

KERES THRESHOLD

Written by

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Based on the narrative treatment by Adam J. Spencer

FADE IN:

"Sometimes I think the surest sign that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe is that none of it has tried to contact us." – Bill Watterson

"What if they have? And what if the reason we don't know is the only thing keeping us alive?"

FADE TO:

EXT. DESERT - LAS CRUCES, NEW MEXICO - NIGHT

The Chihuahuan Desert at four in the morning. No moon. The stars are indecent – too many, too bright, the kind of sky that doesn't comfort so much as interrogate. Somewhere out there, a coyote begins a call and thinks better of it. Even the animals know when to be quiet.

A house sits at the end of a dirt road. Modest. Adobe and stucco. The kind of house a man retires to when he has spent his career in buildings he cannot name, doing work that will never appear in any record anyone will ever read. A house that says: *I am done.*

Every window is dark except one.

INT. HARRY'S STUDY - LAS CRUCES - CONTINUOUS

Not cinematic darkness. Real darkness – the kind that settles into a house when someone has been sitting alone long enough for the house to forget they're there. The air itself feels still, as though it has been holding its breath.

A desk lamp clicks on.

We see hands first. Large. Steady. Liver-spotted. The hands of a man who has spent forty years holding things together – and who has decided, in the particular silence of this particular morning, to stop.

The desk beneath those hands is a landscape. Files, photographs, handwritten notes layered like sediment – decades of paper compressed into strata. The room around it: bookshelves sagging with the weight of a life spent reading. A turntable on a low shelf, the needle resting at the end of a Coltrane record that finished playing hours ago and has been turning in silence ever since. A faded photograph of a young girl on a man's shoulders. A coffee mug that reads WORLD'S OKAYEST DAD, chipped at the rim – loved the way only ugly things get loved, by attrition.

This is HAROLD "HARRY" KERES, 63. Retired, officially. He has the face of a man who stopped sleeping years ago and eventually stopped minding. His eyes are the particular shade of tired that has passed through exhaustion and come out the other side

into something that looks, from a distance, like peace.

Harry writes a letter. We don't see the words. We see his pen moving with the deliberate calm of someone who has already made every decision that matters and is now attending to the paperwork. His handwriting is meticulous – the handwriting of a man who spent decades writing things that would be read under magnification by people trained to find inconsistencies.

He finishes. Reads it once. Folds it with the crease precision of someone who learned to fold documents in the military and never unlearned. Slides it into an envelope. Writes a single name on the front.

Dora.

He sets the pen down. Lines it up parallel to the edge of the desk – a small act of order in a room full of controlled disorder.

He opens a desk drawer and removes a .38 revolver. Smith & Wesson. Blued steel, wooden grip, the kind of weapon that hasn't been standard issue for twenty years but that Harry has kept oiled and loaded in the same drawer since 1969. He checks the cylinder the way a man checks the time – mechanical, absent of drama, the way you'd confirm a dentist appointment you've been dreading for six months.

Sets it on the desk beside the letter. The two objects sit there together – the words and the weapon – like a sentence and its period.

He picks up the coffee mug. Tilts it. The last cold swallow. He drinks it the way people drink the last of anything – acknowledging the ending, not the taste. Sets it down with the careful precision of someone who knows this is the last surface he will ever set anything on and wants the geometry to be right.

He looks at the photograph. The girl is maybe five, laughing, her hands fisted in his hair. Her mouth is open wide. She is mid-shriek – the full-body, unself-conscious shriek of a child who trusts the man beneath her to never, ever drop her. She is the happiest thing in the frame, and the frame is the happiest thing in the room, and the room is the saddest place in the world.

Harry touches the glass with one finger. Just the tip. Just her face. He holds it there for a long time – longer than the audience expects, longer than the camera is comfortable with.

His hand drops.

He picks up the revolver.

CUT TO BLACK.

A single gunshot – muffled by distance and drywall – rolls across the desert silence like a stone dropped into still water. The echo takes a long time to die. The desert absorbs it the way it absorbs everything: without comment, without judgment, the way it has absorbed a million years of things that happened in the dark and were never spoken of again.

Silence.

TITLE CARD: KERES THRESHOLD

The title holds for five seconds. Then:

EXT. LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL LABORATORY - DAY

The high desert of northern New Mexico. Juniper and piñon scrub stretching to a horizon that looks like God started a painting and wandered off. The Jemez Mountains in the distance, their slopes the color of old bruises. Chain-link fencing topped with concertina wire. Guard booths manned by men who have mastered the art of looking bored while carrying automatic weapons.

This is where they built the bomb. The air still tastes like it knows.

A sedan pulls through the security checkpoint. Government plates. The driver hands over a badge. The guard studies it with the deliberate care of someone whose job is to assume everyone is lying until proven otherwise.

The badge reads: KERES, DORA – Q CLEARANCE.

The gate opens. The sedan passes through. The gate closes behind it with a sound like a period.

INT. LOS ALAMOS - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

DORA KERES, 38, walks the hallway of a secure facility with the stride of someone who belongs here and resents it in equal measure. She carries a messenger bag, a thermos of coffee, and the particular weariness of a woman who has spent her entire adult life being the smartest person in rooms full of smart people and knowing it doesn't matter.

She is her father's daughter in all the ways that hurt: brilliant, stubborn, and constitutionally incapable of leaving a problem unsolved. She has Harry's eyes – the same shade of persistent gray – and Harry's jaw, which is to say a jaw that looks like it was designed for the express purpose of not backing down. She is her mother's daughter in one critical way: she does not forgive easily.

She passes a bulletin board. Safety notices. A flyer for a departmental softball game. A poster reminding employees that

"LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS," which in 1983 feels less like a warning than a lifestyle.

INT. LOS ALAMOS - SECURE LABORATORY - CONTINUOUS

Fluorescent purgatory. The specific shade of institutional lighting that makes everyone look like they're recovering from something — a cold, a divorce, the awareness that their tax dollars fund a building where the lights are always this color. Equipment racks line the walls. Whiteboards dense with equations in three different handwritings. The faint electrical hum that passes for silence in buildings that cost more than most countries.

Dora sets her bag down at her workstation, takes a long pull from her thermos, and turns to a whiteboard where an argument she started yesterday is still unresolved, the marker strokes of two competing theories drying side by side like evidence at a crime scene.

Her colleague, DR. PAUL ECKHART, 40s, is already at his terminal. Eckhart is the kind of physicist who peaked during his dissertation and has been coasting on its altitude ever since. He is a decent man, a competent scientist, and wrong about this particular question in a way that Dora finds both professionally frustrating and personally useful, because arguing with Eckhart is the only exercise she gets.

DORA

Tell me you've been thinking about what I said yesterday.

ECKHART

I've been thinking you need a hobby.

DORA

This is my hobby. My job is the other eighteen hours.

She picks up a marker and adds a line to the equation on the whiteboard. The line changes the equation's implications considerably.

DORA

The wave function doesn't collapse passively. Observation isn't a camera sitting in the corner recording what happens. It's a chisel. Every act of measurement is an act of construction.

ECKHART

That's the Copenhagen interpretation with a mystical paint job.

DORA

Copenhagen says the observer matters. I'm saying the observer builds. There's a difference. Copenhagen puts consciousness in the audience. I'm putting it on the stage.

Eckhart swivels his chair to face her. He has the expression of a man who has lost this argument before and knows he's about to lose it again but feels professionally obligated to show up.

ECKHART

Dora. Consciousness is an epiphenomenon of neural activity. It doesn't construct reality. It witnesses reality. Anything else is philosophy, not physics.

DORA

Von Neumann didn't think so. Wigner didn't think so. Wheeler spent his entire career—

ECKHART

Wheeler also spent his entire career driving his graduate students insane.

DORA

And producing more Nobel laureates than this entire facility combined. Funny how that works.

ECKHART

You sound like a mystic.

DORA

Mystics had better funding.
(beat)
And fewer safety briefings.

Eckhart almost laughs. Almost. He shakes his head and turns back to his terminal, conceding the field the way he always does — not because Dora is right, but because arguing with her requires a metabolic commitment he hasn't budgeted for today.

ECKHART

You're going to publish that participatory observer paper and they're going to put you in the office next to the cold fusion guy.

DORA

He has a window. I've asked.

She turns back to the whiteboard. Adds another line. Frowns at it. Erases half of it. Adds it back. The equation is doing something she doesn't expect, which is the thing she likes most about equations – they don't care about your expectations.

Another physicist, DR. NINA CHEN, 30s – small, sharp, the kind of quiet that masks a mind moving at considerable speed – passes by with a stack of printouts.

CHEN

Are you two still fighting about wave function collapse?

ECKHART

She thinks consciousness builds reality.

CHEN

I think you're both wrong and the universe doesn't care what we think. Coffee?

DORA

Always.

Chen leaves. The lab settles back into its hum. Dora stares at the whiteboard. The equation stares back. Somewhere in its structure, something is waiting to be understood, and she can feel it the way you feel a word on the tip of your tongue – present, imminent, and maddeningly out of reach.

A PHONE RINGS somewhere in the hallway. Tinny, institutional – the kind of ring that sounds the same whether it's bringing good news or ending a life. The ring of every phone in every government building since the invention of the telephone: utilitarian, patient, absolutely devoid of mercy.

Dora doesn't hear it. She's back at the whiteboard, adding a subscript to the equation that changes its implications in a way that makes her breath catch.

Her supervisor, DR. CARL RENNICK, 50s, appears in the doorway. Rennick is a man built for corridors and classification levels – the kind of administrator who has outlasted six directors and three presidential administrations by mastering the art of being useful without being memorable. His face is doing something it wasn't designed for. It is trying to be kind, and

the effort is visible, like watching a filing cabinet attempt sympathy.

RENNICK

Dora. Can I see you for a moment?

She reads his face the way she reads data – pattern recognition, rapid and involuntary. The configuration of his mouth. The angle of his shoulders. The fact that he used her first name, which he never does in the lab, where last names are professional currency and first names are reserved for hallways and bad news.

She sets down the marker. It leaves a blue dot on her thumb.

DORA

What happened?

RENNICK

Let's step into my office.

DORA

Carl. What happened.

Not a question. A demand. Her voice has dropped half an octave, and Eckhart, who has known her for three years, has never heard that register before. He looks up from his terminal.

A beat. Rennick glances at Eckhart, who has the good sense to become very interested in his keyboard.

RENNICK

It's your father, Dora. I'm sorry.

The marker is still in her hand. She hasn't put it down. She stands there holding it, and the lab hums around her, and the whiteboard behind her contains an equation about the nature of consciousness that she was thirty seconds away from solving, and the fluorescent lights make the same sound they've made every day for fifteen years, and everything is exactly the same as it was ten seconds ago and nothing will ever be the same again.

DORA

How?

RENNICK

The sheriff in Las Cruces called. I think – I think we should–

DORA

How, Carl.

RENNICK

(quietly)

He took his own life. Last night.
I'm sorry, Dora. I'm very sorry.

The marker falls from her hand. It hits the floor cap-first and rolls under Eckhart's desk. Nobody picks it up. Nobody moves.

Dora nods. Once. The nod of a woman who has just been handed information she needs to process and has decided to process it later, in a place that doesn't smell like ozone and floor wax, in a room without fluorescent lights and whiteboards and colleagues who are pretending very hard not to be listening.

DORA

I need to go.

RENNICK

Of course. Take whatever time you—

DORA

I need to go now.

She picks up her bag. Walks out. The door swings shut behind her with a hydraulic hiss. The lab returns to its hum. Eckhart stares at the equation on the whiteboard — the one she was about to solve — and gently, as though it might bite, reaches over and picks up the marker from under his desk.

INT./EXT. DORA'S CAR - HIGHWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

Four hours of New Mexico highway. The kind of drive where the landscape doesn't change so much as repeat — mesa, scrub, sky, mesa, scrub, sky — like the earth got stuck on a phrase it liked and decided to commit. The road is a single black line drawn across the face of the desert by someone who believed in straight lines and had the budget to enforce them.

Dora drives. Her hands are at ten and two. Her eyes are on the road. The radio is off. She turned it on somewhere near Española, heard three bars of "Every Breath You Take," and turned it off with the decisive violence of someone who cannot, under any circumstances, listen to a love song right now.

She is not crying. She is not doing anything that looks like grief. She is driving the way her father checked the cylinder of a revolver — mechanical, precise, absent of drama. She is keeping her body in motion because motion is a form of problem-solving, and problem-solving is the only coping mechanism she has ever trusted.

A semi-truck passes going the other direction. The wind shear rocks the sedan. Dora doesn't flinch.

The sun drops behind the Jemez Mountains. The light goes copper, then rust, then the particular shade of violet that the

New Mexico sky produces for about four minutes every evening – a color so beautiful it feels aggressive, like the universe showing off at exactly the wrong moment.

Then gone. The desert goes dark. The headlights carve a tunnel through the nothing. Dora drives into it.

EXT. HARRY'S HOUSE - LAS CRUCES - NIGHT

The house at the end of the dirt road. Different now – or the same, but Dora is different, and the house knows it. A SHERIFF'S CRUISER sits in the driveway, light bar dark. Yellow crime scene tape across the front door – a formality, Dora knows, because there's nothing criminal about a man shooting himself in his own study, but formalities are the language of institutions that don't know what else to say.

Dora parks behind the cruiser and sits in her car for a long moment. She is looking at her father's house the way you look at a word you've spelled a thousand times that suddenly doesn't look right – the same letters, the same shape, but the meaning has shifted, and you can't remember what it used to mean.

The porch light is on. Harry must have left it on. One last act of hospitality from a man who knew someone would be coming but wouldn't be staying.

She gets out. The night air smells like creosote and cooling sand and something else – something chemical, faintly sweet, that she can't place. She will learn later that it's the smell of industrial cleaning solution. She will learn later what it was cleaning.

SHERIFF BEN DELGADO, 50s, steps off the porch to meet her. He is a broad man with kind eyes and the particular discomfort of someone who knows the deceased and cannot quite navigate the distance between neighbor and authority. He is wearing his uniform, which means he came here on duty, but his hat is off, which means he came here as Ben.

DELGADO

Ms. Keres. I'm real sorry about your father.

DORA

Doctor.

DELGADO

Ma'am?

DORA

It's Doctor Keres. I'm sorry – that was – I don't know why I said that.

DELGADO

Don't need to apologize. People say all kinds of things. I had a woman correct my Spanish at her husband's funeral once. Grief makes us hold on to whatever we can.

(beat)

Come on inside. I'll walk you through it.

They cross the porch. Delgado holds the door. The crime scene tape has already been cut – someone was expecting her.

INT. HARRY'S HOUSE - FRONT HALL - CONTINUOUS

The house is quiet in the specific way that houses are quiet when someone has died in them – not empty silence but occupied silence, as though the air is still processing what happened and hasn't decided how to feel about it yet.

The hall is narrow. Photographs on the walls: Harry in Army dress uniform, young, jaw set, eyes focused on something outside the frame. Harry and VIVIAN on their wedding day – her in white, him in a suit that fits badly but with a smile that fits perfectly. Dora at various ages: six in a soccer uniform, twelve at a science fair, twenty-two in cap and gown, holding a diploma and squinting into the sun.

Dora walks past the photographs without looking at them. She has seen them a thousand times. She doesn't need to see them now.

DELGADO

It happened in the study. Sometime between two and five a.m., best we can tell. Neighbor – Mrs. Guzman, three houses down – thought she heard something but wasn't sure. Didn't call it in until morning when she noticed he hadn't picked up his newspaper. He always picks up his newspaper.

(correcting himself)

Picked up.

INT. HARRY'S STUDY - CONTINUOUS

The study has been cleaned. But the shape of what happened is still here – pressed into the room like a fossil. The missing chair cushion. The faint chemical smell she now places as industrial cleaner – someone from the sheriff's office, or maybe a service they called, scrubbing the leather and the wood and the wall behind the desk with the thoroughness of people who have done this before and know that thoroughness is a kindness. The way Delgado can't quite meet her eyes when they enter the room, his gaze sliding to the bookshelf, the window,