

# **PAYBACK**

*Sometimes karma takes so friggin' long, you have to step in and handle things yourself.  
The Girl on Fire Series*

A suspense-filled romantic crime thriller. A free book.

(Previously titled You Will Pay for Leaving Me.)

**By Eve Rabi**

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Excerpt from One Way or Another

Excerpt from Betrayed

Romantic Crime Thrillers by Eve Rabi

# PROLOGUE

SYDNEY AUSTRALIA

2012

Operator: "Police helpline, what is your emergency?"

Caller: "Eh, a woman, like, she's screaming her head off. Can you send the police? Please?"

Operator: "What seems to be the problem?"

Caller: "She says...she says that someone stole her car and stuff..."

Operator: "State and town please?"

Caller: "Eh, Sydney...St Ives..."

Operator: "Yeah, where about in St Ives?"

Caller: "Warrimoo Avenue, outside the eh, shops and stuff."

Operator: "Would that be...corner Dalton road and Warrimoo?"

Caller: "Eh, let me see...yeah, that's it."

Operator: "Is anybody hurt?"

Caller: "No. Just the baby."

Operator: "Baby? Did you say a baby was hurt?"

Caller: "No, no, she was *in* the car. The baby. Sorry, I'm just fifteen so..."

Operator: "She was in the...are you saying that the car was stolen *with* a baby in it?"

Caller: "Yeah. Can you hear her? The mother? She's screaming her head off like a ban—"

Operator: "Yes, I can. What's she saying?"

Caller: "She's saying...hold on...eh, she says she knows that it's her ex, like, he's behind it, and she's screaming and running up and down the street, going mental."

Operator: "O...kay. I need you to stay on the line. What's your name?"

Caller: "Carly. But my cell battery is dy—"

Operator: "Hello? Hello? Carly, can you hear me? Hello?"

# Chapter One

Sydney, Australia  
2012

The first time Tom hit me, I was eight months pregnant. Slapped me across the face so hard, I saw tiny white stars, even though I was indoors. I was twenty-two, he was thirty-five.

I was eight months pregnant and waddling like a duck; he was approximately one hundred and eighty pounds of solid muscle. He took part in triathlons, ran five kilometers every day, had wheatgrass and quinoa for breakfast, a green salad with no dressing for lunch, and usually ate lean chicken breast with three different colored vegetables for dinner.

Fit, disciplined, and focused – that was my husband.

Throughout my two years of marriage, I'd seen bursts of his rage – towards me and others, and his road-rage – now that was the worst – it terrified me. Especially since he liked to take on truck drivers. The bigger the truck, the greater his rage. Usually, people steered away from trucks, but not Tom; he took them on, provoked them until I was shaking with fear.

Deep down, I guess I did fear being hit by him one day, but I didn't expect it *that* day – the day of my second wedding anniversary.

I was so stunned by the slap, I didn't move away or try to defend myself. I just stood and gaped at him, one hand on my cheek, the other on my swollen belly.

"I take care of *everything!*" he hissed. "All you had to do was chill the Cristal, and you forget to do that. A small thing like that. Chill. The. Cristal – how hard is that, huh? Huh?"

To celebrate our wedding anniversary, Tom had invited eight couples to a four-course sit-down dinner at our house, located in the upscale suburbs of St Ives, Sydney.

He had hired caterers, waitstaff, and a barman. Like all of Tom's parties, it promised to be interesting, excessive, and showy.

It was true – all I had to do was chill the Cristal, as he had taken care of everything else, without consulting me once about anything. Not even asking me who I'd like to invite. Solo – that's how Tom operated.

I didn't mind. Tom was extremely capable, highly efficient, and most of all, he had flair. I didn't, so if I did make a suggestion for just about anything, he'd usually scoff at it and shred it to bits, making me feel like the hillbilly I was. So over time, I stopped suggesting or contributing, and left everything in Tom's highly capable hands. That suited him just fine.

With pregnancy hormones, my brain sometimes became a pile of mush, and I would walk into a room and forget why I was there. I often forgot which level I had parked my car on at the mall.

It annoyed the hell out of Tom as he called it foolish, and God knows, being as astute and intelligent as he was, he didn't suffer fools gladly.

As my pregnancy progressed, everything I did was foolish and stupid to him, and he became increasingly irritable with me, and finally, he hit me.

"See what you do to me!" he snarled, his nostrils flaring, his lips a thin white line. "You *make* me act like this."

After throwing me a look of disgust, he stood in front of the mirror, carefully adjusted his tie, straightened his five-foot-eight frame, and walked towards the door of our bedroom.

At the door, he paused and turned to look at me. “Put on a darker shade of lipstick, wear the necklace I bought you for Christmas, and be downstairs in five,” he said before he walked downstairs.

With my hand on my cheek, I sat on the bed, shrouded in disappointment and disbelief.

How could he hit me? I asked myself. How could he hit a *pregnant* woman? His pregnant wife – who does that?

There was no way I was going to go to his party after that. I would leave quietly through the back door before our guests arrived. I wouldn’t even *tell* him that I was leaving him. Fuck him and his party.

Just then the doorbell rang. Too late. Our guests had arrived.

“The place looks wonderful, Tom.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, it’s just fabulous, Tom. Marvelous. Where’s Arena?”

“She’ll be down in a sec,” I heard Tom say. “Honey, our guests have arrived,” he called in a sweet voice from the foot of the steps. “Arena, sweetheart?”

I panicked. *What do I do?* How could I possibly *not* show up when guests had already arrived? In all honesty, I’m ashamed to say, I chickened out. Feeling pressured, I decided I would go downstairs and be civil and courteous to Tom’s friends, but I would leave immediately after the party. If he tried to stop me, I would have it out with him and call the cops if I needed to. I may have been twenty-two years old, but I realized that Tom had crossed a line and I wasn’t going to accept it.

I scrambled up from my king-size bed and walked over to a mirror where I eyed my cheek, red from his slap.

I picked up some concealer and dotted it over the redness. Didn’t work. His imprint on my cheek and the welt showed through the concealer.

I tried green concealer. That did the trick and that was the first time I learned that green concealer worked better on bruises better than yellow or beige concealer.

Over the years I used a lot of green concealer, and I became an expert at concealing “flaws.”

Luckily, my deep mahogany hair was in a bob and fell in a sharp point two centimeters below my ears. (Styled as per Tom’s strict instructions. He ordered me to wear my hair *exactly* that way. He was in awe of Victoria Beckham.) That night, with the help of a little wax, I pulled the edges forward so that it covered my cheek. Just in case the green concealer let me down.

Then I went one step further and decided that if the concealer faded and someone enquired about the marks on my face, I would simply say that I had an allergy – a new facial that didn’t quite agree with me. (Over the years, my friends were surprised at how many facials didn’t agree with me.)

Still dazed, I adjusted my clothing, darkened my lipstick, put on the chunky gold necklace that Tom ordered me to wear, and waddled downstairs. As instructed.

When I reached the last stair of the spiral staircase of our 2.6-million-dollar home in Sydney, which had a spa, sauna, tennis court, and an Olympic-size pool, I plastered a smile on my disappointed lips and murmured greetings to our guests.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Tom watching me with elevated eyebrows, probably waiting to see if I would tell on him, or indicate marital discord in our supposedly perfect marriage.

I ignored him and focused on our guests. I would deal with the bastard later.

After a while, his eyebrows returned to normal and he moved towards me. As if nothing had happened, he slipped his arm around my waist. I stiffened, then casually tried to shrug it off, but he held on, his fingers digging into my side, tacitly warning me to behave, or else.

After our last guest had arrived, Tom rattled a knife on a Royal Doulton goblet. “Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time for me to give my beautiful wife her anniversary gift.”

With a fake smile plastered on my darkened lips, I allowed him to take my hand.

He led us all outside, where a silver BMW X60i E75 was parked in our driveway, a huge red bow on it. I knew that it cost more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, as I had gone car shopping with him weeks ago.

“For you, my love,” he said.

All eyes were on me, most of them filled with envy.

Overwhelmed by the slap and by the present, I remained mute.

He pinched my waist. Hard.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured quickly, feeling pressured to say *something*. It truly was a lovely vehicle, although the one I was driving, a Mercedes four-wheel drive, was just as beautiful.

I looked at him. “But, I didn’t get you anything, Tom.” My voice felt strained and high-pitched.

He hugged me. “You are my gift alone, Arena. You bring me so much joy, my love.”

“Aaaaawww!” I heard a guest mutter. “How sweet!”

My guests had no idea that less than an hour ago, this man had slapped his pregnant wife.

“And that’s not all,” he said and produced a pretty red-and-gold box. Tom opened it, revealing a chunky diamond bracelet. He slipped it onto my wrist, then kissed my hand and bowed obsequiously.

Back inside, gasps of delight and more unbridled envy abounded, which Tom seemed to visibly revel in.

Envy was Tom’s currency – his elixir of life. Without it, I do believe that he would have shriveled up and simply died.

Then he took me into his arms and once again, lovingly embraced me. When he kissed me, he threaded his fingers into my hair and slipped his tongue into my mouth. His kiss felt horrible – like sucking on raw steak. I felt awkward and uncomfortable, and I wanted him to stop the Broadway show. I was a lousy actress and a terrible leading lady for sure.

When I jerked slightly away, his fingers gripped my hair and pulled hard, a silent warning – *Play along or else*.

Having no choice, I became a supporting act in his show and felt like the phony I was.

Then the doorbell rang.

He released me and said, “Will you get that, darling?”

I was surprised, because Tom always answered the door. After a moment’s hesitation, I opened the door and caught my breath at the sight of the biggest bouquet of roses I had ever seen.

“For Mrs. Arena Botha,” the delivery guy said, struggling to carry the bouquet.

Again, the room echoed with oohs and ahhs!

Of course, I was not one bit impressed with any of his gifts. It was not that I was ungrateful. Sure, his gifts were lovely, but I would have preferred if he had given me the gifts that morning, when it was just the two of us, or if he had sent me the roses during the day.

These gifts were all about him and his ego – *Look at me. Look how successful I am. See what I can give my woman. Don’t you wish you were married to me instead of your husband? When*

*you leave here tonight, you're gonna wish you were Arena. You're gonna wish you were Tom Botha's wife.*

I did leave the house that night, but it wasn't because of Tom's slap. I went into early labor and had to be rushed to the hospital that very night. Three hours after our last guest had left, I held in my arms a beautiful blue-eyed boy called Warren, who became the silver lining in my life.

All thoughts of leaving Tom and ending our marriage went out the door after that. I continued living with Tom, starring in his Broadway shows and buying copious amounts of green concealer.

One word to describe living with Tom – suffocating.

Every time he was around, I felt like I had a pillow over my face. I dreaded the hour when he would walk through that door, and when he left the house, I felt like the pillow had been lifted from my face.

Weekends were the worst – the pillow seldom lifted, and unlike most people, Monday was my best friend. I looked forward to it.

The moment Tom left the house for work, I would let out a long sigh, make myself a cup of hot chocolate, and as the morning progressed, my shoulders would slowly drop from around my ears and I would smile.

My Sunday morning psalm: Monday my love, where are you?

## Chapter Two

The second time Tom hit me, Warren was eight months old.

Tom grabbed me by the hair and smashed my head against a door. I lay dazed on the floor while my baby screamed his head off. There were no tell-tale signs of the assault – no blood, no marks, just searing pain. It took me an hour to see one of everything again.

We had been arguing about my family. When we migrated to Australia from South Africa, Tom had promised that I could visit my mother and siblings every four months or so. Either that, or he promised to send plane tickets for them to visit us in Sydney.

Now that they wanted to see my baby, my mother's first grandchild, Tom wouldn't let me go to South Africa, and he flatly refused to send my mother a plane ticket.

My mother, being a pensioner, couldn't afford to pay her way to Australia, something Tom was aware of.

Seeing my misery, he said, "You want to go to South Africa, go! But you are not taking Warren with. Go yourself."

Of course I wouldn't leave my baby and go off to South Africa. But I had been diagnosed with postpartum depression and desperately needed my mother's help with the baby, even for just a little while. I felt isolated and alone in Australia, I was jumpy all the time and I cried easily.

In my heart, I knew that I wasn't a model mother – I wasn't serene and smiling beautifully like the moms in the Toddler S26 ads. Chewed-up nails, disheveled hair, sweat pants, dark rings around the eyes – that was me. (Bet you'd never see Victoria Beckham looking like that.)

Tom became a tyrant to live with. He was a neat freak and a perfectionist, and of course the house had to be a certain way, or he'd go ballistic and throw things around. I could cope with that when I didn't have a baby, but things had changed.

Tom refused to understand. It didn't matter that I had sleepless nights and that I was recovering from a caesarian section – everything had to continue being immaculate, organized, and perfect.

*A place for everything and everything in its place* – that was one of Tom's many mottos. (He had about sixty mottos that he lived by. That I eventually had to live by.)

My life became increasingly miserable.

The part I hated the most about my miserable existence – the bedroom. I hated the way he demanded sex just about every night, forced me into perverted positions, and the fact that he was insatiable.

I hated the way he roughed me up during sex, grabbed me by the hair, twisted my neck to kiss me; the way his hand fastened around my throat while he thrust vigorously into me; the way he took total control over my body and my soul, and dominated me in the harshest possible manner.

I hated the way he demanded I orgasm in record time, then got irritated when I didn't, the way I had to fake it just to please him, the way I broke down and cried in the bathroom so many times after I had sex with him – the man I had chosen to have and to hold.

That video of Pamela Anderson giving Tommy Lee a blow job – he forced me to watch it with him.

"I want *that*," he said, pausing the video at a certain point and pointing to Pam. "See that look in her eyes? See that? I want that. That babe, she *likes* it. She *wants* it. She's *begging* for it.

See? See? I want that, you hear? You better shape up, Arena, 'cause I *expect* nothing less than that. *Basic Instinct*, *9 ½ Weeks* – now that's what we should be having. You have to sweat, Arena. If you don't sweat during sex, you might as well be fucking your ... wife. ”

Everything he said didn't always make sense, but I never questioned him. I didn't care to; I just wanted it to be over. And ... never once did I sweat during sex. Not even a slight slick over my body.

If, while we were having sex, Warren cried, which was often, Tom wouldn't stop so that I could take care of our baby.

“I come first,” he'd declare in an angry voice. “Always. He must understand that. I am the man of the house. This is my house. I always get priority. Always. You have to teach him that early in life, or he's gonna get spoiled.”

Once, Warren cried so pitifully – I just couldn't take it anymore. In the middle of sex, I broke down and wept.

Tom got so mad at the sight of my tears; he withdrew from inside of me, stormed over to Warren, and yelled into my poor baby's face for about five minutes. “You just want attention all the time! You are such an attention seeker, you little wuss. Grow up, be a man!”

Warren got so scared, he started trembling and sobbed without a sound.

When I tried to protect Warren from Tom, he shoved me so hard, I fell back and bruised my tailbone. As I lay on the ground in agony, he grabbed Warren by the scruff of his neck. “Do you want to sleep on the balcony tonight? Cry one more time. I dare you. See how dark it is out there? That's where you will sleep all night *without* your mom.”

Warren didn't make a sound after that. Not even when I took him in my arms and tried to comfort him.

I knew I had to leave Tom. But how, I wondered? Where do I go? I had no money, and I knew that Tom would cancel my credit cards when I left. I had no family in Australia, no friends, and I was so young and green, I didn't know where to start. It was easier to just stay, so the idea of leaving Tom was shelved.

To keep the peace, I did everything I possibly could to please Tom. But his beatings, verbal and physical, took their toll on me. Day by day, my spirit slowly eroded. I became really unsure of myself, and I existed under a cloak of shame.

Shame that I was the kind of woman who allowed a man to walk all over me and to beat me. Shame that I wasn't strong enough to tell him to take a hike.

My confidence was almost nonexistent, and I felt fat, unattractive, stupid, and worthless.

How did I get to be like this? I kept asking myself.

As for sex – I hated it. If I never had sex again in my whole life, I would be the happiest woman alive, I concluded.

Just about every woman I knew would hate it if their husband had an affair, a mistress. Not me.

I prayed that he'd find someone, have a torrid sexual affair so that he could leave me alone.

All I wanted was to be a mom to my baby, and to not have to live in a state of constant stress.

Even though it was easier to stay with Tom, I kept thinking about leaving him, and I just couldn't get the thought out of my mind.

I realized that if he divorced me, he would have to give me half of everything. Then I remembered the prenup I signed. I didn't have a copy of it; Tom had it tucked away in his safe at work. But I knew clever Tom would make sure I got nothing from him. I was certain of that.

My future seemed bleak, uncertain – and feelings of hopelessness sapped away all my energy.

One day Warren was watching a television commercial for some pasta product. In the commercial, the father arrives home and says, “I’m home!” and his three kids rush to jump into his arms. They hug and kiss, after which the wife hugs and kisses the husband. The family appeared loving and so happy.

“Mom,” Warren said, his eyes fixed on the family.

“Yes, honey?”

“Do daddies really hug their children like that?”

I stopped what I was doing and looked at Warren. Tom never hugged Warren. In fact, he barely acknowledged Warren, and when he did talk to Warren, it was to scold him about something or berate him for being a sissy.

“Look, Mom.” Tears filled my eyes as I watched my son rewind the commercial and watch it again. Each time the children dived into their father’s arms, Warren chuckled. “See that?”

It was the saddest moment in my life. I scooped up my son and held him to my breast as fat tears rolled down my cheeks. That was the moment that broke me. That was also the moment that I decided, come what may, I was going to leave Tom. He didn’t deserve me or Warren.

It may have been the saddest moment in my life, but once I made a decision to leave Tom, I felt so much relief that it also became the happiest moment in my life.

## Chapter Three

I began to save some of my housekeeping money. Saved it in a jar in Warren's room, which he seldom went into. But maybe I was too transparent, because when I returned from shopping one day, Tom was seated at the dining table, the money from the money jar spread out before him. "What's this?" he demanded.

My heart sank at the bust. I scrambled my brain for an answer. "Oh, just teaching Warren how to save money," I said in what I hoped was a casual voice.

His eyes narrowed at me. "There's over a thousand dollars here. I counted."

He counted.

"Well, I told him that if we save over five thousand dollars, and if he didn't nag me for toys all the time, we would surprise Daddy and buy tickets to Disneyland."

"Disneyland or ... South Africa?" His tone of voice told me that he wasn't buying my story.

"What do you mean?"

For a few moments, he stared at me. Then he stood, scooped up all the money into the jar, and said, "I'll put it in the bank. It's safer there."

Devastated, I could only watch helplessly as he walked off with my hope, my freedom. It may only have been a thousand dollars to him, but to me it was everything.

After that, Tom watched me carefully and monitored every cent I spent. Wanted to see whatever I bought all the time. He had no problem with me buying stuff using the credit cards; it was just cash he didn't want me to have access to.

In fact, he loved it when I went shopping with my friends and bought tons of expensive and unnecessary stuff. When I returned home, he'd post-mortem my shopping expedition.

"Who'd you go with?"

"Did she see what you bought?"

"What did she say about it? Was she impressed?"

"Did she buy one too?"

As I said before, we had to have bigger, better, shinier, newer, or he wasn't happy. In his mind, Tom's life was one big race, one big competition, and he had to come first, had to win every race, all the time.

"Nobody remembers the person who came second," he always said. "To be noticed, you have to come first."

And he was a mean drunk. Whenever he got drunk, which he did after just two Johnny Walker Blue Labels because he hardly ate, he would lecture me on how fortunate I was.

"You are so lucky to have a husband like me. All your friends, they wish they had married me."

"If I were a woman, I'd be attracted to me, 'cause I am a *great* catch. No really, I am."

He was right; my superficial circle of friends thought he was something – man-extraordinaire, doting father (he was wonderful to Warren in the presence of people), loving husband (he always held my hand in public, looked deep into my eyes when we talked, coozied up to me in front of friends), successful businessman (he flaunted his money, paid when we took friends out to dinner, bought super expensive gifts for people), and a super-fit athlete, an iron man (he had a ton of trophies on display to prove it). *Don't you wish your husband was hot like mine?*

Meanwhile, with Tom monitoring my spending, my freedom eluded me, and that television commercial haunted me.

After much thought, I realized I needed a credit card to obtain my freedom. One that Tom didn't know about.

But I was not gainfully employed, so how did I get one? No bank would give me one. Instead of giving up, I decided I would find a way to obtain one. It would be a challenge, but one that I would overcome.

Out of sheer desperation, I lied on an application form about my employment status. Somehow, in a couple of months, I managed to secure myself a credit card! I was ecstatic.

The first step towards freedom. All because of a credit card with a measly limit of just five thousand dollars. To me, it was a key, and I treasured that key.

Now, Tom would search, and if he found the credit card, I would be in so much trouble. To prevent him from finding out, I put the card in a ziplock bag and stuck it in the freezer between the broccoli and spinach.

I went one step further and redirected all credit card mail to my post office box that I rented. Then I rented a storage facility in another suburb. I was excited by my baby steps. Tiny little steps towards my freedom. Hope blossomed inside of me, and it was responsible for the energy I suddenly had.

The first things I placed in my storage unit were certified copies of all Warren's and my documents. Then I started buying like crazy using Tom's credit cards. Bags, jewelry, clothing, designer jackets, designer boots – I went on major shopping sprees and chose expensive stuff.

Unlike most husbands, Tom didn't get upset at my spending; he was happy. "Glad to see you getting out of your slump," he said. "It's about time."

After showing Tom all my purchases, which he demanded to see, I would hang them up in my massive closet and quietly save all the wrapping from the items I purchased. In my storage locker, I saved every single wrapper, box, receipt, tag, manual – anything pertaining to the purchase.

After I left Tom, I would have no money, so I planned to sell the unused items on Ebay and use the money to live on. Because of the original wrapping and boxes, all the items would be brand new.

In my storage locker, I had a desk, a chair, and a laptop. Every second day, I would sit at the laptop and update my inventory. It was something I looked forward to.

Over a couple of months, I had amassed almost twenty grand worth of bags, jackets, shoes, dresses, make-up, toys, and soft furnishings. All designer.

Okay, so I would probably get half of what they were worth, but that would have to do. Until Warren was old enough for me to hold down a full-time job.

Even though I longed to use the money to go back to South Africa, I knew that if I left the country with Warren, Tom would, without hesitation, have me arrested. I would have to live in Sydney, so I needed to find a way to survive.

Each time I took a step towards my freedom, I got more energized, and the pillow moved farther and farther from my face.

Since I desperately needed support, I toyed with the idea of confiding in some of our friends. But Tom had me associating with people he deemed worthy of our friendship. People I found shallow and almost pretentious, and who made me feel small and inadequate. So in essence, I had no real friends, just shopping buddies. However, whenever one of my pretentious friends

received expensive jewelry, I made a point of telling Tom how wonderful her jewelry was and how much I admired it.

Lo and behold, my jealous and vain husband/abuser would better that – a bigger diamond, thicker gold, and more expensive. I would smile and store the present away, then stash the box and price tags in my precious storage facility.

The only hope I had in my life was my storage locker. It was like a shrine of freedom to me. After I visited my locker and worked on my inventory, my spirits always soared.

Once, I was driving home from my storage unit when Nicki Minaj's "Freedom" played on the radio. I pumped up the volume as tears filled my eyes. *I feel free, I feel freedom...*

I didn't mind the profanity – I just loved the chorus. When will I sing those words? *I feel free, I feel freedom...*

At the thought of being completely free of Tom, tears rolled down my cheeks. One day I would taste freedom. I would fly like a bird and soar with my baby on my back.

One day...

But for now, I would take comfort in the fact that I was already feeling free. *Somewhat* free.

## Chapter Four

I amped things up and regularly decluttered – cleared out my cupboards and Warren’s. “Donated” stuff to charity. Made a huge noise about it for Tom’s benefit. Updated and upgraded stuff around my entire house, to his delight. He loved it when I redecorated, especially since he got to choose everything new.

But I wasn’t donating to charity. All my old stuff was carted off to my storage locker. All the TVs, CD players, bedside lamps, kitchen utensils, furniture, and soft furnishings Tom thought I gave away were in my storage unit, ready for my new home. My nest was growing and freedom was within striking distance.

Tom did not want me on birth control, but God forbid I got pregnant while I was trying to escape his clutches, so quietly, I took a contraceptive injection.

But I experienced an adverse reaction to the injection and had to switch back to the pill, which I hid in my freezer next to my illicit credit card among the frozen Brussels sprouts and cauliflower. The freezer was coming in pretty handy these days. Who knew frozen vegetables could multitask?

My fear that he would find out my plans to leave him caused me such panic attacks that at times I threw up from nerves.

I knew that for some reason – and God knows why – Tom didn’t want to lose me. He couldn’t live without me for long. Never once did I kid myself that it was because he loved me too much. He only loved himself. It was the *control* that he needed. Without that control, he floundered.

He was a pretty guarded and private individual, so I didn’t know much about his childhood. But I knew that he had severed all ties with his family a long time ago. It became obvious very quickly that he was extremely jealous of the close relationship I had with my mom and my three siblings. He was especially jealous of my relationship with my darling brother Ritchie. Like most abusers, he had lured me away from my family so that he could control me.

Then disaster. During one of my visits to my doctor, he smiled and said, “Congratulations, Arena. You’re going to have a baby.”

“Wha... what?”

“You’re pregnant.”

“I can’t be!” I whispered. “No!”

Dr. Jackson’s smile vanished.

“No, no, no, no, no!” I cried.

My doctor stared slack-jawed as I broke down and cried in his office. Sobbed.

“Arena, what on earth is going on?” my doctor finally asked.

Dr. Jackson’s voice was so gentle that I felt like blurting, “I don’t want to have this baby. How can I possibly bring another child into this marriage when I live with a tyrant who terrorizes our three year old? Warren is not allowed to be a child, he is not allowed to leave toys around, he’s not allowed to have tantrums, he’s not allowed to run around barefoot. He’s constantly bullied and mocked by his father. He is forced to grow up quickly or face his cruel father’s wrath. I can’t have this baby, Doctor. Make it go away. Please.” That’s what I really wanted to say. But Dr. Jackson played squash with Tom every Friday, so...

“Talk to me, Arena.”

“Hormones,” I muttered and hurriedly left Dr. Jackson’s office.

Tom was ecstatic with the pregnancy and threw a lavish party, where he showered me with jewelry. This time, I accepted the jewelry with a smile. When I look back, I think Tom liked the idea of more kids simply because they displayed his virility, and they were nooses around my neck. Most importantly, they would keep me dependent on him.

From the moment he met me, he was always afraid of losing me. When we first met, I was carefree, but quite confident. He had to work really hard to get me, so it baffled me as to why he treated me the way he did.

It was a difficult pregnancy – I had several miscarriage scares, and I had to be admitted to the hospital at various stages of my pregnancy. No way could I leave Tom now. The noose tightened, and deep down, I resented this baby who had brought the pillow closer to my face.

Then, on a cold July morning, a beautiful, bouncy, blue-eyed angel with lips like rosebuds and skin like satin was placed in my arms.

She was the image of my sister, and I just melted as I held my heart in my arms for the second time in my life. All resentment of her flew out the window. She was so soft and delicate that I vowed never to let Tom harm her.

“We shall call her Sasha,” Tom announced. I had no say in the naming of either of my kids, whatsoever.

He didn’t hurt Sasha, but he grew increasingly impatient and mean towards Warren for no reason. When Warren would cry, he would call him dumb or sissy or stupid and offer him Sasha’s pacifier.

When I intervened, he would get furious, accuse me of taking Warren’s side, and then he’d terrorize Warren even further.

It was flabbergasting to realize that Tom didn’t see Warren as his son; he saw him as his competition, as another *man*.

One night, while reading a bedtime story to Warren, who had been crying earlier on, I stopped and whispered, “Warren, soon you, me, and Sasha, we’re going to leave this house and live away from Daddy.”

His eyes lit up. “Really, Mom?”

I nodded and put my finger to my lips. “Don’t tell Daddy, okay? Our little secret.”

He took my finger from my lips and tapped it to his. “You promise, Mom?”

“I promise, honey. And I’m even going to allow you a dog. A teeny one. Not right away, but soon after we settle down.”

His eyes filled with delight. “We gonna live without mean old Daddy?”

I nodded. “So when Daddy is mean, just remember that soon we are going to say bye-bye to him and live just by ourselves.”

“Then can I run around the house and play hide-and-seek in it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can I yell?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can I eat in the TV room?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can I...can I walk around without my shoes?”

“Absolutely!”

“I can?” He threw his arms around me and hugged me hard, and my heart ached for my son who wanted to kick off his shoes when he was inside his house.

After that, every night I would read him a quick bedtime story, then talk more about our life without Tom.

“Will I be able to leave my toys lying around?”

“While you are playing, yes!”

“Awesome, Mom.”

“Would I be able to...?”

It would be question after question, and he would eventually fall asleep with a smile on his face.

When Tom wasn't around, Warren and I packed a suitcase for him, stuff that he could take in a hurry, then hid the suitcase in the storage locker. Sasha's suitcase and mine were also packed and hidden. Only my jewelry couldn't be packed in advance. I worried about that, as I needed my jewelry so that I could sell it and survive.

In spite of my concerns, our freedom was so close that I became really excited. Because of that, I was able to tolerate Tom's continued abuse.

Having two kids drained me of energy, and I just wasn't able to look the part Tom wanted. I had not lost the baby weight, and because I was sleep-deprived, I didn't have the energy to exercise and be glamorous.

I would awake two to three times a night for Sasha, and then be up at 7 a.m. to give Tom his wheatgrass and quinoa, then get Warren ready for preschool and drive him to it. The day with baby Sasha was a blur and before I knew it, it was time to pick up Warren again. I was constantly exhausted.

That didn't sit well in Tom's perfect world. To him, my exhaustion and failure to look less than perfect was simply an excuse.

“Look at Victoria Beckham. She lost the weight like that!” He snapped his fingers. “She has *four* children, and yet she has an amazing figure. Four! How many children do you have?” He'd cup his hand to his ear. “Sorry, didn't hear you... what did you say...? Ah yes, two children. Not three, not four, just *two*. Oh, and let's not forget that you *don't* have a fashion empire to run.”

He didn't hesitate to criticize my appearance at every opportunity.

“Am I supposed to introduce you as my wife while you wear *that*?”

“What's with those granny shoes?”

“Are you wearing sweat pants again?”

“Look at Elizabeth Hurley – she lost the baby weight within weeks with that watercress soup or whatever. Why can't you? I'll google the recipe for you if you like.”

“How many children has Angelina got? Her own children?”

Berated, belittled, and beaten, I could no longer bear it. Sasha was three months old, Warren was four years old – it was time to leave this toxic environment, I decided.

The question was, when? How? Do I just walk out and leave him a note? Do I talk to him and say goodbye?

I didn't know just how to do it, so I floundered a bit.

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