

Takeover

by Alan Elliott

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“Wake up, hon.” Sean kissed his wife on her cheek and neatly folded back the covers. He glanced at his watch. “I let you sleep as long as I could. Remember the doctor’s appointment at eleven? We can’t be late.”

Darla looked up at her husband through one half-opened eye and mumbled, “Tell me I’m not crazy,”

“No. No, you’re not crazy, but that pill really put you out for the night. Can you sit up? I’ve got a cup of coffee for you.”

She opened both eyes and spoke in a louder voice, “I’m *not* crazy, I tell you.”

Sean put one arm behind her back and helped her sit up. “Just take a little sip. That’ll wake you up.” He pressed the cup gently against Darla’s mouth and tipped it up to where the coffee lapped at her lips.

She opened them enough to let some of the warm coffee flow into her mouth. Comforted by the warm coffee aroma she took a sip and enjoyed the pleasure, then pushed the cup slowly away. “I don’t want to be crazy, I tell you. As far as I know I’ve been fairly normal all my life. I like being fairly normal. Crazy, I don’t like. Not even sort of crazy. If it weren’t for that man . . .”

“We went through a lot last night. Everything’s okay now. That chapter in our life is all over with.”

Darla squinted her eyes, wondering what Sean meant.

Sean ignored the look and helped Darla out of the bed. At the

vanity, she sat down and stared at herself in the mirror. "I look horrible. Did they find our Explorer?"

"Yeah. Already chopped up. I'm sure insurance'll cover it. We'll be out the five hundred dollar deductible, of course and it'll probably raise our rate."

"Look at my hair! Did they find the guy?"

Sean hesitated.

Darla stared at her husband's reflection in the mirror. He couldn't hide the answer. "They didn't? He's still out there? What're we going to do? We can't just go on like this. . ."

"Forget about the guy. He's gone. Let's just see what the doctor has to say, okay?"

"I know exactly what he'll say. He'll say I'm crazy," Darla stabbed at her hair with the brush. "I ought to take a shower. This hair . . ."

Sean glanced at his watch. "You look fine. We've got to leave in twenty minutes."

"What? How do you expect me to get ready in twenty minutes? Have I ever gotten ready in twenty minutes before? Give me my jeans."

"I just wanted you to rest."

Darla gulped down a drink of coffee, washed her face, put on a hint of eyeliner, pulled on her jeans and tee-shirt and stabbed at her hair again with the brush.

"I may look like death warmed over, but I'm definitely not crazy. It's not me. It's the world. The world is crazy. Movies are crazy. TV is crazy. Do you think I need to get it cut?" She ran her fingers through her hair.

With the SUV out of commission they were forced to make the trip to the doctor's office in their ding-ridden Toyota Corolla. Sean tuned in a classical station and Darla stared out the car window, looking at people as they drove by - two elderly ladies standing at a bus stop, a middle aged man walking a German Shepherd and a pot-pourri of people in a multiplicity of cars. None of them, Darla surmised, had a clue.

Her eyes focused on a young woman of maybe twenty wearing khaki slacks, a tight fitting beige sweater, with long black hair and an almost white complexion. That woman has a story, thought Darla. Maybe an interesting and unique story full of plot twists and surprise revelations. An accomplished writer would learn about her and write her story. She wished she could be that writer. But she would have to wait. Only one story mattered at the moment. Her story.

. . .

It started last night when Sean stopped to get money at the ATM. She'd criticized him. "What are you doing? It's after midnight!"

Sean ignored her warning and pulled off the freeway. He headed for a corner where he knew there'd be an ATM. "I've got to get cash for the toll. They don't take plastic."

Darla rummaged through her purse. "Wait, I've got a dime, two pennies, and . . . a quarter -- not enough, huh?"

"Back in a second." Sean stopped the car in front of the ATM kiosk and jumped out.

The damp evening air and amber lights bathed the empty parking lot in an eerie yellow mist. Darla imagined the setting as the opening scene in a mystery. She watched as Sean put his plastic card in the machine, punched in some numbers, and pulled out a wad of twenties.

As he turned and headed to the car, Darla saw a tall, thin man step out of the shadows and shove something into Sean's back. She saw her husband's face turn ashen as he froze, holding his wallet in one hand, and the money in the other. The scene unfolded in slow motion. She wanted to scream. Her hands wanted to grab the cell phone, lock the doors, or honk the horn, but instead she only watched the man push Sean toward the car.

Darla heard Sean, "Take the money and car! Just leave us alone."

The stranger shoved Sean again and yelled, "Shut up and get in."

Sean got into the driver's seat at the same time the stranger climbed into the back of the car, all the while pointing the gun at Sean's head. Darla jumped back in fright, hitting her head hard against her door window. The impact dazed her for a moment, and when she regained focus she found herself staring directly at the black and shiny barrel of a gun. She studied the deep and dark octagonal barrel. For an odd moment, she pictured the gun as an advertisement on the back cover of a slick magazine with descriptive text surrounding the picture. She could see the price of \$299 and an 800 number at the bottom of the ad. The stranger sensed her staring at the gun.

"Don't get any ideas, sister!"

Sean pleaded with the man. "Take the car and let us out. You don't need us. You've got my money."

The gunman waved his gun and ordered Sean to drive south. As he drove Darla wished Sean would purposefully crash the car -- maybe run into a telephone pole -- something that wouldn't hurt anyone else. She'd rather they be injured in a car wreck than get killed by this gunman. But she knew Sean. He'd be wondering if the

insurance would cover the intentional wrecking of a car.

After they'd traveled several miles, the stranger ordered Sean to pull into the parking lot of a 7-Eleven. "Both of you, get out slowly. Make a sudden move, and I'll kill both of you, understand?"

The stranger followed Sean and Darla into the store. He held the gun in a pocket and stood behind them as they walked up to the counter. Then he pushed Sean aside and pointed the gun at the clerk.

"Hands in the air."

The Indian clerk held his skinny hands high above his head and moved back from the cash register. The stranger scooted around the edge of the counter, keeping the gun visible at all times. With one hand he banged the buttons on the register until the drawer opened, then grabbed the bills and stuffed them into his pocket.

"This all? Where's the safe?"

The clerk spoke in a heavy English accent. "Behind you, but I cannot open it. It contains a time lock."

The stranger stared at the safe while keeping his gun waving at his prisoners. "I've got to have more money."

Darla leaned over to whisper to Sean, but the stranger caught the movement and pointed the gun in her direction.

"You're too much trouble. I can't carry you all around looking for more money. I've got to get rid of you. Who wants to be first?" He pointed the gun at Sean.

Darla held up a hand. "Wait! There's another way."

"Shut up, lady! Who's in charge here?"

"Don't make a stupid mistake. Just . . . lock us in the freezer. We won't be found for maybe an hour. All you need is time to get away."

The stranger pointed the gun at Darla.

She continued, "If this is just a simple robbery, the police won't spend a lot of time trying to track you down. They're too busy. But if you shoot us, they'll assign detectives to the case. It'll be on the nightly news, and they won't stop until they find you. It always happens that way. If you use violence, they'll keep looking until you're caught."

He waved the gun under Darla's nose. "What are you talking about?"

She didn't flinch. "It's becoming clear to me now. You know - like in movies and TV shows. The robber always makes stupid mistakes that get him caught. He makes the crime so horrible that the police use everything they have to find him, and they always catch him in the end. It just wouldn't be entertaining otherwise. Movies have to start out like that, with an inciting incident."

“Shut up!” yelled the gunman.

Darla ignored him and continued. “Without an inciting incident the story would never get started. But you don't have to play it their way. You can get away with this robbery if you don't make it too interesting. If no one gets hurt, then the police won't try very hard to come after you.”

The gunman looked at Sean and the clerk. “She's nuts.”

He looked back at Darla. “But maybe you've got something there. No . . . it don't feel right. It's like I gotta shoot you. Something inside says I just gotta do it.”

Darla forced a smile. “But can't you see? That's what *they* want you to do. Violence sells. They always want more violence. But what will it get you? A ticket to death row? Sure, maybe you'll get a movie made about your life. But you don't have to go through with it. You can put an end to it right now by just thinking for yourself.”

The stranger grabbed the clerk by his shirt collar. “I ain't got time for this.” He shoved him toward the back of the store. “Okay then, all of you, get in the refrigerator!”

Darla and Sean followed the clerk into the walk-in refrigerator at the back of the store. Once they entered, the gunman slammed the door shut. He jammed a broomstick into the lock and they heard him run out of the store.

Sean turned to Darla, “What's gotten in to you?”

The clerk smiled at her. “You are a very smart woman. Many thanks for saving our lives.”

“I wonder,” said Darla.

“What?” they both said at once.

“I wonder if that threw him off his guard?”

Sean put his arm around her. “Of course it did, he planned to shoot us.”

Darla crossed her arms, “The robber's not the one trying to kill us!”

Sean took a step back. “Who then?”

She started to say something, then caught herself. “No, no, I can't tell you. You'd think I'd gone off my rocker or something.”

The clerk, who had been trying to open the door, turned back toward Darla. “Listen, lady, you off your rocker is better than most people on their rocker. My heart was beating up in my throat. I couldn't have said 'boo' to the robber if I wanted.”

Darla leaned into Sean. “I'm cold. Isn't there a way out of this?”

The clerk picked up a bottle from a soda display that faced the glass refrigerator door. “We could climb through the soft drink display.”

They took two-liter plastic soda bottles off the racks until they had enough space to climb through and out the glass door. The clerk

called 911 and within minutes a police car roared into the parking lot and parked in front of the double glass doors. Two officers, with guns drawn, approached the store. When they saw that the store's occupants didn't appear to be in danger, they holstered their guns and walked in. A female cop introduced herself as Officer Hall and a tall man introduced himself as Officer Grant. Hall pulled out a writing pad, and started asking questions. Sean and Darla explained their story, from the ATM to calling 911.

"But I think everything was planned in advance," added Darla at the end.

Hall looked up from her writing pad. "What do you mean, planned?"

"This whole episode. It's like the first part of a movie of the week or something. I think I put a stop to it before the plot had a chance to get off the ground."

"Say it again," said Hall, wrinkling her brow as if she didn't hear the first time.

"Everything that happened tonight -- it was a story being written -- by some scriptwriter or novelist or something. That's all."

Grant leaned over and whispered into Hall's ear. "Do we need to call the paramedics? Could be shock."

Hall turned to Sean, "Is she serious?"

Sean put an arm around Darla's shoulder and hugged her gently. "You've got to forgive her. She's a writer. You know, short stories. I think she means that this experience reminds her of a story."

Grant rubbed his chin. "Situations like this can do funny things to you."

Darla pulled away from Sean. "I knew you'd think I'd snapped, but I tell you I can just feel it. Someone's writing this story. But now he's really annoyed because I fouled up his plot. I can't be sure what he'll do next. He may decide to blow us all up or something -- to give the story an interesting turn. That's how writers work. They think they're God or something."

Sean forced a smile. "Let's just go home and forget about all of this."

Hall took Sean by the arm and turned him toward herself. "Are you sure you don't want us to get her a quick checkup at the hospital?"

"No, I'll take her home. She'll be alright."

Sean tried to put his arm around Darla's, but she jerked away and looked at him with disgust. "Don't humor me. I'm not an idiot."

With an earsplitting explosion, a shot burst through the front window sending slivers of glass flying all over the store. The bullet hit a soda display a geyser of cola fizzed up to the ceiling and onto the floor. Everyone scrambled behind the shelves at once. Sean, the

clerk, and Darla landed in one aisle and the officers in another.

"He didn't give up very easily," said Darla.

"The robber?" asked the store clerk.

Darla shook her head. "No. The writer. He sent the gunman back to finish off the job."

"Everyone stay down," barked Grant. He spoke into the walkie-talkie attached to his shoulder and called for reinforcements.

"How do you know it's the same guy?" asked the clerk.

"Authors don't like to have too many different people in one story. It confuses the reader."

Two more shots rang out, one whizzing through the already broken window and the other shattering the glass in the door.

"We've got to put a stop to this before someone gets hurt."

Darla raised her head up a little and shouted to the gunman. "Get out of here while you can. Reinforcements are on the way. You'll be killed for sure. Don't listen to the stupid author. He's just trying to make the story more interesting."

"Keep your wife down!" shouted Hall.

Sean reached up and pulled Darla back down to the floor.

"Leave me alone. I'm not going to be a party to any unnecessary killings." She struggled away from Sean, and shouted out the window again.

"Don't be crazy. Get out while you can!"

"They'll shoot me!" yelled the gunman.

"Officers, tell him you won't shoot him if he runs away."

"What? Are you crazy? We can't do that," said Grant.

"If it will save lives, would you do it?"

"Just keep down," demanded Hall.

Before Sean could stop her, Darla leapt up and stood in front of the shattered window.

"Run now! They won't shoot while I'm standing here! Run! Run!"

Officer Grant jumped up and grabbed Darla by her collar, jerking her to the floor. "What are you, crazy?"

"I'm not the crazy one!" said Darla pulling herself loose from his grip. "It's those who insist on having violence in every scene."

Grant held Darla onto the floor. "I'm going to put you in cuffs if you do anything like that again."

"Doesn't matter, he ran away. I saw him."

Two squad cars whipped around the corner and raced into the parking lot. After an eerie moment of silence the newly arrived officers shouted questions to one another. They couldn't find any sign of the shooter. Everyone in the store stood up and looked out the broken window.

"Which way did he run?" asked Grant.

"I think that way," pointed Hall.

"He went east!" shouted Grant. The officers in the parking lot jumped back into their squad cars and raced out into the street.

Officer Grant turned and looked directly at Darla. "Okay, I want to know what's going on here."

"I've figured it out. We're all part of some sort of story. I think it's a screenplay. I don't know. It may be a short story. Something in me snapped when I saw the man's gun in the car. I realized that it wasn't a real gun at all -- just a picture that the writer saw in a magazine. He used the picture to create the gun for the robber."

Sean tried to pull Darla away from the officers. "I really think we need to calm down and go home now."

"Let me finish. It's like being in a dream when you know you're dreaming but you can't wake up. I realized that the writer was manipulating our lives and I decided to put a stop to it. It's as easy as that."

Hall put her notepad under her arm. "Have you been drinking?"

"No, I haven't! Not much, anyway. One glass of wine -- but that was two hours ago. I'm telling you the truth. We're all made-up characters in this writer's mind."

"I don't feel made up," said the store clerk, pinching himself on the arm. "Ouch!"

"We're based on people the writer knows. A college buddy, maybe. A next-door neighbor. The janitor at his office."

Hall spoke into the mike on her left shoulder and requested an ambulance.

Officer Grant shook his head. "Wait 'til my wife hears this one."

"Do you really have a wife? What's her maiden name? Where was she born?"

"Of course I have a wife. Her maiden name was Rubesamen. She was born in Pennsylvania."

"What a stupid name! He's making up the facts as he goes along."

"I'm not making it up. That really was her maiden name!"

"I don't mean you. It's the writer. I can see him in my mind. He's looking at me through the words on his computer screen as he writes. He doesn't like me. He's upset that I've taken over his story."

Hall motioned to Sean. "Mister, you'd better go with your wife to the hospital. I think this was just too much for her."

Sean stood next to his wife. "Honey, we've had enough of this. Can you just calm down and think this through."

She smiled at him and patted him on the arm. "You just don't get it do you? Can't you understand that this jellyfish of a writer tried to kill us twice? Do you think we can trust him now? I don't care if I am made up, I don't want to die."

Sean put his arm around Darla's waist. "Everything will be clearer as soon as we get you to the hospital. See, the ambulance is pulling up now."

"Sure, I'll go to the hospital. It could be part of the plot. But then what are they going to do -- accidentally give me the wrong medicine and put me into a coma? Or, maybe they'll all turn out to be vampires or something? Who knows how crazy this writer is or what genre he's writing? He's manipulating us in his story as he sees fit. But not me! He'll not be *my* master!"

By now Officer Hall had talked to the paramedics. They came up behind Darla, and each grabbed her by an arm.

Sean pushed them away. "Wait a minute, let her go, I'll handle this."

"Go ahead," said one of the paramedics as they backed off.

"Listen, Honey. I know we've had a bad experience. But everything will be all right. I'll ride with you to the hospital, will that be okay? I think it wouldn't hurt to have a doctor take a look at you. It's okay. Our insurance covers emergencies like this."

"It won't make any difference. He'll think of some way to use it in the plot, I'm sure."

Sean led Darla out to the ambulance. A paramedic opened the door, and Sean helped her up. The other paramedic got into the front cab to drive.

"We just need you to lie down here while we take some vitals, okay? Your husband will be sitting right over there."

Darla allowed the paramedic to take her blood pressure, which was high, and her temperature, which was normal. The other paramedic radioed in the situation.

"We'll be at the hospital in five minutes," he said. The ambulance proceeded without lights and siren out of the parking lot and onto the street.

Sean sat next to Darla and held her hand. Darla reached up and loosened Sean's tie and unbuttoned the top button on his shirt. "Just relax. We'll get through this okay," she assured him. "I'm not the one who's crazy."

About halfway to the hospital the ambulance lunged to a sudden stop. Darla sat up and watched through the window between the cab and the compartment as someone opened the cab door and yanked the driver out of the cab. A tall black-haired man climbed into the driver's seat, slammed the door shut, and began driving.

“It’s him!”

The new driver opened the window between the cab and the medical compartment. He stuck a gun through the window and yelled. “This time I’ve got you for sure.”

Darla recognized the gun, the one from the advertisement. Without hesitating, she leapt past Sean and the paramedic, grabbed the barrel of the gun, and shoved it to one side. A deafening explosion shook the ambulance. The paramedic and Sean scrambled to the floor as the ambulance swerved wildly and jolted to a stop.

“Give it up! Give it up!” Darla yelled. She banged the gunman’s hand against the window rim and twisted the gun. Sean jumped up and also grabbed the gun. Together, they twisted it from the stranger’s hand.

“Now run, get out of here! You’re free. Get out of this story for good!”

The gunman looked through the window with wild eyes. Sean picked up the gun and pointed it at him.

“Don’t shoot him!” yelled Darla. “Go! Don’t come back!”

The gunman threw open the door to the ambulance and vanished. In a few seconds, the original driver’s head poked into the cab.

“You guys okay in there?”

“We’re okay. Just get us to the hospital on the double,” yelled the other paramedic.

This time the driver turned on his sirens and lights and didn’t stop for anything until he pulled into the hospital’s emergency entrance.

Darla sat agitated in the waiting room while Sean filled out an insurance form. After a long wait, a nurse led her to a room where all of her vital signs were taken again.

After another wait a short, balding doctor entered the room. “Hello, my name is Doctor Ludwig Schneider.” He spoke with heavy European accent and sported a small goat-tee.

Darla rolled her eyes. “Our writer didn’t waste any brain power coming up with you. Who are you supposed to be, Freud’s great grandson?”

“Yes, yes. Very interesting. I’d just like to ask you a few questions.”

“I don’t feel like it. It’s late. I just want to go to bed. I know that’ll probably ruin the scene, but I’m bushed. Anyone who writes stuff like this must think we all have inexhaustible energy. Not me. I’m going home, it’s two o’clock in the morning, and that’s it!”

“I really want to hear more of this . . . story. But, I can’t force you to stay here. Your vital signs are within limits. Perhaps resting

in your own house will be best for you right now. Then you'll see everything differently tomorrow." He pulled out a small white pad of paper and scribbled on it. "I can give you a sedative that will help you relax. If I release you now, can you come to my office tomorrow morning, say at eleven o'clock?"

"Do I really need to? I'm ready for this story to end."

"Just humor me a little?"

"Okay, but I've got to get some rest."

The doctor handed the prescription to Sean who studied it with interest. "Doctor, this medicine is covered under our prescription plan, isn't it?"

The next morning, after they parked the car, Sean and Darla took the elevator up to Dr. Schneider's office on the fifth floor, room 501. Sean gave the receptionist his insurance card, and signed in. They both sat down.

"I told you before," said Darla. "I'm not the one who's crazy. It's the writer."

Sean reached out for Darla's hand and gently squeezed it. "We'll just take things a little at a time."

While they waited, Sean browsed through an accounting journal he'd brought with him, and Darla looked through a tattered issue of *People Magazine*. When the door to the doctor's office opened they could hear a conversation between Doctor Schneider and one of his patients.

"I don't think you're losing your edge, Robert," said the doctor's voice. "These things just happen. Take a rest for a few days. Do something different. Your creativity will come back to you."

"It's like she was taking over," said the patient's voice. "I felt helpless. Out of control."

"I understand, but it's just your imagination running wild," said the doctor. "I've seen it before with writers. They become part of their own stories."

"It was like I was there fighting against her," said the patient. "I hated her at first. I thought she was insane. Then I imagined that she became real and attacked me and tore my story into pieces. That's why I brought it here to you today. What do I do with it, Doc? I'm almost scared of it now."

"There's nothing to be frightened of. Just take your manuscript home and put it on your desk. Let it rest for a while. After you've taken some time off, then see what you can do with it. I think you'll find you'll have a fresh new perspective."

The door opened fully and Dr. Schneider stepped out. A tall, thin man with black hair holding a stack of papers in his hands followed him out the door.

Darla stood to her feet immediately and pointed at the tall black-haired man.

"That's him!" she shouted. She grabbed the manuscript out of the man's hand, pulled off the top few pages and ripped them into small pieces.

The man jumped back from Darla and tumbled to the floor. "That's her!" he shouted.

Darla pulled more pages out of the manuscript and ripped them into pieces.

Dr. Schneider helped the man to his feet while Sean rushed to Darla's side.

The man gritted his teeth and stared at Darla. Darla stared back while Sean held her by the waist.

"You've ruined my story," shouted the man, pointing a finger at Darla's face.

Darla countered without wincing. "It's not your story, it's my story."

"Your story? Wait a minute; I created you for this story. You're Darla Longmeadow. Born Dallas Texas, 1981. A struggling writer who fantasizes that she's living her own stories."

"Your wrong, I created you. Richard Gallstone. Born St. Louis, 1976. Six foot-one, thin, black hair. A paranoid wimp without the guts to face reality."

"Now stop, both of you." Dr. Schneider spoke in a forceful voice. Darla, Sean and Richard looked at Dr. Schneider for a moment as their images faded away on the screen.

Dr. Schneider turned to an audience sitting in the darkened hotel convention room.

"As writers this is what you must avoid. Never let the characters take over your story. You must remain in control. You must know who they are, what their intentions are, and how they will eventually accomplish their quest. Keep the audience on the edge of their seats guessing about how the story will turn out until the very end. That is when you reveal what screenwriters sometimes call the 'obligatory scene' -- that scene where you've accomplished the quest and revealed the final truth. Once that is over its time to quickly wrap it any loose details and end the story."

Dr. Schneider glanced at his watch and then looked back into the audience. "I see we have a few more minutes left in this session. Are there any questions?"