

CTRAI KAI WAL TO Z KAREN KIJEWSKI

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I've seen too many old movies not to know what it meant. You remember the ones...

The woman was young and beautiful but a little sad and wistful, bravely so. She was in the kitchen baking or doing the dishes when the doorbell rang. As she walked to the door she wiped her hands on her apron and brushed a curling tendril of hair off her forehead. Passing through the living room, her step faltered slightly, her eyes lingered on the ornate silver-framed photo of a man, young, handsome, and in uniform. A smile fleetingly crossed her lips, tugged at our hearts.

She opened the door to a man in uniform, older, reserved, serious, with his hat in his hands and sadness in his eyes.

I opened the door to Davis, Hank's partner.

"No. Oh God, no!"

"Katy, I'm so sorry."

"You're here to surprise me \dots for my birthday \dots or Valentine's Day \dots or \dots "

He held out his arms.

He was here because Hank was dead.

er eyes were large, smudged and bruised-looking in the way that frightens me. Her voice was soft, honeycombed with desperation. She had walked into my office without knocking, without invitation. And she was unwelcome.

"I'm sorry." I spoke politely, woodenly. "The office is closed."

"You must help me. You must. You're all I have."

"I'm sorry," I said. I was all I had too, and there wasn't much of me at the moment. Not enough to go around.

"My husband's going to kill me. The question is not maybe but when." The smudge around her eyes got deeper, more bruised and purple, like torn and crushed grapes.

"Go to the district attorney's office and get a restraining order. Go to the police. They are committed to stopping domestic violence; they will help you." Mechanical words.

"It won't work." The deadness in her voice threaded through the honeycomb of desperation. There was no light or life in the eyes ringed in bruised purple. "I can't run; I can't hide. He will find me no matter what I do."

"The police will help you."

Outside, sirens screamed. We listened in silence that she finally broke.

"No." A soft sigh that seemed to have neither beginning nor end

trailed off into tomorrow and days after. "No, my husband is the police."

An image of Hank overwhelmed me. And then loss. I missed her next words, heard only the end.

"I have run before and he has always found me. He will kill me. Soon."

"I can't help you. Please go."

Her eyes held mine for a long time. "I'll be back." The words were quiet. The desperation was still there.

In the bathroom I splashed cold water on my face.

My eyes were large, smudged and bruised-looking in the way that frightens me.

I too was fighting for my life.

he alley behind my midtown Sacramento office was empty, as it usually is in the evening. There are occasional parked cars, garbage cans, and No Trespassing—This Means You! signs, but no streetlights. A dog barked lethargically and then the barks drifted off into a bored whine. I thought I heard an owl and froze briefly in the fleeting moments of evening silence. Nothing. Several blocks away a car alarm went off. Business as usual. I unlocked my Bronco and climbed in.

It was a whisper, nothing more, a small sound easily ignored.

Always check the back seat.

Instant rewind. A heartbeat. I was almost out of the Bronco.

Take no chances.

A hairy well-muscled arm around my neck pulled me back and against the headrest into a choke hold.

Never let your guard down.

"I've got a gun. It would be a mistake to fight me." The voice was a harsh whisper, the breath hot on my cheek, the smell of aftershave in my nose. The taste of fear in my mouth. The cold metal of the gun, the barrel resting against my cheek.

Don't lose your head.

"Where is she?" The harsh whisper.

"Who?"

"Sara. I know you're hiding her."

"I don't know any Saras." Stall for time. One person walking down the alley, a police car on patrol. Hey, I wasn't picky, a pimp or drug dealer was fine. "Unless you mean my cousin in Maine? That Sara? Oh, and Sara Lee of course, I love her cakes. How about you? What's your favorite?"

"Fucking with me would be a big mistake." His voice was ugly, discordant. The pressure on my neck tightened. "Sara Bernard came to your office two days ago. I want to know where she is and you are going to tell me." He said it with a note of dark finality. Done deal. Dead PIs were nothing to him, *nothing*, his tone said—all in a day's work.

Sara Bernard, the one who said her husband was going to kill her? It had to be. "A woman came to my office two days ago but I don't know her name. I know nothing about her."

"You're going to tell me where she is."

"I don't know."

He laughed. Unpleasantly. "There's an easy way to do this and a hard way. Give me the car keys."

Have it out right there, the cops tell you. Don't let them take you someplace; it only gets worse. Fast.

"Hey, pal." I exaggerated wildly on the pal part. "There's a guy over there walking his dog. He can see the gun. Bad news. Everyone's got a cell phone these days." My voice was easy, conversational.

The gun slipped away from my cheek, the pressure on my neck eased. I stabbed his forearm with the car key. Hard. Slammed against the door and rolled, hitting the ground with my shoulder. The first bullet ricocheted off the pavement next to me. That's when I scrabbled under the Bronco. And lost the car keys. Damn. Damn!

I was on my own.

There was no one walking a dog. I'd lied. The second shot slammed through my consciousness. Then another slam. The car door. The starter turned over, died. I scrambled, slithered frantically. If I stayed where I was would my body clear the muffler? Would I drag? Asphalt, gravel, broken glass, digging into my hands and chin; visions of me hooked onto the Bronco and dragging digging into my imagination. The starter again. My head and shoulders cleared the Bronco on the passenger side. I dug my elbows in. Hauled. Tucked my knees up. Rolled. The starter caught.

More gravel and glass in my face. Brake lights. The screech of tires. And then silence. I thanked my lucky stars that I hadn't gotten around to

the tune-up that the Bronco was way overdue for. For once procrastination had paid off. Big time. The blood on my lip was salty, ugly-tasting. But I was alive, and I wasn't dragging.

The night was cold with bright sparkly stars. The promise of spring and the smell of winter woodsmoke were in the air. The daffodils had been up this morning, yellow and white and dancing in the soft breezes and lacy sunshine. Stars sparkled and then misted in the blood and pain and relief that drenched me. It was, I realized, the first time in days that I had felt anything but grief and the loss of Hank.

"You okay down there?" a gruff voice called out from the second story of the alley building in the midtown area that is both residential and business.

"Please call the police." I had to say it twice. The first time it came out whispery and hoarse. Bruised vocal cords and the residue of fear. Above me the window slammed shut.

I lay there staring at the stars trying to breathe right and wondering if everything on me still worked. I heard the sound of steps before I heard the voice.

"Don't you worry none. It's just me. I called the coppers and they're on the way over." A tall, impossibly skinny figure wobbled into my upside-down view. He was seventy-five, easy, with a blanket in one hand and a baseball bat in the other. "I thought of bringing you some coffee, brandy woulda been smarter yet, but I figured we was better off with Ole Trusty here." He swung the baseball bat expertly.

I grinned, then winced. Cut on my lip. "Thank you." I could hear the sirens now.

"You want I should drop this blanket on you?"

I thought about sitting up. Lying here was easy, but cold. Getting up was inevitable, but difficult, as I couldn't brace myself on hands, knees, or elbows. Everything was banged up and bruised, or cut and bloody. I made it to a sitting position, finally, and he dropped the blanket on my shoulders.

"Name's Harv. You?"

"Kat."

"Yeah? Reckon you just lost a couple of those nine lives. Heh heh." He grunted at his own joke.

I tried to smile but it was too hard. The sirens were very loud now. A black-and-white sailed around the corner and stopped ten or fifteen yards

from us. Then another. I blinked stupidly in the lights. Harv waved the baseball bat at them and jumped up and down. Big night for him, I guess. He especially liked the run down the alley and the drawn guns. I was okay with it too. Good guys with guns are a lot more attractive than bad guys with guns.

"Gol dang, this is just like that TV show, *Nine-one-one*!" Harv started to sing a song about bad boys bad boys. The cops looked us over—the harmless and the pathetic—and put away their guns.

"You okay, miss? Jerry, better call an ambulance."

"No," I protested. Took me two tries again. Jeez. "I'll be all right." He looked doubtful. "You don't look so great."

Arguing with that was pointless. "Can I get a hand up? Please."

He nodded, reached down, hands under my arms, picked me up effortlessly and planted me solidly on the ground. I didn't wobble all that much. He steadied me. He was not much taller than I but obviously worked out. The dark eyes and hair indicated an Asian heritage. His face was in semidarkness. "What happened?"

I told them, everything but Sara's last name.

"You get the plate on the vehicle, miss?" This was Jerry, the other cop, a nice guy but not, as my grandmother Alma would say, a firecracker in the brains department.

His partner, Sam, the one who had picked me up, closed his eyes briefly and shook his head. "It was her car, Jer."

"Oh, yeah."

I gave them the license plate number. "Do you know an officer with the last name of Bernard?"

"Jed Bernard, sure."

"A patrol officer?"

"They kick him upstairs, Sam? He a detective now?"

Sam nodded. In the glare from the patrol car lights his eyes were curious. "You know him?"

I shook my head. "Just heard his name somewhere. Just wondering. Does he work nights?"

"No. Not regularly, anyway." The curious in his eyes deepened.

"Hey, Kat, is this yours?" Harv walked out of the darkness into the lights of the patrol cars carrying a flattened shoulder bag with a broken buckle and muddy tire tread markings.

"Yes." I breathed out in relief. One less thing to worry about.

The cops finished writing up their report, then left me with Harv, who let me use his phone and wash my face. He made me coffee too, though I disappointed him by refusing to have a slug of brandy in it. So he had one for each of us. Three calls: to the locksmith, who does more work for me than I would wish; to Rafe—my friend who is a swell, and tough, guy with a Dirty Harry kind of attitude—so that he would watch my house until the locksmith got there; and to Charity, my best friend, to come get me. I was hurting pretty badly by then.

Charity didn't say a thing—not about my job, or my torn-up face and hands, or my stolen car—just scooted me out of Harv's apartment and into her 4Runner. Harv made me promise I'd come back and visit. I made him promise he'd leave his baseball bat in the corner. Which made him grin. And then I slept the forty minutes out to Charity's ranch.

I'd been having kind of a tough time lately. Gol dang, as Harv would say.

Dear Charity,

My boyfriend ran off with another girl. She got pregnant so he said he was going to marry her, but then he said it wasn't his, so I took him back. But he left again. He said he needed more fun, excitement and good times. Oh, and he took all my money so I couldn't make the rent or gas bill or anything which was pretty embarrassing! Now he wants to come back and I'm not sure what to do. When he's not drinking or doing drugs he can be a lot of fun. And he has a tattoo of a heart with my name in it! Cool, huh? Also I really love him! What should I do?

Up in the Air in San Antonio

"What do you think, Katy?" Charity is a nationally syndicated advice columnist; answering letters like this is her job.

"It's a fake, don't answer it."

"That's what I thought at first but two of my researchers called San Antonio and she checks out."

"I don't care. No one's that dumb. She doesn't have the wits God gave a turnip. Even people in soap operas have more sense."

"Do soap opera people have lives like that?"

"Yes and no. They screw around, lie and cheat and steal, but they seem to do it with a little more style and finesse. And fewer tattoos." I know these things because Alma, my grandmother, is a soapaholic who insists on filling me in on the plots of her favorite soaps. I reached out and tossed another log on the fire. "Let's ski for a little while."

Charity moaned.

"Just an hour?"

"Katy, I'm tuckered out, we skied all morning. Okay, listen, let's open a bottle of wine first, and get some of those yummy crackers. Cheese too. Tomorrow—I promise!—I'll ski all day if you want to."

I opened a bottle of wine and tossed her a glass and a box of crackers. Then I pulled on my ski stuff. Charity has a not-to-be-believed cabin at Tahoe—you can step right out the door and cross-country. So I was. When I ski I can forget; I can stop thinking. Freedom.

It was dark by the time I got back and the cabin overflowed with welcoming smells: the log fire, roast chicken, and a gazillion-calorie chocolate decadence dessert. After dinner, but before chocolate decadence, she made me listen.

"Okay, here's my answer:

"Dear San Antonio,

You are not up in the air, you are out in the ozone. Your boyfriend cheated on you, stole from you, and told you you weren't enough for him. Remember show-and-tell? The whole idea is to learn, not repeat our mistakes.

Charity

"Does that seem too tough, Kat?"

"No. Put something in about tattoos too."

Charity giggled and poured herself another glass of wine.

"Do you think it was Jed?" I asked.

She frowned at me. "How the hell would I know? I've never even met anyone from San Antonio. You can call him Jed if you want but I'm betting Out in the Ozone would fall for someone with a name like Jim Boy or Shorty. Jed sounds too wholesome."

"Not him, the guy who attacked me. Sara Bernard's husband's name was Jed."

"Oh sure, that's logical. Do you have any facts to support your theory, or is it just a wild guess?"

"You think the woman's visit and the attack on me two days later was a coincidence?"

"I don't know, Katy. What does it matter? You've decided to take some time off from work—this should convince you that your decision was the right one. Have a gooey." She held out the dessert plate.

It wasn't distraction enough. "He tried to kill me. Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be dragged underneath a car?"

"Katy, don't."

"Have you?"

She shook her head.

But I had; I'd thought about it a lot lately.

When I picked up my office messages there was one from a woman who iden-Wtified herself as the person who had spoken with me in my office several days ago. Her name, she said, was Sara. Would I please please please call her back. She was too afraid to come again to my office, she was too afraid to leave a longer message, she was too afraid to do almost anything. Please please please . . . She had repeated that over and over, as if it were a prayer, and she sounded as though she too had thought about being dragged behind a car. At top speed.

I didn't call her back.

Ohmagod, Katy, listen to this one:

"Dear Charity,

My husband cheated his company out of thousands of dollars. He was in a position to make a decision that favored the client, not his company, and he did. The client then wrote him a check for more than he makes in a year. He has been very happy lately, but of course he doesn't know I know this. I was raised never ever to cheat or lie, and am just sick at heart. What am I to do?

Torn in Tulsa

"It breaks my heart to hear stories like this, it really does. No matter what she decides, she won't be happy. She can't be. She has to choose between her principles and her husband and she can't have both. Not to mention that her husband isn't what she thought he was, and now, if she's honest, she knows he never will be." Was that what happened to Sara? I wondered. Did she have to make that choice? I thought this, I wondered this before I could catch myself.

But I didn't call.

I skied. And I thought about Hank. Always. All the time. Sometimes I cried but the tears in my eyes and on my face hurt in the cold and wind. So I cried inside instead. I was used to that.

"People fight so hard not to see the truth. It's sad, don't you think?" Charity's voice was wistful, plaintive.

Sad? Maybe, but it was a protection too. In my dreams Hank was still alive and I was happy. It was hard to fall asleep, to stay there in my dreams. I skied every day until I was ready to drop from fatigue. A glass or two of wine and then . . . dreams.

Sara called again. Twice. I decided not to pick up my messages for a while. The police called too. And Harv. One day there were twelve hangups on my machine. I skied. And tried to dream. I went snowshoeing, though I'd never been before. At first I laughed at my awkward motions on the snow surface and then I cried at the lonely pattern my snowshoes made across the pure white drifts. One pair of snowshoes. One set of tracks.

The tears froze on my cheeks.

And Sara called.

The dreams stopped.

I was alone.

t had all been about sex, she realized now, sex and the unfulfilled fantasies they had flung heedlessly into the waiting expectant emptiness of the other. In the still of early mornings the light had been a cool breaking gold that shivered and shimmered in the moments before it collapsed into the brightness and day that followed.

Then his hands would slide across her skin so softly that at first it was part of her dream, the edges between dream and reality a blur. She liked to stay there as long as she could, half awake and aware with endless possibilities. Finally she would glance at him through hooded eyes and he would smile at her, desire in his eyes, in his hands and mouth.

Sometimes he would awaken her by blowing across her face, the softness of a breath passing over her cheek, caressing her eyelids, dying in the soft swirl of her hair. She would fancy she heard her name or endearments in that exhalation and then she would forget everything, his fingers straying over her body.

She never used to sleep naked. He had taught her that too, taught her to desire his touch every moment, awake or sleeping, until finally she was restless, achy, and unhappy without him. Often they would make love without a word, without a sound even. She imagined it was like being with a stranger—there was nothing to say with words, only with your body.

Whenever they could both get away from work they would meet at the house, taking their clothes off the minute the door closed behind them,