A Prison With No Bars

The darkness came with quiet stealth, its velvety fingers stroking her eyelids. She slipped deeper into its arms, feeling the weight of the past slipping away. A calmness, a deep sense of peace, began to slow the panic that had threatened. And now she gave herself totally, knowing it was the only way. She knew it would bring anguish to her family, but the alternative was worse. Far worse.

“Stand back, charging. Applying charge” his voice was urgent. “Come on Maddie, come on…..you are not leaving this world yet” His voice had an edge of desperation. He had been in this situation too many times before. A young life teetering on the edge of death. The charge was delivered with a brutal force. Anxious faces glanced at the neon lights, waiting for the flat green line to spark into action. “Stand back. Applying second charge” There was an element of desperation to his voice. A small bead of sweat glistened on his forehead, the only clue that this was as stressful for him, as it was for the others in the cardio team. They gathered anxiously around the bed - a face as white as the sheet covering her slight form.

What did he know about her? Not much. She had been rushed into emergency at 12.30am. The urgency to save her life, overcoming any vague curiosity as to who she was. The presence of two uniformed policemen led him to briefly think that there could be more to it than appeared … but the business at hand was to save her life. The rest would come later. What’s your story Maddie, he wondered as he readied himself for the worst.

But Maddie’s story was simple and had been told many, many times before. She had fallen for him instantly. He was tall, dark and handsome as the old adage said. And she was smitten. He was nine years older than her but none of that mattered as he charmed his way into her life. His strong jaw and piercing blue eyes adequately complimented his athletic body. He wore only the best in fashion and was always immaculately manicured and finished. His intelligence matched his wit. A successful business man who was as much at ease in the office as he was in a 5 star restaurant. And she’d enjoyed many of those. He had wined and dined her. The romance was intense. The engagement followed swiftly leaving her breathless. She had often reflected on these days. Were there any clues? Was she so blinded by love, that she had missed the signs…the telltale signs that could have prevented everything.

But the answer was always no, no signs, no clues. The wedding was fairytale. The misery that followed, unbearable. She had felt like a princess. Life was filled with love and best wishes. Her family waved them off, on their way to Thailand. One night in a 5 star hotel in Melbourne and then an early morning flight. Perfect. They checked into the hotel and made the decision to have late night drinks in the roof top bar. Maddie changed into a dress she adored. Shoe string straps in a deep emerald green that matched her eyes. The low plunging back accentuated her slim figure. She knew she looked good and tonight was the perfect night to look her best.

He came up behind her and nuzzled her neck. She giggled, feeling the tingles up her spine. “Why are you wearing that dress?” he murmured. Before she could answer, his fingers gripped the back of her hair and twisted violently pulling her head viciously back towards him. He repeated his question. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t speak. “Get it off, no one gets to see you looking like that except me” She doesn’t remember much more of that night. It was brutal. She woke the next morning, a sense of dread and fear clouded any clear thinking. How was she going to deal with this? The bruising on her body testament to the attack she had undergone. As he stirred, she tensed. But it was as though nothing had happened. They got ready to leave, he chatted about Thailand. It was surreal. And sure enough, their honeymoon was perfect. He was adoring, attentive and just as she knew him.It was as though the horrors of her wedding night had never happened.

They returned to Australia two weeks later. Her hair was bleached blond by the sun and the bruising had healed with time. She felt repaired. But the nagging doubts lingered.

She had moved into his home. Settling into the routines of living in another person’s space and life. She had just two weeks left before she would return to her teaching job. It was a job she loved. It demanded hours of her spare time, but she didn’t mind. She thrived on the challenge of catering for all the little humans in her care.

“I’m going to go into school tomorrow” she told him while they ate their evening meal. “May as well get my head around another school year”. His fork full of pasta stopped midair. His steel blue eyes fixed her gaze and icy fingers gripped her heart with dread. “You are my wife now, you don’t need to work”.

She made the mistake of laughing. A nervous whimper followed. “But I have to go back. I want to go back. I love my job.”

It was the table that caused the worst injury. He slammed it into her as he yelled “No wife of mine works. You love me, you don’t need to love your job”. The beating that followed had left her semi-conscious. This was the beginning. The start of her captivity. A prison with no bars. A prison with no locks on doors. A prison that had no guards, no guns. But a prison impossible to escape from. He had made that clear. He would kill her. She was his wife and she would do as he said. And so she gave up her job. She stopped seeing her family. She stopped living. She stopped loving.

But then, she started planning.

She hated him, but he must never know. She would end this misery but it would need careful planning and execution. How does one end a life? A life with a pounding heart. A heart with dreams and hope, a heart that wants to give so much. How? He watched her every move, she had to account to him for every minute of her day. She couldn’t leave the house without his permission. She couldn’t shop without him. But she couldn’t cope with living this lie any longer. With living in the darkness that every day presented to her. But the light of escape was evasive. Intangible, it slipped away from her grip.

Lying next to him sleeping one night, it all suddenly became crystal clear. The elation took her breath away. She had a plan. She would end this misery and amazingly, it all seemed very simple.

“I have to go to the doctor for my pap smear” she murmured over breakfast one morning. “I’ve made an appointment. Can you take me?” he looked perplexed. “I don’t like other men touching you” His eyes narrowed but she held her nerve. “It could save my life darling, it’s only every two years”.

He had waited in the car. She had her chance. She had booked in with old Dr. Tomms. He should have retired years ago. He had an incredibly small client list and would prove easy to convince. “Anything else I can help you with my dear?” his kind, wrinkled eyes looked deeply into hers. She gave a little sniffle and put on an Oscar winning performance of having depression and not being able to sleep. He prescribed sleeping tablets, a strong dose, just as she had requested, to make sure they would work. He was from the medical era where valium and sleeping tablets were the cure all for any housewife going through “difficult times”.

Filling the script proved to be much more difficult. But it was her neighbor who helped her out. Hanging out the washing one morning, she cheerily called over the fence “I’m just nipping down the street, love. Anything you want while I’m there?” She had often thought that this wily old woman who lived next door, had guessed her situation. And so the script passed hands.

She had planned the evening beautifully. It all had to run smoothly and seemingly normal. Tonight was their anniversary. How ironic. The table was set, the wine was in the fridge. She had made a spicy Italian stew, the sort of dish he relished. She had dressed for the occasion and he was impressed. “You look stunning my love”. She fixed his gaze “It’s all for you my darling” she murmured. The candle light flickered gently in the soft breeze that came through the dining room window. She smiled.

They finished the meal and she knew the time was imminent. Time was also of the essence. “Leave the dishes, it is our anniversary” She led him by the hand and he came willingly. As she slowly unbuttoned his shirt, she felt one of his knees buckle slightly, he swayed. Within seconds he had fallen onto the bed. The stew had been the perfect disguise for the bitter grains of medicine she had poured out of each capsule. She hadn’t really known how much to use. But it had to be plenty to work quickly.

She sat on the bed and watched him. His breathing was shallow. His lips slightly parted. So handsome. As much as she hated him, she was still deeply attracted to him. But there was no hesitation for her next move. As she thrust the knife deep into his neck and the carotid artery, his eyes flashed open. One hand grabbed her arm, but the grip was weak. The spout of blood shocked even her. She pulled the knife upward with a jerking motion exposing the muscle and tissue, allowing the pumping action of the artery free and unhindered passage. His hand fell. His eyes still held hers. But as she muttered “I hate you” they became a glassy stare.

She sat on the bed, simply watching the life ebb out of him. No more beatings, no more cruelty. It was over. But it was also over for her too, she had made the decision to end her own life. It had been hard enough, turning her back on her family. And now, she just couldn’t face putting her family through the hardship of a trial and prison sentence. She had eaten enough of the stew to begin to feel sleepy but she needed to take more. She had to be sure they would work. She stumbled to the bathroom and quickly swallowed the rest of the packet.

The light that had flickered so beautifully, was also the light that had betrayed her. The soft breeze from the window had knocked the candle over setting fire to the table cloth. The neighbor had seen the smoke and, of course, the firefighters had discovered them both.

The neon cardio monitor flickered and jumped into life. “We’ve got her” the doctor proclaimed. “Oxygen, and monitor her life basics, I don’t want her slipping away again” he patted her hand. “Good girl Maddie, welcome back”

The light streamed through the windows as her eyes slowly opened. She ached all over, but it felt good. A deep, warm voice spoke “Maddie Townsend, I am charging you with the murder of your husband Joseph Townsend. You do not have to say anything…. She didn’t hear the end of the charge. She gazed at the window. It was over. The sunlight bathed the room in warmth. She smiled weakly. The light was life. And whatever life had in store for her now, she was ready.