

## The Scream

“Sorry about that,” he said, pulling the car out of the parking lot, still angry for having spent the last hour talking to her about his ever-growing disillusionment, his endless search for a better job, his meaningless love-life.

“What are you sorry about?” she asked him.

“All my whining, I probably ruined your dinner.”

“Don’t be silly. It was a lovely dinner.”

“Yeah, but...”

She cut him off. “This isn’t going to work, Peter” she said. “You try too hard.”

“What does that mean?”

“You think too much, just let it all go.”

“That’s easy for you to say, with a perfect life, a loving husband, a good paying job.”

“Everybody has a perfect life. Maybe you just need to be jolted out of your context.”

“Jolted out of my context?” He laughed.

“Precisely, it makes it easier to let go.” She reached over, softly running her fingers through his hair, playfully pulling at his ear. He was surprised at this bold breaking of boundaries. Happily married women don’t generally get affectionate with lonely unmarried men, unless they’re looking to have an affair. But Karla was different. He was fascinated by her quirkiness from the very first time they met, her constantly trying to steer him in the right direction but never admitting to giving him any advice, claiming only to be tossing her pixie dust into the air, letting it land where it would. When she suggested that they go out to dinner together after work he was taken by surprise. Then she explained that her husband needed to use her car that morning, that if Peter took her home she’d treat him to dinner. Innocent enough, maybe, but why didn’t she ask Nikki? That would’ve made more sense. Maybe she and her husband were having problems? She was stunningly beautiful and totally married, so he always assumed she was off-limits. Now, away from work, out on a kind of informal date, he felt very attracted to her, especially with three glasses of wine under his belt.

“You can’t follow the signs unless you know how to read them,” she told him, now softly massaging the back of his neck

“What signs are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about taking your inventory, slaying your phantoms.”

“C’mon Karla, what the hell are you really talking about?”

“Maybe I’m talking about traffic signs.” She laughed. “You’re full of traffic signs, stop, yield, wrong way, slow down, so many traffic signs that you’re unable to move.” She lightly touched his cheek with the back of her fingers. He could feel her eyes studying him like a dermatologist looking for skin cancer.

He quickly turned his head. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Keep your eyes on the road, Peter. Here, turn left here. I live on Magnolia. It’s just four more blocks.”

He wasn’t surprised that she lived in such a nice neighborhood, she, being a well paid, programmer analyst, her husband, an even better paid medical engineer.

“What was your face before you were born?” she asked him.

*What a strange question.* “Obviously my face wasn’t anything before I was born, Karla.”

“Do you think you’ll still be aware after you die?”

“Aware?”

“Yeah, do you believe in consciousness after death?” Now she sounded like somebody conducting a job interview, peppering him with questions.

“Hmm, I’m not sure.”

“Here’s the thing. If you can accept the idea that you didn’t exist before you were born,” she said this very slowly, keeping track with her fingers, as if she were reciting a mathematical formula, “then you can accept the idea of non-existence after you die, right?”

“I didn’t have to deal with any of this before I was born.”

“Ah, now we’re getting somewhere, that’s the first part. So you just need the second part, not dealing with any of this before you die.” She giggled.

He thought his head was going to explode. She was like a creature from a different planet, rolling in and out of her ever changing personality, nothing fazing her, and looking more

like a high school student than a thirty five year old woman had a right to. He was envious, feeling like the years were piling up on him like dirty snow.

“This is it,” she said, pointing out her open window. “The two story brick house on the right up there.” He turned into her driveway, stopped the car and killed the engine. She looked at him, smiling her enigmatic smile. They sat in silence for several minutes. Finally he said, “Talking to you is like going to the dentist.”

She laughed. “Don’t be so serious, Peter. It’s like I said before, you think too much.”

“So tell me, Karla, why did you ask me out?”

Cocking her head slightly, she waved her index finger back and forth, clicking her tongue the way a teacher might scold a third grader. “You’re doing it again, you’re trying to see some big picture, with agendas, and motives, and consequences, aren’t you? I just needed a ride, that’s all, just a simple ride home.” She took a deep breath. “I have to go inside now,” she said, abruptly.

“You need to go inside to see your husband I suppose?”

“Of course I do.”

“And he doesn’t mind that you were out having dinner with some stranger tonight?”

“You’re not a stranger. Besides, why would he mind? We’re just friends.” She leaned into him, kissing him on the mouth, a warm, wet kiss. He put his hand behind her head, holding her close, not wanting to let her go. He hadn’t tasted a woman since breaking up with Camilla over a year ago. “I don’t have too many friends who kiss like that,” he whispered hoarsely afterwards.

She touched his face one more time. “Thanks for the ride, Peter. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

“No, don’t ever say goodbye, it’s bad luck.” She playfully brushed his nose with her finger. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

She opened the door, leaving him without looking back, leaving him feeling like he’d just been hit by a truck. Sitting in his car, feeling confused, frustrated, and toyed with, he watched her go through the front door, quickly turning off the porch light. *What was that all about?* he wondered, unable to start the car, unable to drive away into the night. Was all of this some kind of cruel joke? She was always laughing about everything, as if life itself were one big joke. Was she laughing at him? He was just about to turn the key when he heard a scream. It sounded like it

came from inside her house. He got out of the car, walked to her front door, and stood, trying to hear what was going on inside. It was still hot even though the sun had gone down an hour before. The windows on either side of the entry were wide open. Everything was quiet. He tapped lightly on the door, waiting for several minutes, and then knocked again more insistently.

After several more minutes, the porch light came on. Then the door opened very slowly, not completely, only half way, the way a door opens when someone inside is intending to say “no, thank you” to somebody trying to sell them something. A man looking to be in his early forties, very slight, with thin blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses finally appeared. “Yes, what is it?” He had a German accent. He smiled but it was without warmth, a self-conscious smile, with his eyes half closed, his face drawn and haggard.

“You must be Karla’s husband.”

“That’s right,” he said. “My name is Lucas. And you’re..?”

“Peter... Peter Bergman. We work together.”

Opening the door fully now, he stood in his bare feet, wearing only shorts and a tee shirt. “Ah, yes, I know. She told me about you. How was dinner?”

Peter smiled. “Fine, thanks.”

“Did Karla leave something in your car? Is that why you came back?”

Peter let out a little nervous laugh. “No, it’s just that...” He shuffled his feet, looking down, feeling very awkward, unable to ask this guy the obvious question: why someone had just screamed inside his house. Lucas’ eyes narrowed, boring into Peter with an increasing display of cold impatience.

“I know this may sound strange,” Peter said haltingly. “It’s just that I could swear I heard a scream come from inside your house a minute ago. Is everything okay?”

Lucas laughed lightly, dismissively. “Ah, a scream.” He shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Karla came in, said hello, and went straight upstairs. I’m sure I would have heard her scream.” He laughed again but it sounded mirthless and phony. “Maybe it came from our neighbor’s house.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it came from your house; your windows are wide open.”

“Oh, wait, right, I’m sorry. That was my TV. I meant to lower the volume when Karla went upstairs but I turned it up by mistake. Sometimes I’m terrible with these gadgets.”

Lucas made it plain that his explanation constituted the end of their conversation, silently staring at Peter blank-faced, waiting for him to get off his doorstep. “So we’ve solved that little mystery, right?” he said flatly, with a forced smile, “I’ll say goodnight then; I’ve had a long hard day and I’m very tired.”

Peter shrugged. “Yeah, okay, nice to meet you.”

“Yes, you too.”

Lucas hadn’t quite closed the door when Peter turned around, asking as nonchalantly as he could, “Would you mind if I talked to Karla for just one second?”

Lucas looked surprised, his eyebrows rising ever so slightly. “It’s getting late,” he said.

“I know, but I just now remembered something I forgot to ask her, you know, work related. It’ll only take a minute, I promise.”

Lucas seemed reluctant. “No more than a minute then,” he muttered impatiently. “Let me go get her.”

Lucas closed the door very quietly. The more Peter thought about it, the more anxious he became, the scream he heard was real, he was sure of it, and it sounded like Karla. The guy looks like a rocket scientist and he doesn’t know how to use his TV remote? C’mon, that’s a pretty lame story. What if he saw them? Karla didn’t go in right away. He may have heard the car pull up, looked outside, saw them talking, and then... shit, he would have seen them kiss. What if he’s a jealous wife beater? By the time the door opened again, Peter’s brain had connected all the dots, putting everything together all the way to the point of wondering where Lucas had hidden Karla’s body.

“I’m sorry but she has her little mandala hanging on the outside of her door.”

“Her mandala? What does that mean?”

“It’s her signal to me that she doesn’t want to be disturbed. It means she’s meditating.

Peter didn’t buy it, but there was nothing he could do. “Oh well, I guess I can ask her tomorrow.”

Peter walked slowly back to his car. He couldn’t call the police. What would he say? That he wanted to report a scream? That there was this creepy German guy they needed to check out?

When Karla didn't show up for work the next morning all of Peter's worst fears seemed to be confirmed. The emotional roller coaster that kept him awake all night wasn't going to go away; that scene on Karla's doorstep would keep playing over and over inside his head, each time more and more ominous.

He heard Nikki arrive, settling into the cubicle next to his, putting her lunch into her little refrigerator, booting up her computer. He had to talk to somebody about what was going on.

"Hi, Nikki."

Nikki looked up at Peter standing a few feet away from her, encroaching into her space.

"Oh, hey Peter." Nikki was thin and pale, kind of cute, with her short cropped pinkish white hair. But it was the kind of androgynous look that Peter couldn't get too excited about, he always wondered whether she was a lesbian. She wasn't that interested in guys, as far as Peter could tell, not interested in him, anyway. On the other hand, Nikki was the kind of geek who didn't have many friends of either sex.

"Where's Karla?" He attempted to sound conversational even though his insides were churning.

"I don't know. You might want to ask Jerry. She usually calls him when she needs to take some time off."

"Aren't they in the middle of the O'Brien project?"

"Yeah, I think they are."

"They have an August deadline and Jerry only has two programmers. Doesn't that seem a little funny to you, why would Karla take time off?"

"Uh, Peter? I'm really busy. Just go ask Jerry, okay?"

"Yeah, sorry."

Peter tapped on Jerry's open office door.

"Jerry?"

Jerry glanced up briefly and then continued staring at his computer screen. "Not now, Peter."

"But I was just wondering if you heard from Karla, I noticed that she isn't in today."

Peter had obviously touched a nerve, Jerry looking up red-faced and angry. “Tell me about it. Her husband called and said she isn’t feeling well.”

“Her husband? Doesn’t she usually call you herself?”

Jerry stared at Peter as if he had just insulted him. Then he exploded, “I just told you she’s sick, man. Don’t you think it makes sense for her husband to call me if she’s sick? I’m the goddamned project manager for chrissake.”

“Hey, Jerry, lighten up. I didn’t mean to get into an argument with you about it.”

Shaking his head, turning away from Peter, obviously embarrassed, Jerry sighed. There was an awkward silence. “Yeah, I’m sorry, Pete,” Jerry said finally, through another sigh, gazing out the window, “I didn’t mean to take it out on you. It’s just that this is a bad time for her to go and get sick on me. I’m in deep shit if she doesn’t get her ass back in here real quick. I was short staffed to begin with so this could be a disaster.”

“Maybe I can help you.”

Jerry turned around. “You? Aren’t you working on some web pages for Jose?”

“Yeah, but you could ask Jose to cut me loose until Karla comes back. We’re way ahead of schedule anyway.”

“Are you serious? Man... you’d be a real life saver if you could do that for me, Pete.”

“Sure.”

“If Karla isn’t back by the end of the week I’ll ask Jose, okay?” Jerry smiled, adding, “But why are you so interested in Karla anyway?”

“She’s a friend, that’s all, so I was wondering where she was this morning.”

As soon as Peter returned to his cubicle he started Googling Karla Gaertner. There was a slew of Karla Gaertners, but none of them looked like her, not the ones in Facebook or My Space or LinkedIn or Twitter. He stepped into Nikki’s cube, standing patiently, waiting while she continued typing. Sensing his presence, she finally stopped, making no attempt to hide her annoyance. “You’re back?” She said this without looking at him.

“Can I talk to you for a second, Nikki?”

“Only a second, Peter; I’m swamped.”

He sat down next to Nikki's desk, leaning toward her, speaking confidentially. "You're Karla's best friend, right?"

"I don't know about that. She's a friend. We've worked on some stuff together."

"I just tried to find her and I couldn't."

"You mean on the internet?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not surprised. She told me once that being on the computer ten hours a day was enough. She didn't want to have to look at screens when she wasn't at work."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Listen Nikki, do you know anything about her husband?"

"Lucas?"

"Yeah."

"I know they met in Munich, let's see, he's some kind of engineer. Seems like a nice enough guy. They've been married for about ten years, I think."

"Do they seem happily married to you?"

Nikki laughed. "What kind of a question is that?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling that Karla might be... uh..."

"Might be what?"

"Well, Karla and I went out to dinner last night."

"Yeah, so?"

Peter stood up abruptly. "Nothing, never mind, I didn't sleep very well so I guess I'm not making too much sense."

"Yeah, you're not."

"Do you have her cell number? I want to make sure she's okay."

Nikki looked at him, frowning. "Peter, she's married. Her husband is quite capable of making sure that she's okay."

“Yeah, yeah, I know, but Jerry asked me to pitch in on the O’Brien project so I may need to talk to her.”

Peter tried to call her several times during the day but he only got her voice mail. His text messages all went unanswered. Over the next couple of days he pressed Nikki for more information, especially about Karla’s husband, but Nikki seemed to be getting more and more irritated with him so he stopped asking.

Karla didn’t show up all week.

Jerry, with a big grin on his face, was waiting when Peter got back to his cube Friday after lunch. “I talked to Jose and he says that you can help me out. Isn’t that great?”

“Karla must be really sick. Did she call you?”

“She never was sick. It turns out her husband, this guy named Lucas, told me a little white lie, as he put it. He says that they’re going back to Germany.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“He says he lost his job a few days ago and they can’t stay here trying to make it on one salary. She’s not getting any referrals from me, that’s for sure. I thought she had more class than that, no two weeks’ notice, no goodbye, nothing. But I have to hand it to her, her code is super well documented so you should have no problem picking up where she left off.”

“Did you actually talk to Karla?”

Jerry’s smile was gone. “Why are you asking me all of these questions about Karla, Peter? It’s time to start talking about what we need to do on the O’Brien project.”

But there was no way Peter could let this go. It confirmed all of his worst suspicions about her husband seeing them kissing in the driveway and deciding to do something about it, either forcing Karla to leave, or worse. He might have locked her up in that house for all Peter knew. He seemed like the type. “C’mon Jerry,” he continued doggedly, “she’s a good friend and I can’t get hold of her; you must have talked to her at some point, right?”

“Well, no, I never talked to her directly. Her husband said she needed to go to San Diego to see her mom before they leave on Saturday. I guess her mother’s pretty sick. That’s what the lie was about.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he lied about Karla being sick so she could head down to San Diego to see her sick mother.”

“Do you think that makes any sense?”

“I don’t really care. All I know is that she’s out of here.”

“But this is all so sudden. She must be coming in to pick up her stuff, right?”

“Nope. Her husband said they have too much to do at home, packing up and getting ready to leave tomorrow. He told me they would be in touch; we can send her things to Germany as soon as they find an apartment.”

“Wow, I can’t believe it.”

“It’s not that big a deal, Peter. People come and go all the time in this business. Enough about Karla already, you’re giving me a headache with all your questions. Here’s her password.” Jerry handed him a little slip of paper. “Her newest stuff is still on her hard drive.”

After Jerry left Peter’s cube, Nikki sat staring at her computer, all kinds of warning bells going off in her head. Normally she hated getting involved in the melodrama that swirled around the IT department, but this was different. Peter had to be stopped. She got up and headed for Jerry’s office, determined to do something before it was too late.

“Jerry, do you have a minute?” she asked through his open door.

“Not really.”

“I need to talk to you in private. It’s pretty important.” Jerry shrugged, motioning her into his office. She closed the door behind her.

As soon as she was seated Jerry said, “Don’t tell me you’re leaving too?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Karla’s leaving, you must have heard.”

“Yeah, I heard, that’s why I’m here.”

“Because of Karla?”

“No, because of Peter.”

“Peter?”

“Haven’t you noticed him this week? He’s been moping around ever since Karla didn’t show up for work on Tuesday, looking her up on-line, cornering me, asking all kinds of questions about her and her husband and...”

“Yeah, well I did wonder about that, but he kept telling me that he was her friend and he was concerned about her – overly concerned if you ask me.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“What?”

“His obsession – and I made the mistake of giving him her cell number.”

“Aren’t you blowing this a little out of proportion, Nikki?”

“I don’t think so.” Nikki sat staring down at the floor, slowly shaking her head.

“Is that it, Nikki? I’m really busy.”

“I never told you about this before...” She stopped and took a deep breath. “But now I have to, Peter is forcing me to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I was stalked once, a long time ago, and it was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I spent years in therapy trying to get over it.”

“You were stalked?”

“Yeah. And that’s what this is about. After everything that’s been going on this week, I finally figured out why Peter bothers me so much, he’s a goddamned stalker.”

“You’re joking with me.”

“I heard he bothered Camilla for months after they broke up. And now he’s become obsessed with Karla, you even noticed it. It all makes sense when you think about it.”

“But Nikki, Peter just doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who would be a stalker.”

“They never do, Jerry. Stalkers are like child molesters, real con artists, totally skilled at hiding their dark little secret.”

“But we’re talking about Peter here. How can Peter be some kind of pervert?”

“Think about it, Jerry. Karla’s leaving all of a sudden and she hasn’t said anything to anybody, does that seem normal?”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

“A stalker can make your life a living hell, believe me, I know all about it. And the only way to get rid of one is to make them disappear, and that can involve years in court, it’s horrible, Karla would never do any of that, she’s a free spirit, she’d just leave. I think that’s why she became so incognito all of a sudden. She wants to make a clean break from this place, and from the weirdo who’s been bothering her. She probably talked her husband into going back to Germany just to get away from Peter.”

“So what do you want me to do? I can’t very well pick up the phone and call the police, can I? I could be sued for slander.”

Nikki slowly nodded her head, chewing on her lower lip. “Maybe you’re right; we can’t call the police, not yet, anyway.

“What do you mean, ‘not yet’?”

“You told Peter that Karla was leaving tomorrow, didn’t you?”

“That’s what her husband told me.”

“Listen Jerry, I know a lot about stalkers and I don’t think Peter is going to give this up. I bet he’s planning on trying to see her before she leaves.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, he’ll probably head over to her house tonight after work, I’d bet my life on it. You and I need to follow him.”

“That’s crazy, Nikki.”

“If we catch him in the act, sneaking around her house, then we can call the police.”

“I don’t know, Nikki, I’m not comfortable with following somebody around like that.”

“If I’m wrong then there’s no harm done, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But if I’m right, then you can get Karla back. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“It’s too late, Nikki, Karla’s going to Germany tomorrow.”

“Maybe not. If we can get Peter to stop bothering her she won’t have to go to Germany.”

“Jesus, Karla, you’re really convinced about this aren’t you?”

“You bet your sweet ass I am. Are you in?”

“I’ve never done anything like this before, I…”

“We can go in my car.”

“But Peter will be late tonight, catching up on the O’Brien project.”

“No problem, we’ll just wait him out. That’s the only way to nab a stalker anyway.”

Between endlessly writing code and constantly worrying about Karla, Peter was completely fried by the end of the day on Friday. He had to settle this thing once and for all, before suffering some kind of nervous breakdown. He was certain that Lucas was lying and if he flew off to Germany nobody would ever know about Karla’s disappearance. He had to stop him.

It was 10 o’clock by the time Peter turned on to Magnolia Avenue. He parked his car a couple of blocks away, thinking it would be better not to drive right up to Karla’s house announcing his arrival. Approaching the house on foot, seeing all the lights ablaze, he felt the rush of adrenalin gearing him up for his confrontation with Lucas. Looking through the open window on the side of the entryway he could see various taped cartons strewn about. Not a stick of furniture remained. Peter knocked loudly on the door, listening to the echo bounce around the empty room.

“I’ll be right there.” It was Lucas’s voice, coming from upstairs.

Upon opening the door, after his initial shock, a sheepish grin crept across Lucas’s face. “I thought you were Michael from next door, he’s been helping pack tonight.” Lucas smiled. “So, you’re probably still wondering about that scream you heard, huh?” he said with a laugh.

Peter remained silent, stunned by this totally unexpected comment.

Lucas laughed again when he saw the confusion on Peter’s face. “I confess, I lied, the scream didn’t come from my television set. But what else could I say? When I told Karla that I lost my job and we’d have to move back to Germany, she screamed and ran upstairs crying. It

was very awkward when you came to the door. How could I get into all of that with you, a total stranger, you know what I mean?"

Peter was shocked by Lucas' animation, looking and sounding so confident, so different from the person he met only a few days earlier. Peter said nothing, continuing to glare at him, not smiling, assuming this was all some kind of big cover-up.

Lucas plowed ahead, undeterred. "Karla feels things so deeply; I'm sure you know. That's why all of this is hard for me. She has this thing about saying goodbye, she hates it, and it's probably the only thing in the whole world that she hates. So she said I needed to cover for her, she wanted to leave without having to face anyone, without all of the tears and the goodbyes."

When Peter didn't respond, Lucas frowned. "I'm sorry." He paused. "You are Karla's friend who was here the other night, yes? Your name's Peter? I'm sure I was very rude to you, I wasn't myself after just having lost my job, you'll have to forgive me." Peter nodded, but there was something in his look that showed he didn't believe a word Lucas was saying. Lucas went on. "You see, I'm scheduled for an interview with Siemens in Hanover next week so things are looking up now." He stopped. "Sorry, I've had too much coffee tonight; I keep going on and on."

Offended by all of these obvious lies, feeling his rage increasing, Peter attempted to speak in very measured tones. "Can I talk to Karla, then? Or is she still up there meditating?"

The question took Lucas by surprise, something about it sounding completely off, completely accusatory. "Well, I'm afraid she's still not here," he said hesitantly, seeming somewhat confused. "She went to San Diego to see her mother. Didn't they tell you at work?"

"Shouldn't she be back by now?" Peter said, unable to hide his ever growing hostility.

No longer able to maintain his veneer of hospitality, Lucas eyed Peter with open hostility, his voice sounding suddenly defensive, suspicious. "I don't think that's really any concern of yours, is it?"

Peter smiled smugly. "It's getting kind of late, don't you think? Aren't you leaving tomorrow?"

"It would be best if you're not here when she returns," Lucas said, his voice now cold, "as I told you, she gets very emotional having to say goodbye."

"Yeah, right."

"Just what does that mean?" Lucas asked him.

Peter didn't answer. He continued staring at him in an accusing manner, fists clenched, bordering on losing control.

Lucas started to close the door. "If you'll excuse me, I still have a lot of work to do."

"You know what I think?" Peter's voice rose, strained and shrill.

Standing, as if frozen in his doorway, astonished by this inexplicable behavior, Lucas heard Peter shout, "I don't believe you. Something has happened to Karla; that's what I think."

Now fully aware that the man on his doorstep was mentally deranged, Lucas surreptitiously pushed the silent alarm located just to the left of his front door. This was his home invasion alarm, the one he was cautioned never to press unless he felt his life was in danger.

"I can't let you do this," Peter shouted.

"What are you talking about?"

"Where is she?" Peter pushed his way into the house.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lucas yelled at him.

Jerry and Nikki were parked under the elms, away from the street lights, across from Karla's house. They had just seen Peter force his way through the front door.

"Holy shit, Nikki, you were right. What a creep. You think he's capable of hurting someone?"

"I dunno, it's kind of weird that he walked right up to the house. He must be really desperate because Karla's leaving tomorrow. I don't see her car, do you?"

"No, maybe she's still in San Diego."

"He'll probably just wait until she gets back so he can declare his undying love. This is good; he's blown his cover completely now." She laughed.

"This isn't funny, Nikki. We need to do something."

"Take it easy, Jerry. There's no real danger here, he's just fucked up, a miserable little stalker doing his thing."

"I still think we need to do something."

“Open my glovebox,” Nikki said, pointing to it.

As soon as he opened it Jerry saw the pistol.

“Here, give it to me, Jerry.”

“What’s with the gun, Nikki?” he said, handing it to her.

“When you’re the victim of a stalker you never feel safe. Don’t worry, I’ve been trained.”

“So what are you planning on doing with that, Nikki?” Jerry said, staring at the gun.

“I’m thinkin’ I may have to make a little citizen’s arrest here.”

“Why don’t you just call the cops, that’s what the plan was, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan, but he might try to leave before they get here. We’re not going to let him do that.”

The inside of Nikki’s car was suddenly illuminated by the glare of headlights. A red Nissan Sentra arrived, slowly rolling to a stop in the driveway of Karla’s house. “What timing, there’s Karla,” Nikki said, “quick, Jerry, you need to warn her about Peter while I call the cops.”

Jerry jumped out of the car, leaving the door wide open, running across the street.

Nikki put the gun up on the dash and started looking for her cell phone. It wasn’t in her pocket. Maybe it fell out. She began searching the crack in the cushion. She was just beginning to look in the backseat when she heard the sound of sirens and saw flashing lights coming up the street behind her at high speed.

“What the fuck?” Well aware that cops don’t like people lurking in the dark with guns, Nikki spun around, snatching it from the dashboard in a panic. She quickly tried to put it back in the glove compartment but it flew out of her hand and slipped under the passenger seat. Two police cruisers, as if falling from the sky, screeched to a stop, surrounding Nikki’s car, disgorging a couple of pumped up cops. Having just retrieved her gun, Nikki popped up only to be blinded by the bright LED light shining through her windshield. With her heart pounding like a sledgehammer, she attempted to shield her eyes, forgetting that the pistol was still in her hand. One of the officers yelled, “She has a gun!” She turned her head to see the other one, down on one knee, pointing his Glock right through the open door on the passenger side. He was a good shot, the bullet going right through the center of her forehead.

Jerry ran toward Nikki's car from the other side of the road, waving his arms, screaming, "What the fuck are you guys doing?" Seeing Jerry heading toward his partner's back, the other cop yelled "Stop!" and without further warning, discharged his weapon, hitting Jerry mid-stride.

All of this happened with mind-numbing rapidity, a surreal dream, full of lights and noise and confusion. Within moments, one of the cops was shining his flashlight and pointing his gun through the open window of Karla's Nissan.

"Alright, step out of the car."

"What the hell is going on here?" she screamed.

"You tell me."

"I live here," she yelled at him.

"Who are you?"

"Karla, Karla Gaertner." This stopped him cold, lowering his gun, completely changing his tone of voice, he said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't know you were the one who pressed the alarm."

"W-what?"

"You're alright now, ma'am, they can't kidnap you now."

"Kidnap me? You just shot Jerry," Karla shouted hysterically.

"Take it easy, ma'am."

She began sobbing. "He said he was here with Nikki, they needed to talk to me, but before I could get out of the car you guys showed up and started shooting everybody..."

"We had no choice, ma'am, they were armed and dangerous."

Then it hit her. Her eyes widening, she shouted, "Oh God, my husband, he must have pressed the alarm."

Hiding in the bushes on the side of Karla's house, Peter was still shaking. He never meant to hurt Lucas but the guy went crazy, they ended up scuffling in the living room, Lucas falling over one of the boxes, his head banging against the corner of the brick hearth, a freak accident. He must have died instantly. *How in the world did the cops get here so fast?*

And now, to his amazement, he could hear Karla's voice. She was talking to one of the cops as they approached the front door, Karla sounding scared and confused, telling the cop how she couldn't believe her coworkers were capable of something like this and the cop assuring her that perpetrators of violent crime are often well acquainted with their victims. Opening the door, he warned her, "You'd best be prepared for the worst, ma'am."

Within minutes of entering the house he heard Karla scream, screaming more than once this time, screaming over and over, the echoing howls following him into the night as he scurried away in the dark, back to his car.

**The end**