

Breathe

83, 84, 85, then a gasp for air. Maggie fell forward with the breath, light headed after a few rounds of practice. *Breathe*. She blinked her eyes open and focused on a knot on the wooden wall across from her to ground herself. She stayed like that for a moment, staring, steadying, as she'd done many times before. Her mind traveled back to her family's cabin, long summers, hot and sticky memories. Knots like eyes on the walls taking over her imagination after a long day in the sun on Lake George. She'd stare for what felt like hours, looking into the eyes of some monster who wouldn't move if she just didn't take her eyes off of it. Maggie tried that the first day with Ben, staring him dead on to show him her strength, to make him too scared to move. It didn't work. She never made that mistake again, always looking away. Staring into the eyes of real monsters is a much harder thing to do.

It'd been 263 days since he took her. 263 days of this cabin. Just four walls, a sunken mattress and a girl on a chain. On one wall was a counter Ben used to clean fish he'd caught. He would bring jugs of water for drinking and fill a bucket from the river to bathe with when it wasn't frozen over. He liked her clean. Most of the floor was wood planked, but there was a corner by the counter that had been fixed with concrete, a small rusted drain in the center. She used this during the winter to wash off her filth. After the snow melted and spring came he started letting her clean her body near the river. It was painfully cold, but it was the only time he

let her off of the chain. The fresh air and the feel of the river water on her skin was freeing, even with him watching. Another bucket was given to Maggie as a toilet that he'd empty when it was full. If he was gone for too long, she'd make do with empty jugs as long as she could, until she couldn't. When Ben would come home to messes he would spit on her or slap her, then toss her some old clothes and tell her to clean up her mess and wash off her impurities.

The only other furniture in the room was a tattered green and navy armchair that'd been around longer than Ben had been alive. That's where he liked to sit, rubbing the worn arms down like he was soaking up memories through osmosis. She often wondered who else had been in this room. Old family members who Ben inherited it from. A great uncle with nobody who wanted it after he died. Maybe Ben came here as a boy, some different person before something changed in him or maybe he was always this way. Or maybe some stranger owned it before Ben bought it from them to do what he wished. Maggie liked to think they had nice memories, probably went fishing in the summers on the river that led to Lake George below, cooked them up on a fire outside of the cabin like Ben would do sometimes. But, maybe other women had been here, too. He'd never talked about other women being at the cabin, but she couldn't help wondering and that turned into frantic thoughts of what might have happened to them and what would happen to her. And then she'd stop. Hold her breath and count until the thoughts disappeared down the rusted floor drain. It was hard not to think who had walked on the same floor she was chained to, the thoughts always coming back to the bad ending. Some dead girl on the news, or missing, never found. Lost in the forest for years and years. *Breathe.*

263 days. It was November 13 when he took her. Maggie thought back on that day a lot, too. She woke up, walked out into the kitchen, said "Morning, Dad." He'd been too consumed in his laptop to return the greeting, as many mornings seemed to go. She poured herself a cup of

coffee, checked her email: *Class canceled for 11:30 with Professor Schuerr*. She'd told Kate she would meet her at the Women's Rally if she had time after class. Now she had more than enough time. Then Mom came down the stairs, big comfy robe, big mom smile.

“Good morning, sweetheart!”

“Morning, Mom,” Maggie answered before quickly flipping her eyes down to her phone. She texted Kate, telling her she'd be free around 11:15. Free, a word that always pops back to her mind, such an easy thought back then. She finished her cup, kissed her mom an abrupt goodbye, skipping by her dad on the way out. She put on some jeans, a well-worn pink sweatshirt with Syracuse written in white across her chest & a light jacket to mask the November chill. A hat too, grabbed just as she walked out the door thinking in her mother's voice “You might get chilly, just in case, love.”

She spent the majority of her afternoon with Kate. They walked through crowds of women in pink pussy hats, all carrying signs with brightly colored pro-woman words and hashtags. They were all sisters that day. She watched the women hold hands with strangers, cheering each other on. Maggie hooked Kate's arm with her own and led her to the main stage as they started chanting “My body, my choice” in unison with thousands. The air vibrated with the sound of strength. A woman wearing an “Impeach Trump” shirt handed them wire hangers wrapped in pink. It was a horrible reminder of what could be. They chanted louder, holding hands, supporting one another.

After the rally was over, they'd found a small coffee shop on the corner and stayed to chat a bit before heading home, still feeling the buzz. They split ways about an hour later. Kate

went right, Maggie left. Already walking away, Kate asked, “Do you want me to drive you to your car?”

“It’s just a few blocks, I’m okay.” Maggie waved back to her as she continued on. *I should have taken the ride.*

She was just a few cars away from her own when she heard, “Hey, excuse me!” Maggie turned around, startled by the closeness of the voice. She wondered how long he’d been behind her. “Did you drop this?” He held his hand out, but it was cupped in just a way that she couldn’t make out what he was holding.

“I don’t think so. What is it?” She took a step closer to look, still unable to see. He was tall, maybe 6’2”, brown hair, brown eyes. He was average. Normal.

“Keys, do you have yours? I just found them right here near the curb.” He stepped closer too, motioned to the ground behind him, still not showing. It felt like a children’s game. Guess what’s in here. She reached into her pocket, feeling the metal of her key against her finger. When she looked up again he was just two steps away. There was something in his eyes that made her catch her breath. Too close, too focused on her. He smiled, but it held no warmth.

She stepped back, ready to turn away. “No, thanks though. I’ve got mine right here.” She pulled them out, carefully placing her key between her fingers and making a fist as her mom had shown her. A small weapon. A tiny feeling of security. Maybe the wire hanger would be better. She turned taking a quick step. He was quicker. His hand grabbed onto her arm too tight.

“Sorry, I’m Ben. I saw you, at the rally.”

“I’ve really got to go, I’m meeting someone.” She gripped the keys tighter, then he ran in front of her.

“A boyfriend?”

“Yes, my boyfriend. Please, I need to leave.”

“You don’t seem like you have a boyfriend. You seem like a slut. Your filthy mind is corrupting you. You need to learn to behave.” His eyes moved to her hand.

“Stay the fuck away from me!” She felt it, the negative energy swirling around her, the pulse of bad thoughts spewing out of him. Maggie shouldered past him and made a run for her car looking for anyone, just one person who would see, who would make it stop or call for help or just do something, but there was no one. She wasn’t fast enough. Ben grabbed her from behind and banged her head into the window of her car door. Dizzy, she stumbled. He picked her up before she could go any further, took her keys and unlocked her trunk, tossing her in like it was nothing. Like she was nothing. And then he took her, his body now.

263 days. She couldn’t take one more. Ben told her he’d be gone for two days. It’d been four, she knew he’d be home soon. He would leave for a few days every other week. The first few times when he took longer than he’d said, she hoped that he was dead. Then she’d spend the time waiting, thinking to herself that if he is dead, how would she get out? The dread would set in. The waiting. Either he’ll come back and hurt her forever or she will spend her last days starving to death, chained to the floor like a forgotten animal. After the first two months she realized he liked running late. He liked to see her anxiety soften a bit when he’d walk in the door, pretending she was just happy to see him rather than that he was her only ticket to freedom. *He’s done this before.*

She’d been planning. Waiting for the right moment, practicing as much as she could while chained to the floor of the shack. *He’ll be home soon.* Maggie grabbed an old coffee mug he left her to drink from, an old man and a dog sitting by a lake illustrated in red on the front of

the cup. She kneeled down by the bed and smashed it underneath, shards flying. She scooped them into a neat pile beneath so he couldn't see, sorted through and found the sharpest piece, the back of the dogs head staring into nothing. Lifting the hem of the oversized t-shirt she was wearing, she took the broken ceramic and brought it up to her inner thigh close to her panties and slit her skin, warm blood running over her hands and down her leg. Stifling a scream, she held her legs closely together, making sure they both were coated in blood. She squeezed the cut and couldn't help but cry out, managing to get some blood pooled in her hand before falling to her knees. She made her way to the bucket she used as a toilet and dropped some blood in, wiped some on the edges, then wiped her hand onto her panties so that they were covered in blood too. Now all she had to do was wait. She curled up on the floor and held her breath. 1, 2, 3...

It was a few hours before he came back, the blood dried up on her thighs. She sat up onto her knees as she listened to his key turn in the padlock outside. He looked at her, looked down, saw the blood. "Maggie, what happened? You're a fucking mess." He slammed his hand down on the counter next to the door. His eyes turned dark and angry, like the first day, like so many more.

"I've been bleeding, I'm sorry. Can I go take a bath, please?"

"You aren't due for blood for another week."

"I think, I think maybe I've had a miscarriage. It hurt." She held her stomach and braced herself for a hit. He lurched forward, then stopped himself on his old chair.

"You don't deserve a baby. You are unclean. Maybe if you get rid of the filth inside of your mind, on your skin, maybe then you will be deserving."

“I know, I’m sorry. Please, can I please take a bath?” She bent her head down, not daring to make eye contact with him. He liked it when she made herself small for him.

“Alright, let’s go.” Ben grabbed an old dirty towel from under the sink, then checked the gun on his hip. He grabbed the keys from his pocket and made his way over to her, snatching the chain up. She eyed the gun. *Don’t, he’ll get it first. Just breathe.* “Get undressed.”

They walked out then, her in front and him watching. She made her way to the river’s edge and carefully bent down, the cut on her inner thigh throbbing. A few rinses, her body shaking. She looked into the water, shallow towards the edge with a few rocks, deeper in the middle. It was fairly wide at this spot. She’d never been in fully, but she couldn’t see the bottom from about three feet in. A nice smooth jump.

“You’re shaking, is the water cold? It’s nice and hot out today,” Ben said, he took a step closer. *Don’t.*

“I’m fine, just a little sore.” Maggie forced a smile, making him smile in return. She turned back to the water and bent once more, scooping up a little water to scrub her face. Then took the deepest breath she’d ever taken, stood up tall and jumped as far as she could into the water. 1, 2, 3, she got past the shallow edge and swam down as far as she could.

“Maggie!” She could barely hear from under water, but could make out a murmured cry and what sounded like “God damn you!” Then the bullet rang out as he shot into the water. She almost gasped. 35, 36, and then another, closer. She swam harder and harder. 57, 58, she was losing her hold. She needed to go up for air. Bang, another shot. She swam up, 72, 73. *Breathe!* She was up just long enough to see she’d made quite a bit of distance, Ben was farther away than she’d thought. “I’ll fucking kill you!” *Deep breath.* Back in the water, swimming down, then going for distance.

Breathe

She made it to 82 before swimming back up for air again and the clearing where the cabin stood was gone. She was surrounded by trees, but she could hear him yelling, running through the branches. *This is it, go deeper, farther. You've got this.* She took another huge swallow of air before heading back into the river, the current getting faster. Maggie didn't know when she'd stop, if she'd dump out into the lake for someone to find her or if he'd find her first, a bullet to the back. All she knew was in that moment, she was free. *Breathe.* 1, 2, 3.