

Hot Water

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The sea. A vast expanse of infinite possibilities. Intensely beautiful. Incredibly destructive.

The sea is a perfect metaphor for a girl I knew, Aria Hennessy. I honestly thought she was the girl of my dreams, but that belief changed rapidly after some of the things I saw and heard.

To understand this story, we have to begin two years ago, when I was only 16, I was entering school after my birthday weekend when I bumped into Aria, quite literally.

I caught her arm and quickly apologised, and her bright blue eyes sparkled as she smiled in response.

‘Where’s the fire?’ She asked me.

‘Oh, I’m just in a hurry to see some friends is all.’

‘Ahhh. Any particular occasion?’ She asked.

‘It was my birthday over the weekend, but I never got to see anyone because I was visiting relatives in York.’

‘Happy belated birthday. It’s Joshua, right?’

‘Yeah. Aria, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah, we’re in biology together.’

‘So we are.’

‘Anyway, I guess I’ll see you in biology.’

‘Yeah, sure. Unless you want to join me and my friends?’ I offered.

‘Ummm, yeah, why not?’

‘Fair enough, let’s get going. They won’t be happy if I turn up too late.’

‘Here comes the birthday boy!’ My best friend, Alex shouted as I headed up.

‘Looks like he’s brought a guest, too.’ Another friend, Skye, added.

‘Guys, this is Aria, we’re in biology together. Aria, this is Alex, Liam, Skye, Katie and Max.’ I told her, pointing each person out one by one. Alex quickly came to wish me a happy birthday and give me a hug, closely followed by Skye. Her dyed electric blue hair got in my face as she turned to allow room for Katie to take over with the hugging. Liam hugged me next, it was short and awkward. He was new to the group and wasn’t really used to our hugging ways. Finally, it was Max. He hugged me a little tighter and for a little longer than anyone else. He wished me a happy birthday as he patted my back, a universal signal to release a hug. I always said Alex was my best friend, but Max was probably closer to me than he was, especially after the last few months. We’d grown incredibly close over the school year, and now he was probably my closest friend.

‘So, how was your weekend?’ Skye asked me, eager to hear any stories I might have.

‘Pretty dull to be honest. I only went to York, the real holiday is happening in the summer.’

‘Oh, where are you going?’ Alex asked.

‘Me and my mum are off to Cyprus.’ I smiled at the thought. When I spoke of my mum, it wasn’t my biological mum. My biological parents died when I was a few months old. They both worked on a ship, which sank due to a freak storm.

‘What about your dad?’ Max asked.

‘Well, my mum bought him a ticket, just in case, but he just told us he’s definitely going to be working and so can’t come, but the ticket she bought, as it turns out, is non-refundable.’ I sighed.

‘Does this mean someone gets to go with you?’ Skye asked, obviously not actually enquiring. It wasn’t her style to ask about a free trip, especially if it was because someone important to the person couldn’t go.

‘Actually yeah, my mum gave me free reign over the ticket, so I get to choose who comes with us, basically.’ I shrugged.

‘Ooooh. I wonder who he’s going to pick.’ Katie said, evidently sensing my inner turmoil.

‘I’m his best friend; he’s going to pick me, obviously.’ Alex said. ‘Right?’ He added.

‘Actually, Alex, I was going to take Max.’ I answered.

‘What?’ Alex asked.

‘Huh?’ Max said.

‘Well, for one thing, Alex, you have a girlfriend, and I’m not getting the blame for tearing you away from her. Plus, me and Max have gotten quite close recently, and I wanna see how things go.’ I explained. ‘Of course, that’s assuming he wants to go.’

‘Yeah, sure. I’ll go. Why not?’ Max said, smiling at me from across the circle we had managed to form while sat down on the field.

At that point the bell rang. ‘Right guys, it’s time for us all to get to lesson. I’ll see you all at lunch?’

‘Yeah, sure. Bye Josh, enjoy the beginning of the day.’ Skye said, with a smile.

‘Thanks Skye.’ We all hugged goodbye, which took a few minutes, and then me and Aria headed towards the biology classrooms.

‘You were awfully quiet.’ I commented.

‘Yeah well, I’m just not great with new people.’ Aria explained.

‘They’re good enough people when you get to know them; they’re just a little weird, especially towards newcomers. It’s kinda like a test. Accept them and they’ll accept you.’ I explained. ‘Tell you what, join us at lunch, I’m sure if you participate in some conversations you’ll see that they’re pretty good people.’

‘I guess I could do that. I’ve got nothing better planned.’

‘Great. I’ll see you at lunch then, I guess.’ I smiled as we entered the classroom and went our separate ways.

‘Yeah, see you then.’ She replied.

We sat down and endured an hour long biology lesson, in which the teacher just seemed to rant for the entire time, not caring that she was boring her students to death at all. She was that type of teacher where she just wanted to talk and talk and talk to the students, and not allow them to do anything interactive.

After Biology was my next lesson, basically immediately. Maths. A subject I was good at, but not particularly enjoyed. The kind of latent talent you have, but never quite use. Of course, I astounded teachers with my ‘latent talent’ by being an A* student who, when faced with a new problem would say ‘I just get it.’ I always had been that way, ever since childhood. Now was a new time, though. Things were getting more difficult, though I was still pretty much winging it, and getting A*s so I was fine. I sat through this lesson, did a few questions, chatted with Alex, who was in this class, and sat next to me, and basically did as little work as possible without getting the teacher annoyed at me, which is what I did in maths. I was just that kind of talented.

After that it was break, when I would spend my time in the library doing any homework I had so I never had to do it at home. I did it every day just to make sure nothing was left undone. I quickly managed to finish some English homework and then it was off to Chemistry.

This lesson was good. Our teacher was funny, and the students consisted of me and my four best friends. Liam wasn't here, but that didn't bother me too much. Me, Max, Alex, Skye and Katie all sat at one table and we basically had a riot. We would do very little work but still get good grades. It was miraculous if we got less than an A, simply because we were naturally intelligent, and we did listen and make some notes, we just didn't really bother doing many questions.

After that was lunch, and, as promised, Aria joined us in our spot, outside the music rooms. We chatted, Aria involved herself in some conversations, as promised, and we basically had an enjoyable lunchtime, the guys even chipped in to buy me a small cake. I thanked them all graciously, and cut it into 7 pieces and passed it out and we basically had a miraculously great Monday morning and lunch time. That was surprising at best. Monday was generally horrible, and mornings were even worse.

Of course, that afternoon, things took a downward trajectory. What I haven't told you so far is that I sometimes suffered from random bouts of depression. I could be the happiest guy in the world but suddenly, for no apparent reason, I'd become reclusive and just generally depressed for anywhere between hours and days at a time. I hated that part of my personality, but my friends all understood and were supportive, and when I asked to be alone, they complied pretty much instantaneously, knowing I could manage it on my own as I had so many times before. On the

rare occasion I felt even slightly suicidal, I would quickly contact a friend and talk to them to distract myself from whatever method I had come up with at that point. They always complied, ever the supportive friends, and I loved them for it. Of course, all my friends had different uses, so they were the perfect selection. Max was my distraction. He could distract me from any problem I had. Skye was my happy-go-lucky contagious smile friend. Her smile made me smile; it was just that way, so she was healthy to be around. Katie was my realistic friend, she helped me rationalise things, sometimes she could be a bit cynical, but never enough to make me any worse. And Alex was a little different. I could talk to him about anything and everything. He was there for me through thick and thin, but every time the conversation swayed to a depressing tone, which wasn't productive, he'd subtly change the subject to something more cheerful to keep us on track to improving my mood, rather than worsening it.

It was this afternoon when my depression decided to kick in. I walked into English, sat next to Max, put my head on my arms, which were on the desk, and sat there. Max put his hand on my shoulder and I looked up at him.

'You okay?' He asked me, a concerned look in his eyes that I wasn't accustomed to seeing. He never seemed to really care quite that much, but then again, he never really noticed my bouts of depression. I'd hidden them pretty well in the past, just got him to talk about something for a while.

'I'll be fine.' I promised him, offering the best smile I could,

which basically meant a very weak smile indeed.

'You don't look it. Need to get something off your chest?' He asked.

'We're in the middle of a lesson. We can't exactly just walk out.'

'I beg to differ.' He said, calling the teacher over. This particular teacher knew about my bouts of depression, he was one of 3 that did. The other 2 were my head of year and my tutor. He let us go so we could have some privacy and we sat in his office, just off his classroom.

'So, what's on your mind?' Max asked me.

'To be honest, I'm not even sure. I just sometimes get depressed. It's what I do. I never really have an explanation for it, it just happens.'

'Sure it's not your dad's inability to come to Cyprus?'

'That might be something to do with it, but honestly, I think I'd rather you come.'

'Why would that be?'

'Well for starters, you're more reliable. Plus you're one of my best friends. I barely even know my dad. I hardly speak to him. Honestly.'

'Yeah, but you want to know him, though. And you can't deny it. I see it in your eyes every time you mention him.'

'You know me far too well, Maxwell.'

‘Yeah well, Joshua, I’m supposed to.’ He shrugged. ‘I am about to become your best friend after all.’

‘You can’t possibly know I was thinking that.’ I said, bewildered.

‘No. But it was a good guess though, wasn’t it?’ He laughed. ‘Well considering you chose me for the trip, rather than Alex, which seriously annoyed him, by the way, it kinda hinted that I was becoming closer to you than he was, even Katie could see it, that’s why she asked who you were going to take to Cyprus.’

‘Yeah but Katie’s more realistic. She can read things better than the rest of us. I expected her to know. I didn’t expect you to have figured it out.’

‘You said yourself that we’ve been getting closer these past few months, you can’t seriously think I didn’t notice that as well.’

‘I guess not.’

‘You okay now?’

‘Yeah, thanks. You managed to do an Alex.’

‘And what does Alex do?’

‘Well, we discuss my problem, and then he subtly changes the subject to something a bit more trivial to distract me from my major problem.’

‘Yeah, basically what I did.’ He shrugged. ‘I guess I’m an Alex version 2, huh?’

‘Yeah, I guess you are.’ I stood up. ‘Shall we return to the class?’

‘Yeah, I guess we should. We can’t hide out here forever; we’ll have to go back sooner or later.’

‘We could spend 10 more minutes in her, you know, just to make sure I’m definitely okay and I won’t relapse.’ I winked.

‘Fair enough.’ We both sat back down. ‘Anything else you’d like to discuss?’ He asked.

‘Shall we discuss the plans for Cyprus?’

‘Nah. That’s ages away yet.’

‘It’s next month, as soon as the exams are over we’re off.’

‘Oh wow. Probably best to go over them now then, just in case.’

‘Yeah. That’s what I thought. Basically, our flight is on the 29th. My mum and I will pick you up from your house at 7am to get to the airport for the right time for the flight. You’re going to need a case full of summer clothes, basically, swimming gear, anything like that. Spending money will be taken care of, unless you have a problem with free stuff.’ I chuckled. ‘Anything I haven’t covered?’

‘Ummm... Not that I can think of.’

I smiled. ‘Still coming?’

‘Try and stop me.’ He replied, returning my smile.

‘That would be counter-productive.’ I said, with a small laugh.

He shrugged and we headed back into class.

We continued the lesson doing creative writing for the English language exam. The English literature exam was on a book we’d already read, but it was after the language exam so we were going to do the work afterwards.

That lesson seemed to fly by, considering me and Max were too busy having a laugh during our writing, as we didn’t take it really seriously, but still practiced the techniques needed for a successful examined story. Yet another lesson where, though we didn’t take it incredibly seriously, we did pretty well. Skye was in this lesson, too, but she sat a few seats away. Sometimes we spoke, but it took some effort as either, we had to walk to each other, which was only condoned by the teacher at certain times, or we had to talk over people, which wasn’t exactly polite. Generally we didn’t talk much.

After English was my final lesson of the day, Religious Studies, which, put simply, I hated. It was a compulsory subject in my school, and I thought that was wrong on every level. I figured it was education’s way of shoving religion down our throats and I hated it. The worst part about it was that, though I hated it, I was good at it. It was one of my hated subjects, but I was getting As in it. RS was a subject I shared with Alex; we were both in the same class. He liked to think outside the box, but a little too much. He didn’t tend to stick to the religions we did. On one exam he

started talking about Buddhism, which didn't really please the teacher, who basically told him to stick to Christianity and Islam. In all honesty, the subject itself wasn't too bad. It was easy enough to understand, it was just the fact that the content was essentially brainwashing that bothered me. I spent the hour basically answering questions on beliefs of Christians and Muslims, and basically being annoyed at how I shouldn't have to know this to pass my exams. I hated that they were forcing it on us like we would ever have to know about religion. Maybe some people would want to, but we should be allowed to choose if we want to stick to Atheism or have our school try and convert us. Of course, I wasn't easily swayed. I had my own problems with religion and the problems it caused, including acceptance issues and old-fashioned views, such as sexism and homophobia. I often had heated discussions with Christians about the homophobic element, and how God is all-loving, so he must love gays, lesbians and bisexuals. I would also say that if God is all powerful, why does he allow people to be gay if that's defying his views? I was a bit annoyed at some of the beliefs people had gotten from religion. I had spiritual beliefs, but I never followed a particular religion, simply because I couldn't bring myself to be brainwashed into conformity. I wasn't one to contest people's beliefs, normally, but if they tried to convert me, or challenged my beliefs, I would hit back. I refused to be converted by people who, evidently, didn't understand why I'd never gotten involved in any religion. But yeah, back to the story.