge despite my effort. I swung my chimes at his back, hitting him again and again. "I can't... I can't! Garrett, you have to fight with me! I can't physically take you! Please, go up with me!"

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Another step forward, and the floor tilt increased. I felt my footing giving way. I released his sleeve and stumbled back to keep from sliding down. I looked at my love one last time as he stepped forward with the crowd, sliding down into darkness, far from my grasp.

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I ran as fast as I could, and I kept swinging my right arm to hear the chimes. I ran against the throngs of people, back towards the elevator. It felt like an eternity. How did we come this far? I think we should have aged and died in the time it took for us to reach these levels.

When I reached the base of the elevator, I saw no visible buttons or controls. There was a large counter-weight attached by a wire, but the elevator was not presently here at the bottom. I spun about, trying to catch someone's attention. "How long have you been here? Where did you enter? Help me go up! Remember UP!"

No one replied, and I could not shake anyone out of their stupor. They walked forward, towards the colosseum as me and Garrett did before. I began to sob and pace. I stopped only to scream at another person in hopes of knocking them back to their minds.

As I paced, I felt myself slipping. I wanted to go... I wanted to go... u...p? Up? UP! UP! I had to repeat it to myself to stop from

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turning and following them back down. “I HAVE TO GO UP! I can’t go down! Not anymore!” I sobbed.

Eventually the elevator returned to the bottom, depositing new arrivals for their march forward. I shoved roughly forward and slam myself into the glass wall of the elevator. “Up, up, UP!” I chanted, shaking my hand to chime along.

The small glass enclosure shuddered and moved. It went up. I chanted and chimed to myself, daring not to stop. As time passed, I forgot why I was saying these words, but I knew they were important. Up is a place. Up is home. Up is good.

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The rooms got smaller as I went up. Each level took a shorter amount of time to get to than the last. I also stopped seeing other people. I walked steadfastly by myself, chanting and swinging my arm. I went up.

At this last room, the only way up was a ladder. The haze was lighter, but the passage of time made remembering difficult. I knew my name started with a K. I had a husband. We had... a home somewhere, and a pet?

I grabbed the first rung of the ladder and pulled myself up. Each foothold was higher up, and I climbed.

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I reached the top, and I saw something that hurt my eyes. I shielded myself with my hands and dropped the chime by accident. It fell back down the ladder and hit the stone floor with a shattering clatter.

I stepped forward and felt dirt beneath my feet. Brightness... I remember this. Light! I stepped out and saw the light gathered into an intense circle. The sun... how could I have forgotten the sun?

How could I have forgotten everything! Memories flooded back, and I turned to see the darkness, the ladder, the basement all disappeared.

I was in a green forest, surrounded by lush trees and a bright sun above. My love, Garrett, was gone. And I was alone.

END



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