

## FALLING

She's after me, but already I'm through the broken fence, slithering on the edge.  
Below, the sharp rocks are hidden in the dark.

She screams. 'No! Stop!'

I leap; then start to fall. A nightingale sings, but I can't change my mind now.  
Too late.

Beating black wings in the dark, like a whole rookery around me, and something hauls my collar, tightening around my neck, slowing me. There's a grunting, wet in my ear; then I hit the ground and my legs buckle. The left one impales on something and twists me round; I hear the bones break and feel the flesh opening. My head smacks hard ground.

I'm losing it. I'm going. Dark inside my head, dark outside.

My head is cradled. 'No, you can't die! Stay with me, Will, stay with me!'

I'm crying because the pain's like someone's sawing through my leg. But my head's against something soft, warm. Salt drops fall hot on my face.

'It's all right,' the voice cries, 'I've got him! No, look, he's alive! Please!'

I can't hear properly now, as the pain takes me. There's a shudder like a death-rattle, and a wail: 'No! No! Not my wings!'

Smoothing my brow. More sobs. Feeling in my pockets for a phone. Calling the blue-lights.

But I'm slipping away. I'm gone.

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I'd tried it earlier. Nobody would have guessed what I was up to; I'd taken care to show nothing. Everyone thought I was taking it very well.

I left the drizzle-soaked streets, and strode up through the woods. It'd be a release. The slate quarry, the hundred foot drop, the sharp rocks to welcome you and make it quick. It's common; hardly a year goes by without some teen "tragically taking his own life". Oh, folk have complained to the Council to mend the fence, but there's always been some complication, some delay.

The rooks flew up as I got into the woods, and for a minute it was all cawing and flapping of black wings. Then I heard a thud, and a cry; and I looked round to see this girl, kneeling on the path, holding her head. All she was wearing was a shiny swimsuit and a pair of wings.

'You all right?' I said, stupidly. Clearly she wasn't.

I helped her stand. 'You've got mud on your thigh,' I said, and before I knew what I was doing I stooped and gently wiped it off with a finger. She was trembling, and suddenly I thought of the last time I'd stroked a woman's thigh, and that made me think of Donna, and *that* reminded me why I was there.

'I don't often do this to strange women,' I said, steadying her as she toppled forward. 'But don't worry. I won't bother you for much longer.'

‘Ow! My head hurts,’ she said, in a low, breathy voice that I’d have liked if I’d let myself.

I asked if she’d be okay now; I needed to get on. But still, I wanted to make my point. I was supposed to be keeping it secret, but there was something about her – with the crazy fancy dress and the bruised head – that made me want to frighten her.

‘I won’t bother you for much longer,’ I said, ‘because I’m going up there’ – I pointed up the track – ‘to kill myself!’

‘Oh,’ she slurred. ‘Good.’

‘Er,’ I said. ‘What d’you mean, good?’

She focussed on me. ‘I mean, you’re the right one.’

I’d had enough. ‘Look, push off to your party, will you?’ I said. ‘Just leave me alone.’

‘Party?’ She blinked hard.

‘The fancy dress?’ I said. ‘The wings?’

She put a hand to her mouth. ‘Oh, Puck!’ she cried (at least, that’s what it sounded like). ‘My wings!’

It’s because I’m so gullible that I got into this mess. And true to form, twenty minutes later we were in a late-night café, with my jacket around her shoulders and hot coffees in front of us. I’d go back to the quarry later, no problem.

She’d made me turn my back while she put away the wings, but the clothes that she’d conjured up were short and spangly: no good for keeping out the rain and no good for hanging around coffee shops. Besides, she’d still been shivering – guaranteed to bring out my inner fool. Then she made it worse by looking at me with those deep eyes, dark like the coffee, and asking for my story. Of course, I blabbed: I told her my name, I told her about Donna. About Donna’s antics with the police, and how even when the charges had been dropped, everyone had said there was no smoke without fire. That had included my boss (so no more job) and my landlord (so one month’s notice). I told her that I’d thought, if that’s what the woman you love can do to you, and what the world can do to you, well it’s only going to happen again, etc. etc. The funny thing was, the girl listened. Not only did she listen, there were actually tears in her eyes, and even after Donna, I still thought the tears were real.

She forced a little smile, and I wanted to smile with her. ‘Things will get better,’ she said. I felt her warm hand over mine. ‘The world isn’t full of bad people. Most people are good – they’re just – they’re just lost. I *know*, Will.’

I looked in her eyes and almost believed her. I cleared my throat. ‘So,’ I asked, ‘who are you? Where do you come in?’

She smiled again. ‘You won’t believe me.’

But I *did* want to know more about the crazy girl with the soft cheeks, crying for me across the table.

She lowered her voice. ‘I’m a fairy,’ she said. ‘I’m supposed to stop suicides. But I’m no good at it – I’ve already had to watch two people die.’ She swallowed. ‘You’re my last chance, Will. Or I lose my wings.’

Yeah. *I* knew what she meant. Samaritans, or some other bunch of busybodies. I remembered what kind of a sucker I am – much more of this rubbish and she'd talk me out of it. I gave her a tenner, told her to go and pay, and ran out of the shop.

Of course she ran after me, though the dark and the rain. 'Wait! Will, listen to me!'

I broke into a run, but she kept behind me, climbing the old track up the hill. The wind was shaking the pines and the smell of resin was everywhere.

'There must be someone!' she called. 'Someone who loves you. Maybe Donna still does.'

I laughed, and kept on.

'Isn't there anybody? Your family, your friends?'

I turned on her. '*No-one* will know!' I shouted. 'No-one will care. All right?' I ran on. It wasn't far now.

'What about the poor people who find you?' she panted. 'What about the ones who have to clear your body up?'

'Yeah,' I spat, 'and what about me?'

She caught me. 'There's *always* a reason to live. Things will get better!'

*Donna*, I thought to myself. *Keep thinking Donna*. 'I'm jumping,' I said, 'so get back to your fairy friends and have a good cry!'

'I'll stop you!' she cried, but I pushed her to the ground. 'I'll rescue you!' she wept.

Birdsong; and pine resin.

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'How's the pain?' It's a nurse, and the lights behind him are far too bright.

I wince. 'Awful.' The voice sounds like it's not mine. 'Got any painkillers?'

'Doctor says you can't have any more,' he says. 'You've had a lot already.'

I digest that. 'How long have I been out?'

'Most of the time. You were yelling your head off when the 'copter brought you in – till we pumped you full of morphine. But you've been pretty quiet since you came back from theatre.'

I swallow. 'My – my leg?'

He shrugs. 'Surgeon says you'll always have a bit of a limp. It was a right mess, bits of bone everywhere. They reckon you're lucky – fall should've killed you. Wanna see your visitor?'

I lie back. 'I don't get visitors.'

'Well, you got one now. She's been here all day and all night. Wouldn't go home. Send her in?'

I don't say no. Outside, it's still raining hard.

Then in she comes, staggering slightly, still wearing my coat. She takes me in. 'Is – is it all right if I see you? I hope you didn't mind – what I did . . .'

She's standing over me now, and I can see the line of her chin, and I feel like I remember my head being cradled softly, and warm tears. 'You were right,' I say.

‘I was?’

‘Yeah. I want to smell the pine, hear the birds, feel the wind in my face. Feel – ’  
I frown ‘– feel someone’s arms around me.’

Suddenly she’s crying, big fat tears on my bed. ‘Oh Will,’ she sobs, ‘I’m grounded! I’m stuck here. I’ll never get back.’ She wipes her eyes, shakes herself. ‘But you – I’m glad you’re okay. I wish they’d known . . .’

‘Who? The Samaritans?’

She takes off my coat, drapes it on the chair. ‘Thanks for this,’ she says.

I’m about to argue when I see dark stains on her spangly dress. ‘Hey, what’s up with your back?’

She sighs. ‘Oh, it’s where they ripped my wings off.’

I play along. ‘A bit violent then? Have you seen a nurse?’

‘It’s okay. They’re healing up already.’ Her head’s down, hand’s on the door.

‘Where are you going?’ I try and sit up; the pain pushes me back down.

‘Don’t know. I – I’m not from round here, you see.’

‘Look, I owe you one. If you’ve got nowhere to go, there’s my flat, see. It’s not much – untidy – but you could stay there. Till I come out. Till you find somewhere else.’

‘Trust me, Will. You don’t want a failure on your hands.’

‘You’re *not* a failure!’ I try to think what to say. ‘Hey. Things’ll get better.’

She nearly smiles. Rubs her back, sucks breath in. Then she holds out a hand.

‘Better give me your keys, then.’

‘Uh, come and see me tomorrow?’

Now she does smile. ‘I might drop in.’