

# THE QUARRY

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Lost

It was a quarter past nine. Rubbing her eyes, Evie sat up in bed, roused by the scent of frying butter and coffee wafting into her room from the kitchen. Untangling her legs from the quilt, she swung them over the side of her bed and stood up as she registered the familiar Saturday morning sounds coming from downstairs. She could hear the television in the family room blasting *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which had become Benny's favourite show as of late. Evie heard her father clattering around in the kitchen, no doubt making a celebratory brunch for her mother—she was due home from New York this afternoon after being abroad for close to a month for work.

Enticed by the idea of a big fry-up and coffee, Evie stepped out of her bedroom and made her way into the family room. Still in his pyjamas, Benny sat cross-legged

on the couch, his eyes glued to the screen, thumb in his mouth. He looked up and gave her a toothy grin when she walked into the family room, his arms flailing for a hug.

‘Mama’s coming home today, Evie!’ He crowed, wrapping his arms tightly around her waist. He looked up at her, his face ruddy and crusted with Weetabix. He beamed at her and she grinned back.

‘Are you excited, Benny?’ she chuckled, eyeing the clumsy ‘Welcome Home’ banner that Benny had drawn for their mum. He’d spent ages the night before colouring it with his crayons and pleading with Dad to let him stay up just a little longer to finish it. Now the banner sat folded on the coffee table, ready to be hung up by the front door, although Evie knew her father would never get around to it. Ben gave her his best gap-toothed smile and nodded. Evie ruffled his hair and padded into the kitchen, where her father was making pancakes.

‘Will Mum be home in time to watch *The Magic School Bus* with me?’ Ben called out, his voice hopeful. Evie laughed.

‘Sorry, kiddo. Her flight doesn’t land until 11:00,’ her father answered, smiling. He had a spatula in one hand and was wearing an apron over his sweatpants and Rabbitohs T-shirt. Evie studied her father’s face as he flipped the pancakes on the griddle. His hair was still mussed from sleep and he hadn’t bothered to shave since her mother had left for her trip. His face had grown wider over the years and reminded her of a gruff but kindly headmaster.

‘So, miss.’ Sensing her presence in the kitchen, her father turned to face her, holding the spatula like a microphone. ‘What would you like with your pancake?’ He gestured to the kitchen island, where he’d set up a cornucopia of pancake toppings, replete with maple syrup, apples in cinnamon butter and chocolate chips. Evie felt a little burst of contentment unfurl in her chest; she loved mornings like this, when her Dad would make them celebratory brunch. Today, they had two reasons to celebrate; her mother’s arrival from New York and the first day of summer holidays.

‘The chocolate chips, definitely,’ she replied, perching on a barstool by the island. Moments later, a plate of warm pancakes was set before her, along with a steaming mug of coffee. A second plate and mug was placed next to hers soon after as her father settled beside her.

‘Are you excited Mum’s coming home?’ he asked, taking a sip of coffee.

‘Of course I am—but what’s she going to say when she sees the state the house is in?’ Evie asked. Her father glanced up from his breakfast, a forkful of pancake held comically in front of his mouth. He surveyed the kitchen, taking in the clutter and general detritus that seemed to accumulate twice as fast in her mother’s absence. Her father shook his head, a small smile dimpling his cheeks.

‘I’ve never seen your mother lift a finger, yet somehow the house is always spotless.’ He sighed. ‘Having said that, knowing her talents in the kitchen, you’re lucky I’m the one who made brunch today.’ Evie’s father winked.

Evie nodded, grinning. ‘Remember the meatloaf fiasco last Christmas?’ she reminisced, referring to the time her mother had become inspired by Nigella Lawson’s cooking tutorials online and had decided to make an entire Christmas dinner herself. Predictably, her mother’s attempt at domesticity had ended with shrieking smoke detectors, a charred meatloaf and takeaway boxes from the local Thai restaurant.

Her father laughed, his eyes crinkling in mirth. ‘Oh yeah—we made her sign an agreement that she’d never enter the kitchen unsupervised again.’ He nodded, his features softening as he remembered.

‘So are you leaving to pick Mum up from the airport soon?’ Evie asked, pooling syrup onto her plate.

‘Yep, just as soon as I’ve showered.’ her dad answered.

It hadn’t been easy, adjusting to Mum being away for so long. While the initial concept of having pizza for dinner and Pop Tarts for breakfast had thrilled her, Evie found that she couldn’t wait to have her mother back home, if only so she could stop looking after Ben while her dad was at work.

‘Good point. Big day for you, huh? Are any of your friends coming over today?’ her dad asked, draining the last of his coffee.

‘No—I haven’t made any plans with friends,’ she shook her head, swallowing a mouthful of pancake. ‘I was just going to relax at home today,’ she finished.

‘Okay, well try to coax that little cretin into the shower,’ her dad gestured to the family room, where Ben had resumed watching his cartoons. Evie gave her father a dubious look, remembering Benny’s cereal-encrusted pyjamas.

‘I’ll do my best.’ Finishing the last of the pancakes, she stood up and went to wash her plate in the sink. Her dad placed his plate and mug beside hers on the counter and went upstairs to shower. Evie enjoyed the sensation of the cool water on her hands as she washed the dishes, her mind absorbed in the pleasantly mundane task. Twenty minutes later, she heard her dad clatter downstairs, clad in jeans and a Polo shirt, his face shaved.

‘Evie, before I forget.’ He began, entering the kitchen where Evie had progressed from doing the dishes to tidying. ‘Please clean up a little around the house so your mum doesn’t think I kept you kids in a den of iniquity while she was away.’ he coaxed, a wry grin on his face.

‘Alright, as long as you promise to fix the porch light when you get home.’ She bargained. ‘Mum’s been nagging you to fix it for ages.’ Evie continued, wiping down the kitchen counter.

‘Sure thing, Evie.’ Her father chortled, patting his pockets for his car keys. After a brief scavenger hunt, they found the keys nestled in Ben’s toy box. Evie returned to the kitchen and kept tidying, the muted sounds of Spongebob and Patrick keeping her company. She heard her father shout a hasty farewell, followed by the familiar creak and groan of their ancient garage door rolling open. Soon, her father had gone, and it was just her and Ben.

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Two hours later, Evie sat on the porch swing, a tattered paperback on her lap. A pitcher of iced tea sat on the coffee table by her side, sweating in the afternoon heat. Having spent the last two hours wrangling Ben into clean clothes, vacuuming the family room and tidying her bedroom, Evie felt like she’d earned a break and had decided to relax on the porch. Evie felt her phone vibrate from the pocket of her jeans and frowned as she went to answer the call; her father never called her. He always preferred to text.

‘What’s up, Dad? Is the plane delayed or something?’ she asked, noticing that her parents should have been home by now.

‘Honey, I don’t want you to worry because I’m still trying to get the details, but there’s been some sort of accident,’ her dad began, his voice strained.

Evie sat up on the swing, her eyes wide. ‘What sort of accident? What are you saying?’ she stammered.

‘I don’t... There’s been an accident. I’ve called Mrs Cassini and she’s going to watch you kids while I’m at the airport. She’ll be over soon,’ he spoke in a rush. Evie felt as if she had missed a step going downstairs; her stomach swooped and her heart seemed to stop for a few moments as her father’s words registered in her brain. Her mother, in an accident? The image did not compute; her mother was the most cautious person she’d ever known. This was the same woman who never gambled, drank only one glass of wine a week and drove five kilometres below the speed limit. Her mother, who would fret and call Evie if she was even five minutes late to pick Ben up from kindergarten every day.

‘Evelyn, are you still there?’ her father barked. Evie nodded, forgetting that he couldn’t see her over the phone.

‘Yes, I’m here,’ she croaked. ‘I’m scared, Dad,’ she quavered.

‘It’ll be alright. It will be fine,’ he answered, his voice slipping into autopilot.

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They didn’t know much, but they knew that her mother’s plane had crashed. Hours later, Evie sat frozen on the couch, her eyes unfocused. Their neighbour, Mrs Cassini, a plump woman in her sixties, sat across from her, a skein of wool and the beginnings of a scarf in her lap. She had come over shortly after Evie had gotten the first phone call from her father and had sat with her and Ben while they waited for more news.

The TV was playing the five o’clock news, with segments every ten minutes about the plane crash. After a while, unable to bear hearing the same news over and over, Evie had muted the television and resisted the urge to chuck the remote at the wall. Her phone had been set to its loudest ringer, so as not to miss her father’s calls.

‘Try not to worry, petal. I’m sure your mama will be alright.’ Mrs Cassini consoled, glancing up from her knitting needles. Evie bit back a retort, but couldn’t resist rolling her eyes. She couldn’t see how Mrs Cassini’s irritating platitudes would help and resumed staring at the TV, her thoughts jumbled. The two of them sat in silence, with Evie staring at the TV, and Mrs Cassini engrossed in her scarf. Earlier, Evie had tried to settle Ben down for a nap. Picking up on the tension, Ben had become churlish and recalcitrant. He’d cried out in his sleep twice, but had otherwise been silent. Evie’s heart rate spiked as she heard the creak and groan of the garage door as it opened. Her father was home.

She was off the couch in a second, her palms moist. Her father entered the family room, his face weathered and beaten, as if he’d aged twenty years in a day. Worry lines creased his face, his eyes red and raw.

Evie stared at him, biting her lip. ‘What are they saying, dad? What happened to Mum?’ she questioned, stepping closer to her dad.

‘The airline said that there was a problem with the wing design, which caused wing failure,’ he answered. He sat down on the couch, burying his head in his hands. Evelyn waited, feeling dizzy.

‘The plane experienced mechanical failure over the Blue Mountains, and crashed somewhere above the ranges,’ her father continued. ‘They’ve sent helicopters and are making their best efforts to find survivors in the rubble,’ he finished, his voice breaking on the last few words.

Through all this, Mrs Cassini had listened in silence, her jaw slack. ‘But... Surely they must find survivors. In this day and age, there must be some,’ she wavered. The old woman’s unflinching optimism made Evie want to put her fist through a wall. Evie closed her eyes as she felt tears prick her eyelids. She didn’t want to imagine her mother hurt, scared and alone. Better to imagine her mother at home, dressed in her comfiest tights and tank top, singing along to Queen.

At a loss for words, Evie hugged her father, burying her head into his chest like she used to when she was little. He hugged her back, but his arms were stiff and mechanical. Sensing that he needed to be alone, she went upstairs to her parents’ bedroom, which was exactly how her father had left it this morning, before the

accident. She closed the door behind her and walked through her parents' bedroom like it was a museum.

All day she'd refused to cry, believing that it would somehow mean her mother had gone. But now, standing alone in the darkened bedroom, she dropped to the floor and leaned against the bed, her shoulders wracked with sobs. She remembered the kind of cries Ben used to make when he was a baby, but this felt different. This felt like grief with no end. Evie cried so hard she could hardly breathe, but her tears eventually slowed to long, deep sighs punctuated by the occasional snuffle. She heard muffled voices from downstairs, and listened, wiping her eyes. Mrs Cassini was trying to console her father, but her presence in their home felt downright intrusive now.

'Listen darl, they wouldn't have sent search and rescue teams to the crash site if they didn't think there were any survivors,' Mrs Cassini began. 'Your Alison is a strong, wilful woman. I've no doubt she's waiting for rescue *right this moment* in an air pocket. She's got so much to live for!' Mrs Cassini cried. For a few moments there was silence, before a loud slam echoed around the house. Evie flinched, her eyes wide.

'Damn it, there are no air pockets! They don't exist!' her father bellowed. 'She's gone. My Allison's gone,' he groaned, his voice cracking. Mrs Cassini fell silent.

Tears began trickling down Evie's face again; she'd never heard her father raise his voice to anyone. She heard Ben wail from his bedroom; her father's shouts had woken him. Doing her best to wipe her face, Evie crept across the landing and into Ben's bedroom.

He was curled up in bed, his face creased with worry. His lamp cast a warm yellow glow around his bedroom, reaching all the way from his bed to his bookshelf.

'Why is dad angry, Evie?' Ben asked, gazing up at her.

'He's not angry, Benny. Just upset,' Evie soothed. She pulled a pile of books off the shelf to read to him just like her mother did whenever Ben couldn't sleep.

'About Mum not coming home?' Ben mumbled.

‘Yeah, about that.’ sensing a change of topic was needed, she told Ben to pick a book from the pile she had chosen. He picked *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch. Evie hesitated for a moment, but opened to the first page, nestling closer to Ben in bed. A picture of a young mother cradling her baby son greeted them and Evie read aloud, ‘There was a mother who had a new baby and she picked it up and rocked it back and forth and sang,’ her voice was hoarse from sobbing, but she persisted.

‘I’ll love you forever; I’ll like you for always. As long as I’m living,’ here, she glanced down to Ben’s face. It was streaked with tears, his sobs so quiet she didn’t notice at first.

‘My baby you’ll be,’ Evie finished the song she’d heard her mother sing countless times before, tears rolling down her cheeks.

‘Is Mum going to come home, Evie?’ Ben sniffled.

‘I don’t think so, Benny,’ Evie whispered.