



The Dangers of Dating a Rebound Vampire (Half-Moon Hollow Series)

By Molly Harper

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Molly Harper is the author of the popular series of paranormal romances set in the small Kentucky town of Half-Moon Hollow. She also writes the Bluegrass series of contemporary ebook romances, most recently *Snow Falling on Bluegrass*. A former humor columnist and newspaper reporter, she lives in Kentucky with her family. Visit her on the web at MollyHarper.com.

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The Dangers of Dating a Rebound Vampire

1



You never get a second chance to make a first exsanguination.

—The Office After Dark: A Guide to Maintaining a Safe, Productive Vampire Workplace

The sensible beige pantsuit was mocking me.

It was hanging there, in my closet, all tailored and boring. And beige. Yes, wear me to work, and let all of your new coworkers know that you have no personality! it jeered at me. Look at you, all nervous and twitchy. Why don't you just stay home and work for the Apple store, you big baby?

"That is one judgmental pantsuit." I flopped back onto my bed and stared at the ceiling. I deserved this job. I was qualified for it. I'd gone through a particularly difficult test of my intelligence and ingenuity to get it. So why was I so nervous about my first day?

"Because you are Queen of All Neurotics," I grumbled, scrubbing my hand over my face. "Long may you reign."

Honestly, I was nervous because this job—programming an internal search engine of vampires' living descendants for the World Council for the Equal Treatment of the Undead—meant something. Because if I played my cards right, this would be the only first day of work I would ever go through. The Council was known for offering increasingly attractive perks and salaries to hold on to competent human employees, resulting in lifelong appointments. Then again, if I played my cards wrong, this could be my last-ever first day of work, because I would be dead.

OK, if I continued this line of thinking, what would the final outcome be? Not taking the job with the Council. And then I tried to picture my sister Iris's face if I told her that I'd decided not to take the job after all. First there would be elation, and then relief, and then would come the "I told you so's." I really hated the "I told you so's," which were sometimes accompanied by interpretive dance.

Even after having months to adjust, Iris was "displeased" about my employment, which was like saying PETA was displeased by the popularity of TripleMeat Whataburgers. Iris wanted me to work in some

respectable office, where my coworkers wouldn't pose an immediate threat to my person. It was nice to know she cared about my safety, but seriously, she was getting on my nerves.

"Right. Spiting your sister is an excellent personal motivator. Let's go." I launched myself out of bed, slipped into the suit, and pinned my hair into a responsible-looking chignon. I was thankful, at least, that I didn't have to deal with Iris's hair. It wasn't that her dark curly hair wasn't beautiful, because it totally was, especially now that she had all that vampire-makeover mojo on her side and looked like a sexy undead Snow White—if Snow White was remotely sexy or tousled, which was tough to pull off in that Disney headband. The point was, I could barely handle my own heavy dark hair. I couldn't imagine throwing crazy curlicues into the mix.

Iris and I also shared our mother's cornflower-blue eyes and delicate features, though I'd inherited Dad's height. It really irritated Iris when her "little sister" propped her elbow on top of Iris's head. Which meant I did it every chance I got.

Yawning, I picked up my equally practical beige pumps and checked my purse for the third time that afternoon. I'd stayed up all night, then slept through the morning, in an attempt to adjust my schedule to my new hours, working from two p.m. until two a.m. This was considered the early-bird shift for vampires, and it was going to be an adjustment for my very human body clock. But at least I would see more of my recently vampirized sister and her equally undead husband.

The house, as expected, was pitch-black, thanks to the heavy-duty sunshades my brother-in-law had installed to protect him and Iris from sun exposure. Carefully, I clicked a button at the end of the hall and waited for the circular "tap lights" to illuminate the stairs.

I turned the corner into the kitchen and punched in my personal security code. Before I could use my "clearance" to open the downstairs windows, I felt a sudden strike at my neck, the sensation of hands closing around my shoulders. I gasped as my unseen assailant yanked me back against his chest, hissing in my ear. I curled my fingers around the offending hands and dropped into "base," the stable fighting stance taught to me by the jujitsu instructor Cal had insisted I train with for the past five months. Spreading my arms wide to loosen his grip, I thrust my hips back, knocking him off-balance. I stopped my face-to-floor descent with my palms, cupped both hands around his foot, and yanked—hard. The force of my pull was enough to send him toppling back on his ass.

I sprang up and flicked on the lights to see my beloved brother-in-law sprawled on the floor with a big, stupid grin on his face.

"Cletus Calix!" I yelled, giving him one last kick to the ribs before climbing onto one of the breakfast bar stools. "What is wrong with you?"

"I just wanted to get your blood going with a prework reflex test," he said, pushing to his feet. "Well done, you. Your reaction times are much faster."

I grunted and threw a banana at his dark head; of course, he caught it, because he has superhuman response times. Totally unfair. Cal had thrown these little tests at me nearly every day since I'd come home for the summer. Always at a different time, always with a different mode of attack. The fact that Cal had probably downed a half-dozen espressos just so he could get up at this hour was somehow very sweet and super-irritating all at the same time. I understood that he wanted proof that I could defend myself if necessary and that the insane amount of time and money he'd spent on my martial-arts education wasn't wasted. But

seriously, I just wanted to make coffee without someone putting me in a choke hold.

“One of these days, Cal, you’re going to sneak up on me, and I’m going to stab you with something wooden and pointy. It’s not an idle threat. You’ve stocked my bag with a scary array of antivampire technology. If Ophelia ever decides to search me, I’ll probably be fired based on the threat my change purse poses to the secretarial pool.”

“Which means my evil plan will finally come to fruition.” Cal snorted. He had lots of reservations about my working for the Council, so he’d devoted the past semester to preparing me for working around vampires. Brazilian jiu-jitsu classes, crossbow lessons, small-blade combat training. The good news was that I was no longer afraid of walking through the campus parking garage at night. The bad news was that most of the people in my advanced programming classes were now afraid of me, because they spotted my knifework gear in my shoulder bag that one time.

“And if you manage to stab me, Gigi, I will deserve whatever pointy revenge you inflict.”

“You’re so weird.” I sighed, catching my reflection in the glass microwave panel. “Now I’m going to have to go fix my hair again.”

“It’s not that bad,” Cal protested. I dashed into the powder room off the kitchen and ran a comb through my mussed hair. Cal leaned his long, rangy form against the doorway, watching me fuss. “Iris would get up and wish you luck, but she hasn’t worked up to daylight waking hours quite yet. It’s more of an advanced vampire trick.”

“There’s also the small matter of Iris not wanting me to work at the Council office,” I said, leveling him with a frank smile. “It’s OK, Cal, you don’t have to sugarcoat it for me. I know I’m making Iris unhappy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said breezily, following me back into the kitchen.

“Aren’t you kind of old for blithe denial? Like several thousand years too old?” I asked, ducking when he attempted to ruffle my hair.

“Keep it up, and I won’t give you this delicious lunch I packed for you,” Cal said, digging into the fridge and pulling a small blue canvas bag from the top shelf. I opened it to find that Cal had made me a California roll and nigiri with his own two little vampire hands. I’d developed a taste for sushi at school, and there were no quality Japanese restaurants in the Hollow. So Iris and Cal had watched YouTube videos to figure out how to make it for me, if only to save me from truck-stop sashimi. This might seem like a minor gesture until one considered that to vampires, human food smelled like the wrong end of a petting zoo. “You’re the only human I know whose comfort food involves raw fish and rice.”

“Vampires living in blood-bag-shaped houses shouldn’t throw stones,” I told him. “And this is very sweet. I sort of love you, Cal.” I kissed his cheek, something that had taken him years to accept without flinching or making faces.

“You completely love me. Now, have a good first day at work. Play nice with your coworkers, but don’t hesitate to use your silver spray. If you get into trouble, there’s an extra stake sewn into the bottom lining of your purse. Call us before you drive home so we can wait up for you.”

“Your employment advice is not like other people’s employment advice.”

• • •

Ophelia didn't deign to visit us on our first day. My fellow recruits and I talked exclusively to Amelia Gibson, the stern vampire head of HR, while sequestered—I mean seated—in the windowless conference room decorated in various shades of gray. In fact, almost everything in the newly renovated Council office was gray: gray walls, gray carpets, gray cement block, and gray laminate office furniture. Cold, impersonal, efficient, it wasn't exactly home away from home.

While the grim-looking security guards processed our security-pass photos, we had to sit through the upsetting orientation videos. Most of them involved strategies for not provoking our vampire coworkers into biting us. Since I was pretty familiar with these tips—including “Lunch Break Hazards: Say Good-bye to Garlic and Tuna Salad” and “Empty Toner Cartridges: Replace Them or Die”—I spent my time studying my coworkers.

Jordan Lancaster was sweet-faced and might have looked like the girl next door, if not for the full ROY G BIV spectrum of streaks in her hair, the heavy navy-blue eyeliner, and the double nose ring. She'd chosen to wear a My Little Pony T-shirt declaring her allegiance to Rainbow Dash, dark-wash jeans, and high-top sneakers. I knew she looked unprofessional. I knew she was reinforcing the stereotype that computer geeks were poorly socialized kids with weird hair and unfortunate wardrobe choices. Ms. Gibson had looked directly at Jordan when she mentioned reviewing the dress code. But I couldn't help but feel just a little bit envious of her while I sat there, tugging at my uncomfortable pantsuit.

Also, I was considering stealing those violet Converse high-tops.

Marty McCullough was a tall, slender guy with piercing dark eyes and a pale, pleasant face. He wore a plaid work shirt and chinos and seemed just a bit too relaxed around the vampires, as if he thought they were too civilized to hurt him. I hoped he would figure out how wrong he was without my having to use the first-aid kit too many times.

Aaron Chen slept through the orientation, but no one could tell for the first hour or so, because his outdated and overgrown Justin Bieber haircut covered his eyes. And when Ms. Gibson woke him up, he didn't even say he was sorry. I think I was looking forward to working with him most of all.

It was sort of a mixed bag for me when it came to vampires and trust issues. I mean, Ophelia was a four-hundred-plus-year-old vampire who looked like a teenager and schemed like a Bond villain. So I was going to avoid any situation that would lead to sitting in her office near a hidden trapdoor. And sure, I'd been duped and supernaturally hypnotized by a vampire sent by a local supervillain to date me under false pretenses. But thanks to the hypnosis, I'd blanked out most of the unpleasant parts and only remembered dreamy scenes of teen vampire romance.

It was interesting to me that none of the programmers was older than mid-twenties. The oldest of us, Marty, looked to be about twenty-three or twenty-four. Then again, working at the Council office full-time, we would be exposed to many of the vampire world's secrets and machinations. We would have access to their leaders. We would figure out how they managed to save enough money to survive for centuries. That was a considerable liability, as far as the vampires were concerned. Maybe responsible adults in their thirties didn't work for vampires because they were too worried about the families they could leave behind.

And while there were a few vampires out there who could do the work, the Council didn't hire them. The rumor was that the Council members didn't trust their own kind enough to handle the genealogical

information. Long-standing feuds between vampires could escalate swiftly if one knew where to find the living great-great-grandchildren of one's archenemy. So the coding was farmed out to us nonsuperpowered humans who had been through a rigorous, highly intimidating vetting process. The theory was that properly intimidated humans wouldn't use their access to secret vampire records to track down (or assist other vampires in tracking down) other humans to hurt them.

Also, by hiring human undergrads, they could employ us at a far lower pay grade than someone who could claim he had helped Charles Babbage perfect his idea of complex machines completing mathematical functions back in 1812. Two hundred years of work experience was a human resources nightmare.

When my coworkers and their wardrobes were no longer entertaining, my mind wandered to the mystery vampire I'd "met" over Christmas break. The "met" is in quotation marks because I hadn't actually introduced myself. Because, well, he hardly stood still long enough for me to see him, much less speak to him. At first, I thought he was a ghost. I'd barely been able to make out his facial features the first few times I saw him. And when Mr. Barely Visible finally became Fully Visible (and ho boy, was the visual nice), he'd surprised the ever-loving hell out of me by swooping in, kissing me like something out of a Nicholas Sparks movie, and then disappearing, literally.

That was one of the few things pre-Coming Out TV and movies got right about vampires. The undead were stealthy and sneaky and could pop in and out of view in the blink of an eye, which they usually did when a human was in mid-sentence, which, in my opinion, was super-rude.

The tragedy was that the hot mystery vampire had completely and cruelly dropped off the face of the earth after giving me the most world-altering kiss I'd ever experienced. It had been months since the Kiss, the meeting of mouths that rocked my world, shifted my paradigm, viva'd my revolution. And despite excessive lip-glossing for months, just in case I ran into him, I hadn't seen so much as a shadow. I was starting to think I'd imagined the whole thing, which would be completely plausible, considering my emotional turmoil over dumping my perfectly nice, all-too-human boyfriend, Ben.

I had too much bad vampire dating baggage to believe in magic and "meant to be" connections with the undead. There was no such thing as Love at First Bite. Passion, sure. Lust, sure. Strong feelings of impending nakedness, OK. But not love. Still, the kiss convinced me that I'd done the right thing in dumping that perfectly nice boyfriend. Because passion could be underrated. And if I was capable of feeling that much world-tilting passion for someone who might not exist, then clearly, my platonic, not-terribly-exciting relationship with Ben wasn't meeting my needs.

It was also possible that I was a deeply troubled hypocrite.

Up close, my vampire was center-of-the-solar-system hot. He looked like every hero in those Jane Austen movies that Iris's friends liked so much, golden hair that sort of curled around his face, eyes so light brown they appeared gold, high cheekbones, long straight nose, chiseled jawline, and a mouth that looked just smirky enough to say some really filthy things when persuaded. When I imagined meeting him again, he was always wearing a waistcoat and lounging around a stable full of fluffy, inviting piles of hay.

And that was a big part of why I didn't tell Iris about this, because that was the sort of thing for which she would mock me mercilessly.

Of course, I didn't know whether I would ever meet him again. Considering his five-month absence, I guessed not. Why had he even been in the Hollow? He seemed awfully "Continental" for Kentucky, though

that really wasn't an indicator anymore, as our little burg seemed to be a magnet for vampires of all origins. Take Miranda Puckett's boyfriend, Collin, for example—tall, smooth, and British. I was pretty sure Collin was an extra in one of those Jane Austen movies Iris's friends liked so much.

Why had my vampire chosen me to pseudo-stalk? It would have been one thing if I'd only seen him the one time at the Christmas tree farm, but he seemed to follow me on several occasions. Had he known my schedule, or was he just that good at guessing where I'd show up? Maybe that was his special vampiric gift: he had a GPS. A Gigi Positioning System. (That sounded wrong but fun.)

Seeing my new (gray) office, the windowless workroom I would be sharing with my three teammates, made me feel as if I was right back in my "cozy" dorm room on campus. Four modular desks were stuck in four corners, abutted by four shelving units. I supposed the vampires considered it "private" since we would be working with our backs to one another.

Still, this was where the perks of working for vampires became stunningly clear: years of observing human weaknesses gave them enough information to know just how to lure us in. Each of our desks was flanked by a mini-fridge prestocked with sodas and juices we'd listed on our postinterview preference lists. A veritable buffet of geek fuel—Twizzlers, Doritos, ramen noodles, obscure gummy candy—would be refreshed "as needed." Our work desktops were custom-built from the fastest processors and computers available—as in "available on planet Earth," not available at our local Computer Barn. And each of our chairs represented the very latest in ergonomically supportive, butt-cradling comfort.

On the far wall, I spotted a console for the lavish Orange Door entertainment system, complete with digital jukebox touch board and four wireless headsets. We would be able to design personalized playlists from all of the songs available, well, anywhere and have them piped into our headphones while we worked—all of the mind fuel, none of the neighbor annoyance.

We had entered Nerdvana.

I noted that none of these little "gifts" from our employers would distract us from our work. We didn't get the Ping-Pong tables or kegerators of the early dot-com-boom legends. All of our perks were meant to fuel productivity through the night. I might have resented the overt manipulation, but I did love free music downloads, so I would take the benefits package without complaint.

The final touch, I supposed, was the enormous aquarium in the corner, filled with graceful, gliding tropical fish. Ms. Gibson explained that the fish tank was supposed to "accommodate the human need for color and light stimulation without the dangers of a window." I didn't think she intended to make us sound like cats in need of a flashlight to chase, so I let it go. The tank was pretty soothing, after all.

Despite these very nice toys, we wouldn't yet be receiving the leases for our company cars or anything from the "grand prize showcase" detailing our clothing allowance, full benefits, and a salary that would keep me in sushi and extra memory drives for years to come. First, we had to pass a probationary period. It was pretty sensible, really, when you considered the driving record of the average college student. It would probably be more sensible to give us a much longer probationary period, but we were only going to be working with the Council for a few months before we headed back to school.

Of course, the probationary period was sort of twofold. Some of us would work freelance for the Council during the school year if we proved ourselves to be competent, trustworthy, and non-vampire-provoking. We would be able to keep the cars, the salaries, and the other perks and then slide right into full-time

postgraduation employment. Sure, it would add some angst to my spring semester, but the dental plan would be worth it.

Beyond the perks, the job was a challenge. It was a huge mystery waiting to be unraveled, and (thanks to a mid-semester switch in majors to computer science) I was one of a very few people who had the skills to do the thread pulling. And once the search engine was established, there would be other opportunities to work on the vampires' secret projects. Who knew what I would see, what I could learn, where they would send me? This was the beginning of an exciting adult life in which I could establish myself as something besides Iris Scanlon's baby sister.

We were dismissed early, but barely so, after signing a mountain of releases, waivers, and nondisclosure agreements. Most of the paperwork involved agreeing that our estates didn't have the right to sue the Council, no matter what happened. We also signed a single document in which we had to check "yes" or "no" regarding whether we wanted to be turned should we be injured on the job beyond the treatment capabilities of modern medicine. I was surprised to be the only one who actually mulled over this signature. Aaron, Marty, and Jordan all immediately checked "yes." Then again, I doubted whether those three had any actual vampires in their families. They'd never seen the postturning adjustment problems, the struggle with bloodthirst, the horrible burned-popcorn smell that lingered after vampires came into contact with sunlight. Most people thought it was all nighttime glamour and leather coats.

With a rather redundant warning not to discuss our nondisclosure agreement with our families, Amelia sent us home. At least, she sent Aaron, Marty, and Jordan home. She asked me to stay a few minutes because Ophelia had some papers she needed to send to Iris's business, Beeline. I stood outside Ophelia's office waiting for at least ten minutes, trying not to take it personally that I wasn't invited inside to wait or that when she finally handed the papers out to me, she just shoved an envelope through the doorway without actually showing her face.

"Thank you," I said, as pleasantly as I could, as Ophelia snatched her hand back and slammed the door.

"Generous compensation and a clothing allowance," I reminded myself as I walked out of the employee exit, rummaging around in my purse version of the Bag of Holding. "A 401(k) and a dental plan."

My keys were, as usual, at the very bottom of my bag. The parking lot was empty, but at least the humans had designated parking right under the lone streetlight. It was the vampire version of handicapped parking. I would take time to be offended by that once I was safely ensconced in my locked car.

I glanced around the empty lot, once and then again, while my heels made a quick clip-clop across the pavement. Just as I passed an unoccupied SUV, two strong hands closed around my shoulders.

I froze. I couldn't move, time stopped, and all I could think was I'm going to die. Iris is going to deserve such an "I told you so."

My feet flopped uselessly two inches above the ground as he—at least, I thought it was a he—dragged me toward the SUV. Given the fact that I was a little more than six feet tall, the guy had to be huge.

Fighting back the initial panic, I hoped somewhere in the back of my mind that this was another one of Cal's tests. I had to stay calm. This was just like getting thrown around the mat by my instructor, Jason. I just had to assess what needed to be done and go through the steps. I threw an elbow back but missed his ribs as his grip on my arms tightened. I wrapped my leg around his, hoping to make it harder for him to walk if he

planned to carry me off. I threw my head back, hoping to connect with the bridge of his nose. But I missed there, too.

My heart raced. There was no way this could be Cal. My brother-in-law would have cackled like a loon if he'd evaded a head butt. Which meant this was real. Crap. I was going to die.

"Please," my assailant whispered, in a tone far gentler than one would expect from a guy who was attacking me in a parking lot. "You will stop now."

Nope, definitely not Cal.

"I don't want to hurt you." I relaxed only slightly against him as the calm thrum of that faintly accented voice settled in my chest. "Who are you?"

I whipped my head back toward him. "What?"

But instead of answering, he carefully turned me around to face him, setting my feet on the ground. And there he was, standing in front of me. Mr. Barely Visible. Mr. Probably Imaginary. Golden-brown eyes, high cheekbones, long straight nose, chiseled jawline, and a smirky mouth, the same features that had haunted me for the last five months. And I'd been right before: he was freaking huge, even taller than Cal, at least six-three or six-four.

"You!" I exclaimed.

The corner of that beautiful mouth lifted in a sort of mocking salute. "Me."

My mouth dropped open, and I growled. "You."

"Yes, me," he said again, stepping closer and leaning in so his body pressed mine against the SUV. His golden hair reflected an icy sheen in the sickly blue streetlights. "And who are you?"

I should have hit him. I should have pulled my fist back and slugged him for following me, for the five months of uncertainty, for the current invasion of personal space. But I couldn't, because, well, Iris had always insisted that violence wasn't the way to solve interpersonal problems. And because he probably would have moved too quickly for me to hit him. And because he smelled really good—like amber and wood smoke—and his mouth was hovering a breath away from mine . . . and reasons.

I'm sure there were lots of reasons, but I couldn't remember any more of them, because his mouth closed over mine and pulled me into a kiss so magically freaking delicious that I forgot to breathe. The man actually stole my breath. I curled my fingers around his shirt, yanking him closer as my lips moved desperately against his soft, cool mouth. Eventually, the lack of oxygen made my knees sag. I might have dropped back, smacking my head against the SUV, but he caught me, cradling my head in his hands as if it was some fragile treasure.

He pulled away, staring down at me, the beginning of a grin blossoming under the bluish light. But the smile faded, and the warmth in those eyes gave way, as a glacial fog slid over his pupils. It was as if they had no color at all. His face went slack and emotionless as his hand wrapped around my chin.

"What's wrong?" I asked, but his grip tightened hard around my jaw. I thought I felt the bone buckle as he

whipped me around, crushing my back against his chest. I pinched the panic button on my keyless remote. In the distance, I could hear my car alarm wail.

The heretofore silent primal part of my brain that was supposed to warn me when I was being sized up as prey started bleating, Mistake! Mistake! And I was reminded that the reason vampires were so mysterious and dangerous was that they were capable of serious violence.

My primal brain was pretty late to the game.

“Stop it, right now!” I squirmed against his chest, pushing the cage of his arms to put some space between us.

Not a word. Not one facial twitch. No response, except pressing me tightly against his chest and wrapping his and around my throat, making it almost impossible for me to breathe. But he still didn't say anything, which was completely weird. Vampires were notoriously chatty during violence. And he wasn't biting me, which was even weirder.

My new boyfriend was either a manipulative mugger or a remedial vampire. I wasn't sure which was the better option.

I struggled, wiggling my arm loose, and reached for the ugly agate brooch on my lapel. With the press of a button, a cloud of colloidal silver spray mushroomed around my head. It was harmless to me, but as this guy was a vampire and therefore allergic to silver in all its forms, it stung enough to make him loosen his grip as he coughed and spluttered against my neck.

“I don't want to hurt you,” I told him through gritted teeth. “But I will.”

Bold words from the girl in the rumpled pantsuit.

Still twitching and retching, he loosened his hold enough that I could reach into my purse and grab the hairbrush strapped into a special compartment. The ordinary-looking purple plastic brush was another one of Cal's security contraptions. I squeezed the bristles until a silver stake popped out of the handle, and I rammed the point into my assailant's thigh. It wouldn't kill him, but he certainly wouldn't be chasing after me anytime soon.

“Augh!” he cried, letting go of my arms entirely and dropping me to the pavement like a sack of potatoes.

Cal would be thrilled to know his security equipment was effective.

My knees almost buckled from the landing, but I planted my feet. It was a good choice, considering that all of his weight pitched forward onto my back and bent me in half. The hands gripped at my hair, keeping my head down. I reached back, searching for the brush. I pulled it from his leg with a sizzling hiss, like angry bacon. No bacon should be angry.

I had raised it to stab the other leg when he suddenly shoved me aside. With one last, regretful look, he took off at vampire speed down the asphalt, disappearing from sight.

“Yeah, you better run.” I panted, bending at the waist so I could prop myself on my knees and catch my breath. But the slick material of my suit gave way under my sweat-soaked palms, and my hands slid right

off. I pitched forward and, unable to catch myself, toppled face-first onto the pavement.

Ouch.

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