

Rehab Nightmare

By Robert V Aldrich

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Rebecca Almus was blindfolded and handcuffed to a wooden chair.

The room was hot and she could hear the buzz of a single light bulb overhead. Her head throbbed with pain and she was shaking nervously. One sandal had fallen off during the move and she felt her heel rub on the hard cement floor. A distant shriek made her look in that direction, muffled by the wall or distance or both, she couldn't tell. Looking did little good, though, thanks to the thick black blindfold.

She heard the squeak of hinges and a door opened, guessing by the gust of air, in front of her. She heard footsteps, more than one pair. "Rebecca Almus?" a man's voice asked. The young girl nodded. "Transferred to the Elmwood Short-term Treatment Facility." It sounded like he was reading off something. "Age 19."

"20," she corrected with a shaking voice.

The man took a moment, audibly comparing pages. "So it is," he smirked. "Happy birthday."

"Where am I?"

"Nowhere for long," the man insisted. She heard him turn away. "Get her prepped. We'll send her to Samara."

"For what?" Rebecca insisted, even as she shook in the chair. She wasn't answered. The men stepped out and she heard the door close. Rebecca's throbbing head didn't help her situation, nor did another shriek far away. She stammered in fear, then rocked forward and back, screaming as she was overwhelmed with hysteria.

Doing so caused the chair to crane forward and Rebecca fell. She planted on her shoulder, slamming painfully onto the floor. The wooden chair creaked as she tilted forward and broke as she landed. Rebecca flailed in a panic and shoved away from the broken pieces of the wood. She wormed her arms out from behind her back, under her legs and before her, yanking her blindfold off.

Big brown eyes blinked desperately as she adjusted to the comparatively bright light of the single dingy bulb overhead. She was in a simple square room, unfinished and solid. No windows or decorations, no furnishings at all. Only a door and a now-broken chair.

Rebecca scrambled up and tried to force the handcuffs off her wrists. The metal restraints bit into her dark skin as she tried to get free and they wouldn't give. Through throbbing, painful thoughts, she undid her belt around her thigh-length shorts. The clasp undone, she worked to use the post of the buckle to work open the handcuffs like she'd seen in a movie.

Beginner's luck paid off and the handcuff slid open. Rebecca laughed at her good fortune and re-secured her mall fashion accessory. She went to the door and looked around it. The wooden barrier was ill-fitting to the frame and she could see around it. There was light on the other side, but all she could clearly see were unfinished cement walls, just like her tiny room.

As she peeked, between door and frame, someone walked by. Rebecca nearly screamed but she caught her mouth with her hand before the sound escaped. The person walking by kept going and Rebecca shivered in fear. Another scream tore through the air, a little louder now that she was right by the door.

Rebecca looked to the handle of the door and found it a simple inner door, like the one she had on her bedroom at home. She undid her belt again and stuck the post of the buckle through, popping the lock open. She very quietly turned the handle, as she'd done a hundred times at home, and cracked the door. She heard no one nearby. In the distance, she heard terrifying sounds of torment and the occasional scream.

Rebecca opened the door a bit wider and she looked down the hall in either direction. An unfinished hall of solid concrete, it was ugly but also weather-worn, like some construction site abandoned halfway through the project. Gaps in the wall, where window installations were no doubt meant to be affixed, let in gorgeous summer air as well as the heat of the afternoon. Distant insects chirped, as did the occasional bird's call.

Rebecca slipped out of the door, checking down the hall. She saw no one and really not indication of where she was, only more doors. She stepped into the hall and went to her right while checking behind her to her left. She slipped to the next door and turned the lock, opening it. She found another room, just like hers, but with the light out and the chair absent.

Footsteps coming from behind. Rebecca yelped in fear and slipped into the room and pulled the door shut. Her hands shaking, she just narrowly pulled the door shut before she heard a man say, "She was admitted for cocaine use, so we may need to—" He fell silent and she heard rushing. She heard an electronic sound and the same man say, "The girl's escaped."

"The black girl?" came a voice over a walkie-talkie, sounding like the man who'd just come to see her. "She can't have gotten far. Get out into the complex and have them comb the grounds."

"Roger," he said. She heard running to her left.

Rebecca waited until their running had fallen silent and she slipped out again. She started down the hall to the next door. Unlocked, she opened

the door. Another girl was tied to the chair, shivering. She whimpered when she heard Rebecca open the door. She frantically shook her head and screamed, "No, please!"

"Shh!" Rebecca whispered. "I'm getting you out," she said. She ran behind the girl and found the cuffs identical to her own. She undid her belt and tilted her pelvis forward to use the post to unlock the cuffs. Giving up when that awkward posture didn't work, she slid her belt out from her shorts and released the girl. "Stay quiet," Rebecca told the girl as she pulled her blindfold off.

"Thank you!" the girl whispered hysterically, her pale skin showing signs of tears and mistreatment. A giant bruise was spread over the right eye. They heard a radio crackle and shouting not far away. The girl squealed and cowered on the chair, but Rebecca rushed to the door. She peeked through the gap and watched until men went running by. "What do they want?" the girl sobbed.

"I guess they're human traffickers," Rebecca guessed. She looked to the girl and said, "Get up." The girl kept crying, even as she did what she was told. "Look, this is a compound, okay?" Rebecca told the girl. "If we can get off the property, we can get to somewhere and get help."

"What help?" the girl cried. "My parents sent me here for using smack. Nobody will believe me."

Rebecca didn't argue. Instead, she took the girl's hands and said, "I'm getting out of here and you're coming with me." She went for the door and checked through the gap. Seeing no one, she opened it and went into the hall. The girl whimpered and resisted a bit but Rebecca pulled her out.

In the hall, the sounds of distant radio chatter seemed to be coming from everywhere. Rebecca looked left and right, then kept going right. She passed two more doors but found the tiny rooms inside empty. She gave up on checking anymore and kept going down the long hall until she arrived at an unfinished stairwell. Rebecca looked up and saw only flights of stairs extending up, any details obscured by the bright sunlight coming through the gaps in the wall. She looked down and saw one more flight with a window, and then a single flight in darkness before reaching the bottom.

Rebecca started down the stairs, only to hear footsteps. She looked down as men began to run up, three of them. She heard the chatter of radios and the men yelling. "Back, back, back," she said frantically, pushing the girl she was escorting back into the hall. She threw open the first door and shoved the girl inside, pulling the door shut behind her. She heard the men run across the hall. As she did, she heard one of them yell, "Floor Three looks clear."

Rebecca slipped back out the door and, holding the girl's hand, pulled her back for the stairs. As her partner in escape kept crying, Rebecca slipped down the stairs, listening as best she could. She looked down the whole time until she came to the window. She looked out and could see nothing but trees. She looked this way and that, but couldn't spot any indication of where they were.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," the girl cried hysterically.

"No, we can't be," Rebecca told her. "My parents put me in here only, like, twelve hours ago or something." She held the girl's hand and tugged her down the stairs, saying, "Come on!" They wound down the cardinal stairs until they reached the bottom. Rebecca ran for the door, only to hear approaching footsteps. She whirled the girl around and shoved her against the wall, then flattened against her, covering her mouth.

The wooden door was thrown open and men came running by, charging up the stairs right behind them. The girl squealed but the sound was lost as the men ran by. Rebecca waited until she heard them clear several flights of stairs, then she released her escort and checked around the door. They were on the bottom floor, with practically no walls obscuring their view of and access to the tree line.

Or the men patrolling it.

Armed men in slate gray military garb, combat vests, and machineguns paced about. The nearest of them touched his ear and spoke into his shoulder, then kept following some search pattern. Rebecca watched as the men moved about, keeping a tight guard on the tree line. "Guess we aren't going that way," she decided. She looked deeper into the building and darted through the door. Hands still clasped, her partner had no choice but to come with her.

Rebecca dashed down an unfinished gap between two hallways and found herself in some inner vestibule between corridors of some large building. With no finishings to gauge, she wasn't even sure what kind of building it was supposed to be, and thus had no idea which direction might lead to a reliable escape.

She went down this hall rather than the next, her feet scratching on the roof concrete, the edges of the hallway walls not far from either shoulder, and the high ceiling devoid of any light fixtures. Rebecca ran on until she arrived at a stairwell that led straight down. She considered it for a second but when she started to go down, her partner grabbed her hand. "No!" she pled. "Let's get out of here."

"We have to—" Rebecca began when light flooded the hallway.

"Found her!" yelled a man, just before shots tore through the air. Flashes of light and louds gunshots made both girls shriek. Rebecca ran for the stairs but the girl with her screamed again and pulled her from descending the stairs. Rather than fight her, Rebecca leapt beyond them and ran away from the guard for the far end of the hallway. Another door was waiting and Rebecca kicked it as more gunshots tore around her, sparks flying. She pulled her partner out and they burst into a large, open space with four men. All four froze when they saw Rebecca and the girl, then they began to scramble for their guns.

"No!" screamed the girl, holding up her hands in surrender.

Rebecca grabbed her hand and yanked her for the nearest wall. A man ran to intercept them, forgoing his gun for a tackle. Rebecca slammed into him hard with her shoulder and knocked him to the ground then ran into the field beyond. Dashing over rocky gravel embedded amongst grass, the two girls ran for all they were worth. Gunshots tore through the air and men yelled, chasing them for the trees.

Into the tree line, Rebecca leapt as gunshots ripped open the wooden trees around her. A cacophony of shots behind her spurred her on, her lungs burning and her muscles aching. She screamed as she ran, refusing to let go of the girl she'd rescued. They ran through a hilly wooden territory, thick with trees, until they spilled out onto a gravel embankment. Train tracks passed before them and the horn of a train was fast approaching. "NO!" the girl screamed but Rebecca squeezed her wrist even tighter and yanked her across the tracks. More gunshots ripped through the air but the train passed by before any of the men could cross the gravel ravine.

Rebecca fell to her hands and knees, panting faster than the clack of the train wheels behind her. She howled in pain and held her head, then screamed at herself. She scrambled to her feet and started to run, then turned back to her partner. "Come on!" she yelled.

"I can't!" the girl screamed, in equal pain.

Rebecca looked for the far end of the passing train. She couldn't see it but knew it couldn't be far off. "Come on, we gotta go!" she yelled at the girl. When she got no response, Rebecca ran back for her and grabbed her hand. "Come! On!" she yelled.

"No!" the girl screamed, even as Rebecca pulled her to her feet and into a run. The two girls kept rushing into the deep forest, losing their way amongst the trees.

The two ran until their lungs gave out, their legs next. Rebecca collapsed against a tree, then dropped to her knees, panting in agony. The girl behind her just flopped down on the grassy forest floor and wheezed. She tried to cry but didn't have the air.

Rebecca grabbed her head and turned around, her back to the tree, and slid down, grasping her skull. "Oh god!" she groaned, still gasping for air. Once she slumped to the ground and the bloody taste of her gulping for breath subsided, she licked her chapped lips and stared up at the sky. The orange sky passed the green leaves was vibrant but far away. Rebecca looked down at her hands and saw them shaking, but she wasn't sure at first if that was her hands or her vision.

"God, just leave me," the girl before her sobbed. "I want to die." Rebecca clamped her eyes shut and slumped back against the tree, trying to calm her heart. "Why are they doing this?"

"I guess human trafficking," Rebecca said. She licked her lips and opened her eyes. A thousand eyes were staring at her. She looked to her left but saw no one. To her right, she looked and saw just as many voyeurs. The forest was filled with an army of invisible spectators. Rebecca felt like she was being crushed under the weight of their staring. "We've got to go," she said, standing. "It's not safe in here."

"I can't move," the girl sobbed.

Rebecca pushed up against the tree and got to unsteady feet. Her sense of perspective felt off and she wasn't sure if she was wobbling or not. "What's your name?" The girl just cried. "What's your name?" she repeated, louder.

"Sandy," she seemed to admit. She sat up finally and tears streamed down her face. "Oh god, what are we going to do?"

Rebecca turned and faced the way they'd been running. She felt another pang of fear, that the forest was watching her. She looked around in the trees, then back the way they'd come. Absently, she began to brush her knotted hair with her fingers. "We gotta go." Sandy just cried, balling up. "Come on!" Rebecca said, bending down and grabbing her hand.

"I can't!" Sandy sobbed.

"Yes you can!" Rebecca insisted, pulling her to her feet. Once the blonde girl was standing, Rebecca held her hand and led her into the woods. The shadows were getting long and the ground was disappearing entirely beneath fallen spring leaves and the underbrush of the woods.

Rebecca wasn't sure how long she'd led the way but she knew that orange skies were turning red at one end and purple at the other. Stars were appearing overhead, tiny white dots of twinkling light watching the girls' every move.

As the woodland ground began to slope forward, the two girls reaching the apex of a ravine, they saw in the clearing below a small cement block. Little more than a sturdy one-room shack in the middle of the woods, it was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, with manicured grass within. A partial gravel driveway led away. "What's that?" Sandy asked, shivering a bit.

"I don't know," Rebecca said before she began to half-slide down the ravine. She and Sandy came into the floor with a bit of a run and stopped themselves just before the chain-link fence. A single lamp on the side of the building was burning so bright, it was nearly painful. Rebecca touched the fence and felt the jagged, partially rusted links. She followed it around to the front, noting the barbed wire atop.

At the front of the fence surrounding the little shack was a gate that seemed simply enough except for the heavy duty lock securing it. Rebecca chewed on her lip for a second, then slipped her belt off her shorts again. "Are you like a thief or something?" asked Sandy.

"No," Rebecca said as she worked with the lock. She tilted her head in the direction she was working her buckle post. "I just..." The lock popped open.

Rebecca smiled with relief and pulled the lock off the gate, pushing it open. The hinges creaked loudly with a high pitch. Rebecca was sure everybody for miles had heard and checked the edge of the ravine. A thousand people were just beyond the edge of the hills, watching them, she was sure of it. As she threatened to succumb to paranoia, Sandy slipped inside and went to the door of the shack. She tried it and reported, "It's locked." She threw down her hands like they were doomed.

Rebecca shut the gate, wincing at the creaking again, and returned the lock but left it open. She came to the door and found its lock more complicated than the ones she'd dealt with thus far. She tried her belt buckle's post but it wouldn't even fit. "Maybe..." Rebecca said. She grabbed the handle and tried to lift.

"What are you doing?" Sandy asked.

"Sometimes you can...get the door to..." Rebecca suddenly gasped when she pushed the door open. She nearly stumbled inside to find a small room, hot and humid, with only a single window right by the door. The floor was hard concrete but strangely smooth. Fire blankets were stacked by the

door while gauges by the dozens lined the walls. "This must be some kind of water pressure place," Rebecca said. She looked back outside at the sky turning to full night. "Come on," she urged Sandy inside. She went to the gate and locked it back.

"What are you doing?" Sandy insisted.

"Those guys are still following us," Rebecca said, practically shooing Sandy inside. "They're gonna find this place." She and Sandy got into the room and Sandy pulled on a chain cord to turn on the single light bulb overhead. Rebecca turned it off again immediately. "They're going to find this place," she repeated. "But if the gate's locked and the light is off," she emphasized, "maybe they won't look too closely."

The room wasn't much bigger than the cells the two girls had been held in. The dials were all warm to the touch and a few lights were on, most of them green. The sound air throbbed but only drowned out noise, it didn't create any. Rebecca sighed, her head throbbing. She looked at the dials on the wall and could see them staring at her. She looked out the window at the gravel path for a driveway, certain people would be coming up any second.

"What's wrong?" Sandy asked.

Rebecca waved her off. She took a fire blanket off the stack and threw it out on the ground, covering the exposed floor and then some. She pulled another blanket on the scratchy bedding and she bundled up. She hadn't realized how cold she'd gotten in the woods, dressed only in shorts and a tank top, until she was collapsed in on herself and could feel her clammy skin. She shivered a bit as she got warm. Her throat still burned from the running.

Sandy did the same thing, pulling a blanket over her and joining Rebecca on the floor. She stared down at the gap between them, growing vacant. "I'm going to be sick."

"It's probably withdrawal symptoms," said Rebecca, closing her eyes and trying to will away her headache. "I'm pretty sure that's what I'm going through."

Sandy nodded. "What'd you do?"

"Cocaine," Rebecca said, seeing no reason to lie or withhold it. She laughed and looked at the window, at the sky beyond.

"I thought cocaine was, like, expensive?" Sandy asked.

Rebecca glowered at Sandy. "What, a black girl can't afford the good stuff?" Sandy recoiled in fear. "I was straight-A, got it?" she snapped at her

partner. "I started using because I wanted to get crap done. You got any idea how much time studying and violin and piano and swim team – yeah, a black girl who can swim – and volunteering takes up? You got any idea how tired I am all the damn time?" She slumped back against some dials. It was uncomfortable but she didn't care. "I got tired of being tired. I got tired of always wanting more sleep. I had, like, a few hours a week that was mine. MY time." She shrugged. "It wasn't enough," she lamented.

"Why cocaine?" Sandy asked.

Rebecca shrugged. "Coke used to be seen as, like, a stimulant. It IS a stimulant, but like, it was a thing people did." The academic in her came out. "I studied an old bodybuilder named Mike Mentzer for swimming." Sandy seemed confused about the connection and Rebecca waved her off. "Point is, he was like 'use cocaine to get more done'." Rebecca shrugged. "It wasn't like I read that and was all 'I should do coke', but that's the first place I saw. Wasn't the last," she lamented.

"And you got addicted," Sandy deduced, hugging her skinny legs to her chest.

Rebecca grew more introspective. She yawned as she said, "I got addicted to getting stuff done." Sandy was suddenly surprised. "It worked," Rebecca told her. "It worked real well. Holy crap, I got so much done. My grades peaked. If I'd kept it up, I'd have been valedictorian or salutatorian." Sandy's face, a half-mask of shadow and light from the window, showed her confusion. "Salutatorian is second-highest GPA."

"I got caught in a random drug test for swim team," Rebecca said. "It hadn't even occurred to me that it was a physical stimulant. I was just using it to keep studying harder, to stay up and spend more time on projects." She yawned again. "Things went downhill from there." She shrugged and pulled the fire blanket closer. "My parents enrolled me in this rehab program and..." She gestured at the shack. "Here I am." Sandy smiled glumly. "What about—"

"Over here!" yelled a man outside.

Rebecca and Sandy both started in shock. As Sandy cowered into her blanket like a child, Rebecca crawled across the floor and peeked as carefully as she could out the window. A man was rounding the gate. He grabbed the lock, a machinegun in his hand. He tugged on the heavy lock and reported to someone, "It's locked!"

Another man appeared. He wasn't armed and he pulled on the lock. He glanced at the shack and said, "Climb the fence. Check it." Rebecca recognized his voice. It was the man who'd spoken to her in

her cell. He pulled a red baseball cap off his head and wiped sweat from his balding head, then told the incredulous man, "Check it!"

The soldier didn't look pleased but he slung his machinegun over his shoulder. He grabbed onto the fence and navigated the barbed wire with great skill but not great ease. It took him a minute to climb through, costing him a patch of material off his jacket. He landed on his feet, but collapsed onto his butt. He glared at the red-hat man, then rose and began to towards the shack.

Rebecca just barely managed to keep from screaming. She lunged over to Sandy and grabbed her, covering her mouth to silence the squeal she knew was coming. She pulled the fire blanket over her and flattened against the wall, just beneath the window. She looked up and could just barely see the man's shadow as it fell through the heavy pane of dusty glass. They heard the door handle shake, then the whole door. Sandy tried to squeal again, but Rebecca kept her silent.

The door fell silent. "What do you see?" yelled the red-hat man.

"Nothing," reported the soldier. "It's just a water monitoring station, probably for the town. Door's locked solid." He turned. "They aren't in here."

"Dammit," cursed the red-hat man. Rebecca could hear him sigh in frustration. "Alright, get out of there. We've got to keep looking. We've got to find both those girls."

Rebecca didn't release Sandy until she heard the fence finishing shaking as the soldier climbed over. They heard a parting "I want a replacement coat," from the soldier as he followed the red-hat man off.

Rebecca slowly eased her hold on Sandy and slumped against the wall. Whatever exhaustion she'd felt before paled compared to the release of that tension to be thoroughly overlooked by their pursuers. Sandy crawled back to her spot on the fire blanket and asked morosely, "What are we going to do?"

"There's a town nearby," Rebecca said. "You heard them. Tomorrow, we'll make for it."

"Tomorrow?" Sandy whimpered fearfully.

"Yeah," Rebecca said, her eyes barely staying open as she laid down on the fire blanket. "Tomorrow." She was asleep before she'd completely stretched out.

Eyes.

Eyes everywhere.

Mom's eyes, crying as the police tell her I'm under arrest. Tell her, not me.

Jennifer, the team captain's eyes, glaring at me as I cost them the meet.

Dad's eyes, so full of disappointment. He's honestly crying. He doesn't cry when I make honor roll, when I make straight As, when I win science camp three years in a row, when I make the varsity team my freshman year. But he cries when how I did it becomes clear.

I did it for them.

Didn't I?

Their eyes. They're looking at me.

Why won't they stop?

Why won't they stop?!

WHY WON'T THEY STOP?!

Rebecca awoke with a soft start. Her throat burned and her shoulder hurt. She sat up slowly, her eyes bleary. Morning amnesia made her wonder what all the dials are in her room and why her bed was so agonizingly scratchy. She discovered Sandy rolled up next to her, the two girls cuddled close for warmth and support.

As Rebecca turned, she heard the distant songs of wild birds beyond the cinder block walls of the shack. She looked to the window, the sole source of light in the room, and saw a golden beam of solid hope shining down onto the girls. Rebecca sort of flopped back and stared at the light. It was like a solid bar of transparent gold, perfectly shaped by the window. Tiny motes fluttered within the light, making its magical presence all the more breathtaking.

Rebecca looked through the window and stared into the sky beyond. Distant trees stood against the vibrant blue sky of the fresh morning. Lush green leaves of healthy life rustled in the breeze. The trees swayed like musicians caught up in the performance of the song of life. Rebecca stared until her eyes watered. Her breath caught the rhythm and she practically swayed with the trees, the membrane between her and the nature beyond the window punctured by her serenity.

A gurgle from her stomach ruined the moment. Rebecca looked down at her stomach and covered it with her arms when it groaned loudly again. She rose carefully onto her haunches and crept over the still-sleeping Sandy and peeked out the window. She saw no one. The gate was still shut and there was no sign of anyone.

"Do you see something?" Sandy whispered.

Rebecca was startled by the noise. She dropped the instant Sandy had spoken. Gathering her wits, she said, "No." She rose back and peeked out the window. Sandy crawled out from under her blanket and looked out as well, though with considerably less care. "I think if we follow that road, we'll come to a town or something." She looked to Sandy. "We can find some help."

Sandy nodded. She staggered back a little and groaned. "My head's killing me."

"Yeah, mine too," Rebecca said. "But we've got to power through it. We've got to go."

"Maybe I can just stay here?" Sandy proposed.

Rebecca glared at her. "No, you're coming with me. We're not splitting up."

"But I can't walk that far," she whined.

Rebecca didn't entertain a response. She unlocked the door and very carefully opened it. The air was warm but felt chilly compared to the heat of the shack. A pleasant breeze was gusting through the ravine and it carried the sounds of birds. Rebecca checked up the wall of the ravine they'd descended and then the other side. She slipped out and checked around the shack but the world felt empty.

"Lock it back," Rebecca told Sandy as she went to the gate. She began to unlock the padlock with the post of her belt buckle.

"What if we need to get back in here?" asked Sandy.

"Then we'll lift it again," Rebecca said. She considered folding the blankets back but decided it wasn't worth it. The two escaped the fence and put the lock back. With a picturesque morning about them, they started down the gravel road towards what they hoped would be civilization.

It was a small country town, little more than a half dozen buildings around which were a few dozen houses from various construction eras. The girls saw the stretch of town as they came down a paved road, waiting for traffic but seeing no one. A gas station and laundromat shared a building with a lawyer and public accountant. Across from them was a general store next to a Subway and a grocery store the likes of which neither girl had heard of. A sign near the edge of town announced road maintenance was performed by the local high school alma mater.

Rebecca checked behind them as they neared the lawyer's office. She saw no one following but a gust of mountain wind. She brushed her tank top down, trying to look presentable, as they arrived at the office door. 'Closed' read the sign taped to the inside. It was a hand-written note. Rebecca and Sandy both looked at each other, already tired of the inauspicious start. They went next door to the gas station in the middle of the shopping spot.

Inside the wood paneled storefront of the Gas 'n Sip, they found yellowed floors, warped shelves, and advertising posters from a decade ago. Behind the register was a thickly-built Mexican woman flipping through an MMA magazine, a cigarette burning in the ashtray next to the register.

"Ma'am," Rebecca said, rushing to the counter. "We need help."

The woman looked up from the magazine and didn't seem inclined to believe her. "Car break down?" she asked, sucking on her cigarette, causing the end to light up ugly red.

"No, we were kidnapped," Rebecca said urgently. To her surprise, the woman didn't respond. She just stared, deadpan. "Ma'am, my name's Rebecca Almus. This is Sandy..."

"Jeffers," she said when prompted.

"Sandy Jeffers. We were kidnapped and being held in some construction site nearby," Rebecca said urgently.

The woman only sighed and sucked on her cigarette again. "Listen, girlie, if you don't want to go to class, just skip like everybody else. Don't go making up—"

"I'M NOT MAKING UP ANYTHING!" Rebecca screamed suddenly, startling Sandy with her rage. She reached for the woman but she lurched back as Rebecca practically climbed onto the counter in fury. "We were kidnapped, you worthless scum! We need help!"

"I'll call the cops," the register woman yelled.

"Fine!" Rebecca laughed hysterically. "Have them come and arrest us!"

"What, no!" Sandy protested.

"The police will be able to sort this—" Rebecca grabbed Sandy and shoved her behind the candy aisle just before the door opened. The man in the red hat entered the store. With him were two soldiers, both carrying hunting rifles. Their backs to the girls, they didn't notice them sneaking towards the back of the store.

"Buenos dias, senora," said the red-hat man to the woman bigger than him. "Estoy buscando a mi hija y su amiga."

Rebecca rushed to the back of the store and, bent over in a crouch, she darted through the back door into the office. As she did, she caught the woman saying, "Espera esto es parte de la derecho del juego?"

Rebecca checked behind Sandy as they slipped into the office and looked around. An ancient computer with a giant monitor sat on a cheap desk bowed with age while stacks of papers cluttered the dead-end space. The two girls looked around before they spotted a tiny window at the apex of the wall. "Think we can get through there?" Rebecca whispered. She didn't wait for Sandy to respond.

Stepping up on the desk, causing it to groan, Rebecca opened the window and pushed it open. She checked outside behind the shopping center and saw only a steep hill that went up the mountainside. She grabbed onto the edge of the building and had to practically drag her lower body out. She flopped down onto the sharp incline of grass and then peeked inside. "Come on," she whispered. She could hear the red hat man in the front talking, but couldn't make out what he was saying.

Sandy crawled through the window much like Rebecca had done and the two girls ended up on the hillside. "What do we do?" Sandy gasped frantically.

Rebecca closed the window and checked both directions of the shopping center. "Did they drive? I didn't see any cars pull up."

"Why'd you go crazy in there on that woman?" Sandy asked.

"Oh my god, not now!" she snapped at the girl suddenly. "I'm frickin' withdrawal, okay? I don't need this crap from you." She scampered up the hill, rushing for the trees. Into the open, sloped field of grass, she ran as fast as she could up the incline before she made it to the first tree. She kept running, her lungs burning again, her throat worn from the exertion. Once she felt like she'd made it behind the canopy of leaves, she stopped and turned around. Sandy was halfway up the hill and falling slower and slower.

"Come on!" Rebecca urged. She looked passed Sandy down into the parking lot of the gas station and saw a large jeep. She didn't see any men amongst the buildings but was sure the man was still inside. Sandy arrived at the trees and dropped to her hands and knees. She began to cry and fell onto her side. "I don't want to run anymore!"

Rebecca sat down behind the tree, her face in her hands. The forest was staring at her and she wanted to scream at it. Every tree, every bird, every insect, they were all watching her like the glaring eyes of god judging

her for her mistakes. She rocked back and forth for a moment, then took a deep breath, trying desperately to force her thoughts clear. "We'll set a fire."

"W-what?" Sandy suddenly exclaimed.

"We'll set a fire, get the forest service and the fire department," Rebecca reasoned. "Local cops might be working with these people but if we get state and federal cops here, then maybe we can get real help."

Sandy sat up, terrified. "R-Rebecca, I don't think we should set a fire."

"It'll get federal cops here," Rebecca reasoned.

"Honey, we'll get into real trouble," Sandy urged.

"Oh my god, I don't care!" Rebecca suddenly screamed at Sandy. She buried her face in her hands and tried desperately not to think about the thousand million eyes watching her. She felt like crying, or screaming. Or both. "Federal cops," she repeated, like it was her only hope. "I'd rather go to jail than be some sex slave thing."

Sandy crawled up the hill towards Rebecca. "There are other options," she urged carefully. "We can try a different store, or we can try to make for another town. Or maybe we can..." She wasn't sure what to suggest. "If we set a fire, a lot of people are going to get hurt."

"I don't care," Rebecca growled from behind her hands.

Sandy risked getting closer. "Maybe that's just the withdrawal talking."

Rebecca's resulting glare scared Sandy back. "Don't," she seethed at the girl. "Just don't." She buried her face back into her hands and focused on breathing. Only distant birds on the far side of the town sang, leaving the two girls in an awkward, fearful silence.

"Okay," she breathed very quietly. "Okay." She lowered her hands and realized she'd been crying and hadn't noticed. She looked at Sandy and her chin suddenly quaked. "I'm sorry," she told her. "I'm..." She rubbed her face vigorously. "I'm okay," she decided and lied simultaneously. She turned and looked up the mountain. "Maybe we can..." She seemed to give up on that idea mid-sentence. "We need to get something to eat, at the very least."

Sandy looked back into town and said, "I never liked Subway, but I could do a sub."

Rebecca giggled in spite of the situation. "Yeah, me either. Or me too. Something." She felt exhausted, more than just physically so, like the emotional swings were more tiring than the sprint up the side of the mountain. She looked into the town and noticed the power lines. She followed the long black wires as they headed down the road in both directions. The next mountain over, she spotted a set of wires going into the woods. "I bet someone lives out there," she said.

Sandy crawled next to Rebecca to see what she was looking at. "Think they'll help us?"

Rebecca shook her head. "I don't know. But maybe we can get some food at least." She rose to her feet and moved laterally along the edge of the tree line. Sandy moved to follow.

The two wound around the side of the smooth mountain to find a waving spine of mountains that pockmarked the land. A thick forest covered the mountains from top to bottom, densely packed trees making the going slow. Rebecca tried to keep an eye on the powerlines, tracing their way towards their destination until they discovered a tiny wooden cabin.

It looked like something out of a horror movie. A dilapidated cabin, covered in decaying leaves, and overgrown by kudzu and grass. The timber making up the cabin looked like it was rotting in places and an old cheap plastic folding chair sat on the lopsided porch. On the side of the building was a power box, however, and a satellite dish sat just outside one of the windows, facing into the sky.

Rebecca led Sandy out of the trees into the small flat space where the cabin sat, kept company with a weather-worn all-terrain four-wheeler out of the 1980s. Rebecca crept close to the cabin, Sandy a few steps behind her. The sound of Wheel of Fortune was coming through with intermittent bursts of static. "Someone must be home," Rebecca whispered back.

The front door was thrown open and a mountain man with a shotgun yelled, "Freeze!"

Sandy screamed and threw up her hands. Rebecca froze, petrified, the end of the gun barrel looming just a few dozen meters away. "Ya'll are tresspassin'," the man warned, his finger twitching over the trigger.

Rebecca's heart was racing as she stared at the gun. "W-we're..." Her knees were shaking. "We're...we need help."

The barrel lowered slightly as the man's wild eyes saw the girl differently now. "What you say?"

"We-we need help," Rebecca stammered. "We were kidnapped." She gestured back to Sandy who practically runs into Rebecca's arms, trying not to succumb to hysterics.

The barrel drifted lower and he stared at the girls for a long time, suspicion running across his expression. Finally, he lowered the gun completely and said, "Better get inside then." He gestured with a thumb to the front door of his cabin. Rebecca cautiously began to approach the door but Sandy pulled at her arm. Rebecca shared her worry with a glance, then led the way inside.

Daylight streamed through the windows. Part log cabin, part mobile harm, and part hunter's retreat, the shack was dilapidated and barely functioning...except for the TV. A giant flat screen TV connected to the satellite on the front porch was working just fine and seemed totally out of place among the decades-old magazines and other faded litter that filled the floor of the space.

The big man who could have easily been half-bear and it wouldn't have surprised Rebecca, sat down in the giant recliner with a broken leg. He muted the TV but didn't turn it off. He set the shotgun against his knee as the two girls sat on a folding chair and a lawn chair respectively, both pensive and nervous. "What's got you out here then?" he asked, sniffing occasionally at nothing.

"We got away from kidnappers," Sandy sort of blurted out.

"Out here?" the man disbelieved.

"We were both going to a hospital," Rebecca told him. Exhaustion was catching up with her again. "I don't know when or how they got me, got us, but we just woke up at this place. Like, some building they never finished building."

"Oh," said the mountain man. "Yeah, I know that place. The Esterfield Plant." He sniffed again and scratched the side of his bushy, matted beard. "Yeah, supposed to bring in five hundred jobs." He fished around in his recliner for a second before pulling out a grody bag of beef jerky. The bite of the blackened meat, however, had Rebecca and Sandy both salivating at the peppered smell. "So some kidnappers kept you up there?" he asked, oblivious to their hunger. "What'd they want? Money?" A quick glance he gave them both below the necks belied his ability to believe they wanted other things.

"It was a human trafficking ring," Rebecca told him. "Somebody said something about Russia."

He took another bite. "They just snatch you out of a hospital then?"

Rebecca shrugged. "I guess."

"Mister," Sandy asked, scratching at her neck. "Can we have some of your jerky?"

He looked down at the bag and seemed to just shrug to himself. He tossed it to Sandy, she flailed to catch the bag. She quickly ripped the plastic open and she and Rebecca dove into it together, wolfing down the final pieces. The big man watched with disgust as they swallowed pieces whole, locking their fingers to get the tiniest fragments. "How long they keep you up there?" he asked. He watched Sandy shudder and scratch her neck again. "What's wrong with you?"

Rebecca looked worriedly at Sandy and gently brushed her hand from her neck. Sandy, though, in a bit of a stupor admitted, "I haven't had a hit in days." She shivered some more.

"A hit?" asked the big man, suddenly sitting forward. "Hit of what?"

Rebecca regretted answering but couldn't stop herself. "We were going into rehab." Then the nightmare took a turn.

"Whatchyu need?" the big man asked. "I got some meth." Before the girls could react, he rose from the recliner that groaned through the act. He headed across the wooden floor of the shack, the boards groaning with each step. He opened the freezer that was half-frozen over and took from it a baggie of sickly brown powder like unbleached sugar.

Sandy's eyes went wide and she started to stand up but Rebecca grabbed her hand and kept her seated on the folding chair. "Oh my god," she groaned, practically reaching for the baggie as the man headed back over to the girls. "I don't have any money," she volunteered desperately.

The big man grinned sickly. "We can figure something out, I'm sure." He looked to Rebecca and asked, "There's plenty for you too."

Rebecca shook her head quickly. Her heart was racing and it wasn't just fear. She could barely take her eyes off the bag, her headache practically demanding she focus on it. Instead, she stood and moved between Sandy and the man. "W-we need to go."

"Your friends looks like she wants to stay," the man said, practically holding the bag at Rebecca, like he was teasing her with it. "Sure you don't want to?"

"We need to go," Rebecca insisted. She grabbed Sandy's arm and pulled her towards the door.

"She wants to stay," the man said, lunging for Sandy. He grabbed her from Rebecca and practically threw her back into the cabin. "Why don't you get outta—"

He was cut off by the front door burst inward. It was hit with such force, the frame cracked and burst inward as the door was knocked off its hinges and went flying passed Rebecca. She screamed and backed away as men in faux-military fatigues came bursting in with guns settled on both of them. The mountain man wasn't interested though, and grabbed up his shotgun. "Get out, commies!" he yelled before firing a shot. The gunshot broke all the windows with its force and volume and the first man to have come sweeping into the room was thrown back off his feet and slammed into the others.

Rebecca grabbed Sandy's hand and pulled her off the floor. She ran to the back of the shack where a rear door could be seen. Rebecca started to open it when a shadow fell over the rear-facing windows and she saw more men outside. She stopped as the door was kicked but bowed in, not giving to the impact. Rebecca looked around and spotted a gaping hole in the floor next to a defunct storage freezer.

Not waiting to further assess the situation, Rebecca stepped over the hole and dropped down. She fell onto slick, muddy ground underneath the shack. With barely more clearance than beneath a car, Rebecca wormed her way through the mud, onto dirt. Through cob webs and other unpleasant entanglements, Rebecca crawled on her arms and knees to the edge of the house. She heard banging overhead and realized the men on the rear porch had just broken in. Gunshots kept filling the air as did their acrid smoke.

Rebecca wormed her way out from underneath the rear of the house, fighting through a broken piece of wooden latticing. She rolled onto her back so she could better see around and got out from under the house. To her relief, Sandy crawled out right behind her. They heard a man inside yell, "Where are they?"

From the front of the house, she heard the voice of the man in the red hat insist, "Search the perimeter!"

Rebecca grabbed Sandy's wrist and pulled her into a run, disappearing into the woods.

The stream water was blistering cold but it washed the much off Rebecca's hands and thighs without too much trouble. Every time she splashed more water onto her skin, she shivered and gasped, wincing in pain, then she quickly flung the remaining residue from her.

She turned around from the edge of the mountain stream and saw Sandy sitting on a rock. The young blonde girl's head was wedged between her forearms, her hands on the back of her neck. Closing in on herself, she looked ready to collapse as her feet vibrated up and down. "Hang in there," Rebecca told her, not bothering to ask how she was doing. The answer was painfully obvious.

"Maybe we can go back," Sandy whispered. "Maybe if we promise not to run away again, we can..." She let out a single sob and fell quiet again.

Rebecca got some water in her hand and came over to Sandy. She let it dribble onto the mud on her forearms and tried to rinse some of it off. "Come on," she told Sandy. She had to work to pull her arms a part enough to see her eyes. "Look, I want to go back to the town. I think the guys chasing us, I think they'll keep going this direction or something, you know? So if we turn around, maybe we can get some help."

Sandy nodded, shivering. "Y-yeah," she agreed.

"We're going to get some help," Rebecca promised. Sandy repeated her acknowledgement but not acceptance. Rebecca took what she could get.

Just after midday, Rebecca peeked around the edge of the store front, checking to see if she saw anybody on the street. A single red SUV was parked at the gas station, but no other vehicles were in sight. Rebecca faced into a mountain breeze, warmed by the high sun, waiting for some sign of their pursuers. Only the placid stillness of mountain life was found.

Finally risking it, she stepped out from the shadowy spot of the building and walked along the shallow parking lot in front of the buildings. She walked as briskly as she could without looking too suspicious, checking behind her as she went. She still saw no one, pursuers or otherwise. Halfway down the shopping center, she pushed into the glass door with a jangle.

"Welcome to Subway," said a woman old enough to be her mother. She was sliding a tray of bread into the oven.

"Help me," Rebecca said quickly. "My friend and I were kidnapped."

The woman shut the oven door and looked stunned. "Uh..." She glanced fearfully at the security camera by the door. "Um...is this..." She approached the closer end of the counter. "Okay, wait, what happened?" She spoke like she was stalling.

Rebecca froze up, strangely afraid of the woman. She looked at the security camera, then back at her, not quite able to put it all together. She began to back out of the store when Sandy came running through. "They're here!" she screeched hysterically. Rebecca took one glance out through the restaurant storefront and saw shadows on the pavement outside. She grabbed Sandy's hand and tugged her towards the back.

"You can't get out that way!" yelled the woman behind the register.

Rebecca ran for the fire exit and kicked the alarm handle. A blaring immediately followed and Rebecca dashed through the door. Against a steep hill like earlier in their escape from the gas station, Rebecca ran along the hill instead of up it. Sandy struggled to keep up but didn't slow Rebecca too much.

They got to the far end of the shopping center and spilled out into a side parking lot that separated the small cluster of shops from a standalone business in a converted home. Rebecca rushed for the business and ran up the rear patio and grabbed the handle. She shook the door, frantically trying to get it open. "Come on!" she yelled.

"There they are!" Sandy screamed. Rebecca turned and looked and saw the men coming along the side of the hill. One man fired shots, loud pops ripping through the air. Rebecca and Sandy both shrieked and ran around the side of the house away from the men. They ended up in a small fenced in area with wooden slats on the fence. "Oh no!" Sandy shrieked fearfully.

Rebecca ran to the fence and began to push on the slats, trying to find one loose. When none presented itself, she kicked at them. Sandy joined her, frantically trying to make an opening. "No, no, NO!" Rebecca screamed madly. She checked behind her at the end of the yard and saw shadows. Her eyes fell down to the grass and she spotted a tool chest under some carpentry wood.

Sandy saw Rebecca's eyes and said, "No, don't!" she suddenly implored.

Rebecca kicked open the chest and grabbed a ballpeen hammer. She faced the rear of the house as the men began to come around. Rebecca screamed madly and charged them.

"She's got a hammer!" Sandy yelled to the men.

Rebecca charged at the first man to round the house and she swung madly. The man released his gun and blocked Rebecca's swing, whipping her around in a judo-style throw. He threw her to the ground with surprising grace and fell atop her, pinning her to the ground. She screamed

and fought against him but the other men dropped on top of her, pinning limbs to the ground until she was completely captured.

Rebecca screamed, trying with all her might to fight against the men that were simply laying on top of her, holding her in place. She began to cry hysterically, her physical strength giving out but her resolve burning on. "SANDY, RUN!" she howled in desperation.

"Rebecca," said Sandy in a calm voice, right over her. "Rebecca, honey, calm down. It's okay."

Rebecca's resistance dwindled to nothing and she stared straight up. Kneeling over her, Sandy was looking her right in the eye, calmly saying, "It's okay. It's over." She addressed the men with far more calm and resolve than Rebecca had seen. "Okay, guys, let her up."

One by one, with gentle care, the men began to release Rebecca. They got off her arms, then her legs, and finally the man that had thrown her and laid across her body got off of her. They all immediately backed away. Those who still had their guns let them dangle from their shoulder slings, nobody's hands anywhere near a trigger. Rebecca quickly scrambled to her feet and backed away from the men and from Sandy. "What's going on?" she stammered, on the verge of hysterics.

"Calm down," Sandy urged in a soothing tone, her hands held towards Rebecca but not approaching her. "It's okay. It's over." Rebecca looked furtively from each of the men, to Sandy, not believing it.

"Thank you, Sandy," came the familiar, nightmarish voice. Rebecca looked to the mouth of the yard and saw the man in the red hat approach. He neared and took off his hat, brushing back an ugly comb over. "Rebecca, it's okay." He stayed one step behind Sandy, nobody approaching Rebecca. "You've been undergoing a rather dramatic form of therapy. It's over now."

Rebecca's eyes quaked in fear but she didn't respond. Her eyes kept glancing to the men and their guns. The man in the red hat noticed and said, "These men aren't here to take you back into custody. My name is Dr Eric Alberts. I'm a clinician at Tri-State Behavioral Therapies," he explained. He reached for his pocket and Rebecca backed up to the fence. "I'm reaching for my card," he told her.

"It's okay, Rebecca," Sandy assured her.

"We can explain everything," Dr Alberts promised Rebecca.

"They tried to kill us," Rebecca said, mostly to Sandy.

"The guns don't fire bullets," Dr Alberts told her. His expression brightened and he pointed to one of the men behind him. "Would you hand her your weapon?" The man looked disinclined but slung the machinegun off his shoulder. Rebecca backed away. "Just leave it there on the ground," Dr Alberts urged. The man did as he was told, placing the machinegun halfway to Rebecca's feet, then backing away.

"Go ahead," he encouraged her. "Pick up the gun. You can shoot it at anyone. Shoot it at me." He held up his hands, completely calm.

Rebecca looked fearfully at the gun, then at Sandy. "It's okay," Sandy urged her.

Rather than go for the gun, Rebecca stepped forward from the fence a bit. "What's going on?"

"I'm happy to explain," Dr Alberts told her. "This is the first round of a new addiction treatment. Your parents knew about it, know about it, and have been monitoring your progress this whole time."

"My parents?" Rebecca whispered.

Dr Alberts nodded. "They're back at TBT now, where we can go." He held a hand towards Rebecca. "I know you're unnerved, I know you're scared, but I promise, you aren't in danger. Quite the opposite, your well-being is our chief priority."

Rebecca looked at his hand, then past it to his face. She said, "First, I want to talk to my parents."

Dr Alberts smiled and took out a cell phone. "Would you like call them, or would you prefer Skype?"

The light streaming through the windows of the doctor's office was very similar to the light streaming through the single window of the cement shack where Rebecca and Sandy had fallen asleep. It was a solid slate of golden light, filled with tiny dusty motes dancing in the heat.

But the office was different. White and clean, it held a modest and professional desk facing away from a wall covered in professional accolades of the man at the desk. The man in the red hat. Now bereft of the hat, he looked much more like a medical professional Rebecca was learning him to be. "I'm sorry about the deception," he began. "It was a treatment."

"We knew about it," Rebecca's father said. She sat between her parents and looked to her father on the right. Her mother, holding her

hand, squeezed it supportively. "I learned about this place while we were awaiting your sentencing. I contacted Doctor Alberts," he said with a nod to the man across the desk. "We arranged for you to be seen here."

"Why?" Rebecca asked, her parents first and the doctor next. "Why...why pretend to kidnap me?"

"Addiction is complicated," Dr Alberts said patiently, with a calm and compassionate tone. "We're still learning just what causes addiction. Years ago, and for most of human history, we thought addiction was just 'stuff that was really good'. We thought drugs were addictive because they overclocked the pleasure centers of the brain, as it were. Turns out, that's not the case. We've learned in the last decade or so that addiction is more complicated, more sinister than that. There's a whole re-wiring of the brain that goes on."

He gestured to the window, as if the world beyond the warm glass was his laboratory. "What we endeavor to do is approach addiction as behavioral-chemical issue, not a habit. As a result, in order to effectively treat it, we have to trigger a complete readjustment of the brain chemicals." Here, he slowed and took a calming breath. Calming for himself. "We do that with perceived trauma."

"So you pretended to kidnap me so that I'd basically get scared straight?" Rebecca asked, angrily.

"Rehab programs exist as a means to remove a person from the stimulus and activities which they associate with addictive behaviors," Dr Alberts explained. "We take it one step further by not only removing you physically from locations and situations that are associated with addiction, but even the mindset of addiction. It allows your brain to, essentially, reset its own standards and recalibrate."

"We used to do this kind of thing with shock treatment," he explained. "Despite what you've seen in movies, shock treatment isn't particularly painful nor is it harmful. We've had very successful results in a very specific circumstances. But this program, with a simulated traumatic experience, has shown even more consistent and reliable results. Not only is response to subsequent treatment better, but the rate of relapse into addiction is vastly lower, as are recidivism rates into rehab programs."

He set his hand forward on his desk. "I do need to stipulate that you ARE NOT cured. Rehab is not over for you. But now that you've completed this initial period, the traumatic period, we can now move you to a more traditional treatment facility where we can pursue more long-term self-care treatment. You are STILL an addict, and I'm afraid to say you will ALWAYS

BE an addict. You can abstain from drug use for fifty years and fifty years from now, you will still be an addict.”

Rebecca drew away from the doctor. She looked to her mother and asked, “You knew.” Her mom looked ready to cry. She kept back the tears, though, and nodded.

“We were watching,” her dad said.

“You were monitored not just by your parents but also by medical staff and independent quality assurance staff,” Dr Alberts said. “At no point did you escape from our monitoring, and at no point were you ever in danger.”

“Even when we crossed the train?” Rebecca asked.

“That train could have stopped on a dime,” Alberts assured her. “And we had a medical response team ready at all times,” he assured her. “Just like the guns not firing bullets. Now, you might have gotten shrapnel from the squibs we had set up on the trees, or if you decided to jump a building. I mean...” He just gestured at the sheer variety of contingencies. “But your safety, in every sense, is our priority.”

She nodded. “And Sandy?”

“A graduate,” Albert told her. “She’s there to help keep you grounded, and also there to keep you from doing anything foolish.”

“Keep me grounded?” Rebecca asked.

“In case you tried to do anything really crazy, like steal a car or take a hostage,” Dr Alberts explained. “We’ve seen those contingencies before. Plus,” he added, “evidence is suggesting that providing accountability to another party helps with responsiveness to the rehabilitation.” He rephrased, “Having to take care of someone makes it work better.” Again, Rebecca only nodded.

“I need to emphasize that you are not done with your rehab,” explained the doctor. “This radical scenario is meant to help make your mind and behaviors more malleable to cognitive restructuring and to help you clear past the first few hours of withdrawal.” Rebecca nodded again, absently. Her eyes were a little distant, like the light beyond the windows. “The next eight weeks, you will remain at this facility and we’ll attempt to help you build habits and thinking patterns that—”

“What if I’d gotten away?” Rebecca asked suddenly. There was a frantic thought in her voice. “What if I’d...what if I’d gotten a car?”

“Honey, this isn’t some chess game to beat,” said her mother.

"Your mother's right," Dr Alberts told her. "You beat the scenario. You beat it by surviving, but making it through your early withdrawal."

She felt unsatisfied. "But..." She didn't know what to ask.

"Most patients don't last more than a few hours," said the doctor. "A good number don't even get out of the chair. Depending on their ambitiousness, we have to facilitate opportunities for them to escape."

It dawned on Rebecca. "That's why I unlocked everything with my belt."

He was visibly impressed. "All the locks have to be carefully constructed so that they appear solid but will unlock with even the slightest tampering. In the moment, you think its luck or something, but in hindsight, yeah. Another problem that we encounter is, because of suicidal thoughts that accompany intense withdrawal, some people allow themselves to be shot. Some attempt to commit suicide with vehicles, or just collapse and attempt to succumb to the elements. We try to think of every option, but sometimes we get surprised. Whenever the patient reaches an endpoint, that is a point where they would likely be killed or seriously harmed, we end the scenario there. Again, that is often a matter of hours."

A stillness settled over the four as Rebecca took it all in. Her mother still held her hand and rubbed her knuckles with a calloused thumb. Their eyes met and her mother choked back tears. Dr Alberts saw this, glanced at her father, and said, "Why don't I give you a few moments?" He rose and excused himself.

The family said nothing, even after the door was shut and they were alone together. Parents looked after their child as she tried to calm herself after the ordeal. She finally reached for her father, taking his hand as well. She swallowed tightly, tears welling up in her eyes, as she whispered, "Thank you."

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"She's working the cuffs," said the voice in her hidden earpiece.

Rebecca looked up in the tiny cement room, a single light bulb hanging over her. Her frizzy hair was matted a little, to add to the look of the kidnap victim. She was dressed in lime green shorts and a white tank top, her

'lucky victim' outfit. Her hands were cuffed behind her as she waited in the chair.

"Okay, cuffs are off," said the voice of Dr Alberts. "She's going for the door. Okay, teams, get ready. Psych eval suggests she'll go right. Rebecca, you ready?"

She nodded intensely and glanced at the tiny dot at the apex of the wall, one of the many cameras watching her. "Ready to go," she whispered. Through the door before her, she heard a loud sound like a nearby door being thrown open.

"She's moving," Dr Alberts reported.

Rebecca waited for a moment longer, then recoiled from the light as her door was opened.