The Pediatric Ward

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The world ended without ceremony—alarms half-working, corridors humming, drip bags still ticking off seconds like metronomes for a future that never arrived. In the pediatric wing, where wallpaper clouds hovered over cartoon giraffes, a nurse stayed on her feet. She counted heads instead of minutes, breaths instead of news. This is the story of a hospital that became a fortress and a ward that became a village, where children learned to measure safety in routines, not in walls, and where one exhausted caregiver learned that leadership can sound like a lullaby.

The Pediatric Ward is a novel about survival as a behavior of the heart. The infected exist beyond the doors, and danger wears many faces, but the fiercest contests are for calm, for trust, for a chance to play without listening for footsteps. Here, scarcity isn’t only about food and light; it’s about stories, structure, and affectionate attention—things children can’t ration and still remain children. Through a sequence of days and nights compressed by crisis, the book lingers on games invented from IV caps, lessons chalked along baseboards, and courage that looks like small hands reaching for one another in the dark.

This story also carries a second purpose. Woven into the narrative are child-centered, trauma-informed approaches for extreme situations—principles that prioritize safety, predictability, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. You will not find rigid protocols or heroic myths. Instead, you will see practical rhythms and gentle practices embedded in scenes: how a circle time can become a perimeter of care, how play can metabolize fear, how children can be offered voice and responsibility without being burdened by adult despair. Fiction gives those ideas breath and consequence; the ward gives them a place to live.

At the center stands Nurse Mara, whose training never promised apocalypse but prepared her for tenderness under pressure. Around her gather a small constellation of survivors: Jae, who fixes things because it keeps the past from slipping; Amaya, who draws what no one dares to name; twins Noor and Nuri, who turn chores into competitions and competitions into laughter; and Dani, too old to be a child and too young to be anyone’s shield, learning what leadership can mean when it has to be shared. Their personalities shape the ward’s rules and rituals; their needs dictate the curriculum; their strengths, not their scars, anchor the community.

You will witness how the children and their caregiver bargain with fear and carve out meaning: rules written in crayon, a classroom in a supply closet, breathing games that make nights passable, story hours that outrun the generators. You will also meet adults who want control more than safety, and you will watch the ward negotiate with

them using boundaries as carefully as barricades. Each chapter aims to honor the reality that in catastrophe, ethics are as essential to survival as water, and that safeguarding childhood is not a luxury but a lifeline.

Some of what you read will be tender; some will be hard. Violence touches the edges of the story but never becomes its spine. The focus remains on what children need to endure without hardening, to remember without breaking. Where the narrative hints at method, it does so to spark imagination rather than prescribe. If you work with children, parent them, or simply care for their futures, I hope these pages offer a vocabulary of steadiness you can adapt to your own storms—literal or otherwise.

Above all, this book is an invitation: to sit a while in a ward that refuses to surrender its gentleness; to inhabit a fortress where the strongest walls are rituals of care; to consider that after the loudest endings, the quietest work begins—hands counting breaths, voices counting together, until morning finds them still counting, still together.

CHAPTER ONE: The Sirens at Dawn

The sirens had been going for so long that nobody could remember when they started. Somewhere far past the river, past the overpass and the strip mall with the caved-in pharmacy, something was burning again, and the wind carried the sound eastward like a rumor nobody wanted to hear. Mara heard it anyway, standing at the nurses' station with her pen frozen mid-sentence on the whiteboard where she still wrote the date every morning out of sheer stubbornness. Wednesday, October 14th. She underlined it twice. The children needed to know what day it was. If she stopped writing the date, it would mean she had stopped believing someone might come to rescue them, and she wasn't ready to believe that yet.

Mara Delgado had been a pediatric nurse for eleven years, which meant she had spent roughly that many thousand hours convincing small humans to open their mouths, hold still, and accept that medicine did not taste like candy even when it came in a candy-colored cup. None of that training had included a module on what to do when the city stopped working. But training or no training, she was still standing, and the children were still breathing, and that counted for more than she had any right to expect.

Behind her, the ward hummed. Pediatric Unit East of St. Mercy Hospital had once been painted in cheerful blues and yellows, with cartoon animals climbing the walls in various states of enthusiastic adventure. The artwork was chipped now, faded by months of flickering fluorescent light and the particular kind of wear that comes from small fingers tracing the same giraffe every morning at six a.m. because they couldn't sleep and didn't know what else to do with their hands. The hum was the ventilator in Room 4, the ancient radiator in the east hallway that clanged like a percussion instrument whenever the heat kicked on, and the low murmur of nine children doing what children do when they are trying very hard to be brave.

Mara set her pen down and surveyed the whiteboard. She had adapted it over the weeks the way a ship's captain adapts a chart to waters that don't appear on any official map. Alongside the date and the shift schedule, she had written the morning routine in block letters: WAKE UP. WASH FACES. STRETCH. BREAKFAST. The routine was not therapeutic in any formal sense, at least not the way her old supervisor would have recognized it. It was survival. Routine was the scaffolding they built their days around, and without it the children would drift into a fog of waiting and silence that Mara knew from experience was harder to climb out of than any fever.

Room 1 was already stirring. She could hear the twins before she saw them, a synchronized clatter of small bodies bouncing on mattress frames like two excited

kangaroos who had not yet received the memo about the apocalypse. Noor and Nuri Al-Faraj were seven, identical in nearly every respect except for the streak of black marker Nuri had been refusing to wash from his left ear since last Tuesday. The twins treated every chore as an Olympic event and every Olympic event as an opportunity to narrate their own sports commentary, which meant that the ward's six a.m. routine came with a running broadcast only Mara could hear.

"And Nuri takes an early lead, folks, staggering toward the sink with the determination of a champion but the coordination of a baby giraffe on roller skates," Noor whispered loudly as Nuri tripped over his own feet and caught himself on the IV pole in their shared room. The IV pole hadn't delivered anything in weeks, but nobody had removed it, and the twins had claimed it as both a coat rack and a training partner for sword-fighting with pool noodles.

Mara pushed through the door before anything could fall over. "Feet on the floor, both of you. If you woke up the east wing, we'll have Gabe trying to relocate to the roof again."

The twins froze with the practiced innocence of children who knew exactly how much mischief was acceptable before the nurse's voice sharpened. Nuri flashed a grin. "We were just stretching, Nurse Mara. Superhero stretching."

"Superheroes put their feet on the floor."

They did, reluctantly, and Mara counted it as a win. Every small victory counted now.

Across the hall, Room 3 belonged to Jae Park, who was fourteen and acted like forty. Jae was already sitting cross-legged on his bed when Mara peeked in, a length of electrical wire in one hand and a stripped paperclip in the other, doing something to the radio that had been dead since the power grid collapsed in late August. He didn't look up when she passed, which was fine. They had an unspoken agreement: if Jae was working on something with his hands, you spoke to him from the side, never from above. He had explained this once, very seriously, in the tone of a union representative negotiating terms.

"How's it going?" Mara asked from the doorway, trying to sound casual about the fact that he was dismantling the radio with the focus of a surgeon.

"Depends on your definition of going. Wire's corroded. Solder's cracked. The AM band has a faint signal if I hold the paperclip at this angle and lean left, but it fades in and out. I caught what I think was a number station two nights ago, which is either espionage or folk music. Hard to tell."

"Did the number station have talking?"

"Counting. Just counting." Jae twisted the paperclip and a burst of static erupted from the tiny speaker, followed by a half-second of something that might have been a voice before it dissolved into noise. He held the paperclip steady with surgeon-like precision, and for just a moment, the static cleared enough to reveal a woman's voice reading numbers in monotone. Then it was gone.

Jae set the paperclip down carefully. "They're still out there," he said, and the simple statement carried enough weight that Mara had no idea what to do with it, so she nodded and told him breakfast would be ready in twenty minutes, which was technically a lie since the breakfast situation depended on how far they'd have to send the scavenging team and whether the pantry still had crackers, but it was the kind of lie that kept children moving in the morning, and Mara had become quite skilled at it.

Room 5 was silent. Mara paused outside the doorway and listened. Silence from Amaya Ortiz could mean one of two things: either she was drawing, which meant she had retreated into a world of ink and color and furious creative energy, or she was awake and waiting, which meant her large dark eyes were doing the thing they did when she was cataloguing threats in the corridor. Both required careful handling.

She knocked softly and opened the door. Amaya was sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, a sketchbook open on her knees, her colored pencils arranged beside her in the order of the spectrum because Amaya did everything in order. She was drawing the view from the window, which was currently a sheet of gray sky and the silhouettes of trees that looked like they had been trying to run and didn't make it.

"Morning, artist."

"Morning." Amaya didn't look up. She was adding smoke to the horizon, a curl of gray pencil that rose from somewhere beyond the treeline and dissolved into the clouds.

Mara studied the drawing. "That's new."

"Nadia's house. It's gone." Amaya said it plainly, the way children sometimes do when they've processed something so large that the only appropriate response is flatness, at least until the processing finishes and the feelings arrive later, usually at the worst possible time, like two in the morning or during circle time.

Mara pulled up a chair and sat beside her. She didn't say it would be okay, because it wouldn't be, and she didn't say anything about Nadia, because Amaya would bring Nadia up when she was ready. Instead she said, "Can you add something to the sky? I think it needs a bird."

Amaya considered this. "What kind?"

"A ridiculous one. Like a pelican carrying a sandwich."

The corner of Amaya's mouth twitched. She reached for a blue pencil and drew a pelican so comically large it took up half the sky, a sandwich dangling from its beak. It was absurd and wonderful, and Mara felt something tight in her chest loosen by a fraction of an inch.

Down the hall, Room 7 was staging what sounded like a diplomatic crisis. Mara walked toward it with the calm stride she had perfected over months of managing children who had lost parents, homes, and any reasonable expectation that adults would fix anything. She rounded the corner to find Dani Reeves standing with her arms crossed, addressing a cluster of three younger children who were sitting on the floor with the expressions of a committee reviewing a hostile takeover.

"Nobody's going to the dark part of the basement."

"Five is old enough," said a boy named Sam, who was six and had opinions about everything and fear about nothing, which was a dangerous combination.

"Five is old enough to think he's old enough, which is different." Dani's voice carried the weight of thirteen years and an authority she had not been given officially but had earned through sheer, relentless competence. She had arrived at the ward nine months ago, transferred from the general pediatric floor when the evacuation protocols collapsed and the hospital became the last place standing between the children and a world that had gone sideways. Nobody knew exactly what had happened to Dani's parents. She hadn't said, and Mara had learned that the things children didn't say were walls you didn't push through but doors you left closed until the child decided to open them.

Dani was practically an adult in the ward's social structure. She helped with inventory, mediated disputes, and had developed an uncanny ability to predict which children were about to have a meltdown before the children themselves knew. She also had the habit of shouldering responsibilities that no thirteen-year-old should carry, and Mara spent a significant portion of her day gently peeling some of those responsibilities off Dani's shoulders and redistributing them before the girl buckled.

"You're not the basement committee," Mara said, leaning against the doorframe. "You're the breakfast committee."

Dani looked at her. "Breakfast isn't until we know if there are rats in the basement."

"There are not rats in the basement."

"There were rats last week."

"There were rat droppings last week, which we cleaned, which means there are not rats now, just a scary basement with pipes that make noise when the heat doesn't work."

Dani considered this with the gravity of a general assessing battlefield intelligence. She uncrossed her arms. "Okay. But someone has to go first."

"I'll go. That's literally the part of my job description that still applies."

The children looked at Mara with a mixture of relief and suspicion that was, she had learned, the default pediatric expression toward adults in uncertain times. She walked to the basement door, which creaked open with the enthusiasm of a haunted house prop, flicked on the light that flickered but held, and called back, "Clear. No rats. One very startled mop."

The children cheered, or rather the younger ones did. Sam pumped his fist. The twins skated past on socks, pretending the hallway was an ice rink. Jae appeared at the end of the corridor holding a bowl of instant oatmeal that he had somehow heated using a candle and a tin can, a trick he had learned from a YouTube video in another lifetime, and offered a serving to Mara with a seriousness that suggested he was presenting it to a head of state.

"You shouldn't have," Mara said.

"It's burnt."

"I didn't say it was a gift. I said you shouldn't have. There's a difference."

Jae almost smiled. Almost. The word almost had become a kind of unofficial punctuation mark in all of their lives, hovering after every positive thing like a question mark made of hope. Almost safe. Almost enough. Almost morning.

Mara took the bowl and they sat together on the floor of the nurses' station, which had become the ward's de facto commons. She ate while reviewing the inventory list she maintained on the back of a pharmaceutical flyer. Canned peaches: four cans. Antibiotics: critically low. Batteries: enough for two weeks if they were careful, which they were never careful, because children needed flashlights for the dark and flashlights were also the ward's primary perimeter alert system, a dual purpose Mara found darkly funny if she thought about it too long.

The radio crackled from Jae's room. He was already back inside it, coaxing something out of the static with the patience of a person who had decided long ago that giving up

on communication was the same as giving up entirely. Through the wall, Mara heard fragments—a voice, broken words, a pattern that repeated. She couldn't make out the language. It might not have been a language. But it was something, and in their world, something was everything.

The siren outside rose in pitch, then fell, then rose again like a mechanical tide. Mara had stopped flinching at it weeks ago. The children hadn't entirely stopped, though they were getting better, especially during the day. Nights were harder. The nights were always harder, and that was a problem she would have to solve not with medicine but with the only tools she had left: her voice, her presence, and an inexhaustible supply of invented games that doubled, whether the children knew it or not, as therapy.

She wiped the bowl clean, set it aside, and stood. Today they would have breakfast in the courtyard if the air was clear, which it probably wasn't, but the possibility of breakfast outside was worth stating aloud because statements of possibility were the currency of childhood, and childhood was the only thing they were all still fighting for.

"Mara?" Amaya's voice came from behind her, quiet and precise. Mara turned. The girl was standing in the doorway of Room 5, sketchbook tucked under her arm, her eyes catching the light from the window in a way that made her look older than twelve.

"What?"

"Can we have story time today?"

"It's barely seven in the morning."

"The siege won't wait until a decent hour."

Mara laughed, and it startled her, a real laugh, the kind that comes from a place so deep you forget it's there until something pulls it out. "Fine. But I get to pick the first one. And it has to be something where someone survives."

"Obviously," Amaya said, and disappeared back into her room, and Mara was left standing in the hallway of a hospital that wasn't really a hospital anymore, listening to the siren, listening to the children, listening to the particular kind of quiet courage it took to build a world inside a broken one.

She checked the courtyard through the reinforced window. Gray sky. Trees standing still. No movement beyond the fence line, which was either good news or the calm before bad news, depending on the hour. She pulled the curtain half shut and pinned it with a clothespin from the supply bin, a solution so makeshift it could have been held together by optimism alone.

Then she went to find the twins and negotiate the sock situation before someone broke a hip.

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