

THE QUARRY

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Live a Little

When I stumbled upon Mr Simmons, on the office rooftop, standing on the ledge that wrapped around the building, I thought two things. Firstly, I was not convinced it was a suicide attempt and the second was, ‘Bullshit!’

‘Aha! Annabel! Glad you could make it’ Mr Simmons remarked, as if he’d been expecting me to find him like this.

‘Glad I could make it?’ I shook my head in confusion, ‘to what? Your funeral?’

My relationship with Mr Simmons was rather unconventional. I met him on my first day at *Unblocked* (a publishing company with its hands in every

pocket – books, magazines, newspapers, and journals) and I found him to be quite the character. Noted by his orange jeans, and navy and white polka dotted shirt. While initially I'd found his uniqueness quirky, and a little bit charming, it grew tiresome quite quickly.

'My funeral?' He laughed, 'don't be daft girl. I don't want to die.'

Could've fooled me, I thought. 'Then why don't you come down?'

This was not the first time I'd come across Mr Simmons in a compromising position. During my first week, I found him first in the female bathroom. He was taped to the end toilet, rope wrapped around his feet and hands. 'It's not what it looks like!' he yelled when I had appeared. I don't recall having thought it looked like anything except a man who was in dire need of help. I reasoned that how he'd found himself in this position was none of my business. Plus, truthfully, I didn't want to know. So after untying and untangling him, time spent counting my blessings I had not found him, a middle-aged man, naked, I bolted. Afterwards, I tried my best to avoid him. I assumed he was caught up in something, exactly what I was unsure of and I didn't want any involvement.

But of course, there was a second time too. I found him next when I was working back late. My fourth week in and already there had been a push to work over time. Working overtime meant more books on the shelf at the end of the year. And more books equalled more money. At around 6:30pm, when I'd assumed everyone else had left, I heard a loud *BANG!* *Strange*, I remember thinking. On shuffling out to inspect the noise, which had come from the lobby, I found Mr Simmons hanging over the glass railing that stretched across the building, connecting two sets of parallel stairs. A bungee rope tied to his ankles.

'What are you DOING?' I yelled, running out into the open space so he could see me.

Caught off guard, he stammered, 'it's not what it looks like!' And then as an afterthought, 'what are you doing here?'

'Working! Because...' I gestured with my hands, '...this is a work place!'

'Ha! For some.'

Since my arrival at the company, I'd heard about an elite group who completed dangerously risky challenges. Who was in it? No one was sure. The danger of these challenges was resigned to getting caught or getting killed. Like taping someone to a toilet or bungee jumping in the lobby. And whilst I was concerned about what I was hearing, I never had any open conversations about it. I did, however, often find myself within earshot of other people's speculations. Yet, I still kept to myself. But with each conversation I overheard, I found more of my attention turning towards Mr Simmons. I began to watch him to see what he was up to. He only ever appeared to be very engrossed and motivated by his work, however. If I had not caught him in action, I would have believed he was the perfect employee.

By chance, I had caught a glimpse of Mr Simmons sneaking into the stairwell as I emerged from a meeting. *Curious*, I thought. *Why go up to the rooftop?* I didn't have to think - I followed him.

'But I don't want to get down Annabel! The view is just marvellous!'

'I am sure it is. But I am pretty sure you can still admire it from of the ledge' I tried reasoning to him.

His eyes suddenly lit up, 'Come join me!'

Is he being serious? He was being serious. 'Join you? Are you crazy?'

He looked at me inquisitively, 'maybe a little.'

He turned away from, and began to side step along the ledge. My heart stopped, I was certain he was going to fall.

‘Get down,’ I yelled. I couldn’t handle this. I was going to witness him die.

‘Did you follow me up here?’ He asked suddenly, rotating his body so he was facing me. His face had contorted into annoyance - not a quality I had ever associated with Mr Simmons. ‘It must be the only explanation for how you found me up here...’ Realisation dawned on him, ‘you know! Don’t you!’ He was like an excited child.

‘How about this... you come in off that ledge and I’ll tell you everything I know.’

Delight. Utter delight ran across his face. At least it did before conflict appeared. He was torn between removing himself off the ledge, which could result in him plummeting to death, and finding out what I knew.

‘Seriously? You have to think about this?’ That got him. Sighing he turned towards me and, with ease, jumped down. *He’s done this before*, I thought. *That crazy bastard has done this before.*

He sauntered over to me, hands on his hips. I watched as he surveyed me, pondering what he going to say. Possibly even pondering what I was going to say. He brought his hand to his chin and stared. He was safely off the ledge. But I had a nagging feeling that if I did he would hop back up again.

‘Are you going to speak?’ My eyes narrowed in on him. ‘I came down safely...’

‘*Somewhat* safely,’ I muttered.

‘...So you would speak. And now you’re standing here not saying a word,’ he shrugged his shoulders. ‘Alright then, up I go again.’

I snapped, ‘oh stop it! Fine I’ll speak! But if you so much as take one more step I will scream so loud you won’t know what will happen. The bloody riot police could show up.’

Laughter. *Does he think I'm joking?* He probably did. He didn't know much about me. And there I was, claiming I would yell and scream and make a ruckus when all he had probably examined of me was my quiet exterior. I didn't blame him for laughing. I could be a little uptight.

There was patio furniture atop the roof I had not noticed before. Perhaps, because this was the first time I had been on the roof. Spotting the nearest seat, I took off towards it. I needed to sit down. Mr Simmons followed suit and sat down opposite me. When I didn't speak straight away he began tapping his foot against his chair. Ignoring him, I said, 'all I know is some of the staff challenge each other to weird and dangerous tasks – like the ones I found you doing.'

Laughter. Again. He needed to stop that soon. My patience was wearing thin.

'Weird? Dangerous? That's close but not really.' I didn't reply. He continued, 'we push each other's limits, we complete challenging tasks to feel a release.' He waved his hands in the air, 'release from the office life, from what is boring.'

'If it's so boring, quit. It could literally save your life.' I deadpanned.

He considered me. I didn't have anything to say, so I stayed quiet. It was ridiculous. Endangering your life for a release? Work wasn't that bad. *Was it?*

'You should try it.'

'Pardon?'

'You need to loosen up' he seemed sincere. 'You need to take risks.'

I didn't answer. I did not know how to. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. Opening it, it read: *23 Cove Way, Pineville*. 'I hope to see you there.' And with that he sauntered past me, leaving me to wonder if our encounter had really happened.

The remainder of the day I didn't see Mr Simmons. I suspected he'd taken off early. I had a mountain of work to sift through but couldn't concentrate enough to do it. Instead of answering phone calls, I ignored them. Instead of attending meetings, I sat imagining what could have happened if I hadn't found him on the roof. Would he have fallen? Would he have died? Will he go up there again? And then, what will happen if I turn up at that address? Nothing. I wasn't going.

I deliberated these questions all day, even as I walked home from work. When I stood at my front door I needed a moment to process where I was. I had been so lost in thought I didn't know how I'd gotten there. Turning my bag to the front I sifted through for my keys. I found them, but something was missing.

'Where are you?' If ever there was a night I needed to go inside and have a glass of wine, it was then. But my house key was missing. My car key was there, my gym key was there, and even the key to my parent's house was there. 'Where are you?' I asked again. I tipped everything out onto the pavement. I sifted through my mess and eventually picked each item up to inspect it and make sure my key had not fallen off and gotten lost in the mix. I hadn't. It definitely was not there. What I did find was a note:

Missing something...

23 Cove Way, Pineville

Mr Simmons had stolen my house key. It was clear. I just didn't know how. 'Little snitch!'

'I beg your pardon?' I turned to the sound of Mrs Barker's, my neighbour, voice. She stood a few metres away, a fence in between us, and had garden clippers in her hand.

'Not you Mrs Barker.' I coughed, 'some... someone else.'

‘Alright dear.’ She was unconvinced, but went back to her business and didn’t say anything else.

Ignoring the contents of my bag at my feet, I stood staring aimlessly at my front door. I willed it to magically swing open. But it did not. This left me with one choice. ‘Alright Mr Simmons, give me your best.’

The address was further away from my house than I thought. But I made it. It was an abandoned building with no lighting and not a single person milling about. Waiting in my car seemed like the best solution.

I waited for five minutes. For ten. When twenty-five minutes ticked over I decided sleeping in my car outside my own house was the safest option. I felt I was being watched and it was not a nice feeling. I turned my car on, put it in reverse and began backing away. Until, a figure appeared at my window and began thumping on it with their palm.

‘Where the hell do you think you’re going?’ I couldn’t exactly make out his face but I knew it was Mr Simmons. His voice is rather unique - like a little boy who had not completely grown up. ‘Don’t you want your key?’

Of course I wanted my key. *What a stupid bloody question.* ‘Yes. Hand them over.’

Laughter. *Again.* ‘You’ve got to come inside first.’ And then he disappeared.

I didn’t want to do it. Whatever these people were into, I didn’t want any part of it. *They’ve literally forced me into doing this,* I thought. *I don’t have to be here.* I knew I could’ve walked away - I had every right too. But there was this nagging sensation in the pit of my stomach. I’d never experienced anything like it before. And while, for a second, I thought of bolting, I knew there was something in there I needed to face. I also knew Mr. Simmons wouldn’t have gone as far as he did to get me there if he didn’t think it too.

Sighing, I conjured up a plan. It was simple. I'd do in, suss it out. But if it was too scary, I was backing out. I'd fight him for my key instead, if I had too.

I turned my car off again and finally got out. I hadn't exactly seen where Mr Simmons had disappeared, but I knew the general direction, so I headed in it. As the distance between the building and myself shortened, a cut out appeared on the side of the building. It was a door, with light peeking through the bottom crack. I latched onto the door handle and pulled it open. Twenty sets of eyes turned on me. Mr Simmons appeared amongst them. He looked like the Cheshire cat from Alice in Wonderland. 'Took your time,' he muttered, as he grabbed my arm and pulled me into the centre.

I recognised several faces. Although no one said anything so I didn't say anything back. *This must be a usual thing*, I decided. *They are used to new people just turning up.*

'Are you ready?' Mr Simmons suddenly asked.

I frowned a little. No I wasn't ready. I just wanted my key. 'Give me my key Simmons.'

'All you've got to do is jump.'

'Jump?' I looked around. 'Up and down?'

He did not answer me. Instead, he looked up and pointed. My eyes followed, and began examining a tall building - with a ledge.

'No.'

'Yes.'

'This is ridiculous. Give me my key!'

'Just follow me.' He didn't leave me with a choice. I had to follow - up four flights of stairs.

I was surprised when we reached the top. It was quiet and peaceful. Well, quiet except for my hammering heart. It was just the two of us. And unlike me,

glued furthest away from the ledge, Mr Simmons walked straight over and peered down.

‘Come have a look,’ he said with his back to me.

‘I’m fine where I am thanks.’

‘’Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all...’’ do you know who said that?’ *Nope*. ‘Helen Keller.’

I snorted. ‘I’m pretty sure that doesn’t translate to jump off a tall building.’

He sighed. ‘Do you know why I got you here?’

I didn’t answer. He knew the answer was no.

‘You need to push yourself. Take a chance. Think heedlessly!’

‘If it’s not already obvious by my being content to stay as far away from the ledge as possible, I am not wired that way.’ I took a further step back to prove my point. ‘I’m sorry but you’re going to have to find someone else to take my place.’

‘What are you scared of?’ A sarcastic comment was on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t think this was a surface level question.

‘I don’t think I understand what you’re asking?’ I frowned a little.

‘Do you think you’re here by accident?’

‘Are you proposing that each time I found you was a part of some master plan to help me overcome a fear - that I don’t know I have?’

He didn’t answer this question. Instead he smiled at me, his eyebrow arched. ‘I cannot confirm that.’ *Who’s following whom now?* ‘What I can say is you work back late, and do more for other people than you do for yourself. You need to live a little. Take more risks. Perhaps not as risqué as me, but at least something that gets your heart racing.’ When I didn’t answer he continued,

‘we’ve all done this and we’re fine. So *you’ll* be fine.’ He moved towards me. ‘Look, just take a look. If that’s the biggest risk you’ll take than it’s a start. Just don’t come back down for at least ten minutes. Otherwise no key.’

I took a deep breath and walked towards the ledge. I think it’s because I really wanted my key. There was no other explanation. While doing so I couldn’t help but think of the places I’d rather be – bed was the first on my list, with wine close by. Walking closer, I peered over. A black hole was in the centre. I turn to Mr Simmons, he just grinned at me. If it was a scare tactic, it was working. I was literally shaking. I hoped because I couldn’t recall any recent deaths at the office, that there was a net at the bottom. This helped me step forward. My heart rate picked up, and sweat beaded across my forehead. All I wanted in this moment was to be at home sipping wine, maybe doing some work before tomorrow. When I woke that morning, I was not expecting my day to end up like this.

Anxiety filled me. I rubbed at my neck. Tingles ran up my arms, and my stomach began to heave. *How did I get myself into this mess?* I didn’t. It found me. I didn’t want to do it. But that nagging feeling had grown. He was right, and I knew it. I needed to do this. I gulped - *Just stop thinking*. I hopped on the ledge, bent my knees and jumped.

At first, I didn’t feel anything. Then gradually I felt a slight draft as it began wailing in my ears. I could no longer feel my heart but I was certain it was thrashing hard. Then, unexpectedly, every muscle in my body began to relax. I had my eyes closed but I opened them. And instead of plummeting to the ground, I was winding through a tunnel. At first it was a tight fit, but as I wound around and around, it grew - wider and longer. I went up and down. Up and down. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. And just as I did so, a hole at the end opened and I flew out. I hit something. It was not soft but neither was it hard. It was a crash mat.

‘How was that?’ Mr Simmons was at my side instantly. He reached out his hand and helped me out. ‘Are you glad you took the plunge?’

It was loaded question. He knew it, I knew, and everyone knew it. But was I? *Maybe a little...* But I would admit, only to myself, that answer. ‘That’s all I am ever doing! Because that’s what you’re really asking isn’t Mr Simmons?’

‘It was only a tunnel!’

‘Mr Simmons...’

‘Tim. Call me Tim.’

‘Tim, you’ve tried to bungee jump in the lobby and you’ve almost jumped off a building... I know for a fact that next time it won’t be a tunnel.’

He smiled his usual smile; the kind of smile that always came before a laugh.

‘Now hand it over.’ He did. And I was gone.