

# FAINT OF HEART



JEFF STRAND

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## CHAPTER ONE

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"Wake up, you lazy bastards! Get your lard-filled asses out of bed and greet the sunny new day! Except that it's not sunny, because the freakin' sun hasn't even risen yet! Get the [bleep] up anyway! don't give a flying [bleep] if it's Saturday! If I have to be up, so do you! And call us and request a song so that we know what you lazy bastards want to listen to! Come on, pick up the [bleep]ing phone!"

Rebecca decided that she didn't much care for this weekend deejay, any more than she liked the way Gary left the alarm clock on the other side of the bedroom. His rationale was that actually having to get up to shut it off would keep him from endlessly hitting the snooze button every morning, which Rebecca believed that snooze alarms were a God-given right to everyone foolish enough to have a job that required getting out of bed.

Gary got up, tiptoed across the floor to make as little foot contact with the cold wood as possible, and shut off the alarm. His briefs had ridden up during the night and transformed themselves into makeshift thong. She whistled appreciatively.

"Don't look at me like I'm some piece of meat," Gary said, in mock annoyance. "I have a personality too, somewhere."

"You can't bite into a personality."

He tiptoed over to the closet. "Why do we keep this house so cold?"

"Because the sane members of this household stay in bed on weekends. You should join them."

"If I could cancel, I probably would." He took a towel down from the upper shelf. "Do I need to save you any hot water?"

She snorted. "Do I look like I'm getting up any time soon?"

"I thought maybe you might make me breakfast, pick out my clothes, pack the car for me..."

"Good. Healthy fantasizing keeps a marriage strong."

He grinned and tiptoed into the bathroom. Rebecca snuggled deeper into the covers. She loved cold autumn mornings when she didn't have to get up. She particularly loved cold autumn mornings when neither of them had to get up, but for some deranged reason Gary wanted to spend the weekend camping with a couple of his buddies. She couldn't even call it temporary insanity, since they'd been planning it for over a month.

Weirdos.

She lay in bed, listening to the shower. She was briefly tempted to sneak in there with him, but unfortunately an extremely cold floor stood between her and the man to whom she'd pledged her eternal love. It might as well have been the Grand Canyon. She wasn't going anywhere.

About ten minutes later, Gary stepped out of the bathroom, hair combed and a towel around his

waist. He hadn't shaved (probably going for the rugged outdoorsman look already) but he still looked damn good. Though he was on the thin side, playing racquetball three times a week was certainly keeping him in shape.

"Stop right there. That's an unauthorized towel," she informed him in a stern voice. "Drop immediately."

"No way. It's freezing out here. I thought you were going to fix breakfast and get my clothes and pack the car and all that stuff?"

"The blankets overpowered me."

Gary walked over to the dresser and took a pair of socks and clean underwear out of the top drawer. Then he dropped the towel.

Rebecca sucked in an exaggerated breath. "Oh, gracious, what is this heavenly sight before my eyes?" she asked, adopting a Southern belle accent. "It would appear to be my darling husband's ass. Glory be!"

Gary stepped into his briefs. "So what are your plans this weekend?"

"Well, first I thought I might sleep in another ten, fifteen hours. Then I figured I'd get up and have a daydream about going back to bed. Then I'd make my dream come true."

"You know," said Gary, sitting on the edge of the bed, "if you ever tried camping, you'd probably love it."

"You're joking, right?"

"Yes. You'd hate its guts." He began to put on his socks.

"Anyway, you wouldn't want me out there interfering with you and your buddies getting in touch with your masculine sides. All that belching and scratching and spitting and tugging. No place for a woman."

Gary patted her foot, or at least the three layers of blanket on top of her foot. "Are you going to be okay by yourself?"

Damn. Why had he brought that up?

Of course, it was a perfectly legitimate question, but not something she wanted to think about while she was all warm and comfy in bed. She didn't want to think about spending the weekend alone.

"I'll be fine."

"You sure? You won't be too scared?"

*Terrified...*

"I'm twenty-eight, I think I can handle staying by myself for a couple of days." She tried to keep the edge out of her voice, but didn't completely succeed.

He frowned. "Are you *sure* there's nobody you can stay with?"

"Gary, I'll be fine, really. I've stayed by myself before." *And jumped at every noise, and didn't sleep for a second, and nearly died of a heart attack every time the phone rang.*

"But not for an entire weekend."

"Again: Twenty-eight. Not six. Don't worry about me. I want you to have fun." She grinned. "No hurry up and get dressed!"

"I'll try to give you a call tonight. In case we have reception problems don't worry if I'm not able to but hopefully the cell phone should work fine."

He crawled over her, gave her a quick kiss, then got off the bed and went to get his clothes out of the closet. Rebecca was going to have a good time this weekend. She was going to sleep, watch television, read a book or two, and contribute nothing of any productive value whatsoever to society. She was a mature adult, she didn't believe in the Boogey Man, and she'd be perfectly fine staying home by herself for two short little days.

And one night.

God, she hated the dark...

\* \* \*

While Gary threw his camping gear into the back of the car, leaving barely enough room for the unfortunate guy who got stuck sitting in the back, Rebecca hurriedly got out of bed, scampered into the cold kitchen, and went to work preparing a bagel with grape jelly. Let it never be said that Rebecca Harpster was a woman who didn't know the meaning of sacrifice.

She peeked through the window at the outside thermometer. Thirty-two degrees. A typical October morning in interior Alaska, which meant that you'd have to be completely nuts to want to go camping. She and Gary had already been through one Alaskan winter, so she knew that *much* colder temperatures were on their way, but she was still a thin-blooded Florida girl at heart. At least there wasn't any snow yet.

She handed Gary the bagel as he walked back inside. "Wow, thanks!" he said. "I knew you loved me."

"Yes, I do." She gave him a kiss. Followed by another, longer one, with a bit of tongue.

He pulled away. "You're making it really difficult to go out wandering through the woods with a couple of ugly guys."

She kissed him again. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. Wretched temptress."

"Then ditch them. Tell them your wife was so alluring that you couldn't help yourself. They'll forgive you."

"That does sound fun. Maybe just a quickie..."

She gently shoved him away. "Go. You don't want to keep your friends waiting. Tell Scott and Doug that I said hi."

Gary gave her another kiss, a quick slap on the rear with his Hands of Ice, and left the house. She watched through the window as he got in the car and drove off.

She'd be fine. Perfectly fine.

In fact, she'd be fantastic. How often did she have weekends with nothing to do? No errands to run, no papers to grade, no social obligations to fulfill...this weekend was going to be absolute paradise.

And when it got dark outside, well, she'd turn on all the lights, pop in a Marx Brothers movie, and enjoy herself. She'd been married to Gary for five years, and if she couldn't handle him leaving for a weekend every half-decade, then she had serious problems.

She went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Now, see, if there was anything to *truly* be scared of during Gary's absence, it was her reflection. Her brown hair looked like somebody had taken an electric mixer to it. She also had a bit of dried drool on the right side of her mouth, and she couldn't stand to lose a good ten pounds (taking her to a place where the health experts said she could stand to lose another ten pounds, which was fine with her).

Well, she'd get rid of the drool, but the freaky hair was staying all weekend. And if she did start to get scared, she'd confront her fears by adding a couple of pounds to the amount she could stand to lose.

She didn't have any childhood traumas to work through, no scars to the psyche--she was just your standard-issue chickenshit, and she wasn't going to let that ruin her weekend.

## CHAPTER TWO

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Rebecca woke up again around eight-thirty. She lay in bed for another ten minutes, but the dark specter of guilt began to hover over her--God, her conscience was annoying--and she reluctantly got up. She cranked up the thermostat, took a long shower, brushed her teeth, and got dressed in sweatpants and a heavy t-shirt.

Then she got back in bed, leaned some pillows against the headboard, and sat up to read the smut romance novel she'd been looking forward to for the past couple of months. *Pauline and the Tailor*. Good stuff.

As the newly deflowered heroine strained toward the legendary heights of her blossoming womanhood and the hero's member throbbed (Gary had previously confirmed that a sensation throbbing in that particular region was abnormal and would prompt him to seek medical attention) Rebecca began to feel guilty again. Damn. It wasn't fair. She had an entire weekend to do absolutely nothing, to live the life of a lazy bon-bon gobbling housewife, and her brain wasn't going to let her enjoy it.

Maybe she'd paint the house.

No, probably not.

Somewhere there had to be a happy medium between painting the house and reading smut.

Maybe she'd paint smut on the house. After all, they were a good half-mile from the nearest neighbor, surrounded by enough trees that you couldn't even see the house from the road. Nobody would complain.

Or maybe she'd just entertain herself all day with this kind of pointless mental conversation. Gary could come home, give her an I-missed-you kiss, and then drive her to the local sanitarium.

Maybe if she watched some educational programming on television she'd be able to be a worthwhile lazy bum without feeling bad about it.

After all, *People's Court* taught important lessons about the legal system...

\* \* \*

By eleven, she was pretty much bored out of her mind, so she trashed her idea of staying inside all weekend and drove the twenty miles into Fairbanks to do some shopping. She ate lunch at the Mexican place she adored but that always gave Gary a good twenty minutes of bathroom time, bought two new blouses, and went to an art gallery, hoping that one of her students would be there and assume that was how she normally spent her weekends. None were, but she did get to see some fascinating artist

renderings of jellyfish, unless they were supposed to be pipe cleaners.

Then she went to see a matinee of the chick-flick she'd been unable to drag Gary to see because she thought the lead actress had weird lips. It was predictable but amusing and she left the theatre in a good mood.

As she pulled out of a fast food drive-thru a few minutes after six, it was just starting to get dark. She hoped Gary was having a good time camping, and not having *too* many beers. The only time she'd ever overindulged was in the presence of his buddies. At least she knew they weren't drunkenly stumbling around the woods with rifles. Worst-case scenario, they were playing flatulence games.

She drove home, singing along poorly to the classic rock playing on the radio. She pressed the button on the visor to open the garage door, drove inside...

...and suddenly had a creepy sensation that somebody was in the house.

This was nothing new.

There was no evidence to indicate that anybody had broken in, there was nothing even remotely out of the ordinary, and Rebecca knew perfectly well that nobody was inside waiting for her. The alarm would have gone off.

She also knew that she'd spend the next fifteen minutes searching the house, and would probably be uneasy for the rest of the night.

She shouldn't have gone anywhere.

Of course, she would have been just as paranoid if she'd been inside the entire time, so it didn't really matter, did it?

Maybe Gary would come home early.

She shut off the engine, closed the garage door, got out of the car, and proceeded to check every possible location that an intruder could conceivably be hiding in her home. And then double-checked them.

Nobody was inside.

She didn't feel any better.

She almost wished she and Gary kept a gun in the house. Unfortunately, guns scared her more than hidden intruders.

She turned on the television and watched the tail end of *Only You*, which was one of her all-time favorite movies even though most people didn't like it. But the romantic comedy did nothing to keep her from looking over her shoulder every thirty seconds. From checking the windows. From cringing every time she heard a noise, most of them probably imagined.

She should never have let Gary leave.

No. That was ridiculous. She'd be fine. If Gary ever suspected just how much of a scaredy-cat she was...well, he'd probably never leave her alone in the house ever again. Which would be nice, but he hadn't married her so he could be a babysitter. She didn't want him thinking she was some timi

cowardly wife who couldn't take care of herself.

Around nine o'clock, she brushed her teeth and prepared to get in some comfy pajamas and read some more delightful smut. She unbuttoned her pants, tugged out the bottom of her blouse, and then hesitated.

What if somebody was watching?

*Oh, for God's sake, there aren't even any goddamn windows in the bathroom!*

It didn't matter. She was still uncomfortable.

She'd be more vulnerable while she was naked.

If anybody was going to get her, they could do it in that second of darkness as she pulled her shirt over her head.

Which was, of course, completely absurd, but her entire life had been spent suffering from the absurd fears, and it didn't matter how many times she told herself she was being an idiot, she wasn't going to feel any less scared.

Remaining dressed, she got back in bed and resumed reading her novel. So she was pathetic. There were worse things in life than being pathetic.

Shouldn't Gary have called by now?

\* \* \*

At exactly ten o'clock, after about an hour of forcing herself not to check the clock every thirty seconds, she dialed his cell phone number. His voice mail came on after five rings, so she disconnected and dialed again. Still no answer.

It wasn't a big deal. There were plenty of perfectly good reasons why Gary might not have answered. Most likely the cell phone reception was crap. It often was. Or they were doing some night fishing, and he'd left it back at camp. The battery could have died. He could have dropped it in a lake. He may even have accidentally left it in the car.

He'd never *forget* to call, but he was out in the wilderness, and he couldn't exactly jog over to a pay phone to let her know he was all right.

Everything was fine.

She dialed once more and this time left a quick I-Just-Called-Because-I-Was-Thinking-About-You message, trying to keep her tone upbeat. She got out of bed, went into the bathroom, and shut and locked the door before she changed into her pajamas.

At least nobody could see how pathetic she was.

She hoped.

She returned to bed, snuggled under the covers, and lay there all night, unable to fall asleep.

If nothing else, an entirely sleepless night erased some of her guilt, and after a breakfast of cereal she finished off the smut book, which had a happy ending where the principal character decided to live in a threesome. Then she went into the den, booted up her laptop computer, and participated in a lively online conversation about standardized testing for about an hour.

Finally, unable to stifle her yawns any more, she lay on the couch and closed her eyes. At least by the daylight, she could fall asleep.

\* \* \*

Rebecca woke up about five hours later, just before noon, feeling barely refreshed but glad that she no longer had those five hours to sit around worrying. She tried to call Gary, but again there was no answer. She considered leaving another message and decided against it. She didn't want Scott and Doug to make fun of him.

For a moment she thought about calling the police, but immediately rejected that idea. They would laugh at her. Gary had said that he might not be able to get through, and he wasn't even due home until this evening, so there was absolutely, positively no need to worry unless he didn't come home tonight. Which he would. They'd kiss and laugh and have really good sex and she'd never even give him a hint of how scared she'd been alone in the house.

\* \* \*

By nine o'clock, he still hadn't come home.

He hadn't called, and he hadn't answered his cell phone.

So, he was running late. It wasn't like you could plan out a camping trip with split second precision. His cell phone wasn't working, and he was hurrying back to the car right now, while Scott and Doug asked him to please slow down because their backpacks were too heavy.

Nothing to get worried about. He hadn't given her a specific time that he was going to be home; just that he'd be home in the evening.

But it wasn't evening anymore. It was night.

Were they lost?

What if, God forbid, they'd let *Doug* lead the way? They could be at Mount Denali!

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Stop it. Nobody likes a crazy paranoid lady.* He'd probably be home by the time she finished ironing her clothes for tomorrow.

Rebecca ironed her clothes *very* slowly, but he still didn't show up. Maybe they'd had car trouble

Maybe they were hitchhiking along the side of the road right now.

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What kind of person would pick them up?

There was a knock at the door.

For several seconds she stood there, frozen. Then she snapped out of it and walked across the living room, feeling a bit sick to her stomach. She looked through the peephole in the door and saw a man with blond hair, maybe in his mid-thirties, standing on the porch. He wore jeans and a brown jacket.

"Who is it?" she asked.

As if aware that she was looking at him, the man reached into his jacket pocket and took out a badge. He held it up to the peephole. "State Troopers, ma'am."

The sick-to-her-stomach feeling turned into full-fledged nausea. "May I ask what this is about?" she inquired, trying to keep her voice formal and steady.

"Is this Mrs. Harpster?"

"Yes."

"Please open the door. It's about your husband."

## CHAPTER THREE

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"What happened to him?" she asked. In the time it took her to ask that question, a dozen ghastly scenarios flashed rapid-fire through her mind.

"Ma'am, this is not something we should discuss through a closed door."

She reached for the chain lock, and then hesitated. "May I have your name and badge number please?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your name and badge number. I won't be able to read it through the peephole."

"My name is Phillip Marsh. My badge number is 0133."

"Thank you. I need to verify something really quick, and I'll be right back."

"Ma'am, this is extremely urgent. Your husband may not have much time left."

Rebecca felt like she was going to vomit. She never let anybody, not even a uniformed State Trooper, much less a plainclothes cop, into her home without knowing exactly who it was, but if Gary was badly hurt...

She reached for the first lock.

Yet this State Trooper looked *wrong*, for some reason. Even with his image distorted through the peephole there was something almost predatory about him.

*Knock it off, you're just being paranoid, for God's sake! Gary could be dying!*

She unlocked the first bolt.

Did she see a hint of a smile?

Instead of unfastening the second lock, she ran into the kitchen and picked up the phone. She desperately needed to know what happened to Gary, but she also needed to know that this was a real police officer at her door.

No dial tone.

She tapped the plunger several times to make sure.

She'd tried to call Gary less than fifteen minutes ago. The phone had been working fine all weekend, and now, as soon as a strange man showed up on her doorstep, it stopped.

"Ma'am, I can't emphasize strongly enough how important it is for you to let me in. I understand your need for safety precautions, and under other circumstances I would praise you for this kind of behavior, but Gary has been seriously injured, and he may be dying as we speak, and I urgently need to bring you to the hospital."

"I'll be outside in one minute," she said. "I'll meet you in your car."

"Goddamn it, lady, your husband is gonna *die!*"

It was all Rebecca could do to hold in the scream. This was no cop.

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But he knew Gary's name. Maybe he'd killed him.

*Stop thinking that!*

Her cell phone was in her purse. Where the hell had she left it when she came home? For a split second her mind went blank.

Kitchen counter. Right next to her.

The man pounded on the door, but only a couple of times. Then there was a crash from the living room. Glass breaking. The alarm went off.

Rebecca grabbed her purse from the counter, snatched her keys from the hook, then opened the door to the garage, praying that the phony cop wouldn't hear her over the alarm and would waste time looking elsewhere in the house.

She hurried into the garage, got into the car, slid the key into the ignition, and turned on the engine—simple actions that felt like they took forever. She pressed the button to start the automatic garage door opener. In the movies, people could drive right through closed garage doors, but in real life she probably end up with a destroyed vehicle.

The garage door began to rise, moving at a slow speed that was excruciating to watch. She locked the car doors.

She put the car in reverse then tightly clenched the steering wheel as she waited for the garage door to lift enough to drive underneath.

The door to the kitchen flew open.

The man pointed a gun at her.

She ducked down as far as she could and slammed her foot on the accelerator. The car shot backward, the roof scraping against the bottom of the rising garage door.

A gunshot rang out. The windshield didn't explode into chunks of safety glass and no blood was jettisoned from her neck, so he didn't appear to have hit the vehicle.

But with the second shot the car swerved out of control. He'd definitely hit a tire.

The third shot hit another tire and the car jerked to the right, smashing sideways into a tree. The airbag deployed. She frantically put the car into drive and stomped on the gas pedal, but the car wouldn't move.

Rebecca flinched at the loud tap on the driver's side window. The man stood there, pointing the gun at her.

"Turn the engine off," he demanded.

She floored the gas pedal again, but the car still wasn't going anywhere, so she reluctantly took her foot away and turned off the engine.

*Shit...*

"Open the door," he said. He spoke very slowly and carefully, as if straining to keep his fury under control.

control.

Since all he'd have to do is shoot through the window and unlock it himself, she opened the door.

"Get out of the car. Now."

"Please don't hurt me, I--"

"Now! You've wasted enough of my time already! And you damn well better hope your neighbors don't show up."

Not taking her eyes off the man, she eased her way out of the car. His eyes, which never left her, were bloodshot and filled with rage.

"How do you shut that alarm off?"

"I can't."

"Lie to me again and I'll shoot your fucking teeth out. How do you shut it off?"

"I have to put in the keycode."

"So do it."

He gave her a violent shove and they hurried into the garage. The alarm keypad was mounted on the wall. As Rebecca reached for it, the man pressed his gun to the back of her head.

"Listen to me," he said, speaking loudly over the alarm. "If you put in anything but the 'everything is fine' code, it'll be really fucking gory. Got it?"

Rebecca hesitated, and then punched in the proper numbers on the keypad. The alarm shut off.

"I sincerely hope you made the right decision," the man said. "Stupid untrusting bitch. I'll laugh myself ass off if your husband *does* die before you see him."

Rebecca's eyes widened. "Gary's really hurt?"

The man grinned. "Ohhhhhh yeah. He's hurt bad."

"Where is he?"

"You may not ever find out. Because of your dumb stunt, we don't get to have the leisurely talk I planned. Now that you've put that code in, are they going to send somebody to investigate the alarm?"

Rebecca shook her head. "No." It was the truth, unfortunately.

"They had better not. If I see a cop, I'm going to start shooting, even if they're giving a parking ticket. Where's your cell phone?"

"It's in my purse."

"And where's your purse?"

"In the car."

"Let's go get it." Keeping his gun pointed at her, the man walked her back to the car. He reached inside and took the purse from where it rested on the passenger seat, then removed the cell phone. "I'd better not find a 911 call in your history. That would be terrible for both of us."

He pressed a couple of buttons on her phone and then nodded, apparently satisfied. He put the phone in his pocket then gestured with the gun. "My car's parked at the end of your driveway. Go."

moving. If it were up to me, I'd shoot you just for the hell of it, so don't give me any reason to give to that temptation."

Rebecca began to cry as she walked down the driveway, which wound around in such a way that she couldn't see the road until right before she reached the end of it. She desperately wanted to keep her tears contained, didn't want him to enjoy her weakness, but the best she could do was withhold actual sobs from the man. Her whole body shook, both from the cold and the fear.

The car was a beat-up, rusty blue thing that looked like it would barely be able to support the weight, much less drive. The man stepped past her, took out a set of keys, and unlocked the trunk.

"See, you were going to get to be all comfy up front, but now I'm a little concerned that people may come looking for you. So guess where you get to ride, sweetie? Hope you don't impale yourself on the tire iron." He threw open the trunk lid, and then pointed the gun at her once again. "Hurry up."

She considered succumbing to the unbearable urge to fall to her knees begging and pleading. Not because she thought it would do any good, but perhaps she could distract him enough to take him by surprise. She didn't have high hopes for her chances of beating him in a physical fight, but she had to try *something*, didn't she?

No, not a good idea. Her neighbors may not have thought anything of the gunshots (target practice wasn't exactly rare in this area), but then again, they might decide to come over and investigate. She doubted very much that this man was bluffing--he seemed like he'd happily shoot anybody who wandered over to see what was going on. And if she didn't go with him, she might never find out what happened to Gary.

She climbed into the trunk, squeezing next to a cold, damp garbage bag.

"Sorry about the smell," said the man. "It usually takes me a few days to remember to stop at the Dumpster."

He grinned, saluted her, and then slammed the lid of the trunk shut.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Alan was tempted to purposely hit a few bumps and potholes, just to rattle his captive, but he wasn't sure the piece of shit he was driving could take it. And then Stephen would have a hissy fit over the car, and Alan really wasn't in the mood to listen to that crap right now.

What a disaster. This should've been ridiculously easy: Pretend to be a cop then grab her when she opened the door. Granted, it would've been a better scam if Stephen's cheap-ass budget allowed for a real police car or even a fucking state trooper uniform, but still, he never anticipated that she would open up for a cop bearing news about her husband.

Hopefully the alarm and the gunshots wouldn't come back to bite him in the nuts. Of course, he had no intention of telling Stephen about the complications, but the bastard kept track of every bullet.

He could almost hear Stephen's cigarette-fried voice now, demanding to know how he could be so careless. What was he supposed to do besides break the living room window? Stand outside whacking off while she grabbed a cell phone and called for help?

Cell phones were a real pain in the ass in his line of business/pleasure. Apparently there was a way to block them, but Alan didn't much care for technology. Cutting phone lines was about as high-tech as he liked to get.

If Stephen gave him too much abuse, though, Alan swore the son of a bitch was going to get a knife in the eye. He'd taken about as much from that psycho as he could for a while. He was still kind of pissed about what happened three weeks ago, having to stand there getting Stephen's nasty saliva on his face while the guy popped a few dozen blood vessels screaming at him.

To be fair, he'd pretty much deserved that one. The kidnapping of Martha Irvin, an attractive forty-year-old, had gone perfectly, but she'd just been too damn tempting sitting there in the passenger seat with her hands bound and mascara smeared from crying. He'd tried to control himself, going so far as to punch her a few times to get it out of his system, but it hadn't worked. He'd pulled into a rest area, dragged her out of the car and into the woods, and laughed the entire twenty minutes he worked her over with his knife. She only struggled for three of them.

Stephen had been absolutely furious, especially when he discovered Alan's souvenirs. Alan had taken the verbal beating without protesting or making excuses...after all, it *had* been an uncool thing to do. But now Stephen was getting on his case constantly, and Alan was sick of it. If Stephen had a conniption fit over the complications with Rebecca, the bossy fuckhead might find himself getting sliced up for a hell of a lot longer than twenty minutes.

There was an exceptionally large pothole coming up, but Alan resisted the urge. With his luck, she really *would* impale herself on the tire iron, and then he'd have to--

"Shit!"

Alan jerked the steering wheel to the right, just barely avoiding the white cat in the center of the road. The right tires went off the shoulder of the road, and the car shot out of control as the rear tire burst. He slammed on the brakes and swerved to the left, trying to avoid going into the ditch. The remaining tires let out a horrible squeal as the car came to a stop.

Alan glanced up in the rearview mirror and watched the unharmed feline bound across the road. He chuckled in disbelief. He'd once slowly strangled a young woman to death with a leather belt while his fiancé watched helplessly through the clear plastic bag over his head, but he'd fucked up Stephen's car to avoid hitting a cat.

Oh well. It'd be good karma. He needed all the luck he could get.

He shut off the engine and got out of the car. He had to get the tire changed as fast as he could, hopefully before anybody drove by. Stephen's throat was going to be raw by the time he got done yelling tonight.

Alan walked around to the trunk and knocked on it three times with the handle of his pistol. "I'm opening the trunk. If you don't want to get shot, be quiet and don't move."

He inserted the key and braced himself. She did have a tire iron in there, but not enough room to maneuver. If she tried to attack him, he'd just slam the lid back down on her head.

He turned the key and opened the trunk. Rebecca lay in the fetal position, arms wrapped tight around her legs, eyes squeezed shut. Her face was heavily tear-stained. He poked her with the barrel of the gun. "Scoot."

She didn't move.

"Pretending I'm not here isn't going to make me go away," he informed her. "It's only going to make me angry. I dismember when I get angry." He'd thought of that line a couple of years ago, and used it whenever he could.

She opened her eyes.

"Sit up and get the spare tire out of there for me. And hurry up."

"I can't move my arms," she said.

"Yeah, well, it's your own fault that you had to leave without a coat. I'd suggest that you get your circulation going pretty damn quick."

He kept the gun pointed at her while she moved the sack of garbage out of the way and lifted the spare onto its side.

"Push it out of there," he said. She was obviously too petrified to try anything, but Alan wasn't taking any chances.

She rolled the tire over the rear of the trunk, and let it bounce off the bumper and onto the ground. Alan was surprised that the bumper didn't snap right off of this piece of crap car.

"Now the jack," he said. "Don't throw it."

She picked up the jack and dropped it onto the ground.

"Very good. Now curl up like you were before. That was adorable."

She ducked back down as he slammed the lid shut again.

He got the tire changed without anybody driving past and without the car falling on his foot. Se good karma for not squishing the cat.

\* \* \*

Rebecca had forced herself not to cry (again, at least) for the first few minutes of being a prisoner but really, what good would that do? She needed the release. The stench of rotten garbage made her want to throw up, but she *did* struggle to avoid that particular release, since she didn't know how long she'd have to remain in the trunk.

She'd sobbed and sobbed until the car went out of control. And when the man had opened the trunk giving her a potential (if extremely remote) chance to escape, she'd done nothing. Not a thing. She hadn't even opened her eyes until he forced her.

She was dead. And so was Gary.

Not that there was much she could do with a gun pointed at her, but she hadn't tried *anything*. She hadn't even *thought* of a plan. She wasn't just scared. She was a coward.

She deserved to die in this cold, dark trunk.

But Gary didn't deserve to die. She had to be strong for him. Keep herself alive long enough to think of a way out of this.

She gently blew on her fingers, trying to enjoy that tiny bit of warmth.

\* \* \*

When the car stopped again, Rebecca had no idea how long she'd been in there, except that she had no tears left and had to go to the bathroom so badly that it was painful.

Somebody knocked on the trunk. "You alive in there?" asked the kidnapper.

"Yes."

"Then close those eyes. If they're open when I lift the lid, you lose 'em."

Rebecca closed her eyes. The trunk lid opened, letting in even more cold air.

A different man with a deep, scratchy voice spoke. "Why is she in there without a coat? And you didn't even empty the garbage first?"

"I forgot about it."

"It's good to know that I'm paying somebody who's so attentive to the small details," said the second man, with a snort of contempt. "Get her out of there and bring her inside before she freezes

death."

---

"Yessah, massah."

"Don't be racist. It's not cute."

"Whatever."

Rebecca felt a cloth sack drop over her head. "I've got a gun pointed at your skull," said the man who'd kidnapped her, tapping her hard on the forehead with it. "So be nice, Becky."

He took her hand, and helped her as she climbed out of the trunk. She lost her balance on her frozen feet, but he steadied her before she fell.

"Whoa, Jesus, is she rank!" said the second man. "Even in the cold that stuff reeks. See what happens if you forget the small details? You see?"

"I'm serious, man, I'll shoot you. I'll do it."

The second man's voice turned deadly serious. "Don't threaten me. Not even if you're kidding."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

The first man led her inside, where it was much warmer. In fact, it felt like they had the furnace on full blast. He led her across a wooden floor, and then gently eased her down onto a sofa. The first man sat down next to her and pressed his gun against her side.

"Welcome, Rebecca," said the second man. "I hope this idiot didn't make things too uncomfortable for you."

She remained motionless and silent.

"Would you like to see where you are?"

After a moment, the man next to her pressed his gun more tightly against her side, hard enough that she let out a gasp. "He asked a question."

"Be careful," said the second man. "Don't damage her. Rebecca, would you like to see? You'll have to promise to behave yourself, but if you do, we'll let you see. Do you want that?"

She nodded. The sack was pulled from her head, and she immediately closed her eyes against the blinding light.

"Would you like anything? A drink, maybe? I could nuke some pizza if you want."

"Bathroom," she whispered.

"Sure. Alan, take her to the outhouse."

"No problem, *Stephen*. I guess if *Stephen* wants me to take her to the outhouse, then I'll do what *Stephen* wants."

"Good. Then do it."

Alan tapped Rebecca on the shoulder. "Uh, Becky, you kind of need your eyes for this part."

Slowly, she opened her eyes. The light still stung from spending so much time in complete darkness, but she could see that she was in a small cabin, virtually unfurnished except for the sofa and a wooden chair upon which the second man sat.

He was a large man, heavily muscled, with brown hair and acne scars. He wore a black leather jacket and thick glasses that were almost comical in appearance.

Almost.

Then she had a sudden realization that nearly brought her to her knees. She'd now seen both of the kidnapers. She'd seen inside their cabin. They'd used each other's names. No way were they going to let her live.

"Where's Gary?" she asked, voice trembling.

"Bathroom first," said Stephen. "Then everything will be explained."

Alan led her back outside and around the rear of the cabin. They were somewhere in the forest, but that did absolutely nothing to help pinpoint her location.

"There you go," he said, gesturing toward a rickety outhouse as if he were a maitre d' in a five-star restaurant showing her to her table. "I hope you'll find the accommodations to your liking. You could make an escape attempt through the hole, but I must warn madam that it doesn't get my highest recommendation. Be quick."

Rebecca opened the door and shut herself in. The door didn't have a lock, so she held it with one hand while she untied the string on her pajama bottoms with the other.

She hated outhouses, even under happier circumstances. Whereas the fear that bugs might crawl up onto you while you were using the toilet at home was a completely irrational fear, here it was very much a possibility. Spiders, ants, beetles, any of them could be crawling on the underside of the seat right now. Except that there wasn't a seat, just a hole in the wood.

In the rare instances when she'd used outhouses in the past, she always felt the need to hover over the seat. That wasn't going to be easy while holding the door shut.

She mentally cursed herself for worrying about that kind of thing when her husband was in serious danger.

Maybe even dead.

No, not dead, he couldn't be, but he certainly had more substantial problems than stressing about a kidnapper catching a glimpse of him peeing.

To distract herself, she thought of a story that she'd found absolutely hilarious as a child. She didn't know if they'd actually done this or not, but some friends had claimed to have set up a speaker underneath an outhouse. They'd hide with the microphone, wait for somebody to enter, give them a chance to get started then shout "Hey, people are working down here!" and wait for the victim to burst out of the outhouse, pants around the ankles.

She'd gotten in trouble at school several times over the years thinking of that story at improper moments, but it didn't make her feel any better now.

Rebecca managed the best she could, pulled up her pajama bottoms, and left the outhouse. Alan was waiting for her. "Everything come out okay?"

She ignored his comment. Alan chuckled and led her back into the cabin.

After she was seated on the couch again, Stephen handed her a cup. "Here's some hot chocolate for you," he said. "Some asshole forgot to bring marshmallows, but it'll warm you up."

"Thank you," Rebecca said. Thanking her kidnapper for bringing her a cup of hot cocoa was

ridiculous, but it was an unbreakable habit. She probably would've thanked Adolph Hitler for a show cap.

"So, Rebecca, do you miss your husband?" asked Stephen.

"Of course I do."

"Happy marriage? No divorce plans on the horizon?"

She shook her head.

"Good. I'm glad you like him. So let me answer the big questions that are probably on your mind."

Yes, he's alive, and yes, you can have him back."

She nearly wept with relief. She didn't care how much they wanted for ransom; she'd come up with the money, somehow.

"Here's the deal," said Stephen, leaning forward. "You have to prove that you're worthy to get him back."

"How do I prove that?"

"Gary and his buddies went through an absolute nightmare. Scary, scary stuff. Now, that was always the intention, of course, but even we didn't anticipate it going as far as it did. But your husband showed what he was made of. To be honest, he impressed the hell out of me. His buddies did all right for themselves, too, at least one of them did, though in the end...well, I don't want to give too much away. But Gary, no matter how much we messed him up, all he cared about was getting back to you."

"Is that fucked up or what?" asked Alan.

Stephen glared at him, and then returned his attention to Rebecca. "I've heard a lot of begging in my life. Hell, sometimes the pleading is the most satisfying part. Know what I usually do? I pretend to go along with it, offer a glimmer of hope that they've found my soft side, and then I laugh in their face. One woman was crying her eyes out, saying that she had a six-month-old baby at home that needed its mommy, and I honestly didn't feel a shred of remorse. It made it *more* fun to watch Alan struggle with the hacksaw."

"You're not drinking your hot chocolate," Alan noted.

Rebecca took a sip, burning her tongue.

"So when Gary told us that he needed to get back to you, it wasn't anything I hadn't heard before, but something about the way he said it just got me in the heart. Weirdest thing I've ever experienced. People spout a lot of superficial lovey-dovey crap, but this guy loves you. He deserves you. Believe me, he deserves you. The question is, can you prove that you deserve *him*?"

Rebecca nodded frantically. "Yes. I'll do anything."

Stephen leaned back in his seat, cracked his knuckles, and smiled with satisfaction. "Then you're off to a good start. It's simple, really. All you have to do is relive his entire nightmare, step by step, minute by minute. Go everywhere he went. See everything he saw. Do everything he did. And survive it."

Rebecca gaped at him. Was he serious? "I don't understand...I can't..."

"Now, now, don't ruin that good start you had. Gary wouldn't have used the word 'can't.' Gary would have said, yes, anything for my darling wife, where do I sign? Did I mention that he's going to die a very slow, excruciating death if you don't come through for him?"

Now Rebecca's legs were shaking. "How do I know he's still alive?" she asked.

"You don't. You go on faith. Gary would have gone on faith, I bet. You'll learn as you go. Just think of the whole thing as a game. In the right frame of mind, it could even be fun."

Rebecca stared at the larger man, stunned. How could they possibly expect her to live through an ordeal that Gary barely survived? And that Scott and Doug presumably didn't survive at all? It was impossible.

"You won't let him go," she said. "I've seen what you look like. I've seen your house."

Stephen let out a surprised laugh. "Give me some credit. This shack is *not* my house. And yeah, you've seen what we look like, but that doesn't matter because we're on our way out of the country. Consider this our farewell party."

"I don't believe you."

"Then leave. Leave now. But let me tell you, they won't find your husband anytime in the near future. And when they do, they'll be too busy puking their guts out to put him in the body bag. Make you a deal, though. If you get through the first part of the morning, the easy part, we'll throw you a bone. How's that sound?"

Rebecca shook her head. "I want the proof now."

"Well, you don't get the proof now. You go on faith or he dies. I will, however, be more than happy to provide you with proof when he's dead. Do you think you could identify one of his ribs?"

Rebecca looked into his eyes. Stephen wasn't kidding. He really did intend for her to relive Gary's weekend.

She couldn't possibly make it through this.

But she couldn't possibly refuse.

"All right," she said. "I'll do it."

"Great!" exclaimed Stephen. "That saves us having to shoot you right here. Now, we still have some more work to do, so my partner and I have a long night ahead of us. You, on the other hand, need some rest, so we'll be taking you to the guest bedroom. I apologize in advance for the quality of the mattress, and for having to lock you in the room, but some things just can't be helped."

\* \* \*

The room was empty save for the bed, lacking even a window. The wood looked good and strong, but she didn't see any way she could break through it. There were several locks on the outside of her door.

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