

# Surviving Toronto

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Published: 2006  
in »Thriller«



Dressed in black, Karen Brown was indistinguishable from her surroundings. Ambient light was nonexistent in the expensive, quiet neighborhood, where *crime* should've been nonexistent.

The microwave clock glowed 3:00:15 a.m.

She switched the Sig-Sauer's grip to her left hand, raised her right to rub her sore neck and stretched her shoulders. Man, she hated custody battles. But this one was different, not because of the challenge, but the parties.

Karen leaned back, ankles crossed, heels propped on the kitchen table, and settled in to wait through the remainder of the third night.

Jeffrey London, as malevolent a bastard as ever drew breath, was far from stupid. He would try again to steal his daughter. If not tonight, then tomorrow or another night soon. She felt it.

And she knew Jeffrey. Instinct and preparation had saved her life before. She wouldn't ignore them now.

Combating boredom, her thoughts wandered to Jeffrey when she'd been in love with him. He was her first college romance and she'd felt as treasured as a rare art object, although the warning signs were there. A chill ran through her. How narrowly she'd escaped his bondage when he dumped her for sexier, younger, more fun-loving and naive Beverly.

Ten years later, Karen felt not only grateful to have escaped, but guilty. *Survivor guilt* was what psychologists called it. Irrational perhaps, but real enough. Jeffrey had to marry someone.

Karen had tried to warn her, but Beverly's inexperience prevailed and the two began the destructive tango that led them all here.

Karen knew exactly why she'd accepted this job. A second chance to save Beverly and her child before Jeffrey destroyed them.

Maybe Beverly had forgotten her worth, but Karen would not.

At 3:34:17, as if her thoughts had conjured him, she heard Jeffrey's heavy tread on the squeaky plank decking. Karen pressed the remote button to activate the security camera outside the back door. The night vision would record everything in an eerie green glow.

Karen blended with the darkness and waited, holding the Sig in her right hand, ready to use it. But not too soon. Only when he left the premises with Deidre would he be guilty of kidnapping.

Should she be forced to confront him before then, he'd claim he wasn't taking Deidre anywhere. Beverly was the custodial parent, but Jeffrey had bought and still owned this house. Technically, he wasn't trespassing and he could visit whenever he chose. His twisted lies had persuaded Beverly to excuse his behavior before.

Karen timed him. Jeffrey spent exactly twelve seconds forcing the lock and opening the back door. She smiled to herself. He should have tried the old key. She'd made sure it would work.

The alarm began its incessant bleat. Karen breathed silently, disturbing the air as little as possible. Jeffrey had the instincts of a predator. He would sense her presence if she made the slightest sound.

He crossed the tile to the alarm panel next to the refrigerator.

He rapid-punched the six numbers of his wedding date, the code he and Beverly had chosen when he still lived here. Before their bitter divorce. The alarm stopped. He turned, never glancing in her direction.

Arrogance was Jeffrey's Achilles' heel. It simply didn't occur to him that anyone would be watching. She grinned to herself inside the black ski mask she wore over her head and face.

She watched Jeffrey climb the stairs and cover the short distance to the first door on the right. He paused. The night-light illuminated him enough that the camera would record perfectly.

He showed his face to avoid frightening his daughter, to keep her quiet and not awaken her mother. Beverly's sheer terror tomorrow morning when she found Deidre missing was much of what the sadistic asshole wanted to accomplish. He wanted Beverly off balance and afraid. He would always control her and Deidre as surely as if they were confined to prison.

He glanced around, maybe assuring himself that he'd made it this far, that Beverly slept soundly down the hall. Then he faced the door to Deidre's room, opened it and crept inside.

He emerged shortly with the sleeping girl in his arms. She was dressed in white pajamas. Strawberry curls framed her cherubic face and cascaded down the back of his arm. She didn't stir.

He eased the door almost closed, leaving it as Beverly had when she saw Deidre last, and descended the stairs in silence.

Karen waited. Her right hand held the Sig firmly pointed in Jeffrey's direction. She'd shoot him if he forced her to.

If Jeffrey saw her, he would do something stupid. Something that might hurt Deidre. The child's safety was paramount.

He snuck out the back door and closed it without a sound.

Karen activated the tiny camera she wore in a pendant around her neck, waited until she heard the creaking boards under his feet and hurried out behind him. She followed him to the street where he'd parked a dark SUV.

Jeffrey was bent over, placing Deidre in the back seat when Karen came up behind him.

"Move away from the car. Much as I'd like to shoot you..."

She allowed her deep, husky voice to trail away.

He stepped back, cavalierly raised both hands palms out.

"Turn around," she said quietly, hoping not to awaken Deidre.

He complied. He saw the gun, pointed now at his chest. "Smile,"

she said, picking up the pendant and pointing the micro camera directly toward him. "A picture's worth a year of testimony, isn't it?" She photographed Deidre sleeping in the vehicle, too.

She'd argued with Beverly and Beverly's sister, Brenda, for hours about this part of their plan. Beverly had cried, said she didn't want her child's father incarcerated. She wasn't desperate enough yet. But Karen knew she would be. Released and alone, Jeffrey would take his daughter again, not because he loved her, but because he owned her. Deidre would never be safe from him. He should have gone to prison for battering his wife. Or when he stole Deidre the last two times. But Beverly had refused to testify. Now she had proof, when she needed it.

Jeffrey stared at Karen, wary but unafraid. Her lanky frame was indistinguishable from a man's in these clothes. And she held an equalizer pointed at his heart. Did he recognize her voice? Probably, although they hadn't talked in years. She could almost see him calculating his next move.

"If you ever set foot in Florida again, the video of tonight's es-capade will be delivered to the U.S. Attorney's Office. You'll die in prison."

He smirked. He wasn't afraid of her. Karen's hand itched to smash the gun into his face, but she kept calm.

"Move to the front of the car." He sidled to the center in front of the grille. Her gaze never leaving him, the gun steady, Karen bent down and lifted the little girl. She stirred, but didn't waken.

When she was sure Deidre was secure in her grasp, Karen distanced herself from the SUV. "Get in and drive away."

Hands in his pockets, Jeffrey sauntered around to the driver's side and opened the front door. Instantly, the car alarm sounded, repeated long blasts of the horn. The cacophony awakened Deidre. When she saw the black-clad apparition holding her, she began to cry and kick, yelling, "Let me go! Let me go!" Karen grabbed her tightly to keep her from taking them both down to the ground, but the gun didn't waver.

"Hush, Deidre. It's me, Aunt Karen. It's okay. Be quiet now."

"Aunt Karen?" the astonished child cried, tears and screams coming to a shaky, tentative halt.

Jeffrey now had one leg in the SUV, his weight shifted toward the driver's seat. He pressed the key fob to silence the blasting horn, and then flashed a sardonic grin. "How nice to see you again, Karen."

She stiffened and extended the gun, her intention clear. "Don't forget what I told you, Jeffrey. No contact. Go."

"You think I take orders from you?" He slid into the SUV, started the engine, rolled down the window and threw a stare of pure hatred at Karen. She shivered imperceptibly. She'd made an open enemy. Somehow, he would prove he controlled her, too, along with everything in his world, no matter what the cost.

All pretext of the gentleness he'd shown his daughter gone, he said, "You'll be sorry you screwed me, Karen."

"I've been sorry about that for years."

Just back from Europe, the news flashed across her computer as she worked on revisions to *Karen Brown's Guide to Switzerland*, courtesy of Tampa P.D.'s Internet subscription active calls for service. A domestic-violence call in a Carrollwood neighborhood.

The first officer at the scene found a woman shot and a five-year-old girl missing. An Amber Alert went out at 3:30 a.m. Karen glanced down at the clock on the screen. Twenty-five minutes ago.

Wasting no time on useless recriminations, she left immediately.

Thirty minutes later, she reached Grouper Circle, a few houses scattered around the cul-de-sac bordering Lake Grouper. Tampa P.D. cruisers blocked the Dolphin Avenue entrance. Karen parked her red 4Runner and slipped her Sig under the front seat. She had a license to carry but no need to make this tense situation worse.

She grabbed her laptop and approached the first officer she saw.

"Hey, Randy," she said, to avoid startling him in the darkness.

"Counselor." He nodded. "What's your interest?"

"Beverly London is a client. Came to offer support."

"She don't need it," Officer Wilson told her bluntly.

Karen closed her eyes. A short moment of mourning was all she permitted herself for now. "Suspects?"

"Nasty divorce. Custody problems with the daughter. That your angle?"

Karen nodded.

"Bet on the ex," Randy said. "Real piece of shit. Restraining orders, my ass."

Nobody needed to tell her how inadequate the law was at protecting women from men like Jeffrey. "Can I go up?"

He nodded.

“Who’s primary?”

“Jerry Scanlon.”

Karen made her way down the short street to the brick colonial at the end. She saw two unmarked cars, an ambulance and people milling around. Officers, crime-scene technicians, photographers. A couple of detectives interviewing one of the neighbors, probably the one who’d called in the gunshots. She walked up the sidewalk to the threshold and stared into the open front door.

Beverly London’s body lay on the tiled foyer floor, clad in a neon-yellow nightgown, eyes open, frozen in surprise. Two entrance wounds were visible in her chest and abdomen. Lots of blood had pooled. Bullets probably severed the femoral artery.

No way Beverly would have survived, even if she’d been found immediately. But she’d been there a while, long enough for all the blood to have congealed.

Karen caught Detective Scanlon’s attention. “I hear you gave up law, writing travel books now,” he said, a question in his tone that she’d answered too many times before. Why? That’s what he wanted to know.

“I like writing travel books,” she said. She was still a member of the bar. That’s all he needed to know.

“Not enough money in the writing to keep you in cabernet?”

“Something like that.”

He sized her up as if he’d never seen her before, although the two had worked together frequently during her short stint in the prosecutor’s office. He waved toward the body. “Not a pretty scene.”

“There are security cameras throughout the house and grounds.” She pointed to the camera hidden in the wall sconce on the side of the front door. When his eyebrows rose in question, she nodded. “Mine.”

“We’re not through processing yet.” He let her pass.

Karen moved carefully through the kitchen, Deidre’s room, Beverly’s room, and the door that led outside to the attached garage. She located the surveillance cameras and removed the memory sticks. The cameras recorded in a loop, replacing images every three days until the sticks were changed.

She opened her laptop, booted up and slipped the memory stick from the kitchen camera into the slot first. The images downloaded quickly. She and Detective Scanlon watched video of the dark kitchen, but nothing more.

“It was a long shot,” he said by way of forgiveness.

Methodically, Karen downloaded data from the other four and continued searching. “Look there.” She pointed to the screen.

The intruder had come in through the garage door. Jeffrey London. No doubt about it. *He’s a bold bastard*, she reminded herself.

They studied the digital images on the tiny laptop screen. She felt a sick déjà vu as she watched Jeffrey invade the house, disarm the security system, climb the stairs, enter Deidre’s room and return carrying the sleeping girl, just as he had the night Karen saw him from the kitchen chair.

“Dammit!” she muttered. She blamed herself. She should have forced Beverly to turn Jeffrey in last year. If she had, Beverly would be alive now.

“Look...” Scanlon pointed to the image.

She shook off her recriminations and watched Jeffrey reach the bottom of the stairs, his body twisted to the right, toward the garage door. Light flooded the foyer.

Camera three captured the entire scene. Beverly stood very near the same location where she was lying now. “Jeffrey!” her voice screeched from the laptop’s inadequate speakers. Karen winced.

Deidre awakened, looked around, sleepy-eyed, disoriented.

“Daddy?” she said, as if she was surprised to be held in his arms.

Which surely she was. He hadn’t seen her in fourteen months, and the last time was under harrowing circumstances.

“Put her down, Jeffrey,” Beverly’s panicked voice instructed.

He chuckled, changed direction and strode toward the front door.

Beverly grabbed his arm, jerking it from under Deidre’s legs.

Jeffrey grasped the child tighter, held her close to his chest. Then he yanked his right arm from Beverly’s grasp, reached around his back, slipped a .38 from his belt and shot her twice.

Beverly fell to the floor. Deidre screamed, “Mommy! Mommy!” and thrashed wildly.

Jeffrey held on to the frightened girl. He strode through the front door and out of camera range. The screen reflected the empty foyer. After an excruciating few seconds, Beverly’s faint groans stopped.

Moments of stunned silence followed before Scanlon laid a hand on Karen’s shoulder. “We’ll get a warrant and an APB. Any idea where he’s taken her?”

Numb, she said, “He’s a Canadian citizen. Lives in Toronto.

Wealthy. Probably flew here in his private plane.”

Scanlon sighed, resignation showing in the slump of his shoulders. “If he gets her to Canada before we catch him, that’s a big problem.”

“Why?”

“Canada won’t extradite him for a crime that carries the death penalty. And we won’t waive the death penalty unless he pleads guilty and accepts a life sentence.”

Karen’s despair overwhelmed her. “I can see that happening all right.”

Scanlon nodded. “Sarcasm won’t help. There are some alternatives. None is perfect, and they all take time.”

“You’ll understand if I don’t think spending the next two years cutting through bureaucratic red tape to get Deidre back through channels is a great solution.”

She cued up the last of the video again and checked the time stamp on the image. “He’s been gone more than six hours. By private plane, he could easily be in Toronto already.” Karen knew Jeffrey wouldn’t have risked planning to return on a commercial flight.

“We’ll check the airlines to be sure,” he paused. “Otherwise, I’m afraid we’re hosed here.”

Karen felt a slow burn rising from her toes to the top of her hair. Every nerve ending alert. Beverly dead. Deidre missing. Jeffrey London gone.

Case closed?

Not a chance.

After the fifth lap, cold rain pelting her body, punishing her for screwing up, Karen began to feel a bit better. Although her racing days were long over, swimming still cleared her head. The water slid past her wet skin. She completed a dive and turn underwater, gliding through the silky depths back to the surface, flawlessly resuming the forward crawl. She used the steady rhythm that allowed her mind to strategize. The problem wasn't finding Jeffrey but extracting Deidre from Canada. And then keeping the girl away from Jeffrey. She finished fifteen laps while the plan worked itself out.

When she left the practice of law, disillusioned and angry with its compromises and failures, she'd turned to writing travel books, seeking a totally different life. She quickly discovered she loved the work. It satisfied her in a way she'd never expected.

And it allowed her to work privately as a recovery specialist, un-encumbered by the rules lawyers were required to follow.

The lifestyle suited her. She traveled to research her books, but she carefully selected worthy clients and fashioned solutions for them that achieved desired results. Clients like Beverly London and her sister, Brenda.

Karen frowned and shook water from her eyes. Jeffrey would never leave his child alone unless he was in prison or dead.

There was no middle ground. She must resolve that problem, too.

She needed a final solution.

Karen swam, one arm over the other, legs kicking, diving and turning, ignoring the wind that chilled her whenever she rose above the water. Her plan resolved, she finished with ten laps of relaxing side strokes. Finally, she floated on her back, allowing the icy rain to drench her face. The cool air now felt refreshing because she knew what she was going to do.

Karen waited several months, long enough for Jeffrey to relax into complacency before she flew from Tampa to Buffalo. At the airport she rented an anonymous-looking gray sedan. She'd avoided a nonstop flight to Toronto. Although faster and easier, she'd be dependent on flight schedules for the return. Since 9/11, airport security had become irritatingly problematic. She'd be required to prove Deidre's identity, which would make them easier to stop and trace. No, driving into and out of Canada was best.

Reluctantly, she rejected buying an untraceable gun on the streets of Buffalo. Taking a gun into Canada was a serious crime.

Canadian citizens weren't allowed to carry concealed weapons.

Even owning them was severely restricted. If she was caught she'd be arrested and probably imprisoned. Deidre would certainly be returned to her father. No, the risk was too great. She'd take Deidre away from Jeffrey permanently using guile alone. She refused to fail again.

Karen drove to Lewiston, New York, and checked into a mom-and-pop motel. She rented the room for two nights. Tomorrow, she'd test her plan. The following day, she'd execute it.

She slept lightly for four hours, then dressed casually in khaki slacks, pink shirt, blue blazer and running shoes. She grabbed her shoulder-length blond hair

into a ponytail and studied herself in the mirror, pleased by the guileless soccer-mom effect she'd created.

It was dark at 5:00 a.m. as she drove toward the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge. Jeffrey would expect her to take the shortest route to and from Toronto. She intended to oblige. Drive time was seventy-five minutes, barring construction or heavy traffic.

The border crossing went well. Off season, during the week, the area was almost deserted both ways. Very few travelers meant only one of the two customs booths were open. As in most of the small tourist towns, the Canadian customs officer simply asked her name, nationality, where she was going and when she planned to return. She'd offered the typical tourist's response for a visit to Niagara Falls and paid the toll. He'd waved her through without asking for ID. *May the return be so easy*, she thought.

She reached the private school where her research revealed Deidre was enrolled. After circling the block twice to be sure Jeffrey wasn't lurking and didn't have Deidre under surveillance, she parked in front. She had a clear view of the playground while waiting for 10:15 a.m. It nagged her that Jeffrey seemed to have allowed Deidre out of his control. Was he that sure of himself?

Had he arrogantly assumed she had given up? What was she missing?

At 10:15 a.m., a young woman led twenty energetic children out the door to the playground. She spotted Deidre. When she saw the little girl with the strawberry curls for the first time, Karen's eyes teared. She wiped her eyes with her fingers, willing the tears away. No time for sorrow now. The job demanded her full attention.

Deidre seemed quiet and unfocused, but functional. Eyes dull and heavy-lidded, she stood apart from the other children clutching a rag doll under her left arm and sucking her right thumb.

A low flame of suppressed anger began in Karen's stomach.

Deidre's parents had been locked into their own rage, unable to put Deidre's life first. The child would never be normal again.

Deidre was a victim of a tragic struggle. All Karen could do now was try to mitigate the damage. And get the bastard responsible.

Like every good lawyer, she'd analyzed the risks, then constructed plan A and plan B. With plan A, she and Deidre returned home without Jeffrey's interference, luring him back into the U.S. where authorities would arrest him. Plan B provided an alternative if Jeffrey attempted to thwart her. He would be dealt with at the border crossing. At least, in theory.

Yet again, she regretted the decision she'd had to make about the gun and prayed her alternative would work, even if it cost her her own life.

As always before executing the final stages of retrieval, Karen slept fitfully. Finally, at 4:00 a.m., she gave up the effort.

She arrived at the school two hours early and parked down the street, waiting for Deidre's arrival. Just before nine, a station wagon stopped. A young woman helped Deidre out of the back seat, and held her hand as they walked to the school's front entrance. The woman was gentle with Deidre, but Deidre demonstrated no affection when they parted. Deidre walked into the school, slowly



and alone, dragging the rag doll with her. The woman returned to the station wagon and left.

When the children entered the playground for recess, Karen left her car and strolled over. She called to Deidre twice. The child looked up. A broad grin slowly lit her face. Deidre loped toward her. "Aunt Karen!" she said, crying as Karen picked her up and hugged her, too tightly. The child felt thinner inside her clothes.

Karen's sadness, followed by hot anger, returned.

Within a few moments, Karen had explained to Deidre's teacher that Deidre had a dentist's appointment and produced a forged note from Jeffrey allowing her to take the child. The teacher looked at Karen carefully, but released Deidre, probably in part because Deidre continued to hold on to Karen as if she never wanted to let go. Less than fifteen minutes after Karen first saw Deidre on the playground, they were driving toward Lewiston. So far, plan A seemed to be working.

Constantly checking the rearview mirror, she retraced the route she'd taken the day before. Deidre, securely belted in the back seat, had returned to her subdued behavior. She talked quietly to the rag doll she'd brought along with her. About an hour into the drive, her eyelids closed, her chin gently touched her chest and she fell into the rhythm of sleep. A bit of drool slid from the corner of her mouth onto the doll's head. She was so young, so sweet. So undeserving of this mess. Karen clenched the steering wheel so tight her hands cramped.

Was Jeffrey controlling her with medication of some kind? Another thing to despise him for. She glanced at her watch. Just like yesterday, she was right on time.

When they approached the border crossing, Karen located the passports, prepared to show them if she had to. She'd seen no sign of Jeffrey or anyone following her for the entire return trip, which worried her.

Jeffrey was crazy, violent, controlling. She'd expected him to know where Deidre was every second, and to come after her. Or at least, Jeffrey should have learned Deidre was abducted and reasoned that Karen would take the shortest route back to the U.S.

So far, she hadn't seen Jeffrey. But her senses were on alert.

She'd learned never to underestimate him. There was something she'd missed. Somehow, she believed, when they reached the border, he'd be there. Plan B. Could she pull it off?

Supremely focused now, she drove over the bridge without noticing the spectacular views of Niagara Gorge. At the U.S. checkpoint, the line of vehicles moved swiftly through the single open kiosk. She looked into the cinder-block customs building, which also housed the duty-free store. She saw one officer behind the counter, and one clerk in the store waiting on a customer.

While she watched, the customer carried a bottle of liquor in a plain brown bag to the rusty battered panel van in front of her and got in. The panel van belched smoke when it backfired, and its muffler had long ago surrendered to the rust belt.

Midweek, off season, at lunchtime, the entire area was relaxed, thinly patrolled and almost deserted. She hoped this would make Jeffrey more obvious, if he appeared and tried anything.

Karen mentally rehearsed the lie she'd tell if the customs officer asked her more than routine questions. Yesterday, the process was casual, easy, intended to encourage tourism, not to thwart a kidnapper.

Two cars ahead passed through the checkpoint. When the panel van jerked toward the kiosk window, Karen pulled up and waited at the yellow line. The van blocked her view of the officer. She glanced again toward the duty-free store. She saw a lone figure, vaguely familiar, standing outside.

Jeffrey. He'd shaved his head and wore sunglasses. She didn't know how he'd found her, but he had. A tracking device on Deidre somewhere? Regular calls to the school just to check on his daughter? However he'd managed it, he was here now. She had to move. Adrenaline made her heart pound and sweat bead on her brow. Plan B. *Stay calm.*

Checking the rearview, she realized she'd have to move forward.

An eighteen-wheeler six feet behind blocked any alternative.

The officer in the kiosk seemed to be chatting too long with the occupants of the van. But she couldn't see him, and he couldn't see her. She tapped the steering wheel impatiently.

Mimicking the guy who'd joined the van, Jeffrey strolled toward her car. Quiet panic fluttered in her chest as she watched him. Did anyone else see him? He reached the door, looked directly into her eyes as if to mesmerize her, grasped the handle and lifted it.

The locked door didn't open. Then he glanced into the back seat where Deidre slept, covered by the blanket Karen had brought, still holding the doll. A smirk creased his face. It was the doll. That's where he'd hidden the tracking device. *Bastard.*

*You think you're so clever. We'll see.*

Karen lowered the back window and Jeffrey stuck his left hand on top of the glass. "Go away, Jeffrey, while you still can. If you try anything here, they'll kill you. Your choice."

He laughed. "You're kidnapping my child, Karen. Do you really think they'll take your side over mine?"

While he held on to the glass and the door handle Karen punched the accelerator. The car leaped forward. Jeffrey lost his balance. She slammed the brake. The car's quick jerk threw him to the ground. Her actions, and Jeffrey's, were blocked from the customs officer's view by the panel van, which moved forward now, slowly, through the gate. Maybe surveillance cameras saw him. Surely, the border guards would protect her and the child. She hoped.

The officer waved her ahead. She released a breath and eased to a stop next to the booth, left hand on the wheel.

"What's your citizenship, ma'am?" the kindly old officer asked.

"U.S." She glanced in the right-side mirror. Jeffrey had risen from the ground. His stare carried a malevolence she could feel.

*Bastard. Go away. While you still can.*

The customs officer glanced into the back seat now, too, where Deidre slept. At the same time, he noticed Jeffrey, hands in the oversize pocket of his sweatshirt, not moving, saying nothing.

The officer became more alert. "How about the child, ma'am?"

Another officer came out of the building, hand on his gun, waiting. They had seen him try to enter her car. It was working. Plan B was working. *Thank God.*

"U.S., too." Small rivulets of sweat tickled her armpits. *Let us go, Jeffrey, and live to try again.*

"Picture ID?"

Karen reached into her handbag, retrieved the passports and handed them to the officer. He examined the blue-jacketed folders. "Your name is Karen Ann Brown? And hers is Deidre London?"

"Divorce," she said. Jeffrey simply stood there. What was he thinking? Was he willing to die to thwart her?

The officer glanced at Jeffrey again. "Do you have her birth certificate?"

She furrowed her brow with consternation. "I didn't think you'd need it."

He closed the passports and gestured toward the building. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Park over there and go inside where they'll verify your identification." Then he nodded at Jeffrey, who stood stock-still, feet braced shoulder width apart, hands still inside his big front pocket. "Do you know him?"

Now. Now was the time. "He's got a gun."

Before the officer could react, Jeffrey slowly extracted his hand from the sweatshirt and pointed the gun at her head.

"Get down! Get down!" the officer shouted, squatting beside the car's engine block, the only place safe from gunfire.

Jeffrey chose death. The deafening noise of shots rang out.

Bullets entered the rear glass. One grazed her arm as she fell sideways. Another exited inches from where her head had been an instant before. The pain seared through her as blood soaked her blazer and ran down her arm. Deidre began to scream.

Border guards acted immediately. They shouted for Jeffrey to drop his gun. He didn't. A guard shot and hit Jeffrey in the leg.

He went down, and kept shooting. Bullets tattooed the back of the sedan. *Idiot! You'll hit Deidre!*

After an excruciatingly long few seconds, the customs officer in the booth drew his weapon, and two additional officers ran out from the building. "Drop your gun! Drop your gun!"

Karen looked into Jeffrey's eyes. Either of them could have changed things at that moment. But they didn't. She jammed the accelerator to the floorboard. The sedan lurched forward, broke through the wooden gate and raced onto American soil.

Jeffrey shot at Karen's car again. As she'd known they would, the guards returned fire.

Karen mashed the brake, jerking the sedan to a stop behind the solid walls of the U.S. Customs station. Applying pressure to her throbbing, bleeding arm, she

managed to open the back door and unsnap Deidre's seat belt. She slid the hysterical child onto the pavement. Determined, Karen held Deidre close until the deafening gunfire stopped.

In the brief silence, Deidre's screams became sobs. Karen struggled to rise while holding the girl, despite the searing pain in her arm, and stumbled back to the kiosk. Jeffrey lay on the ground, blood running from his mouth, lifeless eyes staring straight at her. Her first thought was, *Thank God.*

Karen's anger flared, leaving no room for remorse. He'd chosen to die rather than let Karen take Deidre. He'd intended to get all three of them killed.

A few weeks later, Karen joined Brenda, who sat watching Deidre on the Land of the Dragons playground. The family resemblance was unmistakable. Both were clearly from Beverly London's gene pool. In Deidre, Karen saw some hint of Jeffrey, too. How could a wonderful child have emerged from two such damaged parents?

"She looks happy, doesn't she?" Brenda asked with a wistful tone. Deidre was in counseling and taking medication that the psychologist hoped would help her to work through the traumas she'd endured at her parents' hands.

To reassure her, Karen said, "Don't worry so much. She's young. With luck and love, she won't remember most of it."

A tear rolled down Brenda's cheek. Her lips quivered. "She won't have much to remember about her mother."

Karen closed her eyes against tears of her own. She had risked her life so that Deidre might thrive. Now, all she could do was hope. "It's up to you to keep Beverly alive for her."

Together, they watched Deidre climb the rope ladders and slide down the dragon's tail, laughing when she landed on her butt in the sand.

"Beverly was so smitten. And he loved her, too." Brenda stopped, bewildered. "What went wrong?"

Karen rubbed her sore arm to stop its pulsing. Like Jeffrey's effect on his child, Karen's wound would hurt for a long time and leave a permanent scar. She rejected sweetening the truth. To defeat Jeffrey forever, Brenda must do her part. "She knew he was dangerous before she married him. She ignored her instincts and deceived herself. The best thing you can do for Beverly now is to make sure Deidre doesn't repeat that pattern."

*And I'll be watching.*

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