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## YOU KILLED ME FIRST

### **JOHN MARRS**



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For John Russell, the better half of John  $^{2}$ 

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If you burn your neighbour's house down, it doesn't make your house look any better.

Lou Holtz

If you're gonna be two-faced, at least make one of them pretty. Marilyn Monroe



#### PROLOGUE

5 NOVEMBER, BONFIRE NIGHT

It's a commotion of crackling, sputtering and popping noises that brings her back to life.

She opens her eyes but it's close to pitch-black in there, and when she tries to focus on anything, it's blurred. Her head is pounding like a pneumatic drill trying to penetrate concrete. How much did she have to drink last night, she wonders. She can't remember even the most hellish of hangovers being as debilitating as this. Or is it something more sinister? Has she been involved in an accident, injured her head and blacked out? Or did she suffer a stroke in her sleep? Is that why she can barely move or see a thing? Is her brain holding her body prisoner?

A scent of smoke follows. It's vague at first and she can't be sure if it's getting stronger because she's regaining her senses, or if something is actually on fire. Is it the house? The fear of God flashes through her. Her worst nightmare. She tries to sit up in her bed but she barely budges. She can feel her hands, fingers and feet moving but they won't lift up. Something is stopping them, a weight pushing her down, along with the rest of her body.

She's still so woozy, but panic, she learns, can be sobering. She tries to think rationally.

She's suddenly aware it isn't a mattress she's lying on. It's way too firm, icy cold, and her clothes are absorbing something wet.

Her vision is slowly returning, and she knows that wherever she is, she needs to get out of there. She curls her fingers in on themselves and realises there's something binding them together – it feels tight like cling film, but it won't stretch or tear. It's a heavier plastic wrap. She's wedged in more tightly than a tinned sardine. It's no accident she's here. Someone has put her here. Why can't she remember anything?

She is straddling the fine line between confusion and terror.

There's a terrifically loud explosion and she screams – or tries to. Something restricts her mouth from opening as it should. She's been gagged. She feels sick with fear, but knows that if she vomits, she'll likely choke on it. So she twists her head as far as she can from side to side, until she lowers the gag and it rests on her chin. 'Help me!' she yells as best she can, but even she knows how pathetic it sounds. However, the self-preservation instinct that's been both her downfall and her salvation all these years drives her on until another deafening explosion drowns out her whimpers.

She begins to cough. The smoke has grown slowly thicker. She wriggles and squirms to breathe in unpolluted air and it's only when her ear touches the ground that she feels something lodged inside it. Before she can figure out what it is, there are more thunderous outbursts, and through gaps in her prison, she spots the flickering of bright multicoloured lights.

Only then does it hit her with the force of a wrecking ball. She knows exactly where she is and why she can't escape.

It's November the fifth and the explosions are fireworks.

She is trapped in the middle of a burning bonfire.

She shrieks as she tosses back and forth, contorting her body. But the wrap she's cocooned inside limits her movements.

Suddenly, there's a vibrating in her pocket, like a phone, followed by a resounding ringing in her ears, and she realises what's lodged inside one of them – some kind of open-ear headphone device attached by a hook over the top. The ringing continues but she is powerless to answer it. Then she remembers it'll likely have a touch-sensitive tab that, once pressed, allows you to answer the call. If she can explain to whoever is trying to contact her what's happening, maybe they can help?

She rubs her ear upon the ground beneath her and nothing happens. She lifts her head up as far as she can and slams it down on the ground. It hurts her and it hasn't worked. She tries it again, and again, over and over, her ear throbbing with each collision. Meanwhile, all around her there are more and more explosions as the heat intensifies.

And then it happens. A voice manifests through the headphones.

'You're conscious then.'

'Please help me,' she cries, barely able to get her words out. 'Someone is trying to kill me and I need you to . . .'

Her voice trails off as the words sink in. *You're conscious then*. Whoever it is knows where she is.

'Please get me out of here,' she says.

'Do you think I'd go to all this trouble just to free you now?'

'I'll do anything,' she pleads in desperation.

This earns a laugh. And only then does she recognise her caller.

'I don't know what you think I did, but I'm sorry,' she sobs. 'I'm begging you, I'll do anything. Just help me.'

'I'm sorry, but I can't. You are going to burn alive in a bonfire of your own making.'

'What? Why? What did I do to you?'

The laugh is short and cuts like a blade.

'I'll tell you what you did. You killed me first.'