

Lifeline

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Lifeline

by [roane](#)

Summary

After being held hostage by the Sword of Islam in Iraq, Katie Dartmouth finds that nowhere in England feels safe anymore, unless she's with her rescuer.

"Katie, you don't have to go. You know you're welcome to stay here as long as you like."

Katie Dartmouth loaded her suitcase into the boot of the taxi, refusing her father's assistance. She was learning how to do things one-handed now. The doctors kept urging her to use her new prosthesis, but she hated it. It felt awkward, and it made the phantom pain in her missing left hand worse. And it felt like a lie, like a denial of what had happened in Iraq.

"Dad, I can't stay forever. I have to get back to my own life." They looked at each other for a long moment, then he pulled her into his arms for a hug.

"Call me if you need anything. And I mean anything." He brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "In fact, just call me. Let me know you're all right." Katie kissed him goodbye and got into the taxi.

#

She'd stayed with her parents for a month after leaving the hospital, unable to cope with being alone in her own flat. She opened the door, telling herself there was nothing to be afraid of here. The flat was empty now. Jason was long since gone. They'd only been living together for six months when she got the Iraq assignment, and that had been the end of that relationship.

When she closed the door behind her, she quickly locked it, and thought maybe there weren't enough locks on it to keep her safe.

#

Weeks went by. Living alone, she discovered, suited her. No one expected anything of her. She left the flat only for therapy sessions she couldn't get out of, and for physio--where she kept resisting learning how to use her prosthesis. Her therapist said not using it was a denial, that she was trying to ignore that the hand was gone, taken from her to punish the British government.

She hadn't slept through the night in two months. Every time she closed her eyes she heard gunfire. She heard the thud of a blade against wood. Her experience interviewing victims of war and other trauma had led her to believe that the human mind suppressed devastating memories.

She was wrong. The only moments of those days in Iraq that she did not remember with absolute hellish clarity were the ones she spent hovering in shock after they took her hand. Every other moment replayed over and over in her mind, from the false checkpoint outside Basra until the moment *he* gently laid her on a stretcher on an airstrip in Baghdad.

Only then things started to get fuzzy. She remembered the US hospital in Baghdad not at all, nor the flight back to London. Her memories didn't pick up again until she awoke in a London hospital bed screaming, with the words "Trust me," echoing in her ears.

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Now she knew what a drowning man sounded like. He was chained to a bed, gasping and sputtering when they brought her in and chained her backwards to a chair. She whimpered and mewled and couldn't stop the fear, not once she saw her captor raise the rod behind her.

"Tell me," he said.

Then the man on the bed spoke up. "Let me talk to her! It's her life, if she wants me to talk, she can tell me." The men carried her chair over to him, but she couldn't look at him, couldn't look at the blood and bruises on his face, not until he told her to. "Katie, Katie, look at me." Even bound and upside down he looked more in control than the free men in the room. His eyes were on hers, wide and serious. "Trust me." She was terrified, but she nodded.

"Just so you know, I'm gonna kill every single one of these bastards."

Then the rod landed on her back with agonising fire. While she screamed, she heard the interrogation continue.

"Tell me!"

"I'm sorry, sir, I cannot answer that question."

Another blow to her back. She tried to keep from screaming but couldn't.

"Tell me!"

His voice was breaking. "I'm sorry, sir, I cannot answer that question."

She heard him cursing their captors as the last blow landed. The world went dark to the sound of him screaming for them to leave her alone.

#

Katie woke with a gasp, covered in sweat. It was daylight outside. She sat up and scrubbed her face, trying to catch her breath. Once her heart stopped racing, she crawled out of bed.

She was in her kitchen making a cup of tea when the shakes hit. The mug shattered on the kitchen tile as she stumbled towards the bathroom. She just made it, vomiting up what little she'd eaten the night before. Katie clung to the toilet bowl until she felt able to stand. She washed her face, then caught sight of herself in the mirror. She looked ten years older, hair dirty and straggling around her face, bags under her eyes.

This had to stop.

After she cleaned up the mess in the kitchen, Katie found her mobile, and went digging through her bag for a particular scrap of paper. She took a deep breath, and dialled the

number.

He answered after two rings. "John Porter."

She almost hung up. "John. It's Katie... Katie Dartmouth."

"Are you all right? What's happened?" She heard the shift in his voice, like he was ready to dive back into hell to pull her out again.

"No, no, it's fine." She laughed a little nervously, and then lied. "I'm fine. I just wondered how you were."

"Fine," he said, and she somehow thought he was lying too. "We still haven't found any trace of As'ad."

"That's a good sign, isn't it?"

John was quiet for long enough that she knew he was debating another lie. "The desert is a big place," he said. "We might never find his body."

Neither of them spoke for several seconds, when he huffed out a dry laugh. "This is not why you called. Beautiful women don't usually call me to talk about dead bodies."

Katie felt a rush of warmth through her chest, and she smiled. "You get a lot of calls from beautiful women, do you?"

"Well," he drawled, and she laughed.

"Listen, are you free for coffee sometime?" she said. She wanted to follow it up with a comment about wanting to thank him, or wanting to check on him, but she just let the question stand alone.

"With you, yes," he said, and she could hear him smiling.

#

"No, I mean it," she said. "Cut it all off. I want it short."

The stylist looked at her dubiously, but nodded. Katie tried not to flinch from the snipping of scissors so close to her face. In her newest nightmares, she dreamt that she was being strangled, and each time she woke to find her hair wrapping around her face and neck.

If only all of her nightmares were so easily dispelled.

#

He stood up when he saw her walk into the coffee shop, his eyes widening. Katie didn't think she'd ever realised he was so tall. Then again, until he visited her in the hospital, she'd never

seen him really standing up straight.

"You've cut your hair," John said. She touched it nervously, feeling where it curled close to her scalp. "It's lovely," he said.

She meant to say hello. She meant to ask how he was doing, to sit down, to have coffee. She didn't mean to walk straight into his arms and start sniffing against his chest. His arms went around her like a reflex and for a split second she was back in that cell, but she felt safe. Mortified, she pulled away, wiping her eyes. "Oh god. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

John took her hand and guided her into a chair, crouching beside her and not letting go. "It's all right," he said, reaching up to brush a short curl out of her eyes. "This is you doing fine then, is it?" He smiled, and she had to smile back, like when he'd asked for her autograph.

Katie managed to get her tears under control and wiped the last of them away with a still-shaking hand. "I don't know what came over me. Truly."

He patted her knee and stood, pulling his chair around the table so he could sit next to her. "Can I get you some coffee? Tea?"

"Tea please," she said gratefully. She felt exposed sitting there, once he'd walked away to the counter.

Her skin crawled until he came back. He looked at her for a moment, tilted his head, then gestured for her to take his chair instead. "Sit here. Your back will be toward a wall. It'll be easier." She moved, and discovered he was right. "You haven't been out much since you came home, have you?" he asked.

"Not... much," she admitted, taking a sip of tea.

"It does get easier," he said, watching her.

"Does it? When?"

He shook his head and smiled. God, he looked so different here, wearing a smile instead of blood and desert grime. Katie didn't know if she would have recognised him, but for the eyes, the eyes she still saw in her dreams.

He asked her about the stories she covered in Iraq, and she found she was able to talk about them for the first time, even about the camera crew who'd become her family. The more they talked, the more the tension drained from her, so slowly she wasn't aware of it at first. Her mobile beeped. She checked it with an apologetic smile to see a message from her father, and that two hours had passed. She sent a quick reply, then looked up at John and smiled faintly.

"I've kept you here for hours. I should let you go." She stood up, and he stood as well.

"At least let me see you home." It was getting dark outside; that was reason enough for her.

#

When he kissed her, she was relieved. They were stood in the doorway of her apartment and she was debating inviting him in, when he leaned across the threshold. It saved her the trouble of asking him in when she could just pull him in. Katie locked the door behind him and then just held on while he kissed her, while he picked her up and carried her into her bedroom.

"You're sure?" he murmured against her neck, and she nodded. This was overdue. In the helicopter to Baghdad all she'd wanted to do was climb in his lap and cling, limp and wrung out but alive, so on fire with her own continued existence, a fire that demanded to be fed. He sat her on the edge of the bed and undressed her so carefully, the hands that she'd seen snap a man's neck cautious against her skin.

When he saw the healing scars on her back, he made a soft, miserable sound. "Katie, I'm so sorry." He touched a finger to one of them. She turned back to him and took his hand away from the scars, kissing his fingertips instead.

"You kept your promise," she said, reaching up to kiss him. "We're alive, and they're not."

When he finally lay her down and entered her, she started to cry again. He started to pull away with an alarmed look on his face. "Katie..."

She pulled him back down fiercely and wound her arm around his neck. "Don't you dare, don't you dare stop."

#

Afterwards, with his arms wrapped tight around her, she almost felt like herself again. She didn't flinch at the sound of the heat kicking on. She felt drowsy and relaxed for the first time since the kidnapping. She knew it was endorphins--endorphins and the security of knowing that she was with a man who'd killed to keep her safe before and would do it again. She knew it wouldn't last.

But for now, it was enough. Katie closed her eyes and fell asleep.

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