

### **A SUDDEN CHANGE IN FORTUNE**

Three days after she scratched a lottery ticket and won a million dollars, Jen finalized her plan to leave Joe.

She'd never forget that feeling of momentary elation - on Christmas Day no less. The numbers were always scratched in order, top to bottom, left to right, so the fact the very last number was the winner only added to the drama.

"Joe," she said, squinting in shock at the figure revealed underneath.

Joe grunted, but remained immersed in the sports pages.

"Joe, I think...Oh, my God, Joe. Am I seeing this right?" Jen stood up, but sat back down on the sofa after only a few seconds. "I think I'm going to faint."

Joe looked up, pushing his reading glasses down to the tip of his nose with his middle finger, like he was flipping the bird. It was a familiar gesture that usually annoyed Jen, but not today.

Once her dizziness passed, she compared the scratched number at the end of the bottom row with the winning number at the top of the ticket and looked again at the prize. She repeated the process over and over, each time expecting disappointment, confirmation that she'd made a crushing mistake.

Now that Joe's attention had been finally captured, it was his turn to find his feet.

"What are you on about, woman?"

"It matches. The numbers. The prize," she said, and tears began streaming down her face. "Here, you check it."

The moment Jen handed the ticket to Joe, her elation subsided. It was abrupt, like entering a heated room after being outside in the cold, and her face was filled with a burning flush.

The ticket was bought by *her* mother, put in *her* Christmas card, and addressed only to *her*. Joe would have to understand - it was *hers*.

Using his customary middle finger, Joe's reading glasses returned to the top of his bridge.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, as he held up the ticket with a chubby, trembling hand.

"Jesus Christ," he repeated, this time much louder. Wild eyes stared at Jen, and she took a backward step.

"Whoo! Hoo!", he screamed, and ran around the tiny living room swearing and throwing unintelligible insults at any object that came into view. When he eventually calmed down and returned to the sofa, he hugged Jen so hard she thought her ribs would break.

"Say goodbye to this dump, Jen. From now on we're doin everything in style."

*I will need to be smart and do this right,* Jen thought.

She tried to convince herself the sudden decision to leave Joe had nothing to do with the money. There were other compelling reasons, but it was still a tough sell. They'd only been together for two years and married less than one, and she knew how it would look to outsiders.

Jen often struggled with the little decisions - what to have for lunch, which book to read next, when to color her ever-increasing splash of gray on top. But when it came to the big decisions, it was full speed ahead.

Joe was her second husband, and she knew even back when they were exchanging vows in the dingy town hall, that everything was too rushed. She didn't really know this overweight, unemployed carpenter, who lived in a one bedroom cabin in the middle of nowhere. So while her big decisions were not always good decisions, at least they were made quickly and with finality. At forty-nine years of age, anything was better than being alone.

Such was the case on Christmas morning. Jen had made her decision. Joe had to go.

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The three days that followed Christmas were grueling. While Jen struggled to determine the best plan of escape, Joe's unique style of celebration showed no hint of moderation. If anything, his fervor was escalating, and he was becoming more and more unpredictable. Jen knew she had to act soon. He was already resisting her idea of a financial planner and insisting they cash out now.

By the morning of December 28, an idea had formed. By mid-afternoon, preparations had been finalized. It was a simple, uncomplicated plan that required the purchase of just three items, and a visit to her mother's rented apartment. Sacrifices would have to be made, but if everything went to plan, by this time tomorrow she would have her freedom.

As afternoon merged into evening, and evening into night, Jen battled her rising anxiety. The plan may be simple, but it was not without its flaws. By the time the grease-smearred clock above the kitchen stove ticked over to 1:00am, Jen just wanted it to be over, one way or another. Her feet ached from constant pacing. She sat on the bar stool at the kitchen counter, an unopened bottle of Jim Beam a few feet away. She longed to take a decent slug to calm her fraying nerves, but she needed her wits.

*You can do this. You will do this. It's a good plan. He'll be home any minute. Calm down. Breathe.*

She squeezed her left fist, feeling a twinge of pain in her bruised forearm, and almost fell off her stool at the shriek of the outside screen door's rusted hinges.

The front door careened open with Joe's full weight behind it, and he fell in a crumpled heap on the mudroom floorboards. The spectacle might have brought a chuckle from Jen under different circumstances, but not tonight. Even from ten feet away, she could smell his stench of sweat and bourbon.

A new odor emerged. She eased her slender frame off the bar stool and took a step closer. Sure enough, a dark patch at his groin confirmed it - Joe had pissed himself. A new low.

"Still celebrating, I see," Jen said.

"Something's wrong with the door," Joe said, managing to gain a sitting position. "That's all right." He giggled. "We can buy a new one."

Jen sat back down on the bar stool.

"Help me up for Chris sake."

"You don't need my help, Joe."

"Hey," Joe said, getting to his knees. "Is that what I...Oh yeah, it is!"

He stumbled to his feet, and for the thousandth time this week, Jen thanked God that Kelly's Bar & Grille was only a few

miles away, and there were only so many people and obstacles he could potentially run down between the bar and their little backwoods cabin.

"You get that for me?" he asked, pointing a trembling finger at the bottle of bourbon.

"Yes, Joe. I got that for you. I want us to have a little talk."

Joe almost fell again as he sideswiped the entryway into the living room. Recovering his balance, he shuffled across to the kitchen, his brow furrowed in concentration as he successfully navigated around the edge of the coffee table.

Jen sat impassively on a bar stool with her hands in her lap. Joe stood facing her, leaning his weight against the aging kitchen countertop.

"Joe," she began, but stopped when she saw his smile. "No! Don't you-"

Joe's meaty right fist connected with the left side of her head. The force of the blow knocked her off the bar stool and into the living room where she only narrowly missed striking the coffee table. Through the explosion of pain, there was an unlikely hint of muted laughter, but everything was diminishing, fading away until there was only darkness.

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Jen emerged from unconsciousness while listening to her own groaning. For a fleeting moment, she considered the illogical notion that Joe had hit her so hard he'd knocked her head clean off. Only her right eye opened, and for a few moments everything was blurry. Trembling fingers touched the egg growing on the side of her left eye socket prompting a wince.

A gargling noise came from across the room. Snoring. Very familiar snoring. Jen lifted her head and it was clear a handful of ibuprofen would be needed, but other tasks were more pressing.

Joe lay sprawled out on the sofa. Jen had to check her own rising bile at the sight of dark, crusty vomit running from his mouth and down the seat cushion of their beige sofa.

"Guess you'll want to buy some new furniture as well, eh, Joe?" she said with a humorless smile. On the carpet below the sofa, a brown stain the size of grapefruit pooled under a mostly empty bottle of Jim Beam. Judging by the size of the spill, Jen was hopeful he'd consumed most of the bottle before passing out. At least that part of her plan had come to fruition.

A twinkling on the carpet caught her attention - broken glass. Jen surveyed the room with her one functioning eye.

"Oh, my God," she said under her breath.

Every cupboard, drawer and shelf had been emptied of its contents. Glasses, books, candles, photos, plates, and dozens of other personal items - most of them hers and most of them damaged

- were strewn across the floor. A glance toward the kitchen revealed a similar scene. Her stomach went into freefall.

Treading over broken glass, Jen tried to reassure herself that Joe wouldn't have the brains to find her hiding place, especially in his state.

She stood over him as a fresh snore erupted.

"Joe," she said, but aside from his snoring, and the rattling rise and fall of his chest, he looked as lifeless as a cadaver.

She walked across the room to the basement door, every step a new jolt of pain to the side of her aching head. She descended the stairs, conscious of only having one good eye, and careful to avoid the loose, third step. She groaned half way down at the sight of opened storage boxes, clothes and various other paraphernalia littering the dirty cement floor. A floorboard creaked above her. *Probably just the cold weather*, she thought.

To her right, the chest freezer's compressor kicked in, startling her. Jen walked over to it and lifted the lid. Everything looked undisturbed. She shunted a bag of chicken wings to one side and felt underneath a pork shoulder roast, still wrapped in its shopping bag. A wave of relief washed over her as she held up the bag with all the various items she'd purchased that afternoon, plus a winning lottery scratch ticket worth one million dollars.



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Jen bound Joe at his ankles, knees, and then tied his hands behind his back. She used two plastic cable ties - six in all, to make sure he was secured. Joe's incessant snoring continued unabated throughout the entire procedure.

Now that Joe was immobilized, Jen felt better, or at least safer, until she ventured into the trashed bathroom for much needed ibuprofen, and saw her face in what remained of the broken mirror.

A tear stung her one good eye as she gingerly touched the side of her left eye. She removed her shirt and methodically inspected her arms, stomach, back, nearly all of which were discolored by a mass of dark bruising. Some had a yellow tinge, but most were recent. An ugly darkened ring was still clear under her functioning right eye - that beauty was courtesy of Joe's celebratory zeal late on Christmas night.

After taking a deep breath, Jen put her shirt back on. There was more to do. As she walked out of the bathroom, she felt more determined than ever to see her plan through.

She retrieved a small portable paper shredder from the storage closet and placed it on the coffee table with its drab front facing Joe. Jen touched her breast pocket feeling the smooth outline of the scratch ticket. All she had left to do was to wait for Joe to wake up, and if it took a few hours, she

didn't mind in the slightest. The ibuprofen had yet to kick in and her throbbing head felt and looked the size of a bruised melon.

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It was the absence of snoring that woke Jen up. Her head was fuzzy, and for a few seconds she couldn't work out why she was in the living room and not in bed.

"Call Doctor Halveson," Joe croaked. "I musta had me a stroke."

Jen took a deep breath, and was relieved to find her head felt much better.

"Relax, Joe, ya fine," she said, checking her watch. It was 7:00am. He only had a couple hours sleep, would no doubt still be smashed, but he could still listen.

"I can't move anything. My..." Joe shook his head and squinted in the direction of his grimy dungarees.

"What the hell have you done, woman?" he yelled, and began thrashing his legs about.

"You won't break them, Joe, so best you lie still and hear what I have to say."

"The hell I will," he said through gritted teeth, but he stopped struggling.

Jen saw hate in his eyes, and was struck with a profound sadness. Where was the man she married? Where was the woman who

married him? She didn't have an answer to either question, and wasn't sure she even wanted one.

"Joe," she said, but couldn't continue. Speech was suddenly impossible. Tears streamed down her face.

"You hid it well," he said calmly.

His smug demeanor roused her. "Hid what, Joe? The bruises you gave me? Is that what you mean?"

Joe stared at his feet.

Jen moved to the foot of the sofa. "Look at me, you coward."

When Joe wouldn't oblige, Jen lowered her voice, but filled it with menace. "Look at me."

Joe looked at Jen for a second before looking away.

She waited until his eyes returned to her before she said, "That's right, take a good look. See what you've done. See how pretty you've made me."

"I didn't," he began, but stopped when Jen's glare dared him to continue.

"You're hiding it from me. That's not right, Jen. It's mine just as much as yours!"

"Those cable ties around your legs, I bought them at Lowes, Joe. \$6.79. Such a small, insignificant purchase, but I made the mistake of paying for it with a card, you see, and I had to remove my sun glasses to see the signature pad. The skinny, no good kid behind the counter..." Jen wiped her nose as fresh tears

streamed down. "He gasped...Yes, he gasped. That was his reaction when he saw my black eye. What have you got say about that, Joe? I'd really like to know."

"You need to untie me, Jen, before this goes any further. You've got no right to do this."

Jen almost laughed, but was instead overtaken by an urge to vomit. She sat on the coffee table and took a few deep breaths. The nausea took a few seconds to abate.

She turned her gaze back to Joe. "And now you've resorted to sucker punching, I see."

"I knew what you were up to. Bottle of bourbon. We've got to talk." The last phrase came out in a mimicry, whiny voice. "How stupid do you think I am? If you don't split that money with me, Jen, then it's stealing. No other word for it."

Jen exhaled. It was a long and satisfying breath. "You and money, Joe." She shook her head. "Only worse combination I can think of is you and booze. You're obsessed with both, and can't handle either one of them to save your life."

Joe renewed his thrashing, but it only lasted a few seconds before he belched, coughed, and then declared, "I'm cramping up here, Baby. Come on, untie me. I need a drink of water. My head's all messed up."

"I don't think so, Joe, but you're wrong if you think I won't be splitting it."

Jen smiled, took the lottery ticket from her pocket and placed it on top of the shredder.

"You're the most destructive person I know, Joe, and nothing's more certain to me than the fact we'd both be better off without this ticket."

A guttural noise escaped from Joe's lips as his eyes doubled in size.

"No, you wouldn't do it. You wouldn't," he stammered.

"All I need to do is turn this thing on, Joe, and we'll both be out of our misery."

"Wait! Wait just wait a God-damned minute."

Jen could see sweat on Joe's forehead, and pressed on.

"It's the right answer, Joe. You'll see in the end."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he shrieked, renewing his struggling.

"Well, Joe, here on the shredder is the quickest buck you'll ever hope to earn. Don't get me wrong, I know how much it means to you, which is why I'm more than willing to give it up."

"Show me the ticket. I know you're trying to put one over me," he said, the panic in his voice unmistakable. "You'd never do it."

Jen rolled her eyes again. "Really?" She removed the card from the top of the shredder and held it a few feet away from Joe's unshaven, puffy face. He squinted, and she could tell he

recognized the card. She smiled as his eyes went to the bottom row, where underneath the last number on the right, a million dollar prize had been scratched.

"Please," he said, in his calmest voice of the night.

"You're not thinking. I know I've been...upset lately. But I was excited. I'm so sorry, Baby. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Hurt me? Look at me, Joe."

But Joe wouldn't take his eyes off the shredder. He started crying.

"Joe! Look at me!"

He complied, his tears slowing.

"There's only one way I'm not shredding this ticket."

"Okay," he said, weepy but attentive.

"First off, I'm leaving you Joe, end of story. Final."

Joe stared blankly.

"Second, you're going to promise me, you'll not go after me or my mother, and I mean no harassment whatsoever. We're gone from your life. Understand?"

Joe swallowed hard, and then nodded.

"In return, I'll send you a portion of the lottery winnings, but only after I know we're safe, and only after I know you'll leave us alone and not come after us."

"How," Joe began, but was interrupted by a ghastly bout of phlegm-filled coughing. "How much?" he finally managed to whisper.

"It won't be enough for you, but it'll be more than I want to give you," she said.

Joe screamed, and renewed his thrashing.

Jen waved the ticket in front of Joe. "I'll do it, Joe, I swear. You really want to try me?"

Joe ignored her, only stopping when he managed to roll off the sofa.

"I can't believe you're ruining this," he said, sounding defeated at last. "How can I trust you?"

Jen smiled. "The way I see it, that's your problem, not mine."

"But it's my money, too" he said.

Jen stood up from the coffee table, looking shocked.

"You're unbelievable. You know what? I don't think you will leave us alone, not while I've got this ticket. In your own misguided, psychotic way, you really *do* think it's your money."

"It is!" he screamed. "Wait! What are you doing?"

Jen switched on the shredder. She placed the ticket on top, next to the feeding lip.

"For richer or poorer, right, Joe?" she said, and pushed the cardboard ticket into the shredder.

Joe screamed, but all Jen could remember from that moment was the same feeling of elation she experienced when she first scratched the ticket. But this time, it lasted much longer.

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Jen drove to her mother's apartment feeling as giddy as a schoolgirl on her first date. She routinely broke into fits of laughter, which hurt her bruised ribs, as she re-lived in her mind the look on Joe's face as she shredded the lottery ticket.

Her mother was waiting in the lobby, her packed bags beside her.

"You ready for a road trip?" asked Jen. "Canada's going to be cold, but you look like you've got your whole wardrobe with you." Jen laughed.

"Oh, sweetheart, look at your face. The bastard should be in jail."

"I'm fine, Mom. No, I'm better than fine, and he won't get to do anything to me again." She smiled, and added, "Hey, did you get the cash out? Things are going to be a bit tight for us for a while, and I don't want to use cards if at all possible. I'm paranoid that way."

"Yes, Love. Went to the bank this afternoon."

"Great. Let's hit the road!"

It was a simple ruse, and only time will tell if it would hold up. But for now, Jen felt confident. She was banking on the



belief that Joe was too lazy to be vindictive, especially without the motivating prospect of getting his grubby paws on her fortune.

It had taken her eight attempts to find the same type of scratch ticket with a million dollar prize in just the right location. It was the biggest risk of the whole plan - that Joe would look too closely at the ticket. But he was without his reading glasses, and was hung-over drunk.

Maybe he would still chase her. Nothing's certain, but for now, Jen's sense of elation just kept growing stronger.