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Opening Extract from...

Unravelling

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One

There should be a scar. Vanessa's often imagined it, an ugly, angry weal crawling over his forehead. Her eyes search for it. The wall light above his head creates a pool of shadow, and she can't see it. His head is cocked at an angle, just as it used to be, as if the rest of the world's out of kilter with him and he's trying to make sense of it.

She steels herself for the moment he'll look up, but he's staring into the flickering glow of the candle on the table. The waiter turns to her and raises his eyebrows. He gestures to the table, but she shakes her head.

She edges away. Retreats. Back through the long room, past tables with their white linen cloths. People. A couple, heads close. His fingers trailing through her blonde hair. Her lips lifting in a smile. A group. The flash of raised glasses. Mouths open ... laughter. She can't hear it. The thrumming in her ears drowns everything out. Her gaze flits over the wood-panelled walls, up to the chandeliers. Like spiders, waiting. The scent of the lilies on the mahogany dresser inside the door catches in her throat.

At last, the hotel foyer. The grandfather clock next to

the reception desk chimes seven. Her heart races against its steady beat.

The maitre d' appears at her side. 'Is everything all right, Madam?'

'It was hot in there.'

'Would you like some water?'

She shakes her head.

'Shall I call your guest to come?'

His questions circle like a persistent bluebottle.

'If you could give me a minute?'

'Of course, Madam. You can sit here.' He indicates a low leather sofa. 'I'll tell your guest you'll be with him shortly.'

She perches on the edge of the sofa. Her velvet trousers cling to her thighs and her wooden beads feel tight at her throat. It's not too late to escape. She glances up at the staircase, imagining the smooth wood of the balustrade cooling her palm. The tranquillity of the hotel room will calm her. With its view over the leafy square, it's the one she always asks for when she stays in London. Her clothes hang in the wardrobe; her make-up is scattered on the bathroom shelf; her laptop is on the desk. The items are familiar, part of the pattern of her days. She can phone down to reception, ask them to tell him she's unwell. She imagines his face as he listens to the waiter's whispered message. He's bound to be disappointed. 'I can't wait to see you again,' he said in their last phone call. She remembers the deep creases that made his heavy brows merge when he was cross or disappointed, the pouting lower lip, the way he would drag his hand through his already unruly hair.

His hair. Black, wild, gloriously wild. But not now.

She sees again the shorn head, pale and vulnerable, bending towards the candle on the table. Shorn. Shriven. Forgiven. Not now. Not yet.

The years have left their mark on her too. She fingers her eyes where she knows he'll see a network of lines that weren't there when he last saw her. The furrows on her forehead that gathered permanently after the accident. But her hair is still much the same: a golden red that he liked to call titian; curly, always escaping from the comb she tries to tame it with. And her body is slim. True, her breasts have grown heavier and fuller, and the ice-sharp hip bones that he used to complain dug into him in bed are now covered with soft flesh.

She has almost decided to leave, when she hears the bleat of her mobile. She feels around inside her bag, glances at the name of the caller: her daughter. Her finger hesitates over the accept button. Then she flips the lid shut and drops the phone into her bag. Now is not for Cordelia.

It's only a second's delay but time enough for the maitre d' to reappear. 'Is Madam ready now?'

She stands up. An invisible hand seems to propel her forward, compels her to place one foot in front of the other. Her heels click on the marble tiles. They reach the heavy oak doors, and the maitre d' looks back, as if he's checking she's still there.

'If you'd like to come this way.'

They pass through the tables with their white linen cloths. They'll be there in seconds. No time to calm her breathing, reorganise her face into a sleek smile.

He doesn't seem to have moved in the time she's been away. His gaze is still fixed on the flickering candle, as if it might go out if he doesn't keep watch.

He glances up and gets to his feet. He's wearing a tweed jacket. What has happened to him that he wears tweed jackets? He holds out both hands and she notices how bony his wrists are. He smiles. It's a lop-sided grin with none of his old arrogance. But where's the scar? There should be a scar. He puts his arms round her and she breathes in, expecting to smell cigars. Instead she gets an aroma of expensive after-shave. He used to hate after-shave.

'Vanessa,' he says. 'Beautiful butterfly.'

She draws back from the embrace. 'Hello.'

He laughs. That same billowing laugh. The laugh that makes you want to fling your arms in the air and dance.

'What's so funny?' she asks.

He shakes his head. 'I've imagined this so many times. How it would be. What you would say.' He laughs again, this time a little puff of sound that has a world of hurt in it. 'And all I get is *hello*.'

She finds it then. The scar. It's absorbed into the wrinkles on his brow, a fine line faded to silver.

As they sit down, he covers her hand with his, and she sees he's wearing the signet ring she gave him on their wedding day.