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## Prisoners of Men

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## Prisoners of Men

*Briana Kelley*

“LOOK AT WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!”, my father screamed as I hid underneath the coffee table. He had my mother backed into a corner, a crushed beer can in his hand. His black hair was slicked with grease and drunken sweat. I was four years old. My mother who took care of me, who knew everything, who could take on the world in my eyes— she looked so small. Her head in her hands, begging for forgiveness, “Please stop, Patrick. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Please stop you’re scaring Briana”. I’ll never forget the way he looked at me then. It was almost like he sobered up, if only for a moment. True guilt and true sincerity in his eyes— that was the last time I ever felt any affection from him.



Technology was evil. The government and God knows who else was watching us through the television. Close the blinds, people might see in. These were common phrases in our household from the time I was eight to twelve years old. He lived in fear and he wanted us to be afraid with him. The day my mother remarried was the day I knew our lives were going to take a turn for the worst. When I walked into his house, my heart sunk deep into my stomach. Something was wrong. I looked at my stepfather’s dull gray hair and dead eyes. This is not going to be good, I thought to myself. I was right.

My mother’s Facebook account was to be deleted— how did he know she wasn’t trying to reconnect with old boyfriends from high school? My mother and I kept my Facebook account a

secret from him; she wanted to allow me freedom that she didn't have. He caught me one night. I quickly attempted to switch over to Microsoft paint, but he wasn't as naïve as I'd hoped. He knew what I was doing, and he said that God was not happy about it. "No righteous child of The Lord would adhere to such sinful activities". I wasn't ashamed; I knew I had nothing to be sorry for. My mother wasn't allowed the same confidence. She wasn't allowed a phone call unless it was with him, because who knows who she would try to talk to? A usual night consisted of yelling— so much yelling. "I am enough for you! You're lucky I brought you and Briana in, I didn't have to do that you know. A righteous wife obeys her husband without question. Only a Pharisee would...." I looked at my mom. My mother who took care of me, who I thought knew everything, who I once thought could take on the world— she looked so small.



It took my mother too long to leave my father behind. She wasn't even the one who broke everything off. I don't remember a time he wasn't drunk. I don't remember a night she didn't cry while I hid from his rage. When he moved out, I often went to visit him. There was a woman at his house named Hilary. She was always there, and in my four-year-old mind, she was just Daddy's friend. My mom learned of my dad's affair from me, and it tore her apart. She could no longer cook for me because she couldn't find the motivation to do so. I got to pick where I wanted to eat every night, and she ordered water and stopped engaging me in conversation. "Mommy what are you going to eat? I'm not going to finish my spaghetti. Here, try some," I offered a helping of noodles to her and she said: "That's okay sweetie I'll eat something at home." She never did.

One night I was helping her do dishes, one of my favorite things to do with my mom.

"Mommy I miss Daddy", I said

"I know honey. I miss him too"

“Why did you make him leave us?”, I said through tears.

“I didn’t. I didn’t. I wanted him to stay as much as you do. He made that decision for himself. I’m so sorry” she responded through sobs.

We sat on the floor in front of the open dishwasher and cried. I looked at my mother who still took care of me even though she was sad, who still knew everything, who could still take on the world— she looked so small.



My mom’s computer dinged; she had a new email. My heart stopped. He whipped his way back into the room, his gray hair bouncing with each step. Oh no... I thought.

“What was that?” His voice was unusually calm.

“Just an email from Bath and Body Works” my mom answered too quickly, “I signed up to get notifications on sales they have. It’s actually a really great deal...”

He then launched into a full interrogation. Was she going somewhere without him? What did she need from Bath and Body Works that he couldn’t give her? She really shouldn’t even have an email if he couldn’t trust her with one. Why was she on the internet anyway? Was she hiding something from him?... and it went on and on and on. I sulked into my room with my dog. We always laid together while they fought. I stroked his silky black fur while we sat on my bed and asked him: “Will it ever get better, Brew?”. He turned his ears up and tilted his head to the side. I guess he didn’t know either.

One night my mom padded into my room while I was reading and sat on my bed. She seemed unusually solemn. “I’m going to get a Facebook account.” She said it with conviction, as if this was something that she would seriously need to discuss with me. I can imagine that any other

child might have laughed, or maybe they would've acted embarrassed. But I understood why this was a giant step for her. We both knew that there would be repercussions for this. But, right then, she didn't care. She was breaking away from the constricting hold my stepfather had on her. And because she wasn't allowed a job or any friends, I was the only person she could share the news with. I looked at my mother who took care of me, my mother who didn't really know everything, my mother who was taking a step to take on her world— she didn't seem so small.



I understood the words “drunk” and “alcoholic” at a very young age. I knew that alcohol made you sick, and my dad was really sick. On my scheduled visits with him he would drink, but I was used to that. It wasn't all bad. We watched Star Wars together, and I enjoyed it until he fell asleep drunk, and when I would attempt to wake him up he would yell at me.

“Briana! I was sleeping, that was rude. Now, leave me alone”

“Daddy, I'm bored. Let's play something.”

“Watch the movie” he said as he closed his eyes.

My poor mother was at a loss.

“Mommy, I don't like going to Daddy's. He drinks his beer and gets mean” I said with crocodile tears in my eyes.

“Baby, I know. Come here, let's talk.” She sat me on her lap and told me: “Mommy and Daddy are in court right now. If you don't go see him, I could get in a lot of trouble with the judge. If you don't see him, he might take you away from me. Do you understand?”

I didn't. I didn't understand why I had to go see my dad, but I did understand that I didn't want to be taken away from my mom. So every other weekend, I went. I watched Star Wars alone, and he slept. I didn't try to wake him up again.

Things got so much better before they got worse. My dad was in rehab. My mom told me he was there to get better, and I was as happy as I'd ever been in my 5 years of life. When we went to go see him he looked so different, so much happier. He had so much more energy. I'd never seen my dad like this before. He was giving me attention, something I'd wanted from him for as long as I could remember. That time in my life was like a sigh of relief. I assumed my dad would come back home, and I kept asking him when he would come live with us again. He never answered me.

When he graduated from rehab, my life was turned upside down yet again. He went to live with Hilary, not us. I never saw him anymore. He knocked on our door one day and asked to see me. He pulled me outside and said:

"Daddy's going far, far away, and you're never going to see me again. I love you from the bottom of my heart, don't forget that".

"But where are you going? Why?" I said through tears

"Far, far away. I love you. Goodbye, Briana."

I watched him drive away.



"I want to get a job. I'm lonely here. I'm by myself all day. I want to make some money so I can buy myself some makeup" my mom said this with hesitation, but she looked into my stepdad's dead eyes and said it straight to his face. I still admire her initial confidence, but he reacted like he

usually did: by using the Bible to make her feel bad. No dutiful wife would ever want to work, and if she considered herself a righteous woman of God, she shouldn't want to either.

“Do you realize what you're asking?” He questioned her.

“I just want some extra money and I want to be around people. Please. I'm sad here by myself.” Her tone was pitiful.

“Oh, so I don't make you happy? You spend more time with Briana than you do with me! A sinner, that's all you are. You'll be lucky if God has mercy on your soul. I gave you this life. You owe me. Where would you go without me? Huh? You'd be on the street is where you'd be. You should be thankful I ever took in a wretch like you...” I looked at my dog, and we started our walk to my room.

His words had a strong influence on my mother. She heard them every day and, soon enough, she believed them. Her days were spent on the couch. She stopped eating.

“Mom I'm making some mac and cheese. Do you want some? I can't eat it all by myself.”

“No sweetie, I don't think I can eat anything right now” was her consistent reply.

It felt like I was four years old again, trying to get her to eat some of my spaghetti. I looked at my mother, who no longer took care of me, who didn't know anything, who couldn't even take on my stepfather— she looked so small.



Years later my mom told me that she attempted to save her dead marriage with my father at the very end. She made a marriage counseling appointment and he agreed to come. He was late, but that wasn't surprising. My mom was sitting on the couch in the counselor's office; she was a pile of tears and dirty tissues. He walked in without looking at her and sat down.

The therapist asked: “What do each of you want from now moving forward?”

“I want to try and save this” my mom answered.

“And what do you want Patrick?”, said the therapist.

“I think it’s time I leave Lynn and Briana and make a new life for myself” my father answered.

The therapist told him to leave; my mom was a wreck. She told my mother in her fifteen years of counseling she had never seen that before. Maybe he felt a twinge of guilt, and that’s why he showed up at our door that night and told me he’d never see me again. I’m not sure, I never will be. But when my mom moved us away, I knew we were going to be okay.

My mom packed up all our things, and we moved in with her sister and my cousins. There were 6 of us total, crammed into a tiny trailer. The place reeked of dog piss and stale cigarettes, and it was far from clean, but my Aunt Lori cooked us dinner every night. I hated living in that box of a house, but I realized that that was what family was supposed to look like. My aunt didn’t make much money, but she brought us in and showed us unconditional love. Soon enough, my mom landed a decent job as an apartment manager; she was making enough money so we could move out of my aunt’s house. I got to help pick where we were going to live. I looked at my mother signing the papers to buy our house; my mother who was taking care of me, my mother who obviously still knew everything, my mother who I knew could take on the world— she looked so strong.

Later on, our lives molded into a routine. We were comfortable and stable. We started attending church and my mother found a single mom’s group she loved. That’s when she found the confidence to start dating. Her friends set up an online dating profile for her, and that’s when she found Dennis. A single man in Warsaw, Indiana. He would become my stepdad three months later.





The night we left my stepfather was the darkest night of my life. Everything was normal; I didn't expect anything but the usual screaming for the night. It actually seemed like things were getting better for a bit. As a part of survival, humans adapt to their surroundings, and that's what my mother and I did. We tried to make the best of the emotionally abusive situation we were in.

While she was cooking dinner, my stepdad was joking around with me. It was innocent enough. We were having a thumb war and he grabbed my arm.

"Ow that hurts", I said through laughter, "Okay you're really hurting me."

He didn't let go.

"Please stop, OW, please you're hurting me" I begged.

My mom stepped in, "Dennis stop!" She ripped his arm off of mine.

What followed was the usual overreaction. He asked us if we were accusing him of child abuse and said, "What are you going to do, call the cops? They'll never believe you". To this day I don't believe he meant to hurt me, but when he wouldn't let go of me and he wouldn't apologize, my anger began to simmer.

We had a prayer request book we passed around every night before dinner- a pitiful attempt by my mother to make things better. I was angry and passive aggressive, so I wrote down: "Pray for my arm". When he saw what I wrote, what followed was a nightmare. He began screaming like I've never seen him scream before. He slammed his hands on the kitchen table; it seemed like the whole house shook. He towered over me and boomed "WHAT?! ARE YOU ACCUSING ME OF HURTING YOU?! THIS IS MY HOUSE AND YOU WILL RESPECT ME!" That's when he raised his hand; I looked into his eyes and I saw pure rage. He's going to hit me, I thought to myself.

My mom stepped in front of me and retaliated: “YOU WILL NOT SPEAK TO HER LIKE THAT! GET AWAY FROM HER! STOP! I’M TIRED OF THIS!”, she turned to me, “Briana get in the car.”

Sobbing, I ran to our rusty minivan. She got in the driver’s seat minutes later.

“Where are we going?” I asked in between sobs.

“I don’t know yet”, she sounded unsure but calm.

I looked at my mother who was taking care of me, my mother who didn’t know everything, my mother who was taking on our world— she looked so righteous.