

# COLD HEARTS

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A SHORT STORY

BY

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It was supposed to be a short cut. They had turned off the icy road and driven down a narrow rutted track. Then at the top of a slight incline, the car suddenly stopped. Headlights showed dense plantations of pine trees on either side. Janet wound down her window, 'I take it you know where we are, Robert?'

'Somewhere in the wilds of Surrey.'

'That *is* helpful. Aren't you going to get out and see what's wrong with Toby?' Toby was the name they had given their first and only car.

Robert laughed. 'What about the Surrey Puma? A lot of scary sightings recently.'

Janet quickly wound up her window.

'Toby's getting old,' Robert said, getting out.

Janet thought: 'As old as our marriage...' Toby had been a wedding-present from her parents. She remembered rushing over to Robert's flat with the wonderful news that her parents were buying them a new car. Robert, surly at discovering that it was only a Morris Minor whilst her parents drove a top-of-the-range BMW. Thereafter, he'd smirk to her friends: 'We call our car - Toby. Really quite decent of the old folks, buying us a jug when they've got a Venetian vase.'

Robert went through the motions of poking about under the bonnet. He mimed something nasty out there; his hands shielding his face from a ferocious cat then slid back into his seat, wiping his hands on a cloth. 'Think we hit a boulder just now.' He seemed to take their breakdown in his stride.

'At least, it's nice and snug in here,' he whispered, trying to cuddle up to his wife. Janet gave an involuntary shiver. After a moment's silence, he said, quite unsympathetically: 'I told you to bring your Winter coat.'

She answered that she was perfectly all right.

‘Yes... you certainly look *all right* in that cocktail dress. Quite stunning.’ He knew it had cost *Daddy* a small fortune. ‘Janet, confession time. Your very own Roberto’s been a rather silly boy. Forgot to fill the jug. Toby did not get his weekly drink.’

Janet rubbed her hands together. Something she did when extremely irritated. ‘I never forget your boiled egg, do I? How far are we from my parents?’

Robert laughed, saying that they were close enough if good enough.

Janet glanced at her husband. Why was he so cheerful? Upsets to routine normally threw him into a rage. She looked dubiously at her shoes. ‘If we knew the way, I suppose we could walk.’

‘Walk?’ Robert responded, incredulously. ‘Look about you. These trees are pretty impenetrable. And I don’t much fancy seeing a pair of horrible *beady* eyes giving me the once over.’

Janet shivered again. The car was definitely getting colder. ‘I suppose you didn’t think to bring your mobile with you?’

‘Never without it, pet. So why don’t we phone your Ma stroke Pa? Report our last known position and...’

‘No!’ she said, quickly. ‘They’ll think you’re an even bigger catastrophe than they do already... Besides Daddy won’t ever drive in the dark.’

Robert opened the door for a moment. ‘A few flakes of snow, don’t you know...’ After a pause he added: ‘Surprise, *I’ve* brought the thermos.’

Janet looked astonished. ‘You made up a thermos? It seems to me you knew we were going to break down.’

Robert was turning to her, smiling. ‘It *is* Winter, pet.’

It was ages since she had seen him so happy. Perhaps he was trying to, well... *Do away with her*. But why the hot thermos? And if he had really wanted to kill her he would have done it last year in Tunisia, in the middle of the desert, when they truly hated each other.

The coffee came out piping hot. How he'd enjoyed his year of meticulous planning; covering every eventuality. And what a brilliant stroke insisting that she wore her sensible woollen dress, knowing she would not, just to spite him.

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'It's nearly midnight, Janet. We've got to do something soon.'

On the radio there was a warning of heavy snowfalls in the area of the North Downs.

'If you want the truth...' he mumbled.

Janet bit her lip, for whenever Robert talked of truth, her heart sank.

'...if you want the truth, Ma stroke Pa had no idea we were coming.!' He smiled at Janet's shocked face. 'Wanted it to be a big surprise.' He picked up the torch, saying: 'I'm sure there's a short cut up yonder. Put the headlights on just for a minute to show me where I'm going, but whatever you do, don't run down the battery. My God! It's perishing!'

Janet wished only that he would shut the door. 'Yes, yes.' she said, impatiently. 'What will I do if you don't come back?'

'*Don't come back!*' he was incredulous. 'You don't expect me to stay out in this weather for more than twenty-minutes, do you?'

When the headlights eventually went off, Robert did a little dance of joy. The bliss of a well-laid plan; all these weeks of listening to weather forecasts... And now the