

AJ Hampton

Frozen Terror

By AJ Hampton

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Thick trees lined either side of the one lane road. Their branches created a wavering canopy over the desolate highway. The wind gusted and closed the thin gap that exposed the heavy gray clouds that streaked across the night sky. Rusty orange leaves crackled in the late October storm. The storm's strength tore many of the autumn leaves from their limbs, forcing them to dance hazardously already thickly covered ground. A battered sedan sped over the cracked asphalt, forcing the fallen leaves to churn upwards.

The needle on the speedometer hovered at sixty and was slowly creeping upwards as the car veered left, hugging the curves of the road. A steady stream of heat pumped out of the vents and drew a rosy glow of warmth on the inhabitants' cheeks. With eyes that were only half focused on the road before her, Whitney Pierce's shoulders swayed back and forth to the soothing rhythm of the country song that drifted from her radio. Driving west from Atlanta, Rockmart's 107.1 Country was the only station she'd been about to pick up for the past 50 miles. Although she wasn't a country fan, it was starting to grow on her.

Slender fingers drummed the black steering wheel in an off beat fashion. As the chorus approached, Whitney gave a quick, distracted twist to the knob to crank up the volume. Her tires skimming over the road as she motored along. With the volume up, she could no longer hear the vibrations of her tires or the howling of the storm raging around her. The sun had set hours ago, and the lone stretch of road was encased in total darkness.

The bright red check engine light flared to life. Yet Whitney was too focused on the monotonous stretch of highway to notice. She sang off-key as the car zoomed past the small green highway sign that told her she'd just crossed into Rockmart, Georgia.

The engine started to stutter, but the sound was no competition for the volume of the radio. The light, which remained unnoticed, continued to blink in warning. Whitney's out of tune voice faded as her tawny eyes finally caught sight of the warning that shone through the dust on her dashboard.

"Shit," she muttered under her breath, scrambling to turn down the volume of the radio.

A sudden flash of panic welled and her heart quickened as she gripped the wheel tighter. Alone on the highway, Whitney heard nothing but the broken hum of her tires that bumped over the potholes. The sputtering knock of her engine grew louder, and the car started to jerk. One by one, the lights on her dash came on and her stomach plummeted.

"Oh come on!" Whitney shouted at the console, giving the plastic a good thump with her fist.

All the doors were shut, yet according to the lights they were ajar. The gas tank showed half full, but it was accented by a bright yellow light that indicated low fuel. Even her parking brake and blinkers were apparently all on. With sweaty palms firmly rooted on the wheel, her wipers squeaked to life, drawing back and forth across the dry windshield.

Watching in horror, lips parted in a silent gasp, Whitney traced the red needle on her speedometer as it fell drastically. In a frantic pace, her high-heeled foot pumped against the gas pedal as she pressed it as far as it would go. Despite the pressure on the throttle, the car slowed as the power steering locked the wheel. The squealing of the engine was amplified. It sounded like a tangled mass of broken gears grinding against

each another. She peered through the rapid back-forth motion of her wipers, her heart sinking at the wisps of gray smoke that curled from under the hood.

The needle on the speedometer dipped below ten miles per hour and she struggled--hands cranking one over the other—to pull her car to the side of the narrow road. A billow of red, crumpled leaves followed the sedan as she slowed to a stop. Stunned, breathless, and ready to weep, Whitney sat in silence. The wind gusted, picking up leaves and dragging them along the side of the car so it created a dull, scratching sound against the metal.

"Shit. Shit. Shit." Each word was punctuated by her closed fist hitting the wheel.

Whitney took a deep, steadying breath as she forced her car into park. Her heart hammered in her chest and she felt like it might explode at any second if she didn't find a paper bag to hyperventilate in. She drew in another breath as she felt her asthma tighten her chest uncomfortably. She broke into a sweat. Scrambling, her hand found the beige purse on the seat next to her and she fumbled through the contents. Lips stick, cell phone, eyeliner, it all scattered to the floor until she found her inhaler. The plastic felt cool between her lips as she drew in a deep breath of the medication and automatically she felt the panic subside.

There was a determined slant to her thin lips as she set her inhaler next to her and turned the keys in the ignition. Closing her eyes, she did her best to ignore the nasty grinding sound when the engine struggled, but failed, to turn over. She tried once more to get the engine to turn over. This time, she added an encouraging whisper, "Come on baby, you can do it..."

When that didn't work, she cursed low under her breath and turned the key with more vigor. She kept trying until fifteen minutes had passed and now nothing, not even the nasty grinding sound, could be heard from the car.

It was official, she thought with despair. The car was dead.

Closed fists banged against the steering wheel, forcing a cry from her lips as the pain spread up her wrists and into her elbows. The horn blared each time she made contact, and Whitney continued to beat on it until the unshed tears in her eyes clouded her vision. Warmth tracked down her cheeks and angrily, she wiped the tears away.

What was a little car trouble? Whitney thought. She'd taken auto shop in the ninth grade. She wasn't some blonde bimbo from California who knew nothing about cars; this she could handle. Hell, she changed her own oil for God's sake! She was independent! (According to her grandmother, *independent* was just another word for single).

The cold, end of autumn air slapped her in the face as Whitney stepped out of her car. Her normally pale cheeks, which had been rosy from the heat of her car, were now red with the stinging iciness of the air. Wind nipped at her heels as discarded leaves tickled over her feet. She shivered and wrapped her long, black wool coat around her slender frame. It seemed that the gusting of the storm had picked up speed the second she slammed her door closed. Wincing, the short, choppy golden strands of her hair whipped against her face as she huddled into the warmth of her jacket.

Over the smell of impending rain, Whitney could almost taste the acidic scent of something burning as she stopped a few feet in front of her car. Lower lip tucked between her teeth, she watched as light gray smoke continued to curl from under the hood and disappear into the of the night.

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Should she open it? What if there was fire under there? She knew there was something that you weren't supposed to check when your car was hot, but for the life of her she couldn't remember what it was. Was it the oil or the water? The only thing she knew for sure was that something bad happened when you did one of them.

Her teeth chattered and Whitney closed her eyes as she struggled to remember something, anything, from auto shop. The only thing that was coming to mind was Bradley Hart and the look in his warm brown eyes when he handed her a pencil. In detail, she remembered the contours of his ass in the blue coveralls they used to wear to protect their clothes. There was that and the feel of his lips against hers as they stole kisses before he'd sneak out of her bedroom window late at night.

"Focus," Whitney chastised as she slapped a flat palm against her forehead.

Her manual! She should look in her manual under the trouble shooting section. The triumphant thought was enough to put a bright smile on her blue tinted lips. Through the layers of leaves surrounding her, Whitney scrambled back to the car door, struggling in her two-inch heels.

Her triumphant smile quickly fell as she tugged on the door handle. What should have opened didn't. Maybe it was stuck? Tugging harder this time, her nails slipped from the handle, a frown pulling the corners of her mouth down, as she yanked at the door. It couldn't be, she thought. Surely, even she wasn't dumb enough to hit the automatic lock button when she got out of the car. She wasn't, right?

Frantic, she shot to the rear driver's side door and tried that handle. Locked. All but running to the other side of the car, Whitney found those doors to be locked as well.

"No!" Whitney cried as she let her head fall against the passenger side window.

The frosty-cold glass caused an aching sensation deep inside her head that she couldn't have cared less about. Opening her eyes, she stared past her forlorn reflection. With longing in her eyes she looked at her little black and silver cell phone that was on the floorboard along with her make-up.

Whitney straightened, as she looked left and then right down the long, dark stretch of highway. She could walk for help; get a tow truck or something. Yeah, she groused, that was feasible.

There was nothing out here except a broken down sign a few miles back that said she was in the middle of nowhere Georgia and miles of empty road stretched before her.

An icy drop of moisture splashed in the middle of her forehead, forcing her eyes up to the canopy of leaves that stood out so strikingly against the bleak night. The wind danced through the leaves above, exposing the sky every few seconds. The clouds, which passed from dull to dark gray seemingly before her eyes, morphed and twisted. Whatever blue sky she'd been treated to when she'd first entered Georgia, had vanished hours ago. The skyline now loomed dangerously. Unwelcoming.

Her long lashes fluttered as she blinked away raindrops. The creases on her forehead deepened with her frown. Her gaze flickered from the clouds to the barely paved road. The pavement started to darken with the splattering of the rain in the areas that weren't covered by leaves. Whitney watched the rain pour. Her gaze pointed towards the Gods who obviously had it out for her. She sighed with a dejected slump in her shoulders as the heavens opened the floodgates.

Back against her car, Whitney drew her hands threw the now soaked strands of her hair, slicking them out of her face. The drumming of rain echoed in her ears as she

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turned. She curved her shoulder against her door and looked to the road ahead. Through the haze of the downpour, a flash of movement forced her body upright.

There was a split second where time seemed to stop and the haze cleared enough for her to make out the foreign object crawling into the middle of the road. Heart pounding, Whitney struggled to breath past her icy panic. Terror crept along her spine, tightening her skin.

On hands a knees, what appeared to be a man froze in the middle of the highway. The creature was a contrasting void of color against the vibrant leaves blanketing the road. Pale and ashen, it resembled an animated corpse. Vacant eyes glowed iridescent in the night and penetrated straight through her. Frozen, she watched in horror as it snarled, saliva dripping from its jagged teeth. Lungs contracting, she longed to scream, but no sound came. Time crawled to a halt, and the moment was suspended as the horror in her built. The creatures head jerked back to the ground as if a demented puppeteer was controlling it. She blinked, hoping to clear her vision. When her eyes opened, the creature was gone.

Wheezing through the rain, the water sputtered from her lips as she scuttled back to her car. Gasping at the handle, her nails scrambled against the dull paint as she frantically pulled to get it open. Hands slipping from the slick surface she clawed in desperation. Unable to breath, and too scared to scream, she felt overwhelming fear clenching her gut into a knot.

Through the cold, frozen night, there was a sudden heavy press of warmth on her shoulder. Looking left, breath stolen from her lungs, she trailed the feeling over her shoulder until she found a hand gripping against her. A piercing scream sounded through

the night as she found her voice. Whitney jumped, jerking away from the stranger as her heels caught in the soft earth below her feet. Spinning, she fell to the ground; her arms propped outwards to break her fall.

Hot pain lanced through her hands as her palms scrapped against the gravel. She scrambled to get up and ignored the hot, sticky feel of blood as it dripped down her forearms. Her knees were skinned. There was a moment when the blood sliding down her shins was a warm comfort. By the time she regained her footing, the sensation was cold and sticky.

“I didn’t mean to startle you!” the stranger behind her shouted through the rain, his deep baritone voice an odd comfort.

Turning, she met his eyes straight on. She wiped the dirt from her hands on her coat before pushing the strands of her tangled hair out of her eyes. Standing before her in nothing except a half buttoned plaid shirt and pair of faded denim blue jeans, was an attractive man. Dark strands of hair were plastered to a broad forehead. Whitney traced his narrow nose with her eyes, making sure to take in the prominent slant and the gentle curve of his lips. Soft, blue eyes expressed apology as he offered her a hand through the rain.

Shaking her head, Whitney drew her coat against her body. The gesture was more for comfort than for warmth. The shirt he wore gapped at his chest, exposing the pale contours of muscles. Lower, following the path of his jeans, she found his bare, dirt smudged feet. She looked left and then right, the panic that never quite subsided rearing to life as Whitney found no car, and no trace of where this stranger had come from. Chills moved up her arms that had nothing to do with the temperature.

“I know this must look strange!” he shouted as he dropped his hand to his side. “I live just through these woods. My dog...he ran from the house and I chased after him. Shoes were an afterthought.”

A slow, seductive smile curved his lips and flashed a set of inset dimples that made his eyes sparkle. Whitney nodded as she blinked the rain from her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Slowly, her heart rate started to decrease and she let out a shaky laugh that vibrated through her.

“I’m sorry, I saw this *thing* in the road.” She shook her head at the ridiculous thoughts that passed through her mind. “I didn’t know what it was and then you just came out of nowhere. How far is it to town? My car broke down, and then I locked my keys inside, along with my cell phone. I need a tow truck.”

Relief forced a breath from her lungs when he nodded sympathetically and she felt the pressure in her chest subside.

“The next town isn’t for miles, but I just live about a quarter of mile through the forest. You’re welcome to dry off and use my phone if you’d like,” he offered, taking a slow, cautious step forward.

A harsh gust of wind forced an onslaught of rain into her face. Looking down the barren road and then back at the stranger, she nodded and extended her hand. What other choice did she have?

“I’d really appreciate that. I’m Whitney Pierce.”

Warm skin grazed hers, sparking instant heat between them as the size of his palm dwarfed hers when he accepted her handshake. Glittering eyes danced as he drew her gaze up to his face.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Dex.”

Her smile faltered for only a moment when Whitney withdrew her hand and took a shaky step forward. Leaves broke under her feet as she walked ahead and into the thicket of woods. Behind her, she heard Dex move through the same leaves and the gentle press of his hand on her lower back suddenly didn’t seem as comforting as it should have been. The dense canopy of the trees grew thicker as she moved deeper into the woods. The farther she went in, the more it felt like she was being swallowed alive. The road disappeared, and the only thing that remained was the heavy press of Dex’s hand on her back propelling her deeper.

Fear edged up her spine; it was a nasty feeling she couldn’t quite shake.

Close on her heels, the man behind her pushed forward and forced her to take another step into the woods. What she didn’t see was the curve of his lips melting into a menacing smile. His eyes flashed from a pale blue to an eerie white, the healthy glow of his skin fading into a dingy gray. Teeth grew, snarling. They pressed into a full lower lip, causing a stream of drool to fall down his chin as his fingers split into claws.

“We’re almost there,” Dex growled and his now deep, gravelly voice was as thick as his appetite.