GUYS NAMED BOB

By Elizabeth Engstrom

MONDAY

It happened at the stop sign, right in front of the Springfield post office on a lovely June day. The passenger door of Darlene Martin’s red Ford opened without warning and a skinny young blonde girl with tangled hair and ravenous eyes jumped in.

“Drive,” she said.

“What?” Darlene was certain the girl had mistaken her for someone else.

Then the barrel of a gun appeared out of the girl’s baggy and torn denim jacket. “*Drive*,” she said again.

Darlene’s mind emptied of all but the survival basics as her heart pumped down to her foot, which stomped on the gas. Then she let up, which jerked both of them back, and she hit the brakes, which chirped.

“Jesus,” the girl said. “Drive normal.”

Darlene took a deep breath, tried to collect herself. She looked over again at the gun. And at the girl. The scared, skinny little girl who had a hard time holding the heavy gun in her frail little hand. She was more afraid of Darlene than Darlene was of her. Maybe. Darlene was pretty scared.

She put her hand on her throat for a moment, took another deep breath and made herself relax. She had always wondered how she’d react if confronted with violent crime. She decided she would never give up her money to a creep at an ATM machine. She decided she’d bite somebody’s pecker off if they tried to rape her. She decided she wouldn’t stand for it, not any of it. Darlene Martin was no victim, and that was a fact.

She eased onto the gas and took another look at the pale girl sitting next to her.

Darlene had kids older than this, kids who had put her through worse than a carjacking, for God’s sake. She could handle this. Her heartbeat slowed. She took a comfortable, competent grip on the steering wheel. “Okay,” she said. “Where to?”

“Roseburg.”

Darlene looked down at the gas gauge. “Not enough gas to get to Roseburg,” she said.

“Then get some.”

“You have money?”

“No,” the girl said, her eyes wider, her nerves tauter, her skin tighter around her eyes and mouth. The cords in her wrist stood out where she gripped the pistol too tightly. “Don’t you?” Darlene heard the faint sound of hysteria in her voice.

“Okay, okay, relax,” Darlene said, feeling like the adult in charge and therefore oddly in control of the situation. “I just bought stamps, but I think I’ve got ten bucks.”

“Get the gas somewhere else,” the girl said, looking behind them. “Out of town somewheres.”

“Okay.” Darlene turned left and left again toward the I-5 on-ramp. “Did you just rob somebody or something?”

“Just drive,” the girl said, her movements jerky, her eyes frantic.

Once on the freeway, the girl seemed to settle down a little bit, letting the gun fall to her knee, but her face was still tight. So young, Darlene thought. So hard.

“Hungry?” Darlene asked as she reached into the back seat.

The gun came up immediately. “What are you doing?”

Darlene grabbed a bag of pretzels from the grocery sack in the back seat. “I’m hungry,” she said, and popped the bag open. She set it between the seats. “Help yourself.”

“No, thanks.”

Darlene munched while she thought.

Who could have imagined this? Who on earth could have predicted that she’d be carjacked on such a beautiful day? Just this morning she had soaked in a long, steamy bath scented with perfumed oils that had dissolved out of little opalescent pearls. She lay in the tub, late morning light coming through the small bathroom window, a candle burning on the lowered toilet lid. Carolyn told her that candle flames have special properties, and every time she thought to light one, she should. She had dripped warm slippery water over her breasts with the sponge while she thought about the long afternoon and evening before her.

Just this morning she had wondered what it would be like to know the future. If she knew with absolute certainty that she was just going to go the post office, buy stamps, come home and watch television, would she even bother to bathe, shave, shampoo? Maybe not. Maybe it was that tiny element of uncertainty—those tiny little surprises that life came up with that kept her grooming herself.

She’d watched her nipples shrivel as the bathroom door opened and cold air swept over them. Little toenails clicked along the bathroom floor, then a tiny white poodle face poked up over the edge of the tub.

“Hi, sweetie,” Darlene said. Ashes wagged his little bobbed tail. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

He got down and clicked away.

But though the house was empty, the bathroom door was now open and her privacy and reverie disturbed. She sloshed more water over herself, liking the feel of her ample body. Would she be ashamed to show this to a new lover?

Perhaps. If she knew she was going to meet a new lover, she wouldn’t have eaten that pasta and ice cream the night before. She would exercise more. She would take better care of herself.

Catch 22, she thought. Perhaps if I took better care of myself, then I would find a new lover.

Her fingers toyed with the hair below her belly that waved gently in the bath water. It was not as thick as the pubic hair on some women she’d seen, enviable, dark, thick glossy pubic hair. No, hers was sparse, and, she noticed with dismay, turning gray.

The familiar longing gnawed at her. Pleasure hunger. She could use a lover. All this sweetness going to waste. She wished she knew how to masturbate. She’d tried, but while it had always been moderately pleasurable, it was quite predictable, ultimately boring, and never satisfying.

She ran her hands over her legs, massaging in the hot oil. Then she pulled the plug, stood under the cool shower water and shampooed her hair.

No lover today, she thought. What a shame. What a waste.

As they passed a huge motorhome on the freeway, she pulled another pretzel from the bag and remembered her morning bath. No lover today, she thought again. Just a carjacking. Maybe she should have masturbated instead of going to the post office.

“What’s in Roseburg?”

“Huh?”

“I said, what’s in Roseburg? Why are we going there?”

“*Listen*, just don’t talk to me, okay?”

“You hijack my car and then you want to be rude to me too?”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Just fucking drive,” she said.

Darlene grabbed another handful of pretzels. She didn’t think this would be a good time to lecture the girl on her language. “I’m going to get a Diet Coke,” she said, and reached to the back seat again. “Want one?”

“No. Yeah. No.”

Darlene handed her one and she took it. They popped the tops and drank in silence. “I’m Darlene Martin. Who are you?”

“Don’t talk to me.”

“You hijack my car, you drink my Diet Coke and we have to drive all the way to Roseburg together, and you won’t tell me your name?”

“Call me... call me Ice.”

“Ice. Cool name.” Darlene smiled at her joke, but the girl just scowled. Darlene remembered, when she was younger, how she wanted people to call her Jet. “How old are you, Ice?”

“Shut up. Just shut the fuck up.” The girl waved the gun around. “I don’t want to talk to you, and I don’t want you talking to me. Just drive. Just drive. Just–—”

“Okay. Sorry. I didn’t want to upset you. It’s just that... Well, I’ve got kids that are probably your age, and—”

The girl pushed the barrel of the gun up under the folds of one of Darlene’s chins. “Shut the fuck up,” she said.

Darlene knew the girl wouldn’t shoot her while they were doing sixty-five on the freeway. “That means I’m the same age as your mom,” she said.

The girl flounced back into her seat. “Of all the cars in Oregon...” she said.

“Yeah, you got lucky.” Darlene munched some more pretzels, finished her Diet Coke, threw the empty onto the floor of the back seat.

“Here!” the girl said, and pointed to the Curtin freeway exit. “Pull off here and get gas.”

Darlene eased into the right lane, put her turn signal on and glided off the freeway into Curtin. She had the attendant put ten dollars in, then reached for her purse.

She had a vial of pepper spray, but it wasn’t in her purse. It was in the coat she wore when she went out at night. Who’d have thought she’d need it going to the Springfield post office at noon?

“Ice” apparently never thought Darlene could have a defensive approach stashed in her purse, because she never gave it a second look when Darlene opened it and extracted her wallet. Nor did she give a thought as to any signal Darlene could give the service station attendant. This kid was a definite amateur.

But Darlene didn’t do anything in front of the attendant. She just figured the kid needed a ride to Roseburg, and that would be the end of it.

She was wrong.

She slipped the ten dollar bill out of the window and started the car.

“Go west from here.”

“Roseburg is south.”

“I know where Roseburg is,” the girl said. “And I told you to go west.”

“If we do some sightseeing,” Darlene said, “that ten dollars isn’t going to get us very far, and unless you robbed a bank back there...”

“Go west.”

“You da boss,” Darlene said, and they started on the winding road toward Reedsport.

Desperate acts, Darlene thought as she munched those good pretzels. What would cause someone so young to be so desperate? She thought of her own children, fat they were, not in the same fleshy way as she, but fat with security, with sense of pride, sense of self, blessings and about as far from desperation as young people get. True, young adulthood is sometimes a moist breeding ground for desperation—uncertain young adulthood and emotionally-charged midlife—but Darlene’s two kids were smiling, well-adjusted contributors to society.

She looked over at the pale profile of the young woman who wanted to be known as hard and cold. The stringy, unwashed blonde hair with the darker roots, the dark brown eyes, the nose with the turned up end, the lips that would be pert and sweet with a touch of pink lipstick. She could be beautiful, this girl. This could be Darlene’s daughter, with a nice summer dress on, her hair back in a ponytail, bangs cut neatly above the brows and curled slightly, dangling earrings, prattling on about boys and school and such.

It could be. It should be. Life shouldn’t be this hard or this burdensome on a child this age. Twenty? Eighteen?

*A man*. Darlene would bet her life that this girl was being driven to this desperation by some guy. Guys did that to women. Phil had done it to her. But Darlene had been older, and able to resist gun-toting desperation, although it had crossed her mind more than once.

“Okay, okay, okay,” the girl said. “Slow down.”

“Slow down?” They were only doing forty.

“See that old car?”

The rusted white rear end of some kind of small foreign car protruded from the underbrush at the side of the road.

“Yeah.”

“Turn there.”

“There? I thought we were going to Roseburg. Or Reedsport.”

“Just turn in there.”

Darlene didn’t like the looks of this at all. Her security and superiority as pilot of the vehicle was about to be jeopardized. She didn’t know what was back in that hollow in the woods, and didn’t care to find out. She turned the corner, got off the main road and stopped the car.

“Keep going.”

“I’m not driving you in there.”

“Keep going,” the girl said, and brought the muzzle of the gun back up.

Looking down the barrel of a gun was every bit as unsettling as she had always heard it was. “No,” Darlene said. “You needed a ride and you got one.”

“I didn’t need a ride, you stupid cow,” the girl said. “I need a car. Now drive on back there or I swear to God I’ll shoot you and leave you to die in the weeds.”

Darlene looked deep into the brown of this girl’s eyes. That unfathomable desperation. No telling where it came from, no telling what it would do. She decided she could believe that this girl would do that very thing. Men can make women do unimaginable things.

She stepped on the gas and drove the car slowly down the rutted road, though a thick tangle of brush, across a rickety wooden bridge that spanned a wide, slow-moving creek, and on up a weed-choked path that hadn’t seen the tires of a vehicle in years. Giant drops fell from the overhead trees to smat on the windshield. Farther along, ferns and bushes brushed both sides of her car as she drove slowly along, afraid for the paint job, afraid she would have to back up all the way back down, afraid she would get stuck, afraid of what was at the end of this godforsaken road.

The brush opened out and they kept driving through a stretch of graveled road, across a wide open field. The road ascended again, into the hills, and Darlene could see that it led directly to another wooded area.

She drove slowly and carefully. She didn’t like this, she didn’t like this at all.

The girl sat forward on the edge of the seat, gun in her lap, one hand on the dashboard. She was excited. Darlene drove slowly and steadily. The sun disappeared as they entered the woods. Weeds scratched again at the sides of her car. They closed in, and the road became less of a road and more of a rutted path.

Then she drove through a hole in a thick blackberry bramble and there it was. A cabin. A light curl of smoke slipped out of the chimney, but that was the only nice thing about it. It was a shack, now that she looked at it, its exterior half-shingled, and half tar-papered. Old rusted hulks of vehicles, some cars, some trucks, some machinery, all overgrown with ivy, blackberry brambles, and weeds littered the area. A bathtub and a toilet were set out under one tree, what seemed like hundreds of wooden boxes filled to overflowing with silver and rust-colored parts of things were stacked everywhere. Four television sets, one atop the other had been targets for some instrument of destruction, probably the pistol the girl had in her hand, wood was piled haphazardly in a half dozen spots, the moss-covered roof sagged in the middle and a portion of a rusty gutter funneled water from one sagging corner down and away from what must be the front door.

A yellow dog came wandering out from somewhere, and looked at Darlene with tired brown eyes and white muzzle. An old dog.

“Park over there,” the girl said, and Darlene obeyed, pulling the car between a rusted truck body and an enormous stash of beer bottles whose cardboard cases had rotted in the rain and slumped over. She put the car in park and the girl snatched the keys from the ignition. “Wait here.”

Darlene sat for a moment, listening to the sounds of the Oregon forest. She turned and watched the girl walk through the wet knee-high weeds in her dirty white tennis shoes.

The best defense is a good offense, Darlene thought, and opened the car door, heaved her bulk out and dusted off the pretzel crumbs. She walked slowly toward the door that had closed crookedly behind the girl.

Water seeped in to her little black slippers and she wondered how long she’d have to be with wet feet. Maybe they didn’t really need a car. Maybe she’d just get her keys back and go home. She wanted to go home. She didn’t want to stay here.

The dog came up to her and wagged its long tail slowly. Darlene patted its head, then scratched it between the ears. He closed his eyes and relished the attention. But he was dirty, and smelled like dog, and Darlene was sorry she had touched him, because now she needed to wash her hands.

The steps up to the porch were round slices of tree, and they were slippery with moss. A Grateful Dead bumper sticker held the ripped screen to its frame in the door, which didn’t close by at least five inches. Darlene looked through it and saw the girl talking with a young man. He was backed up against the kitchen counter, she was leaning against him.

I knew it, Darlene thought. A man made her do this. And here he is in the flesh.

“I got us a car, Patrick, I got us a car. We can go now, right? C’mon, babe, let’s go.”

Patrick had a beer bottle in one hand and the other on the girl’s shoulder. He looked up as the sagging porch creaked under Darlene’s weight.

“Who is that?”

Darlene considered that an invitation. “Darlene Martin,” she said, opened the door and stepped in.

Patrick looked at the girl. “You brought a *stranger* here?”

The girl looked at the floor. Shrugged. “You know I don’t drive.”

Patrick looked confused.

“She stole my car,” Darlene said. “And I came with it.”

“I thought I told you to stay in the car,” the girl said.

Patrick pushed her away from him. He looked at her, then shook his head in speechless amazement. He held his hands up for quiet, then looked at Darlene, then looked back at the girl. “You stole her and her car?” he finally said.

“At gunpoint,” Darlene added.

“At *gunpoint*?”

The girl began to back up, away from him. “You said we could leave here if we had a car, babe. I was only thinking about you, about us, you know.”

Darlene relaxed as soon as she realized the girl had acted of her own miserable accord. This wasn’t any kind of a band of merry thieves, it was just a couple of poor trashy kids eking out an existence, a bad existence, in the Oregon woods.

The kitchen was a mess. Dirty dishes were piled up everywhere, the floor hadn’t been mopped in ages. An old wooden cookstove was perking along, and Darlene enjoyed the meager heat coming from it, although it wasn’t a cold day. This cabin was cold, probably was always cold except maybe in the August heat.

Darlene wanted to sit down, but she didn’t trust the rickety chairs, and besides that, they were filthy. The whole place was filthy. All it needed were a couple of chickens nesting on the couch and a baby trailing a messy diaper and it could be a real cartoon. It smelled sickly sweet, a smell she couldn’t quite define, but probably had to do with the rotting floorboards.

And there was some kind of buzzing noise coming from the somewhere else in the place.

Patrick set his beer bottle down on the edge of the kitchen table. He spoke slowly and carefully to the girl, almost as if he were talking to a child. “I want you to go into the bedroom and wait for me there. Do not come out. I’ll come in when I’m ready.”

She obeyed without a word. She walked through a doorway on the far side of the room and went around the corner.

Patrick, she saw, was only a little bit older than the girl, perhaps twenty-five. He was tall and lean, his hair short and neat. He had dark blue eyes and thin, almost feminine eyebrows that arched gracefully over each eye. His jeans were torn, but not dirty, his shirt, while not ironed, was not wrinkled and he wore it neatly tucked in, buttoned all the way to the collar, long sleeves buttoned at the cuff, looking modestly and incongruously formal. He was clean shaven and his eyes were clear and bright. When he smiled, he showed big, beautiful, straight teeth, the kind of teeth that had seen expensive care while he was growing up.

He leaned back against the sink, then ran his hands over his head. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked up at Darlene, gave her that dazzling smile. “I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Then just give me my keys and I’ll be on my way,” Darlene said, “and I’ll just think of it as giving her a ride home.”

“Well, you know, that’s the worst part of it,” he said. “I surely do appreciate your generous offer there, I surely do, but now that you’re here...” he shrugged. “Molly and me, we need that car.”

“Come on, Patrick,” Darlene said. “Don’t make this into a lot of trouble for yourselves—for all of us. There are other ways to get a car without kidnapping at gunpoint and grand theft auto.”

Patrick picked the beer up off the table and took its last swallow. “Beer?” he offered her as he turned to the fridge for a refill.

“No, thanks.”

He unscrewed the cap on the fresh one and threw it in the general direction of the overflowing trash. “What if we gave you a ride back home and then kept your car? You could phone it in as stolen—give us a couple of days until we could get out of the state—and we would have us a nice car and you could collect on the insurance.”

Darlene was unprepared for this brash proposal. She had to be careful here, she didn’t want to antagonize these people, but she didn’t want to damage herself, either.

“Well,” she said, “first of all, that makes me an accessory. It would be an incredible inconvenience, and my insurance rates would go up. I can’t see any reason why I would want to do that.”

Patrick looked down into his beer bottle and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “I see your point. Why don’t you wait here for a while and we’ll go talk about it.”

Darlene nodded.

“Sit down or something,” he said, then he walked into the back room.

The buzzing stopped. Darlene heard voices. She could hear the girl’s voice, she could hear Patrick’s voice, and she heard another voice, a lower voice. Another man was here. Her heart pumped. An unknown quantity, yet to be reckoned with. She wished she had a big sloppy jelly donut.

But she didn’t.

She looked around. This place was awful. There was no place she wanted to sit. She didn’t want to stand. Her hands still smelled like dog, but she didn’t want to wash them in that sink full of moldy dishes.

She was nervous, and she didn’t know what to do with herself.

A brand new yellow sponge drew her attention like a beacon. It was still wrapped in plastic, leaning up against a grimy bottle of blue Dawn dishwashing soap.

She walked over to it, pushing up her sleeves. Before she knew it, she had a sink full of sudsy water, and was washing all those nasty dishes, cleaning up the table and wiping down the counters and surfaces.

Voices still murmured in the back room. Once, she thought she felt eyes on her back, and she was certain that someone had come to the doorway to see what she was doing, but she didn’t stop. She just kept washing and cleaning. Let them look.

It was a tremendous task. It took four sinks of sudsy water. Took what seemed like hours. But when she was finished, all the dishes were washed and dried and stacked on a clean kitchen table. All the rotten, torn and curling Formica countertops were wiped down, as was the stove and the front of the refrigerator. Perspiration stuck a few wild gray hairs to her forehead, and her middle was wet in a horizontal line that matched the height of the countertop.

She dried her hands on the last clean dishtowel, hung it over the back of a chair, then opened the refrigerator and helped herself to a beer.

She thought the clean kitchen would make the place look better, but it didn’t. It just made the rest of the house look rattier. The filthy kitchen somehow fit right in with the ambience of the place; the clean kitchen made her want to clean up the rest. The floor was crusty with food and mud and nastiness. It would take a dozen moppings and some work with a putty knife to get it clean. The windows were covered with cobwebs and spiderwebs and dust and dirt and who-knows-what that had been splashed on, sprayed over and wiped on over the years. The sills were deep in detritus. And the garbage.

Patrick came around the corner and stopped, stunned.

Darlene leaned back against the refrigerator so he could get a good view of the whole area. Her fingers were pruny and she had soaked off most of her fresh nail polish. She wished she had some hand lotion.

“Clean up that garbage, Patrick,” she said.

“Yes ma’am.” He pulled a box of plastic trash bags from under the sink, shook out a couple and began putting the trash into them.

While he was doing that, the girl came around the corner, and stopped with much the same kind of stunned look on her face.

“How come you can’t keep the kitchen like this?” Patrick asked her. “Look what a trash heap this place has turned out to be. It wasn’t this way before you came along.”

“Not my job,” she said. “You all just thought that because I was a woman, I ought to be cleaning up after you. I do my share.”

“You don’t do shit.” Patrick hefted two black plastic sacks and slammed out the cabin door with them, leaving one more in the corner.

“You take that one out,” Darlene said.

“So you’re giving the orders around here?”

“I’m giving that order.”

The girl gave her a look that was so familiar to Darlene that it made her want to backhand the little smartmouth. That look of defiance had seemed to be permanently etched on the face of Darlene’s teenage daughter during those years of raging hormones and puberty out of control.

But the girl picked up the bag and carried it outside. She set it on the porch, then came back inside.

“Now put these here dishes away,” Darlene said.

“Kiss my ass,” the girl said.

“Come on, now. I washed them and dried them and stacked them all nice. I’d put them away except that nobody would be able to find anything afterwards. Come on.” Darlene picked up a stack of dinner plates. “Where do these go?”

With that same, typical, burdened teenage posture, the girl slumped over to the cupboard and opened it.

Darlene held her tongue. Within a couple of minutes, all the dishes were put away.

Patrick pulled out a chair, turned it around and straddled it. “This is more like it,” he said, looking around. He put his hands on the clean kitchen table. “This is how it’s supposed to be, Molly.”

“Molly?” Darlene said with a smile. “That’s a nice name. Much better than Ice.”

“Shut up,” Molly said.

“I hate it when you get your attitude in an uproar like this,” Patrick said. “I do enough around here, you know that.”

Molly hung her head.

“You could do a few things now and then.”

Molly looked down at her hands, then pulled out a chair and sat down, too.

Darlene ached to sit in a chair, her knees hurt, her back hurt from standing so long doing the dishes, but she still didn’t trust those rickety chairs.

“Sit down,” Patrick invited.

“I don’t like the looks of those chairs,” she said.

Patrick jumped up and went into the other room, and when he returned he was carrying a sturdy captain’s chair, with a round back, arms, and a little pad on the seat. He set it down, then bounced it a couple of times. “Sturdy.”

She smiled and squeezed herself into it. Her legs and feet were grateful.

She finished her beer, then looked at her watch. “You know, it’s time I got on home.”

Patrick frowned, looked down at his hands again. “Well now,” he said, “we’ve got a problem in that area.”

Oh boy. Here we go again. “What’s the problem?”

“Leathers,” Patrick said. “Leathers says we keep the car.”

“Who’s Leathers?”

“He’s...” Patrick nodded toward the open doorway that led to the back room. “He’s back there.”

“Well, what business is it of his?”

“We owe him,” Patrick said.

“I don’t owe him,” Darlene said. “Why do you think you need to pay him with my car?”

“Because we have it.”

“Just give me the keys and I’ll be out of your hair,” Darlene said. “Find another way to pay whatshisname.”

“Leathers.”

“Leathers. What kind of a name is that, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Patrick said. “I think it’s because of what he does.”

“What does he do?”

The buzzing in the back room stopped. Darlene had become so accustomed to it that she hadn’t noticed it until it stopped.

Patrick and Molly both looked at their hands like naughty children.

Molly reached over and grabbed the sleeve of Patrick’s shirt. He pulled away from her grip, smoothed his shirt, then leaned over to hear what she had to say. “Let’s get out of here, Patrick,” she whispered. “Let’s go now.”

Fear, real fear flushed through Darlene. This guy had a hold on these kids, and he was the fuel for Molly’s desperation, not this Patrick kid. Whoever was in the back room, whatever he was, Darlene didn’t want to deal with him at all. She wanted to go home. “Take me with you,” Darlene whispered.

“Patrick?” Molly whined.

“Come *on*,” Darlene said, conspiratorially. “Let’s go now.”

“Wouldn’t be right,” Patrick said.

Molly hit him hard on the arm. “Pussy,” she said.

“It’s not right to steal my car, Patrick,” Darlene said.

“There are levels of right and not right,” Patrick said, looking directly at Darlene. “Taking your car is not as bad as running out on Leathers. Not after all he’s done for me.”

“Yeah?” Molly said. “What?”

“You have no idea.”

“That’s right, Patrick,” she said. “I have no idea. I have seen what he’s done *to* you, but I haven’t seen a thing that he’s done *for* you.”

“That’s enough,” Patrick said.

“I have no idea whatsofuckingever as to why you’re so loyal to him. None. Seems to me there are other things you ought to be concerning yourself with, rather than that kind of weird loyalty. It’s weird is what it is, Patrick, it’s weird.”

“Enough,” Patrick said again, but Molly had already said her piece.

Silence descended on the table like a blanket. Darlene could feel Leathers’ presence as clearly as if he had been sitting at the table with them. Was he listening to them?

Molly chewed a fingernail. Patrick thumbed perspiration from his beer bottle. Darlene cleared her throat. “All I know is that I’ve got a dog and a cat at home that need to be let out and fed. They’re overdue.”

“Can you call someone?” Patrick said.

“Call someone? No. I want to go home. Don’t keep me here. Listen, Patrick, you’re a smart boy. I’m telling you that if you give me my keys, I’ll just go on home and chalk this day up to adventure. I gave Molly here a ride home, cleaned up your kitchen a little bit, visited with you and then went on home. If you keep me here, boy, you’re asking for a heap of trouble that I don’t think you want.”

Patrick kept wiping the water off his beer.

“Let’s have her take us to the freeway, babe,” Molly said. “We can catch a ride. It’s a good time for Arizona, you know? It won’t be too hot yet. It’s still June, isn’t it? We can go to Arizona, remember, like we talked about? Patrick?”

A chair groaned and creaked in the back room. Tense silence grew in the kitchen. Darlene heard footsteps and shufflings back there, and then a voice.

“Patrick.”

A deep voice, a dry voice.

Patrick jumped up so fast he almost spilled his beer. Without making eye contact with either Darlene or Molly, he went into the back room.

Darlene heard voices.

“What’s the deal?” she whispered to Molly.

Molly just shook her head. Shrugged her shoulders and then shook her head again.

In a moment, Patrick was back, jangling like a puppet. “C’mon, Molly,” he said. “We’re going to the store.” He tore the box top off the corn flakes and rooted around in a drawer for the stub of a pencil. “Here,” he said as he handed it to Darlene. “Write down the number of who you want us to call to tend to your animals.”

“You’re leaving me here alone?”

“Just write it down,” Patrick said. “Please. Don’t cause no trouble now, and let’s get them animals cared for.” He pushed the box top and pencil toward her. “Please.”

She wrote down her ex-husband’s name and phone number. He had a key to her house. “Just tell him to take the dog and cat home with him,” she said. “I can’t be worried about them. Tell him I’ll call him when I can.”

Patrick grabbed up the paper. “Thanks. Uh... What was your name again?”

“Darlene.”

“Darlene.” He wrote that under Phil’s phone number, and Darlene saw that he had that architect’s way of writing. This boy had draftsman training. He was no dummy.

“C’mon,” he said to Molly, and they went out the door.

Darlene stood up, and when she did, she found she brought the chair up with her. It took her a moment to free herself. “Don’t leave me here alone,” she said.

“You’re not alone,” Leathers said.

Darlene whipped around at the sound of his voice. His bulk filled the doorway. He was a big man, but more than that, he was flat-out astonishing. She’d never seen anything like him before. She stared and stared, even though she knew she was being rude. Eventually, her eyes found his and she slowly started to smile.

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0999665634?pf\_rd\_p=d1f45e03-8b73-4c9a-9beb-4819111bef9a&pf\_rd\_r=41AVWFCD72PRPQT0YQPX