

WHEN THE SIREN CRIES

TOM BARRY

Copyright © Tom Barry 2014

First Edition

Tom Barry has asserted their moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work. This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All Rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the copyright holder, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Published in 2014 by FeedARead.com Publishing

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

WHEN THE SIREN CRIES

First published as a student, Tom Barry spent twenty years as an equity partner in an international management consultancy Firm. His debut full-length novel was the critically acclaimed *When the Siren Calls*. Married with three children, he lives in London and San Diego, the setting for this story. Contact him at

www.tombarrywrites.com

TO

The wonderful people of Coronado, San Diego, my home from home. If there is a better place on earth for a writer to live and work, I have yet to find it.

Chapter One

In a line of a thousand lights a single beam blinded Isobel. Strong knuckles rapped the glass. A flashlight raked her body. Through the rain-spattered window she could see a face shrouded in a drenched hood, features blurred and distorted by the deluge. She ran her fingers along the upholstery left and right, hunting for a button in the unfamiliar surroundings. The knock came a second time, the sound against the window sharper now. She felt the ribbed contours of a switch and jabbed down. The light returned to her face and again she shielded her eyes against the penetrating brightness.

“Is this your vehicle, ma’am?” The man spoke in a southern drawl, respectful yet authoritative.

“I’m sorry,” said Isobel, “can I help you?”

The man threw back his hood to reveal a blue cap with a silver badge that drew her eye like a lightning bolt.

“I asked if this is your vehicle, ma’am,” he repeated, lowering the flashlight and leaning in closer. She could feel the heat of his breath against her face, sense the probing intensity of his gaze.

“Yes,” she said, raising her voice to be heard, recoiling from him as a sheet of rain swept in, carried by the gusting wind.

The man lifted his cape to offer some protection. “You own this vehicle?”

“It belongs to a friend of mine. I’m just using it.”

“So it’s not your vehicle?” he asked, the courtesy in his voice now laced with impatience.

“No, it’s a friend’s.” Her heart rate quickened. “That’s not a problem, is it, officer?”

He didn’t respond, his lips twitching slightly as Isobel glanced away. Her truck no longer sat bumper to bumper with the car in front. Ahead of her, taillights were creeping toward the row of gates in the distance. On the other side of the freeway headlights accelerated past as the road widened, welcoming those heading into the sprawling chaos of Tijuana, and beyond.

A horn behind gave a single but penetrating beep and Isobel watched the policeman’s face shift from calm control to irritation.

“Stay where you are, ma’am. Don’t move the vehicle,” he commanded, striding through the rain to the car behind, the elements

mirrored in his face. Isobel shook her head in confusion. What on earth could he want? Why, out of an endless line of traffic waiting to cross back into the US, had her car been singled out?

Despite knowing she had done nothing wrong—four hours had passed since she sipped a single glass of wine—Isobel started to tremble. She touched her skin, half-expecting to feel a tremor pulsating to the surface. Instead, her fingertips skimmed goose bumps and she tugged her light cardigan closer around her. She pulled down the visor and glanced at her reflection, as though her unease might, somehow, be visible in the mirror.

When the man returned he walked into the space to the front of the pickup, seemingly oblivious to the lashing rain. Isobel watched as he began a methodical examination of the truck, prowling twice around it before dipping to the ground. Isobel craned her head out of the window as he disappeared from view. One brown boot flicked at the pooling water as the man crouched down on his knee, his trousers plastered to his legs by the ever-falling rain. The leg in view lay still for more than ten seconds. Was he looking for something or examining something? Isobel felt sure he would not find a single fault; she knew that Ryan fussed over what he drove and the image it projected. In Hollywood, style outranked substance every time.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked as he finally stood up and returned to her window. Again, he did not answer, instead directing her attention to the area behind her seat.

“What do you have hidden under those blankets?”

She was getting tired of this. “Nothing is hidden under those blankets, or anywhere else,” she said, trying to control her tone. “They’re protecting some artwork. If you’ve quite finished, can I please go now?”

She immediately regretted her irritable reply. He leaned closer, almost through the window, and smiled at her, a thin drawing of the lips and narrowing of the eyes that told her she wasn’t going anywhere.

“What I need you to do now, ma’am, is to pull out of this line and take your vehicle over to the area on the left.” He jerked a thumb at an ugly grey box of a building and turned to leave.

“Whatever for?”

“Just take your vehicle and park under the canopy, ma’am, and stay inside until you are told you can go. Right over there,” he said, pointing, “and wait behind the white SUV.”

As Isobel inched forward she could see three uniformed men and a dog scurrying around the SUV. Whoever had been in the vehicle had been taken elsewhere and what had begun as a search quickly turned into disassembly. Car parts, upholstery, and hubcaps littered the ground like a salvage yard. One man busied himself with systematically kicking a wheel. His two colleagues struggled to haul a suitcase the size of a wardrobe out of the back.

Isobel brought the Chevy truck to a halt, and a similarly uniformed figure dashed out of the building. The stiffness across Isobel's shoulders eased as, silhouetted against the arc lights, she saw the curves of a female figure and the gentle swish of an ash-blond ponytail beneath a cap. The officer bounded forward as if time was her enemy, taking long, ungainly strides.

"Mrs. Roberts," she said. The softness of her voice, more feminine than her gait, took Isobel by surprise. "If you could step out and follow me, please."

Mrs. Roberts? How does she know my name?

The officer left Isobel no time to dwell on her thought.

"Leave everything behind in the vehicle."

"But my handbag and –"

"Leave everything behind and follow me, please, ma'am."

Isobel pushed her shoulder against the heavy door and stepped out rear first. She tentatively extended a leg onto the glimmering chrome of the running board. Tall and slender with raven hair that cascaded over her shoulders, she cut an unlikely figure descending from the heights of the high-axle super-Chevy. Only the lines that had begun to etch themselves in the corner of her soft blue eyes betrayed the passing years. She glanced self-consciously toward the SUV, her gaze drawn first to the green Mexico City license plate. The search team had paused from their labours, their stares going beyond professional curiosity. Three pairs of eyes sized her up, lingering on the outline of her figure. She made the final jump down, wishing she had a shapeless cloak to wrap around her. The female officer stood waiting with arms folded like a praetorian guard. The moment Isobel's feet hit the concrete, the woman turned and set off toward the building; each booted step splattered Isobel's white jeans with a mist of red-brown water, dyed with earthy dust. Isobel broke her stride, falling two steps behind as she picked her way around the puddles in her pink Prada loafers.

Puzzlement turned to foreboding as Isobel sought to make sense of

what was going on. How many cars did they pull out of the never-ending stream that went across the Mexican border? One in a thousand? One in five thousand? In any event, on this wretched wet night, as far as she could tell, only her vehicle and the SUV had been singled out.

The officer had halted by the door, waiting for Isobel to catch up. When she finally did, carefully skirting the muddy quagmire that a hundred pairs of feet had churned in the wake near the door, she gave a final glance back at the Chevy. A border guard had already climbed into the cab. A shiver ran through her and she hastily followed the woman inside.

The scent of rain and dust gave way to an overpowering dullness as the woman directed her into a bleak white-walled room, made more garish by the fluorescent lighting. Isobel took a seat as instructed, her clothes squeaking against the plastic as she rocked slightly, desperately needing the bathroom but unwilling to prolong this ordeal a second longer than necessary.

Her surroundings had the imposed calm of a school examination room and the sterility of a medical chamber. Silvery black one-way mirrors gleamed from the far wall. The signs around her offered no comfort, displaying warnings about draconian penalties for drug smugglers and gunrunners. The only other occupants, two unshaven and sullen-looking Hispanic men, one short and wiry, the other marked with an angry pink scar across his cheek, were staring at their laps, occasionally exchanging a few muttered words of Spanish. She watched them, guessing they must be from the SUV, but quickly adjusted her gaze to the floor as the short one looked up at her, a leer crossing his face. Isobel shrunk down in her chair, her eyes fixed on her shoes, their soft canvas turning cold and brown from the muddy water. She wanted to call Ryan, to hear his voice. She needed to hear him tell her that she had nothing to worry about. After all, she reassured herself, they had detained the vehicle, not her.

A message on one wall showed an image of a mobile phone marked with a red cross, with the ubiquitous bilingual message underneath. Isobel gritted her teeth. She had left her phone in her bag, and that was in the pickup, or perhaps now somewhere else, being analyzed, with her call and contact data uploaded to some computer beyond the one-way mirrors. She pressed two fingers to the pulse in her temple, aware that her imagination might be running away with her, and that in five minutes she would be on the road again and shortly thereafter back in the bosom of the USA, home of the free.

The entrance door opened and the sounds of racing traffic, desperate to put distance between itself and the border, rushed in. One of the uniformed men from earlier swept through clutching a brown envelope with some indistinct red ink stamped across its face. As the door swung closed, Isobel briefly caught sight of Ryan's pickup suspended eight feet above the ground. She allowed herself a sigh of relief. At least it was still in one piece, unlike the SUV. But the breath caught in her throat as the ponytailed officer met the man halfway across the room. Hushed words passed between them and the woman glanced at Isobel as she took the package.

Fifteen minutes ticked by and Isobel's unease grew with each passing second. She rose from her seat, still horribly in need of the bathroom, and began pacing back and forth from the mirrored wall, careful to keep to her side of the room, away from the two desperadoes. They sat now with heads hung low above their knees, looking like men who would surely not be seeing home anytime soon. Just as Isobel expected her bladder to burst, the female officer re-emerged through the door.

"This way, Mrs. Roberts," she instructed, gripping Isobel by the elbow and steering her back towards the door marked 'Authorised Personnel Only'. Isobel looked past her at the two Mexicans whose empty eyes now followed her. Whatever her misdemeanor, it had been enough to jump the line ahead of her hapless fellow detainees.

"Excuse me," she said, "but I need the bathroom...I mean the restroom."

The woman hesitated, stony professionalism written into each line on her face. "We don't normally allow that, and you'd be better to wait till you've been seen."

"I'm sorry, I need to use the bathroom now. I've been driving three hours and waiting here for the last thirty minutes."

"I'll have to accompany you, ma'am, unless you can wait till you've been interviewed," said the woman, her voice like ice.

Isobel hesitated. "I do need to go."

"Then this way," said the officer, changing direction with almost military precision, the last remnants of patience and politeness long gone from her voice.

The cubicle looked like no bathroom Isobel had ever been inside. Twice the size of a facility for the disabled, the room contained nothing more than a low-slung aluminium toilet with no seat, and a white ceramic

basin. It lacked a cistern and a red light blinked from a white ball in the top right-hand corner of the room. The door had no lock, and the woman in uniform stayed fixed beneath the frame. Now realising exactly what “accompanied” meant, Isobel hesitated, her fingers on the buckle of her belt. The woman held Isobel’s look, her face devoid of embarrassment or compassion. Isobel reddened, looked up at the blinking corner light, loosened her belt and tugged out her shirt. She forced her clinging jeans below her knees, protecting her modesty with her blouse, and squatted. She winced at the sound and willed the moment over, focusing her gaze on the boots of her unwelcome companion and the spotless tiles on the floor.

With as much dignity as she could collect, Isobel re-adjusted her clothing. The woman moved forward, easing past her with a cursory “Excuse me, ma’am” and looking down to inspect the contents of the bowl. Isobel had read about cross-border mules hiding the contraband inside their bodies, swallowing it in condoms or stuffing it up inside themselves. She wrinkled her nose at the thought, but thirty minutes in the holding area had been more than enough time to absorb the signs around the room—she had clearly fallen into the custody of people whose interests went far beyond her duty-free allowance. She rinsed her hands. The woman pulled a brown paper sheet from a metal dispenser and offered it to her.

“Thank you,” said Isobel with sincerity, as much for the towel as for the concession of being allowed to empty her bladder.

The officer led her back along the corridor to an inconspicuous white door with aluminium kicking plates running along the bottom. Inside sat a simple desk-sized table and two metal chairs. If a bare, low-hanging light bulb had hung from the ceiling it would have looked just like the movies.

“Take a seat please, Mrs. Roberts,” said the woman. She dragged out the chair, the screeching against the floor grating on Isobel’s frayed nerves.

Isobel had barely sat down when the door re-opened, pushed so hard the handle clanged against the wall. A man entered. A shield-shaped badge bearing the letters “SDPD”—Isobel assumed they stood for “San Diego Police Department”—hung from the breast pocket of his dull grey suit. He didn’t offer his hand or any form of greeting but swung the chair opposite around and straddled it, resting his arms across the back. His pronounced forehead and jutting chin gave him a tough-guy look. Isobel could smell his musty aftershave.

“Mrs. Roberts, I’m Detective Dan Burnham. You know why we asked you in here?”

“I don’t remember any ‘asking’,” said Isobel, determined to show her mettle. “And I have no idea why I’m here.” Burnham pulled out the now-familiar stuffed brown envelope from somewhere inside his jacket. As he did so she caught a chilling glimpse of the black butt of a firearm nestled in a shoulder holster. He stuck two fingers inside the envelope and fished out a passport. As he flicked the pages like a deck of playing cards, Isobel noticed his well-groomed nails, so like those of a husband she never expected to see again.

“I see you’re a frequent traveller, Mrs. Roberts. And not just to the United States—Europe, Southeast Asia, India, and now Mexico. So you’re familiar with cross-border regulations.” He tapped the passport on the desk. “How many times have you visited Mexico?”

“I really couldn’t say,” said Isobel, wary of saying anything concrete. “I first visited as a student.”

“Let’s stick to the last six months. How many times have you visited Mexico since you last entered the US?”

The directness of the question unsettled Isobel and she shuffled her feet, crossing and uncrossing her ankles. “Three. This is my third visit.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“I’m just a tourist.”

“So I gather from your visa. What about the merchandise in the pickup?”

“What merchandise?” asked Isobel, her exterior confidence beginning to crumble.

“The pictures” he said, leaning a little closer, drumming his fingers on the chair. “Did you go to Mexico to buy or to sell?”

“The *paintings* are my own watercolors—it’s how I spend most of my free time. And I didn’t take them to buy or sell. I visited an exhibition in Rosario to show them.” She found herself watching his fingers again, rhythmically rising and falling against the back of the chair.

“And you only visited Rosario during your time in Mexico?”

“Yes,” she said, lifting her eyes to meet his, confident in her answer.

“You never stopped off in TJ? You just drove right by?”

Isobel shifted slightly in the chair, worried that Burnham wanted to trip her up with his questions and well aware of Tijuana’s reputation for drug-fuelled debauchery. She hesitated before answering. “I just stopped

once. I needed petrol—I mean gas.”

“And you remained with the vehicle all the time? No one could have interfered with it any time without your knowledge?”

“I had a sandwich and a coffee, but I know I locked the truck.”

“You’re sure of that?” he asked, his tone suggesting that she shouldn’t be. His persistence caused Isobel to doubt herself but she answered with certainty, traces of indignation in her voice.

“Yes. I wouldn’t have left the paintings or my overnight bag without checking the doors. And,” she threw in, meeting his eyes with force, “I was in Tijuana, after all.”

Burnham returned to flicking back and forth through the passport, eventually laying it down on the table. He fixed his gaze on her, pinching his chin as if contemplating his next line of attack. “And when you go south, do you always travel in the pickup?”

“No, I only borrowed it because I needed something with more luggage space for the paintings.” She hesitated again, unwilling to provoke further questions. “And my rental car isn’t insured to cross the border.”

“So whose vehicle is it?”

Isobel could feel sweat on the palms of her hands. “I’m sure you’ve already checked all that out while you’ve been keeping me waiting.”

Burnham raised his eyebrows, pausing before continuing. “I’d like to hear it from you, if I may.”

“It belongs to a friend of mine, Ryan Stamp.”

“A friend?” repeated Burnham, his eyes looking at Isobel’s hands as she glanced at the skin where her wedding ring had been for the last fifteen years. “How long have you known Mr. Stamp?”

“Not that long,” said Isobel, feeling some guilt at the speed with which loneliness had caused her to allow her lover into her bed and her life.

“But long enough for him to trust you to take his vehicle, alone, into Mexico, and for you to trust him that doing that carried no risks?” His brow was furrowing with incredulity and Isobel sensed the hint of a sneer in his voice as he twiddled the heavy gold band on his ring finger.

“I’ve known him for six weeks,” said Isobel, raising herself up in her chair. “I think that’s long enough to trust someone, unless you’re in the business of not trusting people.”

Isobel thought, just briefly, that she detected a hint of a smile. “Mrs. Roberts, it might be good to remember that you’re in a room like this

for the first time. I've spent a career interviewing people across tables." Burnham's tone carried no overt threat but nor did it need to; his words said it all.

"Please," said Isobel, abandoning her last vestige of courage and barely holding back tears, "can you tell me what this is about? I've done nothing wrong, and I'm just returning back from an overnight stay in Rosario."

Burnham picked up the brown bag and pulled out a cellophane pouch. Isobel's eyes widened in shock. She knew instinctively the sachet carried something you couldn't buy over the counter from a tobacconist; she'd seen enough marijuana in her university days to know only too well what he dangled from his fingers.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

Isobel shook her head. "I've never seen that before. And I don't use it."

"So you do know what it is," he said, with the triumph of a poker player laying out a full house.

"I can guess, but only because it is in a plastic bag and you're holding it in front of my face."

"The dog sniffed this out in the back of the pickup." He paused, and the pressure of the silence ate into her, but she did not break it.

Thoughts ran through her mind like stampeding horses. "So, if it is not yours, then presumably it belongs to your friend?"

"I don't know who it belongs to." Isobel glanced up at the white clock with its severe, practical black hands. It seemed like her only connection with reality.

"But it is you, Mrs. Roberts, who have been found bringing it across the border into the US. In a vehicle owned by a man you trust." Burnham raked his fingers through his hair as he studied her. "Ferrying narcotics across the border is a serious offence. To claim ignorance of the drug in the vehicle is no defence. You are responsible for the pickup and its contents."

"I don't know anything about it," she said, afraid to somehow incriminate herself with each further truth. Burnham rose languidly from his chair. He came around to her side of the desk.

"Stand up, Mrs. Roberts, please." Isobel could feel her legs wobble and she gripped the edge of the table as she rose. "Though cross-border trafficking is serious, this is a small amount of a class-B drug. If you admit that it's yours, for your own personal use, then I can release you now with a

verbal caution. You will not be placed in a holding cell, and there will be no need for a full body search or anything like that.” He looked across at the female officer, as if a glance to another woman indicated just how invasive that search would be. “But if you continue to deny knowledge, then I can offer you no guarantees.” He held the sachet before her. “I ask you again, Mrs. Roberts, is this yours?” Isobel looked at Burnham, and then to the silent policewoman, despair and desperation holding her like a vice. “For the last time, Mrs. Roberts, is this yours?”

Isobel hung her head. “No,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “It’s not mine. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Please take a seat, Mrs. Roberts,” said Burnham. “I’ll be back shortly.”

Isobel slumped into the chair as the blood seeped from her face. Visions of a hand sheathed in a surgical glove invading her most intimate parts flashed before her eyes.

Her wait lasted no more than a minute. Burnham returned with a pen and paper in his hand. “Mrs. Roberts, you’re free to go. I just need you to sign this form and I’ll be able to release your passport and the articles in the envelope, and you can be on your way without delay.”

“I don’t understand,” said Isobel weakly, looking from Burnham to the officer and back again.

“Unfortunately, Mrs. Roberts, once my officers found an illegal substance in your vehicle, regulations required that we follow standard procedure. The patrolman pulled your vehicle over on a routine random check. The amount of the drug discovered is below the serious felony threshold.” He delivered his explanation like a speaking clock, precise but emotionless. “I apologise if this has been an unpleasant experience but everyone you have encountered this evening has only been doing their job, working to make our borders secure and enforcing the laws of the United States.”

He paused and Isobel sank a little further into the chair, confusion stemming all other emotion. “Now, if you can please sign this form, you can continue on home. You will find the contents of the vehicle just as you left them, minus one sachet of—let’s call it ‘English breakfast tea’—that has been confiscated.”

Isobel only glanced at the form. She took the pen and attempted a signature, unable to disguise the shaking in her hand. She tightened her hold and tried to scrawl but the trembling would not stop. She looked up at

Burnham with pleading eyes.

“Just take a deep breath, Mrs. Roberts, and sign.”

Chapter Two

The twelve-mile journey back to Coronado should have been straightforward but it had taken ninety minutes. The trip had started without promise. Isobel had torn a fingernail as she fumbled with the key in the ignition. It had broken and split down to the cuticle and it had taken all her resolve to hold back the tears and drive.

Clenching the steering wheel, she had crossed over to San Diego County and into the thriving town of San Ysidro, where English was rarely spoken. A first and last port of call for cross-border travellers, by day the streets buzzed with Mexican day-trippers filling shopping bags with US branded clothing. Now the malls stood closed and the pavements empty.

The fear from her interview had given way to nausea that, in turn, became simmering anger. As darkness set in, only the neon lights of San Ysidro shouted out to the passing motorists, flashing by in an annoying blur of red and green. The blue interstate sign marked “North” jumped out at her as she drew level with it, and she jerked the wheel down to the right, only to find she had taken the wrong freeway.

She followed the signs for San Diego, using her instincts to correct her mistake, to eventually find herself headed into downtown, having half-circled the city. Her upper body stiffening yet further from the tension, she again cursed her own misjudgement in agreeing to Ryan’s suggestion of using his pickup.

The dashboard clock showed ten when Isobel turned onto the Coronado Bay Bridge. As she reached the brow she could still make out the red turrets of the Hotel del Coronado, San Diego County’s most iconic landmark. It presented a castle-like profile against the grey sky, belonging more to the Swiss Alps than the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

A look to the left offered an uninterrupted view down to Tijuana, a fluorescent spectacle in the distance. But Isobel’s focus stayed straight ahead, her only distraction the frequent blue suicide counselling signs with their toll-free number for those intending to make the bridge their final stop.

Monday night, much like every night in Coronado, offered little for serious night owls. Only the Irish-style pub favoured by the Navy SEALs gave signs of merriment. Those looking to party had already made their getaway, either over the bridge or, if they preferred hard action, down

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

