

THE QUARRY

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As We Go On

‘... at ten-thirty.’

Her hands tighten around the phone. ‘I know.’

‘Don’t be late.’

Her vision melts into a multi-coloured blur as she considers how to best answer the command. ‘I’ll try.’ The sound of laughter forces her vision to refocus. Two teenage girls walk past her and she watches them as they cross to the next carriage.

‘I’m gonna go.’

‘Okay. Take care, Gwen, okay?’

‘Mmm.’

‘Remember: ten-thirty.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll see you tomorrow—love you.’

‘Love you too, mum.’ Sighing, Gwen disconnects the call and drops the phone on the tray. She doesn’t rise; instead, she glances at the folded piece of paper beside the phone—she was in the middle of unfolding it when her mother called. She continues to stare, breathing deep, heart lurching as she exhales. Fingertips shaking, she takes the paper and resumes unfolding. The page opens within seconds, but she barely reads the first word when her heart jumps up her throat. She scrambles to refold the paper and stuffs it in her trouser pocket. Pain and guilt radiate in her chest as her heart continues to race.

Later she promises. Sleep—that’s all she needs; she hasn’t been sleeping well for the past few nights. She curls into herself, rests her head against the window, and closes her eyes.

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‘I got lucky with my kids.’

‘Yeah?’

The words floated from the kitchen to the living room. Thirteen year old Gwen ate blue M&M’s and turned from the TV to look at the kitchen where her mother and Melanie’s nanny, Ella, stood.

‘Mhm. Seven years apart, but no big problems. It was hard at first, though, let me tell you. Hallie was a rascal and she had all the attention. She threw some massive tantrums when she found out about Gwen—even chucked toys at me when I began to show.’

‘Oh no!’

‘Yeah... she stopped when Gwen arrived, though—good thing too. Gwen’s shy—easily bullied... Hallie was all she had. Now they’re close and everything; I don’t worry about them.’

‘Aw. Siblings are good, aren’t they? Melanie’s an only child, you know—’

‘Mmm.’

‘And Mr Kingston’s always busy so she had to do things alone. Meeting Gwen was the best thing for her.’

‘Oh, Absolutely. Thick as thieves, those two!’

Laughter exploded out of the kitchen as Gwen heard footsteps behind her. She turned and saw Hallie approaching, expression expectant. ‘You’ve twenty bucks for a cab, Gwen?’

Gwen hesitated. ‘Uhm...’

‘Please? If I’m late again they’ll fire me.’

Hallie’s words stabbed guilt into Gwen and she couldn’t resist. She retrieved her wallet. ‘Maybe... you should stop being late?’

‘Shut up. I was up all night for an assignment.’

‘Sorry.’ Gwen held out the bill and Hallie snatched it. ‘I really need this back.’

‘I’ll try—but you know I’m saving up for a car, right?’ Hallie kissed Gwen on the head before striding towards the door. ‘Love you!’

Gwen felt Melanie’s eyes on her, but she ignored it as she resumed her seat after Hallie left.

‘Has she paid you back for last week?’

‘Not yet.’

‘You should tell your mum.’

‘Why? Hallie needed help, that’s all.’ Gwen grabbed a handful of her M&M’s and nicked a few of Melanie’s red ones. Gwen laughed and tried to escape when Melanie attempted to flick her ear. Soon Melanie relented, leaning back just as an M&M commercial came on.

‘Wouldn’t it be cool to have purple M&M’s?’ Gwen blurted.

‘That’d be awesome, actually.’

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At fourteen, Gwen entered the airport for the first time. Melanie's father was going to Singapore for a five months business trip and Melanie, with Ella, had to see him off. Gwen accompanied Melanie at her request.

Father and daughter exchanged farewells while Gwen observed from a short distance. She expected tears, but it was all perfunctory. The hug didn't last five seconds and when they parted the words that came out of Mr Kingston were: 'Stop causing trouble in school, okay? Every call I get from the principal is a waste of our time.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Concentrate on your studies.'

'I will.'

Mr Kingston nodded and turned to Gwen. 'Take care.'

'Have a safe flight, sir.'

The girls and Ella watched Mr Kingston depart for the gates, only facing each other when he finally disappeared into the crowd. Gwen noticed Melanie's eyes glistening and draped an arm around her shoulders. 'Let's eat?' she said.

'Okay.'

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'So pumped for this movie.'

'Same—mum! We're going!'

'Take care!'

Gwen, fifteen, opened the door. Melanie nearly stepped out when footsteps echoed in the living room.

'Gwen! Help me out with my assign—oh. Going out?'

Gwen tensed and faced Hallie. ‘Yeah, the movies... I told you yesterday.’

‘Really? I forgot. Was hoping you’d help me.’

Gwen winced, but before she could say anything Melanie took her shoulder. ‘You’re a big girl, Hal; you’ll be fine,’ she quipped.

‘No shit.’ Hallie snorted. ‘Back to work for just me then—you girls enjoy.’

Gwen couldn’t say goodbye as Melanie pushed her out of the flat. Inadequacy and guilt plagued her as she walked down the hallway. If she only knew earlier then she could’ve spared more time—

‘Stop.’

‘What?’ Gwen glanced at Melanie.

‘Stop feeling guilty.’ Melanie raised her brows. ‘You’re not Hallie; you’re not responsible for her uni work or her life.’

‘She just needed help—’

‘You always say that. She’s an adult; she needs to stop relying on you—it should be the other way around, actually.’

‘I don’t need help. Besides, she’s my sister.’

‘So?’

Their eyes met, each gaze challenging, but neither said another word as stifling silence fell between them.

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Gwen, sixteen, waited at the back gate for Melanie—the teacher held her back to discuss detention. Gwen wanted to wait outside the classroom, but Melanie told her to go on first. Now, she glanced at the gates every few minutes and wondered every time if Melanie was okay.

Minutes trickled on and the crowd of students diminished as they boarded their respective buses. Often, Gwen glanced up the school. Finally, as the worry threatened to overwhelm her, Melanie emerged from one of the buildings. Her expression was

impassive and flanking her were three girls. Gwen's stomach dropped at the sight of them. Those girls belonged in their grade and she knew them... though, not for the right things.

She watched them approach; soon, they were near enough that she could hear their conversation:

'You having a party?'

'No... just dinner and stuff.'

'Really? It's your sweet sixteenth, but.'

'Yeah, we was thinking you'd have a party.'

'Uhm... that's not really my thing.'

Melanie smiled at Gwen and she smiled back, though she wanted recoil when the other girls noticed her. They only gave her saccharine smiles as they said farewell to Melanie.

'You seem close.' Gwen said after they left.

'Sort of.'

'Since when do you guys talk?'

'Oh... we had a group assignment in English.'

'I see.' Gwen widened her smile and decided not to push the matter for now. 'Dinner? You did that last year.'

'I lied.' Melanie sighed. 'It's just me. Dad decided to stay longer in London.'

Gwen's smile vanished. 'What? Wait... didn't he come home last night?'

'He called yesterday and said something came up. I don't know.'

Gwen remained silent. Soon, Melanie's car arrived, driving off after the girls slid into the backseat. The journey was thick with silence, the tension so dense that it was suffocating. Gwen stole glances at Melanie and made her decision.

'You're sleeping over.' Gwen said as the car stopped in front of her house.

'What?'

'Come on.' Gwen grabbed her backpack and stepped out of the car.

‘Seriously?’

‘Yes! Let’s go!’ Gwen grinned when Melanie jumped out of the car. She pulled her backpack forward as the car drove away, fishing keys out of the front pocket. ‘This’ll be great,’ she said. ‘We can buy cake—if not, we’ll make one. It’s gonna be crap, but better than nothing, yeah?’

‘Gwen?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Thank you.’

Gwen looked at Melanie, saw the red cheeks and glistening eyes, and embraced her. ‘Don’t mention it. Come, we’ll order pizza—I think we still have M&M’s somewhere.’

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‘Cigs’re gone. What’d he say?’

‘He grounded me... from everything.’

‘Well, you deserve that.’

‘It’s just a bit of fun.’

Gwen, seventeen, rolled her eyes and closed the bedroom door behind her with more force than necessary. ‘Defacing public property is not fun.’

Melanie sighed. ‘All right. Thanks for helping, by the way.’

Gwen sat on the edge of the bed. ‘You should stop.’

‘Stop what?’

‘Whatever you’re doing. Stop hanging out with those people. Stop ruining your life.’

‘They’re not bad—’

‘They’re not good for you!’ Gwen snapped. ‘This is beyond skipping school, Mel. This is far from—from shitty test scores and back-talking teachers. This is illegal—do you want to be a criminal?’

‘... No.’

‘I don’t either—wait.’ Gwen glanced at her phone when it buzzed and saw a text from Hallie: *gwen im short on rent money cover for me pls i’ll pay u back love u!* Dejection settled heavily in her stomach. ‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously what?’

Gwen brought the phone back to her ear. ‘Nothing.’

‘Hallie?’

‘No?’

Melanie scoffed. ‘Okay. *You* need to stop.’

‘Wait, don’t change the subj—’

‘Listen: giving Hallie everything you have is ruining your life. You have to stop enabling her.’

Gwen rubbed her face in irritation. ‘But she needs m—’

‘Stop saying that! She’s using you, Gwen! If you let her she’ll keep using you until you die! Is that what you want?’

Gwen’s lips trembled, but remained silent.

‘Stop enabling her... or I’ll tell your mum.’

Tears dampened the corners of Gwen’s eyes. She bit her lip. Neither girls said another word, but the line remained open and the silence between them stretched for a long time.

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Gwen, eighteen, laid flat on the couch. The TV showed the news, but she wasn’t listening. On the floor a poster covered with signatures, sketches, and messaged

leaned against the coffee table. The urge to cry hung at the back of her throat and she had to swallow hard repeatedly to keep the tears from escaping. Resentment danced in her mind—right now, she didn't want to see Hallie's face.

Somewhere in the city her classmates celebrated graduation. She mean to go—saved for it the week before, but two days ago Hallie was short on rent money *again*. What could Gwen do?

Minutes melted into hours. A game show replaced the news, but Gwen remained on the couch. Thoughts of the celebrations filled her mind—she could've been with them.

The sound of a lock releasing shattered the silence. Gwen didn't move when her mother called her name until—

'Melanie's here.'

Gwen sat up and saw her mother approaching. Melanie stood by the door. Gwen's shock at the sight of Melanie diminished under growing confusion when she caught the way Melanie avoided her eyes and the sombre expression on her mother's face. 'What's... happening?'

'Gwen...' her mother hesitated. 'We need to talk about Hallie.'

A cold feeling spread across Gwen's back. She stared at her mother in horror before turning to Melanie. 'You told her.'

'I did.' Melanie finally looked at Gwen.

Gwen stood and approached Melanie. 'But... it's none of your business! Why would you do that?'

'I'm sorry—I can't stand by anymore. You're meant to be celebrating with us, Gwen... but look what Hallie did. I'm so sorry, but I've had enough. I had to do something.'

Gwen shook her head as her hands balled into fists. 'Get out.'

'Gwen—'

'Get out!' Gwen shoved Melanie out of the flat and slammed the door in her face.

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Gwen stared at her phone. No messages in the past three months; not one phone call. This was the longest they went without talking. The fact that she didn't notice until now...

Gwen's anger at Melanie lasted for a while. Hallie avoided Gwen after their mum found out—it was expected, but it didn't lessen the hurt. To distract herself from the absence of the two most constant people in her life, Gwen applied for jobs and volunteer work. Then university started, the new experience overwhelming her. Often she'd stare at her mobile lonely, dejected, and tempted to call Melanie, but her mind persistently returned to that night—after what she'd done, why would Melanie want to talk to her? That call never happened. Work, stress, and anxiety piled high above Gwen's head and she struggled to resurface.

Then one night she received a call from the local hospital about Melanie Kingston.

Gwen's head snapped up from the phone when she heard a groan. Her throat constricted at the sight of Melanie moving and scooted forward to take her hand. 'Hi.'

'Gwen?' Melanie struggled to open her eyes, voice rough.

'Yeah.'

'W-what're you—'

'Apparently, I'm your emergency contact.'

'Oh... yeah.'

Gwen stroked Melanie's hand. 'I had to call your dad, though. I hope that's okay.'

'Might as well.'

Gwen didn't say anything and continued to stroke Melanie's hand. She eyed Melanie's arm, examined the scars and bruises marring the inside of it. Her stomach

felt hollow. Melanie didn't have these the last time they saw each other... they've only been apart three months. How was this possible?

'Gwen?'

Gwen swallowed hard. 'Yeah?'

'You forgive me yet?'

The words were casual, rough. Tears sprang to Gwen's eyes unbidden. She bowed her head, gripped Melanie's hand, and rested her forehead on it. 'I do. I forgive you.'

*

Eleven-fifteen.

Fists deep in her coat pockets, Gwen appraises the church from the bottom of the steps. A faint male voice echoes through the open doors and glues Gwen's feet to the concrete. She swallows hard and inhales sharply before dragging one foot in front of the other. Like a machine, she repeats the action until she reaches the top of the stairs.

'When I almost—almost lost her a year ago... it opened my eyes. Right then I promised her that we'll be a proper—proper family.'

Gwen enters, presence muted, not making a sound. Half of the church is filled with guests, but she doesn't know most of them. She sits on an empty pew, unable to join the sea of black. On the podium is Melanie's father; he spots her and smiles gratefully. She returns the gesture reluctantly.

'For the past year we were... uhm... happy. I learned... so much about her—' he sobs and bows his head. 'When s-she overdosed again and I-I finally lost her... it's c-cruelty I never expected.'

Regret is pointless, Gwen thinks. It doesn't revive the dead... it doesn't forgive the living either. She tunes him out and stares at the casket separating him from the guests. The lid is closed, the lower half covered with white lilies. Knowing what's inside sucks all the air out of Gwen's lungs. Disbelief suspends her out of the bubble

of grief. She doesn't believe it, but the next second she wants to scream. Tears dampen the corners of her eyes as the desire to keel and pull her hair claws her body. She steels herself by gripping the folded paper in her trouser pocket.

'We now invite Gwen Morgan, Melanie's best friend, to speak.'

She shuts down the moment all the guests turn to stare at her. She doesn't remember rising from the pew or the walk to the dais. The next time she becomes aware is when she stands behind the podium, her hand still gripping the paper. She stares at the casket and freezes—she's glad the lid is closed. She doesn't want to see what Melanie looked like in there. Instead, she thinks about the times when Melanie smiled, joked, and was alive. She steals courage from that and pulls the paper out. Her fingers remain steady as she unfolds it, but when she leans towards the mic and tries to speak, no words come out. Her tongue feels like glue in her mouth. She clears her throat and tries again. 'Thick as thieves... that's what my mum said about us. But... we're more than that.'