

One Way Out

The tears burn down my face, slicing through my red and welted skin. My heart has turned to scar tissue from his hundredth broken promise, and the man fishing through the closet is a stranger. My stranger.

“Where the hell is my red button down?” he asks again. The click of plastic hangers ticks away as he slides each to the left. “I told you to hang them dark to light.”

He pulls down a hanger, sighs, flips it around, and puts it back. “And they should face this way!” he voice boils to a yell. “How hard is it? Married a fucking idiot, can’t even hang clothes.”

My voice left me months ago. My mind rages, but my lips won’t move. My soul packs and leaves, but my feet have grown into the floor and I can’t pry the roots free. He turns to me and grabs my face. His fingers are rough and he’s grabbing so hard I feel the shape of my teeth in my cheeks. He raises his other hand and puts his index finger so close to my eye my lashes brush it.

“Don’t fuck it up again,” he says, and pushes my face away.

The night crawls up slow. Fingers of darkness sneak through the windows until I know our house has become a lantern to the outside, a beacon crying for help and falling unheard on sheltered ears.

Jane hands me her favorite book without saying a word. We both glance at Alex. Jane is five years old and she knows it’s safer not to talk around him. Already she’s figured out noise is a gamble. Jane’s eyes are like the windows, beacons. I take her book in one hand, her hand in the other, and lead her off to bed. She snuggles under her blanket and I tuck the edges in around her. Her smile breaks through the iceberg in my chest.

“Why is Daddy mad?” she asks, and I can’t find an answer.

“He’s just frustrated because he thinks he lost his favorite shirt.”

“He can have one of mine.”

The thought of her trying to quell his rage grabs me by the throat. It should be unthinkable that he would hurt her, but I see him screaming at her to stop making a mess as if it’s already happened. My life has already happened and I’m falling through it in rewind, the hiss of its static numbs me.

He goes to bed at eleven. I lie next to him and let my eyes crawl through the maze of the popcorn ceiling until they lose focus. My lids are heavy now and each time I blink it’s soothing cool water over a burn, but I can’t keep them closed, not even an extra second.

When it feels like three days have passed I know an hour has, and I keep waiting. When I can’t remember the last time I heard a car go by I know it’s time. His breathing is rhythmic and slow. Adrenaline floods through my limbs and brings them back to life. My heart hits my chest so hard I’m sure he must hear it, but when I look over at him, he’s still. I can’t find that thing I mistook for love anymore. I can’t even remember it.

I slip from the bed, standing beside it in paralyzed fear until I'm sure he's not waking, not concerned even in the darkest reaches of his subconscious that I'm capable of leaving him. I find my socks and shoes and move to the living room.

I take his keys from the table by the door, then go to his office and unlock the filing cabinet. Behind the files in a shoebox is what I need. What Jane and I need to start over. I pull off the lid and stare at the stack of cash and the pistol.

I shove the money as deep in my pocket as it will go. It's humming in there like it's alive with all the worst parts of him. I try to find a good way to hide the gun. The elastic of my sweatpants isn't strong enough to hold it. I pull on my jacket and put it in the pocket.

My breath freezes in my chest as I make my way to Jane's room. My footsteps are silent, my mind a symphony. Her room is glowing orange from her nightlight. I crouch by her bed and pick her up. Her head flops on my shoulder and her arms automatically encircle my neck. I squeeze her close and soak in her fragility, letting it run through my veins and become strength.

I'm walking down the hall with her now. For the door. For the car. For freedom. For her. And then he shatters it all. A hand spins through my hair from behind and pulls so hard I feel her fall from my arms. I'm sprawled on the carpet and he's towering over me.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" The words pound into me the way waves do when you've forgotten which way is up.

"Mommy!"

Just as the world is upright again his hand claps against my face and I hear Jane squeal from across the hall.

"You think you can just leave?" he screams. "You think I'm going to let you take my daughter, you dumb bitch?"

I try to back away from him. The carpet is dragging and pulling the back of my shirt so it chokes around my neck. Jane is trying to get past Alex. He's leaning over me, taking up every corner of my view, but I still somehow see her red face, her gaping, screaming mouth and the snot and tears running into it.

"I told you what would happen if you ever tried this."

His fingers wrap around my throat and squeeze. His eyes bulge like he's the one who can't breathe. I reach to pry his fingers free but can't. He pushes me into the wall so hard my head is against it and his leverage is crushing. I wedge my feet between us and shove as hard as I can. He stumbles back, fresh rage coloring his face. Jane tries to run to me, but he catches her by the back of her shirt and slings her behind him into the orange bedroom.

I reach for the gun. The grip is stuck in my too small pocket, but something deep inside me is calm, and I maneuver it free. Its weight in my hand makes it real and I squeeze without a second breath. The gun kicks hard enough it wants to point at the ceiling. The sound slams into my temples and finally my eyes remember to see.

Blood spurts from his throat. His hands slap over the wound and his eyes are wide with terror and shock. He wants to hit me, but he can't lift a hand from the gushing hole in his neck. A stream of blood drips through his fingers and leaves a trail down his shirt.