

THE ESCAPE

She was going to get out this time. As she raised herself from the bed to look at the time, Alice's hip cracked and she groaned. They had done something to her body, it seemed, something to make her sluggish. Stifling another sound, she threw back the itchy bedcovers and swung her legs over the side of the mattress. So far, so good. Her feet touched the cool tile floor and she stood up, bracing herself on the railing alongside the bed. She was up. Alice smiled to herself. That was one victory so far. She had many more to go.

Her body ached as she shuffled towards the dresser where her clothes were kept. This facility at least let her wear her own clothes. She had seen some of the other prisoners earlier in the night, and they were forced into hospital gowns. Alice dreaded the moment when that would happen to her. Those people had been completely unresponsive when Alice had whispered to them her plans of escape.

"I'm going tonight," she had said to one who used to be her friend, Maxine. "I'll get out and I'll get us all help, you'll see." Maxine hadn't said a word though, merely looked at her with pale blue eyes that seemed to stare right through her.

The doctors had come then and taken Maxine back to her room. It was time for her 'medication.' That's what they called all the experiments they performed on the helpless inhabitants of this place.

Alice pulled a sweater out of the dresser, and with difficulty, pulled it on over her shoulders. She looked down at her feet, bare against the white floors. She needed shoes. She looked around the sparsely decorated room. The guards sometimes came in to put things on her walls, but Alice never looked at them. It had to be another form of brainwashing, like they did. Still, at night when she couldn't sleep, Alice sometimes found herself staring at the white squares of paper on the ugly floral walls. But it was all a trick, she knew.

Bending down was hard, but Alice was able to pull her shoes from the corner. They were ugly, thick and black. They made her wear these. She wasn't sure why. It was all part of their twisted regime. She wished she knew what they were experimenting for, but the guards never said. They only whispered to each other when they thought Alice wasn't listening. Well, Alice was always listening. She had to escape. She wasn't sure how long she had been here, but tonight, she decided it had been long enough.

Alice sat down on the bed again with a soft thud. That hurt. Her bones felt weak and stiff. It was the drugs, she knew. The drugs they forced her to take day after day. There was no time to worry about that now though. She had bigger fish to fry. Like putting on her clunky shoes. She leaned forward and slipped her foot into the first of the shoes. Her whole body was sore, and she stifled another groan as she pulled the shoe on. The other one was even more difficult, but soon enough, Alice had done it.

She glanced at the clock again. The time was edging on three AM. Perfect. The night shift was a skeleton crew at best, and she knew for a fact that tonight, one of the guards hadn't shown up for his shift. He was supposed to be guarding her hall, and this time, there was no one there. If ever she had a chance to get out, it was now.

She rose from her spot on the bed and gathered her scant few belongings. She shoved them into the pockets of her sweater. They were nothing, really. Knickknacks and harmless little figurines, but it was all she owned anymore. It was *something*.

Her knees weak, she shuffled over to the door, bracing herself against the wall as she walked. There was a staircase down at the end of the hall. That would be her means of escape. She lurched forward, her footing unsteady, but she caught herself. Once the drugs wore off, she would have her body back to normal. At least, she hoped. What if whatever these doctors had done was permanent? Well, Alice would worry about that once she was free.

The door to her room was already open, a dim light flooding in from the hallway. Alice pulled it open and stepped out. There were no guards in sight. She breathed a sigh of relief and made her way down the hall, holding the railing along the wall as she went in order to support herself.

It seemed to take forever to get to the door that led to the stairs. She passed by Maxine's room on her way out and paused to send her a silent word of comfort. *"I'll get you out,"* she promised. *"I'll come back with help and break us all free."*

The stairs were close now, and Alice was almost there when she heard one of the guards call to another. "Hey, we need to start our rounds!"

Oh no. Rounds. She had forgotten that they checked on them every hour! Moving faster than she thought she could, Alice made it to the door. She pushed it open and looked at the concrete steps leading down. She had made it! She slipped out the door and let it close behind her before leaning heavily on the rail as she made her way down. It was an agonizing journey. Each step was painful, and the hallway was very cold. She was glad she had thought to bring a sweater. Alice wasn't even sure what month it was, but it must be close to winter.

A red exit sign was Alice's salvation! It was blurry, and she realized she had forgotten her glasses. Well, there was no going back now. She pushed open the door and stepped out into the cool night. An alarm blared suddenly and red lights flashed overhead. Alice gasped. She would be caught if she didn't run now. She had no idea what kind of guards they had outside the facility, but she didn't care. It was her only chance.

Moving as fast as her legs would allow her, she hurried from the door, which banged shut behind her, down an asphalt path that led alongside the building. She thought she could hear panicked voices from inside, but she might have been imagining things. Alice made her way along the path until she came to a group of dumpsters. This was perfect. She could hide here. Shivering in the cold, she pushed her way behind one of the tall green containers. There was barely any space there. It was lucky Alice had become so thin during her stay at the facility, or she might not have fit. Surely no one would think to look for her here.

She leaned against the wall, waiting for the alarm to stop. Long minutes passed before it did, and soon Alice was left in a ringing silence. She tried to keep her breathing quiet, though she was still breathless from her climb down the stairs. Moments later, just as her breathing had begun to return to normal, a siren booped. The police were here! They could save her! Alice almost stepped out from behind the dumpster before she heard voices. She stayed put, listening.

"Yes, Alice Shelton is the one missing, we aren't sure how she managed to get down the stairs, but she can't have gone far."

"Thank god it's only September. If she'd gone missing in the winter..."

"I know. We can't send any of our staff out to look, we're short tonight as it is. We need to keep the other residents calm."

“Of course. We’ll start the search right away.”

“Her family has been notified and they are coming to join the search as well.”

“Good, a familiar voice may help draw her out.”

The voices faded, and Alice swallowed. They were bringing in her family? Her mother and father would only want her back, wouldn’t they? They would rescue her from this prison! But then why would they help the facility? Maybe they were being threatened. Maybe the police were in on it too! Well, they wouldn’t catch her. No matter what she heard, even if her parents were screaming her name. She looked out from behind the dumpster, but no one else was there.

Seizing the opportunity, she made a break for it, moving as fast as her body would allow her. There was a wooded area not far from here, she could see the shadowy trees. If she made it there, she was certain she could escape. She crossed over a parking lot and made it to the grass. She started running, really more of a shamble, and caught hold of the trunk of one of the trees. She had made it!

She eased her way into the forest, using each tree to stabilize herself. As she walked further in, a voice called her name. “Alice!” it cried. “Mrs. Shelton!”

Alice shook her head. They wouldn’t catch her. Not when she was so close to getting away. She picked up the pace, haphazardly rushing through the trees. Suddenly, she was on the ground and she heard a snap, a throbbing pain in her elbow. She tried to push herself off the ground, but her arm wouldn’t move. She must have broken it in the fall. What had they done to her in that facility to make her bones so brittle? A fall like that would normally do nothing to a healthy body.

As she lay on the ground, the voices grew closer, calling her name, and other things.

“Alice!”

“Mrs. Shelton!”

“Mom!”

“Grandma! Where are you?”

Mom? Grandma? Who were they looking for? She wasn’t a mother, let alone a grandmother. Was she? Everything seemed fuzzy to her now as the pain in her arm grew. She thought about where she was. Would she rather die alone in the woods, or try to escape again from the facility? She shivered in the cold. Her arm hurt. So did her head where she had bumped it on the ground.

“Help!” she cried, making her choice. “Help me!” Her voice was feeble and cracked.

“Mom? Oh my god, Mom!” A middle-aged woman rushed up to her, shining a flashlight down on her face. “I found her! Over here! She needs help!”

One of the doctors ran over. “I’ll get the ambulance over here!” He rushed away.

“Who are you?” Alice demanded. “I don’t know you.”

“Yes you do, Mom,” said the woman, tears spilling from her eyes. “It’s me, it’s Sarah, your daughter.”

“I don’t have a daughter.”

She was spared from hearing anymore lies from the woman when a team of paramedics appeared with a stretcher. Gently, they lifted her from the ground onto it and began carrying her away. The woman, Sarah, followed along. She tried to take her hand, but Alice quickly pulled back. “Don’t touch me,” she spat.

Sarah's tears fell faster and a younger man appeared at her side. "Mom, it's me. This is Carter, my son. Your grandson. Remember? He and Julia just had a baby girl. You're a great-grandmother."

Alice stared at them. There was something familiar about them, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. "If you're my daughter, then you're going to get me out of here, right?" she demanded. She still didn't believe it, but maybe she could still escape!

"Mom, you live here. This is Pleasant Pines, remember? The nursing home?"

Nursing home? No, she wasn't old enough to be in a nursing home! She wasn't even married yet. Her fiance must have been looking for her for weeks now. "Where's Bruce?"

Sarah sighed heavily. "Dad died six years ago, Mom. He isn't here anymore."

The paramedics loaded the stretcher into the ambulance and Sarah went to climb in after her. "Ma'am?" One of the facility doctors had arrived. "She'll need to stay overnight at the hospital, but whenever you have the chance, I'd like to go over some new procedures we would like to put in place in case of another incident like this."

"Yes, of course, anything," said Sarah. "Her dementia isn't getting any better, then, is it?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. It rarely does. The medications we have her on may help a little bit, but there's nothing to be done for full-blown dementia."

"Okay, thank you. I'll follow the ambulance to the hospital."

Hearing that, the paramedics closed the doors on Alice and she was left with them in the back of the ambulance. "I'm not going back there," Alice said to one of them.

"Right now, we're taking you to the hospital," he said. "We're going to get that arm of yours all fixed up."

Alice nodded, going quiet. There was nothing she could do now. She was back in their clutches again. But someday, maybe soon, she would be able to make another attempt to get away. Someday, she would escape.