

by Greta Milan

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I

There was a piece of salad between Jesper's teeth.

I wondered whether I should tell him but then decided not to. Instead, I tried to ignore his furtive glances by focusing on the crumbs that had fallen from the bread basket onto the starched linen tablecloth.

Summertown didn't have a lot of restaurants to offer. But Jesper had decided on the prettiest: a cosy steak house with an enchanting garden.

It was a surprisingly mild April evening. Burning torches had been set into the ground everywhere and provided an additional cosy warmth. A gentle breeze carried the smell of resin and moss-covered soil from the nearby forest towards us and mixed with the sharp-smelling aftershave Jesper had applied a little too liberally.

Muted jazz music came from the speakers that had been skilfully distributed across the garden. The clatter of dishes and the murmured conversations of other guests resonated around us. But all these sounds couldn't mask the awkward silence at our table.

Jesper seemed to notice this, too, because he cleared his throat with an effort and kept plucking at the collar of his blue shirt. He had certainly dressed up for the occasion. There was no crease to be seen on his clothes, as if he had ironed them for hours beforehand – or, more likely, his mother.

"Don't you like it?" he asked and moved on to fiddling with his short blond hair that was fashionably styled into shape.

I ignored his annoying fidgeting and forced a smile onto my face. "No, I do. It's nice."

Feeling tense, I sawed off a piece of filet and shoved it into my mouth while, not for the first time that evening, the question of how I had ended up in this situation in the first place shot through my head.

I didn't really date anymore. Especially not fellow students. Not that I wasn't getting any offers. It was just that my otherwise pretty chill parents were downright nerve-rackingly old-fashioned when it came to dating.

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Dates were taboo for me. And no matter how often I tried to get Mom and Dad to relax this rule, they never changed their minds.

No idea why they trusted me so little when it came to the opposite sex. I wasn't stupid, after all. I knew only too well that most guys our age only had one thing in mind and I had no intention of ending up as a notch on somebody's bed post. Unfortunately, my parents' prejudices robbed me of any chance of ever even *meeting* a nice guy.

Like me, Jesper was in his last year of school, but we'd never really had anything to do with each other. That's why I had been surprised when he had approached me yesterday afternoon while I was strolling through town with my best friend.

I had been sitting cross-legged on a bench, scrolling through Insta posts on my smartphone, while Delilah had gone missing in the bookstore across from where I sat. Jesper had asked nicely whether he could keep me company, and out of politeness, I agreed.

Our conversation had been pleasant. He had made me laugh and, at least at first glance, didn't seem like a player who only wanted sex. When Dee reappeared from the depths of *Pete's Book Corner*, an hour had whizzed by and I had had a lot of fun.

After my last secret date a few months ago had turned out to be a total failure, I had been determined not to go behind my parents' backs again. I had never felt all that comfortable doing it in the first place and it just didn't seem worth the risk. But Jesper had been so sweet when he had asked me out that I had ended up saying yes after all.

Dee had freaked out because she was so excited that I was finally giving in to my rebellious side again. Naturally, as she had the other times, she had offered to cover for me tonight. Hence, while my parents assumed that we were having a girls' night with popcorn and Jane Austen movies, I had actually come to this steak house. And now I was sitting here, pissed off that I had once again fallen for an illusion.

I had a hard time suppressing a disappointed sigh. I had really thought this time would be different.

Unfortunately, Jesper had now shown his true colours. The mischievous sparkle in his eyes had gone out and given way to an uncomfortable stare. Once again, his gaze clung to my neckline. Never mind that I was dressed downright chastely for a seventeen-year-old. I was

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wearing a loose blouse, patched skinny jeans, sneakers and a grey cardigan. My blond hair was tied into a pony tail. I hadn't even used a lot of make-up because I didn't really enjoy sticking some overpriced beauty product onto my face.

Jesper was licking his lips – and it gave me the creeps all over.

I noisily dropped my cutlery. I had finally lost my appetite for good. And it had nothing to do with the salad leaf that still stuck to his upper left incisor.

"Let's get the cheque," I said.

Jesper's attention returned to my face. "Why?" he asked, surprised. "Aren't you having a good time?"

I almost laughed. Instead, I pulled myself together and just shook my head with an indulging smile.

Absolute bafflement appeared in Jesper's brown eyes and no matter how hard I tried, I could no longer detect any trace of the cool guy I had been laughing with on the bench the day before. However, since I didn't just want to walk out on him, I waved to the waiter, signalling him to bring the bill.

"What did you expect?" he asked in a casual tone. He seemed unaware of any wrongdoing on his part.

Unbelievable!

"No idea." I rubbed my forehead tiredly. "That you'd be more interested in *me* than in my breasts. That would have been a good start, at least."

Jesper looked at me in confusion. "I thought women liked being looked at."

Well, that kind of depended on who was looking. At this stage, his glances were causing me heartburn more than anything.

I couldn't believe I was lying to my parents and using my best friend as an alibi for a guy who was barely capable of looking into my eyes for more than two seconds. To my relief, the waiter hurried over, seeming to have realised my predicament. Jesper whipped out his wallet. Since I didn't want to owe him anything, I dug around in my handbag and put a twenty on the table. Then I got up and left the steak house through the garden gate.

Jesper followed me silently. I stopped in the parking lot to get my car keys from my handbag.

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"Do you wanna go for a walk maybe?" Jesper asked suddenly.

Now it was my turn to give him a baffled look. I had assumed my hasty departure had sent a clear message. But apparently I had to be even blunter. "I'd rather go home straight away."

"Oh, come on." Stepping towards me, Jesper lowered his voice to a murmur. "We could talk a little."

I shook my head in disbelief. Sure. That had worked really well during dinner, too. I demonstratively took a step back. "Take care, Jesper."

"Call me soon?"

I honestly didn't understand why he would seriously consider a repeat after this awful date. But judging by the hopeful look on his face, that was exactly the case.

"I'll see you at school anyway," I said evasively, unlocking the door of my red Honda Civic. All I wanted was to get out of there.

Jesper reached out towards me. "Wait."

"I have to go." I hastily evaded him, getting into my car and pulling the door closed behind me. The locking mechanism snapped shut automatically, something I had my overly cautious father to thank for.

I was just chucking my handbag onto the passenger seat when Jesper hammered against the window like a madman. Startled, I looked at him but naturally made no move to roll down the windows, let alone open the door again.

As if he thought I was too stupid to understand his expansive gestures, he raised his voice so it could probably be heard all the way to the restaurant. "Don't be like that, Nayla. The night is young."

Well, he was right about that. It was only ten past nine. On a Friday night. I might as well have stayed home.

I grumpily glared at Jesper, shaking my head.

He seemed to realise that he didn't have a chance because he straightened. "Fine, whatever," he grumbled and stalked off, thoroughly annoyed.

Well, hadn't that gone swimmingly.

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I dug out my smartphone with a sigh, dialled Delilah's number and activated the speaker. While it was ringing, I started the engine and drove off the parking lot onto the main road leading back to Summertown. The steak house was located a few miles outside of town, which is why I had at least a ten-minute drive ahead of me and thus enough time to whinge to my best friend.

After the sixth ring, Dee finally picked up. "Nayla?"

"Hey." I sounded so sad that she gasped.

"Everything okay?"

"Not really."

"Stay on the line," she asked me and continued in a hushed tone: "Push pause for a second, please. I need to talk to Nayla."

"What's wrong?" I heard Matt's voice.

I smiled when I heard his concern. Apart from Dee, Matt was one of my few real friends. It all had started when the three of us had been sitting in the sandbox together at kindergarten. Matt had ripped a shovel from my hands to hand it to Delilah as a gift. However, she hit him over the head with the thing because he had taken it away from me. Poor Matt had been so perplexed that he howled down the entire playground, and Dee was crying because she had hurt him. In the end, we all ended up consoling each other. We've been inseparable ever since. Matt was also the only boy my parents allowed anywhere near me because it was downright ridiculously obvious how much he loved Dee. Nevertheless, it had taken years until the two of them had finally managed to admit their feelings for each other. They had now been officially together for five months and were disgustingly happy.

I was naturally very happy for the two of them but honest enough to admit to myself that I envied them. I, too, would have loved to have a great boyfriend who laid the world at my feet.

"Okay, I'm back," Dee said. "Out with it. What happened?"

"Oh my God, Dee. It was awful," I complained. "The worst date since Brandon Mitchell."

"What? But why? You seemed to get along so well yesterday."

"I have no idea." Headlights flashed behind me and I slowed down as another car overtook me. As a thank you, I got a toot on the horn that was in no way intended in a friendly manner.

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"Asshole," I grumbled, which Delilah naturally misunderstood.

"What did Jesper do?" she asked, alarmed.

"Nothing," I replied, frowning. "He was just like a totally different person. Yesterday, he was funny and charming. But tonight ... I can't even describe it properly."

"Oh, sweetie. Maybe he was just nervous."

Snorting, I followed the road around a bend. "No, I think his problem was definitely located further south, if you know what I mean."

Dee giggled. "What can I say, you just have that effect on guys."

I groaned, annoyed. "Please don't start with all that again."

We had had this discussion numerous times before. Sure, I wasn't ugly. But I wasn't exceptionally beautiful either. I had curves rather than being built like a model. And I didn't walk around in clothes that showed more skin than fabric. To be honest, I thought I was actually a bit boring compared to the girls in my class.

"It's true, though. You're simply pretty sexy. Get used to it," Dee insisted before bursting into laughter. "Matt just said *intimidating* would be a better term."

"That's ridiculous. I'm no femme fatale. I don't even look that dangerous."

"No, you look like an angel," Dee replied bluntly. "And that's definitely even worse."

"Great. That makes me feel a lot better." I pulled a face in frustration when I suddenly heard a crackle on the line.

"Nayla? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, dead spot. I might be gone in a second."

Dee sighed in empathy. "Okay. But don't take that whole thing with Jesper to heart too much, sweetie. You'll find a nice guy eventually."

"But where?" I grumbled, even though I definitely felt like never going on another date again by now. To make things worse, Summertown didn't exactly have a lot to offer. "We already know every guy our age – and they're all idiots."

"Good point," Dee admitted. "I've snagged the only decent guy. So we'll have to extend our feelers beyond the town. Why don't we go along to an away game? I think our basketball team has a tournament in Williamsburg next week."

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"Uh, no thanks. I'm not *that* desperate."

Dee laughed. "You'll have to shed your aversion to sports eventually and find some more socially acceptable hobbies."

"My hobbies are perfectly socially acceptable," I said, slightly peeved.

Dee snorted in amusement. "As much as I admire you for it, roaming the forest for hours on end, deactivating traps and treating injured animals isn't something you can impress high school boys with."

I rolled my eyes. "You're addicted to books. That's not exactly cool either."

"But it's very educative, so I always have quip at the ready."

"That's true", I murmured while I heard another crackle on the line.

"You could come along to the concert tomorrow night, of course." I could practically see her cocking her head, her lips pursed in thought. "I'm sure we can get a ticket for you at the door. Maybe we'll be able to convince your parents after all?"

"Unlikely." My lips formed into a cynical grin. "After all, there will be evil, dangerous boys there who might break my poor, weak-willed heart."

Dee giggled. "Not to mention your hymen."

I couldn't help but think of a party I had secretly attended with Dee and Matt shortly after my sixteenth birthday. I had spent the entire evening talking to a cute boy from Atlanta who was visiting his fifth cousin or something. He was nice and I thought he was great. At some point, he kissed me, and because he was really good at it, I had allowed myself to be carried away for a while. At least until his hand had moved lower and lower and I realised that I had forgotten his name. A bucket of ice water couldn't have been more effective.

My heart had not been in danger at any point that evening. But that wasn't the way I wanted to be with a boy. It just wasn't me.

In the background, Matt had started intoning *Self Esteem* by *The Offspring*. Presumably, he did so less because of the song's message and more because it allowed him to fervently belt out "la la la". He loved Punk Rock.

My best friend broke into roaring laughter. "I think Matt doesn't want to know whether your hymen is still intact."

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"Heavens, Dee!" I exclaimed, rolling my eyes. "Can we please stop talking about my intimate body parts in Matty's presence? He's like a brother to me. This is disgusting."

She laughed even louder. When she had calmed down again, she took a deep breath. "Are you feeling a bit better now at least?"

"Yeah, I think so. Thanks." I shrugged, even though Dee couldn't see me. "Let's just forget the whole thing. I don't have time for boys anyway. In a few months' time, we'll be graduating and then we'll be out of here."

I could feel butterflies in my stomach. I knew exactly what our future looked like. Years ago, Dee and I had decided to move to Nashville together, and, knowing Matt, he would surely follow us. I would study veterinary medicine and Delilah would study literature. We would share a room in some cool student residence and enjoy our lives to the fullest.

I could see it clearly in front of me. As sharp as the beam of light from the car that was coming towards me on the narrow road.

"Oh yes!" Dee exclaimed, prompting a soft laugh from me.

But the laugh got stuck in my throat when I realised how fast the other car was going. What the hell was this idiot doing?

Cursing, I took my foot off the gas and steered my Honda closer to the edge of the road to make room for the bigger vehicle.

"Nayla?"

"Yeah. I ..."

My words died away as the SUV suddenly started fishtailing and shot onto my lane. Instinctively, I hit the brake. But I knew it was too late.

Shock, horror and naked fear overwhelmed me.

A split second later, our cars crashed into each other and the world abruptly turned white.

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I woke up with a jolt, yelling. My blood rang so loudly in my ears that I could only just hear a low beeping sound. Disoriented, I looked around and realised I was in a hospital bed.

What the ...?

Shit! All of a sudden, the memory was back: I had been in a car accident.

The SUV racing towards me flashed across my mind's eye and the panic returned in full force. It held me in its icy claws until I almost hyperventilated. I shook my head to drive out the horrifying images. Instead, I focused on my surroundings: pale yellow walls, a window with blinds, daylight penetrating into the room between the slats, a nightstand with a bunch of flowers on it. My father had probably put those there. He loved flowers.

While I tried to breathe calmly, I let my gaze wander down my body. I was wearing a typical hospital gown and was covered with a white blanket up to my waist. A heart rate monitor was attached to the tip of my index finger and connected to a machine next to my bed. On a small screen, I tracked how my pulse slowed down as I continued to control my breathing.

Strangely, I didn't feel any pain. Maybe I was off my head with meds, pumped into my veins through the needle in the back of my left hand. That would also explain why I felt as if I had been packed in cotton wool. My body felt like lead, completely drained. But at least the shock had subsided and my pulse was beating normally again.

Nervously, I ran my tongue over my lips. They were chapped and rough. It took some effort to lift my hand and cautiously touch my face. I couldn't feel anything unusual beneath my fingertips. No bandages, no swelling or bloody abrasions. I couldn't see anything on my arms either. Since I was too weak to lift the blanket, I just rubbed my legs against each other and wiggled my toes.

Everything felt undamaged. Apart from the fact that I was incredibly exhausted, there seemed to be nothing wrong with me. When, really, I should have been dead as a doornail.

Again, the beeping of the heart rate monitor increased in synch with my accelerating heartbeat. How was that possible? How had I survived a head-on collision without a scratch?

At that moment, the door opened and my mother came in. She stopped in her tracks when she saw that I was awake. "Nayla!"

"Mom?" My voice sounded raspy and scratchy, completely unfamiliar in my ears.

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My mother, Dr Allegra Carlesso, was a surgeon at Great Mountain Medical Center, twenty miles south of Summertown, and I couldn't remember a time she hadn't seemed completely in control to me. No matter how small or large my brother's or my injuries were, her composure had always managed to calm us down and ease our pain. But now, the brown strands of her short, fashionably cut hair stuck out from her head in all directions. As if she had been tearing at it countless times. Her blue coat, usually spotlessly clean and wrinkle-free at all times, was crumpled and showed coffee stains. Pure horror was etched into her ashen face. She was scared.

Just like me.

Tears welled up in my eyes and a sob escaped my throat. "Mom."

"Oh, darling!" She rushed to me immediately, sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled me into a consoling hug. She gently rubbed my back while I cried and cried, my forehead pressed against her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," I sobbed.

"It's okay," she murmured. "Everything's okay."

Nothing was okay. I had been in a head-on collision with someone else. By rights, I should be dead. And yet, here I was at the hospital, unharmed. While ...

My pulse accelerated again. "What about the other car?" I croaked, leaning back a little to look at her. "How is the driver doing? Was anyone else involved in the accident? Is anyone hurt?"

Uneasy, she lowered her gaze. "Let's talk about that later. First, I want to examine you."

"No, I ..."

"Later," Mom interrupted me sharply, and since I knew that any discussion was futile when she took that tone, I shut up like a good girl.

Sniffing and wiping away my tears, I sat upright and let her do her thing. First, she raised her hand to shine a little flashlight into my eyes. The light was uncomfortable but I kept still so it would be over as quickly as possible.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, now a little more gently.

"Alright."

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She wiggled the lamp in front of my face. "Are you feeling dizzy? Do you have a headache? Are you seeing double?"

"No, I'm just exhausted. That's all."

"Hmm." Sie reached towards the bottom of the bed, fished my patient record from its holder and flipped intently through the pages.

Curious, I leaned forward, eyeing the many images and reports. "What's all this?"

My mother shrugged. "X-rays, MRI, lab results. You seemed unharmed at first glance, but we double-checked everything to make sure you didn't have any internal injuries."

"Isn't that a little over the top?" I asked uncertainly.

The left corner of her mouth lifted into a lopsided grin. "What's the point of me being a senior physician at this hospital?"

"Good point," I replied and looked at her hopefully. "So? Is everything okay?"

She nodded. "All the reports are looking good." Mom took a deep breath and studied me thoughtfully. "You were incredibly lucky."

"Probably," I mumbled in agreement but was unable to feel any relief. "And the other car?"

My mother lowered her gaze to the file in her hand.

"How bad is it?" I whispered.

She pressed her lips together tightly. I could tell she didn't want to tell me the truth.

"Mom?" I clawed my fingers into the fabric of her coat. "Please."

She heaved a soft sigh. When she looked back up, her motherly care had given way to a professional distance. "There were two young women in the other car. Sadly, they didn't survive the accident."

"That's impossible." I shook my head in disbelief. "I'm unhurt. So they must be as well."

Somewhere deep inside me I knew that this argument was completely illogical. But I refused to believe that I had gotten away without a single scratch while others had lost their lives.

"I'm so sorry, Nayla," Mom said, affectionately stroking my hair.

I stared at her speechlessly. I still didn't get it. "But how is that possible?" I stammered, trying to remember the details of the accident even though doing so made my stomach turn.

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I had been talking to Dee when the SUV had been coming towards me. The car had been fast but nothing had indicated that it would suddenly speed onto my lane. Yet somehow, it had started to fishtail. I had tried to brake but it had been too late. Light had blinded me. And then there had been a screech as metal was bending underneath me. I could still hear the echo in my ears. Like fingernails scratching across a blackboard, just a thousand times louder. I had even felt the force of the impact as if from far away.

"That's impossible," I said firmly. "The SUV was hurtling straight towards me. It would've had to have crushed my Honda."

Again, my mother avoided my gaze. "Your car was only lightly touched and forced into the bushes. The SUV, on the other hand ..." She took a shaky breath. "It overturned multiple times before crashing into a tree. Any help would've arrived too late for the two women."

I shook my head, confused. So I had only imagined the head-on collision?

No. Neither of us had had time to swerve. I was sure of that. On the other hand, that was the only explanation that made sense. I would never have escaped unhurt otherwise. Maybe ... maybe I had had some kind of blackout and was missing a few crucial milliseconds in my memory?

I suddenly realised that I didn't just have a gap in my memory as far as the exact sequence of events was concerned. "How did I get here?"

Nervously, Mom smoothed a short strand of hair. "In an ambulance."

Frowning, I bit my lower lip. "I don't remember that at all."

"That's probably the shock. The paramedics gave you a strong sedative on the way here. That's also why you slept so long."

My gaze fell on the digital clock hanging on the right-hand wall. It was midday. But that wasn't what worried me. What shocked me was the date. "Sunday?" I exclaimed in disbelief. "I've been completely out of it for more than a day?"

"Like I said, you were given a strong sedative." Mom put her hands on my shoulders, pushing me gently back onto my pillow.

I let her.

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"I'll get you something to drink." My mother got up, sliding the file back into its holder at the foot of the bed. "Why don't you rest some more?"

"Okay," I murmured, even though there was no way I was going to sleep because my thoughts were reeling right now.

Two women were dead. I, on the other hand, had escaped without a scratch. Again, the two headlights flashed across my mind's eye, heading straight towards me.

Head-on.

I had braked. But how big had the distance been between us? More than fifty metres? Was that even enough to evade if you were going forty miles an hour? And the SUV had been a good bit faster than I was, too.

At driving school, they had made us learn the formula for the braking distance by heart and we had calculated it frequently. But there was too much chaos in my head to fill in the variables now.

Impatiently, I waited until my mother came back with a filled water pitcher and a glass. "Your father and Victor are already on their way. They should be here in half an hour, then we can go home."

"Okay." After I had taken a few sips, I looked at my mother questioningly. "Where's my phone?"

Mom took a chocolate bar from her coat pocket and handed it to me. "It got lost at the accident site."

My eyes widened, aghast. "But I have to call Dee. She's probably freaking out already ..."

I fell silent because my mother's eyes had narrowed into small slits. Angry spots appeared on her cheeks and I realised that my problems were much, much bigger than I had assumed until a moment ago.

"Delilah already knows what happened." Mom crossed her arms, studying me with a mixture of anger and disappointment. "Would you like to tell me where you really were on Friday night?"

I slid deeper into the pillows. We lived in the northern part of Summertown, where one single family home sat next to the other. Dee lived on the eastern side, not far from Ellington High.

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Unfortunately, the steak house was located a few miles to the southwest and thus in a completely different direction. I could see in Mom's face that she already suspected. Yet I still found it extremely difficult to say the truth out loud.

"I was meeting a boy from school," I admitted softly.

Mom's eyes widened as if she had refused to believe right until the end that I had really gone behind her back. She even shook her head.

"We were only having dinner," I mumbled, fingering the blanket. "That's all."

"Damn it, Nayla!"

I jumped. Not just because of her sharp tone but also because my mother didn't usually swear.

"How could you abuse our trust like that? You know only too well ..."

Again, tears welled up in my eyes and I blocked out the rest. I didn't have the strength for yet another debate about principles. I was feeling bad enough already. A sob escaped my throat and I buried my face in my hands in shame. I had never regretted breaking a rule more.

Even though I knew that I hadn't caused the accident, I felt guilty. I had seen the SUV and I knew that it had been going too fast. That, strictly speaking, it wasn't my fault. But maybe I would have reacted differently if I hadn't been on the phone with Dee. Not only would I have reduced my own speed but I would have tried harder to evade the car as well. Maybe I could have prevented the accident that way. And the two women would still be alive.

Grief and regret overwhelmed me. I could feel the realisation crushing my heart. It hurt. Horribly. As if I were burning up from the inside. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks and my breathing grew ragged. Even the heart rate monitor sounded the alarm again.

"Nayla." My mother's tone was now gentle again as she hesitantly took me into her arms. She rocked me the way she used to when I was a little girl. But she couldn't ease the pain.

Ultimately, after what felt like an eternity, it was probably only thanks to Dad and Victor arriving that I managed to suppress my distress and put on a strained smile.

"Nana!" My little brother didn't waste any time. He raced towards the bed, climbed up and threw himself into my arms as soon as Mom had sat back. He hung on to me with surprising strength. His whole body was shaking.

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Victor was only six. Yet the age difference had not diminished our mutual affection. I loved him more than anything. I pulled myself together for him. "Hey, little monkey."

Across his mop of brown hair, I sought my father's gaze. He was pale and seemed to have aged ten years since I had last seen him on Friday night. His jaw was stubbly, his dark curls dishevelled. He was studying me with fear and concern as well.

"What do the reports say?" he asked hoarsely.

"Everything is fine, Julius," my mother replied, smiling. "She's fine."

He relaxed a little, but nowhere near enough for me to feel calmer. I knew that I wasn't out of the woods yet. I reached for his hand anyway.

Dad took my hand without hesitation. His Adam's apple jumped as he gently squeezed my hand. It was almost as if he couldn't believe his eyes and had to convince himself through touch that I was still there.

"You were sleeping so deeply," Victor mumbled into my ear. He pulled back to look at me. With his big wide brown eyes, incredibly similar to our mother's, he gazed at me in what you could only call an accusing manner. "I thought you'd never wake up again."

My throat constricted. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

Victor first looked at Mom, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed next to us, then back at me. "Is everything okay now?"

"Yes, Vic," I lied. "Everything is fine."