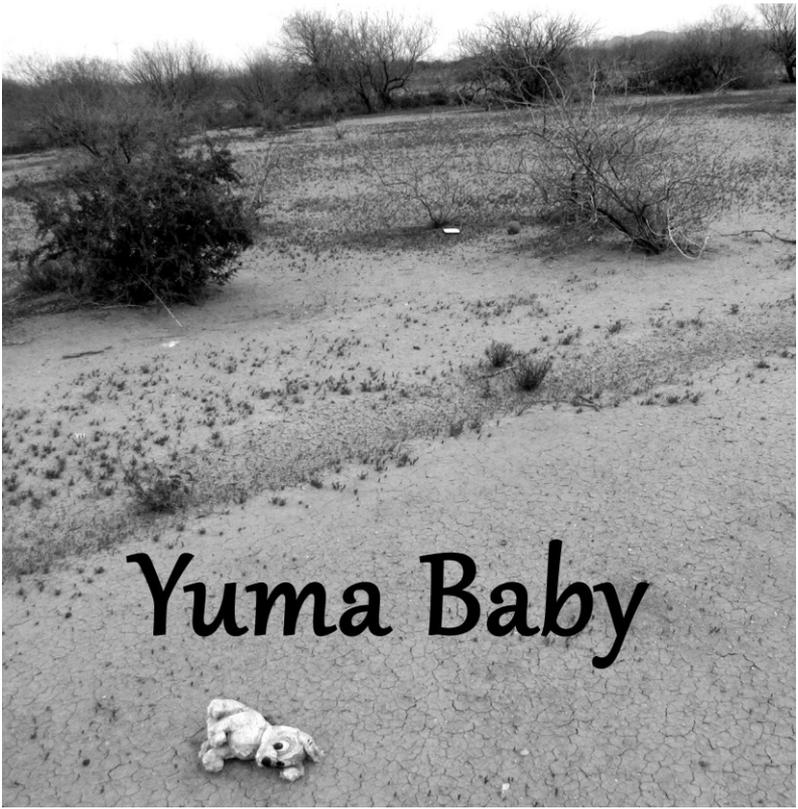


# Yuma Baby

ELLEN BEHRENS





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A Rollin RV Mystery

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First Edition

For my husband Robert Craig, without whom our full-time RV lifestyle would never have come about, our adventures on the road never begun, and Walt and Betty never imagined. You my baby and sweetheart.



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# **Yuma Baby**

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## Chapter One

The same ancient, pukey green Dodge had been tailing us since we merged onto Interstate 8 from El Centro along the southern edge of California, despite plenty of time and space to pass us almost anywhere he pleased. We were well out of the reaches of San Diego traffic, miles into desert made fertile with diverted Colorado River water. Out my passenger window I watched field after field of bright green vegetables scurry past.

“Probably a woman driver,” I said. Maybe I’m a traitor to my own gender, but the fact is most women are much worse drivers than men. We’ve seen it thousands of times – women tailgating, turning in front of us from side streets, pulling into our lane with less space between their back bumper and our front grille than I possess between two of my eyelashes.

My husband Walt and I are full-time RVers, having given up a “sticks and bricks” house to live and travel year-round in our recreational vehicle. We’ve crisscrossed the country more times than we can count and have seen more nightmares on wheels than most people (except long-haul truckers, who have their own cargo-load of tales to tell). Honestly, male drivers might be more aggressive, more sure of themselves behind the wheel than they ought to be – maybe living out fantasies of NASCAR or some action movie stunt man. But women? Women are distracted drivers – they’re thinking of the groceries they forgot, the kids’ after-school schedules. They’re not paying attention to who’s coming down the road with tens of thousands of pounds of house-on-wheels that can’t stop on a dime. Women are often deprived of sleep and over-dependent on caffeine, making them drowsy or hyper. They might even be fluctuating between the two. Men might be overconfident in their driving skills, but women are overconfident in their ability to multi-task. They chat on their cell phones, send text messages, turn around to scold toddlers in the back seat, reach for a dropped piece of paper.... They’re too busy to drive, even when they’re behind the wheel.

“Probably,” Walt said.

I could feel the rig start to slow and knew he was trying a tactic he’s used successfully many times in the past: getting the other driver to go around us. The one time this didn’t work was in Michigan, when he kept reducing his speed but the driver behind him wouldn’t pass. No turns or exits were anywhere close, so we knew they weren’t waiting to get off the four-lane highway. No other cars were nearby, so Walt slowed

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the rig to a crawl. Still the driver wouldn't pass, creeping along behind us like a timid puppy. Finally we came to a stop in the middle of the right-hand lane. The driver behind us stopped, too. So we sat and waited. A minute, sitting in the middle of a highway at a dead stop, is a long, long time. But it took the car behind us that long to figure out we were waiting to be passed. And when the car went by? A woman was behind the wheel. (Flipping us off, by the way.)

This time the split pea Dodge slithered around us before hitting the gas as if we'd been the hold-up, despite the light traffic and extra lane. Didn't surprise us: RVs are often the objects of other vehicles' frustration. We're big and slow, and usually more careful than everybody else on the road, so making us easy targets. We drive a large Chevy Silverado one-ton, crew-cab dually pickup truck and we pull a thirty-eight-foot fifth wheel behind us. Add two bicycles on a rack mounted to the back of the RV, and we're pretty long to pass. On this road, plenty of other cars and even some semi-tractor trucks passed us easily.

"It was a man," Walt said.

"Huh." I was genuinely surprised. Hopefully we were rid of him. I settled into the leather seat, impatient for the final fifty-some miles into Yuma to pass us by. We'd spent at least part of every winter in Yuma since we started full-timing a few years before, drifting in on a seductively warm breeze while the rest of the country shivered under layers of snow and fleece clothing. This mid-December we would stay until a very important phone call sent us to the Yuma International Airport where we'd head back to the Midwest for a few weeks, despite

the snow, ice, sleet, or blizzard that would otherwise keep us away. Grandbabies coming into the world will do that for snowbirds. Our daughter-in-law was due on Christmas Eve, and we were fully prepared to book a fast, expensive flight to Ohio when the time came. We'd leave the RV and truck at the site we'd be renting in Yuma until we got back. Usually we followed the weather and whim, but this particular year we actually had a plan.

Restless in my seat after four hours in it, I distracted myself by fence-spying: watching for glimpses of the border between the US and Mexico along this strip of I-8. Something about the fence undulating across the sand dunes, separating two very different nations from each other, fascinated me. I studied it every time we made this drive, maybe trying to catch a glimpse of someone dropping over the top of it. Of course, illegal border crossings were much more likely via underground tunnels than fence-jumping these days, but I kept my eyes glued anyway. Who knew what I might see?

The coffee I'd been buying and drinking at every rest area and gas station since we started out that morning was quick to run through me. Though we towed our own bathroom behind us, we still had to park to use it. I remembered a small, rustic rest area between here and the Arizona border. It wasn't much, but it would do. "Can we stop? I don't think I'll make it to Yuma," I said.

Walt nodded, saying it was fine with him. It's one of the quadrillion reasons I love him even more than I did when I married him over thirty years ago – he never minds it when I ask if we can make a pit

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stop. “We’ll be there in plenty of time to get a site and hook up before Brownie’s closes.”

Brownie’s Cafe was one of our favorite “mom and pop” local restaurants, their hearty meals always served hot and with a smile.

“You’re kidding me,” Walt muttered.

“What, Sweetheart?” I glanced over to see Walt gripping the steering wheel, shaking his head.

“It’s that damn car again.” The best looking sixty-plus year-old I’ve ever known, Walt had his kept thick black hair when his peers were losing theirs. He credited his Cherokee ancestors and a daily dose of black strap molasses. Bad drivers, though, were taking their toll on him – it seemed his hair turned a little more gray from stress the longer we lived this nomadic lifestyle.

I leaned forward, straining against my shoulder harness, as if getting closer to the windshield would help my vision. Up ahead, at a snail’s pace, was that cruddy green Dodge. I knew what Walt was thinking – he’d end up passing it just to have it sit back there on our bumper again, making us both nervous. It had to be frustrating to Walt, who drove with the cruise control on most of the time, his fingers playing the little plus and minus buttons on the steering wheel with the finesse of a concert pianist. I let out a long sigh. We still had another hour or so to go to the RV park. Why couldn’t the car gods smile on us for this last leg of our trip into Yuma?

The Dodge slowed, and Walt closed in on it. If we’d known any better, we might have thought it was pulling our own “slow down till

they pass” trick on us. Intentional or not, it worked. Walt heaved our one-ton Duramax Diesel Silverado and our fifth wheel into the left lane to pass. We pulled next to them without so much as a slight shift in the gears.

Of course I had to look, not so much to confirm the driver was a man driving like a woman, with his fast-slow, not-paying-attention pace, but out of pure curiosity.

A scruffy-faced man whose age was hard to guess drove, his chin jutted forward as if trying to make out what was ahead. Next to him sat a woman in cut-off shorts, the rest of her obscured by my angle.

In the backseat, a smiling little girl of about five bounced around (where was her car seat?), her mouth moving – chattering or maybe singing. Whatever it was, the driver didn’t like it and reached to smack the little girl, who crumpled into tears.

Sometimes with the height of our truck I see too much. In this case, I wasn’t sure I saw enough. Walt finished passing the car and when we were safely back in the right lane I said, “That man just hit their little girl.”

Walt frowned. He hated anything having to do with kids and violence. “Can’t drive, either,” he said, just as the car sped around us.

“Maybe they didn’t like that I saw what they did.” I poked around in my purse and pulled out a notepad and pen. I flipped through a few pages of grocery lists, odd notes, and license plates numbers and added this one.

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I heard the turn signal go on and looked up to see we were coming to the rest stop exit. Wedged into a relatively narrow median strip of open gravel between the eastbound and westbound lanes of the interstate, the rest area allowed traffic from either direction to pull in and park in the same big lot before taking the appropriate entrance lane back onto the freeway. We had stopped at this wayside before – a dusty, unpaved pullout area surrounded a small concrete block building housing restrooms. It wasn't the Ritz of outhouses, but it was safe and had always been clean. That meant it passed both primary requirements for a public restroom.

“Let's give them a chance to pass us again while we're at it,” Walt said, a pinch of sarcasm spicing his remark. He slowed the big truck to a crawl as the pavement ended. Swerving wide, he found a space for the rig at the far end of the open lot and pulled it to a stop. “I'll go too,” he said.

Climbing out of the truck, I noticed the Dodge jerking to a halt in front of the restrooms. “Look,” I said. “It's that car.”

“Oh, goody,” Walt said. “I get to tell him what I think of his driving.”

My skin, cooled from the truck's air conditioning, welcomed the afternoon sunshine. The peaked ridges of the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area paralleled the highway on both sides. Far off on the steep edge of a particularly high dune I could make out a bright orange pennant flying high over its off-road vehicle. Someday maybe we'd do that – rent a four-wheeler and tackle the steep sand.

In the rest area parking lot just one commercial tractor-trailer sat idling other than the Dodge and our rig. I pulled open the rusting door to the women's room and stepped inside. One of the two stalls was available so I slipped in and pulled the door, securing the metal latch.

The woman in the next stall nagged her daughter: "I thought you said you had to go. Now go!" I didn't want to eavesdrop, but public restrooms are just that – public. Sometimes there's no escaping someone else's conversation.

"But I don't have to anymore," the little girl said, her voice a whisper, just loud enough to reach me. Under the privacy panel the little girl's shoes flickered red – a tiny, embedded LED light flashing as she shuffled around. Why do kids these days get all the cool stuff? If I could find a pair of those sneakers in my size, I'd buy myself a pair. Or two.

"Well try," the woman said.

"I am trying!"

"I swear you're going to be the death of me. I swear with all my might you will. If you can't go, then come on."

When I let myself out of the stall, the little girl was at the sink, reaching as far as she could to hold her hands under the running water. With a grunt, the woman plucked the girl up and held her closer so she could splash her little fingers under the faucet. It struck me how different the two looked – the mother, with stringy blonde hair, red at the tips but muddy brown at its roots, had fair skin spotted with red blotches and dark freckles. The little girl was as dark as the woman was fair, with big brown eyes and long black hair. She looked more Hispanic than white.

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Her pink and purple dress fell past her knees – a hand-me-down, no doubt.

“Hurry up,” the woman said, struggling to hold the girl before giving up. “Okay, that’s enough.” She loosened her grip, and the girl slid from her arms to stand next to the dingy sink.

The little girl eyed me warily as I neared the sink.

“I like your shoes,” I said, pointing to the flashing sneakers.

She looked at her feet, then back at me before the woman tugged her arm, thrusting a brown paper towel into her tiny fist. “Dry your hands,” the woman said.

I couldn’t help it. Maybe it was those big brown eyes the little girl had laid on me. “Excuse me,” I said. Some people rescue abandoned pets. I wouldn’t say I rescue people, but I’ve always believed we need to treat each other better than we usually treat our animals.

The woman looked up as if I’d slapped her. She was younger than I’d thought – she might not have been twenty yet, and I wondered if she could even be old enough to be the little girl’s mother – nineteen minus five equaled a very outside chance of it, but the differences in their appearance made the math irrelevant.

I couldn’t let it go – that slap. “I realize it’s not my business,” I said, thinking it was a good way to start, but I was wrong.

“Then it’s not,” she said, starting to turn away, her grip strong on the girl’s arm. That moment of vulnerability I’d seen in her was gone, vanished with the flick of an internal switch.

“I noticed you didn’t have your daughter in a child seat,” I said. I’d meant to say something about the driver slapping the girl, but it was clear it wouldn’t make any difference to her. Some women will stand by their men all the way to the electric chair. Why I thought saying something about the car seat instead would matter more, I have no idea. It popped into my head, so I said it.

The little girl twisted to look at me, her brown eyes sad. I knew that look. Walt and I had two children together and although they were now both adults – our son about to be a father himself for the third time – I remembered those unspoken pleas: “But I don’t want to sit in the dentist’s chair...” “Please don’t make me get on that school bus...” “I know you’re saying iodine on my scraped knee will help it, but I know it will hurt...” The little girl didn’t use her words; her eyes said it all. She wanted – maybe needed – someone to help her.

“Maybe you should mind your own business, like you said.” The woman led the girl to the door. “Come on, Daddy’s waiting.”

“Daddy!” the little girl sang out, a smile lighting her face.

The woman gave me one last “I dare you” look before the metal door slammed between us.

I washed and dried my hands, hurrying to follow them. As I left the ladies’ room I could see the man and woman getting into their car. They looked like they might have been arguing.

We needed to follow them.

Around the side of the cement building I found Walt punching numbers on a snack machine. The machine had snatched his change, and

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the metal holder had twisted around but not far enough to drop the peanut candy package. It hung mid-way between its safe home on the rack and the deep plunge to the dispenser below. “Damn!” Walt pounded the machine.

“Change is inevitable, except with vending machines,” I said, grinning, though I couldn’t help wishing he would get a move-on or we’d lose track of that Dodge.

Walt looked at me and smiled. I melted. Even after all our years together, one smile from him made us both young again, dating, falling in love. When you’re lucky enough to be with the right person, as we were, the blush of first love takes on a deeper glow, but it never fades. That dash of gray hair and a few lines faintly etched from years of trials and triumphs made him more appealing to me than ever.

“Okay, I read it on one of those little wooden plaques you can buy at the souvenir stands for six bucks,” I confessed. “Come on, we have to follow that car.”

He was putting more coins in the machine. The second packet of candy pushed the first, then fell. Sometimes you just end up with one snack when you try this – almost as if the machines are rigged so you’ll dump twice the money into them (go ahead, call me cynical). This time we weren’t lucky enough to get both the packages, and we left the second one dangling. Maybe the next person would win the candy lottery and get two for the price of one. “What car?”

“The crazy Dodge. Something’s wrong with them.”

He offered to pour a few of the peanuts into my palm, so I held my hand out for him. “Anybody can see something’s wrong with them,” he said.

“Seriously. I think they’re abusing their daughter or maybe she’s not even theirs.” I started jogging back to the truck, thinking it would hurry him up, too.

He clicked the unlock button on his key fob and I pulled open the passenger door to crawl up and in. “You really should mind your own business,” he said when he was seated next to me.

I was more inclined to agree with Walt when he said it than when the woman did, and, looking back, hindsight being 20-20 and all, I probably should have listened to either one of them. I should have told Walt to head us on into Yuma and the RV park we liked to call home while we were there. I should have put the entire episode with the woman and girl out of my nosey mind, but I couldn’t let it go. Not that easily.

“I’m just worried about that little girl,” I said. “Let’s just make sure she’s okay, can we?”

Walt rolled his eyes at me, but he exited into traffic at a speed that got us quicker on the heels of the Dodge than if he just wanted to get us to the RV park. In another few minutes he was passing the Dodge.

I tried not to be obvious, but when I saw its empty back seat I couldn’t hide my surprise. “She’s gone!”

“What?”

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“I don’t see the little girl in the car anymore,” I said. “They couldn’t have left her back there at the rest area, could they? They wouldn’t do that, would they?”

Walt pulled into the right lane in front of the Dodge and slowed down. “How in the world would we know?”

My mind raced, thinking back to our walk around the building to the vending machine. We hadn’t seen her. Nor had we spotted any other cars in the a wide-open lot. The tractor-trailer rig, idling on the far end of the lot, clear of the few scraggly trees, was too far away for anyone to have vanished into it before being spotted. If they’d left her, wouldn’t we have seen her? Wouldn’t she have cried? Wouldn’t we have heard her?

When the pukey green car passed us again, Walt looked into the car, being more obvious than I was. “You’re right,” he said. “I don’t see anybody in there except them.”

## **Chapter Two**

For the next fifteen miles or so we kept the Dodge in sight, Walt driving like he'd been trained to keep a one-ton dually truck towing a long fifth wheel nearly invisible while tailing a criminal suspect. At least I hoped they weren't criminals.... I hoped we were on a wild goose chase, that we'd eventually witness the little girl crawling out of the back seat, sleepy and happy to be home.

We passed the Winterhaven/4<sup>th</sup> Avenue exit and crossed the Colorado River which marked our entry into Arizona. We cruised past the Giss Parkway on-ramp. I held my breath. I didn't want to have to follow them off Exit 2 – 16th Street. Even though I wasn't driving, it would be punishment for Walt to navigate the congestion around the Yuma Palms Mall area when he wasn't even sure we should have been doing this in the first place. Christmas was still a few weeks away, but the traffic wouldn't be pleasant. It would be harder to keep up with the

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Dodge, and making sudden turns across a few lanes would not only be tricky but dangerous in our big rig. Though it was relatively easy for us to blend in on an interstate, drifting back from the Dodge, making it look as though we just happened to take the same exit, it would be harder to tail them in town. At least Yuma had more than the average number of RVs running around so maybe we'd look just like any other rig on the road.

Of course they took the 16th Street exit, despite my silent prayers they'd stay on I-8. Walt pressed his lips together and followed, his knuckles gripping the steering wheel hard enough to turn them white. You'd think if they wanted to go to the mall they would have gone to El Centro, instead of coming all the way to Yuma. But who knew what people were ever up to?

“Re-calculating,” said Sally, our GPS at the time. If she'd been a human, she would have struggled to keep up with our turns and detours, frustrated at our inability to follow her directions to the RV park. Thankfully, she was a computer, though the frequent turns meant she was constantly “re-calculating.”

Instead of heading west toward the mall, the Dodge went in the opposite direction, back toward town. “Re-calculating,” Sally said. Ignoring her, Walt scooted into the turn lane, and though we were a few vehicles back in traffic, the Dodge was still in sight.

At least the streets in town are wide and the locals accustomed to maneuvering around recreational vehicles of all makes, models, and sizes – more than the residents of most other big towns. If you've never been

to Yuma, then you can't begin to imagine the number of RV and mobile home parks dotting the city grid. Many have been around years and years, and the streets – fortunately – are mostly made for these big rigs. I'd read the population of the city increases by roughly 100,000 residents each winter because of the “snowbirds” or “winter visitors,” as the friendly local merchants like to call us. Tracking the Dodge, we were at the early edge of prime snowbird time – December. Though most winter visitors arrived after the first of the year, many were already staking claims to a choice location before someone else dropped RV anchor in that spot, setting out chairs, table, barbeque, plants, and other items to make the site feel like home.

“You're sure you didn't see the girl in the back when we passed them?” Walt asked, his hands loosening a little.

“No,” I said. “I mean, I'm sure I didn't see her. Are you sure *you* didn't see her?”

He shook his head and made a turn. The Dodge was heading north on Arizona, and we were trying to retain our imaginary shield of invisibility behind them.

“Re-calculating,” Sally said for the umpteenth time, adding, “Make a U-turn.” She was nothing if not determined to get us to our RV park for the night.

Walt pressed the mute button. “Quiet, Sally,” he said.

We took Arizona up to 12th Street, then up 14th Avenue.

“Maybe they're going to Brownie's,” I said. Maybe my wishing it would make it so.

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“If they are,” Walt said, “they’re going in the wrong direction.”

“Maybe they don’t have a GPS.”

“They had Arizona plates. They were coming from California, so they’re probably on their way back home.”

Why didn’t I think to check the state of the license plate? Jeez Louise. “You’re a genius,” I said, grinning.

“I know. But I’m about ready to give up on this cat-and-mouse—”

He hit the brakes and I would have slammed into the dashboard but the shoulder harness locked, holding me in place. The rig’s emergency brake engaged, stopping the fifth wheel. The front of the truck was inches from the Dodge’s battered rear bumper.

“I guess he’s onto us,” Walt said, more calmly than he probably felt. His fingers closed around the door handle, but before he could open it the Dodge sped away. “Oh, is that the way he wants to play?” Walt asked. I knew it wasn’t a question he wanted me to answer, a question he wasn’t even really asking me, so I kept quiet and held on tight.

It had to have been quite a thing to see a four-door pick-up truck with four back tires pulling a long, tall recreational vehicle (don’t forget those two bicycles mounted to its rear end) as we looped and swooped around the streets of Yuma. The chase was on, and Walt kept an amazing lock on that Dodge.

We bucked and turned, swerved and curved through the residential streets, driving the Big Curve so many times in each direction I lost count. Traffic was light, but we knew from experience things

tended to pick up around 2:30 in the afternoon; maybe people quit work early because of the extreme heat, having started their day at dawn. We knew if we didn't break off the pursuit in the next half hour or so we'd be stuck in what was considered rush hour here.

"Where in the world is he going?" I asked no one in particular (how would Walt know, anyway?).

"Probably trying to shake us," Walt said, his eyes fixed on our prey. He was so focused I wondered if he had a peripheral view of the traffic on side streets. This had been my cockamamie idea, so I wasn't going to ask about his driving right then. Instead, I kept an eye open for an exit strategy if we needed one. At least we could back up if we had to, but that was not something anyone driving such a rig would want, especially if his wife had coerced him into such a crazy situation to start with.

The driver of the Dodge must have figured out we weren't going to be easy to shake and headed out of town. We zoomed past MCAS – the Marine Corps Air Station – and south past rows of lemon trees, their leaves bright green, yellow bulbs of lemons dangling from their branches. We knew this route; the RV park where we'd planned to stay was off this road. For a second I wondered if the Dodge was occupied by our future neighbors. Wouldn't that be awful?

A sigh escaped me when we cruised past the side road leading to the RV park that was our ultimate destination. Instead, we shambled further down what we knew would be an ever-shrinking pavement. I strained to remember what was out this way – we had only driven it once

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or twice in the truck, having left the RV safely anchored at the RV park. I could remember nothing of interest out this way – fewer and fewer houses, lemon groves so old the trees formed walls of green, open fields of maybe alfalfa where sheep gnawed the plants to their roots before the herd was moved to the next field, asphalt roads that turned to sand. Not what we wanted with the big rig. I started keeping track of side roads, places where we would be able to turn the rig around if the asphalt disintegrated.

Just as I was forming words meant to encourage Walt to abandon the chase – though he was, as far as I could tell, more determined now than I'd ever been to follow the Dodge to the very border of Mexico, if that's what it took – he suddenly relaxed. His hands lost that white-knuckle sheen and a grin played on his lips. "Home is where the Dodge is," he said, nodding in front of us.

The pukey car pulled into a gravel driveway shielded by a row of deciduous trees and a tall hedge. Walt steered into the gravel driveway behind him, then backed up carefully to pull the rig so it was alongside the road, facing the direction we'd come. He had the rig stopped, parked, and was out before I realized he wasn't turning us around so we could leave but was getting us in a fast getaway position (well, as fast as you can get with a big truck and even bigger fifth wheel). I scurried after him.

The Dodge man was already on us. Even scarier looking out of the car than he had been behind the wheel, his dirty blonde hair stuck out all around a baseball cap that looked as though it had been tossed into a grease pit, stirred around a bit, then fished out and plopped on the crown

of his head. A torn pocket on a red tee-shirt so faded it was pale pink sagged around his thin frame. Baggy jeans with worn knees stopped just over frayed edges and flip-flops. His hands were folded into fists – big fists. For a slight man, he had big hands. Or maybe his knuckles had just been exercised a lot from fighting. “What you doing comin’ onto my property like this?” he demanded. “Why you harassing me and my wife out there on the highway, anyway? What’s your problem?”

“Where’s the little girl?” I asked. “You had her with you at the rest area, but then she wasn’t in the back seat.”

The man looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. Maybe I had. He frowned and for a second I thought he might spit in my face. “Of course she was. You just didn’t see her. She likes to sleep on the floor in the back, as if it’s any-a your business.” He shook a finger at Walt. Uh-oh. Not a good move. “Get your ass off my property, old man. Not askin’ again.”

Old man? Did he just call my sweetheart an *old man*?

Dodge man turned and walked away, a certain huff to his step.

“I want to see her,” I said, surprising not only Walt but myself with my courage. Or stupidity. “I need to see her.” Yep, probably stupidity.

He swung around. He pointed at the fifth wheel. “You better move that monster. Who knows what could make a tree fall on it out there.”

That “monster” was our home. Everything we possessed was sitting in those four hundred square feet. Our lives were being

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threatened. “Let’s go,” I whispered. My momentary courage was gone. Poof. Just like that.

“She better be okay,” Walt said, pointing a finger back at the man. “She better have been napping.”

“Or what?” The man pressed his hands to his hips, jutted his jaw.

Or what we didn’t know. We threw him one last look we hoped was menacing before backtracking. We climbed into the truck, and Walt started the engine. We’d either stumbled into something we weren’t meant to discover, or we’d antagonized a local resident for no good reason. Neither possibility was a good one.

*[What happens next? Just go to [www.ellenbooks.com](http://www.ellenbooks.com) for complete information and links to get a full version – or e-mail Ellen directly at [ellenbehr@aol.com](mailto:ellenbehr@aol.com). Thank you!]*