

THE QUARRY

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TAKING A CHANCE ON LOVE

Sarah scrunches up her nose as the smell of strong cologne drifts her way, doing nothing to suppress the smell of stale sweat and beer. The floor vibrates to the pulsing base of the rock music and she's struggling to keep up with the conversation. She's already had two wines launched at her by the same drunk girl. Too many bony elbows will leave her bruised tomorrow and her toes are pinched into ridiculously pointy shoes. She wonders why she agreed to this Friday night of fun with Andrea and Clare. Fun? More like torture. She's just not in the mood.

Andrea points to the bar, holding up an invisible glass and shouts ‘vodka?’ raising her eyebrows. Sarah shakes her head, no thanks. She’s had enough, unlike Clare and Andrea who join the scrum at the bar. Sarah wiggles her toes, dreaming of fluffy cat slippers and a week's worth of Married at First Sight. Helping herself to water at one end of the bar, she spots Andrea’s neon-pink bobbing head at the other end, desperately waving a \$50 note at the barman. Clare beside her, twirling her blonde waves around her fingers, a classic Clare move, while ogling the guy next to her. She’s been grateful for these two crazy friends these last two weeks. Seeing a free bar stool, Sarah plonks onto it and checks her phone. No new messages from Matt. She hadn’t replied to his messages or answered his calls. She longed to but was trying to play it cool.

‘Move in with me,’ she’d said two weeks ago, during a particularly amorous moment.

‘It’ll be magnificent.’

She’d clear a shelf for a few of his Toby Jugs, get an extra chest of drawers for his clothes, make room for his Star Wars DVDs. They’d shop together, cook together, watch TV together. And think of all the extra opportunities for sex. Turns out he was content with his one jocks-and-socks drawer by her bed, a toothbrush in her bathroom and his Earl Grey tea in the kitchen. He did raise his eyebrows at tad when she’d mentioned sex, but wondered where would he hang his corduroys and shirts and where would he fit his desk? He’d stumbled over his words, said he wasn’t ready for cohabiting and if that’s what she wants, then maybe he’s not the man for her. Sarah was surprised as they’d had an amazing eight months together. But she’d raced too far ahead and scared the corduroys off him.

Her friends offered the usual break-up advice. You need to get back out there. You’ll find someone else. His loss. What about on-line dating apps? Or speed dating? Singles nights? No. No. No. She’s not ready for that minefield yet. It’s all too raw.

‘Your biological clock is deafening,’ Andrea had said. Thanks Andrea. Like I need reminding. Andrea already had the fairy-tale wedding followed by two kids in quick succession.

‘She’s only thirty-two, Andrea,’ Clare had said. ‘She still has time to pop out a few sprogs before she hits forty.’

Clare likes the single life, but Sarah wants the whole deal: husband and kids, two at least. A life of school concerts, Saturday sport, camping trips, graduations and, eventually, leisurely road trips in a camper van with her greying husband, whom she hoped would be Matt. At this rate she’ll end up as everyone’s favourite auntie, living alone with nobody to talk to except twelve cats, three dogs and maybe a rabbit.

Sarah joins her friends, who present her with another vodka. She groans but follows them to the far side of the pub to chat to some people from Clare’s work. She smiles and pretends to be having a good time, allowing a guy called Mark to chat her up, knowing he’s wasting his efforts. She has no interest in the best waves in Sydney, but lets him drone on about rips and wipeouts while thinking about Matt. She’d rather be sipping a nice chianti at the Italian place with him right now. She misses his strong arms around her, his mop of mad curly brown hair, the cute dimples that appear in his cheeks when he smiles and his blue eyes that sparkle when he talks about his dad. While Clare gets everyone to huddle together for a photo, Sarah reads Matt’s messages again. How are you? Sorry I upset you. I miss you. Can we talk? Please call me.

Matt is at home browsing the internet for Toby Jugs. He’s got his eye on a 1985 limited edition Captain Cook jug on eBay with the bidding currently standing at \$75. It doesn’t appear to have any cracks or chips and he’s prepared to go to \$120 if he needs to. It would be a good investment with only 2000 of these in circulation. He’s aware that it’s an unusual thing for a man of thirty-four to collect, but most of his fifty-three assorted character jugs were his fathers. His mother sometimes complains that the small lounge is too cluttered with a

lifetime's worth of holiday souvenirs, family photos, golfing trophies and her own collection of ornamental plates. All the same, she'd kept his childhood sticker collection and stamp books. They've always been a family of collectors. When his dad became ill over a year ago, he'd asked Matt to mind the Toby's after he'd gone. Matt had kept his word and the Toby Jug collection is still growing. He loves the thrill of finding a limited edition in mint condition. You'd have loved this one Dad, he'd say as he rearranged the jugs and positioned the new arrival in the special Toby Jug glass cabinet in the lounge. Might need to stretch to a second unit soon.

He'd usually be out with Sarah on a Friday night, eating gnocchi or Chicken Cacciatore at a little Italian eatery near her place, the type with checkered tablecloths and soft opera music. His job as a programmer for a large bank doesn't provide many interesting stories, it was pretty much him and a computer. News? Yep, it worked. All good. But he loved listening to Sarah's stories, about who she'd interviewed that week for the magazine where she worked as a feature writer, talking animatedly about the guy from *The Bachelor* or some hot new celebrity chef. He disliked reality TV programs, but he'd listen intently, watching her green eyes sparkle as she spoke, thinking how lucky he was to have met this vivacious red-head. He loved the way she tilted her head and fiddled with her left earring when she was concentrating. He also loved the way her pupils grew wide and dreamy when he kissed her.

Matt sighed. He'd stuffed it up with Sarah. He'd only really wanted time to think after she sprang the moving-in-together thing on him- not to split, but he'd tripped over his words and inadvertently suggested they break up. What was I thinking? I don't want to lose you Sarah. He'd panicked of course, and all he could think about was what could go wrong if they cohabited. There's no room for the Toby's, especially not with all those awful miniature china cats taking up the whole of the shelving unit. There's also the cat cushions, pillow slips, clocks, dinnerware, an ugly tabby teapot and two sets of kitty stacking glasses. Would she be willing to compromise on the cats?

Then there was the storage situation. Sarah's built-in wardrobes were bulging with clothes, bags and shoes. She'd mentioned buying a new chest of drawers for his clothes, but he'd need somewhere to hang his trousers and shirts

too. Sarah's clothes are thrown haphazardly over chairs or piled in mounds on the floor in the corner whereas Matt likes to be organised.

His mother is out at her regular drag bingo night with friends. She'd asked him to come along and although it's a hoot, he's not in the mood. She'd asked about Sarah again, urging him to go and see her rather than texting. She likes Sarah, more so than his other girlfriends in the past, not that there'd been many. Matt had moved back home temporarily when he'd returned from Melbourne two years ago, but he couldn't leave his mum on her after his dad died. She insists she's fine now and that he should go and live his life for himself. Go and sort things out with Sarah, Matt. Don't let that one get away. And your dad would say the same, God rest him.

While waiting for the kettle to boil for tea, he checks his Facebook. Sarah hasn't posted since their split, but she hasn't changed her relationship status to 'single' either. Sarah's friend Clare had checked in at The Willow Tree ten minutes ago and had posted a photo. Matt zooms in and sees Clare, Andrea and Sarah, shiny faces beaming at the camera. There's a few people with them he doesn't recognise, one being a shaggy blonde-haired guy with his arm around Sarah, the beach-bronzed type that makes Matt feel ghostly pale. Forgetting about his tea, he slumps back into the sofa, sitting there for a while contemplating his options. 'Right,' he says determinedly, before grabbing his keys and marching out the door.

Having ditched the surfer, Sarah checks the time - 9.45pm now. She'll call it a night at ten. With the lengthy queue for the bathroom, she may spend the entire fifteen minutes there. She sees a tired woman in the mirror - makeup worn off, hair sticking to her head and dark circles under her eyes. She looks like she's been climbing through unruly bushes on a humid day. *Yes, it's time for me to go.* As she's washing her hands, Andrea comes racing in.

‘Sarah, Matt’s here.’

‘Oh.’ She feels jittery. ‘Is he looking for me?’

‘Well, of course he is. Doh!’ Andrea grabs her wet hand. ‘Come on.’

‘No, let him wait.’

‘Don’t leave him standing there too long.’ Andrea says and goes back outside to make sure he doesn’t leave.

Sarah considers her reflection again in the mirror. Raking her fingers through her hair, she makes a futile effort to tame it, before running a tissue along the skin under her eyes, removing some stray smudges of mascara. She sighs. What does Matt want? And will whatever he might be offering be enough for her?

After about ten minutes, she decides to hear what he has to say. If he says he’ll move in with her, she’ll give it a shot. If he just wants to plod along aimlessly, just passing the time, then she’ll forget about him and get herself a big fluffy cat. To hell with Matt and his Toby jugs. She struts out of the bathroom with her head determinedly high.

Matt is smiling nervously as she approaches.

‘Hi Sarah.’

‘Hi Matt.’ *Be cool.*

‘Look, can we talk?’ Matt asks, blinking furiously. ‘Go somewhere quieter?’

Sarah hesitates for a second. ‘I suppose,’ she eventually replies, shrugging her shoulders, when she really wants to throw her arms around him, her resolution dissolving.

Matt looks relieved. ‘Great. How about that late-night cafe around the corner?’

‘Ok, let me just tell Andrea and Clare.’

The cafe is buzzing, full of revellers drinking coffee in an attempt to sober up and students trying to stay awake while furiously tapping on keyboards. Sarah finds a booth in the corner while Matt orders tea, before sliding in opposite her.

‘Sarah, I’m sorry.’ Matt begins. ‘I reacted badly, and I was hoping we could maybe start that conversation again.’ He’s pulling at his right ear, another of his nervous habits.

‘Sorry that you don’t want to move in with me or ... what?’ *Has he changed his mind?*

‘Just ask me again,’ Matt says. ‘About the living in sin idea.’ He’s smiling now.

Sarah hesitates. *He has. He has.*

‘Ok, I’ll start. Can I move in with you? If you’ll still have me.’

‘Oh Matt, I-’

‘Wait, before you answer, I want to show you something.’ Matt pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket. ‘I realise that it will be a compromise for both of us, so I’ve made some notes.’

‘Oh, ok.’ Sarah suspects it’s one of his pros and cons lists.

Sarah takes the piece of paper and reads it. It’s titled *List of things to consider if moving in with Sarah*. It’s not too long. *Toby Jugs vs cats, The Bachelor vs Antiques Roadshow, Not overly tidy vs neat freak, Desk for work? Verbal diarrhoea vs liking occasional silence. Cats. Cats. Cats.* Sarah’s smirking at Matt as he sips his tea.

‘Something funny?’ he asks when she chuckles, her attempt at playing it cool dissolved.

‘Oh, Matt. You always know how to make me laugh. Look. We will both have to compromise. We each have habits that will drive the other one nuts at times.’

‘It’s a big step, Sarah, and I was just worried we might ruin things.’

‘We won’t. This is us. We’re good together.’

Matt takes Sarah's hand, rubbing his thumb along the dips between her knuckles. 'I need to tell you something else,' he says, blinking rapidly.

'What is it?' asks Sarah.

'I really don't like cats.' He's pulling his ear again. 'In fact, the live ones make me sneeze and you've said you'd like to get a real cat when you're not renting.

'I have actually noticed you turning my cushions over, and it also features fairly high on your list,' she says, waving the piece of paper. 'I'm not a fan of your Toby Jugs either or Star Wars, but they're only little things. And I do like dogs too, you know.'

'So, can we do this?'

'Yes, Matt, I think we can. I know we can.' Sarah leans across the table and kisses him. She's missed him, missed these lips. 'I love you, Matt Smith.'

'I love you too, Sarah Lyons.'