

VERITY

*Sometimes they come, sometimes they spin it. When the hoop spins, the pictures move —*

*— and I am alive again.*

*Spin it and —*

*— yes. There, yes.*

*— a girl in the sunlight, a leap, a joyous scream. And later — later, screams again: yes, screaming, pressing in, and the darkness —*

*— and it stops.*

*Wall.*

*Window.*

*Wall.*

*They come again, it spins again —*

*— and, oh, but the summer was endless, and swifts screamed, and the chest-high grass, and the warm boards of the treehouse under me, and the games, and the waiting —*

*Window.*

*Wall.*

*Shadows moving. Voices.*

*It spins —*

*It spins and —*

*— and later he will come to me, and we will lie together, and the moon will turn the clouds to quicksilver, and the leaves will stir and whisper to each other*

*—*

*— and we will kiss.*

*And then I will slap him, and run home in the moonlight laughing.*

## HARRY

Begin at the beginning if you want to. But frankly it would make as much sense to start anywhere. Perhaps it makes no sense wherever you start.

Why did Verity end up drooling at the walls in a hospital, with the nurses occasionally spinning her beloved zoetrope, and she herself blank and saying nothing? Why did I lose her all those years ago, and why have I lost her again now? Perhaps the answer is, that's who she always was, just as I am simply me. We can't help it. Call it destiny, call it justice, call it life: does it really matter? It all happened and I can't unmake it. The same questions go round and round for me: cause, effect, cause — and I'm back where I started. So begin where you want to.

You could even say that it began with those photographs, with an impossible, wild idea which Verity, being Verity, made happen — and I couldn't prove you wrong. She realised that if you took lots of photographs, all of the same thing, all at the same time, all from different angles, then the shots would make up a three-dimensional picture. You would see a single moment of time, but from every perspective. It was brilliant. It was mad. It was wonderful — and it worked. In many ways, I wish it had remained a fantasy — but then I wouldn't be here, would I? Verity would still be Verity, and I'd be someone else entirely.

It all connects, you see. It was just a piece of fun, but it has haunted us ever since. I could have said no, we all could have; but the madness of it swept us along — and so the wheel began to turn.

That was only one of many beginnings — and anyway, it's done. And here we all are — well, some of us. And you must be wondering who I am and what I'm on about. I'll tell you.

My name is Harry, and if it's all the same to you, I'll begin my story at another beginning — another of the moments scattered through my life when, for me, it all started.

I'll begin with Verity's fall.

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## ONE

I wasn't there.

I heard about it the next day, and by then it was far too late. But as I said, perhaps the idea that we can change things is only a comforting illusion, perhaps I couldn't have stopped it even if I'd been there or even if she'd told me what was going on beforehand.

I wasn't there when she fell a hundred and twenty feet through the air from the cliffs near England's most famous suicide spot — she hadn't even made it to Beachy Head itself, just to a lower spot nearby. I didn't see her crack her shoulder and the side of her face on a chalky outcrop half way down. I wasn't on the stony beach another fifty feet below to see her crunch into the loose flint with little more sound than a footstep. I didn't wait with her as she lay misshapen and unconscious on the shingle, her body cooling and her life ebbing with the retreating tide. (If the tide had been coming in the sea would have taken her; sometimes I wish it had.) It wasn't me who found her half an hour after her fall, it wasn't me who called the police. I didn't witness the rescue; not the helicopter which picked her up from the rocks, its blades sweeping perilously close to the cliffs; not the frantic rush of the gurney across the helipad; not the clipped and urgent voices of the men and women who struggled to save her — and succeeded. It seems unfair that these ghosts haunt me because they are not my own. But perhaps that's why they do: Verity needed me, and I wasn't there.

I was eighty miles away, sitting in Jim's in London, wondering where the hell she had got to.

Jim's is a pub, hidden in a narrow side street a few blocks off the unfashionable (and therefore, in Verity's perverse reasoning, trendy) end of Battersea. It's not actually called Jim's, it's the Dog and Duck — but it's one of those areas which prides itself on having a village atmosphere, everyone is supposed to know everyone else. The Dog and Duck's landlord is Jim; so Jim's it is.

The area is comfortably middle class but has retained a suggestion of grime and roughness which Verity loved. The streets smelled of the leather interiors of open-topped cars, of perfume and the expensive cigarettes of the chattering classes, but Verity detected an old faint whiff of the gutter in the mix. She liked to say that the thrill of living there was the feeling that anything might happen to you if you walked up the wrong street. Alongside the successful thirty year olds who were something in the city or insurance or the media, there were

garage mechanics made good and older men and women who were well-off from renting out houses they had bought thirty years before for a few grand. Now, the original natives served to add a little spice and the odd scandal to the newcomers' too-tame lives. Verity adored it all. She always said that the common touch was essential in her job. She needed real people about her, an antidote to the pseudery of the fashion world. Jim's quickly became the centre of her life — and therefore of mine.

I always felt a little out of place there, but she never noticed and I never told her. We met there every second week on Wednesdays (Thursdays, Fridays and the weekends were 'hot nights' when Verity might get lucky; she didn't want me anywhere near her). Seven-thirty on the dot, with her always twenty minutes late, table in the corner by the fireplace under the mounted shove-halfpenny board; first one there (always me) to line up the drinks, a pint of Kronenbourg for me and a tequila for Verity with a pils chaser (it was a dead rough area, honest), last person to need a piss chose the restaurant. But the twenty minutes before she arrived were always uncomfortable. The place would be quiet, only four or five people in there, a couple playing pool, the others hunched over the bar exchanging silences. Every time I stood at the bar and ordered the drinks, Jim would stare through me for an uncomfortable moment, and the silence of the other drinkers suddenly would seem less companionable.

I might have been imagining it. I have never been entirely at ease with myself. I think of myself as clumsy, affable, mildly inept, likeable in an amusing way; but charming, confident, magnetic, these things I am not. If I had been, then perhaps I wouldn't have waited for two hours and four pints (plus one tequila and a pils lined up and waiting) before I finally decided I'd been stood up.

I'd phoned her every half an hour or so, ringing off just before I had to leave a message, because it was embarrassing in an otherwise silent pub. No reply. Eventually my battery gave out. So I'd made excuses for her. She was on her way. She'd been late from the studio but she'd lost her mobile so she couldn't ring. She was caught in traffic. By my third call, the excuses were getting strained. She was still at the studio, but stuck on the phone, sourcing fabric she could only get from Brazil perhaps. She'd lost my mobile number, she didn't have Jim's, she couldn't ring.

That night, as during all twenty-plus of the years I'd known her, there was a small whisper inside me that I very much did not want to hear. She'd forgotten me, she didn't want to see me. She never had. Not ever. She hadn't noticed that she was supposed to be with me, she was off with someone else, having *fun*.

The police say she fell at eight-thirty, give or take half an hour. Alone.

I sat drinking and trying to look at ease, as though it was the most normal thing in the world for me to be there — which on alternate Wednesdays it was. I

started on fantasies of what would happen when she arrived. Righteous and sarcastic anger was top of the list, along the lines of "Oh never mind me, I mean how could I *possibly* be upset? Sitting in a strange pub being stared at for hours on end is what I *like* to do with my evenings." But I never could stay angry with Verity. She knew I'd forgive her and I knew it too. So I moved on quickly to reconciliation. She'd rush in, she'd be so concerned. "Harry, sweets, what can I say? Nightmare at work." Down goes the tequila and a slug of the pils. "Mmm. Lifesaver. Look, I'll make it up to you. Let's go back to mine, have a take-away. More relaxing, yes? Only promise me, you're not angry are you? Forgive?" She widens her wounded eyes, looks so fearful and expectant. I laugh masterfully and reach for the remains of my pint. I never could resist her. She puts a dainty palm over the top of my glass and presses it back down onto the table. "Let's go now," she whispers. Then she links arms with me and chatters gaily and without stopping all the way to her flat. What happens later in this particular scenario I'll leave to your imagination, and to mine. It kept me going for most of a pint, but then reality crept back to sit at my table. My glass was empty and there was no point in getting another. She wasn't coming. I dumped my glass on the counter, muttered a thank you to Jim and left, imagining that behind me the joyless place would immediately burst into life.

I couldn't believe that she had stood me up. I was hardly blind to her faults; but I also knew *her*. She was generous (sometimes), thoughtful (likewise), energetic and enthusiastic, half-mad, inspirational. Loyal. There were people she would drop without a moment's notice, but not me. We were part of each others' lives. She'd have rung at the very least. Surely. She was my friend. Of course, that line of reasoning didn't stop me brooding. It takes more than reasoning to banish self-doubt — a truth Verity frequently had to remind me of.

"I love you Harry," she'd say. "I do. You *know* I do. Lots of people love you." She would lean forward to reach my hand and the soft darkness of her cleavage would tug at my eyes. "I love you. And you'll find someone, you'll see."

Of course, I couldn't ever tell her the truth. Instead, I would stare into her face, narrow with large brown eyes that could drip sincerity or glow with mischief in a blink. Her complexion was olive-pale, her skin flawless. Her mouth was a little too large for her face, so generous. Her lips were full and wide and parted; her teeth were fine and delicate and the front two were broad and flat enough to give the impression that she was caressing them with her lower lip. And her hand, absently stroking mine where it lay unresisting on the table cloth, carelessly familiar, told me as always that what she meant was not what I secretly hoped, not at all. In the low late light of whichever restaurant we'd chosen that week she would let her eyes melt and crease slightly with friendship and naughtiness, and she would say it again. "I love you Harry."

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And love me she did, in her own dizzy way, she did love me: and she would never have stood me up, not ever.

I rang her from a phone box opposite the pub. It smelt of stale breath and piss and failure. There was no reply on her mobile. After two rings on her home number, a machine kicked in. "Hi-i-i-i-i this is Verity." Her voice was a rushed drawl, the words fast but relaxed, the syllables drawn out breathily. "Hi... Look I'm not answering the phone. Obviously, so... Leave a li'l message and I'll get back. G'bye y'all." Her giggle was cut short by a high beep.

They are the last words I have ever heard her say.

"Where were you?" I mumbled sulkily. I paused for a moment, thinking what else to add, then I put the phone down, feeling helpless and rather silly. I wanted her to know that I hurt. I wanted her to feel remorse. If she didn't feel guilty — *she didn't care, she hadn't even tried to ring* — then I had just made a fool of myself. Poor little Harry clinging to Verity's coat-tails. Sad, hopeful, dependent, dependable Harry. Well, alcohol does that to you. So does rejection.

But however much I hurt, her injuries were worse. She couldn't feel them because she was unconscious. She was on her way to hospital, a tube pumping air down her throat, her crumpled skull gripped tight against a head-brace, her hair leaving fine blood-smears on the orange plastic.

And I wasn't there.

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## TWO

"You all right Harry?"

Adam glanced over at me, frowning, then turned his gaze back to the motorway. It was the fifth time he had asked me. But it's hard making conversation with someone in shock, and I was grateful for his attempts, however clumsy.

"Not really, Ads," I mumbled. "Thanks for being here."

"Anything. You know that."

Thank goodness for friends.

I had rung Adam at 7.30 that morning. There was no reply from his home, but I caught him on his mobile. He was in Manchester, part-way through a complex, high-profile court case of the sort he normally killed for. Within five minutes of my call he had cancelled several meetings and had passed his entire court brief over to one of his juniors. He promised he would be with me before noon, and he was as good as his word. This was important: I should explain that Adam was ambitious, both as a barrister and as a politician: a day off work was a big sacrifice. He was even doing all the driving — although that may not have been charity, it may have had more to do with his preference for his huge BMW over my beaten-up Renault 5. But it didn't matter that his reassurances were hopeless. He was here.

We were on our way to Eastbourne General Hospital, where Verity lay unconscious in intensive care.

Adam glanced over at me and smiled gently. He set his shoulders firmly, his hands square on the wheel, as though his grip could squeeze an extra few minutes from our journey.

I was numb. Horror takes time to sink in.

I was nervous too: I didn't know what to expect. It's not an experience I can easily describe. There was only one thing I could think about, but I knew nothing about it, so I couldn't really think, and so my mind span, round and round. I picked out strange rhythms in the ticks of the air-conditioning and the sighs of passing cars: *let it be over, let it not be, let it be over, let it not be...*

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The telephone had woken me at seven-thirty. I had taken my time answering, because I knew who it was: Verity, ringing to apologise. The last person I had expected was Gabriel, her father. We only ever spoke when I went

up to Oxford to see Mum — which was rare these days. He'd never phoned me before, which meant it could only be bad news. Adrenaline lurched in the pit of my chest. I'm not sure I was shocked when he told me, though: not then. These things never seem to hit in one overwhelming blow. The information dribbles in one tiny ripple at a time. It is only later that you realise you are lost and struggling. I had already known something was wrong: I had known the night before when Verity wasn't at Jim's. By the time he rang, all that remained were the details — and you know most of those already.

On Wednesday evening, between the hours of eight and nine, Verity Patience Charlotte Hadley fell two hundred and twenty-four feet from the cliff-tops near Beachy Head in Sussex, striking the cliffs once during her descent. She was discovered at nine fifteen by David Curzon, an unmarried fifty-two year old sculptor, who was out scouring the shingle beach for driftwood. He telephoned the police from the nearest phone box and had nothing further to do with it. Verity was airlifted to Eastbourne General, where her head and body injuries were assessed and she underwent emergency surgery, which she survived. At this point, the police rang Gabriel. They had found her Filofax in her car, with him neatly marked as her next of kin. There had been no answer, so the local police were sent to wait for him. When he arrived home, at eleven at night, one of the policemen — in an amazingly kind gesture — had offered to drive him down to Eastbourne. They had arrived at three in the morning, and Gabriel had waited until a more civilised hour before ringing me. After all, he thought, why rush; what could *Harry* do?

I hadn't been there.

I was brisk, competent, efficient — and scared. Said I'd be there. Rang Adam. And here he was, and here I was.

Now, the world whirled about me, unreal. The miles bled indistinctly past. Occasionally I let out a little groan, aimed at no one in particular. Mostly, though, the journey passed in silence; and the cars whined past us, each following its own obscure purpose, in transit, faceless.

Then we were there.

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The door to the Intensive Treatment Unit had a window. I peered through it.

Gabriel was in the reception area. He was standing in the corridor, staring blankly at a row of prints on the wall. The lighting in the corridor was subdued; beyond him, it faded completely and there was darkness until the nurses' station, which was lit in pools by angle-poise lamps.

The door opened with a suck of air and a muffled click. He looked up, but stayed where he was. We stopped just inside, unsure what came next — and the door clicked closed behind us. Adam put his hands on both my shoulders and



pushed me forwards with a squeeze. "Go," he said. I walked towards Gabriel, alone in a lake of watery bleak light. He shook my hand, and his deep-sunk eyes locked on mine, puzzled and a little desperate.

Gabriel. He was six foot three — or he had been; at seventy he was beginning to stoop. He did not quite seem to fill his clothes; they hung limply from him as though they were outsized. He had a great curling milk-and-steel shock of hair, all at strange and unruly angles. Beneath it, his face was thin and deeply creased. He had high cheekbones that stretched the skin beneath his eyes and made it seem as pale and weak as yellowed paper. His mouth was pulled into a wistful smile, or perhaps into a reflection of some profound inner sadness, you could never tell. His mouth and eyes gave you the feeling you were looking at a man in the throes of the deepest emotion. Generally, he said little; and now was no exception. He took my hand briefly, bloodless and damp. He nodded, and turned away without words, shuffling ahead of me towards the nurse who was waiting for us by lamplight.

The nurse in charge ushered us into a waiting room and insisted that we see a doctor before we went in to see Verity. He arrived quickly. He swept into the room and scanned us impassively. He was a young man, younger than me, with the brisk but slightly dazed manner that junior hospital doctors always seem to have. I wondered how many hours he had been working without sleep: twenty, thirty?

"Mr..." he glanced down at a clipboard, "... Hadley?" He looked up expectantly. Gabriel rose wearily from his plastic bucket seat. "Excellent. Good, good," said the doctor, leaning steeply forward to shake his hand. He was already looking at me before their hands had touched. "And you are Mr?..."

"Harry Waddell. Family friend," I mumbled. He shook my hand too, so lightly that I was hardly sure it had happened.

"Excellent," he said again. "I'm Mr Balasubmaranian." (That's what he said, honest.) "I'm the Senior House Officer on for ITU and Neuro on Mr Oxley's team."

Frankly, that last bit slipped straight past me — partly because he was speaking incredibly fast, he'd obviously said the same thing to hundreds of people on hundreds of occasions — but mostly because I was gobsmacked by his name. Let's be honest, it's not a name your average white middle class Londoner comes across all that often. He had a faintly northern nasal accent which I couldn't quite place, Lancashire maybe; there was no trace of Indian, Tamil, Malaysian or whatever. I am sure I have his name right, though, because I spent the rest of our brief chat trying to read it from the little badge on his coat lapel (well, quite a big badge in his case). I learned it by heart. It was definitely Balasubmaranian. And he was definitely a reassuring, thoughtful and exhausted man. I liked him. That's why I wanted to learn his name, so I could thank him

by name when we were done. Hospitals always make me behave oddly. I feel as though I have to work that much harder at being human. Whatever: the name was so striking that it has stayed with me ever since.

What mattered, though, was what he told us. There had been minimal internal bleeding which they had easily contained, he said. By some miracle, none of the fractures had punctured anything vital. Many of her organs were bruised and her whole body was in shock, but those symptoms would rapidly disappear. She had lost very little blood. The broken bones would heal with time, none of them were serious. With luck, none of these injuries would kill her.

But her skull had been partially crushed. There was damage to her brain — and brain damage, Balasubmaranian told us, can often kill for no reason that anyone understood. She might die, she might survive. They might switch off her life-support and find she could breathe for herself, that her heart kept pumping, that bags of liquid food alone were enough to keep her alive — or they might not. He didn't know, he couldn't say, it would be inappropriate to speculate... But he did tell us one thing: it was unlikely that she would ever recover consciousness — and even if she did, she would never again be the Verity we had known. In effect, he said, if she didn't die, she would either be unconscious with her eyes closed, or with her eyes open. She would sit there, immobile, staring, blank. This was her future.

"Verity's tough," I said. "She'll fight it. You'll see."

I felt stupid almost immediately. I don't know what I was thinking. That somehow she'd overcome the limits her own shattered brain, I suppose. That sheer force of will could transform her prognosis. Not that she'd ever had much will power.

I saw a film once where that happened — I don't remember its name. Come to think of it, films are full of it — people come back from the brink of death, or recover the use of their limbs. In movie-land, miracles happen every day: people triumph over impossible adversity. But then, maybe films about people who suffer appalling accidents and then just survive, comatose, for years don't have quite as much Hollywood appeal.

And there's another lie in the movies too: that there is always hope, that we are in control, that we can make things better if we only believe we can.

"She may regain some function over time, Mr Waddell, but really her injuries are very severe," Balasubmaranian said carefully. "I wouldn't hold out too much hope. More than likely she'll need round the clock nursing for the rest of her life. I'm sorry." And I suddenly felt like I needed to justify myself to him, to explain why I'd said something so idiotic.

"Well it's just —" I stopped because I became conscious of Gabriel next to me. Why do I always shut up when it's just too late?

"I am sorry, Mr Hadley, Mr Waddell," Balasubmaranian said gently. "There really is nothing we can do. It was a very big fall. Most people don't survive it."

Most people. I wondered how many people fell from the cliffs here each year, perhaps each week. Verity was just another among hundreds, nothing special — except that she had reached the hospital alive.

Gabriel let out a heavy breath and sat down, staring at nothing. The doctor looked at him for a moment then nodded briefly, muttered, "If you need me..." and left, white coat tails cracking and flapping in his wake. I never did get the chance to show off my mastery of his name.

I sat down next to Gabriel and stared at the same nothing as him. Perhaps it was the future we were looking at. Whatever it was, it was blank and uninviting. "Gone," he said flatly. His voice was weak and breathy. There was no room for emotion, just for horror. So I sat wordlessly with him, wondering which memories of her were haunting him, what he might be hiding behind those fierce unblinking eyes. Eventually he slapped his knees softly, and stood.

"Well, then. Best get it over with," he muttered.

In a darkened room beyond a glass wall, shrouded in linen and pale white light, Verity was motionless and silent except for the slow sighs of the machines holding vigil at her side, waiting for us.

### THREE

"Are you our new neighbour?" A head was poking through the hedge near the bottom of the garden.

I didn't know how long she'd been watching, but it didn't really matter. All I'd been doing for the past half an hour was try to hook my old half-inflated football high enough for it to catch in a three-pronged niche in the upper reaches of the apple tree.

I was bored and lethargic, not wanting to settle to anything. I had nobody to play with, and I knew that what my mother kept telling me was true; that it was my own fault. The village was full of children. I knew several of them from school. If I wanted company, all I had to do was go out to the front of the house and kick the ball around there. Sooner or later someone would come along. I didn't want that. I felt awkward. The prospect of making the effort to have friends and be social made me uncomfortable, I preferred solitude.

(These days, I'm not at all bad with people. Most people think I'm charming and confident — at least that's what Mum says — and Verity of course; but when you're thirteen the world's a more complicated place. I had only lived in the village for a few months — two school terms. Settling in had not been an easy process — nor had my parents' almost immediate separation. Frankly just being a thirteen year-old wasn't much fun either. I didn't know quite who I was supposed to be, or to whom. And so I played out roles in my head, notions of who I might be. This particular day, the character I'd chosen for myself was First Victim. It wasn't much of a speaking part.)

"Huh," I said.

It was disturbing to know that this girl had been watching *me*, just blank-minded me, kicking a ball in a high arc towards an apple tree over and over and over again, saying nothing, thinking nothing. She must have thought I was more than a little strange.

"Depends who you are," I added, and hooked my toe under the deflated ball. I hoisted it up, hoping that this would be the time it stuck. Instead, it hit the trunk about three feet too low, and fell with a soft smack. Not a good start, when you thought about it: surly replies and a display of inept footwork. And she obviously *was* my neighbour. After all she was poking her head through the fence from next door's back garden. And in any case I'd watched them move in the day before, a tall gaunt man and a young girl. I had hung around at the window hoping for another sight of the girl, and the more glimpses I caught the

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more I thought that for once something good had happened to me. Now, in person, she was as pretty as I'd hoped, with big brown eyes and a face like an elf who's about to get into trouble and is looking forward to it. All in all, not the best time to start behaving like a prat. Mercifully, she giggled.

"Oh, I'm your neighbour," she said merrily. "No doubt about it. Only I was asking if *you* were *my* neighbour."

I sniggered at the joke despite myself. I hoicked the ball up again, and once again missed. And that made her laugh too. She slipped through a narrow gap between two spindly trunks in the threadbare hedge, and stood next to me. I swaggered off to collect the ball.

"It would work if you used a sling," she said. Neither of us looked at each other, only at the ball and the tree: rules of engagement. "I don't think you can control it well enough with your feet." I snorted a sarcastic thanks. "I don't mean like that," she giggled. "I mean you're never doing it the same twice, so you don't get any better. You're just starting again."

Which was true enough. I hadn't been thinking of it that way because, of course, perfecting the result wasn't the point. I was just passing time. I hadn't yet succeeded with the ball that day — and in fact I could only remember ever having done it once. I ambled back with the ball.

"What do you mean, a sling?"

"Like the Romans used in sieges." She waved her delicate hands about airily. "A catapult. A lever with the ball on one end, and a weight on the other. Or a spring in the middle, doesn't really matter. And you'd need some kind of release thing so you wound it up to the same tension every time. Otherwise it'd go all over the place."

I kicked the ball twice more in silence. She stood with her hands behind her back twirling idly from side to side. Her yellow print skirt was slightly translucent because the light was behind her. Her shadowy legs were long and lean, and where they appeared from under her skirt her knees bulged slightly. Her thin brown calves had a haze of transparent hairs. Her sandalled pigeon toes scuffed at the tussocky grass with every sway. She kept her head still as she swung her shoulders back and forth, and the yellow light reflected from her dress cupped her chin, first on one side then the other. She was almost as tall as me — but then I was short and stocky. I was lumpen and graceless, my growth spurt had all been sideways while everyone else went up. She was long and supple as a willow. She didn't seem to notice the contrast. Mostly she seemed to be eyeing up the tree. The thin fabric pulled gently at the two small bumps on her chest with every twist of her scrawny arms. I decided I liked her. Sort of.

"Won't work," I said surlily.

"Rubbish," she pouted. "Anyway, why not?"

"Well have *you* got a spring and a ratchet and a lever and all that other

stuff?" I asked petulantly. "Cos I haven't." I kicked at the over-long grass around the football (did I mention that it was my job to mow the lawn?). I kicked the heads off a couple of dandelions. Then I said, "Look, I've got to go for tea and stuff. See you around." And I slouched away feeling her gaze on me and knowing my ears were going red. I wasn't trying to push her away. But that was exactly how it sounded, and I knew it.

"Bye then," she called softly. I pretended I hadn't heard. I didn't turn round. A moment or two later I heard the leaves rustling as she pushed back through the hedge.

When I was inside I buried my head in my hands. I was stuck inside for the rest of the afternoon now. Tea wasn't for two hours and I couldn't go out again before then without looking utterly stupid. I congratulated myself on having blown it on the first day.

I spent most of the afternoon at the window, but I didn't see her again.

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The next morning it was eleven o'clock before I went out into the garden. It was bright day, already hot, with a few small clouds moving so slowly that they could form or evaporate in the time it took them to pass behind the tree. The sky was full of unhurried birdsong and the eager screams of swifts. The smell of grass and summer tightened my chest; each breath was slow and heavy.

I had woken late. Mum had already gone to work but she had left me breakfast. I ate, then dumped my plate and bowl in the sink. She always hated it if I left stuff hanging around, it was one of the things that was guaranteed to get me shouted at. She was more uptight than ever now Dad wasn't around.

But who cared? It was a Friday.

I hated Fridays. Not every Friday, just every other Friday; and this was one of them. After tea I'd have to go upstairs and get my things packed and then sit around waiting until Dad turned up after work sometime. Generally when he arrived Mum would kick me out into the garden for half an hour while she and Dad screamed at each other: as though I couldn't hear, as though the neighbours couldn't, or the whole village come to that. Then Mum would come bustling outside, all sniffles and sharp words, and tell me to hurry up because I was going — now — *now*, Harry, chop chop. And while I struggled with one too many bags in the hall, Dad would snarl *For goodness's sake* from the car. Then we'd drive off, too fast, saying not a thing. It was all right once we got there; it's just that I didn't look forward to it. Fridays were spoiled in advance.

On this particular Friday, though, things were different. Spread neatly on a patch of flattened grass in the garden were some lengths of old wood, a much-repaired bicycle inner tube, and a seaside spade with a long shank and a slotted plastic 'T' for a handle and a metal blade with red paint peeling from it. I'd never

seen any of the objects before.

The undergrowth crackled and swished, and I heard a voice.

"You got up then." She grinned at me. Her slim hips swung subtly as she walked. She was wearing yesterday's dress (now a little rumpled), but today her feet were bare and already grass-stained. She dropped an armful of assorted ironmongery onto the ground and then stood back and dusted off her arms. She frowned at the pile in front of us, hands on hips, her forehead creased into delicate bumps. "Tools," she said decisively. "Saw, hammer, nails. Then we're ready." She turned to look at me, then stepped a pace closer. "I don't know where my Dad's tools are. We haven't unpacked yet. Does yours have any?" She was standing so close that she had to look up at me. She looked so innocent and trusting suddenly — as though I was the only one in the world who could help her, as though she was lost and she needed me more than anything.

Luckily for me, Dad hadn't yet collected his tools. They were all still in his shed, where he had spent so much of his time in the few months we had spent together here before Mum sent him packing. Me and Mum had never been allowed in the shed. That had always puzzled me, because it was really dull in there, there was nothing thrilling, no secrets. I knew, because of course I'd broken Dad's rule the first time I had the chance. But, dull or not, there *was* a saw, a hammer, there would be nails. When I came back bearing them, she clapped her hands, and her large eyes were liquid with excitement, as though I had just slain a mammoth single-handed and dragged it to our cave. For a moment I preened — and then she turned to the pile and began to mutter and give directions. Which I followed.

The Great Sling began to take shape.

We went straight through lunch and didn't miss it. Mum was still at work, and I assumed her dad was too. The first I really noticed of time passing was when Mum called me in for tea at six and yelled down the garden, had I packed yet? She didn't come to find me, just poked her head out and shouted — and she didn't talk to the girl, even though she was squatting next to me. I called back that I'd be in in a minute, and turned back to the sling.

We had been trying to decide how many twists to put in the inner-tube which stretched across the middle of the frame. It was doubled over so that the lever (the spade) could be pushed between the two strands. When you 'wound up' the spade, the doubled inner-tube would twist. It was a good idea — hers of course — but we were having problems getting the tension right, and we couldn't afford to nail the inner tube on too many times at the wrong strength, because then the rubber would rip.

Two minutes later Mum came back out and screamed down the garden, "Harry! Tea. *Now!*" She waved a fish-wifely arm at us. "And you, young lady, scam!"

We both stood and looked at each other. I could see my own excitement reflected back in her sharp face, all angled bones and warm plump lips. Her teeth were white and broad.

"You're called Harry, then. Finish it later, Harry?"

"Can't. Got to go to Dad's for the weekend. Split up. Yours?" I heard Mum's shrill voice — *Harry!* — a million miles away.

"Mum's dead," the girl said idly; not as though it mattered, just as though it was true.

"Oh. Right," I mumbled, suddenly my old familiar clumsy self.

She shrugged. "When d'you get back?"

"Sunday. Late though. After dark."

"Finish it Monday then, Harry?"

"Yeah. All right." I knew I sounded unenthusiastic; but I felt my heart speed up and the blood rush dizzily about my head. "Bye then." I turned and headed towards the house.

"Don't you want to know who *I* am, Harry?" she called after me. I twisted back to look at her. The light was behind her again, and her teeth and the big round whites of her eyes glowed in the shadow beneath her sunlit hair. I said nothing, and she giggled. "Verity," she said with a little mock-curtsey. "My name's Verity."

She whirled and vanished through the gap in the hedge, leaving the long grass nodding and confused, and a half-finished tangle of wood and rubber and metal lying incongruously beneath the apple tree.

Somehow the journey to Dad's didn't seem to take as long as normal.



## FOUR

Most of her injuries were hidden. Bandages covered all her hair and one side of her face. The visible side of her face was purple with bruising, the eye puffed shut, her perfect skin tight and glossy over the swollen flesh. A clear plastic respirator tube plunged into her throat, gaggingly deep, and a thinner tube disappeared into her nostril. A huge plastic collar hugged her neck and thrust her mottled chin up at a proud angle. Her arms were outside the covers, one in plaster, the other bare, bloated and blackening. A needle sank through thick wads of tape into her elbow. I couldn't help thinking that it must all hurt terribly. Her name tag was on her wrist. Verity Hadley, and a number.

After a while, Gabriel mumbled something incoherent, and left me on my own with her.

A few feet away in both directions, caught in their own sharp downlights, were other figures stranded somewhere between life and death, ghost-pure within their machines, their white gowns and sheets a kind of shroud.

I'm sorry, I'm being self-indulgent, aren't I? But the place affected me. I'd seen ITUs in countless films but until you've actually been in one you cannot possibly know. The only sounds of life come from the machines, softly breathing, pumping, trickling. Even the nurses sit at their station in respectful silence. No one is alive, it's just that no one is quite dead either. Each of the unconscious people in that room had had a life until recently. Each had once had someone who looked at them and saw them smiling or crying or running — husbands, lovers, children, teachers and friends. They saw them joking, talking, just with their eyes open. Verity had never really given up her childhood. She was still innocent and wicked. She still loved and disliked for no reason other than the love or dislike of things. For all her disfigurement, now she looked the part: she looked like a sleeping child. It must have been even worse for Gabriel than it was for me. No wonder he left me to it.

I bent and kissed her forehead softly, felt the heat from her injuries warm my face. "I'm sorry Verity," I whispered.

So sorry.

\*

Adam was chatting with a young nurse. When he saw me emerge, he hurried over. The nurse brushed past me with a small warm smile. There was a waft of perfume, cool and fresh.

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Adam looked at me earnestly, then nodded slowly. "Bad?"

I nodded mutely. His face softened and he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Harry. Truly."

I breathed out sharply, hoping to clear the fog from my thoughts. "It's OK," I muttered. "What did that nurse say?"

"I was just asking her about Verity..." Adam frowned and glanced around. Beyond the glass, machines rose and fell in pools of disinfected light.

"And?"

He shrugged. "You already know. She's in a coma. It's bad."

I may have known it — but I had not heard Balasubramanian put it quite as starkly. "How bad?" I asked sharply. "Is she going to die?" I was on the edge of panic. I desperately needed at least the illusion of hope. As gently as he could, Adam shattered it for me.

"Not die, no..." He scanned an empty distance, his lips pressed tight and his eyes glossy. When he spoke again, his voice was hoarse. "Harry, I don't know what's worse. For you, I mean."

Adam's hand on my shoulder stopped me shaking. I had not even realised that I was. He coaxed me gently round to look at him. His eyes, magnified by his glasses, were large and anxious and full of care. He said nothing, just peered into my eyes sorrowfully. Then he muttered, "Come," and pulled me into a brief fierce hug, before propping me upright again. It felt oddly uncomfortable. "Take your time," he said gently. I nodded, not sure I could talk without cracking.

A nurse drifted behind the bed next to Verity's, bent over the patient's head doing something with a plastic tube. The quiet was overwhelming. From where we stood, Verity was indistinct, one part of a jumble of sharp white lines and edges, machines, bandages, bedclothes. No cards, no flowers. Against the wall was a small locker for her personal effects, set back neatly from the bed so that it would not be in the nurse's way as she tended to her motionless patients.

My panic gradually faded. Emptiness remained. And anger.

"There's people to see you," Adam said after a while. He nodded towards the Visitors Room. I looked at him enquiringly. He shrugged. I trudged towards the room.

The police. Gabriel was already with them, standing at the room's far end staring out of a grimy window into the concrete courtyard below. There were two of them, a man and a woman, both in shirtsleeves and each weighed down with a beltful of their own personal selection of hardware — CS spray and a couple of obscure black leather boxes for the woman, handcuffs and a baton for the man (*handcuffs?* In an ITU for God's sake! Who was going to escape?). And for a moment I could almost have smiled. I could imagine Verity sighing and rolling her eyes. This was a fashion disaster, just look what those belts did to the line of their uniforms. Even I could see that she'd have had a point. The walkie-

talkies clipped to their epaulettes looked silly, their drip-dry shirts fitted badly, and those nylon trousers... The gear on their belts made them walk with a swagger.

After the formalities, they settled down to asking us about Verity. The man was clearly senior, but he let the woman do all the questioning. The conversation was unreal. It was like they were talking about a different person. To stand there with two strangers trying to formulate reasons why she might have done something that I simply couldn't imagine her doing... It was madness, a dream.

The man stood still while the woman talked, but he managed at the same time to give the impression that he was prowling. He craned his neck occasionally, he stared about proprietorially, as though she was a young cub having her first playful stab at being an adult. If I'd been the woman (PC Jefferies? Jefferson? Honestly, I don't remember. She was kind, she was brunette, and I liked her), I'd have hit him. Instead she just seemed to get a little softer and sweeter every time he leaned over to check what she was writing in her notebook, or finished her sentences for her, the patronising bastard. She was quite pretty actually, in a bland sort of way. Perhaps that was her problem: he'd cast her in the role of dumb blonde before she even opened her mouth. And before he'd bothered to notice that her scraped-back hair was dark. She was good, too; sensitive but not indulgent. She kept her voice neutral and efficient.

"This is really just a formality," she said. ("Formality," echoed PC Bastard. She glanced at him and then pointedly turned her gaze back to Gabriel.) "There are no suspicious circumstances, so we just need to complete an Incident Report ." ("Report," he said.)

She asked us for Verity's personal details, and Gabriel and I alternated answers as if conforming to an unspoken system. Age, thirty-three; job, freelance fashion designer; residence, Gladstone Terrace, Battersea; single, no children; next of kin Gabriel, there was no one else to notify. Yes we could confirm it was her. We could be contacted at the following addresses and numbers. Yes she had our names down right. PC Brunette made it as easy as she could. All the same, it was a depressing process.

"Thank you," she said. She carefully folded her notebook into her breast pocket. "I know how difficult this is."

No. She didn't.

PC Bastard harrumphed in a *Haven't you forgotten something* way. She blinked slowly, gathering patience. "Do you have any idea why she might have done it?" she asked gently. Gabriel looked half-hypnotised. He had shrunk even further into his clothes, and was scuffing his fingers back and forth across his threadbare jacket. He said nothing, so I spoke for us both.

"No..." I said doubtfully. "No idea at all. I thought she was happy."

But happy people don't jump off cliffs, do they?

"I see..." She sighed in a never-mind kind of way. For her the reason really did not matter, it was enough that it had happened. She could complete her paperwork. "Well, that's pretty much all we can do for now. Our report will record this as attempted suicide. Unless either of you have reason to think otherwise?" We shook our heads meekly. She continued sympathetically. "Well, we didn't find a note in her car. Perhaps there's something in her flat. If you do find anything, please let us know. We'll keep the file open." She smiled warmly at us both, and handed us each a card with contact details.

"Car," PC Bastard said suddenly. She frowned at him, then nodded. We must have looked blank.

"Ms Hadley's car," she explained. "We found it in the car park at Beachy Head. It's in the pound. But I'm afraid we really can't keep it there."

I looked at Gabriel, who shook his head, not returning my gaze. "Don't drive," he muttered hoarsely.

Down to me then. I sighed. "Where do I go?"

"It's all on the card," she said. "Eight-thirty to twelve-thirty, and two to four-thirty."

I nodded. They nodded. They left.

Gabriel and I sat, and stared at the floor. Eventually Adam came in and stood waiting for us to notice him.

I glanced up at him, and didn't budge. Gabriel glanced listlessly up at him, and I roused myself enough to make the introductions, "Gabriel, you remember Adam." It must have been at least fifteen years since they had seen each other. Gabriel cast an apathetic eye in Adam's direction. Adam grimaced his sympathy and murmured, "If there's anything I can do..." Gabriel's gaze returned to the floor, his face expressionless.

"Harry?" Adam sounded as though he was talking to someone else, someone far distant. "Harry?" I looked up tiredly. His face was etched with concern. "What next?" It came out like a conspiratorial whisper; he did not want to disturb Gabriel.

"Car," Gabriel croaked. I had forgotten about that already. Reminded, I groaned. It seemed so cruel to have things to *do*. I was so weary. All I wanted was silence, and a featureless piece of floor I could stare at. "Car," I echoed. Adam waited while I gathered myself, showing none of the exasperation I am sure I would have felt in his position. Finally I explained that we had to collect Verity's car from the pound.

"OK. I'll drive you down there, Gabriel."

"Gabriel can't drive," I muttered sullenly.

"Well, I'll drive it then, and you can take the BMW. We'll go in convoy. Where am I taking it?"

I looked to Gabriel for an answer, but he was lost somewhere. I sighed again. "Best get it to London. Deal with it later." Gabriel showed no reaction at all.

A new awareness began to press down on me: I was going to have to do everything. Gabriel was all-but paralysed; and if he wasn't capable of sorting out Verity's life, then who else was going to do it but me? He was her family, all of it; and though she had countless friends, not many of them were truly close, most were more like partners in fun, and not one of them had known her anywhere near as long as I had. And the practicalities: the rent to be settled, her tenancy cancelled; bills and contracts to be dealt with, services to be cut off; her possessions, what to do with her possessions? The burden was inevitably mine, just as the horror was, and the grief I knew would eventually come.

Adam came across and sat next to me, surveyed the patch of floor I was staring at, put a hand on my shoulder.

"I'll do it," he said quietly.

"It's not just the car, Ads —" My voice was beginning to crack. He squeezed my shoulder.

"I didn't *mean* just the car, Harry." There was nothing to say. Instead, I concentrated on not crying. He sensed my difficulty, and slapped my shoulder and stood briskly. "I hate to say it, though, but the car does still need fetching." He was right, of course. Time to be responsible. I stood, heavily, and drew myself up as tall as I felt able. Adam smiled warmly at me, then grimaced and gestured at Gabriel with his eyes. It took me a moment to realise what he was trying to communicate. Gabriel was the real problem. He was still staring at the floor. His lips were working gently, as though he was trying to find words to whisper to himself.

"Gabriel?" I said. He didn't look up. "Gabriel? Will you be all right?"

He blinked hard and looked up at me. His expression seemed carved into his skin: soulful, wise, careworn. His deep-set eyes were glossy and large. They held no clue to his thoughts.

"You're a good man, Harry. Verity was fond of you." He stared at me for a moment, then he drifted away again. Adam spread his arms helplessly.

"Gabriel?" I urged gently. "Go home for a few days. The hospital will let you know what's going on. I will, I'll call you. You need some rest. There's nothing you can do."

"Harry's right, Gabriel," Adam said.

"I'll give you money for the train," I added. "Will you go back to Oxford? Go and get a few nights sleep. You need it. "

Suddenly, he stood. Then, painfully, he straightened himself. His gaze glittered.

"Don't patronise me, Harry." His voice was cold, and addressed solely to

me. His eyes glowed darkly, and his face tightened; I could see the blood pulsing in his neck and jaw. "I'm no use here. I'll go. I don't need money." Verity had told me that he had a fierce temper, but I had never seen it before. It was a little scary. His posture relaxed slightly, and he smiled thinly. "I don't need charity," he said, more gently. "But thank you, Harry. I could do with a lift to the station."

We dropped him at the station and saw him to the platform. As we left, he seemed to shrink back into himself, until he was small and grey against the desolate stretches of concrete and iron.

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As we looked for the police station, I began brooding again, this time about Verity's car. Adam's offer to drive it home, and for me to take the BMW, was kind. He loved his car, he had never let anyone else so much as touch it. To let me drive it was a humbling token of how much he cared for my well-being. But I had begun to realise that I could not possibly accept his gesture. I *wanted* to take care of Verity's affairs. What else did I have of her? These scraps of her life were my only remaining connection to her. To have allowed someone else to rummage around in them would have been unbearable. I told him. He was uncertain and unconvinced, but finally shook his head in puzzlement, and agreed.

When we arrived at the police pound, Adam went to retrieve Verity's car while I wrestled with a pointless mass of forms and releases: insurance waivers, liability disclaimers, declarations of proxy. It took me fifteen minutes, and when I emerged into daylight, the car was already outside the pound office. Adam's backside was high in the air facing me, his head buried somewhere in the driver's footwell.

"Hey there," I said flatly.

"Hey Harry," he answered, his head still buried in the car. "You took your time." He withdrew himself carefully and straightened, ruefully rubbing his back. In his other hand, he held a bundle of bits and pieces, which he waved at me. "Thought I'd have a poke around, see if I could find anything useful."

"And?"

He passed me the items one by one. "Filofax. Could be handy. Some kind of bum-bag — make-up, I think. Keys." I recognised the keys. They were for her flat. Adam went on. "This postcard — from Spain, it looks like, from..." — he held it close and screwed his eyes — "I dunno. 'S', whoever that is."

I took it and flipped it over: the *Sagrada Familia* cathedral. Stamped in Barcelona, postmarked two weeks ago. Generous handwriting, big and expansive, looping blue ink: "Wow!!!! Barcelona!!!! The clothes... The boys... The buildings... The boys..." Then a gap, then, "Paris, Babes — slay 'em or

die!!! (By the way, did I mention the boys? Hot hot hot!!!!). Love 'n' hugs, S." — and a heart. The echo of a past life.

"Sam," I said. "Verity's business partner. Sam Mandovini." When I looked up, the concern I saw in Adam's face was almost too much for me. He spotted my distress immediately, and pretended to have noticed something fascinating on the far side of the pound. It was at least a minute before I was confident of my voice again.

"Thanks Adam. For everything. I mean it."

He peered sideways at me, and grinned shyly. "Friends. What they're for." He patted me on the shoulder and frowned at me. "Look, I'm not sure you should take her car, Harry. You're still pretty upset and it's only going to remind you. Why not take the BMW? I'll pick it up when I drop this one at your place."

"Honestly, Adam, I'm fine. Truth be told, I *want* to drive it. And I'd probably smash yours anyway, and then you'd never forgive me." Her car would smell of her. It would have her things in it. The mirrors would be adjusted for her eyes. The seat would be moulded to her shape.

"But..." Adam surveyed my face, frowning his concern, then nodded.

I gave him a lift to his BMW, a few hundred yards down the road. When I pulled up next to it, he opened his door, but did not get out. He just looked at me, concern written clearly on his face.

"She was happy," I muttered, at last. "She *told* me. Last time I saw her. She told me she really felt on top of everything, she felt she was getting somewhere at last."

A van ripped along the street. It thumped past Adam's half-opened door, rocking the car, and leaving me reeling from the sudden implied violence. I was filled for a moment with a terrifying awareness of all those near misses that we bury and forget, the endless parade of moments when our lives could have changed irrevocably — and, through chance, had not.

"Thanks again, Adam," I said softly.

He shook his head mournfully. "No more thanks, Harry. Beer. This evening. You need it. So do I." I nodded, reluctantly.

Adam hopped out and strode across the road towards the BMW. He waved briefly, pulled out and roared away. I stayed behind the wheel, gazing blankly at the road ahead of me.

Verity, bruised and bloated, crippled beyond recovery. She had chosen to die, alone. She had not come to ask my blessing. She had not come to say goodbye.

Perhaps I never knew her at all.

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