

Stella Samuel

About 800 Words

Phoenix, Arizona

SoriesbyStellaSamuel@gmail.com

*Five Locks for Comfort*

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Ethel wasn't safe. She felt it in her bones. Before moving in, she'd asked the building superintendent to install extra deadbolts for her. The night in her last apartment would live with her forever. Her life wouldn't get much better than memories of freedom before the wheelchair. People wouldn't treat her with any more kindness than the super. His short response when she requested additional safety measures for her hollow outer door left an unnecessary reminder. Her life didn't matter to them. She felt it in her bones.

"I cannot reach that high. I'm in a chair." Ethel straightened her back and sat taller in her chair. She wouldn't be taken advantage of again. Not in this lifetime. She would matter from here on out.

The super, an old man with hatred chiseled into the cracks on his face lacked empathy for Ethel's needs. He'd placed the top of three deadbolts too high for Ethel to reach while sitting in her chair, her only lifeline. She wouldn't be standing to unlock that top lock. It wouldn't be useful to her, and if anyone locked it, she'd be stranded inside her home unable to get herself to safety. Because her life didn't matter. Not to anyone.

The old man smirked and snorted then told Ethel, "I'll move it down. I can't help your wheelchair, you know."

She hadn't asked him to help her wheelchair. It didn't require help. She did. She needed many things. Most of all she needed to matter. But peace and safety topped her list.

Her new apartment lacked space to turn around. Ethel backed her chair to reposition. The broken stove in the studio kitchenette took up the only useable space for her chair. If it weren't there, she'd have a place to park her chair before moving forward again instead of wheeling the room in one direction from the useless coffee table to the useless mattress placed too low on the filthy floor. Ethel hadn't tried the mattress. She didn't want to be stranded next to the stench unable to get back into her chair. Instead, she slept in her chair every night ready to face whatever might stand in the doorway should it fly open as the one from her haunted memories. Memories where her life did not matter.

The super turned from her to move the top lock while Ethel wheeled in one direction, backward, to get out of his way, her head tilted down. Weakness was not a trait she allowed any man to see. Not anymore. Backed into her kitchenette with dust hanging off greasy walls, Ethel waited. It wasn't long before the super called her back over searching for satisfaction, so he could get back to his ancient twelve-inch black and white in the boiler room.

"Five, little miss. I gave you five locks. You should be safe here. You might not get out if there's a fire, but ain't no one comin' in." The super wiped his hands on a dirty gray rag.

"Thank you," Ethel whispered from against the wall opposite the door. Her voice trembled. She sat taller in her chair again.

The superintendent gathered his tools. It only took one screwdriver to add the locks, but he'd emptied his entire toolbox on her floor as if he were building her a new home altogether. He unlocked the five and left through the flimsy door.

From inside the dark one-room apartment, Ethel saw a glimpse of the world outside her safety net. Her five new deadbolts would save her from an outside world of criminals who'd broken her door and her spirit before her wheelchair did. But criminals weren't outside her door. Instead, from the chair in her new home, an old apartment where brown was not only the color but the theme, Ethel's eyes opened to color and life surrounding her. An open door across the hall revealed red walls and a low purple ceiling. Ethel, trapped in her mind as much as in her chair, closed the door to the world, beautiful colors and all. She would only matter within her net of safety, behind her five locks of comfort.

Ethel backed her wheelchair into her small space to close the door. With no force behind her push, the door slammed. Ethel wheeled closer again to lock the world away with her five new locks. The top lock was at the perfect height causing her to lean only slightly in her chair. With almost no effort, Ethel locked the next three locks touching her breasts to her lap as she bent over. The fifth lock, however, was below her feet. She'd never be able to lock it. She'd never reach it without falling forward out of her chair. Once more Ethel was reminded she did not matter. She felt it in her bones. One more abuse Ethel suffered from man.