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## SERPENT

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She shifted her position for the hundredth time in as many minutes, hours, or days. Time meant nothing anymore as the darkness hid its passing, hid the passing of days and nights. It was impossible to get comfortable in the wet and muddy dark, so her movements were now mere reflex, nothing more. Her body, muscles, moved automatically out of constant pain and discomfort.

There had been a time when she'd still huddled against the pervasive cold as well, had held her knees to minimize the constant shivers, or had tried to pull together the ripped and torn tatters of her clothing to somehow shield her cold skin. Back when time still mattered and she'd still maintained a shred of hope that she'd be rescued.

The worst part wasn't the lack of hope or the uncertainty as to how long her ordeal would last. No, the worst part was the *certainty* that he—it—they—would return, and she would have to face the serpent once more.

\* \* \*

"Yes, dad, I *know*..." young Kaitlin King (or KK, as her friends called her) replied to the voice at the other end of her cell phone, for what seemed to her to be the thousandth time. "I'll be with friends and won't ride with any strangers."

Kaitlin paused to listen to her father's voice over the phone, feeling just a little annoyed and embarrassed. Her friends were all ready to go and were occasionally giggling over her side of the conversation. "I *know* there are crazy people, but I'm not *with* any of them at the moment. And yes, I promise to be home by ten. Good-bye!"

"Wow, your dad sure is overprotective, isn't he?" asked Josie, her best friend. "I mean, *my* dad *trusts* me and *never* gives me the third degree like that!"

"Yeah, I guess," Kaitlin responded. "I mean, he *knows* I'm smart, that I wouldn't do anything stupid, so you'd think he wouldn't worry so much."

As she finished speaking, Kaitlin noticed the brand-new SUV that had just pulled up to them in front of the school. She recognized Pete in the passenger seat but not the older man behind the wheel.

"Hey guys!," yelled Pete from the passenger seat, "check out the new ride!"

As Kaitlin, Josie and their friends ooh'd and ah'd over the new black Cadillac Escalade, Pete introduced the driver. "This here's Johnny. He's a friend of the family, and my godfather. He was in front of the house when I got your call and offered to take us all home from school in his new ride. Hop in!"

Josie and a few others immediately began to get in the shiny black SUV, but Kaitlin hesitated.

"Come on, KK!" Josie yelled to her. "It's Pete's *godfather*. Stop being so paranoid!"

Feeling the eyes of all her friends on her, and still feeling just a little bit embarrassed from the conversation with her dad, she shrugged her shoulders and hopped in with her friends. As soon as she was inside, she could tell it was a new car from the smell, the soft and immaculately clean leather seats, the plush carpets. She put on her seat belt and began happily chatting away with her friends. As they pulled away from the school, she caught a look into the eyes of Pete's godfather in the rear view mirror and couldn't help thinking to herself, "What kind of eyes he has."

\* \* \*

"Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.'"

Kaitlin hung her head, trying not to think about what would come next, trying not to think about anything.

"Hear the word of God, you cursed little bitch!" The backhanded slap she knew was coming, that always followed the 'sermons,' knocked her head back, causing her to involuntarily look at him. He no longer looked normal, as he had that day so long ago, in the car with her friends, before he ... before they were..... Now she knew him, knew the evil inside, the evil that permeated every part of him. Though she tried to look away, she still caught a glimpse of It as well, that which he called his serpent. He said it was a punishment, that God himself had granted man such a thing to punish women for their betrayal. He said that every time and repeated it yet again now.

"Bow down, woman, and accept the punishment of God's serpent!" The words rang hollow and mad, as they always had, but that made little difference, as the outcome was always the same. She closed her eyes, waiting for his hands to intertwine in her hair, to wrench back her head. And then she shivered, for this time she actually

thought she heard it hiss.

\* \* \*

Kaitlin looked away from the conversation with her friends for a moment and noticed something odd. She didn't recognize the neighborhood they were driving through or the street they were on.

"Excuse me, sir, but where are we?" she asked.

Pete turned away from the conversation at that moment, as well. "Yeah, Uncle Johnny, where are we? I thought we were dropping Josie off first."

"I just have to pick up something at my place real quick, a prescription I forgot to pick up earlier. It'll just take a second. As a matter of fact, here we are now."

He pulled into the driveway of an old two-story house with paint peeling on practically every surface. Kaitlin noticed that the other houses in the neighborhood looked similar, with dead front yards and peeling paint, some with old cars parked on the lawns.

"But, Uncle Johnny, this isn't your house. I've been to your house with my dad."

"You're right, Petey, this is my mother's old house. My prescriptions still arrive here by mail. I'll be right back."

As Pete's godfather got out of the car and loped up to the front door, the kids quickly lost interest and began talking again. So engrossed in their conversation were they, in fact, that they didn't notice when Pete's godfather returned, didn't notice what he held in his hands until it had bitten all of them except Kaitlin multiple times, hissing and rattling all the while amidst the young, high-pitched screams.

\* \* \*

"The LORD God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.'"

She didn't hang her head this time, more from weakness than anything else. The fact that she appeared to be looking at him, albeit with her head lolling listlessly to one side, spared her the perfunctory slap, though she'd long since stopped caring. In the beginning she'd prayed to God for rescue. Then, as rescue seemed less and less likely, she prayed for release, for an end to the horror, even if it was the end her friends had met. At least they weren't locked in the cold muddy darkness under the house, and forced to ... to....

Her prayers went unanswered though, so she'd stopped. Now she simply waited. At the times when she thought much of anything, which were becoming fewer and more fleeting, she hated herself for

it, wished she had the courage to end it all herself. And yet she didn't, possibly because of some vague and distant memory that told her it would be wrong. Or maybe it was just the apathy, the numbness she tried to wrap around herself long after she'd given up on the tattered remnants of her clothes.

As she felt the expected hand at the back of her head, she thought she heard the hissing once again, and this time she imagined that she saw the flicker of a pink forked tongue.

\* \* \*

"His name is John Walker. He's the godfather of one of the missing kids, Peter Lyndh. He's also a retired minister, one of those snake charmer Pentecostal types who use poisonous snakes in their church services. Peter's father met him during the first Gulf War, and they've been friends ever since."

As the police captain stopped speaking, the hands of the detectives went up. "Yes, detective Ybarra?"

"Why do we think this is the guy?"

"He went missing around the same time as the kids and hasn't been heard from since. He also has an arrest record related to the molestation of several children at his old church. The charges didn't stick, though, because the parents refused to press charges. Next question, Detective Sanders?"

"Where do we look for him?"

"Well, we've tried his house already. A neighbor mentioned something about him owning another house, his mother's old place, and we'll be requesting a search warrant as soon as we get an address. In the meantime, keep your eyes and ears open. I'd like to think those kids could still be alive."

\* \* \*

"And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.'"

Though she was almost too weak to notice much of anything, Kaitlin still noticed something different about him this time. His face was redder, pinched and puckered, as if he were in extreme pain. He also seemed in much more of a hurry, barely gasping out his Bible verse before releasing it. At which point even she gasped.

It was larger, much larger, and appeared to have scales. And, though she'd long wondered about her own sanity, the hiss sounded much louder, as well. Though she'd always wondered if she actually heard it, this time even *he* looked down. And then he screamed.

She was alone again moments later, locked away in the darkness, though she could still hear his continued screams from above. She also thought she smelled gasoline, though she couldn't be sure.

Then the screams abruptly stopped, and she was completely alone once again. Eventually she dozed off, only to be awoken several hours later by what sounded, impossibly and unbelievably, like sirens.

\* \* \*

"It's all right, Ms. King. My name is Detective Ybarra, and you're safe now. He's dead. Killed by one of his own snakes."

She jerked away from his initial contact, his offer of a helping hand out of the darkness. Then they brought in a female detective whom she allowed to touch her elbow, just to help her up through the trap door, before shaking off the contact.

"It also looks like he was getting ready to torch the place before he died," Detective Ybarra continued. "There's gasoline everywhere, so we'd better get you out of here." Then he and the female detective glanced away from her for a moment to look back into the living room.

She could see what they saw, looking between them. The large pink and scaly form, lying on the living room carpet, pulsating as it appeared to be digesting its last meal. Kaitlin was reminded of a picture she'd once seen, of a large snake in the Amazon that had swallowed an entire man whole.

"It doesn't look like any snake I've ever seen," commented the female detective, shivering as she said it.

While they stood in front of her, looking into the other room, Kaitlin noticed a pack of cigarettes and a lighter on the kitchen table. As she picked up the pack, removed a cigarette, placed it between her lips and proceeded to light it, she vaguely recalled all the trouble she'd gotten into the one time her father had caught her smoking.

The two detectives, who'd turned when they'd heard the lighter, watched in horror as she took a long drag and then flicked the lit cigarette in a tall and seemingly timeless arc onto the gasoline-soaked living room carpet in the next room.



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