After the Storm

by Alison Reid

The monsoon arrived like a beast unleashed—violent, unforgiving. Rain pounded down in torrents, soaking her in seconds. The wind shrieked, ripping through the trees, sending leaves and branches spinning through the air. Thunder cracked like cannon fire, shaking the ground beneath her feet.

"Rachel—move!" Darcy's voice was urgent, cutting through the storm.

She turned—just as the ground betrayed her.

There was a deafening crack. A rush of air. A terrifying sense of nothing.

The trail crumbled beneath her, the world vanishing in a blur of wet green and grey. She screamed as gravity yanked her down—but just before she slipped entirely into the abyss, her hand caught on a thick, gnarled root jutting from the cliffside.

Her body jerked violently. Her arms screamed in protest. She dangled over the churning sea, suspended by trembling fingers.

Below, waves exploded against rock. Foam and fury. Death and distance.

Rain lashed her skin. Her arms burned. Her grip was slipping.

"Rachel!" Darcy's voice was raw—closer now, desperate.

She looked up and saw him drop to his knees, rain pouring down his face, eyes locked on hers.

"I've got you," he growled, reaching. "Hold on."

She tried—but her fingers were numb, her strength draining. "I—I can't—" she gasped, blinking away the water.

"Yes, you can!" he barked. "Take my hand! Now!"

With one last breath, one last burst of terrified strength, she let go of the root—and lunged.

Their hands collided.

Fingers locked.

Darcy hauled her upward with a grunt, his muscles flexing, rain streaming down his arms. He dragged her over the edge with brute force, and they collapsed—mud and skin and breathless bodies tangled on the jungle floor.

For a moment, neither moved.

Only the storm breathed for them.

Then—Darcy surged upward, cupped her face in both hands, and crushed his mouth to hers.

It wasn't soft.

It wasn't slow.

It was raw—born of adrenaline and panic and something far more dangerous.

His kiss was unrelenting, bruising, and Rachel—drenched, shivering, shaken—kissed him back like he was the only thing keeping her tethered to this earth.

The heat of his mouth, the demand in his grip, the need in every second of that kiss—it tore through her like lightning. Her fingers clenched the front of his shirt, her body curving instinctively into his.

And just as quickly as it had begun, he pulled back—forehead pressed to hers, his breath ragged.

"Thank God you're okay," he whispered, his voice thick, shaken. "I thought I was going to lose you."

Her eyes burned. Her chest heaved. Her fingers still fisted in his shirt, holding onto him like she didn't dare let go.

The rain beat down, the wind howled, but in that one infinite moment—it didn't matter.

Only he did.

She should speak. Should move. Should say anything.

But when she looked into his storm-dark eyes, her own heart felt like the ocean—raging, wild, impossible to calm.

And all she could do was hold on.

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