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Baby Doll

Written by Hollie Overton

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Baby doll

HOLLIE OVERTON



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LILY

A dead bolt has a very specific sound. Lily was an expert at recognizing certain sounds—the creak of the floorboards signaling his arrival, the mice scurrying across the concrete in search of food. But Lily always braced herself for the sound of the dead bolt, listening as metal scraped against metal. The lock was beginning to rust, so it always took him several tries. But inevitably, she would hear the click, the sound that meant they were trapped for another week, another month, another year. But tonight, she heard nothing. Only deafening silence. Hours passed, and she couldn't stop thinking about the lock.

Beside her, Sky stirred in her sleep and sighed. Lily stroked her daughter's jet-black hair, her gaze lingering on the stupid yellow stuffed monkey that Rick had given Sky for Christmas. Lily despised that monkey, but she couldn't deny her daughter a toy. Not when they had so little to begin with.

But the lock—why hadn't she heard the lock?

Stop obsessing and go to sleep, Lily told herself. She couldn't be tired when he returned. She knew how angry he would be if she were tired. Obsessing was foolish. But tonight she couldn't seem to stop. She'd been on edge these past few weeks. She hoped that it was just the aftermath from the stomach flu she'd been battling. But that didn't explain why she hadn't heard the lock.

The problem was, Rick didn't make mistakes. He was too

precise, too meticulous. Maybe he was testing her again. There were so many tests in the beginning. But she'd proven herself. He believed she was his. She'd made him believe.

Maybe that's why he'd forgotten. What if he'd finally trusted her? What if this was their chance at an escape? There were so many what-ifs they left her paralyzed. She was still weighing the odds when Sky stirred again, and that was all Lily needed. She summoned every ounce of courage and gently slipped out of bed. She inched up the steep wooden staircase, her stomach clenched in a million knots. What if he was on the other side of the door? She could already picture his Cheshire cat grin, wagging his finger, eyebrows curled in that calculated manner. *Tsk, tsk, Baby Doll. Didn't I tell you what would happen if you disobeyed me?*

Lily hesitated at the top of the staircase. What was she thinking? Her last attempt at freedom had nearly gotten her killed. Could she really defy him? She almost made her way back down the stairs but her gaze landed on Sky, radiating innocence, and Lily realized that she couldn't fail her child. *Do it for Sky*, she told herself. Lily turned the knob and just like that, the door swung open. She tentatively stepped into the perfectly preserved winter cabin. Plush fur rugs lined solid oak floors. An ornate vintage desk tucked into the corner, a well-stocked bar on the opposite wall: an ordinary room for a man who was anything but.

Lily held her breath. Nothing but silence greeted her. She glanced toward the windows, moonlight streaming in through the white silk Italian curtains, massive pine trees stretching out as far as her eyes could see. She forgot about Rick and his threats and raced toward the front door and suddenly, Lily was standing in the doorway, staring out at the vast, white, snow-covered horizon.

Outside. She was outside!

She hadn't been outdoors in so long. There was a different kind

of silence now, nothing like what she'd grown accustomed to. This was peaceful and content. An entire world was unfurling around her, and somewhere out there in the distance was her family.

Run! We have to run!

Lily turned and raced inside, nearly tripping as she made her way back down the rickety stairs. Scanning the makeshift closet where their clothes hung, Lily knew nothing was appropriate for the winter conditions.

"My baby doll has to be beautiful," he'd said when Lily requested more-functional clothing. Their pajamas would provide almost no protection against the elements, but there were no other options. Lily would rather freeze to death than waste this opportunity. She moved toward Sky, who was still fast asleep. Lily wanted to scream, *Get up. Hurry. Move!* The clock was ticking, and her panic was rising. But she forced herself to breathe. She had to keep Sky calm. Lily knelt down beside the sleeping child and gently shook her.

"Baby, wake up, we have to go."

Sky bolted upright. She was an extraordinary child and had been since birth, displaying an innate understanding that life down here wasn't normal, and adapting to each and every circumstance. Sky wiped her eyes, blinking away sleep.

"Is it time for our adventure, Mommy?"

Lily always told Sky that they were so happy together, just the three of them, that they didn't need the outside world. But sometimes when Rick didn't visit, she would tell Sky about the magical adventures they'd take one day. She'd talk about trips to Paris, Morocco, or Indonesia. Places Lily had only ever read about online or in her high school geography class. Every child deserved to believe in a fairy tale even if Lily knew it was only make-believe.

"Yes, Chicken, it's time. But we have to be quick."

Sky grabbed that stupid stuffed monkey, clutching it tightly. Lily

hesitated. She couldn't handle the thought of bringing anything Rick had touched with them.

"Sky, we have to leave your monkey here."

Sky's eyes widened as she shook her head emphatically.

"Mommy, I can't... He has to come with me."

"Mommy will get you a new friend. Cross my heart."

Sky hesitated but she would never disobey her mother. She bravely set the stuffed animal back under the covers and gave it a tender kiss good-bye. Lily layered Sky in several pairs of pajama pants, pulling three sweaters on until she was wrapped up tightly. She grabbed a fuzzy down blanket and draped it around Sky's shoulders.

"Hold on to this, okay? Don't let go."

"Okay, Mommy."

Once Sky was ready, Lily pulled on several pairs of tights under her pajamas. Her hands trembled violently; she worried that any moment he might return. But she just kept breathing, just kept telling herself if she stayed calm, they'd get out of here.

They were both ready but Lily had one more task to do. She hurried over to the corner of the room and worked open a loose floorboard. She grabbed a worn piece of paper, the note she'd written years ago, when she was still a child herself and the mother of a newborn. The pages were yellowed with age, but the writing still legible, each word painstakingly written. If this was a trap, there was no hope for Lily. She knew his punishment would be fatal. But she had to believe that Sky might have a chance.

Lily took the note and tucked it into the pocket of Sky's pajama pants.

"Remember Mommy's rules for the big adventure?"

"If you say run, I run. No stopping. No looking back. Find a policeman and give him this."

"And how will you know he's a policeman?"

“Because he’ll be wearing a uniform, and he’ll keep me safe.”

“You’re Mommy’s perfect little angel; you know that, right?”

Sky gave a brave smile as Lily lifted her daughter into her arms. Sky’s body was so tiny and birdlike; she felt weightless. As they slowly ascended the stairs, Lily found herself gazing down over the railing, studying this room that had housed them for the last eight years. No more than four hundred square feet, with its damp, dark walls . . . Hell on earth in every sense of the word. With each creaky step, she vowed she’d never return. She would never let him bring them back here. She pushed open the door again and they made their way through the main cabin. Seconds later, they were outside.

The cold air whipped Lily’s hair around, her face burning from the frigid temperatures. Sky gasped, wiping her cheeks as if she might be able to swipe away the cold. She clung to Lily’s neck, her body convulsing from winter’s brutal assault. But Lily reveled in this moment. With the snow crunching under her slipper-clad feet, she could barely contain her joy.

“Chicken, this is it! This is the beginning of our great adventure!”

But Sky wasn’t listening. She was gawking at the endless sea of white powder stretching out before them.

“What’s that white stuff, Mommy?” The one request Rick indulged them in were books. They’d studied weather and season patterns. Summer. Winter. Fall. Spring. But how could dear, sweet Sky really understand what snow was when she’d never seen it? How could any child raised in that awful, windowless room truly understand anything about a world they couldn’t see or touch or feel? Lily wanted to explain, to give Sky a chance to revel in these new experiences, but there wasn’t time.

“No questions, Chicken. You have to do what I say, when I say it.”

The sharpness in Lily’s voice was uncharacteristic, but she couldn’t worry about that. Sky grew quiet as Lily began walking. She forced herself to ignore the ominous, looming shadows the

pine trees cast. With each step, Lily's pace quickened. She refused to glance back at the nondescript cabin. Her walk turned to a jog, and then she was running. Her legs ached, muscles weak from lack of use, but she fought through the pain. She'd endured so much that this was nothing. Lily's heart pounded so hard in her chest she thought it might explode. It had been so long since she'd been able to run, but her cross-country training came rushing back to her. She could almost hear Coach Skrovan's voice telling her to "Find a rhythm. Find your stride."

Lily ignored the cuts on her face from wayward branches and thick brush. She lost track of time as she made her way through the overgrown trail. She kept running until they arrived at what appeared to be the main road. Lily squinted, trying to make out the sign in the distance. As she grew closer, she gasped, stopping in her tracks. Highway 12. With growing horror, Lily realized she was less than five miles from home. Five miles!

The realization nearly derailed her. She wanted to drop to her knees and scream in anger and frustration. But she couldn't. *Focus on this moment.* This moment was all that mattered. *One foot in front of the other,* she told herself.

She focused on Sky, who was whimpering from the cold. "You're such a brave girl. Mommy is so proud of her brave little girl."

It was difficult, witnessing Sky's discomfort. But darkness was their salvation and she couldn't waste any time. In spite of the cold, in spite of Sky's distress, Lily realized that today was a spectacular day. She hadn't had one of those in over 3,110 days. It was a silly game she'd played with her twin sister, Abby. They'd started tracking their "spectacular days" in seventh grade.

Spectacular was a vocabulary word. *Definition: Beautiful, in a dramatic and eye-catching way.* Abby, older by six minutes, was obsessed with Oprah and her happy-go-lucky philosophies. Following the talk show host's lead, Abby had created a calendar to track their

spectacular days. And so it had begun: the day they both made varsity track. The day they both passed their driving tests and sat on the hood of their Jeep outside the Dairy Queen eating their banana split Blizzards, reveling in how grown-up they finally were. And then there was the most spectacular day of all, when Wes asked Lily to go to the movies. Lily was the first one to be asked out on a date, but Abby helped her get ready, choosing the perfect outfit and doing her makeup. When Wes picked Lily up, she'd been worried that her spectacular day was not meant to be. He was quiet and on edge, not a trace of the carefree, goofy boy she'd been crushing on for half the school year. She kept pushing him. "Are you okay? Are you sure? What's wrong? You can talk to me."

Wes had lost his temper and told her he was far from okay. His father had been arrested for driving under the influence. He tried to pretend it didn't matter.

"I don't know why I'm surprised. I should be used to him acting like an asshole. It's stupid. I don't want to ruin the night. C'mon, we're gonna miss the previews." Lily had grabbed him before he could get out of the truck.

"I don't care about the previews. And it's not stupid. Tell me what's going on." An expression of gratitude flickered across Wes's face. "Really?"

Lily had nodded. No movie in Hollywood could compete with that moment. They sat in his pickup as Wes explained that his father's drinking had only gotten worse once Wes's mother had died. He was trying to keep the bills paid, make sure his father didn't miss work, but it was wearing on him. But he didn't just want to talk about himself. He'd asked Lily about her life, listening as she talked about Abby and how close they were and how she was so worried that their parents were planning to divorce. They were so busy talking they missed the movie, and Lily had nearly missed curfew. She couldn't believe it. She'd only ever felt this comfortable

with Abby. Just when Lily thought the evening couldn't get any more perfect, Wes leaned over and kissed her. Before long, Lily's life became one spectacular day after another.

Lily kept running, adjusting Sky in her arms, but she couldn't stop thinking about that spectacular year she'd spent with Wes. Of course, that Tuesday in September had been as far from spectacular as one could get. In fact, the day had been totally shitty. She was still on crutches after spraining her ankle at her first track meet. She'd stayed up late talking to Wes on the phone and had forgotten to study for a chem pop quiz. She knew that she'd completely bombed it. Lily hobbled over to Abby's locker, prepared to vent about how she'd screwed up her GPA. Abby didn't bother hiding her annoyance.

"Where's my black sweater? You said you put it back in my locker," Abby said.

"I did. You had it on last week after practice."

"No. I didn't. You lost my favorite fucking sweater, didn't you? I knew you would."

Lily had adamantly denied losing the sweater. But Abby didn't believe her. She'd called Lily a liar. Face red, lips thinned to slivers and pursed in a way that always annoyed Lily, Abby had glared back at her. A fight had been inevitable.

"You're such a fuckup," Abby said.

"Right... and you're sooooo perfect, aren't you?" Lily retorted. She hated how Abby acted like she was the Second Coming just because she was six minutes older.

"Whatever. You're never borrowing anything of mine again."

"Abby, seriously... I didn't lose it."

"You can never accept when you're wrong. I swear, you're such a selfish bitch. Life would be so much easier without you."

Abby had stormed off. Lily knew Abby would take the car because it was her day to drive, but she didn't care. She'd rather get

a ride with Wes or call her parents than listen to her sister's stupid tirade about a sweater that Lily knew she'd given back.

The things they said to each other might have sounded awful to an outsider, but that was how twins fight. Their arguments meant nothing. One minute they would be trading vicious insults; the next, they were curled up on the sofa in the family room, examining each other's Facebook pages and making plans for the weekend. Any other night, Lily would have come home and flopped onto the couch beside Abby, the entire fight forgotten. How could she have known that day would be the last time they'd see each other? She could never have predicted what lay ahead. No one could.

Lily's arms were aching now. She rearranged Sky, kissing her and whispering encouraging words. Lily was careful to stay off the main road, ducking anytime headlights grew near. They needed to get warm soon or they'd be risking hypothermia. Lily had no idea how long they'd been running, but they had to be close. She rounded the bend and suddenly gasped. There it was—the WELCOME TO CRESTED GLEN sign. For years, Lily had hated that sign. She hated what it meant—being stuck in suburbia for another day. She'd wanted skyscrapers and the frantic pace of a big city. She wanted coffee shops and hookah bars and tiny pubs where hipster bartenders served endless pints of Guinness. She'd dreamt of seeing off-Broadway plays and thrift shopping. She'd imagined finding a career she loved. She'd envisioned living in a loft in the West Village, with Abby, the two of them exploring New York City together. “The Riser Twins Take on Manhattan” was their childhood dream, the two of them making vision boards and daydreaming about decorating their loft space. Crested Glen was the opposite of New York. It was, Lily used to joke, where dreams went to die. She'd never imagined feeling such joy at being back here. But seeing that sign, that spectacular sign, meant they'd almost made it home. She picked up the pace, whispering to Sky that everything was going to be okay. *Keep going*, Lily thought. *Just keep going*.