

TWO WRONGS

MEL McGRATH



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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HQ

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

This edition 2021

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First published in Great Britain by
HQ, an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2021

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN HB: 978-0-00-833683-7

TPB: 978-0-00-833684-4

TPB (Canadian edition): 978-0-00-845695-5



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This book is set in 10.6/15.5 pt. Sabon

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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To those who continue to listen.

In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. The Canada Suicide Prevention Service is 1-833-456-4566. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.

Prologue

The lights on the Clifton Suspension Bridge are dazzling in the thin Bristolian rain. The woman walks across it all the time on her way to and from her shift cleaning at the Royal Infirmary and even though it is a notorious suicide spot she has never yet seen anyone fall. But there is a first time for everything and as she spots a young woman clutching the railings of the suicide fence, the thought zips through her mind: this might be the time.

She hears herself call out reflexively – Hey! The young woman clutching the fence looks her way and for an instant hope surges in the woman who has just come off shift until the younger woman, turning back to face the gorge, reaches out and begins to climb the fence. There is a terrible purpose in the way she moves. The woman who has just come off shift knows that whatever she does now could make the difference between life and death, and knowing that, sensing it, makes the hairs on her skin lift and her heart hammer and her legs surge forward.

Still the young woman clammers upwards.

‘Hey!’ The woman who has just come off shift feels her breath quit. She is so tired. It was a long day at work and

she cleans the A&E department and there is always so much blood and grease and body fluids and so many cups and snack wrappers to clear up. She is accustomed to seeing bodies and knows what that three-second flight from the bridge through the air and into the water can do to flesh and bones.

The young woman lifts one arm and shouts, 'Go away!'

The woman who has just come off shift stops in her tracks, three or four metres from the figure making her way up the fence. It is all in this moment. Life, death. She hears her own voice bark back, 'Please, stop!' The young woman freezes and shouts down.

'Stay where you are,' the young woman screams. 'I don't want your help!'

'OK, OK,' the tired woman replies, holding up her hands as if in surrender. 'But talk to me!' She has no idea what she is going to say but she knows that she must find a way to connect. The tiredness has drained from her. Her mind is razor sharp. If I let this happen, she thinks, what will I tell my kids? How will I live knowing I have let a woman die?

She wonders how the young woman can think of leaving this city that she loves so much, this wonderful, stone city with its dark history, its independent, almost feral people and its brilliant, hopeful bridge? She wonders if the young woman knows that this bridge was first conceived of by a woman with six children who drew up the plans and gave them to a man and refused to take any credit because women 'shouldn't be boastful'. Women are always building bridges, linking things, people, moving between worlds not made for them, always thinking up new ways to reach across the darkness, to connect.

She wants to ask the young woman why she is doing this,

how can anything be this bad, but she knows enough not to. Instead she shouts out, 'I'm Sondra, what's your name?'

The young woman turns her head. 'Satnam.'

'We've all felt like you're feeling now, Satnam,' the tired woman says. 'I'm older than you, so I know. But the feeling passes. It always passes.' They are more than strangers to each other now. Each has made her way indelibly into the other's experience, their history, the story of their lives.

Satnam shakes her head. 'I can't, I just can't.'

Her words are slurred. She's not in her right mind, Sondra thinks. 'Please, Satnam, come down from the fence. If we stand here any longer, we'll both be wet through. I live just the other side of the bridge. We can go and have a cup of tea. I've got chocolate chip Hobnobs! We can talk.'

Sondra reaches for her mobile phone to call the emergency services but, guessing at her purpose, Satnam shouts, 'No, no police!'

'OK,' Sondra says. 'No police. But let me call the Samaritans. You don't have to speak to them. You can just let me do the talking.' She'd love to call the Samaritans right now. They would know what to do and the tired woman has absolutely no idea.

Satnam's head is bobbing. She's mumbling, trying hard to remain conscious and on the fence. The wind is up, the bridge swaying minutely underfoot. Bristol is such a blowy city. The tired woman loves that about it. Every day is a bad hair day in Bristol. You can't be a Bristolian and be fussy about your blow-dry. What odd thoughts come unbidden when you're up against it. Sondra scopes around in her head for some better ones. 'I don't need to call the Samaritans. I can call anyone,' she says. 'Just give me a number.'

Satnam is looking at her now. She is so young and beautiful, with delicate, even features and long, black, unruly hair. ‘I don’t know any numbers. My phone...’ She’s losing focus, slurring her words. Sondra can’t tell if this is a good thing or not. She takes a step closer. It’s the wrong move. Satnam resumes her grip on the fence and climbs higher, balancing herself by bracing on the upright.

‘OK, OK, I won’t move. Is your phone here?’

Satnam nods. She’s pointing away, towards the bridge tower. ‘You left it over by the tower?’ Satnam moans in response. Sondra says, ‘Promise to stay there and I’ll get your phone.’ She walks backwards towards the tower, slowly, one step at a time. In a minute she’s reached the spot where Satnam was pointing. One eye scouts about under the lights, the other remains on Satnam. It’s hard to see. The rain is on her glasses and so much is in shadow. She wants to ask, What does it look like? What colour is it? But those questions will be wasting time and there is no time to waste. Besides, the young woman is growing more and more incoherent. Soon, she thinks, Satnam won’t be able to say anything at all. Sondra’s eyes sweep the paving on the walkway. Just as she is beginning to feel desperate, her foot makes contact with something. She bends and gropes at the pavement and there it is. An iPhone. Oh, what a relief! She has found it and it’s an iPhone. Sondra also has an iPhone so she knows how they work.

‘You need to tell me the passcode.’ She thinks she hears one oh four oh but it’s so slurred that might not be it. Hurriedly, she plugs in the numbers. And thank God, thank God, the homescreen appears.

Satnam says, ‘Call Nevis.’

Nevis? Is that a last name or a first? Will Sondra find it in the contacts? Maybe, but it'll take too long. Another better idea bubbles up. She pushes the menu button and waits for the tone then speaks into the phone as clearly as she can. 'Siri, call Nevis.'

The phone speaks. 'Calling Nevis.'

At that moment the eye that is on the young woman registers movement. Sondra turns her head and sees that the young woman has jumped down onto the walkway and is dragging herself towards the gap in the fence where the suspension wire attaches to the bridge.

Oh God, thinks Sondra. I shouldn't have walked away. I shouldn't have left her. She's going to go and I'm not going to be able to pull her back. She feels herself take a leap forward and closes her eyes.

Chapter 1

Nevis

Nevis Smith, student mathematician, bird lover, and keeper of secrets, is lying on her bed in the flat she shares with Satnam Mann trying to finish a tricky piece of coursework on deep vent modelling when her phone bleeps with Satnam's ringtone.

'Hey, I thought you'd gone to bed already.' The door to Satnam's room was shut and the light was out when Nevis came in late from the library.

An unfamiliar voice replies. 'My name is Sondra. I'm with your friend Satnam on the Clifton Suspension Bridge. She wants you to come *straight away*. Please come, right now.'

Nevis says, 'Is she hurt?'

'Not yet, not yet, but she's in a bad way. Oh please. Don't call the emergency services. She's says that if she sees a blue light she'll jump. Please, I don't know what else to say to her, just *come*.'

The words hum and hiss and swirl around in Nevis's head. Is this some kind of joke? Or a scam? Someone playing a sick prank. What would Satnam be doing on the bridge past midnight? Why would this woman be calling? In any case what Sondra is saying is impossible because it's after midnight and Satnam is asleep in her bed.

And yet the urgency of the voice is unmistakable. Nevis rushes into the hallway and throws open the door to Satnam's room. In the murky light she picks out the shape of an empty bed. There is something rancid in the air which she has never noticed before. Is she imagining things? She can hear her head drumming or is it her heart? What is happening? Nevis, who prides herself on thinking straight, can hardly think at all.

She reaches for the light switch and flips it on as if that might illuminate the inside of her head. But no. The bed remains empty. She walks around it and opens the wardrobe. She calls, 'Satnam?' and hears traffic outside and the clamour of her pulse. What is going on? As she turns to leave, her eye catches a bottle of vodka on the bedside table. How could she have missed it? She hurries over, picks it up, shakes the few remaining drops inside the bottle, puts it back down and feels the moving parts of her brain clicking into place at last.

Is this *The Moment*? she thinks. Has it come?

Honor always told her that in every life there is The Moment. It might be very small, like holding out a hand to stop a child stepping over a pavement, or very big, like giving the go-ahead for a doctor to flick the switch on a life-support machine. It may be saying yes or saying no. It might be as simple as making or taking a phone call. The Moment can steal up on you and arrive in the most unexpected minute of the most unexpected hour. It may hit hard or be so soft-footed that you may not hear it coming. Your life can be defined by it. It can be your making or your ruin.

Satnam is on the Clifton Suspension Bridge with Sondra. Satnam is... oh it's too horrible to think about but Nevis must steel herself. Satnam is in deep, deep trouble. This is my

Moment, she thinks. This is my time. Whatever decisions she makes, whatever action she takes now will be etched on her soul. She cannot escape this; she can only move towards it.

Nevis's hand is trembling so hard now that she can hardly hold the phone. 'Let me speak to her.' She can feel her adolescence receding. So distant now. Adulthood coming at her like a rocket.

'She won't let me approach. Please just come,' Sondra says.

Nevis thinks. Can I do this? Do I have a choice? She takes a deep breath. You always have a choice, Nevis. The right thing or the easy thing. Step up. Stop asking questions. Control yourself. Take a breath and quiet your heart. This is The Moment.

'Tell Satnam I will be there in fifteen minutes.' Her voice sounds weirdly distant, Nevis thinks, as if it belongs to someone else. She grabs her phone to summon an Uber and throws on clothes. A different person from moments ago. A crisis will do that. In seconds she's rushing down the stairs and into the street, one eye on her screen to follow the progress of the taxi, willing the driver to go faster. Farok in the black Prius, *come on*. Three minutes, two, one. The longest one hundred and eighty seconds in history. There's a moment, maybe a second or two, when she loses heart and thinks, how can I do this? But how can she not? Satnam is her best friend, her only friend. Nevis owes her this.

The Prius has barely come to a stop at the side of the pavement before Nevis is throwing open the door and hurling her body inside. Farok whips his head round, meets the expression on her face with a look of alarm.

'Nevis, Clifton Bridge?'

'Yes. It's not what you think. Or it is what you think, but it's not me, it's my friend.'

Farok hesitates for a second as if trying to decide whether this ride is way above his pay grade. He turns back to the dashboard and glances at her in the rear-view mirror and – miracle – a look of resolution is on his face. He’s decided this one is worth doing.

‘OK,’ he says. ‘We’ll go very fast.’

As they speed up the hill towards Clifton she calls Satnam’s number again, but the device goes to voicemail. What if it’s too late? Oh God, please no. This is like solving an equation, Nevis tells herself, perhaps the most complicated, challenging equation you have ever been asked to solve. There will be a point where you can take one of several different pathways. Only one of these pathways will lead to the correct solution. You have to think it through. You have to get it right.

But how? She does not have all the parameters. This isn’t the Satnam that she knows. This is not the friend who sits on her bed and watches crap telly or the friend who called out the wanker who thought it was funny to spray-paint ‘Mentalist’ on Nevis’s daypack. This isn’t the friend who dreams of becoming a medical researcher, the girl who is determined to marry for love whatever her parents might think. It’s not the girl who jogs even when it’s raining and is always happy to share her chips. But perhaps the Satnam on the bridge is the same Satnam who says she’s going to the library but never seems to be there, the friend who has lost weight recently but says she hasn’t, the one who cries in her bedroom and once – recently – threatened to leave Avon University. Perhaps this Satnam has secrets.

People are complicated. Satnam is complicated. If only people were as simple as mathematics.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ Nevis says, to no one in particular.

The person she would normally ask in a situation like this is Satnam. Because Satnam has everyday, ordinary, practical smarts. Nevis has maths smarts as well as knowing a great deal about river birds. But Nevis has no people smarts. I am useless, she thinks.

Farok doesn't answer. He doesn't know either. Of course he doesn't. He has no idea. In any case, he's doing what he can, which is driving really very fast across the northern edges of the city towards Clifton. Farok is looking at Nevis in the rear-view mirror. He also seems terribly concerned.

I can't speak, Nevis thinks, the words have gone. There is just wire wool in my throat where sentences should be. Who can I text to help me?

She pulls out her phone. There are so few numbers in her contacts. There is Honor of course but they haven't really spoken in months, not since Nevis found the letter.

Chapter 2

Honor

Honor is asleep when the call comes from Nevis. At first she doesn't realise what has woken her and thinks it must have been Zoe, who is sitting at the bottom of her bed, doing what she has always done since she died, staring into the middle distance. Is it morning or is Zoe playing one of her tricks? Perched on her elbows now, Honor scouts the darkened room. The slice of window left visible after she shrank the curtain in the wash is still night-black. She listens out for birds but hears only the usual distant hiss of London traffic making its way along the A12 at Bow and the murmur of the boat on the water. Her brain, which feels as thick as toothpaste, is demanding more sleep. It's tempting to ignore Zoe. Over the nearly two decades since Zoe's death it has become Honor's principal survival technique to pretend there's no trouble in life so pressing you can't turn your back on it and hope it will go away. Then again, Honor also knows that Zoe will not go away until she's said what she's come to say, which is tricky, given that she never speaks.

'What's up?'

No reply.

Her phone buzzes and throws out its tinny blue light. So this is why she woke after all. There are only two people who ever text after work hours: her daughter Nevis and her neighbour Bill and it's too late to be Bill.

Honor reaches over to the bedside table where the phone is sitting on its charger and reads **Need speak now**. The breath catches in her throat. Her pulse thrums. Nevis was always scrappy about keeping in touch. She's never been one for the long, intimate conversations that Honor knows other mothers have with their daughters. In the last few months they've barely communicated at all. Something Honor did or said. Nevis won't say what. It's gone midnight. There's a hammering at the front of her brain. Her chest pops and splutters. All the old, long-buried anxiety comes rushing back as though the dam that had kept it back all these years has just burst its banks. She can feel it rising in her legs. She presses callback, the pad of her finger sliding on the screen, leaving a tiny slick of sweat. Holds her breath while the call connects and when Nevis doesn't pick up, feels a terrible sinking. She cuts the line and bashes out a text.

I'm here. Call me.

She waits a few seconds and when there's no response, tries again. The cold damp inside the narrowboat hits her. The *Kingfisher* is always chilly on the canal, even in summer, but March cold is particularly penetrating. On another night she might throw on her poncho but there are more pressing things. A moment or two later she tries Nevis for a third time and gets no response. She takes a breath, checks the sender and re-reads the text in case she has got it wrong.

Need speak now.

Honor thinks about calling the police but what will she say? A nervous tic starts up behind her eyes, like the ignition on the gas burner. Again she calls and again, nothing.

She's up now and in the saloon, plucking her puffa jacket from the hook beside the steps to the deck. There's a sudden tiny shock of fur as Caterine the Great, disturbed from her usual routine, weaves herself around Honor's legs. Any other time the cat would be a comfort but tonight she steps round the animal and clammers up the steps onto a deck already slippery with rime. Frosty cobwebs sit on the glass windows, reminding Honor, unexpectedly, of a day, a few years ago, passing a happy hour or two on a school science project with Nevis to make ice from supercooled water, the seed a grain of rice thrown into the water bottle, the instant transition of water to ice, the cracking as it shattered. There is a bright moon and over the marshes a pink London sky. From somewhere far away comes the tinkly laughter of people partying on the water. A distant siren blares.

She runs up Sugar House Lane towards the van. Beside the old warehouses, newly converted into 'luxury apartments', a fox crosses her path, its breath pluming the night air. The driver's side door of the orange 1999 Ford Connect – which Nevis christened Gerry – gives with a 'thunk' and a musky blast. A pool of stagnant water sits in the passenger side footwell, the result of some leakage whose source she has never been able to locate. Moss grows on the interior seals. She hopes the cold won't prevent the engine starting. The key hasn't been turned in weeks. Time was she needed a vehicle to haul boat supplies – timber, marine varnish, engine and pump parts – from the chandlers in Essex, but these days everything's

available online for delivery and most of her work is now fixing and repairing other boats on the canal. Gerry remains hers out of sentiment and to haul Nevis's things to and from university at the beginning and end of each academic year, though now Nevis is no longer living on campus that's probably not so necessary either. Day trips to visit her daughter are easier by train. An hour and forty-five minutes and not too expensive if you book early enough, though this year she hasn't made any of those. Hasn't been invited. Nothing has been the same since the week before Nevis started back at Avon University in September. Nevis did not come home at Christmas. They have barely spoken in months.

Need speak now.

The key turns and the van, which she bought second-hand only months after Nevis's birth, chugs into life. *You beauty!* Honor pats the dashboard as a thank you, puts the gearstick into first and pulls out of the parking space into the street.

Chapter 3

Nevis

Nevis is feeling queasy, though she knows it's only nerves. They are in Clifton now, the tyres of the Prius tocking wildly across granite setts. True to his word, Farok is driving like a man whose wife is about to give birth in the back. Or a man trying to prevent a death. She checks the time remaining on Google Maps and notices the missed calls and messages from Honor. She will have to call or text later. For now, it is more important to prepare herself for whatever she is about to face. Why has Satnam asked for her? Has she kept something from her? What can be so bad that she has never mentioned it to Nevis? Weren't they supposed to be best friends? What can she be wanting to say that Nevis doesn't already know? Why did Nevis never think to press her about the weight loss? Why didn't she probe when Satnam talked about leaving uni? Why did she allow herself to be soothed by Satnam when she said her tears were PMT? She sees now that these things might have been cries for help. Why didn't she see it then?

I'm stupid, she thinks. I'm a bad friend.

At last the Clifton Suspension Bridge looms up ahead, dimly lit by a thin moon. The lights are customarily switched off at

midnight and it is now gone half past. The journey has taken one minute fifteen seconds less than the prediction on Google Maps, but it's been the longest journey of Nevis's life.

And there is still further to go.

Directly ahead on either side of the slipway onto the bridge stand the two toll houses, each illuminated by a night light, and beyond them the looming mass of the first tower dimly lit by the moon. No one is visible. Where are the toll house attendants? She'd read somewhere that after midnight, when the lights on the bridge switch off, body heat cameras are able to detect anyone climbing the suicide barrier. Perhaps the attendants have picked up Satnam's image and are on the bridge with her now. Perhaps they have called the police? A shocking thought bubbles to the surface. What if she is too late?

The thought stops her in her tracks. Wouldn't she be able to tell if something terrible had already happened? Wouldn't there be a sign? They say you can sense the presence of the dead if you put your mind and your body to it. Nevis has experienced this herself: sometimes, in the quiet of the night, she has sensed her birth mother, Zoe, as if she were waving to her from behind a closed door.

Stop thinking, Nevis, you are wasting time! Just move. Shouting a thanks to Farok, she feels her limbs breaking into a run, the soles of her feet thudding onto the pavement, propelling her past the toll buildings towards the tower and, reaching it, into the cool darkness beneath and then out again onto the span of the bridge. There, just beyond the first tower with her back to Nevis, she sees a figure standing in the moonlight. Too tall to be Satnam. The woman is unaware of her presence and there is no one else to be seen. Could this be Sondra? Does

Sondra even exist? Her belly pulses, stomach churns. What if this whole thing is some kind of sick joke, or a scam? She'd been scammed before, more than once. Satnam says it's because she's not very worldly for which Nevis reads, not very good at reading people. To Nevis human hearts and minds are like jewels sitting in a locked box for which she has no key. She knows they're there. If she picks up the box and shakes it, she can hear shuffling and the sound of soft cries and laughter whose origins she will never understand.

She shouts: 'Hello?'

The figure on the bridge wheels about and shouts back.

'Are you Nevis?'

'Yes.'

The woman beckons her with frantic hands. Nevis takes a step forward then two and in a few moments she has caught up to her.

'Look,' Sondra says, pointing a few metres ahead, to where Satnam stands, spectral in the moonlight, on the edge of the bridge where the fence meets the suspension rail, facing the abyss and unprotected by the fence. There's a gap in the barrier here. At any moment Satnam could squeeze through it and step out into the air.

Never in her life has Nevis seen anyone more lonely.

'Just talk to her,' Sondra whispers, but how? She thinks, I'm no good at talking, there's a wire loose. Some connection between mouth and mind is broken in me. The fear is choking. The terror of getting it wrong, of saying the one thing that sends Satnam over the edge. She can feel the ribs rattling in her chest.

'Speak! Tell her you love her,' says Sondra. And so she does,

faltering at first and then finding her voice all of a sudden, crying, 'Satnam, it's me!'

It's as if a great wave has rushed to the shore and caught her unawares. How did I not see this coming?

Satnam's face whips round. In the moonlight Nevis can just make out the faint gleam of her teeth. Is she speaking? What is she saying? The wind is taking away her words. Once more Nevis calls her friend's name, then gathering herself she advances a step.

'Stay back!'

'Whatever the trouble is, we can fix this, Satnam.' She thinks, you called me. You want me here. Please, let me come closer. Let me come to you.

Her friend is shaking her head now.

'Please, Sat, it's going to be OK. I promise.'

The girl is sobbing and speaking. As the wind dies most of what reaches Nevis is incoherent, a slurred stream of words not meaning much. The odd sentence makes its way to her. *You don't understand. I've had enough. I can't live with myself any more.*

Nevis takes a step forward. Her heart is a drum roll, pulse drilling her brain. She thinks, why did you ask for me? Was it to ease your soul or to be a witness to your death? She stops, dizzy with fear, clutches her head and in that instant something soft arcs across her field of vision. A shout. 'Oh God, no!'

She turns to see an owl banking over the gorge.

An owl means wisdom.

An owl means endurance.

An owl means new beginnings.

The owl is a sign.

‘Satnam!’ No answer. Nevis is close enough now to see her friend’s face, dazed and expressionless, the head unsupported and wobbly, shaking on legs that don’t seem to belong to her, hair pasted by the rain against her cheeks, speaking without making sense. She feels herself surge forwards calling, saying ‘No!’ and ‘Please!’ and finally, ‘I love you!’

Satnam lifts her right foot. Nevis can no longer look, feels the breeze against her cheek as she turns away. The world goes to black and one by one the tracings of the retinal veins appear like red comets. The wind whips up again and sings through the wires of the barrier. Nevis braces herself. Behind her Sondra cries out.