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The Vendetta

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Numb from shock, drowsy from drugs, Jan drifted in and out of consciousness. She understood she was in bed. But there was a background of buzzing and occasional cheeps, like a hedgerow in summer. Periodically her mind came into focus and the hedgerow dissolved into the hospital. She was besieged by medical paraphernalia – drip stands, tubes, wires, bleeping monitors. She shut her eyes. Her body felt as if it was bobbing weightlessly in warm water. Opening her eyelids again, she knew she was staring at the ceiling, where the strip light seemed to her as sharp and real as anything she had ever seen in her life. She understood for a moment it was the source of the buzzing. Her hearing seemed selectively amplified. She heard a voice in some other room or corridor call out the word, 'Doctor!'

Much less clear were the figures in white and blue flitting around the blurred periphery of her vision. She tried to move her head. Someone touched her arm. A needle went in and she returned to semi-consciousness. Now she was at the same time in a hospital ward *and* in the corner of a ripe June hayfield. Something rattled and she heard the harness of a horse, smelled the leather. A door hinge whinnied, a trolley clattered

exactly like her pony's hooves on the cobbled surface of the yard when she was a girl. Somewhere down the ward a shaken pillow snorted like a horse going to exercise in the early morning.

A little later images of the previous day began to form in her brain, messages she could not read properly. They floated past her like a surreal landscape viewed from a ghostly train. Eddie insisted he would drive her home. She picked up a race card. She stood in the centre of the paddock, giving Finbar Howlett, the jockey, his instructions. She placed a two pound bet on the Tote for the kids. The crowd shouted at the start of the Gold Cup – the Cheltenham roar. She handed Magic Maestro's passport across the counter to the declarations clerk. Leading the horse from the preparade ring, Joe Paley looked as grave as a chess player. Finbar got a leg up into the saddle and Magic Maestro skittered for a moment before walking on. Drumming hooves. Virginia Gilbert queening it in the trainers' bar. Eddie insisted he would drive her home. The last fence. Excitement. Whoops of joy. The winners' enclosure. The trophy presentation, with cheers and clapping. The face of Harold Powell snarling at her by the weighing room. A.D. O'Hagan in the hospitality box, beckoning the waiter to pour more champagne. Eddie insisting he would drive her home . . .

These impressions seemed unconnected, like a randomly shuffled pack of picture cards. Her mind fumbled with them for a while, and then she fell back into a deep sleep.

A woman in a white coat and with glossy dark hair was beside her bed. It was early morning.

'Nurse, what's happened?' Jan asked. 'Why am I in hospital?'

He throat and mouth were dry. She could manage no more than a creaky whisper. The woman leaned nearer.

'It's Dr Pierson, Jan. Penny Pierson.'

'Are you a doctor?'

Jan found she could shift her head, and it didn't hurt. She looked sideways and saw the folded earpieces of a stethoscope protruding from a pocket of the white coat.

'Oh, yes, so you are. Sorry.'

'Are you feeling better?'

'Better? I don't know. Can you tell me what happened? I don't . . . I can't remember.'

Dr Pierson perched herself on the bed beside Jan.

'Well, you've been in a road accident. Coming away from the racecourse, so I've been told.'

'An accident? Did I smash up the Shogun?'

'No, it wasn't you driving.'

'Oh.'

Then her brain sparked a connection. *Eddie insisting he would drive her home.*

'Eddie. Eddie was driving,' Jan said. 'Something . . . some car hit us.'

'Is it coming back to you?'

'Bits of it.'

'Good. You'll remember it all in time. Bit by bit.'

In her mind, fog still swirled around the previous night, but it was true that more and more was coming

back to her. It was dark. They were in Eddie's old two-seater Morgan. Its throaty engine was coughing bronchitically as he accelerated up the hill.

'Some other car was there, going fast,' she said as a whole chunk of memory cleared the mist. 'Eddie went off the road and we crashed . . . Then, nothing, until I woke up – *When? – Last night? This morning?* – and the car was a complete wreck. Eddie was knocked out. At least, I thought he was. I was talking to him, and he didn't reply. And then I thought maybe he wasn't knocked out. I mean, I thought . . .'

She felt a sudden panic and began shaking. She snapped her head sideways to look at Dr Pierson and this time the suddenness of her movement caused pain in her neck and the side of her face, which she now realized was bandaged. Her voice was little more than a parched croak.

'He *is* OK? He wasn't moving. I think I thought he was dead.'

The doctor smiled again.

'No, Jan, it's all right. Eddie's still with us. But he's very poorly. He's in the intensive care unit.'

'Thank God.'

Jan raised her hands, still trembling violently, to her face. Dressings covered her cheeks and temples. Her hands too were bandaged. She let them fall back to the covers and suddenly the tears came.

'Thank God. Oh, thank God . . .'

Physically, Jan had come off lightly, with superficial face wounds, a throbbing bump just above her right

temple, and bruises where the car's impact had thrown her body against the seat belt. There were also cuts to her hands, caused when she had tried to brush away the crumbs of window glass that had showered down on her. Otherwise, incredibly, she seemed unhurt.

No longer needed, the drips and monitors were wheeled away and one of the nurses, a sympathetic Scottish girl, gave Jan a mirror.

'See?' she said. 'It's no so bad.'

Jan saw that dressings wrapped her head from the crown to beneath her chin, making a square white frame for her even whiter features, the eyes hollow and sunken from shock.

'I look like a nun in a horror film,' she commented disapprovingly.

At half-past nine her parents were the first visitors to arrive, her father holding a big bunch of bananas and her mother, practical as ever, carried a holdall with a change of clothes and Jan's toilet bag.

'We stopped at Edge on the way to pick them up,' she said. 'Fran will be down with the children in a few minutes.'

'But what about school?' Jan asked.

'Oh, they can miss the first hour. It's more important they see you – they wouldn't be able to concentrate anyway.'

Perched on the bedside chair, Mary Pritchard looked pale and strained, though she would not have admitted it. Reg made a more convincing show of cheerfulness.

'You look fantastic, girl.'

His daughter knew it was a well-meaning lie, though

she could tell also that Reg was mightily relieved to see things were not a great deal worse.

'Don't be daft. How can I look fantastic, Dad? I'm a bloody mess.'

'A few cuts. You did worse trying to gallop your pony through that copse as a child, remember?'

'Well, I'm not a child now. And what's the news about Eddie? They won't tell me anything.'

'Eddie'll be all right. He's young and strong.'

'Then why's he in intensive care?'

She caught Reg and Mary exchanging a doubtful glance.

'Mum? Dad? Please, I need to know. I'm sure he wasn't wearing his seat belt. I thought he was dead. Dad, can't you try and find out how he is? I can't stand the way they're not telling me anything.'

Reg said he would ask about Eddie if the chance came up. But Jan knew her father too well and it was obvious he already had more information than he was letting on. She did not pursue the matter, for now Fran, the woman who acted as her nanny and general helper around the house, arrived with Megan and Matty. The children approached their mother with serious faces. The sight of the bandages and the dark blue bruises frightened them. After a few moments' consideration, Megan turned to her grandad.

'Mummy looks like a mummy. She's frightening me.'

Jan blinked back her tears.

After three-quarters of an hour, during which Reg reassured Jan that all was well in the yard, and that

he'd been told by Annabel how well Magic Maestro had come out of his race and eaten up his feed, Mary Pritchard saw that her daughter was exhausted and began to shoo the family out.

'These children are due at school,' she told her daughter, 'and you need to rest.'

'No, I don't. I have to go home. I thought I would get out today, but now they're telling me not until tomorrow at the earliest. It's the bump on my head they're concerned about, though of course it's nothing.'

Mary placed the palm of her hand across her daughter's forehead, in a gesture she had always used to soothe Jan as a small child.

'Nothing is important after an accident like that, child. You need to look after yourself. Get your strength. Annabel will be all right at the yard for a day or two, I'll have the little ones and your dad can drive them to school.'

Jan lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

'All right, Mum, don't go on. I'll try. I just wish I knew something about Eddie.'

Later in the day, after Jan had been moved out of the A and E department and into a room off a general ward 'for observation', she awoke from what was probably the deepest sleep of her life. Her bandages were now removed and replaced by smaller dressings, and she was beginning to feel more herself. Her face, although it was swollen, was otherwise surprisingly lightly damaged with, as Penny Pierson told her, no danger of any permanent scarring.

'Your skin will be pristine again in a few days,' the

doctor said. 'The bruises will last a little longer, but I'd say you'll be at least presentable by the end of next week. It's just that bump on your head that we want to keep an eye on.'

'Please tell me how Eddie is. Is he bad?'

Dr Pierson studied her patient for a few moments, weighing up how much to divulge.

'Mr Sullivan's got problems,' she said judiciously. 'We're doing all we can for him.'

'What do you mean – problems? What problems? Is he conscious? Can I see him?'

The doctor shook her head.

'I'm afraid not. He's not fully conscious yet.'

'But I could *see* him, couldn't I? Just for a moment?'

'I don't think it's advisable, Jan. Not just yet.'

Jan knew it was pointless to continue the argument. Instead she broached the subject that had been nagging at her ever since she'd woken up in the morning.

'I vaguely remember there was another car – in the accident, I mean. Was it overtaking us? Or coming the other way? I'm still a bit muddled. Was there another car?'

'Jan, I'm just the doctor. But I can tell you someone else was brought in.'

'The driver of the other car?'

'He was apparently driving another car, yes.'

'And? How is he?'

Dr Pierson laid a hand on Jan's briefly, and said in a soft voice, 'I'm really sorry to say this, Jan, but he didn't make it. He was pronounced dead on arrival.'

'Dead on arrival,' Jan repeated dully.

'In fact, I believe he was killed instantly.'

'I see.'

Closing her eyes, Jan breathed deeply in and out, feeling the seat-belt bruises around her left collarbone. The life of a stranger cut off in an instant, and she had been there.

'Do you know his name?'

'No,' said Penny Pierson, 'and I don't think it's a good idea for you to worry about it. Don't make me regret that I told you, hey? You've got to be strong. Your family needs you at home, so don't go and make yourself worse.'

She stood up and bustled towards the door, but then spun round, reminded of something.

'Oh, yes, I forgot, there's a Detective Inspector Hadfield who's been wanting to see you. He called in this morning and said he'd be back this afternoon. Shall we stall him? I can get the consultant to tell him to go away if you like.'

Jan waved her hand, dismissing the idea.

'No, no, it's OK. Let him come in. I'd like to see him.'

And find out what he knows, she added to herself.

DI Brian Hadfield, of the plain-clothes branch, turned up within the hour. He tiptoed into the room, as if afraid to waken the occupant, though he could see Jan was awake and expecting him. He was of medium height, with a thatch of grey hair and blue eyes twinkling out of a ruddy complexion. A small uniformed woman constable was in attendance.

'Mrs Hardy, may I say what a fan I am of yours? That Irish National with Russian Eagle, what a finish. Great win.'

'Thank you,' Jan said mechanically. 'Would you like to sit down? How can I help?'

Jan tried to assess the policeman as he shifted the bedside chair into a position closer to her. He looked innocuous enough. But that 'what a fan I am' stuff was a warning sign. Maybe he really was a racing enthusiast. On the other hand, maybe he'd done a spot of research just so he could butter her up. Jan had never had anything against the police, but she was instinctively wary about a complete stranger paying her compliments, particularly a policeman.

'We're investigating the serious road traffic accident on Cleeve Hill last night – as you've probably guessed . . .'

He gave a slight hiccup of a laugh. Was he nervous?

'And obviously we want to know exactly what happened, so at some point we're going to need to take your statement about the incident.'

'My statement?'

She hadn't visualized this. She'd thought it would be DI Hadfield briefing *her* on what had happened.

'Yes,' he said. 'There's nothing to worry about. It's just your version of events.'

Jan hauled herself into a slightly more upright position in the bed.

'My *version*? I thought you'd come to tell me what happened. Now you're making it sound as if there's something suspicious, as if I did something wrong.'

Hadfield's cheerful face wilted slightly. He held up his hand.

'Oh, don't get me wrong, Mrs Hardy. You see,

unfortunately a man has died: the driver of the other car.'

'I heard just before you arrived. I'm sorry.'

'You were in Mr Sullivan's car, the Morgan?'

Jan nodded.

'So the thing is – obviously – there now has to be a full police investigation, and as Mr Sullivan's in no state to speak to us, you're the only one who can throw any light on the situation at the moment.'

Jan frowned. Alarm bells were ringing. The truth was that she had not yet fully constructed her memory of the previous night. In fact, subconsciously, she'd probably been avoiding doing so. Her memory was still only jumbled fragments. And she was quite sure she shouldn't give Hadfield a statement consisting of fragments. She would have to be certain of the truth before she could tell it.

'I guess I'm still shocked – I did have a nasty blow on the head, you know. I can't really remember what happened fully. Not yet anyway.'

'Can't you tell me *anything*?'

He spoke gently, regretfully.

'Sorry, Inspector. I've got lots of rather fuzzy impressions, nothing concrete. It'll all come back eventually though, I'm told. The doctor will explain . . .'

The policeman had to accept Jan's polite refusal to give a statement, and he withdrew, tiptoeing out of the room in the same bizarre way he had come in.

Later that afternoon there seemed to be a lull in ward activity. Jan was hardly breathing as she slipped out of bed and put on her dressing gown. She opened the door of her room and looked out: the corridor was deserted. She quietly crept out and headed for the stairwell. Holding the banister tightly, she went down one flight. Her legs felt weak and wobbly but they held her.

On the next floor she saw a sign with an arrow pointing to the intensive care unit. She padded in its direction, and after what seemed like an age came to the unit, which was entered by a pair of swing doors. Amazingly nobody challenged her as she eased her way through. Now she was in a corridor which ran past a suite of dimly lit rooms, furnished with beds that looked more like operating tables, each surrounded by batteries of high-tech equipment. Each interior could be seen from the corridor through a double-glazed window, although the rooms had slatted blinds. Some had been drawn shut on the inside. The patients' names were written on small cards posted on the doors.

She counted six rooms before the corridor was broken by the nurses' station. The first room was empty. The second housed a patient who was, as she could see through the slats, encased in bandages. She checked the name on the door, but it meant nothing. The third room was occupied by a female, but on the door of the fourth she found what she was looking for: 'Edward Sullivan'.

The blinds were lowered but not fully shut, so Jan could peer between them. The lighting was dim, but sufficient to give a view of the bed and the patient. He

lay there, heavily bandaged around the head, arms and midriff, encircled by the latest electronic machinery and drip stands. His bare chest, rising and falling as he breathed, was the only movement he made. She could see the electrodes that fed the cardiograph machines and other monitoring devices. The black hair sprouting above the head dressing seemed like Eddie's. But this man had a huge head and face, a bulbous nose, bloated jowls and lips like frankfurter sausages. This man was not Eddie. Had they moved him and forgotten to change the name card? If so, where was he?

'Can I help you?'

A blue-uniformed nursing sister had bustled up without Jan noticing.

'Er, I don't know,' said Jan, startled. She instantly collected herself and indicated the intensive care room. 'Actually I'm wondering about Eddie Sullivan. I'm Jan Hardy and I was with him, you see, in the car.'

'Oh?'

'Well, see it's his name here on the door, but this isn't him. Can you tell me what's happened? Where is he? Have you moved him? Has he come round? Is he able to see anyone?'

The sister gave a faint smile.

'Oh, this is him all right.'

Jan jabbed a finger in the direction of the patient.

'*That's* Eddie?' she asked in disbelief.

'Large as life.'

'But it can't be.'

'Oh, no doubt his face looks a bit different from when you last saw him. It often happens after car accidents. I've had mothers in here unable to recognize

their own sons. Don't worry too much, I can assure you his face will return to normal.'

Shocked, Jan studied the supine patient again, and now realized that it was indeed Eddie, his features so grossly distorted by swellings and a large haematoma as to be unrecognizable.

'He came off much worse than me, didn't he?' she said quietly. 'Is he unconscious?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'In a coma?'

'That's just a term for it, but don't be too worried. It's amazing how quickly young people can recover.'

'When will he wake up?'

The sister shrugged.

'You can never be sure. He's quite heavily sedated, but we think the signs are good.'

'So he'll make a full recovery?'

The nurse smiled again, a professional and practised smile, but comforting all the same.

'We take one step at a time around here, Mrs Hardy. The first thing is for him to be fully conscious. The doctor thinks he might, just might, come round in a day or so. Then we can reassess him.'

On her way back to her own bed, Jan began to have thoughts of a kind she had not entertained before. What if Eddie didn't come round? What if he stayed in a coma for years? What if he died?

As she climbed the stairs, Eddie's voice suddenly came back to her, as he gunned the spluttering engine of the Morgan. *I bloody love you, Jan Hardy.* Yes, he really had said that last night. And what was more, she'd said the same thing back to him, the only time

she'd said those words since the death of her husband, John.

Oh, Eddie, you stupid, stupid, irresponsible idiot! You didn't wear your seat belt and now look at you. Silently she wept.