

## 9. DESPERATION

I catch her violet Eclipse speeding away. I am supposed to follow here. But there is already a line of cars ahead of me. I see the light turn to yellow ahead. If I can't catch up to her, I could lose her then and there. I try to pass the cars ahead. But another driver cuts me off. I see the light turn to red. I am convinced that she has completely eluded me. But her car is there waiting at the light. She isn't able to make it through in time.

"Who said that you are supposed to call her?"

"I've been told to."

"That's a likely story. What are you going to do when you catch her?"

"Nothing particular. I just have to keep tabs on her."

"Tabs? You've picked her out just to follow her. Does it give you a rush to look at her sweet body?"

"She just has an air of innocence."

"She's already sleeping with a couple of guys. And here's you. The neighborhood pervert. You're following her."

"I was told to follow her."

"I received money—cash. And a photo. There were instructions to follow her. Write down where she goes. Take pictures of who she's with."

"Isn't she sleeping with her swim coach?"

"I never saw any evidence of that."

"But you're still following her."

"I took the money."

"Where do you send your reports?"

"I fax them in."

Her body seems fuller than Ariel's. She has sleeker definition. She moves with more grace. Her clothes have a more compact line.

I feel that I am getting to know her. She doesn't know me. She doesn't even suspect what I am doing. I am very careful.

I am there to protect. She's my doll. She's my baby.

I follow her to the pool. She comes out in her blue Speedo ready to do her work out. She is always busy. The library. The pool.

"You don't follow her at night."

"I have to."

"Do you have an infrared lense? Do you use your night vision to penetrate her private moments?"

"I do what I have to do."

"Do you take your time as she peels off her suit?"

"I watch. I have to watch her."

"She gives you a rush, doesn't she?"

"It's a job."

"But you want to slip yourself inside her. You want that warm youthful body surrounding you."

“I’m friendly. I want to be her guardian. I am doing her a service.”

“You’ve never even talked to her.”

My neighbor seems as if he is in a permanent process of renovation. The house is a total mess. Progress is at a snail’s pace. He delights in the dug up lawn and the port-a-potty in the yard. One side of the house is not even done and remains that way day after day. He has supplies piled throughout the lot. He thought that he was taking charge when he placed a fence on the property. In fact, the fence crossed the property line of both mine and my other’s neighbor’s yard.

Henry apologized to me, “Dude, I’m really sorry. I’ll take the fence down. It’s just temporary.” But he never does a thing.

Henry ends up moving the fence for his other neighbor.

“Henry is definitely cracked,” the neighbor tells me.

“You’ve never even said anything to him. And he’s obliged you,” I wonder about the resolution..

“I’m afraid of him. There’s just something about him that gives me the creeps.”

“I think that everyone around here questions what planet this guy came from.”

“One where they fight all the time. That’s why I keep out of his way.”

A couple of days later, I see Henry standing near my driveway.

“Hey, dude, how’s it shaking?”

“I’m doing OK, Henry. I just thought that you might be a little further along on this project of yours.”

“I’m doing what I can.”

“You told me that you were going to move the fence for me. You did it for your other neighbor.”

“Patience, patience.”

“You could have done it when you moved the rest of the fence.”

“What the fuck! I don’t need you pressuring me.”

“It’s not pressure. I’m just making a suggestion.”

“You piece of shit. You don’t appreciate a good neighbor.”

“Good neighbor. Your house looks like World War III. It’s never going to get done.”

“Cool it, mate. You’re going to have a heart attack.”

“At least, you could be honest with me. You said that the renovation would be done in March. It’s almost September.”

“We’ve had some bad weather. Chill, dude.”

“Bad weather, nothing. We’ve had one of the driest summers on record. You’ve hardly done a thing.”

“Fuck wad, are you calling me a liar?”

“You’re nothing but a fucking liar.”

He calls the cops on me. He claims that his kids heard me use profanity.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I didn’t even know that you had kids.”

“What do you know? They’re good kids. We educate them ourselves. Keep them away

from ilk like you.”

I feel myself squirming along the ground. His wife sneers at me. I had always looked at her in a friendly way.

“Why don’t you just move, you pond scum?”

Ariel gets mad at me

“You shouldn’t have got into a fight with him.”

“He was being a real ass hole.”

“Now, look what he’s done. He’s called the cops on you.”

“The cop laughed at him.”

“But you don’t know what his next step is. He could just go psycho on all of us.”

I call a surveyor out to make sure that the fence is on my property. He goes out and screams at the surveyor as he does his job. The police show up again and talk to him. There he is square in the center of his yard with his hands on his hips. His wife is there next to him. Her scowl has become worse.

I am pulling out for work. He jumps in front of my car and tries to block my progress. This has gone too far. His wife just goes along. I had found her friendly before this. Now she is just as monstrous as he is.

I want to get rid of him somehow. I see myself sneaking in the house and strangling the both of them. I squeeze and squeeze and squeeze. He struggles to know avail. There is his last gasp. The nasty shaking. Boom!

His wife’s murder is even more pleasurable. I get a special charge taking her down. She squirms much less than he does. She is like a puppy who needs to be drowned. The rock weighs her down as she travels to the bottom.

I never see the kids. I think that I would bear them more ill will. They have been raised by monsters. They will be the next generation without any reference point. They are already little fascists. They will do his bidding. Their deaths are even more justified. Who knows what nefarious deeds they already perpetrate with friends.

Ariel’s concerns are warranted. I don’t want to give in to these fantasies. I get a lawyer to resolve it all.

I have been unable to locate the package. Aaron’s advice has been completely useless. The Director calls me in.

“Walter, I’ve always had faith in you. But you really let me down. I gave you opportunity after opportunity. None of this has worked out at all. You needed to get those files. You’ve left the company exposed. I have no choice but to fire you.”

“I’ve exceeded my sales quotas every year. Even this year is on course to be a record for me.”

“But this is a security issue. We’ve depended on you. And you let us down.” He is trying to act the part of a distraught parent. I only suspected this would happen. But when I meet it face to face, it is such a let down. I don’t know what to do. I feel as if he has lied to me. The package is just an excuse. I want to call him a liar to his face. I retreat sheepishly from the office.

They give me two months severance pay. I should be able to make a claim for

unemployment as well.

“The shit finally hit the fan.”

Ariel listens to my story, “What happened?”

“I lost my job.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I can get another job. I’ve got severance. We’ve got savings. We’ll be OK.”

“That will only last so long.”

“We should take a vacation while we have the chance. We can turn this into an opportunity.”

“You’re unemployed. I can’t get away from work.”

This isn’t very well planned, but I have decided to confront the Director. I am going to slamm him against a wall and fucking strangle him. I’m going to bash him, and kick him. Just knock him around. I am going to drag him out of there for everyone else to see.

“You can’t see him today. He’s very busy.”

“You can’t stop me!”

She calls security.

“I should strangle you too.”

She throws something at me. Then she leaps up to tackle me. I drag her body along for ten feet, and then push her to the ground. Security is slow. I have my opportunity.

“Walter, we’re glad that you stopped by. I know it must seem painful to come back here after your dismissal. But we needed you to sign some papers.”

“You couldn’t have sent them to me.”

“We figured that you wanted to accelerate your severance settlement.”

“I could use my money.”

She wonders about my plans, “Are you going to move or stay in Atlanta?”

“I’d like to move. I’m not sure what are my options.”

“We actually could have processed all this already. But there was some confusion. By coming in, you’ve sorted it all out.”

I decide not to tell my wife about the fact that I’ve been terminated. I’ll keep pretending to go to work. I’ve got money. She’ll never know the difference.

Each morning I dress myself as if I am going to work. I avoid my crazy neighbors. I drive away and head for Marta. I leave the car at the Dunwoody station, and head in town. I take my lap top with me. I am doing some writing. I spend time in the library or at a coffee shop. No one bothers me. I am productive.

After my day, I head back in the train with the other commuters. Then I drive home. Ariel doesn’t know the difference.

“How was work?”

“It was good.”

“Walter, you haven’t seemed like yourself lately. Is everything all right?”

“I’m doing fine.”

“That’s not good enough. You hardly even touch me. Where’s the tenderness in this marriage?”

“I told you about that package. I’ve been under pressure to find it.”

“You’ve been away all the time for work.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m feeling cooped up here. I need to take some time off.”

“We could go to the islands.”

“You can’t take the time off. You’ve been away so much already.”

“I have some vacation time.”

“Walter, I have to get away to think about things.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s just a week by myself at the beach. I’ll be OK. I’ll make it up to you. Just give me this.”

Even while she is away, I continue my routine. I send in a few resumes. No one wants a washed up salesman.

As I watch the other passengers head for work, I wonder how anyone can manage any zeal for the daily grind. I am losing perspective. I am so far out of that world, I can’t get back in.

Without Ariel, the house seems very quiet. I am looking through some of her mail when I find a note from some guy.

*I’m glad that I can be so supportive. We all know how difficult Walter can be at times. I want to advise you to stick with it. But it may be too late! Do what you feel is right.*

Who the hell is this turd? I am glad that he can be so helpful offering his advice. He needs to mind his own business. His motives seems apparent. He wants her for himself. I bet that he is in Bermuda with her. I don’t even call her. I am afraid that he will answer the phone.

Ariel comes back with a great tan. She seems healthy and refreshed.

“You didn’t have to meet me at the airport. I could have taken the train back.”

I have flowers for her in the car.

“This is so wonderful.”

Back home, I feel that we have recovered the spark. I reach over to kiss her.

“Not now, Walter. I just got in.”

“You were expressing the need for me to be more tender.”

“You’re just doing this because you feel that you have to.”

“So be it! I don’t know what you want.”

“Walter, I have a confession to make.”

“What is it?” I can feel the pit in my stomach.

“I slept with a guy down there. A few times. We were in my room having a drink. He just slid his hand under my bikini. It felt like the thing to do.”

“All that time away, I had temptations and I did nothing.”

“But you said it. It was time away. And when you came back, you never were very friendly.”

“That’s what life is about. You have to be loyal.”

I try to restrain myself. I am not screaming. I cannot look at her. She pulls a knife from the counter. She is cutting cheese to eat with some crackers.

“I’m hungry.”

She uses the knife to emphasize her point of view.

“Do you want a divorce?”

“It was just something that happened. It felt so good. I’ve never felt that liberated. It was probably the tropical breezes. It was magic.”

“I asked you if I could come.”

“Walter, I don’t want to be here tonight. Let’s give it a day or so. I’m going to get a hotel.”

She doesn’t even unpack. She just gets in her car and drives away. A couple of days later, some guy drops her off. I run out to confront him. He remains in his car.

I scream, “Are you fucking my wife?”

He starts to drive away. I am foaming at the mouth. What is going on? I can’t control myself. I run at his car.

He is playing a game with me. He hasn’t even taken it out of first. He drives barely fast enough to elude me. I keep running after him. I am going to catch the fucker. I’m going to pound him out.

I run after him for about a half a mile. He switches to second gear. His car just sputters. I have my chance. I am going to drag him out of there and beat him to a pulp. Fortunately for him, he gets away.

“Walter, what the hell are you doing? I felt to upset to drive home. My friend helped me out. He told me that you followed him for ten blocks.”

“He taunted me. He was going slow enough for me to almost catch him.”

“He said that he was having trouble with his car. You were being a maniac. He was afraid for his life.”

“He was laughing at me.”

I take her phone from the counter. I dial his number. He answers thinking that she is calling back.

“Listen, you fucker, stay away from my wife.”

“Chill, Walter. I was taking your side. I told her to go back to you.”

“Like shit! You were telling her to run away. You probably fucked her in Bermuda.”

“We’re friends. That’s all.”

“Bull shit. I’m going to find that car of yours and blow it up with you inside.”

I put down the phone. She is looking at me with a glare of hate.

“What was that about? He’s my friend.”

“You’re fucking all your friends now.”

“Walter, you need help.”

“You’re the one who’s having an affair, and I need help. Fuck you. You miserable bitch. You whore!”

“I don’t feel safe around you.”

“I haven’t even touched you. You ‘re the one who’s ground up my insides.”

I am losing my mind. I have never felt like this before. There has never been anything that I cared about. I’ve never even been jealous of her at all. This is absurd.

I don’t know where to go. I don’t know what to do. I am being silly. She goes up to the bedroom and locks the door. I sit in the living room with a drink. This is all too far for recovery. I try to collect myself. This is worse than losing my job.

She comes down about ten.

“Walter, I’m going to my sister’s.”

“Your sister doesn’t even live here. Don’t you have to be back at work?”

“They’ll cover for me. Someone will take care of things for me. I have to get away. You’re crazy.”

“What do you expect me to do? You come back from a vacation, and you are rubbing in the details of an affair that you had. Why should I think it was the first time?”

“It wasn’t. It’s been the same for both of us. We’ve been fucking around on each other.”

“I haven’t done a thing.”

“I’ve watched you stare at our neighbor. She wears those skimpy shorts that barely cover her ass.”

“I hate the fucking red neck and her cretinous husband. Her body makes me want to puke.”

“That isn’t what she told me!”

“That’s all bull shit. You fucked up, and now you’re trying to turn me into the guilty party.”

“This marriage has been coming apart for a long time. I haven’t said a thing. I can’t talk to you. I can’t even tell you about the lawns.”

“What about the lawns?”

“Nothing. That’s just a manner of speaking.”

“What about the lawns?”

“You’re being silly now. I just need to go see my sister.”

What can she really tell me that is going to make any of this better? It just feels over. I sit at the dining room table and watch her leave.

While she is away, I don’t want to leave the house. But I feel the neighbors are watching. I don’t want them to catch on. A week later, I come home from my day at the library. Ariel is there. She seems perturbed.

“Walter, what is going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I called your work. They said that you were fired. What are you doing lying to me?”

“I thought that I could get another job.”

“Have you? Have you been even trying?”

“I’ve done what I can!”

“That’s hardly good enough. Hardly at all.”

“Ariel honey, you’re not going to leave me.”

“We’re going to have to sell the house. Walter, it’s over. I don’t want to stay with you anymore. I realized that there’s more to my life. There’s more to me. You’re a dead weight. I think that it’s always been that way.”

“You don’t know what real life is about. Real life is having to be places where you don’t want to go. Get sent around the country for your job. Waiting in hotel rooms with nothing to do. Dealing with angry clients.”

“That’s not my life, Walter. My life is waiting for you to come back from traveling. Dealing with your moods. Feeling shitty about myself. Wondering why I am so listless at work. I trusted you, Walter.”

“All that I’ve done is hide my dismissal. You had an affair. Maybe more than one.”

“That guy in Bermuda made me feel beautiful. He called me gorgeous. You don’t even notice if I change my hair. You don’t understand me for me.”

“I’ve done what I could for you, Walter. It’s never going to work out for us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve always hidden yourself from me. We’ve never been right for each other.”

“You can’t say that.”

“Grow up, Walter. We can divorce. It’s the right thing to do.”

“I love you.”

“Those are words, Walter. We are not even meant to be together.”

“I am doing what I can!”

“It’s over!”

“We were supposed to work together on this marriage. We were going to make it better.”

“It’s not going to get better. We’re killing each other. I’ll have my lawyer contact you.”

I am sitting on the couch in the living room. I hear her upstairs getting some clothes. I don’t even move. She gets in her car and drives away for the last time.

The settlement is amicable. We split the proceeds of the selling of the house. I am still not working. I get an apartment. I still have some savings. She agrees not to dispute the bank account. She has her own money from before our marriage.

I am now living life without Ariel. I get a room in house. It is on Piedmont Road. The house is run down. A few street hustlers scrape up a few bucks a night and are able to make the rent for their rooms. They leave me alone. I don’t have a television. I have time to write. Time to think about what has happened to me.

I have no neighbors to bother me about my property. I have no purpose for life. I am surviving.

“Walter, we saw that you were on your own. We need your help.”

“Who are you?”

Two men are in my room. I don’t know how they made their way inside. I can’t even see their faces

“We’re friends of the owner. We know that you’re looking for something. We’re here to help you out.”

“What if I don’t want to help?”

“What are you going to do for money?”

“What do you want from me?”

They hand me a picture of girl.

“She drives a purple Eclipse. We’d like you to follow her.”

“That’s all that I have to do,” I ask.

It seems pretty easy. Little do I realize that she is a bat out of hell. I do my best to keep up. She isn’t supposed to know that I’m following her. Since I’m always catching up, I figure that there’s no way that she even knows that I’m there. But sometimes I just spurt away from a crowd of other vehicles. It’s pretty obvious that I’m there.

I have no idea who I’m working for. I could hardly see the guys in the dark. I am so desperate for money, I would do almost anything. This is easy work. At the end of the day, I

complete a log on her activity. I email it to the address that they gave. I receive a check in the mail.

I wish that I could say that she was doing something of interest. Even a little scandalous. Maybe having an affair with the swimming coach or scoring coke with her rich friends. None of that is part of her itinerary. I seldom see her with guys. It's not as if her parents are restrictive. She is able to avoid them most of the time. It's just the way that she is.

To be honest, I hardly see her. She is hidden in that car of hers. She has a couple of female friends that she hangs with a lot. I'll wait in the car while she's over at one of their houses. I only have to follow her. I take pictures to supplement my surveillance. But there is not need to find out who are these people with her.

I'm waiting for her to do something really bizarre. That would almost give me a reason to do all this. I don't have to be on her twenty-four hours a day. But they want me to follow her as much as possible.

One of the men show up at my place. This time he knocks. My lights are on. I can see his face. He is not as formidable as I imagined. His mannerisms are rather halting. He is surprisingly friendly.

"Have you thought about joining our organization?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're pretty well one of us already."

"One of us. Whatsoever does that mean?"

"We are a secret brotherhood. We can send you a web link to learn more."

"How did they recruit you?"

"I was working for a federal agency. In fact, I still do. That's part of my function in the organization. I help hold things together. I get the information that they really need. You wouldn't believe how easy it is to get stuff on the government computers. I can just break down all the security codes. All the information in the world is there."

I want to learn more. He gives me the internet link.

The next day I am back to my job. It is an arduous day as she is off on a myriad of errands. It still makes little sense why they are having me do this. I figure that I'll stop at a local grocery store on the way home. When I come out with my bags, she is blocking my exit.

"What's this about?" I ask rather innocently.

"You've been following me."

"Not at all."

"How dumb do you take me for? You've been on me like white on rice."

"Just mere coincidence."

"You have Fulton County plates. You don't even live around here."

"I've moved since I got my tags."

"You're not even a good liar. Are you a pervert? A sex offender. Do you like how I look? Do you want to touch my breasts?"

She tugs on her shirt. I back away.

"Some men paid me to follow you."

"A likely story."

"No, really. How do you think that I could spend all my time following you around if

there wasn't something in it for me?"

"You're a pervert. You were going to kidnap me and do outrageous things to me."

"I was watching out for you. I was protecting you."

"A likely story. I bet you get hard just looking at my firm body. If I reached in your shorts now, would Mister Peters be all hard and wet for me?"

"It's not like that!"

She had her lips close to my mouth.

"What do you want from me now? You going to kill me in the supermarket."

After this incident, I'm not much on surveillance any more.

She suggests, "We could plan it out together. You could send them fake info."

"I still don't know why they wanted me to follow some seventeen year old."

"I'm eighteen."

"Wow, a voter."

"I'm not as stupid as you think."

"What's your name?"

"Rachel."

"I'm Walter," I give her my hand to shake. She gives me a firm grip. I hold the hand a little long.

"Walter, does this trick always work?"

"What trick?"

"Getting young girls in bed."

I look embarrassed. I suppose my gig is up. I email my contact. I'm told to wait for a future assignment. I'm quickly running out of money.

A couple of weeks later I am driving home when I see her near the police station. She is barefoot and crying.

"Get in, I'll give you a ride," I tell her. She is all disheveled. "You look a mess. What happened to you?"

"My man ran out on me. He took all my shit to buy meth."

"You can come back to my place and clean up.

After riding with her for a while, I realize that is not Rachel.

"I'm sorry to admit it. I thought that you were someone else. You're spitting image."

"Whoa. That's why you picked me up!"

"I can still help you."

"My name's Angel. I thought that you were being nice.

When she cleans up, I realize that the resemblance is even greater.

Immediately she starts to hit me up for cash. I am helpless to say no. I am doing everything that I can to help her. I let her stay for a couple of weeks

"Walter, I need some more money."

"I barely have any for myself."

"Don't be a prick on me."

"What do you need all this money for? Are you doing meth?"

I know that she is. I let her deny it.

"Walter, I'll have sex with you if you let me stay."

I don't even feel that attracted to her. I know too much about her.

"Walter, are you to have us believe that you didn't sleep with her?"

I am being awakened by my two male friends.

"I looked up that stuff on the website. Pretty powerful organization."

"You're changing the subject. We found out that you slept with Rachel."

"No, I didn't. I told you exactly what happened in the email."

"We investigated on our own."

"She's lying."

"We never talked to her."

"Whatever. She's lying."

They offer me another assignment.

"I'm not ready to join an organization."

"You need money."

"I'm not desperate."

I am surprised that I have gone through such a lot of money in a short time. I don't want to have to sell my car. But it is a liability. Once the insurance runs out, I won't be able to renew. I'm glad that all the payments are done.

I have barely enough money to stay here for a couple of months. I don't look fondly on my prospects on the street. I can hold out a little longer if I dump the car.

The organization frightens me. They are pursuing me with more vigor. What is their real purpose? It's almost like a cult. I don't need a reason to live. I need a reason not to die.