

The Sky's Reach

Katherine McLaughlin



In this peculiar town made of blocky architecture, every single person carries a colorful balloon tied securely to their wrist by a long white string. It is a known law of survival that if a balloon drops, catastrophic and mysterious bad things will happen to the owner.



Once every week, all the townsfolk are strictly required to participate in a grueling twenty-four-hour ritual of keeping their balloons afloat in the air without stopping. If anyone fails and lets their balloon touch the ground, a massive hand reaches down from the dark clouds to scoop them away forever.



Every Sunday afternoon at precisely twenty-eight minutes past three, the giant Town Watch Tower begins to chime loudly for two full minutes to warn everyone that the dreaded trial is about to commence. The blocky citizens stop whatever they are doing and gaze nervously up at the darkening sky.



When the clock tower finally strikes half past three, the whole town throws their balloons high up into the air all at once and waits for them to cascade back down. They must constantly bat them upward in a tense, non-stop game of keepy uppy to ensure safety.



Last year during the twenty-four-hour trial, my five-year-old little brother Toby had been bravely playing keepy uppy for hours alongside me as the daylight began to fade. It was almost time for the grueling event to finally end, but exhaustion was clearly weighing heavily on his small block frame.



Toby started missing his timing as his balloon floated lazily back down toward the pavement for the millionth time that exhausting day. Panic surged through me, and I desperately shouted for him to wake up and hold on for just one more hour.



Instead of snapping him out of his fatigue, the sound of my anxious voice only made him sleepier, his blocky eyelids growing impossibly heavy. Right before my horrified eyes, his grip slipped completely and his balloon crashed helplessly against the ground.



Instantly, a gigantic, terrifying hand materialized from the churning clouds above and descended rapidly toward where my brother stood frozen. I screamed in sheer terror that it could not have him, rushing forward to fight off the ominous intruder.



I struck and kicked the massive fingers with all my might, but my efforts were entirely useless against the overwhelming force from the sky. The giant hand scooped my little brother up effortlessly just like a tiny pebble, vanishing upward into the atmospheric gloom.



Within seconds, everything was silent again, leaving behind only Toby's small hat resting quietly on the empty pavement. That single fallen object pierced my heart like a needle, reminding me that I had no choice but to go after him.