

Robert Young is a master at a certain type of story that blends speculative and starkly realistic fiction, for example the grim tale below concerning a man who listens to commands and does unpleasant things...

PRNDLL

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Pick up girl!

The command shocked Keller. It had been uttered in a guttural voice whose seeming source was his own mind. He had just got on NYS 90 and was heading home after a Saturday stint at the office. His dashboard clock registered 5:23 P.M.

He saw how white his knuckles had become, and he forced himself to relax his grip on the wheel. Instantly his hands began to tremble. He became aware of a faint buzzing in his ears. Beyond the hood of his Caprice the throughway unrolled into pale-gold distances beneath a pale-blue October sky, late-afternoon traffic flowing smoothly on either side of the attenuated island of the mall.

Pick up girl!

This time, the command was followed by pain — a blinding pain that exploded in Keller's mind like a fragmentation grenade made of crimson glass, then diminished to red mist. He nearly lost control of the Caprice.

Gradually the mist dispersed. He heard the voice again: *That was sample of what you get if you disobey!*

"Who are you?" Keller whispered.

No answer.

Instinctively he took the next exit. It brought him into one of the southern arteries of the city, where he joined the in-going traffic flow. He wondered desperately if he'd gone insane.

Why you not find girl yet?

Give me a chance, Keller pleaded. This is a bad time of day. Later on—

Later on will not do! Must have girl now! Remember pain?

Keller shuddered. *I'll do my best. But picking up a girl isn't all that easy.*

Who you think you fool? You chaser. Picking up girls your specialty. Why you think I choose you?

Keller sighed. *I said I'll do my best.*

You better. And you better get good girl too. Virgin, if possible.

Keller concentrated on his driving. Maybe if he kept his mind occupied, the voice would go away. Meanwhile, he would look for a girl. He didn't dare not to.

He had been passing through a middle-class residential area. Now, as he grew closer to the city's core, the houses gradually gave way to business places. There were numerous bars. When he spotted one that looked less inauspicious than the others, he parked and went inside. He drew a blank. Outside again in the slanting October sunshine, he looked up and down the street. Late shoppers were climbing in and out of cars, going in and out of delicatessens and grocery stores. Buying booze, mostly. Sixpacks for tomorrow's Buffalo Bills game. He felt terribly, horribly alone. Back behind the wheel of his Caprice, he rejoined the traffic flow and stayed with it till he spotted another bar that might conceivably contain an unescorted clean-cut American girl with a still intact hymen. He parked and went inside. A couple of Saturday-afternoon drunks were playing pool, a tired-looking man in a business suit was reading the afternoon paper, and a pair of middle-aged housewives were sipping screwdrivers. The barmaid was fairly attractive and reasonably young, but she gave Keller a stony stare over the whiskey and water she brought him, and he knew that propositioning her would be a waste of time.

Back behind the wheel of his Caprice, back in the traffic flow, sunlight ricocheting from the burnished hood into his eyes, he asked, *What happens can't find a girl?*

For answer, he received a second sample of the red pain. But it was much milder than the first, and, moreover, the two whiskies he'd drunk had lent him a courage of sorts. *What's your name?* he demanded.

A pause. Then, *P R N D L L*.

That's not a name. You read it off the automatic shift.

It will do.

Who are you? What are you? No answer.

Whatever it was, whoever it was, it could see through his eyes and could read his thoughts. At least it could read his thoughts when they were mentally expressed in words. But could it do so if they weren't? Keller wondered. If he were to think the way he did most of the time, in series of images rather than in words, would he be able to preserve his intellectual privacy?

To find out, he visualized himself ignoring a bevy of available girls, U-turning the Caprice, returning to NYS 90 and resuming his journey home. Then he waited.

No reaction.

Apparently PRNDLL's powers were limited.

Keller was about to try another bar when out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a green Mustang standing next to the curb with its hood raised and a tawny-haired girl leaning over its exposed engine. The shot was a long one, but he had to play it. He backed into the first empty parking space he came to, forced himself to sit perfectly still till a quantity of his aplomb returned, then got out of the Caprice and walked back. The Mustang was still there, and so was the girl.

Keller dressed just behind the times. He did this deliberately, knowing that were he to keep abreast of them they would betray him. Today he had on a white turtleneck, a maroon blazer, gray-checked flare-slacks and black buckle-strap boots. The combo lent the exact effect he wanted: that of a seasoned man of the world, almost but not quite past his prime, plainly confident enough of his prowess to disdain catering to the calculated vicissitudes of fashion. He did not wear a hat; he never did. His hairline, although it had receded, was still lower than some men's half his age, and what few gray hairs he had contributed rather than detracted from his image.

The girl half turned, looked up at him. Blue eyes went well with the long tawny hair. Her face was rather thin. Nice upper lip, though, and a mouth that was neither too wide nor too babyish. Trim waist. Nice legs. No wedding band as far as he could see. She was wearing a medium-short green skirt, a yellow pullover and brown kick boots.

"I turn the key and nothing happens," she said.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll take a look."

He checked the battery terminals, found both clamps to be tight. The battery was a new one, but he checked the cells to make sure. The water level was down, but not enough to matter. Finally he checked the tension of the alternator belt. The give was about half the length of his thumbnail. He straightened. "It's probably your starter solenoid," he said.

"Can you fix it?"

"Not without the part. Probably not with it, either. You need a mechanic, and mechanics have a thing about working weekends. Do you live around here?"

She shook her head.

He hadn't thought she did. "There're two things you can do," he continued smoothly. "You can climb in my car, and we can start visiting service stations on the 1000-to-1 shot we'll find one operated by a competent mechanic who has the part in stock and who'll be willing to leave his place of business long enough to do a repair job. Or you can lock up your car, leave it here till Monday morning and let me drive you home."

She looked at him, at his eyes mostly; then she looked at the engine. Finally she looked at him again. "I live about forty miles from here — just this side of North Falls. How far would that be out of your way?"

"Not far," he lied.

She looked once more at the Mustang's engine. Then she slammed down the hood, got her purse out of the front seat and locked both doors. "I insist that you let me buy you some gas."

"Nonsense. I've got a full tank." (It was only half full, but he didn't want to risk stopping at a service station: the operator just *might* be a mechanic, just *might* have the part and just *might* be willing to take on a repair job.) "My name's Bruce — Bruce Keller."

"Carla Banks."

She got an overnight bag out of the Mustang's trunk and accompanied him up the street to where his Caprice was parked. She climbed in beside him. So far, he'd been able to hide his nervousness quite well, but he didn't know how long he could continue to do so. The voice in his mind had been silent for some time; however, he knew it would not remain so. Worse, any moment he might be on the receiving end of another sample of the red pain.

Christ! what was he going to do?

He got a grip on himself, rejoined the traffic flow and proceeded to South Park. He took South Park to Hamburg Street, and Hamburg Street to Ohio Street. Ohio Street took him to Fuhrmann Boulevard, and he passed over the Father Baker Memorial Bridge and joined the traffic flow on the Hamburg Turnpike. To keep his mind off PRNDLL and the red pain, he told Carla about his ex-wife and about his job as copywriter with Burrow, Dare, Grebb and Evans. In return, she told him that she was attending SUNY, that she'd been on her way home to spend Saturday night and Sunday with her folks and that she probably would have got there all right if she hadn't gone way out of her way to visit a friend who wasn't in.

PRNDLL put an end to Keller's respite as they were leaving Woodlawn. *Have been studying girl. Will do nicely.*

What now? Keller asked.

Rape her.

Appalled, Keller gasped, "I can't to that!"

Can do. Easy.

"Did you say something, Mr. Keller?" Carla asked.

Keller shook his head.

Rape her! PRNDLL repeated. *Pull car off road!*

For Christ's sake, I can't rape her in broad daylight!

All right. Keep going. Be dark soon.

But why rape her? Keller said desperately. *If it's a piece of ass you want to be a party to, let me go about getting it the legitimate way.*

"I'm famished," Carla said. "There's a Howard Johnson restaurant just ahead — let's stop, shall we? I'll treat. Turn right at the traffic circle."

YOU KEEP GOING! PRNDLL screamed.

No, Keller said, slowing. *If I don't humor her, I may blow the whole thing. I've got to wait till dark anyway.*

Easy for you to wait! PRNDLL howled. *Lay a new girl every other night. Me, hundred of nights in space since last time. Am horny as hell!*

Keller was incredulous. *How did you get in my mind?*

Am not in your mind. Am in ship high, high, high above. Hovering. I focus teach-beam on school, assimilate language. Mind-scanner single you out, say you chaser, good bet to find girl. So I tune in on you with trans-encephalo-electromagnetizer. You see, I see. You feel, I feel. Except pain. Pain on different channel. Ha-ha. But must work fast. Am being pursued by members of own species who say PRNDLL is sex deviate and who want to lock him back up.

You stole the ship, didn't you, Keller said.

Yes, yes. Steal. Lab ship, many instruments. Go many planets. Rape, rape, rape. Good, good, good. Now will rape again. But must wait, you say. Very will. Will wait. But only for little while.

What do you look like? Keller asked.

Little bit like you. But handsomer. Much handsomer.

Then why don't you land and do the job yourself?

Cannot. Earth gravity too strong. But am talking too much. Stop, you and girl. Eat.

Meantime, here comes something so you not forget PRNDLL.

Keller's third taste of the red pain was more agonizing than the second but much less agonizing than the first. He noticed that during the few moments he experienced it, the buzzing in his ears was absent. Now that he thought of it, he was reasonably certain that the buzzing had been absent during the previous two times. The conclusion was obvious: the buzzing was a side effect of the artificially induced telepathic contact PRNDLL had established, and each time the alien administered the pain he broke the contact, because, feeling everything Keller felt, he would feel the pain too.

He might be even more susceptible to it than Keller, in which case a massive dose might kill him. H'm-m, Keller thought.

"It may well be," said Carla, between bites of her ham-on-rye and dainty forkfuls of potato salad, "that 'Babylon Revisited' was Scott's best short story, but I much more enjoyed his 'Bernice Bobs Her Hair.' Our English lit. instructor, by the way, is Irish to the bone. On the side he does book reviews for the *New York Times*. He dotes on Hibernian writers and drools whenever he brings up Molly Bloom."

"Did you ever read *The Five Little Pepper* books?" Keller asked.

Carla blinked.

"It's a juvenile series," Keller elaborated. "Early twentieth century. I have a thing about them, you might say. I always think that if I ever find a girl who's read them, even one of them, she'll be extra special."

"I read a *Nancy Drew* book once," Carla said.

"I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised at all. It's almost the same thing."

Carla finished her sandwich, chewed and swallowed a final forkful of potato salad, pressed a paper napkin to her lips. She looked at him shrewdly. "Your ex-wife — did *she* ever read any of *The Five Little Pepper* books?"

"No, I don't think she ever did."

"You never *asked* her?"

"You have no idea what my marriage was like. For the last half of it, my wife and I were locked in mute and mortal combat. I can't remember what it was she stopped speaking to me about, but after a few months of it I stopped speaking to her, and all you ever heard in the house after that was the blaring of the TV set and the slamming of doors. I took it for as long as I could, then I — I—"

"Started chasing?"

"That's a cruel way of putting it."

She regarded him keenly. "Believe me, Mr. Keller, you'll never find a modern girl who's read *The Five Little Pepper* books. You would do as well to look for a purple cow."

Keller sighed. The ploy had never failed before. Clearly, Carla was made of more sophisticated stuff than her sisters.

He left half of his cheese-on-rye, finished his coffee. The buzzing in his ears blurred the ambient clatter of dishes and the murmur of voices. It served as a constant reminder of his predicament and had destroyed what little appetite he'd had.

Christ! what was he going to do?

If he told Carla to get lost, he'd probably receive a dose of the red pain that would blast his brains loose. And if he survived it, he'd either have to retrieve Carla or start looking for another victim.

If he went to the police and told them to lock him up, he'd have to provide them with a valid reason, and the only reason he could provide them with was that he was under the control of a rapist from outer space. It sounded worse than a low-budget science-fiction movie, rated X. He still only half believed it himself.

What was he going to do?

To the maximum extent possible, he had been confining his thoughts to images. Presently a picture of a mountain lake whose mirrorlike surface reflected a thousand stars took shape in his mind. He stared at

if for a long time, at a loss to understand where it had come from and what it represented. Finally it faded away.

The shadows were long and cool when he and Carla left the restaurant and climbed back into the Caprice. *Now we get down to the brass tacks*, PRNDLL gloated.

Wearily Keller backed out of his parking place, returned to the traffic circle and got on Camp Road. After crossing Highway 20, he headed east on 62A. "I was going to give you directions," Carla said, "but you seem to know the way. Apparently you've been to North Falls before."

"I went through there once. Why did they build the business section on that rocky hillside instead of in the valley down below?"

"Maybe so they could fight off the Indians better."

Despite her levity, he detected a faint tautness in her voice. He could understand why she might be nervous; after all, she'd known him for less than two hours. He wanted to reassure her, to let her know that he was a gentleman first and a chaser second, and that she had nothing to fear from him. But he couldn't — not with PRNDLL running the show.

What the hell was he going to do?

He *couldn't* rape her. Not even if his life depended on it.

And his life *did* depend on it.

Be dark soon, PRNDLL said.

Very soon. The sun, red and distended, showed occasionally between the hills, through the gold and red and russet foliage of the trees. Keller looked sideways at Carla. Her tawny hair had a crimson cast; she seemed bathed in blood; surreal.

She sensed his sideways stare. "Cat got your tongue, Mr. Keller?"

He jostled his thoughts, tried to free them from PRNDLL's telepathic tentacles. He turned on the radio, punched the selectors till he got music. Hillbilly. "Country," they called it now. "Like to dance?" he asked.

"I'd love to, sir," she said, "but not right now."

"Can you do the fox trot?"

"Seems like I danced it once or twice with my father when I was a little girl."

The remark hadn't been intended to hurt his feelings — he knew that. She probably thought he was thirty-four, like all the others. At the most, thirty-seven. But it hurt just the same. Momentarily a reddish mist partially obscured his vision.

Dusk came. He rolled his window up. Carla had already rolled up hers. He held the Caprice at an even 55. At sporadic intervals, headlights swam out of the darkness ahead, resolved into passing cars. Entering Hillcrest, he slowed to 35. Soon the little town diminished to a handful of lights in the rearview mirror. He hit SS again.

Is dark enough now.

I know, but I have to find a secluded place.

He drove for another fifteen minutes. He tried to think, but his mind seemed to have gone numb. Five miles beyond Saundersville, PRNDLL Said, *Stop car!*

I can't. Not—

STOP CAR!

Keller braked, pulled onto the shoulder and switched the emergency blinker on. *Look—I think you stall. I think I teach you lesson!*

No, Keller cried. No! I—

This time, the pain was molten steel from a tapped furnace pouring into and swiftly filling the ladle of his mind. The crimson slag of the overflow covered his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his entire body. Screaming silently in the crimson wasteland, he clawed at the fiery lava, raised his hands for succor to heavens he could not see, to a god he had forgot. Abruptly a black pit opened beneath his feet and he was falling, falling, the redness all around him, down, down, down—

"— for a doctor. I'll get one somehow. Stay right where you are, Mr. Keller."

Keller located her in the fading redness, reached out and seized her arm before she could slip out of the car. He realized he had slumped over the wheel, and he forced himself into an erect position. "No — no. I'll be all right in a minute."

She hesitated, then closed the door. He relaxed his grip on her arm. "Would it maybe be your heart, Mr. Keller?"

"No. Is there a place near here where I can pull off the road? It's bad business parking here."

"There's a rest area just up ahead ... I still think I should get a doctor."

"You'd be wasting your time."

"An ambulance then? I could flag down a car, tell them to call in for one."

He toyed with the idea. If he were admitted to a hospital, Carla would be safe. But PRNDLL would still be with him; PRNDLL looking at the nurses and the nurse's aides through his eyes, ready at the slightest provocation to administer the red pain. Keller shuddered. No, an ambulance wasn't the answer.

He switched off the blinker and pulled back onto the highway. When he came to the rest area, he drove into it gratefully and parked in a clearing among the trees. He turned off the engine and left the parking lights on; then he rolled down his window and breathed deeply of the night air. It was cool and damp, redolent of dead and dying leaves. He could feel Carla looking at him in the dashlight, but he did not return her gaze. Instead, he concentrated on his predicament.

It boiled down to a simple set of alternatives: he could rape the girl, in which case PRN DLL might set him free, or he could continue to refrain from raping her, in which case PRNDLL would administer another massive dose of the red pain. In the first case, he would undoubtedly go on living; in the second, he would undoubtedly die.

You want another lesson?

Let me get my breath, will you? You nearly killed me.

I give you three full rotations of the black-and-white indicator on your car's chronometer.

Three minutes.

"Are you feeling better now, Mr. Keller?"

"A little."

Perhaps there was a third alternative.

The alien instruments that were being employed to manipulate him might be beyond his comprehension, but their means of accomplishing their purpose was not. Put simply, they had adapted his mind to function as a receiver for PRNDLL's commands and for the red pain.

Two minutes.

They had also adapted his mind to function as a transmitter. No, not just his mind — his entire body. Everything he saw, everything he felt, everything he thought — all were transmitted instantly to PRNDLL. It was true that the alien didn't respond to thoughts expressed in images, but this didn't imply that he didn't receive them; it merely implied that he didn't interpret them — either because they were too scrambled or because his mind functioned differently from Keller's.

One minute.

The red pain was transmitted from a separate source. Every time PRNDLL administered it, he severed contact with Keller so that he wouldn't experience it himself. If he could somehow be tricked into administering a massive dose of it *without* severing contact, would he be able to survive it?

In view of the fact that Keller probably wouldn't be able to survive it himself, the question was academic.

Thirty seconds.

Was there a way that the pain could be fed back to the sender without the receiver experiencing it?

Could it be *reflected*?

Fifteen seconds.

Suddenly Keller remembered the mountain lake that had taken shape in his mind back at the Howard Johnson restaurant and which he had found so puzzling. He did not find it the least bit puzzling now. He knew now that it had originated in his unconscious, that unconsciously he'd known the answer to his predicament ever since he'd deduced that PRNDLL might be susceptible to the red pain.

Ten seconds.

But was it the *right* answer? Right or not, it was the only one Keller had. He took a deep breath; then he closed his eyes and pictured the starlit mountain lake in his mind, concentrating on its mirror-like surface. It was essential that PRNDLL be infuriated to such an extent that he would act first and think afterward, if he was still able to, and so Keller chose his words carefully. Oddly, he knew exactly what to say. *You're not a sex deviate, PRNDLL. You turned rapist because on your own world you could no longer get it any other way. Because you started turning females off instead of on. Old age caught up to you, PRNDLL. You're nothing but a—*

Keller paused as the lake in his mind turned bright red. The brightness intensified, half blinding him, and he saw that it was raining down from above. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the rain reversed itself and the brightness streamed back into the sky. An anguished scream sounded in his mind, abruptly broke off. The buzzing in his ears ceased.

He opened his eyes. Carla had got out of the car and was standing in the clearing. "Look, Mr. Keller," she cried, pointing. "A falling star!"

PRNDLL's ship? Perhaps. Whether it was or not, Keller was certain that the alien had administered his final dose of the red pain.

"Is this it?"

"That's the house, Mr. Keller. I still wish you'd let me buy you some gas."

Keller pulled into the gravel driveway and moved the automatic shift lever to PARK. The house was three-storied and dark. Screening it from the road were four gnarled sugar maples. Starlit fields stretched beyond, and on either side, and directly across the road, the dark mass of a barn or shed broke the monotony of other starlit fields. "No one seems to be home."

"No one is. Mom and dad still do their shopping Saturday night."

She picked up her purse and her overnight bag, opened the car door and started to get out. "Thanks thousands, Mr. Keller."

He seized her hand. "I could stand a cup of coffee."

"I'm sorry — I just haven't time. I've a date at eight thirty and I have to get ready."

Keller tightened his grip on her hand. "How long would it take you to fix one cup of instant coffee?"

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Keller, but there just isn't time. Now, if you'll please let go my hand—"

"Circles," Keller said.

"Beg pardon?"

"Concentric circles. The circle of relatives. The circle of friends. The circle of acquaintances. You can't break through them — ever."

With an abrupt movement, she pulled her hand free and got out of the car. He saw naked contempt in her eyes, knew that it had been there all along, camouflaged out of forced respect for social convention. Carrying her purse and her overnight bag, she ran across the lawn and up the front-porch steps. She got her key out of her purse and opened the door. She stood in the doorway, looking back to where Keller sat stunned in the Caprice. "Go home and soak your dentures, you old fool!" she shouted. "I knew what you wanted all along!" She stepped inside and slammed the door.

Keller got in by smashing one of the front windows and stepping through it into the living room. She was frantically dialing the phone when he entered the fluorescent-bright kitchen. He knocked the phone to the floor, base and all, and shoved her against the kitchen stove. She screamed. The room, the appliances, her face — all had a strange reddish cast. He tore off her skirt; when she fought him, he struck her in the stomach. She doubled up. He hit her again, on the side of the head this time, tumbling her to the floor. The alien pain was as nothing to the pain he knew now. He rid himself of it with cruel, savage thrusts backgrounded by screams, then whimpers. The whimpering got to him after a while, and he put an end to it by employing the base of the phone as a bludgeon. He went out the way he'd come in. He could see his name on the automatic shift as he backed out of the driveway and began the long trip home. It glowed mockingly in the lonely darkness of the car—

PRNDLL...