

Charlene

Pete noticed the new waitress at the Waffle House as soon as he walked through the door. She was a slim young thing with just the prettiest face, black hair bunched up in back and hanging down in wavy locks along the sides. He slid into a booth and took his eyes off her just long enough to look around.

He liked this little place, some ways outside Paducah, and made it a habit to stop here on the way home from his frequent trips to the Georgia carpet warehouses. Big windows faced out on three sides, and the view downhill toward the interstate gave it an expansive, optimistic feeling. It was never crowded, even on bright mornings like this when mobs of people waited in rocking chairs on the porch of the Cracker Barrel just down the road. Today just a couple truckers warmed stools at the counter, some old farmer dozed at a table, and a couple of white-haired tourists filled a booth on the other side of the room. He exchanged greetings with the chunky older waitress, a battle-hardened pro named Paula. He recognized the Mexican cook, too, although he never saw more of him than his great head through the opening to the kitchen. A lanky teen-aged dishwasher, fiddling with a cell phone, swiveled on a stool. The pretty girl glided up to his booth. "Mornin'," she sang, "how you-all doin' today?"

Pete smiled. "I'm doing fine, just fine, thanks, and how about you --" he squinted at the name tag pinned to her shiny black waitress blouse "—Charlene?"

She cocked her head and seemed to think it over before voicing a little sigh. "Oh, I'm just fine and dandy. And what can I get for you today?" Every sound she made came out like music.

"I'll have coffee, for starters. Black."

Pete was in love. Again. He couldn't help it. But what was it with him and waitresses? His first wife had been a waitress. And there'd been others. People called him a womanizer, but Pete didn't like that. Because he genuinely liked women, all kinds of women. And when the woman was young and

lovely as Charlene here, with her shapely behind, and tight little cupcake breasts in the white bra that flashed when she bent to pour the coffee ... the man just couldn't stand it.

"You-all need a little time to look at the menu?"

"Just a little time," he agreed, although he knew what he wanted. He always ordered the short stack of wheat cakes with a couple eggs over easy and sausage patties. He needed the time to look at Charlene, that delicate chin, slightly pouty lips, perfect nose... Below one eye, the makeup failed to hide a fading bruise.

He stared at the mark, his blood racing, and the girl noticed. She started to turn away, but looked back down at him with her jaw clenched, and her dark brown eyes flashed defiantly. He looked down at his coffee, shaking his head sadly.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

She sighed her little musical tone, but stood where she was, fidgeting with the order pad.

Pete glanced up at her and almost whispered, "You don't deserve that. You deserve better than that."

Charlene tossed her head, turning to look back toward Paula at the counter, then took a deep breath that caught and came near to a sob. To Pete's surprise she collapsed suddenly into the seat across from him. Elbows on the table, she covered her face with her slim fingers. One of them, Pete noticed, wore the rings of a married woman. His heart ached, and he longed to reach out and take her hands in his, to kiss the tears away from her bruised, beautiful eyes.

Pete was a hell of a salesman, anyone could tell you. He believed what he'd been taught early on in this business – that you always sell yourself first. And he *did* sell himself with some success, in his suburban Chicago territory, and sometimes on these business trips. Of course last night was a "no sale" night, those college girls in the bar in Nashville just too young and silly to sit still and listen to a guy like Pete. But Charlene, here, this beauty, she'd listen.

She was too good for this miserable life, he told her, that was plain as day.

Charlene could only agree. She *was* miserable, it was a fact. Her man didn't appreciate her, didn't treat her right. She was *this close* to walking out on him, and the place she pointed to on the Formica table was right close to Pete's pounding heart.

Pete made his pitch. She deserved so much better! Pete understood women, recognized the frustration and anger and helplessness Charlene must feel at the hands of some - *animal*. She needed to get out. Come on up to Chicago, where she could find a better life for herself.

"There a lot of jobs up there now?" she sniffed.

Pete nodded, "Sure, there's always lots of restaurant jobs, but in a city like that, you can set your goals higher, you know, you can do anything you like! A girl like you! Anything's possible!"

She smiled shyly at that, leaned closer over the table to whisper, "I *could* do anything, in a city like that, couldn't I?"

"Don't listen to him!" Paula yelled from behind the counter. "Din't you ever hear the one about the traveling salesman?"

Charlene looked up, confused. "No?"

"Well, you're sitting with him right now!" Paula cackled. Then she got a serious look. "Don't you listen to Mr. Big City, here. He ain't nothin' but trouble!"

Pete took a chance and patted her arm reassuringly. "I'll get you *out of* trouble, if that's what you want."

"Speakin' of trouble..." Paula called out.

A car had pulled up in the parking lot. Charlene slumped with a barely audible moan. They watched a woman's broad back at a rear door, and in a minute she lurched into the restaurant with a baby in a car seat on her hip.

This was the happiest, brightest little baby Pete had ever seen, pink and blonde with his blue eyes wide to the world, and his little hands and feet just trembling with excitement over everything. Tough old Paula turned to jelly; she held out her arms for the kid, squealing “Timmy!” with delight. The stone-faced woman unbuckled him and handed the kid over, then marched right up to Pete’s table. Charlene stood up to face her.

“Thet boy, I swear, he sleeps like a stone soon’s you put him in the car! But stop for a traffic light and he’s wide awake, wigglin’, and makin’ mischief.”

“Is he okay? Hasn’t he been good?” Charlene asked, and strode over to pull him away from Paula. The cook beamed and said something in Spanish, while the dishwasher got up and started making comical faces. The baby would stare and smile at him until it was just overwhelmed, and he’d have to turn away. Everybody in the place was smiling and oohing and talking about the baby. Pete couldn’t get over him either, really, but he couldn’t help but feel sad. He could see that the little game with Charlene was over.

Standing, bouncing the little boy in his ducky pajamas, Charlene looked back over at Pete and smiled ruefully before turning away. “Here, you go, Bobby,” she said, handing him to the dishwasher. “You mind holding him a while?”

The teenager scooped him up like he was used to handling little kids. “Mind?” he said. “I’m-a take him with me to pick up some girls!” He waltzed away to show the baby to the customers, though there wasn’t a girl among them.

Charlene shuffled back over to the table, where the thick older woman stood impatiently. “I’ve got to go pick up Harold at the garage in Morley. So you’ll have to deal with Timmy your own self.”

Jingling her keys, she stomped out the door. Charlene looked apologetically at Pete. “Oh, my gosh! Did I never take your order?”

His drawn-out recitation of the menu still called for a short stack with eggs and sausage patties. Pete got up then and headed for the men's room. The dishwasher was parading Timmy around the restaurant for every new customer. "I believe I could get some big tips by introducing this little guy to folks!" he confided. Pete rarely thought about it, but he liked kids, and every once in a while, like now, he'd feel a pang of regret that he'd never had any of his own. Not that the Panopolis name was in any danger of dying out, what with all his brothers' kids. But still... He studied his face in the water-spotted mirror. He'd made his choices. Things don't always pan out. But sooner or later you run out of time. He combed his thinning hair over the bald spot and struck a pose with raised chin turned a bit to the left.

Pete had thought he was hungry, but when Charlene swooped down on the booth with his breakfast he pretty much ignored the food. He nibbled at the meat and pushed the eggs around his plate absently while Charlene waited on the other tables. Only Bobby's antics with the little boy could draw his attention from the waitress. She whisked by his table, so near he felt the breeze of her passing. He knew she could feel his eyes on her like the lightest caress, like a butterfly kiss.

"Is there something wrong with the food?" she wondered.

"Oh, no," he said, "it's delicious." And he took a dry forkful of the pancakes to prove it.

Some time later she stopped at the table and just stood there with a hand on her hip, the question in her raised eyebrows.

Pete laughed, "No, I'm sorry, but I guess I've lost my appetite." He leaned back against the cushion in surrender.

Shaking her head, Charlene cleared the plates from his table. Returning, she refilled his coffee cup and sat down across from him again. She made a little duck-face, hummed a note, and gave him a sad smile.

He gestured toward the parking lot. "Was that your mother-in-law, with the baby?" He knew that pig-nosed woman could never have given birth to a pretty thing like Charlene.

“Yep. She’s a piece of work.”

“Well, at least you’ve got somebody to watch Timmy -- while you’re at work, or ... if you should go somewhere...”

Charlene nodded, and gave him a level look. “Snakes,” she said. “They’s all snakes, the whole fambly.” Bobby playing peek-a-boo brought a delighted giggle from the baby. “I’d as soon see him with total strangers than to have those people bringing up my boy.”

She stared out the window for a while towards the interstate where sunlight gleamed off passing cars.

“Go ‘head and take your break,” Paula said walking by with a tray. “It’ll be emptyin’ out now.” Charlene stood and, out of habit, filled Pete’s cup. Then she walked over to Bobby, gathered up the baby and hugged him warmly before buckling him back in the car seat. Lugging it by the handle, she cast a faint smile back at Pete and made a little sound before disappearing through the back door.

Pete sagged inside like the place had lost air pressure. His coffee chilled as he daydreamed Charlene – such a delicate face, such sweet music her voice! With moist eyes at last he roused himself and knew it was time to go. He slugged down the cold brew and, leaving a ten dollar bill on the table, paid Paula at the register. “You-all have a safe ride back to Chicago, now,” she said.

Bobby came around from the kitchen. “Thet your Suburban, there, Mister?”

“Yeah.”

“Mighty nice. I like them knobby tires you got on there. Those ain’t stock tires are they?”

“Uh, no. I like to get ‘em oversized. They’re good for off-road and in the snow – just a little noisy on the highway.”

“I’ll just bet they are!”

He was well across the Illinois border when all that coffee had run through him and he decided to stop at the Rest Area near Mattoon. He turned the car off and was just listening to the end of a Tom

Petty song on the radio, when he heard a little catlike noise. Curious, and a little cautious, he opened the back doors, peering among the piles of carpet samples stacked there. Pulling aside a thick album of plush synthetics, he found the smiling pink face and bright blue eyes of Charlene's baby boy.