

THE QUARRY

Affliction

Emi Marriage

‘Audrey. *Audrey.*’

His grip tightened on my shoulder before he spun me to face him. His eyes were clouded with concern. ‘Did you hear me, babe? Don’t go out tonight.’

‘I’ll be fine.’ I shook him off. ‘It’s just a little rain.’

Liam was sweet, and had been nothing else for the six months of our relationship. A part of me, though, resented this aspect of him. His need to always be with me was smothering sometimes. Everywhere I looked I saw traces of him. A shirt slung over the back of a chair, books stacked on the coffee table.

‘Don’t you ever watch the news? They said it’s set to be a thunderstorm.’

‘Of course I do,’ I answered. And I did, though it was all the same story lately: news about the Affliction. I did my best to tune it out, but little slivers of information managed to lodge themselves in my mind. There had been an upsurge in cases in recent years; men were

most commonly affected, the disease causing them to lash out and harm those closest to them. Rehabilitation centres were overcrowded and understaffed, though there was no evidence that rehabilitation was an effective treatment.

‘I’m not going to let a storm ruin my night.’ I picked up my lipstick and leaned toward the bathroom mirror to inspect my reflection as I applied it. He watched me from the doorway with his arms crossed.

‘Got a hot date, huh?’ His tone was light, but there was a hint of hurt pulled taut like a cord beneath it. I rolled my eyes, unable to keep the smile from playing on my lips.

‘No. It’s Aimee. I told you already.’

It had been a last-minute arrangement. I’d needed some space, and she’d suggested catching a film together. The latest action flick, just like old times. Laughing over the overdone fight sequences had been our main bonding activity since high school.

‘Oh.’ His voice dropped. ‘*Her.*’

‘I wish you would at least try to like her for me.’

Liam raised his hands in a defensive gesture. ‘Hey, I’ve tried plenty.’

I raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

It took only a few seconds for him to cave. ‘Okay. I just think she hangs around you too much. It’s a little...obsessive, to be honest.’

‘She’s my best friend.’

‘And *you* have other priorities...’ He pulled me towards him and leaned in for a kiss. Normally that trick might have worked, but I was overdue for a night out. It had been months since I’d seen anyone socially.

‘I’m going.’ I pulled away and headed out of the bathroom and to the front door.

‘Oh, come on.’ He followed me, and something about the heavy thudding of his footsteps made my heart jump in my chest. I was reaching for the doorknob when his fingers wrapped around my other wrist. ‘Babe, don’t leave.’ His voice was pleading, dripping honey, but his grip on me was like a vice.

‘I’ll be back soon.’ I laughed and tugged lightly on my wrist, expecting it to give with little resistance. My breath hitched in my throat when he didn’t immediately release me.

I pulled and twisted to no avail, my skin stinging and rubbing raw where he held on.

‘Liam.’ I laughed again, the sound of it high and trembling even to my own ears. ‘Let go of me.’

‘No.’ He wasn’t smiling anymore. Something cold had crept into his voice, sending a chill into my veins. ‘I can’t ever let you go.’

On our first date Liam had bought me a flower bouquet, pulled out my chair for me, picked up the cheque. He’d been a proper gentleman, but it was his personality that drew me to him. His face had lit up whenever he talked about his friends or his parents or his younger sister. He was a keen listener, an easy laugher. Relaxing around him was almost second nature. Still, I hadn’t let him walk me home until the fourth date, and I hadn’t invited him inside until the sixth. I’d been careful. Maybe not careful enough.

I waited until I was certain he was asleep before I dared to move. Even that was difficult since his right arm was slung across my stomach, pinning me in place. I could feel each breath he took tickling my cheek and making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I disentangled myself from him inch by inch, second by painstaking second. He remained oblivious in his slumber, so I picked up my phone from the nightstand and slipped out of the room.

I’d told Aimee that something had come up at work, and she’d accepted my explanation without question.

‘No dramas, let’s just catch up next time!’

The glow of her cheery text illuminated the dark hallway. Aimee wouldn’t have understood if I’d told the truth about what happened. She would have twisted it to use as ammunition against Liam, when it really wasn’t anything to worry about. He had wanted me to stay in tonight and I’d agreed. Simple.

I examined the red marks patterning my wrist where his hand had been. Those hands that made me feel so secure when they were resting on my shoulders or wrapped around me. They had left an almost perfect circle on my wrist. A bracelet. A bruise in the making.

They were called Secondary Symptoms; the marks that manifested on those people closest to the Afflicted, detached from the disease itself but still directly related. I remembered them from all those commercials for the National Affliction Helpline: black eyes, bruises on the face or neck. Apparently early intervention was key, so that the Afflicted could receive necessary support. I'd always hated those commercials. I'd seen bruises like that before, and I knew without doubt that nobody could unthinkingly inflict such damage on another person. It couldn't just be a disease. It had to be a choice.

'You're awake?'

I almost jumped out of my own skin at the sound of Liam's voice. He stood at the bedroom door, rubbing a hand over his face.

'Just getting a drink of water.' I walked back towards him, a moth drawn inexplicably to a blinding flame.

He cupped my face in his hands as he leaned down to kiss me, warm and sweet. 'Come back to bed. Not the same without you there,' he slurred sleepily. And he was himself again. The Liam that I loved.

'Okay,' I whispered.

But even as I lay beside him in the dark, slowing my breathing to match his, I couldn't shake the image of Aunt Alexandra sitting on our couch all those years ago.

She'd had her face buried in her hands. Her shoulders were rapidly rising and falling as she took shuddering breaths. I had noticed immediately that she was thinner, smaller, so different from when I'd last seen her. Being eight at the time, I was old enough to know that something was wrong, but too young to pinpoint exactly what. My mother had stroked soothing circles in her back while murmuring something. I'd only heard snippets of what she'd said: *'it's alright'*, *'not your fault'*, and *'Harold'*. My Uncle.

Aunt Alexandra's voice was hushed and punctuated by sobs. When she'd finally looked up, she was nothing like the person I remembered: purple bruises bloomed across her neck and up one side of her face, her lip was cut, her eye almost completely swollen shut.

Stifling a gasp, I had shrunk back behind the door, out of sight. I couldn't reconcile these two different versions of her in my head: the woman who smelled like sunshine and brought me presents and sang me to sleep at night, and the woman I saw that day.

This was nothing like that, I reminded myself as I rolled over to face Liam. The marks would fade quickly. Couples arguing was nothing new, and this one had been brewing for a while. I'd made the right decision by staying in tonight; things had been so busy lately that I hadn't made enough time for Liam. But he was a good guy, a nice guy. I knew that.

Uncle Harold had been a nice guy, too.

A month passed, and then two. I learned to stick by the unspoken rules of our relationship; to spend all my time with him, to text him whenever we were apart just to keep him updated. He didn't like not knowing where I was.

There were some days where Liam was inexplicably moody no matter what I did. Small things like leaving the dishes in the sink or forgetting to start the washing machine became fuel for much bigger fires. Those days were rare, though, and for the most part I avoided the never-ending arguments, the heated words and the cold shoulders that followed. The routine was good, it worked. Until it didn't.

The trains were delayed.

The trains were delayed, and my phone was dead.

Sickening dread clawed at my stomach as I stared at its blank, unresponsive screen. Useless.

A tinny broadcast played overhead, the announcer managing to sound apologetic yet cheerful as she said that the train would be another forty minutes, sorry.

I paced the length of the platform and back again. My eyes darted to the people around me, but their faces and voices all merged into a churning sea. I could barely hear them over the beating of my own heart in my chest, in my ears, pounding in my head.

I could catch a taxi, but it was rush hour. I could borrow someone's phone, but his number wasn't one I knew by heart. For a crazy moment, I contemplated not going home at all. But that was ridiculous. It was my apartment.

My hands clenched then unclenched, tighter each time until my nails left marks on my palms. I stood still and let the shakiness run through and out of me. He would understand. He had to.

'I'm sorry.' The first words out of my mouth as I opened the door. 'The delays—'

'Sorry?' Liam was on me in an instant. He'd been waiting in the hallway all this time. 'I called you! I kept calling you! What happened?!' His voice rose with each word, like a siren growing louder the closer it got. I realised then that I'd been bracing for this the entire way home. It was almost a relief to get it over with.

'My phone died. I'm sorry.'

'Your phone...' He stared at me. 'You didn't charge your phone?'

'I must have forgotten. I know. It won't happen next time.'

'Next time?' He ran his hands through his hair and pulled at the ends of it.

'Can you stop parroting everything I say? It was just a mistake.' I couldn't help but snap at him. The annoyance bubbling inside of me ebbed immediately afterwards. I wished I'd never spoken at all.

He moved before I could flinch, grabbing my shoulders and shaking me hard.

'Do you know how *fucking* worried I was? I thought you were dead. I couldn't reach you, I didn't know where the hell you were. How could you do that to me?!'

'Liam...' Hot tears pricked at my eyes. My head hurt. Everything hurt.

'And this?' He snatched my phone from my hand. 'What's the point of this if you don't *fucking* charge it.'

'No, don't!' I cried as the phone hurtled at the wall. It hit with a thundering *crack* before falling to fragments.

'Can't even remember to do that. You're useless.'

'Get off me,' I mumbled. Then louder, 'Get off me!'

A stinging slap hit my cheek before I managed to push him away. The tears spilled over as I held a hand to my face.

Liam only laughed. There was no trace of remorse in his eyes. ‘You really have no idea, do you?’

I did now. And I’d never be mistaken again.

‘Screw you,’ I said. He started towards me, and I ran back out of the door, slamming it in his face.

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The apartment building was the same as I remembered it. Short and squat, its grey concrete lined by dozens of small, eye-like windows. I wasn’t expecting to remember her address, but it was still lodged in my mind from when I was younger. I’d spent most of my afternoons here waiting for my mother to pick me up after she finished work. That had been before everything that happened. I wasn’t even sure if she still lived here.

My chest fluttered with apprehension as I knocked on the door, and my stomach tied itself into knots in the moments of silence that followed. Finally, it swung open, and relief coursed through my veins.

‘Aunt Alexandra.’

‘Audrey?’ Her eyebrows rose. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Well–’ A lump formed in my throat that I tried desperately to swallow around. I’d already shed enough tears for a lifetime, but they seemed to just keep coming. ‘It’s...Liam.’

Instantly her expression cleared. She nodded to me.

‘I think you’d better come in.’

It felt like no time had passed since I’d last been here, sitting at her kitchen table while she made tea. Only now we were on equal ground. Her life and all its messy complications were all too easy for me to understand. At first I couldn’t find the right words, but once they started spilling out I didn’t know how to stop them. Aunt Alexandra listened through it all, and the understanding was plain on her face.

‘I just don’t know...’ My voice finally exhausted itself. ‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘What can you do?’ She sighed. ‘I went through it all with Harold, and it was a bunch of crap. Weekly couples’ counselling, rehabilitation that they made *me* pay for. As if that would help anything.’

I hadn’t heard her talk about Uncle Harold since that night in our living room. She’d been frightened then, but this time she only seemed weary.

‘How is he doing now?’ I hesitated. ‘Is he still Afflicted?’

Aunt Alexandra’s face hardened. Her hands balled into fists at her sides, squeezing then releasing. ‘Last I heard he was back in rehab. His second wife is paying for it this time around...’ She closed her eyes. ‘He should be locked up.’

I thought about having to see Liam every week, having to *support* him through it all, when I had given so much of myself to him already. I thought about letting him slip away to find someone else to keep under his thumb.

‘It’s okay, you know,’ Aunt Alexandra said.

‘I know, and I’m leaving him.’

And that was enough. It had to be.