

THE QUARRY

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Heart of the Storm

Rhythmic island beats from our neighbour's dorm serenaded the rain. But the rain was relentless. Cyclone Winston was a force to be reckoned with. The wind was like a sadistic puppeteer pulling its strings - no mercy. Trees had been uprooted from the earth as though their grounded existence was a cosmic joke. An abandoned white bed sheet clung onto its last peg, flailing about on the clothes line. Empty boxes were strewn out in the pool of muddy rainwater collecting between the campus buildings, resembling a river. Towels had been piled up beneath the windows in all the rooms on the left side of the hall to absorb the leaking rain water. The rooms on the right side of the hall were untouched by the rain, both Neha's and mine. Images flooded my mind as I lay in Neha's bed, holding her safe and warm in my arms. It was less than a month ago when we first met at Suva airport, Fiji. We'd both been granted a scholarship from Wakeford University to study for a semester here at the Sandy

Valley University. It's hard to believe there was a time when we could have walked past each other at Wakeford as complete strangers. Now, I couldn't begin to fathom life without her.

Homes had been torn apart, but our concrete walls stood high and mighty. The days and nights had morphed into one. The power was out. No cooking. No water. More importantly for some, no wi-fi. I recognised Ana's loud hyena-like laughter echoing through the walls of Neha's room. I smiled at the sound of it. It was only a month ago when I first met these girls. Our night had consisted of blaring loud music to drown out the sound of the pouring rain. I might have busted my speaker in the process. Ana braided my hair as we all sat at the dining table and shared stories, going through our supply of breakfast crackers and canned food. Even though the cyclone had confined us to our dorms, I had never felt more free.

I listened to the background voices die down as the girls slowly retreated to their rooms. Neha and I had left the others early to watch a movie on her laptop. Her laptop sat abandoned on the corner of the single bed, dimly lighting up her room. The wind danced against the shutters. I looked up. They remained tightly locked in place. I imagined the wind circulating the building, searching for a way in, tearing through whatever stood in its way. Shaking the thought from my mind, I pulled Neha in close and wrapped my arm around her waist. We lay on top of her bed sheets. Even the rain couldn't drown out our heat. Her long, dark hair cascaded across the pillow we shared. The smell of her cherry blossom shampoo wafted through my nostrils. I nuzzled up to the curve of her spine. My fingertips wrote fleeting thoughts across her soft arms. Her hairs stood on end. My hot, heavy breath sent goosebumps crawling along the back of her neck. She tentatively held my hand close to her chest. Her heart was racing with mine. I swallowed, sliding my bare legs against hers. She responded, releasing my hand, running her fingertips down the side of my leg.

Wait, Neha's straight, isn't she? All she'd ever talked about was this Henry gamer dude on Team Speak who I couldn't give two fucks about. Aren't they in some weird, virtual relationship? Was I misreading this entire situation?

Her ass pressed against me.

Holy shit.

This could ruin everything. You're friends. You cook together, you live together! Her oversized shirt slid up her body, revealing black laced panties. My fingertips teased her

perfect mocha skin. Her body twitched in response as my fingertips danced down her waist. I slid my hand down the slope of her hip, enamoured by her curvy figure. My lips brushed against the back of her neck. A stifled moan escaped her lips.

Fuck it.

‘Do you want me to kiss your neck?’ I whispered in her ear. No response. Oh God. She doesn’t want this-

‘O-okay.’ Holy shit. Taking a deep breath, I lightly pressed my lips against the back of her neck. Her body tensed against mine.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ I asked through heavy breaths.

‘N-no.’

My lips caressed her skin, slowly tracing the length of her jaw. A moan escaped her mouth as she reached back, her fingers entwined through the strands of my hair. Her body turned to face me as I gripped her thigh, nails digging in, our legs entwined. Rolling my body on top of hers, I pressed myself against her warmth. She gasped, sliding her hands down my lower back, my tee hanging loosely from my chest. Running my finger over her parted, plump lips, I leaned in.

She pulled away. ‘I-I don’t think we should do that,’ she murmured, her heavy breath on my cheek.

‘O-oh, okay,’ I replied, hovering over her hesitantly. I watched her chest rise and fall, mirroring my own. She smiled at my confused expression. Lifting her head, she pulled me in to kiss her neck again. I kissed trails down to her chest. Her hips rolled against me. I did the same, causing a loud primal moan to escape her mouth. Giggling, I covered her mouth before pulling her on top of me. Bemused, I watched her confused expression as she tried to position herself. Sitting up, I undid the buttons of her plaid shirt, kissing my way to her chest. She gasped, falling down on top of me.

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We lay for a short while in each other’s arms. It felt safe, warm.

I’d almost forgotten about what was going on outside these walls. The rain had died down, and the wind had become a whisper. Its soft breath tickled my ear, taunting the sound of my frantic heartbeat. Neha’s face rested against my chest as she caressed my exposed stomach.

‘S-sorry. My heart is beating so fast,’ I gasped through heavy breaths. ‘It won’t slow down.’

Neha laughed. ‘It’s okay.’

Bzzt. Bzzt.

I glanced over at her vibrating phone lit up on the bedside table.

Neha groaned, reaching for her phone. ‘Fuck,’ she jerked upright. ‘It’s my mum.’ Buttoning up her shirt, she walked over to the chair by her desk, answering the call. ‘*Asalam wa alaikum* mama?’

I curled up under her sheets as she spoke to her mum. I couldn’t stop smiling. Holy shit. That was my first experience with a girl. Finally. But what does this mean for our friendship? Is this going to be a friends-with-benefits sort of thing? Will this even happen again? Could Neha also be bi? I glanced over at her. We briefly made eye contact before she looked away, hanging up. She proceeded to scroll through her phone.

‘Everything okay?’ I questioned.

‘Yeah, my mum was just checking what we ate for dinner. She really thinks we’re living in poverty eating all this canned food.’ She laughed, scrolling through her phone again.

‘Okay, how are you not freaking out right now?’ I hammered, sitting up. ‘This changes everything.’

She put down her phone, looking at me. Her deep, brown eyes bore into mine. ‘I don’t want this to change anything. This doesn’t mean I’m bi or whatever...’ Her voice trailed off as she stared intently at the floor. ‘I don’t know why, I just felt comfortable doing that with you.’

She could be in denial. ‘Till next time then?’ I suggestively grinned.

‘No...’ She ran her hands through her hair, avoiding eye contact. ‘Mary I feel bad. I shouldn’t be doing this, it’s against my religion.’

‘And having an online relationship with a non-Muslim guy isn’t against your religion?’ She flinched. That got her attention.

‘Please don’t make me feel any more guilty,’ tears welled in her eyes. My heart battled with my brain. I chose my brain.

‘So that’s why didn’t you kiss me?’ I pressed on. ‘Because the flaws of your faith only have room for Henry, not me. Am I right?’ I snapped.

‘I didn’t kiss you because I want my first kiss to be with a boy. I’m sorry but I don’t see you... that way.’ Her voice treaded carefully as though it were tiptoeing on eggshells.

‘Mary, I’m straight. I’ve never done anything before tonight... I just got carried away in the moment.’

And suddenly, I saw tonight for what it really was.

‘Look, we’re still cool, right?’ Neha questioned.

‘Yeah. Yeah, we’re cool.’ The pitter, patter of rain filled the silence in the room. I glanced over at the space on the bed where she laid moments before. ‘Will we ever do this again?’ a small voice I didn’t recognise escaped my throat.

‘I don’t think so. If we ever did, it would just be for fun. Could you handle that?’ she asked.

I hesitated, falling back onto the pillow.

‘Sure. Sure, I could handle that.’ I could handle it. Right?

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3 months later

I dragged my purple, dirt stained carry-on through the front door of our 11th halls residence. It was 6am, everyone was still asleep. I hesitated outside Neha’s bedroom door. It would be so easy to knock on the door, see her face, spend the day asleep in her arms. Taking a deep breath, I took a step back. I had to be strong. Fighting the urge to wake her, I rolled my luggage down the hall to my room.

Kicking off my stained white chucks, I collapsed on my bed. Grabbing my journal from the bedside table, I flicked it open to my last entry.

May 19th

Dear Diary,

Everything I thought was real is nothing but an illusion. When I’m with her, I forget everything and everyone else. Yesterday put everything in perspective. She fooled around with Henry the same day she’d fooled around with me. She insisted on staying in my room after she told me, she could tell I was upset. I needed my space, so I frantically left for the bathroom. I sat in the cubicle, thinking. Eventually I snuck out to Rita’s room downstairs and told her everything. That was before Neha figured out where I was and intruded my ‘safe space.’ Technically, Neha didn’t do anything wrong. I know we’re not in a relationship. But

when we're together, I don't think straight. I love her. This has to be love. Why else would I let myself feel so much pain?

I turned the page, hovering my pen over the paper. I was too tired. My journal lay abandoned on the mattress as I rolled onto my stomach, letting sleep take hold of me.

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The sound of laughter resounded from outside my window.

Groaning, I rolled onto my back, slowly opening my eyes. The room was almost completely dark, faintly lit by my phone screen. I grabbed my phone, squinting at the screen. Holy shit. How long was I asleep?

11.30am: Neha: Hey! Weren't you supposed to be back early this morning?

4.30pm: Neha: I miss you. When will you be back?

Smiling at my phone, I bounced out of bed, fixing myself in the mirror. Tentatively, I stepped out into the hallway. Weird. It was so quiet. Everyone must be chilling in their rooms. I strolled down the hall to Neha's room, knocking on her door.

'One second!' I listened to the bed squeak as she got up, making her way to the door. My foot tapped anxiously. I finally get to see her. She opened the door. Her high pitched squeal rung through my ears as she embraced me in a warm hug.

'Oh my God, you're here! When did you get back?' she beamed. Her long, black hair hung softly over her grey Star Wars shirt.

'Gish? I've been asleep since I got here,' I laughed, leaning against her doorway.

'How was it finally seeing your family?' she exclaimed, perching herself at the head of her bed.

'It was amazing... ' I shut the door behind me, approaching her bed. 'I didn't realise how much I missed my mum and bro till I saw them.' I sat opposite her, her laptop between us. 'Nadi was incredible. I wish I was rich and could take my mum anywhere. She's done so much for Carl and I, raising us on her own.'

'She did an amazing job.' Our eyes met. Everything felt warm and fuzzy.

'Thanks.' All I wanted to do was close the space between us and kiss her.

Ding!

My eyes drifted to the laptop between us.

‘Oh, sorry. Were you on a call before I came in?’ I imagined Henry waving his crippled gamer fingers from behind his laptop screen.

‘Pfft, that can wait,’ she closed the laptop and set it aside. ‘I missed my masseuse,’ she grinned.

‘Eh, this masseuse has had enough of her bossy client,’ I teased. ‘Her name’s Neha. She thinks just because she’s studying to be a teacher, she can teach the *master* of masseusery?!’

‘Wow,’ Neha laughed. ‘And this bossy client has had enough of her masseuse thinking she can invent new words, just because she’s a writer. Masseusery? Really?’ I snorted.

‘Okay, who should go first?’ Neha routinely asked. She laughed, reading the look on my face. ‘Okay I’ll go first, as usual. You’ll just end up falling asleep if I massage you first.’

‘Hey! That was one time!’ I laughed.

I shifted to the side of the mattress, giving her space to lay on her stomach. She slowly slid off her shirt, revealing black laced panties. I’d seen them many times before, yet they still had the same effect. Taking a deep breath, I perched myself on top of her, gently squeezing coconut oil onto her back. I watched her tense as it trickled down the arch of her spine. Setting the bottle aside, I spread the oil across her soft skin. My thumbs moved in circular motions up and down the edges of her spine. She moaned in approval. My hands worked their way to her neck, moving in intricate circles. Leaning forward, I rested my body on hers, running my nails along her arms. I watched goosebumps form as my nails followed their familiar route along her arms, down the sides of her back. I felt her butt twitch against me as I reached her ticklish spot. I moaned in response, gripping her hips. She giggled, placing her arms protectively by her side.

I leaned in till my mouth was inches from her neck. She stifled a moan as my breath caressed her skin.

‘M-Mary, we talked about this. I thought we weren’t going to do this anymore. It’s been 3 weeks since we’ve-’

‘I’ve been counting the days too.’ I ran my lips lightly over her skin, silencing her. ‘I need you.’ Gripping her hips, I pulled her body against my warmth.

‘M-Mary. This isn’t fair on you. We talked about this-’

‘I’m done talking,’ my fragmented thought process escaped my throat in a broken whisper. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘Are you sure?’ Neha’s body spoke on behalf of her mind. Reaching back, she placed her hand over mine. Thoughts flooded my mind.

Soon we’ll be back in Sydney. That means no walking down the hall to Neha’s room in the middle of the night when I miss her. Which was most nights. No cuddling when I feel lonely. No massages to relieve my physical pain, briefly numbing my emotional scars. It was inevitable that this would come to an end. Things would never be the same once we leave Fiji. I was willing to hold on for as long as I could, before letting go.

‘Mary?’

I silently wiped a tear away with my shoulder, staring at the back of Neha’s head. I would regret this, I knew I would. ‘I’m sure.’

Our bodies became one as our minds watched on in be-known silence.