



Locked Inside

A SHORT STORY

by KJ Hutchings



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Do you remember the first time Warren accidentally locked me in the flat? I doubt you remember it as well as I do but you came straight round with the spare key after I rang you and you made a remark that I recall to this day: 'He locked you in, Emma, because he doesn't want anyone else to get to you. You're his princess in the tower.'

Afterwards, I watched you from the balcony as you walked across the car park and then reluctantly faced the glaring fact that has haunted me for so long.

Warren demands I love only him. The intensity of his love, which seems to far outweigh mine, sometimes frightens me. It's not just locked doors. It's a glass smashed against a pub wall if he thinks I'm so much as looking at another man and a diatribe in the taxi home. Sometimes I think his love will devour me whole. Sometimes I think I will never escape.

We've been together for three years, Warren and me. But even after all these years he still thinks I'll leave him for someone else and he's told me in great detail what he would do if that ever happened. Sometimes we talk ourselves in circles about it all and I feel so tired, so drained from trying to soothe and reassure, wishing I had someone to soothe and reassure me.

It's taken me a long time to get to know you, a gradual process of mutual effort. Warren would always push me up the stairs to his room as soon as I set foot in the door. I would call out a hello to you as he drummed me up the staircase and would hear your soft 'Hello, Emma' just before the door shut behind me.

But I found ways of talking to you. If I was staying the night – as I invariably did – I would leave Warren snoring into his pillow, pull on the voluminous dressing gown he'd bought me, and tiptoe downstairs to get a glass of water and see you. We would drink tea together, two fellow night owls, and talk about the stories in the newspaper, or books we had read and films we wanted to see. Warren has a slapdash opinion about everything, but we *discussed* things, didn't we? We really talked. I miss those softly lit late night chats.

You see, in the beginning I was drawn to you for a different, entirely innocent, reason. I just wanted to get to know you better. What I feel now would have been unthinkable back then.

It was inevitable that Warren would find me one night, displeasure darkening his sleepy face when he saw I was sitting in the living room chatting to you. When we went back to bed Warren fidgeted and announced that it wasn't right. It was improper. 'Can I trust you?' he demanded, snapping on the bedside light. I nearly laughed but stopped when I saw his expression.

'We were only talking, Warren,' I said. 'It's not –'

He interrupted. 'That's not what I said. I said, *Can I trust you?*'

'Yes. You know you can,' I replied, feeling tearful.

But he didn't trust me then and still doesn't. He trusts you, of course, but not me. That's why he locks the door, asks me who've I've seen or where I've been. He quite rightly trusts you, which is why he gave you a spare key.

It was not before long that Warren decided we should find a flat of our own. I thought it might be for the best, too. We invited you to dinner to thank you for helping us move; Warren insisted on doing all the cooking and sent me off to the shops with a long and precise list of ingredients: ground coriander, cardamom pods, ghee, coconut milk.

I had felt so nervous and excited my stomach was tender all day. Thankfully, the evening was a success. You gave me a kiss on the cheek and told me how lovely I looked and Warren gleamed under our praise as we polished off his culinary creation. As usual he drank too much beer and became louder and louder, but at least he was in a good mood. I was happiest when I could look at you and listen to your stories and jokes.

When I am halfway drunk, I feel braver about you. I can regard you without any shyness at all. At the end of that evening you put your arm around me and said, 'You're a lovely girl, Emma. I love you to bits.' I hope you remember. I replied that I loved you too. Warren was behind us with a beer can in his hand. 'What did you say that for?' he said with a frown. 'You know what he's like when he's pissed.' The smile slid off my face, but suddenly you roared with laughter and even Warren saw the funny side in the end.

I often say 'I love you' when I don't mean to, but I meant it that time even if you didn't. 'I love you, I love you' is what I say to Warren every day like a desperate mantra, hoping to hypnotise myself into truly believing it. I am duplicitous Emma, the girl who says one thing and thinks another.

These days, when Warren's face hangs above mine, I imagine it's your weight and rhythm I am welcoming. There are other lies: when I hear about your latest girlfriend I act pleased and after I meet her I say how nice she is, and how happy you seem. For once, Warren voices what I feel. He finds fault with them all and says so to your face.

My guilt has made me compliant. The flat is decorated to Warren's taste: I do not like the red walls or the Dali prints, but say nothing. We eat what he wants, watch films he likes and go to the pubs he prefers. His friends think I'm a doormat and I bet you think so too. It's funny what guilt can make you do.

When my father died last year, you were very kind to me. I felt dreadful for weeks and Warren hadn't known what to do with me, but I shall never forget the way you instinctively opened your arms to hug me. You smelt of warm cotton, cologne and cigarettes. I nestled there, sobbing; sobbing for everything I had lost and could not have.

Warren always felt he had to say something, such as reminding me my father walked out on me when I was a kid and rarely kept in touch, just like his mum left him, but you just held me and didn't say a word. You understood.

And then I felt Warren begin to prise my arms away, saying he was going to take me home. I didn't want to go. I felt numb as he led me out to the car and I do not remember getting into the lift or reaching our flat or even getting into bed.

Since then I have dreamt about you nearly every night. In the dreams you always ask me what I want and I begin to tell you but then I lose my voice. I wake up to see Warren's green stare bearing down on me as though he would like to unlock my mind and look inside. He says I mumble things in my sleep and I am terrified that he'll find me out and do all those things he said he would.

You'll be here soon. I look at the clock again: Warren will be hurtling along in his van, on his way to wherever with a delivery. Does he realise what he's done? Has it ever been accidental?

I make some tea and prepare small talk about the news, the weather as I wait, poised, for the clink of your key in the lock. You'll sit for a short time, long enough for me to mourn the differences I savour: your easy-going nature, your lined blue eyes, the flecks of grey at your temples. I'll thank you again and apologise for the inconvenience of it all, which I know you'll amiably brush aside.

I won't say what I want to say. I can't. That will remain locked inside me.

And as you get up to leave after drinking your tea, you'll shake your head and say that you really must have a word with your son about the way he keeps locking me in the flat.

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