

I'll Come Back for You

By A.C. Hall

It happened in a swift series of violent moments. The door being kicked in, the heavily armored men rushing inside, the screams of the young couple who lived inside, the brief struggle as they fought back, the way they were pinned down and bound, the dragging out to the waiting vehicle. A minute before they had been curled up on the couch, in the midst of a movie and a quiet evening at home together. Now they were prisoners, their deaths not far off if all of the rumors were to be believed.

“Why is this happening? Why us?” Beverly cried.

“Just stay calm, we’ll find a way out of this,” Harold told her.

They had been blindfolded and she couldn’t see his face, but it was all too clear from his tone that he didn’t believe his own words.

“Both of you shut up,” a gruff voice barked.

The increase in abductions by this group was covered daily by the news, but like most people Beverly and Harold never thought it would happen to them. No one knew for sure who they were or why the government hadn’t stepped in to stop them. It was the perfect atmosphere for rumors to grow and that’s precisely what they did. In just a few short years the group had grown to mythical levels. Some of the most popular beliefs were that they were a government sanctioned group that abducted and experimented on whoever they wanted. Others reported that they brainwashed those they took. The only fact was that anyone who had been taken by them had never been seen or heard from again.

The vehicle made three more stops and each time more people were shoved into the back of the vehicle. One woman couldn’t stop crying. One of the heavily armored men stalked among them, stepping on the prisoners without a care. The woman’s cries stopped and she gasped for air. The sound of her being choked to death went on for minutes longer than Beverly thought was possible. Finally,

mercifully, the woman fell silent. Her lifeless body was flung on top of the rest of them. Beverly scurried out from under it. Tears began flowing from her own eyes but she forced herself to stay silent.

Harold held her tight for the entire time they were in the vehicle. From time to time he'd whisper reassurances to her, trying to keep her spirits up. Beverly used to think that any situation would be okay as long as she was in it with Harold, and it was true that having him with her now helped greatly, but she struggled to believe escape or survival were possible.

He tightened his grip on her. Harold had always been able to read her moods, they had felt connected the first night they met, and he sensed her despair.

"Do you want me to try to break us out of here?" he whispered.

Beverly was surprised he had waited so long to ask, but was glad he hadn't acted on the thought without verbalizing it. As much as she liked the idea of escape, everything was in the favor of their captors right now.

"Let's wait," she whispered back. "Maybe we'll see an opening when we get to wherever they're taking us."

It was impossible to know how much time passed as they were taken to their destination. Beverly fought against dark scenarios in her mind, trying everything she could to keep some semblance of hope alive within herself. At last, what must've been hours later, the vehicle stopped and they were pulled out. The air smelt different here and there was a low roar. They were near the ocean.

A tear escaped from Beverly's eye as she realized this. Harold had proposed to her on the beach. They were planning to get married in the same spot.

"Move," a man said as he pushed her.

She stumbled forward, arms out in front of her. Panic was setting in now that Harold wasn't holding onto her.

"Harold?" she asked quietly.

"I'm here, right behind you."

"No talking!" someone shouted.

Her foot caught on something and she fell. Rough hands gripped her and yanked her up. They were herded into a building of some sort and then gathered together. Harold found her quickly and again pressed himself against her.

“It’s going to be okay, I’m here,” he said.

She fought against her doubts and struggled to buy into his reassurances. Before she could respond jets of water slammed into them. All of the prisoners huddled up as they were hosed down, the water battering them. Finally it stopped and they were led from the room. Their soaked clothing hung on them, immediately chilling them as the temperature in the drafty building steadily plunged.

The sound of metal gates opening and closing could be heard. Beverly was shoved forward and she fell onto a hard stone floor. Someone crouched on top of her and removed the bindings on her hands. Another crash of closing metal rang out. Then the sounds started moving further away.

“Beverly?”

“I’m here Harold,” she said.

She heard him crawling, then felt his hands on her face. He lifted her blindfold. Her vision was blurry and it took a few moments for her to be able to focus. Harold offered her a weak smile and she appreciated the effort. With their hands completely free they embraced fully now, then separated to take in their surroundings. They were in a prison cell. The walls were made of solid concrete but there was a barred window on each of them. Beverly moved to the window on the back wall and looked out.

“The ocean,” she said.

She took a deep breath, trying to get a lungful of the refreshing breeze. Harold approached and studied the bars.

“Those are pretty far apart,” he said as he stuck his arm between two of them.

“We’re on a cliffside and it’s hundreds of feet down to the water. Even if we could get out we’d probably hit rocks near the shore and die,” Beverly said with a frown.

Harold had his whole arm out now and was wiggling, seeing if he could get his shoulder through.

“At least we’d have a chance,” he said through gritted teeth.

Beverly was about to argue with him, to try and talk some sense into him, when they heard a loud voice. It was coming from one of the nearby cells. They went to the side window and peered into the next cell. Three young men were in this one, and all of them were gathered at their own window, watching something unfold in the next cell down.

“What’s going on in there?” Harold asked.

One of the men turned towards him and answered.

“Men in protective clothing are doing something to the prisoners. They’re filming it.”

“What do you mean ‘doing something’?” Beverly asked. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing yet, just poking and prodding and – “

“Something’s happening!” one of the other young men said.

The man who had been talking to Beverly and Harold returned his attention to the window. A moment later a wet explosion could be heard. The three young men leapt back in unison and screamed out. One of them fell to the floor while another ran in circles yelling.

“GOD IN HEAVEN!” he repeated.

“What is it?” Beverly yelled, trying to get one of them to snap out of it long enough to tell her. “What did they do to the prisoners?”

None of the men answered and Beverly’s hard fought control over her panic started to slip away. Her heart was pounding and black scenarios assaulted her mind. Harold could sense her distress and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Try to stay calm. We just need to...”

A loud metal scraping sound cut him off as the door to the neighboring cell opened. Harold and Beverly watched as the three young men scurried to the back of their cell.

“No!” one of them screamed.

Four men entered. Three of them wore black containment suits that covered their whole bodies. A fourth man wearing armor and strapped with weaponry stood guard at the door.

“Stay away from us!” one of the young men yelled.

The three men in the containment suits steadily came closer. One of them held a small camera and filmed, while the other two had strange objects in their hands. A blue liquid shot out from one of the objects and covered the young men.

“AHHHHH!” one of them screamed.

Seconds later the three of them exploded. Blood and gore decorated the walls and the ceiling. Three piles of entrails and nastiness were all that remained of the three young men.

“We have to get out of here!” Harold yelled.

Beverly was frozen, her knuckles white as she gripped the window bars and stared at the horrifying mess in the next cell over. Harold tore her away and lightly slapped her, trying to snap her out of it.

“We have to get through the bars!” he yelled.

She watched as he moved to the back window and again started sticking his arm out of it. He grunted and wriggled and a moment later his shoulder popped through as well. He was having trouble fitting his head and sweat ran down his face as he struggled to get it through the bars. The sound of a key being inserted into their cell door spurred Beverly into action. Her heart was threatening to leap from her chest and she rushed towards the back window.

“What can I do?” she asked frantically.

“Push!”

She placed both hands on his head and pushed as hard as she could. The loud scraping of their cell door being opened gave her new strength and she shoved with all that she had. Harold’s head popped through the bars and he nearly lost his grip on the outside of the window and fell to the ocean far below. He pulled his leg through and was then fully clinging to the outside of the cliffside prison.

“Now you,” Harold said. “Stick your arm out first.”

Beverly could hear the men coming up behind her and she knew. A tear rolled down her cheek and she shook her head.

“It’s too late, they’re here,” she said.

“No!” Harold shouted. “Just stick your arm through and I’ll pull you out.”

Over her shoulder he saw the three men rushing forward. His eyes went wide with panic as he realized Beverly was right, that she wasn’t going to make it.

“I love you, Harold,” Beverly said quickly.

“No, no, no, don’t you say that!” he yelled. “Don’t give up!”

Beverly turned and rushed the three men, trying to block them from the window.

“Jump, Harold!” she shouted.

He reached in through the bars, trying to grab hold of her, but she was too far away. He tried to squeeze his shoulder back through, to get back in, but it was impossible to do from the outside. Beverly fought and clawed at the men as they tried to get to the window. Her eyes met Harold’s and she gave him the briefest of smiles.

“Jump,” she said calmly.

Tears poured down Harold’s face.

“I’ll come back for you, do you hear me?” he said.

“We both know I’ll be dead,” Beverly said. “Just go and live your life.”

“I’ll find a way to save you!” Harold raged. “I will come back for you!”

The men knocked Beverly to the ground and moved towards the window.

“I swear it, Beverly. I’ll come back for you!”

“Jump!” she screamed.

Just as their hands reached for him Harold jerked backwards. He fell towards the ocean far below and they watched until he disappeared from view. The three of them huddled together and spoke in hushed tones. Beverly laid her head against the cold floor and sobbed. Part of her was relieved that he had escaped but now she felt completely and totally alone.

She closed her eyes and resigned herself to her fate. She pictured Harold living out the rest of his life, happy and healthy. She watched in her mind as he grew older,

found another person to fall in love with, had a family. Beverly smiled, ready now to die.

A strange buzzing sound caused her to open her eyes. The armored man guarding the door was convulsing as a blue laser beam of some kind bored into his head. A moment later he dropped to the ground, giving her a clear view of the perfect circular wound that went all the way through his head. An odd figure cloaked in a prismatic robe stepped into the doorway holding what looked like a small laser pistol. Trying to focus on the clothing hurt her head as it shimmered brightly.

The three men in containment suits turned to face this mystery person. The robed figure raised the laser pistol and fired three times in quick succession, burning a hole through each of the men's heads. They fell to the ground, dead.

Beverly looked up at this unknown rescuer, trying to see their face below the heavy hood of the prismatic cloak. The figure reached up and pushed the hood away.

“Harold?”

She could hardly believe her eyes. It was him but in a way it wasn't. Gone was his smooth, twenty nine year old flawless skin. This man's face had wrinkles, weathering, and he had a nasty jagged scar down one cheek.

“You're as beautiful as I remember,” Harold said with a smile.

Beverly slowly stood up, never taking her eyes off of him. She stared at him hard and it was like staring into the future. Tentatively, she reached her hand out and touched the side of his face.

“Is that you, Harold?”

He brought his hand up and touched the back of hers. As soon as she felt his hand upon her own, Beverly knew. Somehow, somehow, this was her Harold.

“It's me,” he said, tears forming in his eyes. “It's me.”

“But... how?”

Loud footfalls rang out in the hall and Harold pushed Beverly into the corner of the cell.

“No time to explain. I only have a small window here and I used most of it getting to your cell.”

He pressed her into the corner and stood in front of her, facing the door. Two armored men rushed into the cell but Harold dropped them quickly with his laser pistol.

“Put your arms around me and hold on as tight as you possibly can,” Harold said.

A million questions rushed through Beverly’s mind but she did as he said.

“No matter what happens, don’t let go,” he said.

“Okay.”

She wrapped her arms around him and held as tightly as she could. Her face was pushed into his back but she heard him fire and kill three more guards. Then there was a blinding white flash and the world around her was gone in an instant. She closed her eyes as tight as she could but the light found its way inside. Beverly wanted to scream as it felt like her brain was being cooked inside her skull but no sound came when she opened her mouth. Just as the pain became unbearable the light faded and she fell into a state of deep and profound unconsciousness.

* * *

Beverly opened her eyes slowly but was met with nothing but darkness. She moved her fingers, struggling to get them to obey. Her whole body was stiff and as she tried to sit up she felt as if she was emerging from a deep sea dive. Her thoughts moved sluggishly in her brain and as she got shakily to her feet she groped into the darkness.

“Hello?”

The only answer was her voice bouncing back to her in what sounded like a very small room. Flashes of where she had been, the cliffside prison, and what had been about to happen came back to her. Beverly panicked and moved forward as quickly as she dared in the dark. She found the wall and slid down it, feeling all over for a window or a door. Her hands found a door knob and she yanked it open.

The hallway was barely lit and she rushed down it, looking for any signs of an exit. Just as she neared an intersection she heard voices. Beverly skidded to a stop, then took off in the opposite direction. Visions of heavily armored men or of men in

head to toe black containment suits haunted her memory and she ran from them. Her bare feet slapped against the concrete floor as she continued her flight.

Several random turns later she spotted an exit. Beverly pushed herself harder, disregarding any thoughts other than the one that urged her to escape. She slammed through the door, swinging it open on its hinges and immediately she found her eyes assaulted by an unfamiliar site and her lungs assaulted with a foul, sulfuric air. The door slammed shut behind her and she covered her mouth as she looked around at her once familiar hometown.

Immediately recognizable was Mount Gregory, the small mountain that the town was built around. But the cityscape she had grown up in, the place her and Harold had called home, was barely recognizable. Many of the larger buildings were partially destroyed, some were in flames. She turned in a slow circle, realizing that she was at the location where the mall should be. Instead it looked like some sort of a military installation.

The earth beneath her feet shook and Beverly held out her arms, startled by the minor quake. It passed quickly, leaving her gazing up into the orange, dirty sky, wondering what was wrong with her town.

What had started as a minor burning in her lungs slowly grew to be a horrible pain and Beverly covered her mouth with her hand. It grew worse with every breath and despite her great desire for escape she moved back to the door she had come from and pulled on it. It was locked.

Each breath was harder to take than the one before and her lungs screamed out at her for more oxygen. A thin blackness played at the edges of her vision, then grew larger, threatening to overtake her. Beverly fell to her knees and clutched her throat.

“Beverly!”

She barely heard the voice, but she felt the strong hands pulling a mask over her head. Soon she could breathe again and slowly the burning in her chest subsided. She allowed herself to be helped up and then turned to look into the face of her savior.

“Harold,” was all she could say.

It came back to her now like remembering a dream. The prison, his pledge to come back for her, and then his almost immediate return in older form. She looked upon him, at the aging on his face, the scar on his cheek. This was the same Harold who had rescued her from the prison.

“It’s not safe outside today,” Harold said, placing a reassuring hand on her back. “Let’s get you back in the complex.”

Gunfire rang out in the distance, towards what appeared to be the front gate. Harold frowned.

“Let’s get inside now,” he said sternly.

Beverly did as he said. A young woman wearing combat fatigues opened the door as they approached. She clutched a machine gun in her hands and had a laser pistol hanging from her belt.

“Thank you, Amelia,” Harold said as they passed her.

“Of course, Commander.”

Beverly raised her eyebrows. She looked over at Harold questioningly but he looked away. He led them down several corridors and then into a large, well furnished room. He pulled off his mask and she followed suit. Her eyes never left him as he moved to a safe in the wall and opened it. He removed a pitcher of water and poured two glasses, then offered one of them to Beverly.

“How old are you?” she asked.

Harold looked hurt for a moment but laughed quickly to cover it up.

“That’s your first question?”

Beverly’s cheeks flashed red and she took a long drink of her water to cover her embarrassment.

“Easy,” Harold said, “we don’t have much water left.”

She stopped drinking and nodded.

“Please, sit down,” he said.

Beverly sat on the edge of the couch and continued to stare at the man that she loved. He sat in a chair across from her, studying her face. Finally he leaned back and took a deep breath.

“I’m fifty.”

She tried to process this information. They were both twenty-nine years old, their birthdays were six months apart.

“But you’re Harold,” she said. “You’re my Harold.”

He smiled and nodded.

“I’m your Harold.”

“The prison, it was...”

“Twenty-one years ago,” he interrupted. “That was the worst day of my life.”

Beverly’s mind was overloaded as she tried to piece together what was happening, what had happened.

“I watched you fall,” she said. “They rushed the window and you let go, but then just moments later you were back and... older, and you saved me. It wasn’t twenty-one years ago, it was recent, it was just the other day.”

She wasn’t sure why but tears had started filling up her eyes. Harold frowned as he watched her.

“For you it was. But it’s been twenty-one years since the prison. Twenty-one long years.”

An unexplained anger was growing inside of Beverly.

“But I was just there!” she yelled. “And so were you!”

Harold nodded.

“This me was just there, that’s true. Twenty-nine year old me was splashing down in the ocean at the time,” he said.

Beverly stood up, feeling on the precipice of a mental breakdown.

“How is that possible, Harold?”

He got to his feet and took her hands in his. Part of her felt strange being this close to him, but another part felt comforted.

“I said I’d come back for you, remember?”

Deep down she knew what he was saying, that what he was implying had happened, but she couldn’t allow herself to believe it.

“I’ve spent the last twenty-one years developing...”

“Don’t say it,” Beverly pleaded.

“... time travel.”

She pulled her hands from his and backed away. She shook her head as tears began falling from her eyes.

“The men that took us that day, they were more powerful than you can imagine,” Harold said, pleading for her to understand. “But I organized a resistance and we fought back against them. We purged them from the face of the planet. And all the while I kept the most brilliant scientists and physicists working on time travel so I could come back for you and save you from your horrible fate in that cliffside prison.”

Beverly kept backing away until she was up against the wall.

“This can’t be happening,” she cried. “It can’t be real.”

Harold slowly walked towards her, his arms outstretched.

“I know it’s not ideal, Beverly and I know I’m not the same as I was back then. I’m fifty and you’re not even thirty, I know it’s weird, but I swear to you I tried to develop the time travel faster,” he said. “But those bastards, they were imbedded in every level of our society. It’s a miracle we were able to beat them at all. They slowed my research, but I never gave up hope, no matter what the obstacles I never let anyone stop my development of the technology that could send me back to save you.”

He extended his hand.

“Excuse me, Commander,” a sharp voice said from across the room. “I’m sorry to interrupt but an attack on the complex is imminent. Your presence is needed in the command center.”

Harold sighed, then nodded.

“I’ll be right there.”

“I thought you said they were beaten, the ones who took us that day,” Beverly said.

“They are, there are none of them left. This is... someone else.”

She could sense the tension in his answer but didn’t call attention to it.

“I have to go deal with this,” Harold said. “Please just stay here and try to calm down. I’m sorry this is so strange for you and I promise I’ll answer any more questions you have when I get back.”

Beverly nodded and watched as he strode from the room. She was glad to be alone and returned to the couch. She closed her eyes and attempted to make sense of everything that she had just learned. Despite her best efforts not to, she felt herself falling asleep.

Beverly's eyes shot open and she sat up quickly. She had no idea how long she had been asleep on the couch. Looking around she saw that the room was still empty. She got to her feet and went to the door. The hallway was empty as well and she moved down it slowly, totally unsure of where she was going or what was even housed within this complex.

At the intersection at the far end of the hall she saw a line of soldiers sprint past, weapons at the ready. The sound of explosions and gunfire outside were faintly audible through the thick walls.

She was just about ready to accept that she was lost when she heard Harold's voice.

"You're out of your mind!" he screamed.

Beverly came around the corner and saw a large command center. There were computer stations set up all over and in the middle stood Harold. He was addressing a dark haired young man on a video screen.

"Out of my mind?" the man laughed. "That's a hell of a thing for you to say to me."

Originally planning on going inside, Beverly stayed just outside of the room, fearful of the scene currently playing out.

"Do your people even know what you've done to this planet? Do they know that you're the one responsible for the quick death of the Earth?" the dark haired man asked menacingly. "Or are they so brain washed that they believe only what you tell them?"

"Most of my people have been with me since the revolution!" Harold shouted. "They and countless like them fought and bled and died by my side so we could rid our world of the tyrants that had silently overtaken it! You're free today because of what I did you ungrateful little bastard!"

The man on the screen laughed bitterly.

“Ever the conquering hero, huh Harold? I’ve never disputed that you saved us all, but you’ve never acknowledged that the whole time you kept running your secret project that was killing our world from the inside out, all so you could reconnect with the love of your life.”

The young man paused and leaned closer to the screen, his face growing even larger.

“But I must say, she’s quite beautiful.”

Beverly froze as she realized the man could see her. Harold spun around and his eyes went wide as he saw her standing there.

“My men will lay waste to your complex and everyone inside,” the man on the screen said. “If you come out and give yourself up I will spare your people.”

Harold didn’t even hear what his opponent was saying. The crushed look on Beverly’s face hit him like a bullet to the chest. He stepped towards her but she took a step away. He opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off.

“You caused everything I saw outside?” Beverly asked. “Your pursuit of time travel ruined the Earth?”

“There may be ways to heal it,” Harold said. “I’ve got people working on it around the clock, but this little pissant and his revolutionary army have been hounding me for years. It makes it hard to sustain research.”

“What did you do, Harold? Why would you cause such destruction?”

“I did what I had to do! Whatever was necessary!” he shouted, causing her to jump. “The only power source on the planet strong enough to supply the needed energy for time travel was the planet itself.”

He realized he was yelling and paused to calm himself.

“We’ve tapped into the Earth’s core, but it wasn’t supposed to cause so much damage. We’re not sure why it happened.”

Beverly shook her head and took another step away.

“You doomed an entire planet, all because of me?”

“I swore to you that I would come back.”

“At the cost of damning the entire human race?” Beverly shouted.

“I couldn’t just leave you there to die!”

He rushed towards her but she turned and ran.

“Please just hear me out!” Harold said as he chased her down the hallway.

Beverly ran blind, taking every turn she came to. Before long the hallways began sloping downwards, taking them into the bowels of the complex. Above it had been more of a military installation but down here were laboratories and huge banks of computers. And then she saw it.

A giant room and in the center a machine that could be only one thing. She adjusted her course and ran for it, knowing that the love of her life had left her with no other choice. Harold saw what she was doing and ran faster.

“No, Beverly!” he yelled.

She sprinted through the door then turned and slammed every button on the control panel. The heavy metal door slid shut quickly just as Harold reached it. Beverly studied the control panel, piecing together how to lock the door. She manipulated the buttons that were by a picture of a lock and listened as the door sealed shut. There was a small window in the middle of the door and Harold’s face appeared there.

“Don’t do it, Beverly. You don’t know what power you’re messing with.”

She turned away from him and approached the machine. It was a circular apparatus and tens of thousands of wires fed into it from the ceiling. A large control panel stood in front of it and she began looking it over, trying to decipher how it worked.

“You can’t just go back in time, there are consequences if you change things,” Harold yelled through the door.

“I won’t stay here in this future that you’ve ruined because of me. I can’t.”

“This can be our future, our time to be together,” Harold pleaded. “Come out and work with me, let’s undo the damage together.”

She punched buttons, familiarizing herself with the map layouts and the time gauge. The machine was still set to how Harold had used it when he came back and rescued her.

“What do you think you can accomplish here, Beverly?”

“I’m going to go back to that day, and I’m going to convince you not to come back for me.”

He slammed his fist into the door.

“Don’t you understand what that will do?” he yelled. “It’ll change this timeline, it will erase it. Once your time in the past runs out you’ll have no future to return to.”

Beverly paused as she let his words sink in.

“Even I don’t know what that means,” Harold said, desperately hoping he was getting through to her.

She returned her attention to the control panel and pushed a few final buttons. Flashing red lights and an alarm sounded out in the chamber.

“No! Beverly don’t do this! I waited so long to see you again!” Harold screamed.

Beverly saw one of the prismatic cloaks that Harold had been wearing when he time traveled and she quickly put it on. She had no idea if it was essential to the time travel working or not but decided not to chance it. She stepped onto the platform and then looked out the door to Harold. He was raging against the door, smashing it again and again with his fist, but when their eyes met he stopped.

They stayed that way for a long moment until finally he spoke.

“I only did all of this because I loved you so much,” he said. “I love you, Beverly.”

“I know you do,” she replied. “I never doubted that for a second.”

And with a blinding white flash she was gone.