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Don't Get Me Wrong

Written by Marianne Kavanagh

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Don't Get Me Wrong

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To Philippa

2015

The waiting room was painted off-white. There were blue plastic chairs all the way round, their backs against the walls. In one corner, two women surrounded by shopping bags, heads close together, were whispering.

It was the kind of room that made you feel you were in the wrong place.

Kim was sitting by the window. Her blonde hair was sticking up in tufts.

He sat down. Hospitals are always hot. But he didn't take off his jacket in case it looked like he was assuming something. Like a welcome.

'Any news?'

She shook her head.

The whispering in the corner got louder. One of the women shifted her weight and a Tesco bag fell sideways, gaping open. Harry could see pizza boxes and a litre carton of milk. He said, 'Can I get you something?'

She looked up. Someone had pressed inky thumbprints beneath her eyes.

He said, 'You look terrible.'

'Thanks.'

She wore black jeans, as usual, but her T-shirt was faded. You could just make out the stencil of a grinning face and BRIXTON LIVE! in red letters. He said, 'I meant you look tired.'

She didn't reply.

'Coffee?'

'What?'

'Do you want me to get you some coffee?'

'No.'

After a while, he said, 'Tea?'

'Harry, shut up.' Her voice was so loud that one of the women in the corner looked up. 'I wouldn't have rung you if I thought you were going to sit there wittering all night.'

Harry said slowly, 'I'm glad you did, though.'

She slumped, defeated. 'I thought you ought to know.'

Both women were staring at them now. We have become a TV drama, thought Harry. A bit of hospital entertainment for a Sunday night. He flashed them a brilliant smile to shame them, and they dropped their eyes. One of them righted the Tesco bag and moved it closer to her chair.

For a while, no one in the room spoke at all. Harry wanted to ask more questions. He wanted to take off his jacket. He wanted to get some coffee—ideally from the kind of machine that promised a double espresso. But he was unable to move. He felt like a fly in a web, all bundled up in sticky silk.

The door opened. A woman in a blue tunic and trousers

glanced round. Kim went white and sat up straight.

'Don't get up,' said the woman. 'I just wanted to let you know that we're all done. I'm going off duty now, so I won't see you again until tomorrow. If you're still here then.'

'What's happening?' said Harry.

'Are you a relative?'

'No, he's not,' said Kim.

Harry read the name badge. Dr Annan.

'He's a friend,' said Kim, after a pause.

Harry shot her a quick glance.

The doctor said, 'No change. We have to let the drugs do their work.'

'How long before we know?' said Kim.

'I can't tell you, I'm sorry. It's just a matter of waiting.'

Update over. Harry couldn't believe that Kim was letting her go. They watched the doctor walk out of the room, and Harry's need to know more was so strong that he almost shouted out. But he had no right to demand information. He had no right to anything. He felt the two women in the corner watching him. They had been listening to every word. 'It's wonderful, isn't it?' he said in a loud voice, addressing them both. 'The National Health Service. Such dedicated staff.'

They looked away.

'But she's good,' said Kim.

'I didn't say she wasn't.'

He thought she was going to argue. The old Kim would have. Dived in to deliver a lecture on the public ownership of essential services. From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. But she said nothing.

'So what now?' said Harry.

'We wait.' Her eyes had no expression. 'Or at least I wait. You can do what you like.'

'Here?'

'You can go in if you want. It's the bed on the left.'

'Are you coming?

'Not now.'

She looked so small and defenceless, sitting there in the bland chair against the blank wall. It didn't suit her. Kim was a fighter. He said, 'I could go home and get some stuff for you. A change of clothes?'

She shook her head. But he understood that. If life is shit, a clean pair of jeans isn't going to help. And she'd never cared much about the way she looked anyway. It was Eva who cared, with her long hippy skirts and beads and trailing scarves. Harry swallowed. 'Do you want me to ring anyone?'

'Like who?'

'Your mother?' He could almost hear her voice. *I've never been very good with illness. I find it so draining.*

'I rang her this morning. She can't come.'

Harry nodded. He wouldn't have expected anything else. 'Your father?'

She looked at him as if he were stupid. 'Why would I want you to ring my father?'

Because he's family. And that's what you do at a time like this. You gather people around who might help. Even if you haven't seen them for years. 'What about Jake?'

Kim stood up so suddenly, the chair jumped. 'Harry, if you don't shut up, I'm going to find somewhere else to sit, OK? This is not some mess that needs you to barge in and take control. I've done everything that has to be

done. I rang you because I thought I should. But I don't need you. I'm fine on my own.'

She was shaking.

After a while, she sat down. But she kept her head turned towards the window, although you couldn't see anything—trees, red buses, ambulances—because of the white slatted blinds.

Harry felt in his jacket pocket for his phone. 'I'm going outside. I'll be back later.'

If she heard, she gave no sign.

In the corridor, which smelt of warm disinfectant, Harry—in his City suit, handmade, cashmere—leant back against the wall. The hopelessness made his body feel light, his bones hollow.

§

Kim felt sick. The effort of standing up to Harry had swallowed the last bit of energy she had. She wished she had something in her pocket to eat—an old packet of mints, some chocolate. But she had nothing. She didn't even have any cash in her purse. That would have been something he could have helped with. He always had money. Notes folded over in thick wads, ready to be peeled off and spent.

'That your boyfriend?' said one of the women in the corner. They were both staring at her.

Kim shook her head.

'I wouldn't say no to him,' said the bigger one. Her hair was pulled back so tight that the skin on her forehead

was smooth and shiny. She wore gold hoop earrings.

Both women laughed.

'He looks like that actor off the telly,' said the woman with the earrings to her friend. 'The Italian one who's always smiling. You know.' She turned back to Kim. 'So who is he, then?'

Kim realised she was shivering. She ran her hands up and down her arms.

'You all right?'

Kim hugged her arms closer.

'It's the waiting. That's what it is. It gets to you. We've been here since three. And now they're taking blood from him.' She shuddered. 'I can't do blood. I've never been any good at blood.'

Leave me alone. Please leave me alone. I can't think about anything but not thinking.

The door opened. A nurse in a blue uniform stood at the threshold. Kim's heart missed a beat. But the nurse looked over at the women in the corner.

'You can come through now.'

There was the kerfuffle of finding coats and hoisting bags on to shoulders. As they left, the woman who'd been doing all the talking looked over at Kim and nodded. 'I hope it goes all right for you.'

The door slammed shut. Kim was alone again.

Except, as usual, Harry was around somewhere. Harry was always around somewhere.

Kim put her head in her hands.

2006

'I can't see her,' said Kim.

Outside in the hot July sun, all the parents stood shoulder to shoulder, laughing and talking like guests at a wedding. The women wore pink silks and cream linen, the men pale grey suits. Gold bracelets shone. Diamonds caught the light, sparks of electricity. The new graduates in their black gowns stood out like crows.

From the top of the stone steps, Kim searched the faces below. All through the ceremony, she hadn't been sure.

'She'll be here somewhere,' said Izzie.

But would she? Eva was never on time for anything. Kim took a deep breath. Don't think about it. Keep your mind blank.

Next to her, Izzie started waving. Kim looked down the steps, and the crowd parted, and there beneath them was a creased-looking man with a red face supporting what seemed to be a large floral sofa.

Izzie's eyes widened.

'All right, pet?' said the red-faced man, leaning up to kiss her.

'That was lovely,' said the floral sofa. 'I cried all the way through.'

Izzie's dad seemed half-strangled by his collar. He kept jamming a finger behind the top button, straining his neck like a football fan who can't see the pitch.

'So you got here OK,' said Kim, to break the growing silence. 'From Newcastle.'

'No problem at all,' said Izzie's dad. 'Just a bit of trouble round Alnwick.'

'Mam,' said Izzie, finding her voice, 'where did you get that dress?'

Her mother looked down, as if pleasantly surprised by the view. 'I made it. What do you think?'

'Did you bring a coat?'

The crowd swayed against them. Izzie's mum rolled sideways, gliding on castors.

'Shall we go and find a cup of tea?' said Izzie desperately.

Kim shook her head. 'I can't go yet.'

The noise of the crowd was getting louder.

'You're waiting for your parents?' said Izzie's dad.

Kim swallowed. That feeling of desolation was creeping up on her again, like a cold mist. She wasn't expecting her parents. Her mother wouldn't dream of travelling all the way from the south of France. And her father, living in Leicester with his new wife and small sons, didn't even know the date of her graduation. 'No,' she said. 'For my sister.'

'So how about a few photos?' said Izzie's dad, taking

out a battered camera in a brown leather case.

Kim felt embarrassed. She didn't want to get involved in someone else's family mementos. Izzie had been her friend since the first year, but that didn't mean she wanted to end up in a silver frame on a telly in Newcastle. She was just shuffling sideways, taking small steps so that no one would notice, when there was a shout to her left and a small explosion, like a firework. Somebody shouted 'Watch out!' way too late, and Kim found herself sprayed at close range by a magnum of cava or prosecco or, for all she knew (this being Edinburgh), vintage champagne. She blinked and spluttered as someone said, 'Oh, sorry!' and then found herself, dripping wet, in the middle of a crowd, mobbed by people anxious to help, dabbed at with tissues, urged to take off her sodden rented gown. A tall woman in a bright-blue fascinator kept saying over and over again, 'Poor girl. Look at her. Look at her! Like a drowned rat.' And then, in the midst of it all, shaking champagne from her hair, she heard a voice she knew.

'Kim?' said Eva.

With a rush of joy, Kim looked up. There was her sister with her white-blonde hair, her fine-boned face, that same, ever-present look of slight surprise. And in the exact moment that she recognised her—as the familiarity of the person she loved more than anyone else in the world brought her truly alive again, from the top of her head to the tips of her fingers—Kim realised with a jolt to her heart that Eva was not alone.

Next to Eva, smiling, was Harry.

Kim narrowed her eyes. 'What the hell,' she said to her sister, 'is he doing here?'