

Running
Montana Lane (2018)

My phone rings. Thank goodness.

I had only been looking for it for the last five minutes. I answered it, sighing with, as it turned out, short lived relief.

‘You’re welcome.’

The unknown caller hung up and left me with the company of my empty apartment. Terrified, I scanned the empty room.

The curtains.

I moved to close them, almost tripping in my haste. They had been open. I dared not search the street, but I didn’t remember opening them. I turned to survey my studio again. My gaze flicked to my bed, to the space I had made into a makeshift office, and the kitchenette: clear.

You’re welcome, he had said.

I dashed into the kitchen. The only knife I owned lived in the near empty cutlery draw. Damn it, I thought, yanking it open and grabbing the inadequate weapon. Stalking over to the couch, I edged onto the comfortable three-seater, wrapping myself in a blanket and prepared for the long night ahead.

Dawn came in golden red streaks. My weak body and exhausted mind, I sat up. Scenarios of my slow, painful death filled my head, leaving me wide awake, all night. Quivering, I walked into the kitchen. 5:14am glowed the microwave clock. I clutched my knife; a permanent extension of my shaking hand. I was certain if someone walked into the view, I would either dropped it in fright or throw it, hoping for the best.

It wasn’t until close to seven o’clock, after a cup of camomile tea and some Valium, that I finally calmed down enough to have a shower, dress, and climb down the three flights of stairs to my garage, where my beat-up Corolla, complete with green P plates, was parked.

‘Hey Miss.’

The student who had spoken to me couldn’t have been older than fifteen, but he was polite enough not to yell to get my attention. I looked at him with gritty eyes and fought off another yawn. At least, my boss wasn’t working until three, and that was when I finished. So,

as bad days go, today was getting better. The fear that had gripped me throughout the night seemed like a bad dream.

My response to the student must not have been understandable; he looked confused and handed me a folded piece of paper.

‘A man told me to give this to you,’ he said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

I wasn’t surprised. Sometimes people found other’s bookmarks in the books and returned them to the front desk. Accepting the paper, I placed it on the desk, to sort out later.

Packing up at the end of my shift, I saw the paper again and opened it on a mission to find its owner. Instead, I found something else again: a threat. Or a love note, depending on who read it. To me, it was a threat.

The cursive writing was unique. So few could even read the script. Yet it was, for me, spelt out clear as day: my name, today’s date. It had been sitting there for hours. He knew where I worked. He knew where I lived. The fear clutched my heart again. What could I do? Who could I go to? Mum and Dad lived in America. My siblings wouldn’t take me seriously; they have their own lives anyway. I hadn’t lived here for long. Anyone who tried to make friends with me, I pushed away. Living in a city scared me at the best of times, especially one as big as Brisbane, too many people. Now, it was a whole new level of scared.

What did he want? What if I couldn’t give it to him? What if I could? Would I? The boss came in right on time, as usual: three o’clock. I left in a rush, ignoring the questions: ‘Are you alright?’ and ‘Where are you going?’ that he asked, most of them not even registering through the fear hazing my thoughts.

My car was untouched; no graffiti, notes, or people around. Relief. I still had my haven. The sound of the motor and wheels on gravel calmed my nerves. Driving. If I continued driving, I could get away. Restart somewhere else. Be rid of the fear of being watched, chased, stalked.

I laughed. Loud, clear, fake.

No. There would be nowhere safe from him. I could never stop running. I never would. The threats of my childhood were so much easier when my parents had been here. It wasn’t my fault I was different. It wasn’t.

I made a checklist. What I needed. Who should I call? Could I call anyone? I surmised that he could track my phone, so that had to be the first thing to go. Out the window, into the middle of the road. Bye-bye my many loved playlists, hello radio.

I needed cash. ATM. I didn’t have much saved, but it would have to do.

Next stop, apartment, but I had to be quick. I had to grab what I needed and go. No looking back. No electronics. No one to rely on.

On the road, packed with cash, fresh clothes, daily requirements, camping gear, and a new phone. Between the assorted bits and pieces I kept at home and a quick pit stop at the local camping store and servo, I had everything I needed in less than an hour.

I hadn't stopped running in five days. Fast food and sleeping in my car could only last so long. A call to Mum and Dad on my third day had rewarded me with cash sent to their PO Box. That was my next stop. It was a sixteen-hour drive from here. Almost across the entire eastern coast. And I would have to stay in the area until the package arrived. Thank goodness they hadn't asked too many questions, just if I was okay. They had told me this could happen when I enrolled in university. People don't like us, they had said. We're too different. We can do things they can't.

I remember thinking, yeah, right. It was easy for Mum and Dad. They had jobs overseas, scientists for themselves. I didn't even have anything special. Not like them. I couldn't breathe underwater. I couldn't touch fire and not burn. I couldn't even cook, for goodness sake. Why were they chasing me?

Alice Springs, Uluru, Perth. Anywhere away from the city. I needed to move. No sign of him. But the fear that had clutched me during that first night had turned into steely determination. I started the car again, for the billionth time in the last seven days. The red-orange sunset guided me west. Towards temporary safety, towards isolation. Away from people, away from the limited help I had.

It's been eighteen months. I've lived in caravan parks, the car, even a homeless shelter, always moving. I finally got an apartment in some beat up town in Western Australia. I've been living here for almost a month. I got a job at the local servo, bringing in some cash, once I'd used my limited supply. Part of me thought I was getting lazy, but I hadn't seen any sign of him for months. As I opened the door to my apartment, I sighed: peace.

A dozen roses sat on my kitchen table.

He had found me.