

**ALREADY
GONE**

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I put up a good fight.

But once they get me on the ground, facedown, with the big guy holding my arms and pressing his weight into my back, there isn't much I can do. I call them every name I can think of, but they don't say a word. I tell them they can take my wallet, my car, anything they want, if they just get the fuck off me.

Still nothing.

I try to roll to the side, but the big guy grinds his knee into my spine and pulls up on my arms. My shoulder starts to slip in the socket and I scream, more out of frustration than pain.

Inside the bar, everyone is still drinking. Doug is telling stories about the sixties and getting high with the Beats, while the rest of the faculty listens and laughs and pretends to be impressed. I know this because up until five minutes ago, I was one of them.

Now I'm out here with these two, and I have no idea who they are.

I'd seen them earlier, sitting at the end of the bar and staring at our table, but I didn't think anything of it at the time. It was a quiet place, and Doug was loud. Everyone was staring. The only reason I noticed them at all was because of the jagged scar on the

little one's neck. It ran from one ear to the other like a swollen pink worm, bright and impressive.

After a couple drinks, I told everyone I had to get home to my wife. There were a few good-natured newlywed jokes that I waved off before getting up to leave. Someone, obviously drunk, said we should have all our department meetings in bars.

Everyone laughed.

As I walked out, I didn't see the two guys at the bar, and I didn't notice anyone following me. Once outside, everything was quiet and dark. There was a soft breeze passing through the trees lining the parking lot, and the late summer air felt cool against my skin.

I took the keys from my pocket and started walking. I was almost to my car when I heard footsteps coming up fast.

I turned, but it was too late.

One of them hit me across the face, hard, and for an instant everything faded. Then the pain focused me and I started swinging. It was two against one, but I still managed to get in a few good shots before they took me down.

Now I'm here.

This isn't the first time I've been jumped, and since I don't see a gun, I figure everything will be okay. A few bruises, wallet gone, nothing I can't walk away from.

Then I see the bolt cutters.

"What the f—"

Again, I try to struggle free, and again the big guy presses down on my back, harder this time, and all the air rushes out of my lungs. I can't breathe, and an explosion of tiny black flowers blooms behind my eyes. I taste the oiled surface of the asphalt on my lips and try to lift my head to see what's coming.

Behind me, the big guy says something in a language I don't recognize, then the man with the scar and the bolt cutters steps closer.

I try to say something, anything, but there is no air and no voice. Dark shadows creep in along the edges of my vision, and I know I'm close to passing out.

My lungs burn.

I barely notice the big guy prying my hand open.

I bite the insides of my cheeks so hard I taste blood. It brings me back, just a little, but it's enough.

I won't let myself pass out.

I feel the cold metal blades slide around my finger, and I close my eyes tight.

I won't pass out.

A second later, the man with the bolt cutters leans forward. There is a quick, hard movement, and I hear something snap, loud and wet.

The pain is stunning.

It screams up my arm and into my brain and then it is everywhere and I forget all about my lungs. Again, the dark shadows rush in from the edges like a flutter of wings, blinding me, turning the world black.

This time, I let them come.

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When I open my eyes, the big guy is standing over me wiping his hands with a small white towel. I'm on my back staring up at one of the streetlights in the parking lot. Hundreds of tiny bugs circle in the pale yellow glow. It makes me think of winter and snowfall.

The two men are searching the ground by my feet, ignoring me. A moment later, the one with the bolt cutters bends down and pushes my legs aside. When he stands, he's holding my severed finger by the tip.

The streetlight reflects clean and gold off the wedding ring just below the knuckle.

I want to stand. I want to tell them not to take my ring, but I can't find the words. I try to sit up, but the pain in my ribs pushes me back.

I don't have the strength to scream.

I stay on the ground and listen to the breath rattle in my chest. I have to cough. I try my best to hold it in, but I can't, and this time I do scream.

The big guy bends down and reaches for my hand.

I don't even try to fight.

He takes the white towel he was using and presses it against the spot where my finger used to be, then he takes my other hand and holds it against the towel.

"Tight," he says.

My left hand is warm and wet. I pull it in and squeeze it to my chest. The towel is red with blood.

The big guy stands and says something to the man with the bolt cutters. The man nods and starts walking across the parking lot.

The big guy watches him go, then looks down at me and says, "Nothing personal, okay?"

The accent is thick, and I can't place it.

"Fuck you," I say.

It isn't much, but it's all I have.

The big guy smiles, turns, and is gone.

I stay on the ground, unable to move, staring up at the pale yellow light. I think about Diane and about the wedding ring I've worn for the past month, the one I'll probably never see again.

All at once, I feel like crying.

I'm not sure why.

I put up a good fight.