

Scorch (Croak Series)

By
Gina Damico

Carl Scutner wondered, for a brief moment, what it would feel like to punt his wife off a cliff.

“Would you shut up in there?” he yelled from the sofa. Between the noisy construction crew down the street, the whimpers coming from the dog cage that sat in the corner, and the pots and pans his wife was banging around in the kitchen, the baseball game on television had become nearly inaudible.

“Jesus Christ, I can’t hear myself think!”

Lydia appeared at the kitchen doorway. “Like there’s anything worth hearing in that so-called brain of yours.”

“Woman, I swear to God . . .”

“Here.” She handed him a fresh beer and sat on the edge of a hideous orange chair, its matted fabric dingy and stained. “Cubs losing?”

Carl let out a belch. “As usual.”

Lydia looked down. Crumpled fast food wrappers littered the floor. A glob of ketchup had leaked onto the carpet. As the construction noises down the street grew louder, so too did the whimpers from the cage. She glanced at the telephone, then couldn’t stop staring at it. Her breaths became shallow. “They haven’t called, Carl.”

He took a drag from his cigarette. “They’ll call.”

“You always say that. You’re not always right.”

“Lydia. They’ll call.”

“They better,” she said, wringing her hands. “I don’t want to do *that* again.”

“It’s up to them, not us. You know that.”

Lydia picked through her mousy hair with a trembling hand. She shot a resentful glance at her husband and his ever-expanding beer gut, then sniffed the air. “It smells like shit in here.”

“It *is* shit.”

Lydia looked at the dog cage, into the big brown eyes staring back at her. “Maybe we should let him out for a little while.”

“Are you kidding me? The last one got halfway down the driveway before I caught him.” He took a swig of beer. “You’re getting sloppy.”

“I’m just — ” She stopped and looked around. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

She listened. “I thought maybe — the back door — ”

“Alarm system’s on.” He stubbed out his cigarette on the arm of the sofa. “Would you knock it off? You should be used to this by now.”

Unnerved, Lydia grabbed his empty beer bottle and walked into the kitchen. “At least let me feed the poor thing.”

Carl gestured at the bowl of kibble on the floor. “He’s fine. Too fat as he is, if you ask me.”

Four things happened next.

The construction crew grew louder, so Carl grabbed the remote and turned up the volume as high as it could go. This just so happened to coincide with a home run, which prompted Carl to let loose with a torrent of obscenities.

And so, as the living room erupted into a sustained cacophony, Carl never heard the bottle shatter on the kitchen floor. He never heard his wife’s tortured screams. And he certainly never heard the intruder enter the living room; in

fact, he didn't even realize she was there until she was right in front of him, her eyes peeking out from beneath a black hood, her nose almost touching his.

"Hello, Mr. Scutner," she said, extending a thin, pale finger. "Goodbye, Mr. Scutner."

"I'm sorry you had to see that," she said a few moments later, opening the door to the dog cage. "Are you okay?"

The little boy inside nodded his head, his eyes blurred with tears. She took his hand and led him across the living room, careful not to let him get too close to the scorching remains of his captors.

"I have to go now," she said, grabbing a phone and dialing 911. "But I need you to be brave and do one thing for me." She handed him the phone. "Just tell them who you are and that you're at fifty-one Forest Drive. Then go sit out on the front steps. Can you do that?"

He wiped his nose and nodded.

"Good boy. And don't tell anyone I was here." She smiled and raised something that looked like a knife. "It'll be our little secret."