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Opening extract from
One Moment

Written by
Kristina McBride

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1 so close to flying

“SO YOU’RE GONNA DO IT?” Adam looked at me, his sun-blazed cheeks aglow with a daring smile.

I was sitting on Joey’s damp towel near the lower bank of the gorge, squinting at the large rock wall ten or so metres away, my hands propped behind me on a cool patch of grassy ground. Light sparkled off the rippling water swirling in a deep pool before us, flashing me a warning I would never decode. Joey was there, tangled in the message, floating on his back and squirting water up from his mouth like he was some lazy fountain.

“I said I’d do it.” My eyes trailed up the wall, stopping at a tangle of trees and vines. Bright patches of azure sky peeked through fluttering leaves, like a child searching for a long-lost promise. My head was heavy from the beer I’d drunk, the heat of the sun, and the twang of Kid Rock’s “All Summer Long” coming from the iPod dock beside me. My body practically screamed with the twining fear that had curled itself into every space within me.

“You sure?” Adam playfully swiped my damp fringe into my face.

“No freaking way she’s gonna do it,” Shannon said. She was lying on a fuzzy yellow towel, lazily running her fingers through her thick brown waves, her sunglasses propped on the bridge of her nose.

“Maggie’s full of surprises.” Tanna stood up from her towel and drifted towards the edge of the water. Her long blonde hair, tied loosely in two braids, fell forwards as she turned. “Isn’t she, Joey?”

“What’s that?” he asked, standing. I imagined mud squishing through his toes.

“Maggie.” Tanna smiled, scrunching up her tiny nose. “She’s a wild one.”

Joey laughed. “My Maggie?”

“She’s gonna do it this time.” Adam offered me a hand and pulled me up. “You’ll love it. Total free fall. It’s like you’re flying.”

“Last time all she did was stand up there and hyperventilate,” Shannon said. “You don’t have to do it, Mags. We’ll love you anyway.”

“Of course we will.” Joey stumbled as he made his way up the bank, water dripping off his tanned skin with bright sparkles. “But if you jump, we’ll think you’re a rock star.”

Tanna laughed. “Maggie’s already a rock star.”

“I know exactly what Joey’s thinking,” Shannon said. “If she jumps off the cliff, he might finally get her to jump into his bed.”

“Shannon!” I leaned down and smacked her bare thigh, dying to tell both Shannon and Tanna to shut up before they ruined the plan I’d been working on for weeks.

“What?” Shannon asked, sitting up and adjusting the strap of her bikini top. “It’s not like we don’t all know that you two haven’t sealed the deal.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of.” Tanna twirled one of her braids between two fingers.

“Of course not.” Shannon tipped her head back, turning her face to the sun. “I’m just being honest that’s all.”

“Because you’re always so honest?” Joey snorted.

Shannon didn’t respond. Just whipped her hair from one shoulder to the other like she couldn’t care less what anyone thought of her.

Joey rolled his eyes, then looked towards me with a wide grin. I tried to focus on the shimmering droplets of water falling from his longish brown hair, instead of the ball of panic that was coming to life in my chest. But it was difficult.

“Ready?” he asked, reaching his hand out and snagging my arm in his. It felt nice, his warm skin sliding against mine.

I nodded, unable to speak. I wasn’t sure if I would ever be ready. But I knew I had to do it.

“Clear?” A deep voice echoed off the walls of the gorge, tumbling down the rocks.

We all looked up, Joey and me, Tanna, Adam. Shannon, too, though it seemed as if she was focused on something beyond the cliff top, her eyes sparking in the rays of light cascading from the blue, blue sky.

“All clear.” Adam cupped his hands around his mouth to shout the familiar go-ahead. “Jump on!”

Pete, who was standing at the edge of the cliff looking down, gave us a thumbs up before turning away, his thick dreadlocks swaying with his head. He disappeared after only a few steps, the height and angle of the cliff hiding him from our view. And all we could do was wait.

I held my breath as I stood there, watching in silence as he flung himself out into open air, spun around a few times, and dropped through the plane of the water with a glittering splash.

When Pete surfaced, his laughter pinged around us in a crazy dance. That was one of the things I loved most about the gorge. The way it took sound and distorted it, flung it around like it was something tangible but as light as air.

“*That,*” Pete shouted with a laugh, “is the best rush in the world.”

“Maggie’s going up,” Shannon said. Her voice was tinged with vicious energy, making me more determined to follow through with the jump that had started out as a simple

dare. Shannon had pulled the same thing the first time Tanna decided to jump. It was like she needed to be the only girl bold enough to take the ten-metre plunge, but she'd just have to get over it.

Joey, Adam, and Pete had found the cliff one day during the summer before eighth grade. After a long upstream hike along the creek that bordered our sleepy nothing-ever-happens-here neighbourhood in Blue Springs, Ohio, they came to the top of the cliff. Once Joey, the oldest of us all, had his driver's licence, he'd found an easier route, starting with a parking lot and two-kilometre trail. I loved the gorge, especially our Jumping Hole, even if Shannon was acting bitchy. Besides, I had more important things to worry about. Like survival.

"Rock on," Pete said, pumping a fist in the air, flinging water everywhere.

"I'd prefer if you didn't use phrases that include the word *rock* right now, seeing as how my main goal in the next twenty minutes will be to *avoid* all rocks," I said, glaring at him.

"You'll be fine," Joey said, one hand rubbing my back, the other pointing to a spot halfway up the steep wall. Or halfway down, depending on how you viewed things. "All you have to do is miss that ledge and you're golden."

"Right." I twisted my hair up into a messy bun and secured it in place with a hairband. "Miss the ledge.

Golden. Does that mean I can have a swig of that tequila once this is over?”

“You can have anything you’d like,” Joey said, pinching my butt.

I squealed and jumped away from him, swatting at his hand. “Will you stop it? This is serious.”

Joey shrugged. “Made you laugh, didn’t I?”

“I’m too nervous to laugh.” I attempted to smile, but I wasn’t sure if it worked. “Let’s just go.”

Joey and I made our way down the trail, towards what we’d always called the Jumping Rocks, a natural bridge that crossed the creek and led to the cliff-top trail. I stumbled the first few steps but fell into pace beside him quickly, almost melting into his warm, reassuring body.

“It’s no scarier than The Beast,” Joey said. “That’s your favourite roller coaster at Kings Island, isn’t it?”

“The Beast has a harness to strap me in. Doesn’t compare.”

The trail twisted to our right just downstream from the Jumping Hole, and Joey hopped across several boulders bridging the narrower section of water. When he reached the middle and largest rock, he stopped and held out his hand. I leaped towards him, crashing into his lean body, almost toppling him over.

We laughed and bowed our heads together. He kissed me lightly on the lips. “You can do it,” he whispered, the

tart smell of the beer he'd drunk invading me.

"Sometimes, when I'm with you, I feel like I can do just about anything." I almost told him that I loved him. It would have been the perfect moment. But whenever I thought about saying those three words, I remembered what Joey had said when we'd first started dating.

We'd been driving – to Shannon's for one of her infamous, my-parents-are-out-of-town-again parties – and I was talking about how, even though it's totally cliché, I'd had that butterfly feeling in my stomach while I was waiting for him to pick me up. He'd looked at me then, maybe sensing where I was headed after three months of dating, and said, "Can we make a deal?" I'd been a little nervous but nodded my head anyway. I remember the taste of my Razyzy-Tazzy lip gloss, how it turned bitter with my fear of what he was about to say. "Let's never pull the *I Love You* card. It's like a curse. And I like you too much to let it ruin things." He'd actually held his hand out. I thought he'd wanted to hold mine for the rest of the ride, but when my palm met his, his fingers curled upwards like a Venus flytrap, and he gave my hand three short shakes before letting go. "It's a deal," I'd said with one of the fakest smiles I'd ever worn.

That had been about a year and a half ago. I wondered if the statute of limitations on our deal had passed. But standing there on the rock with Joey, with the steady flow

of water rushing towards us and then away, with the steep dirt trail calling to me, I did not have the focus to wonder such things for long. I could deal with that later. After the last day of school, when we would officially be seniors. After our first time, which I'd secretly planned for the first week of summer when Joey's parents were heading out of town for an entire week.

I took a deep breath, tasting the honeysuckle that saturated the air around the rock bridge, and swallowed my words. He knew I loved him. I didn't need to say it.

My chest was heaving, my thighs screaming, but I pushed myself forwards. I hadn't climbed the narrow dirt trail leading to the top of the cliff since the previous fall, when I'd chickened out of the jump and had to scurry back down again. The light-headed feeling I'd experienced that day was threatening to take over again, so I tried to focus on my feet, the steps, anything but the reason that I was steadily moving away from solid ground.

"You're lookin' pretty good from this angle," Joey said from behind me, swatting the butt of my black bikini bottoms. "Is it terrible that I'm hoping you lose your top on impact?"

"Joey, sometimes you border on pervert."

"I'm a seventeen-year-old guy. Whaddo you expect?"

I turned, propping my hands on my hips. “Let’s switch places and see how you like being objectified.” Waving a hand in the air, I indicated that he should take the lead.

“Oh, baby!” Joey held on to my shoulders as he passed, leaning in to nip at my neck with his teeth. That’s when I noticed something different about him.

It was a bracelet. A small and totally insignificant accessory. But something about it bothered me.

I studied it as we climbed, the way the leather strap tied around his wrist slid up and down with the swing of his arm. The way the sun glistened off the three turquoise-coloured glass beads threaded onto the leather.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked when we’d reached the flat part of the climb.

“Where’d I get what? My fine ass? My rippling muscles?”

“Your bracelet.”

Joey swung his arm up, as if he’d forgotten he was even wearing a bracelet. He paused for a beat. “Found it in the laundry room. I thought it was cool, so I snagged it. Rylan’s probably gonna be pissed off.”

Something was off, but I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. And then I wasn’t sure if my stomach had bottomed out because of Joey and that bracelet, or because I was standing at the top of the cliff looking down at my friends, getting ready to jump. A breeze stirred and I swayed with the

treetops, the prickly feeling of terror spreading through my body.

“You can do it, Maggie,” Tanna yelled up to me.

“Don’t stand there looking down for too long,” Adam called. “Just figure out how far right you need to be to avoid the ledge.”

Shannon must have said something, because I saw Tanna smack her arm.

“What’s her problem, anyway?” I asked, trying to focus on anything but the wide open space before me that was causing my vision to blur.

“Who?” Joey looked at me, his blue eyes eerily alive in the sunlight.

“Umm, Shannon,” I said, like he was clueless. “She’s being such a bitch.”

“Isn’t she kind of always a bitch?”

I shrugged.

“I thought that’s part of what we all love about her.” Joey wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me to him. “Focus.”

I nodded once, feeling a little dizzy.

“You can do this.”

I nodded again, sure that the world was tumbling through space at super-warp speed with gravity pressing me forwards and the universe itself daring me to leap over the edge of the cliff.

“I’m going to jump left, so you don’t have to worry about the ledge.”

“Can we hold hands?” I felt like a little kid, but I needed a connection to something real and stable if I was going to do this.

Joey smiled and bumped his nose against mine. “Of course.”

“How far back do we have to go?”

Joey took ten or fifteen steps away from the edge of the cliff, turned, and held out his hand. “We just need to get a running start.”

“Why does there need to be any running?”

“Momentum. We need to jump as far from the wall as we can.”

“Oh. Duh.”

I walked towards Joey and took his hand. He squeezed mine. I squeezed his in return. From where we stood, I could only see the edge of the cliff and a leafy batch of swaying treetops beyond. It was as if our friends didn’t exist.

“We’re gonna go on three,” he said. “You ready?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“You trust me?”

I looked at him then. Took in his freckled nose, the wisps of damp hair clinging to his forehead, the way his smile always tilted to the left.

I nodded. “I trust you.”

He squeezed my hand again. “Everything’s gonna be fine.”

I ran my thumb up the inside of his wrist, feeling the pulse of blood, his life, ebbing through his body.

“One.”

The cool shock of those turquoise beads zapped my skin like I’d been electrocuted.

“Two.”

What was it about those beads?

“Three!”

Running.

We were running.

Almost there.

But the thunder of my feet crashed through something in my consciousness.

And I knew.

It was like I hit an invisible wall. One that did not exist for Joey.

I had been so close to flying.

Then, suddenly – I stopped.