

1

“AAAAUUUUGGGH!” she screamed, beating her fists on top of the car’s fender, but not too hard. As frustrated as she felt, this was still her beloved pink 1965 Shelby Mustang convertible she was beating on. Not only did she not want to take a chance on denting the fender, but she didn’t want to take a chance on breaking her wrist, either. One hard crack with her even-more-beloved wrist on that little signature knife-shaped ridge the Ford designers had molded into the fender’s outside edge, and she wouldn’t be playing tennis for a long, long time.

Yet, this had been a bad day, on top of a bad week, capping off what seemed an impossibly bad life since her father disappeared ten years ago. Having her pony-car’s engine burst into clouds of white smoke to the staccato accompaniment of loud rapping noises had just been the cherry on top of that evil cake.

“Life shouldn’t be this hard,” she thought. All she really wanted was what every woman wanted, at least what she knew her mother had always wanted: a home, a family, kids to bring up, and a husband she loved and respected to grow old with. Was that too much to ask?

What was wrong with her? She was smart. She had the grades in a top university to prove that, at least. People said she was pretty. She *was* awfully tall – taller than any woman she’d ever met, including her mother, who wasn’t exactly short – but there were plenty of guys taller than she, and a lot who didn’t seem to mind tall girls. She was athletic, but what was wrong with that?

She liked guys. She liked guys a lot! Especially, she liked the big, competent ones who, like her father, always seemed to know what to do, and met every situation with humor because they knew everything would turn out alright. Ever since she could remember, she’d felt a little something in the pit of her stomach whenever she was around them.

Because she liked guys, she tried to make herself attractive to them, not like a lot of the girls she knew, who purposely tried to look plain in an effort to make people respect them for their minds. “Judith,” her mother had said, “if you were a really great guy, and you had to choose between a smart, homely girl, or a smart, beautiful girl, who would you choose? You can be the smart, beautiful girl, so don’t be stupid!”

So, why couldn’t she find one of those great guys for herself? Her mother had. Why couldn’t she? True, her father

been taken away from her mother when he was needed the most, but at least she'd found him, and had him for a while.

Judith had been devoted to her father. When he was home, which wasn't often, they'd spent days together hiking the Appalachian Mountains near their home in Maryland. He was her guide to the wonders of the natural world, and science in general. He was her favorite playmate, most inspiring teacher, and her idol.

Even when he was away, she never felt separated from her father. She still explored the same hillsides. She read the same books. She dreamed the same dreams. Whenever she discovered a new glade, or saw a brook she'd never seen before, she would think, "I can show this to Daddy when he gets back."

Judith couldn't believe he'd abandoned them. Why'd he disappear? There was nothing in her memory that could explain it. She just *had* to find him to find out why. Maybe then she could figure out what was wrong with her.

James McKenna had always been a maverick. As a geologist, he was known for leading his employers to fabulously rich deposits of oil, gas, and minerals. He was also known for ideas that more conventional geologists found just a little crack-brained. The fact that he was right more often than not just made the arguments more heated. His fine Irish temper didn't exactly smooth things over, either.

Consequently, when he wasn't off pointing drilling rigs at sand dunes in Saudi Arabia, or mapping Tarzan's escarpment in sub-Saharan Africa, he was wandering the hills alone trying to prove that some odd rock pinnacle stood sentinel over amazing mineral wealth, despite what his rivals said. As time went on, these expeditions grew more frequent, and stretched from weeks-long into months, and even years. Finally, when trying to find an undiscovered mother lode in Nevada, he simply never came back.

Things then became more difficult for Judith and her mother. After her father's disappearance, money was harder to come by. There was no insurance because he wasn't legally dead, just not around. When their savings began to run out, her mother worked menial jobs full time during the day, and took classes at night to build a career. That left Judith on her own more than ever. The little girl doing chores, playing outdoors, and reading books grew into a young woman running a household, excelling in sports, and earning top grades.

Growing into a six-foot-three-inch redhead with a crack athlete's body, an aptitude for mathematics, and an independent streak a mile wide, she didn't have much luck with boys. Those who weren't intimidated by her size,

strength, and no-nonsense attitude were scared off by her mind. Of course, she compensated by spending more time with sports, and books, which just made everything worse.

Then, in her second year of college (full scholarship at an Ivy League school, of course), her mother suddenly had her beloved father declared legally dead so she could marry some oil tycoon. She never understood that. She blamed her mother for weakness, and her step father for trying to replace her father.

Here it was, Spring Break of her senior year, and she'd come to spend another dreary week on her evil stepfather's yacht at his Miami Beach yacht club while he pretended to be nice to her. When she found he was trying to fix her up with some pencil neck he knew from work, she'd had enough. She just got into her car, and drove off.

That cloud of white smoke was the final betrayal. After getting out, stomping, screaming, and pounding her anger out on the car's fender, she dropped back into the driver's seat to have a good cry.

That's how he found her, sitting with her long, freckled legs sticking out of white shorts through the open car door, sneakered feet in the dust by the side of the road, head buried in folded arms cradled on her knees, with long flame-colored hair cascading over everything, and sobs wracking her shoulders.

"Looks like you've had a tough day," was all he said.

Startled, she looked up to see a tall figure standing over her with a motorcycle helmet dangling from one hand. He'd ridden up on what seemed to be the biggest, yellowest motorcycle she'd ever seen, gotten off, and walked over while she'd been busy bawling her eyes out.

Instantly, she felt that old, involuntary jolt of excitement in the pit of her stomach. Yet, he was nothing like the picture she had in mind for her ideal mate. Sure, he looked like something out of an old Errol Flynn movie, but she knew that was just fantasy. Real guys with whom she could build a home and a family, and who'd stay around long enough to grow old with, didn't look like something out of a pirate movie. The ones that did just weren't husband material.

Starting from worn, stained black boots laced up to his knees into which were tucked equally grime-covered black leather pants whose tightness exposed tree-trunk-like thighs, her gaze rose to a black tee shirt, which enhanced rather than hid his weight-lifter's upper torso, and muscular arms. Finally, she came to a tanned weather-beaten face with

shaggy dark-brown hair, and beard.

Definitely out of a pirate movie. She suppressed her physical attraction by thinking to herself: “another macho would-be tough guy.”

Yet, there were those eyes that seemed to peer right inside her as if reading her thoughts, but in a kindly way. Not what she’d expect from the testosterone-addled egomaniac biker image she was force fitting him into.

Confused, she simply gave in to her very real need for immediate help.

“Yeah,” she said, simply.

“My engine broke down,” she continued, as if the still billowing cloud of white smoke wasn’t a dead giveaway.

“I don’t know what to do,” she added with equal transparency.

Thinking she must look like an idiot, frustration and embarrassment once again overflowed through her tear ducts. She turned her face away so he wouldn’t see.

What he really thought, when he saw her lifted face, was that she was the most gorgeous woman he’d ever seen, despite the tears streaming over freckled cheeks, and the puffy red-rimmed eyes. “This one has good bones,” he thought, and, while her expression was a mixture of frustration, anger, confusion, and even a little fear, she displayed not a hint of panic. She wasn’t giving up, she was looking for a way out. It showed an unusually tough character for a woman who looked as good as she did. Usually, beautiful women didn’t have to work that hard.

“You’re not the first one to blow an engine,” he laughed. “Everyone who’s ever given love to a classic car ends up by the side of the road more than once. Pop the hood, and let’s see the damage.”

Somehow, his comment made her feel instantly better. Instead of a moron who couldn’t do anything right, she suddenly felt like an adventurer faced with a sudden challenge. Maybe she’d be okay, after all.

While she pulled the handle that unlatched the hood, he put on the driving gloves he’d stuffed into his helmet with his sunglasses when he gotten off his bike. It took him a while to feel around in the narrow space between the hood and grill to find the safety catch. She noticed he didn’t seem embarrassed by the difficulty. He just made funny faces as he

felt around for the lever, then tried pushing it in different directions, each time changing to a different wry expression, until a bright smile appeared as the catch finally released.

His little performance actually made it seem like they were having fun!

He involuntarily backed his face away from the white cloud released as he raised the car's hood. It was hot, wet steam that smelled of anti-freeze, and felt like it was melting his eyeballs. He put his sunglasses back on to protect his eyes, and tried to peer through the cloud to find the source of the loud hissing still emanating from the engine compartment.

“Hopefully, you’ve just blown a radiator hose. When was the last time you had this thing serviced?”

“I dunno. I don’t drive it very much. I go to school up in Cambridge, and just drove it down here on vacation.”

“Hmmm. Next time, change all the fluids, check all the seals, and do a tune up before taking it on a long trip. Cuts down on the roadside adventures. The first thing that goes when you let a car sit a lot, then take it on a long trip is the hoses. ... Nope, I don’t see a problem with the hoses.”

He pulled the sunglasses off again to peer more deeply into the shadowed engine bay. Ducking his head under the steam cloud, he stuck his face close to the engine.

“That’s what it is! You’ve blown both head gaskets. They’ve probably been leaking a little bit for a long time. Water was being sucked into the cylinders on the down stroke, and blown out through the exhaust. You didn’t see anything because it came out as invisible superheated steam. When you ran too low on water, the engine overheated, and pffsht!”

He delivered this report in an almost clinical tone. No emotion, it was just data. He could have been giving a weather report, or explaining the migratory patterns of monarch butterflies. He didn’t blame her for hurting her car. He didn’t commiserate over her trouble. He made an engineering assessment.

“Is that bad?” she asked, not knowing from his tone what it could mean.

“Well, it’s a whole lot better than, say, having melted a piston, which I’ve done more than once.”

“He says that as if it’s just nothing!” she thought. Again, what he said, and the way he said it, made her feel better about having screwed up.

“But, it’s a whole lot worse than splitting a hose,” he said, “which I’d hoped for. You’re going to be stuck for about a week.”

It took a few seconds for that to register. She had no place to go. She couldn’t go back to Miami. She wouldn’t! She started to feel the first signs of panic crawling up from her belly. Her eyes started to fill up again. Fighting, she pushed down the panic, and flicked away the tears.

“What do I do?” she asked, thinking aloud.

Thinking she was asking him for advice, he said, “Luckily, there’s a mechanic about a mile ahead, who owes me a favor. He’s a good guy, and won’t screw you over. He can tow it in, then we’ll find out for sure what the situation is.”

“Uh, I don’t know,” she replied, suddenly wary. “Maybe someplace else?”

“You gotta choice? It’s that, or start leafing through the phone book, and you’ve got no phone book. I understand that all you have to go on is a recommendation from me, and you don’t know me.”

“But, you’ve never steered me wrong, either,” she laughed, realizing she was looking a gift horse in the mouth. “Okay, we’ll do it your way. I really do appreciate your stopping to help. Nobody else seemed to care.”

“Well, I couldn’t leave you to the tender mercies of some half-drunk college sophomore looking for a Spring Break thrill, now could I? Lock up everything you can’t carry, leave the hood up, and I’ll ride you over to Bill’s. He can come back to get the car while you get in out of the sun. I hope you’re wearing sun block. You look like you’ve had enough, already.”

“Yes, I am. I’ve spent enough time outdoors to know that much. As you can see from the freckles,” she said, suddenly shy about her spotted complexion.

Figuring it was simplest, she grabbed her shoulder bag, put up the convertible top, and locked the doors. By that time, he had the motorcycle up off its kickstand, and running. As she walked over, slinging the shoulder bag strap over

her neck to leave her hands free, he started to explain about first putting her weight on the left-hand floorboard to reach her right foot over the seat. Instead of listening, she stood with her left foot flat on the ground next to the bike, and simply raised her right foot over the seat, planted it flat on the ground on the other side, then sat down on the elevated passenger's seat.

“Damn! Those legs reach all the way to the ground!” he said, impressed.

“This is like an easy chair,” she commented as she lifted her feet to the floorboards as the bike took off.

“I designed this bike specifically for long distance touring,” he shouted as the bike picked up speed. “Ten hours a day, seven days a week can get pretty rough, so I wanted all the comfort I could get.”

“It's quiet. Just a low rumble.”

“The loud rapping most choppers make, and the angry buzz of a lot of sport bikes, can tire you out fast on a long trip.”

“Wait, you said you *designed* it?”

“I like to design all my bikes. For a touring bike, I usually start with a stock frame and engine because the factory does a lot of testing to make their touring bikes reliable. I could never get that reliability in a one-off design. Then, I put everything else together the way I want it.”

Putting two, and two together, she came to the conclusion he was an itinerant motorcycle mechanic, or a bike builder, like on TV. “Where did you say you were from?” she asked.

“I live in Arizona. I come out here every year for Daytona Bike week.”

“What's that?”

“Every year they have a week-long motorcycle racing event at Daytona Speedway. Racing fans come from all over the world to see it. Years ago, more people started coming in just for the parties and fun than for the races. Now, it's one of the four biggest motorcycle rallies in the U.S. There's one in Laconia, New Hampshire, one in Laughlin, Nevada, and the biggest one's in Sturgis, South Dakota. Hundreds of thousands of people show up just as an excuse to get

together.”

“Sounds like fun. How come I never heard of it?”

“Probably because you’re not a biker. My company sells equipment to a lot of the racing teams, so I come out every year. The races finished up today, and I’m taking my time riding back to Arizona.”

So much for her theory about his being a itinerant bike mechanic. He worked for a company. Maybe in sales? He didn’t look like a salesman, but who knows?

“What is it you do?” she asked.

“Ahhh, well. The company makes a lot of special equipment for different industries. Motorcycle racer stuff is just part of it.”

“What do *you* do?”

“Ummm. I do a lot of things. The company mainly develops stuff for the aerospace industry. Test equipment, and so forth.”

Why was he being so evasive? She asked about him, but he answered with vague tidbits about this fabulous company. He was probably just a low-level flunky trying to impress her with the stuff his company makes.

“Where were you going, by the way?” he asked.

“Oh, I was headed west,” she said, being evasive herself.

“Vacation?”

“Not exactly,” she said, trying to avoid explaining that she’d run away with no clear plan in mind.

2

Uncomfortable silence was broken by their arrival at what looked to be a gas station from the mid-20th Century.

The building, and the single gas-pump island were painted with the corporate colors of a major chain, but the logos had been painted out and replaced with “Bill’s Auto Repair” in large, neat lettering. The gas pumps were gone, and the roof over the island protected what appeared to be customers’ cars waiting their turn behind one of the two large roll-up doors. Despite its obvious age and repurposing from a gas-station franchise to an independent repair shop, the place was neat and well kept up. Apparently, the proprietor was working hard to build a new business in a building that had essentially been abandoned.

The repair-shop lot was separated from the parking lot of a diner of similar vintage by a gravel strip, with concrete parking stops protecting it from encroachment by cars parked in both lots. Three large, but empty, picnic tables sat on the gravel next to an open-faced tent set up on the diner’s side parking lot. Several large folding tables within it, along with a commercial barbecue setup, implied a temporary open-air food court in the process of being taken down. A large “Welcome Bikers” banner hanging over the gravel strip’s street end made the intentions of both establishments known to anyone cruising down the road. At the front of the diner’s parking lot was a second, somewhat larger, tent offering leather goods and jewelry to riders of a dozen motorcycles clustered in front of the diner, which sported a smaller “Welcome Bikers” sign over its door.

As Judith and her rescuer pulled into the repair shop parking lot, she spied a pair of coverall-clad legs sticking out from under a pickup truck with its rear end suspended from a tow truck’s crane. Bursts of blue-white light signaled that arc welding was in progress under the pickup.

“Blown up any good gas tanks recently?” Judith’s biker called out.

The legs quickly pulled a wiry body supported on a rolling creeper out from under the truck. Heavily gloved hands flipped up the welding mask to reveal a broadly smiling face framed by disheveled sandy-colored hair and beard.

“Aw, Doc, you know I’m real careful welding around gas tanks,” the beard replied. “I always stuff wool blankets between the tank and where I’m welding.”

“This guy got drunk,” the beard continued saying, “and banged over one too many curbs. Broke a rear spring. I’m patching it up enough to get them home to Arkansas. They can replace it there. Hey, I thought you were pulling out early.”

“I ran across this stray about a mile down the road,” Doc replied, indicating Judith. “She managed to blow not one, but *two* head gaskets on her ‘65 Mustang. Let the radiator go dry. I told her you were the man who could help her out. She’ll need a tow.”

“I’m almost done with this job, but I can send Pete out with the hauler to pick it up. Don’t want to leave it there all lonesome with only hubcap thieves for company,” the beard, which Judith assumed belonged to Bill, said while trying to hide the fact that he was eyeing her appraisingly.

“Pete!” Bill yelled over his shoulder. “Can you drop that tune up, and go rescue this lady’s Mustang?”

“Be right there!” came a reply from behind the raised hood of a sedan in one of the inside bays, followed by the snapping sound of a distributor cap being clipped in place.

“Pete’s my little brother,” Bill told Judith.

“He’a turned out to be a really good mechanic,” he explained to Doc, for no apparent reason. “Picks things up fast, and he’s real reliable. Good for business, as you can see.”

“Uh, let’s not talk business right now,” Doc said with a nod toward Judith.

“Ooh-kay,” Bill said, getting Doc’s point, but not knowing why he shouldn’t talk business. Judith caught the exchange, but was even more in the dark than Bill.

A gangly, sandy-haired teenager, who looked like a younger, slightly taller, beardless version of Bill, emerged from behind the sedan’s hood.

“All done,” he said to Bill, “and ready for you to check.”

When he caught sight of Judith, he turned red, and tried to simultaneously stare, and drop his eyes. The impulse to stare won.

Turning to Judith, Bill asked, “Where’s your car, and what does it look like?”

“It’s a pink 1965 Mustang convertible with a white top. We left it up on the northbound side of Route 95 about a

half mile south of the exit with the hood up. Will you need the keys?”

“We’ll need to get inside to put it in neutral, and take off the brake, so if it’s locked, yeah.”

“Here they are,” she said, handing him the keys.

Bill tossed the keys to Pete, who grabbed them out of the air, then sprinted off to the hauler parked behind the garage.

“I think I’ll take Red, here, over to the diner for lunch while we’re waiting,” Doc told Bill. “She’s had a busy morning.”

Judith suddenly realized she’d never told Doc her name, and he’d never asked. Somehow, she didn’t mind being called “Red.” When he said it, he made it sound special.

“Judith,” she said when they’d seated themselves opposite each other in one of the diner’s booths.

“What?”

“My name is Judith McKenna. I thought you should know, but I don’t mind ‘Red,’ either.” It made her feel adventurous, and just a little like an outlaw. It was exciting to feel like an outlaw. She liked that, and wanted the name to stick.

She’d spent most of her life trying to fit in, which she found nearly impossible. This adventure reminded her of how much fun she’d had hanging around with her freshman roommate, Cheryl, who’d been probably her best friend ever.

Cheryl made no bones about liking to take risks. She was brash, outspoken and demonstrative to the point of being lewd, and was always up for anything that looked like fun. She’d led Red into all kinds of escapades that Red would never have considered on her own.

Cheryl was tall, too, although not nearly as tall as Red, and smart as well. While Red’s intellectual passion was mathematics, Cheryl’s was archeology. After they’d completed their core course requirements in their sophomore years, they no longer had classes in common. And, when Red moved into her own apartment, they’d drifted apart. Red

suddenly realized how much she missed hanging around with Cheryl. It had been lonely being on her own. And, boring – none of the zest Cheryl brought to everything she did.

“Folks just call me ‘Doc,’” the biker said, bringing Red back to the present.

Here was that same evasiveness. She’d told him her full name, but he wasn’t saying anything about himself. Why?

“Why ‘Doc?’” Red asked.

“I guess I’m sort of a know-it-all. Whenever somebody has a question, they seem to ask me. And, most of the time I seem to know.”

“That sounds like a good thing.”

“Well, I suppose. Sometimes it gets embarrassing, though, and some people get their noses out of joint. I try to keep my mouth shut, but now and then I forget.”

“Ahh, will you excuse me for a minute,” Red said, suddenly feeling an urgent need. “I really need to find a ladies’ room.”

“Oh, sure, it’s right back there,” he said pointing.

She walked back to the restrooms. Turning as she opened the ladies room door, she saw the waitress arrive at their table with menus, sit down, and start a conversation with Doc. It seemed like they were old friends.

Later, as Red returned from the ladies’ room, she noted that the waitress was gone, and Doc was talking on a cellphone. Looking up and seeing Red, he quickly ended the conversation and put the cellphone away.

“When people expect you to be someplace, and you don’t show up,” Doc explained, “it’s just polite to call them, and let them know why.”

Suddenly uncomfortable with the thought of her movements being known, Red blurted out: “You told them about me?”

“Why, what’s the problem?”

“Well,” Red began, thinking it was time to uncover some of the truth to prevent future information slips, “there are people I don’t want to have find me.”

“That sounds sinister. I hope it’s nothing illegal.”

“No. I just don’t want my step father to find me,” she said, feeling it sounded a little lame.

Doc just sat there, regarding her with patient expectation, awaiting further explanation.

“I don’t like him,” she said, explaining very little.

Doc still waited.

“He keeps trying to be nice to me,” she said even more lamely.

“Are you trying to tell me he’s hitting on you?” Doc asked.

“No, no! He pretends to be nice so my mother will like him.”

“Aha! You’re jealous. You think he’ll come between you, and your mother. Kind of an odd take on an Oedipus complex?”

“No. Well, I guess. He wants to be my father, but I already have one.” Red was telling him a lot more than she wanted to.

“Where’s your father?”

“He disappeared, but I know he’ll come back when he can.”

“But, your mother’s remarried. How long has he been gone?”

“Ten years.”

“That’s a long time to be missing. Maybe he’s not coming back?” said Doc, doubtfully.

“He’s not dead. He’s *not!*” Suddenly, she was a little girl again, frustrated, and frightened that maybe she really

couldn't have what she desperately wanted.

"I know where he is," she continued. "They just don't want to believe me. I was on my way to find him when my car broke down," she said, as she felt tears starting to well up in the corners of her eyes.

She wiped them away, and drew up to her full seated height. "That's all you need to know," she said, suddenly imperious.

"Hmm," he said, noncommittally.

Changing the subject, he said "I took the liberty of ordering lemonade for you. Coffee's no good for someone who's been out in the sun riding on a motorcycle – or in a convertible. It makes you pee too much. You need to retain water."

"I see what you mean about being a know-it-all," she commented, trying to get back on a friendly footing. "But, I already knew that. I've spent a lot of time outdoors and with sports since I was a kid. Lemonade will be perfect, thanks."

"Speaking of peeing too much, it's my turn to use the facilities."

After he left for the men's room, the waitress brought two large glasses of lemonade, and asked: "Will that be all for you?"

"I think that's it for now. We're just waiting for the young man next door to tow my car in from the highway. It broke down."

"Ah, that'd be Pete. He's my brother in law. Bill's my man. He runs the garage, and I run the restaurant. Between us we make a tidy living."

"You seem to know Doc," Red said, prying for information. "Have you known him long?"

"We've known him for years – long before we bought this place. I'm Harriet, by the way. You know, like on the old *Ozzie and Harriet* TV show. My parents loved that show."

"What do you know about Doc?" Red asked, ignoring the reference to a television series she was two generations

too young to know anything about.

“He won’t tell me a thing, and I’m curious,” she said with an avid look in her eye.

“Uh, oh. Looks like you’re getting stuck on him,” Harriet opined. “Look, not many people will tell you much about Doc. He’ll tell you what he wants you to know when he wants you to know it. I can tell you this: If you need anything, and I mean *anything*, just ask him. And, you can trust him with your life. I mean that! But there, I’ve said enough. Too much, in fact.”

With that, she turned around, and walked back to the counter.

“Nobody knows where you are from me,” Doc said when he returned, picking up the conversation from an earlier point. “I was just telling the people I was to meet why I stood them up.”

“Bikers don’t have a reputation for being so polite.”

“Actually, they’re some of the politest people on Earth,” he said in a professorial tone. “If you find yourself among large, muscular people who tend to do what they like, and don’t take any nonsense from anyone, it pays to be polite.”

She liked hearing him tell her things that way. It reminded her of how her father had talked to her. Her father had always explained things to her, too. It was as if he wanted to fill her mind with everything he knew – as if it was somehow important to him that she understood the reasons behind what he thought and did. Other men acted like they thought she should take what they said at face value, without explanation.

“What if you’re particularly large, muscular, and independent, yourself,” she asked pointedly eyeing the solidly muscled arms sticking out of Doc’s black tee shirt.

“There’s always somebody bigger, more muscled, and more independent,” he replied. “Some of them also have pretty short fuses, and you never know who. Besides, bigger guys don’t get hassled much growing up. It’s the little guys who have something to prove.”

Just then, Harriet returned to take their lunch orders.

“So, when do you have to meet them?” Red asked after they’d ordered lunch.

“Whom?”

“The people you were supposed to meet. I assume you’re still going to meet them.”

“There’s no point, now. I’ll get back to them another time. I figure on hanging around until we know what’s what with your car.”

“That’s awfully kind of you.”

“Just being polite,” he said with a wan smile. “I’m on vacation, now, so there’s no place I have to be. And, it’s kinda nice to spend time with a pretty lady. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” she smiled. Having him around made her feel oddly safer. While she had been running her own life for years, in the back of her mind she always had a hollow feeling that she might do the wrong thing, and that there’d be consequences. With Doc there backing her up, she felt there was nothing she couldn’t handle. She didn’t know why she should trust him to back her up. She just did.

He wasn’t like the boys she knew, and she now thought of them as “boys” rather than men. They were always trying to take charge. They wanted to show how macho they were. Doc didn’t do that. He stepped back, and let her handle things, while just being around in case there was need. Like with Bill at the garage, Doc had made introductions, then let her take it from there. She liked that.

“What do you think will happen with my car?” she asked.

“That depends on what Bill finds when he takes it apart.”

“He has to take it apart?”

“We know that you need new head gaskets because I could see steam shooting from underneath the heads. We also know the engine overheated. That’s what the knocking sound was before it stopped. What we don’t know is how bad the damage is. Hopefully, it’s just those head gaskets.”

“How long will it take to fix?”

“That depends on a lot of different things. He might have the gaskets on hand for that engine, since Ford still makes it, or a modified version of it. There might be some seals that have changed since it was made in the ‘60s, but he should be able to get all that stuff locally. If so, he could have the parts in under an hour. You’re probably looking at two hours for each head, then another hour to put it all back together, then an hour or so to test it, and get it ready for the road.”

“Why so long to test it? Once he fixes it, it should work, right?”

“Well, the reason you ran out of coolant is because it’s been leaking for a long time. Maybe months, or even years. It wasn’t noticeable because it was a small leak. You probably have had to keep adding coolant, right?”

“Yes, I’ve had to add a little every few weeks since I’ve had it.”

“How long has that been?”

“Two years. I’ve gotten pretty good at mixing anti-freeze, and filling the little plastic tank.”

“All that time, the system has never gotten up to normal pressure, and the hoses have just gotten older, and rottener. I’ll bet the temperature gauge has been low, too.”

“It’s always been like that, too. That’s why I never worried.”

“The coolant is supposed to be pressurized to keep it from boiling, but instead the pressure leaked out. That let it boil early, and the temperature and pressure stayed low.

“After Bill fixes the head gasket and all the seals in the engine, that will close the leaks. The pressure will go up, and all the hoses and joints in the rest of the system will have to work hard for the first time in years. There’s a good chance something else will blow. After he fixes that, the next weakest thing will blow, and so forth until he gets them all. If you’re lucky, it’ll take about an hour. Maybe two.”

“So, we’re talking about five or six hours work. Could he finish it today?”

“Well, if you’re lucky, and there aren’t any more emergencies (remember that truck with a broken spring that he’s working on now), he could finish it before he closes up tonight. I’d figure on spending the night here, though, and maybe getting away tomorrow.”

“So, I can leave tomorrow,” she said, visibly disappointed.

“Well, maybe. Remember that knocking was caused by overheating. The heat might have warped one or both heads. I don’t think either of them cracked, but that’s also a possibility”

“How will we know?”

“When he gets the heads off, he’ll check them for flatness. It’s standard procedure because you never know. It takes only a few seconds, and can save having to do the whole job over again.”

“What happens if they’re warped?”

“If they’re only slightly warped, he can send them out to a machine shop where they’ll shave a little off to flatten them. That would take a week or two, depending on how busy the machine shop is. If they’re too bad, you’ll have to throw the heads away, and get new ones. That’ll probably take as long, and will be a lot more expensive.”

“How much is ‘a lot?’”

“You’re looking at several hundred dollars anyway. If you’ve damaged the heads, it’ll cost thousands.”

“What’ll I do?”

“I’m telling you this now, so you can start thinking about that. Look, if you get really lucky, Bill can just torque the heads to tighten up the head gasket, which’ll take about an hour, and you can be on your way. But, I’d be totally amazed to see that. It’s almost impossible. We can try, but it’s probably a waste of time.

“When Pete gets back with your car,” Doc continued, “we’ll see about retorquing the heads. Likely, Bill won’t even want to try because there’s so little chance of success, and they could just let go again an hour down the road.

“If that doesn’t work, I’ll stick around for the night. We’ll scout up a couple of motel rooms and have a leisurely

dinner. By then, we'll know how long it'll take to fix your car, and you can figure out what you want to do."

"You'd do that for me?"

"I told you, I'm on vacation. You're stuck here until the middle of the afternoon, anyway. There's no point in my starting out then on a bike just to hunt up a motel in the dark. I've been down that road before, and there's no reason to do it today. I figure I'm already staying here the night. I'll find a room while there's plenty of daylight left."

"Then, I'll stay, too. Okay?"

"Okay. Here comes lunch," he said, seeing Harriet walking toward them carrying full plates.