

above her head and the rope, with her still gripping it, clattered and rattled uncontrollably upwards through the ceiling. Sarah shrieked in shock and fear as she was lifted clean off her feet.

‘Let go!’ yelled Pete the bell captain and steeple keeper. The tail of her rope thrashed around, hitting two other of the ringers, and then Sarah plummeted over a dozen feet to the floor and landed in a heap. The bells fell silent except for hers which clanged wildly on, until it ran out of momentum.

As the ringers gathered round the motionless body on the floorboards and Pete rang 999 there came the sound of footsteps up the twisting stone steps from the body of the church. Heather, followed closely by Olivia, appeared in the doorway.

‘What’s happened?’ she asked as she gazed at the white and shocked faces of the ringers. ‘Is

Sarah OK?’ Heather ran across to the casualty and knelt beside her, feeling for a pulse.

‘The ambulance is on its way,’ Pete told her.

‘Well, she’s alive,’ said Heather. ‘Out cold but alive.’ She gazed up at the bell captain. ‘What happened?’ she repeated.

‘The stay snapped,’ said Pete. ‘It happens, it’s rare but it happens, but I’ve never seen a ringer injured like this. I think she must have pulled too hard, newbies do that, and she didn’t have the experience to let go. Without the stay there’s nothing to stop the bell carrying on turning full circle, again and again, wrapping the rope around the wheel. She got lifted clean off her feet.’

Heather transferred her gaze to look up at the ceiling of the bell chamber and at the multicoloured sally of Sarah’s rope, now filling the hole that guided it into the belfry. She looked back at Sarah. ‘Poor kid. How terrifying.’

In the distance they could hear the wailing ululation of an approaching emergency vehicle. Sarah groaned and her eyelids fluttered.

‘Lie still,’ said Heather, patting her hand. ‘You’re going to be OK. Help is coming.’ She turned to Olivia. ‘It might be an idea to tell Brian – or anyone for that matter – to meet the ambulance and show them how to get up here.’

‘Of course.’ Olivia rushed off.

Sarah groaned again and opened her eyes properly. Tears slid down her temples and into her hair. ‘It hurts,’ she whimpered.

‘What does?’ asked Heather gently.

‘Everything. My back, my legs.’

Heather looked at Sarah’s legs which were encased in jeans and saw her left ankle was at a hideous angle and blood was seeping into the denim covering her right shin. Heather was pretty certain that Sarah’s ankle was broken and she’d put good money on a compound fracture of her right tibia too. But even more worrying

was the matter of Sarah's back. And good luck to the ambulance men who would have to find a way of getting her, immobilised, down the tower steps.

When the ambulance crew arrived Heather and Olivia rejoined the congregation which was buzzing with curiosity as to what had happened.

'How bad is it?' asked Brian who was waiting at the bottom of the steps.

Heather shook her head. 'Not great. Definitely one broken leg, possibly both of them are but her back hurts – that's the really worrying thing. Pete said she fell quite a distance.'

Brian ran his fingers through his sparse grey hair and made his fringe stand on end like Tintin's quiff. 'I think, under the circumstances, we might abandon matins. Maybe just all of us join together and say a prayer for poor Sarah and suggest that everyone comes back for

evensong...’ He looked at his wife. ‘What do you think?’

Heather nodded. ‘I think that sounds like a very excellent plan.’

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The next day, another of the town’s residents, Bex Millar, stood in the primary school playground and watched her two young boys, Lewis and Alfie, hare around, like overexcited puppies, as they greeted friends they hadn’t seen during the long summer break. What a difference, she thought, from the start of the previous term when they’d just moved to Little Woodford and they’d been new and shy. She wondered how her sixteen-year-old stepdaughter, Megan, was getting on at the comprehensive at the other end of town. Hopefully, now the class bully had been put in her place, Megan would slot back in with the