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Opening extract from

Far Rockaway

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‘There’s more than one way to get to **Far Rockaway**: stay on the A train until it runs out of track, or change at Penn Station and go via Jamaica.’

Victor Manno, to his granddaughter.



1

Merry Christmas

Cat Manno was crossing 55th Street head down, hoodie up and earphones cranked to 11, when the speeding fire-truck hit her.

Her parents were already on the other side of the intersection putting loose change in the charity bucket of the cheery Santa Claus on the corner. They were close enough to see it happen but too far away to have any chance of saving her. Her grandfather Victor was closer, but though they all saw the danger and yelled a warning, the music in Cat's ears was so loud that their shouts didn't do any good. Neither did the fire-truck's siren or the air horn that the driver pumped an instant before impact.

Blinkered by her hoodie and deaf to any world beyond the pounding bass in her ears, Cat stepped off the kerb with her eyes locked down on the smart-phone through whose small, bright screen she was urgently scrolling. She had her hood up

because she was sulking and her head low because she was feeling bad about it – but not yet quite bad enough to know how to stop, suck it up and plug back into her family's annual trip back East from California to New York to visit Victor for the holidays.

All she knew was that she didn't want to go to Far Rockaway.

She was too old for that stuff.

She had better things to do.

The fire-truck that hit her was Ladder Two from Midtown, on the way to deal with a small inferno in the back of a large sweatshop in the garment district. The blaze had been started by someone drying a wet dress too close to an old three-bar electric heater and leaving the room for a quick smoke on the fire escape.

Because of that fire escape all the people in the building got lucky and made it out safely when the alarm sounded, though the sprinkler system failed so spectacularly that the entire workshop and the two floors above it burned out before the three trucks that did make it to the scene knocked the resulting firestorm down.

Ladder Two never got there.

But no one died at the fire.

Back at the collision on 55th Street there was no fire escape, no luck, no happy ending.

All there was was Cat's grandfather.

Victor Manno was close enough to see what was about to

happen and, at a spry 75, still sharp and agile enough to launch himself back across the street to try and save Cat by shoving her out of the way of the truck.

If he'd succeeded the story would have been a different one, maybe about a miracle, but on any given day very few miracles happen deep in the gridded canyons of Manhattan, and this one – even with Christmas three days out and closing fast – was no exception.

Victor sprang in front of the massive chrome grille on the front of Ladder Two, his long tweed coat flapping behind him as he stabbed at it with his cane and hit Cat in a full-body tackle.

He was fast, but not quite fast enough.

Instead of just Cat being hit by the truck, they both were.

But Victor did succeed in knocking his granddaughter three crucial feet backwards before Ladder Two slammed into them, and that yard made all the difference.

Instead of the fire-truck pounding an immediate full stop to the too-short story of her life, it hit her a glancing blow. It was Victor who went under the fire-truck instead of Cat, who bounced into the cars at the kerb, smacking her head with an ugly crack against the aggressively flared wheel-arch of a parked Dodge Ram.

It wasn't a happy ending.

But it was a beginning.

2

First aid

When Cat came out of unconsciousness all she could see was a world on its side, full of boots, knees and tarmac.

She tried to get up, but strong hands held her shoulders to the ground, and a stubbled face she didn't know dropped into view and told her she'd had an accident and that she should keep still and that an ambulance was inbound.

The intense professional calm in the fireman's voice terrified her and she tried again to buck upwards against the restraining hands of other firemen huddled round her.

'Cat. Stay still, darling. You're—'

Her mother's voice choked into her consciousness. She rolled her eyes and found her, kneeling at her side, winter hat askew, face white and ticking with tension.

'You're going to be fine. Just stay still.'

She tried to tell her that she wasn't fine, she was being held down on the pavement by unyielding hands when she

urgently wanted to get up, but her voice seemed to have gone wrong, and all she heard herself rasp was: 'Grandpa . . . ?'

Her mother's eyes flicked left for an instant and, despite firm hands holding Cat's head still, she managed to follow the direction of her glance along the road surface, just far enough to see another huddle of backs and boot-soles kneeling around something trapped under the rear wheel of the fire-rig. Her eyes treacherously slid away from the second group of firemen so as not to linger on what exactly that something was, and travelled back along the side of the truck until they were stopped by the sight of her grandfather's cane sticking out at right angles from the radiator grille, as if Victor had stabbed the great metal beast a mortal blow and stopped it in its tracks.

It was such an incongruous and terrible sight that she choked out a defensive gout of laughter.

'Grandpa killed the truck!'

And then she started giggling, and once she'd started it seemed to build and build with no hope of stopping. The more she giggled the more she wanted to get on her feet, because the giggling wasn't a good sort of laughter, but a series of judders that seemed to get more and more intense and be shaking something loose inside. She just couldn't stop. She knew she needed to get to her feet and get her breath, but the strong hands held her down. She began to twitch and flip in her struggle to free herself, and then her mother's face dropped into view again, hat gone, eyes wet,

and she held her face and spoke calmly.

'Cat. Stop moving. You need to stay still until that ambulance gets here.'

She jerked her head back towards the approaching blip-and-wail of a siren cutting its way out of the background growl of the city.

'You *really* need to be still, Cat. You hit your head.'

It was the rawness in the way her mother's voice nearly broke on the 'really' that stopped her.

The giggling dwindled and the shudders eased off and she went slack beneath the hands of the firemen.

'Stay with us, kid,' grunted the stubbled face, 'everything's gonna be cool, but you need to stay awake for me.'

The approaching siren was interrupted by two loud blasts from an air horn.

'Ambulance is nearly here. You're gonna be comfortable any minute now, OK, champ?'

Cat felt her vision begin to twitch and she realized she felt very cold.

'That's just shock, OK? It's the adrenaline flushing out of your body. You take a knock like you just took, the system piles on the adrenaline to cushion you from the immediate effects, keep you going 'til you're out of immediate trouble – like the body's got its own First Aid mode, right?' The fireman's voice was calm and reasonable. Somewhere in her head – which was beginning to throb now – Cat knew he was talking like this to keep her from giving in to the undertow of

sleep pulling her away from the rising pain behind her eye. The fireman carried on. 'Tell you what, kiddo, you're going to have a hell of a black eye and a real bad headache when that adrenaline does go, but stay cool, stay awake, look at me, you're going to be fine, right? Right, Cat?'

Cat knew he wanted an answer, but she was shivering too much to get the words out. She closed her eyes for a moment.

'Cat! Look at me. Look at me . . .'

A thumb gently opened her eye and she saw the stubbly fireman smiling in at her.

'Attagirl. Stay awake now, you hear?'

Cat heard the double thump of car doors closing, and realized the ambulance siren had got really loud and then just stopped. Two figures in green paramedic coveralls jogged into view.

'What have we got?' said the closer of the two, a tall high-cheekboned woman with thick black hair braided into two long plaits.

'It's a twofer,' said the fireman, hawking a thumb towards the other group at the rear of the truck. The other paramedic guy evaporated in that direction. The dark eyes and the plaits swung into the place in Cat's vision where the stubbly fireman had just been.

'What's her name?' the paramedic woman said. Cat heard her mother's voice answer.

'Catriona. Cat . . .'

'Hey, Cat. I'm Natalie. Looks like you took a hard shot to the head here . . .' She produced a penlight from the pocket on her sleeve and shone it into her eyes, one by one.

'Can you talk, Cat? Can you tell me what happened?'

Cat tried to nod. But no words came out. She heard an urgent voice call from the direction of the other huddle of firemen.

'Natty? You OK to give me a hand here for a minute?'

Natalie's eyes didn't break contact with Cat's, although the distance between them seemed to be slowly receding, as if she was gently falling away from her and everything else.

'Cat. Can you talk? I need to be somewhere else for a moment, but I need to know you can hear me before I go?'

She tried to speak. It hurt, so she stopped trying and concentrated on breathing instead.

'Do you know what happened here?'

She got her breathing sorted out. Then she heard her own voice coming from an increasingly distant world that was already telescoping away from her, as the walls on the edge of her vision began to close in and she started to search wildly for her mother's face. It sounded like her throat was packed with gravel.

'We should have gone to Far Rockaway . . .'

3

The bad step

They should have gone to Far Rockaway.

Despite all the calculations that followed, working out the angles, measuring the marks on the road, estimating the velocities – and above all weighing the blame – that's what everything came down to. That and the fact Cat had her earphones in.

Stepping somewhere just beyond the safety of the kerb on the corner of 3rd Avenue and 55th Street the thin line between life and death came down to that one decision: Cat cranked up her tunes, stuck her 'phones in, dropped her head, started Googling something and just plain didn't hear it coming.

That explained it.

That's how it happened.

That's where the journey began. That's when that line – thin and final as a razor – got crossed.

'Why' is a whole other thing.