

Beautiful

He'd found her already.

Oh, no, she thought. Lord, no...

Eyes filling with tears of despair, wracked with nausea, the young woman sagged against the window frame as she stared through a crack in the blinds.

The battered Ford pickup — as gray as the turbulent Atlantic Ocean a few hundred yards up the road — eased to a stop in front of her house in this pretty neighborhood of Crowell, Massachusetts, north of Boston. This was the very truck she'd come to dread, the truck that regularly careened through her dreams, sometimes with its tires on fire, sometimes shooting blood from its tailpipe, sometimes piloted by an invisible driver bent on tearing her heart from her chest.

Oh, no...

The engine shut off and tapped as it cooled. The dusk light was failing and the interior of the pickup was dark but she knew the occupant was staring at her. In her mind she could see his features as clearly as if he were standing ten feet away in broad August sunlight. Kari Swanson knew he'd have that faint smile of impatience on his face, that he'd be tugging an earlobe marred with two piercings long ago infected and closed up, leaving an ugly scar. She knew his breathing would be labored.

Her own breath in panicked gasps, hands trembling, Kari drew back from the window. Crawling to the front hallway, she tore open the

drawer of a small table and took out the pistol. She looked outside again.

The driver didn't approach the house. He simply played his ail-too familiar game: sitting in the front seat of his old junker and staring at her.

He'd found her already. Just one week after she'd moved here! He'd followed her over two thousand miles. All the efforts to cover her tracks had been futile.

The brief peace she'd enjoyed was gone.

David Dale had found her.



Kari — born Catherine Kelley Swanson — was a sensible, pleasant-mannered twenty-eight-year-old, who'd been raised in the Midwest by a loving family. She was a natural-born student with a cum laude degree to her name and plans for a Ph.D. Her career until the move here — fashion modeling — had provided her with both a large investment account and a chance to work regularly in such pampering locales as Paris, Cape Town, London, Rio, Bali and Bermuda. She drove a nice car, had always bought herself modest but comfortable houses and had provided her parents with a plump annuity.

A seemingly enviable life... and yet Kari Swanson had been forever plagued by a debilitating problem.

She was utterly beautiful.

She'd hit her full height — six feet — at seventeen and her weight hadn't varied more than a pound or so off its present mark of 121. Her hair was a shimmery, natural golden (yes, yes, you could see it flying in slow motion on many a shampoo commercial) and her skin

had a flawless translucent eggshell tone that often left makeup artists with little to do at photo shoots but dab on the currently in-vogue lipstick and eye shadow.

People, Details, W, Rolling Stone, Paris Match, the *London Times* and *Entertainment Weekly* had all described Kari Swanson as the "most beautiful woman in the world" or some version of that title. And virtually *every* publication in the industrialized world had run a picture of her at one time or another, many of those photos appearing on the magazines' covers.

That her spellbinding beauty could be a liability was a lesson she learned early. Young Cathy — she didn't become "Kari" the supermodel until age twenty — longed for a normal teenhood but her appearance kept derailing that. She was drawn to the scholastic and artistic crowds in high school but they rejected her point-blank, assuming either that she was a flighty airhead or was mocking the gawky students in those circles.

On the other hand, she was fiercely courted by the cliqueish in-crowd of cheerleaders and athletes, few of whom she could stand. To her embarrassment she was regularly elected queen of various school pageants and dances, even when she refused to compete for the titles.

The dating situation was even more impossible. Most of the nice, interesting boys froze like rabbits in front of her and didn't have the courage to ask her out, assuming they'd be rejected. The jocks and studs relentlessly pursued her — though their motive, of course, was simply to be seen in public with the most beautiful girl in school or to bed her as a trophy lay (naturally none succeeded, but stinging rumors abounded; it seemed that the more adamant the rejection, the more the spurned boy bragged about his conquest).

Her four years at Stanford were virtually the same — modeling, schoolwork and hours of loneliness, interrupted by rare evenings and

weekends with the few friends who didn't care what she looked like (tellingly, her first lover — a man she was still friendly with — was blind).

After graduation she'd hoped that life would be different, that the spell of her beauty wouldn't be as potent with those who were older and busy making their way in the world. How wrong that was... Men remained true to their dubious mission and, ignoring Kari the person, pursued her as greedily and thoughtlessly as ever. Women grew even more resentful of her than in school, as their figures changed, thanks to children and age and sedentary lives.

Kari threw herself into her modeling, easily getting assignments with Ford, Elite and the other top agencies. But her successful career created a curious irony. She was desperately lonely and yet she had no privacy. Simply because she was beautiful, complete strangers considered themselves intimate friends and constantly approached her in public or sent her long letters describing their intimate secrets, begging for advice and offering her their own opinions on what she should do with her life.

She grew to hate the simple activities that she'd enjoyed as a child — Christmas shopping, playing softball, fishing, jogging. A trip to the grocery store was often a horror; men would speed into line behind her at the checkout stand and flirt mercilessly. More than once she fled, leaving behind a full cart.

But she never felt any real terror until David Dale, the man in the gray pickup truck.

Kari had first noticed him in a crowd of onlookers when she was on a job for *Vogue* two years ago.

People always watched photo shoots, of course. They were fascinated with physiques they would never have, with designer clothes that cost their monthly salary, with the gorgeous faces they'd seen gazing at them from newsstands around the country. But

something had seemed different about this man. Something troubling.

Not just his massive size — well over six feet tall with huge legs and heavy thighs, long, dangling arms. What had bothered her was the way he'd looked at her through his chunky, out-of-fashion glasses — his expression had been one of familiarity.

As if he knew a great deal about her.

And with a chill Kari had realized that *he* was familiar to *her* too — she'd seen him at other shoots.

Hell, she'd thought, I've got a stalker.

At first David Dale would simply appear at shoots like the one in Pacific Grove, California, parking his pickup truck nearby and standing silently just outside the ring of activity. Then she began to see him around the modeling agencies that repped her.

He began to write her long letters about himself: his lonely, troubled childhood, his parents' deaths, his former girlfriends (the stories sounded made-up), his current job as an environmental engineer (Kari read "janitor"), his struggle with his weight, his love of Dungeons & Dragons games, television shows he watched. He also knew a frightening amount of information about her — where she'd grown up, what she'd studied at Stanford, her likes and dislikes. He'd clearly read all of the interviews she'd ever given. He took *to* sending her presents, usually innocuous things like slippers, Day-Timers, picture frames, pen-and-pencil sets. Disturbingly, he'd sometimes send her lingerie: tasteful Victoria's Secret items, in her exact size, with a gift receipt courteously enclosed. She threw everything out.

Kari generally ignored Dale but the first time he'd parked his gray pickup in front of her house in Santa Monica, California, she'd stormed up to and confronted him. Tugging at his damaged ear,

breathing in an asthmatic, eerie way, he ignored her rage and simply stared at her with an adoring gaze as he studied her face, muttering, "Beautiful, beautiful." Upset, she returned to her house. Dale, however, happily pulled out a thermos and began sipping coffee. He remained parked on the street until midnight — a practice that would soon become a daily ritual.

Dale would dog her on the street. He'd sit in restaurants where she was eating and occasionally have a bottle of cheap wine sent to her table. She kept her phone number unlisted and had her mail sent to her agent's office but he still managed to get notes delivered to her. Kari was one of the few people in America without e-mail on her computer; she was sure that Dale would find her address and inundate her with messages.

She went to the police, of course, and they did what they could but it wasn't much. On the cops' first visit to Dale's ramshackle condo in a low-rent neighborhood, they found a copy of the state's anti-stalking statute sitting prominently on his coffee table. Sections were underlined; David Dale knew exactly how far he could go. Still, Kari convinced a magistrate to issue a restraining order. Since Dale had never done anything exactly illegal, though, the order was limited to preventing him from setting foot on her property itself. Which he'd never done anyway.

The incident that finally pushed her over the edge occurred last month. Dale had made a practice of following the few men whom Kari had the effrontery to date. In this case it'd been a young TV producer. One day Dale had walked into the man's health club in Century City and had a brief conversation with him. The producer had broken their date that night, leaving the harsh message that he would've appreciated it if she'd told him she was engaged. He never returned Kari's calls.

That incident had warranted another visit from the police but the cops found Dale's condo empty and the pickup gone when they'd

arrived.

But Kari knew he'd be back. And so she'd decided it was time to end the problem once and for all. She'd never intended to be a model for more than a few years and she'd figured that this was a good time to quit. Telling only her parents and a few close friends, she'd instructed a real estate company to lease her house and moved to Crowell, Massachusetts, a town she'd been to several years before on a photo shoot. She'd spent a few days here after the assignment and had fallen in love with the clean air and dramatic coastline — and with the citizens of the town too. They were friendly but refreshingly reserved toward her; a beautiful face didn't place very high on the scale of austere New England values.

She'd left L.A. at two a.m. on a Sunday morning, taking mostly back streets, doubling back and pausing often until she was sure she'd evaded Dale. As she'd driven across the country, elated at the prospect of a new life, she'd occupied much of her time with a fantasy about Dale's committing suicide.

But now she knew that the son of a bitch was very much alive. And somehow had found out where she'd moved.

Tonight, huddled in the living room of her new house, she heard his pickup's engine start. It idled roughly, the exhaust bubbling from the rusty pipe — sounds she'd grown oh-too-familiar with over the past few years. Slowly the vehicle drove away.

Crying quietly now, Kari rested her head on the carpet. She closed her eyes. Nine hours later she awoke and found herself on her side, knees drawn up, clutching the thirty-eight-caliber pistol to her chest, the same way that, as a little girl, she'd wake up every morning, curled into a ball and cuddling a stuffed bear she'd named Bonnie.



Later that morning an embittered Kari Swanson was sitting in the office of Detective Brad Loesser, head of the Felonies Division of the Crowell, Massachusetts, Police Department.

A solid, balding man with sun-baked freckles across the bridge of his nose, Loesser listened to her story with sympathy. He shook his head then asked, "How'd he find out you were here?"

She shrugged. "Hired a private eye, for all I know." David Dale was exactly as resourceful as he needed to be when it came to Kari Swanson.

"Sid!" the detective shouted to a plainclothes officer in a cubicle nearby.

The trim young man appeared. Loesser introduced Kari to Sid Harper. Loesser briefed his assistant and said, "Check this guy out and get me the records from..." He glanced at Kari. "What police department'd have his file?"

She said angrily, "That'd be departments, Detective. Plural. I'd start with Santa Monica, Los Angeles and the California State Police. Then you might want to talk to Burbank, Beverly Hills, Glendale and Orange County. I moved around a bit to get away from him."

"Brother," Loesser said, shaking his head.

Sid Harper returned a few minutes later.

"L.A. is overnighting us their file. Santa Monicas is coming in two days. And I ran the Mass real estate records round here." He glanced at a slip of paper. "David Dale bought a condo in Park View two days ago. That's about a quarter mile from Ms. Swanson's place."

"Bought?" Loesser asked, surprised.

"He says it makes him feel closer to me if he owns a house in the same town," Kari explained, shaking her head.

"We'll talk to him, Miss Swanson. And we'll keep an eye on your house. If he does anything overt you can get a restraining order."

"That won't stop him," she scoffed. "You know that."

"Our hands're pretty much tied."

She slapped her leg hard. "I've been hearing that for years. It's time to *do* something." Kari's eyes strayed to a rack of shotguns on the wall nearby. When she looked back she found the detective was studying her closely.

Loesser sent Sid Harper back to his cubicle and then said, "Hey, got something to show you, Ms. Swanson." Loesser reached forward and lifted a picture frame off his desk and handed it to her. "The snapshot on the left there. Whatta you think?"

A picture of a grinning, freckled teenage boy was on the right. On the left side was a shot of a young woman in a graduation gown and mortarboard. " 'S' my daughter. Elaine."

"She's pretty. You going to ask me if she's got a future in modeling?"

"No, ma'am, I wasn't. See, my girl's twenty-five, almost the same age as you. You know something — she's got her whole life ahead of her. Tons and tons of good things waiting. Husband, kids, traveling, jobs."

Kari looked up from the picture into the detective's placid face. He continued, "You got the same things to look forward to, Miss Swanson. I know this's been hell for you and it may be hell for a while to come. But if you go taking matters into your own hands, which I have a feeling you've been thinking about, well, that's gonna be the end of your life right there."

She shrugged off the advice and asked, "What's the law on self-defense here?"

"Why're you asking me a question like that?" Loesser asked in a whisper.

"What's the answer?"

The detective hesitated then said, "The commonwealth's real strict about it. Outside of your own house, even on your front porch, it's practically impossible to shoot somebody who's unarmed and get away with a self-defense claim. And, I'll tell you, we look right away to see if the body was dragged in after and maybe a knife got put into the corpse's hand." The detective paused then added, "And, I'm gonna have to be frank, Ms. Swanson, a jury's going to look at you and say, 'Well, of *course* men're going to be following her around. Moth to the flame. She ought've had a thicker skin.'"

"I better go," Kari said.

Loesser studied her for a moment then said in a heartfelt tone, "Don't go throwing your life away over some piece of trash like this crazy man."

She snapped, "I don't *have* a life. That's the problem. I thought I could get one back by moving to Crowell. That didn't work."

"We all go through rough spots from time to time. God helps us through 'em."

"I don't believe in God," Kari said, pulling on her raincoat. "He wouldn't do this to anybody."

"God didn't send David Dale after you," Loesser said.

"I don't mean that," she replied angrily. She lifted a trembling, splayed hand toward her face. "I mean, if He existed, He wouldn't

be cruel enough to make me beautiful."



At eight p.m. a car door slammed outside of Kari Swanson's house.

It was Dale's pickup. She recognized the sound.

With shaking hands Kari set down her wine and shut off the TV, which she always watched with the sound muted so she'd have some warning if Dale decided to approach the house. She ran to the hallway table and pulled out her gun.

Outside of your own house, even on your front porch, it's practically impossible to shoot somebody who's unarmed and get away with a self-defense claim...

Gripping the pistol, Kari peeked through the front-door curtain. David Dale walked slowly toward her yard, clutching a huge bouquet of flowers. He knew enough not to set foot on her property and so, still standing in the street, he bowed from the waist, the way people do when meeting royalty, and set the bouquet on the grass of the parking strip, resting an envelope next to it. He arranged the flowers carefully, as if they were sitting on a grave, then stood up and admired them. He returned to the truck and drove into the windy night.

Barefoot, Kari walked out into the cold drizzle, seized the flowers and tossed them into the trash. Returning to the front porch, she paused under the lantern and tore open the envelope, hoping that maybe Detective Loesser had spoken with Dale and frightened him into leaving. Maybe this was a good-bye message.

But, of course, this wasn't the case.

To my most Beautiful Lover —

This was a wonderful idea you had, I mean, moving to the east Coast. There were too many people in California vieing (or whatever... ha, you know I'm a bad speller!!!) for your love and attention and it means a lot to me that you wanted them out of your life. And quitting your modeling job so I don't have to share you with the world any more... You did that ALL for me!!!

I know we'll be happy here.

I love you always and forever.

— David

P.S. Guess what? I FINALLY found that old New York Scene magazine where you modeled those lether skirts. Yes, the one I've been looking for for years! Can you believe it!!!! I was so happy! I cut you out and taped you up (so to speak, ha!.) I have a "Kari" room in my new condo, just like the one in my old place in Glendale (which you never came to visit — boo hoo!!!) but I decided to put these pictures in my bedroom. I got this nice light, it's very low like candle light and I leave it on all night long. Now I even look forward to having bad dreams so I can wake up and see you.

Walking inside, she slammed the door and clicked the three deadbolts. Sinking to her knees, she sobbed in fury until she was exhausted and her chest ached. Finally she calmed, caught her breath and wiped her face with her sleeve.

Kari stared at the pistol for a long moment then put it back in the drawer. She walked into the den and, sitting in a straight-back chair, stared into her windswept backyard. Understanding at last that the only way this nightmare would end was with David Dale's death or her own.

She turned to her desk and began rummaging through a large stack of papers.



The bar on West Forty-second Street was dim and stank of Lysol.

Even though Kari was dressed down — in sweats, sunglasses and a baseball cap — three of the four patrons and the bartender stared at her in astonishment, one bleary-eyed man offering her a flirty smile that revealed more gum than teeth. The fourth customer snored sloppily at the end of the bar. Everyone, except the snoozer, smoked.

She ordered a model's cocktail — Diet Coke with lemon — and sat at a table in the rear of the shabby place.

Ten minutes later a tall man with ebony skin, a massive chest and huge hands entered the bar. He squinted through the cigarette smoke and made his way to Kari's table.

He nodded at her and sat, looking around with distaste at the decrepit bar. He appeared exactly like she'd remembered him from their first meeting. That had been a year ago in the Dominican Republic when she'd been on a photo assignment for *Elle* and he'd been taking a day off from a project he'd been working on in nearby Haiti. When, after a few drinks, he'd told her his line of work and wondered if she might need anyone with his particular skills, she'd laughed at the absurd thought. Still, David Dale came to mind and she'd taken his phone number.

"Why didn't you want to meet at my place?" he now asked her.

"Because of him," she said, lowering her voice, as if uttering the pronoun alone could magically summon David Dale like a demon. "He follows me everywhere. I don't think he knows I came to New York. But I can't take any chances that he'd find out about you."

"Yo," the bartender's raspy voice called, "you want something? I mean, we don't got table service."

The man turned to the bartender, who fell silent under his sharp gaze and returned to inventorying the bottles of cheap, well liquor.

The man across from Kari cleared his throat. With a grave voice he said, "You told me what you wanted but there's something I have to say. First —"

Kari held up a hand to stop him. She whispered, "You're going to tell me it's risky, you're going to tell me that it could ruin my life forever, you're going to tell me to go home and let the police deal with him."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it." He looked into her flinty eyes and when she said nothing more he asked her, "You're sure you want to handle it this way?"

Kari pulled a thick white envelope out of her purse and slid it toward him. "There's the hundred thousand dollars. That's my answer."

The man hesitated then picked up the envelope and put it in his pocket.



Nearly a month after his meeting with Kari Swanson, Detective Brad Loesser sat in his office and gazed absently at the rain streaming down his windows. He heard a breathless voice from his doorway.

"We got a problem, Detective," Sid Harper said.

"Which is?" Loesser spun around. Problems on a night like this... that's just great. Whatever it was, he bet he'd have to go outside to deal with it.

Harper said, "We got a hit on the wiretap."

After Kari Swanson had met with him Loesser had had several talks with David Dale, urging — virtually threatening — him to stop

harassing the woman. The man had been infuriating. He'd appeared to listen reasonably to the detective but apparently hadn't paid any attention to the lecture and, with psychotic persistence, explained how he and Kari loved each other and that it was merely a matter of time until they'd be getting married. On their last meeting Dale had looked Loesser up and down coldly and then began cross-examining *him*, apparently convinced that the cop himself had a crush on her.

That incident had so unnerved the detective that he'd convinced a commonwealth magistrate to allow a wiretap on Dale's phone.

"What happened?" Loesser now asked his assistant.

"*She* called him. Kari Swanson called Dale. About a half hour ago. She was nice as could be. Asked to see him."

"*What?*"

"She's gotta be setting him up," Harper offered.

Loesser shook his head in disgust. He'd been concerned about this very thing happening. From the moment in his office when he'd seen her eyeing the department's shotguns he'd known that she was determined to end Dale's stalking one way or another. Loesser had kept a close eye on the situation, calling Kari at home frequently over the past weeks. He'd been troubled by her demeanor. She'd seemed detached, almost cheerful, even when Dale had been parked in his usual spot, right in front of her house. Loesser could only conclude that she'd finally decided to stop him and was waiting for an opportune time.

Which was, it seemed, tonight.

"Where's she going to meet him? At her house?"

"No. At the old pier off Charles Street."

Oh, hell, Loesser thought. The pier was a perfect site for a murder — there were no houses nearby and it was virtually invisible from the main roads in town. And there were stairs nearby, leading down to a small floating dock, where Kari, or someone she'd hired, could easily take the body out to sea to dispose of it.

But she didn't know about the wiretap — or that they now had a clue as to what her plans were. If she killed Dale she'd get caught. She'd get life in prison for a lying-in-wait murder.

Loesser grabbed his coat and sprinted toward the door.



The squad car skidded to a stop at the chain-link fence on Charles Street. Loesser leapt out. He gazed toward the pier, a hundred yards away.

Through the fog and rain the detective could vaguely make out David Dale in a raincoat, clutching a bouquet of roses, walking slowly toward Kari Swanson. The tall woman stood with her back to Dale, hands on the rotting railing, gazing out over the turbulent gray Atlantic.

The detective shouted for Dale to stop. The sound of the wind and waves, though, was deafening — neither the stalker nor his prey could hear.

"Boost me up," Loesser cried to his assistant.

"You want — ?"

The detective himself formed Harpers fingers into a cradle, planted his right foot firmly in the man's hands and then vaulted over the top of the chain link. He landed off balance and tumbled painfully onto the rocky ground.

By the time the officer climbed to his feet and oriented himself, Dale was only twenty feet from Kari.

"Call for backup and an ambulance," he shouted to Harper and then took off down the muddy slope to the pier, unholstering his weapon as he ran. "Don't move! Police!"

But he saw he was too late.

Ending removed.

Can you guess what happens next?