

"If I Can't Have You, Nobody Will"

Obsessed, the huge man aimed his gun at the young woman's head and slowly pulled the trigger

BY ANITA BARTHOLOMEW



THE BREEZE streaming through the open car windows made Laura Kucera's long blond hair dance as she pulled up at her friend Sara Tello's house. October 1, 1994, was a picture-perfect Saturday in the northeastern Nebraska town of Wakefield. While Sara's baby brother and sister played in the front yard, the two young women sat in the sun, engrossed in small talk. Then Laura noticed a

white pickup coming down the street.

As the truck stopped, she saw the scowling, muscled man with the Fu Manchu mustache. "Oh, God, it's him," she gasped, recognizing Brian Anderson, the six-foot-four, 240-pound ex-boyfriend who had been stalking and terrorizing her for three months.

"Come and talk to me a minute," he pleaded. Panicked, Laura dashed into the house, grabbed the phone and dialed 911. Seconds later, she

realized with horror that Anderson had followed her in.

As she slowly placed the phone back in its cradle, the two toddlers, drawn inside by the commotion, saw Anderson and started crying. Laura allowed him to lead her back outside.

"All I'm asking is for you to talk to me," Anderson cajoled. Then, quick as a striking snake, his hand shot out and grabbed her arm. "Sara, get the police!" Laura screamed.

As Sara stood paralyzed with fear, her mother and 19-year-old brother,

Mike, came racing out of the house. Holding Laura with one arm, Anderson backed to his truck and pulled out a pistol. "This is none of your business," he said coldly. "Get back in the house!"

Frightened, Mike and Sara retreated. Anderson tucked the gun in his belt and shoved Laura into the truck.

WHEN 18-YEAR-OLD LAURA first met Brian Anderson in April 1994, she was captivated by his charm. Brian, 22, opened doors for her and bought

her flowers. He conversed with her biologist-turned-farmer dad.

But Anderson's adoration quickly turned to obsession and a desire to control Laura. He'd "bump into" her friends and warn them against keeping dates with her. He'd wait for Laura until she got off work at a nearby chicken farm and insist she come with him. Uncomfortable with his demands, Laura tried to taper off their time together. But the more she tried to pull away, the more hostile Anderson became.

The night in July when she told him she no longer wanted to see him, Anderson became enraged. Putting a shotgun to her head, he said, "If I can't have you, nobody will." After the longest minute of Laura's life, he lowered the gun. Trembling with fear and anger, she fled.

Anderson began stalking her. He repeatedly called her late at night, threatening to torch her family's farmhouse unless she agreed to meet him. Hoping to scare him off, Laura filed an order of protection against him.

Yet a month later, when Laura again rebuffed his pleas to renew their relationship, Anderson grabbed her by the throat and put a pistol to her head. She watched his finger slowly tighten on the trigger; then she shut her eyes—only to hear the impotent click of an unloaded gun. "See how easy it would be?" he whispered in her ear.

When a police officer witnessed the two together—a violation of the protection order—Anderson was given

30 days in jail. But two days after his release, he ran Laura's car off the road and held her prisoner for several hours. It was two days later when he dragged her into his truck at Sara Tello's home.

GUNNING HIS ENGINE, Anderson zigzagged through a maze of winding, deserted roads deep into the country. Well-tended fields of corn and beans gave way to stretches of grassland and forest. Laura had no idea where they were, but she was acutely aware of Anderson's gun. *Out here, no one would hear a shot*, she thought. A chill traveled through her, but she commanded herself to stay calm. Eventually, he would have to stop. Then she would run for it.

As they crossed a paved highway, she saw a sign in the distance: *Macy—6 miles*. Now she knew where they were—on the Omaha Indian reservation, about 50 miles southeast of Wakefield. They bounced along a rutted back road through trees and tall grass. Finally, at the crest of a wooded bluff overlooking the Missouri River, Anderson pulled over and yanked Laura out of the truck.

"Look," Anderson said, "I just want to talk." She had provoked him, he said, but he was willing to forget and start fresh. Things would be different, he promised.

Laura pretended to pay attention, but barely heard him. Then she saw it: the truck! He'd left the driver's door open. She knew he

often left the keys in the ignition.

When Anderson turned slightly to look out over the forest, Laura decided this was her chance. Sprinting to the pickup, she slammed the door behind her and banged down the door locks. Her heart hammered in her throat as she felt for the key. It wasn't in the ignition!

Through the window, she saw Anderson saunter over. Coolly he pulled the keys out of his jeans pocket, unlocked the driver's door, shoved Laura to the other seat and started up. He drove about half a mile before stopping at a meadow.

"I can see you're not going to change your mind," he said, sighing. "But can't we still be friends?"

Seething, frightened and exhausted, Laura could no longer hide her feelings. "Brian," she blurted, "I'd rather die than be friends with you."

He stared at her coldly. "Then I guess," he said, "you'd better start running."

For a split second she froze. Then the instinct for survival took over, and she vaulted out of the truck. Running into the field, she heard Anderson get out behind her and slam the door.

For a moment she heard nothing more. *He isn't following*, she thought with relief. Then she heard a blast, and a bullet ripped through her shoulder. *Keep running*, she told herself. *He can't get you if you keep going*. She heard another shot and felt it pierce the back of her neck.

He was coming after her now. *Faster... faster!* she commanded her

"IF I CAN'T HAVE YOU, NOBODY WILL"

rubbery legs. *You won't get away with this*, she swore to herself. *I won't let you beat me!*

He was gaining on her. Suddenly, he was so close she could hear him panting. "You had this coming," he rasped. A third shot rang out, hitting her in the back of the head. Laura Kucera fell face first into the hard-packed earth, two bullets in her head.

ANDERSON HAD A POLICE SCANNER in his pickup. As he drove back toward Wakefield, he learned that the Dixon County sheriff's department had begun a manhunt for him. He devised a plan. Stopping at a phone, he called the sheriff's office and told them he had heard they were looking for him, and that he wanted to cooperate. He had dropped Laura off in South Sioux City, and now he had no idea where she was.

Later that night, preparing to question Anderson, county deputy sheriff Donnie Taylor recalled hearing stories of Anderson's earlier threats, abductions and assaults. *How had this monster been allowed to terrorize the poor girl unchallenged?* he wondered. The father of four, he was overcome with foreboding for Laura.

After advising Anderson of his rights, the soft-spoken deputy got straight to the point. "What did you do to Laura, Brian?"

The young man smiled amiably. "I didn't do anything to her, I swear. We drove around for a while, and then Laura asked me if I would drop

her at Hardee's in South Sioux City. That was about 8:15."

Taylor smiled back. "Brian, I don't want to say you're a liar, but that Hardee's is where state police hang out on their breaks. No one saw her. Now, you want to tell me where you really took her?"

Rage flared briefly behind Anderson's smile. "I think I'd better talk to a lawyer first," he said. "That's my right, isn't it?"

MONDAY MORNING, state police investigator Doug Johnson was getting ready for work when his wife called to him. "Doug, did you hear? Someone has been abducted at gunpoint in Wakefield."

As soon as he got to state police headquarters in South Sioux City, he phoned Donnie Taylor. The two men had worked together several times over the years, and respected and liked each other.

Johnson agreed to help, and Taylor filled him in. Laura, carried off at gunpoint, had been missing for three days. There was no real question in either officer's mind: Anderson had killed her. Their first obligation, they agreed, was to find Laura's body and put an end to her family's horrible wait.

Taylor and Johnson met with Anderson's attorney, Douglas Luebe. With hunting and harvest seasons coming soon, they reminded him, it would be only a matter of time before someone found Laura Kucera. It would be better for Anderson if

he agreed to lead police to her now.

Meanwhile, witnesses had told police that after the kidnapping Anderson's truck had headed north. In that direction, they deduced, the most likely place he would have taken her was a remote wood near the Anderson family farm.

An eight-man search team began its grim chore on Tuesday morning. Walking side by side, they made ever-widening circles—and kept watch for vultures. They were also alert for tracks of coyotes and foxes that might lead to the body. It was hard, discouraging work, but the men refused to rest. As darkness fell, however, there was still no sign of Laura.

When the search team arrived back at the county sheriff's office in Ponca, they were met by a police forensic expert. "He's ready to confess," the man said.

Anderson's lawyer and the Dixon County Attorney reached a tentative deal. In exchange for leading searchers to Laura's body, Anderson would plead guilty to second-degree murder. That carried a lighter sentence—ten years to life—than the mandatory life-without-parole he would receive if convicted of kidnapping.

Laura's parents, Mary and David Kucera, arrived soon after the investigators. Ashen-faced, they leaned on each other for strength while the district attorney told them about the possible plea bargain. Under the agreement, he cautioned, Anderson could be back on the street after serving just five years—half the minimum term. If Anderson was going

to pay fully for his crimes, the D.A. had to refuse the deal.

David choked back tears. "Take the deal," he said. "I just want my little girl back." Mary agreed.

The lawyers quickly finalized the plea agreement, and Anderson confessed that he had shot Laura Kucera. Her body was in a meadow near Macy. Johnson and Taylor looked at each other in surprise. Macy was southeast, at least 50 miles from the area they had been searching.

WITHIN MINUTES, more than a dozen law-enforcement officers were driving into the night toward the crime scene. On directions from Anderson, handcuffed in the back of Taylor's red four-wheel drive, they pulled up to the meadow at about 11:15 p.m.

Johnson and the others fanned out and formed a line. Their heavy flashlights swept over the ground, casting eerie shadows that made the brush appear to sway.

There she was!

Johnson's heart leapt into his throat as he caught sight of Laura's body, 20 feet from the road in a hollow depression under two tall elms. She was lying on her back, her right leg cocked up. Her red windbreaker and long blond hair were shining like bright flags in the darkness.

The officers moved methodically toward the body, making sure they did not disturb the crime scene. Out of the corner of his eye, Johnson thought he saw Laura's leg shift position. Startled, he tripped, then caught

"IF I CAN'T HAVE YOU, NOBODY WILL"

himself. *Just shadows caused by the flashlights*, he guessed.

Then he saw movement again. "My God!" he screamed. "She's alive!"

Stunned to a halt, the men stared wide-eyed at one another. Then they heard a faint moan. Quickly recovering, they raced to her in a wave, whooping and hollering. "She's alive!"

Johnson and Taylor knelt beside her. Johnson stroked her hair and the girl groaned, seemingly in acknowledgment. "It's okay, Laura," Taylor said softly.

While they called for a medical emergency helicopter, Johnson walked back to the four-wheel drive where Anderson and his lawyer sat waiting.

"Luebe," he said cheerfully, "I hate to tell you, but your plea agreement is in the toilet. Laura is alive!"

The young woman was airlifted to the Marian Health Center in nearby Sioux City, Iowa. With two bullets lodged in her head, doctors weren't certain Laura would ever regain consciousness. But her body temperature, for some unknown reason, had dropped only to 95 degrees. She wasn't nearly as dehydrated as she ought to have been after being exposed to cold and rain through four nights, nor did she seem to have lost much blood. Doctors were astonished.

Whether it was all the prayers that had been offered up for her or her own strength and courage, Laura continued to surprise doctors as she recovered her ability to speak and then to walk. She was released from the hospital on November 19, 1994.

a month earlier than predicted.

Still, doctors doubted she would ever be the same as before. And that was what Brian Anderson was counting on. After his plea bargain for second-degree murder was foiled by Laura's miraculous survival, he pleaded not guilty to kidnapping and attempted murder charges, hoping that Laura, the only eyewitness to the shooting, would be too badly brain-damaged to testify—or too intimidated to try.

But Laura Kucera surprised him too. On March 3, 1995, she entered a lawyer's office and sat across the

table from Anderson. Coldly, he tried to stare her down, but she would not be bullied. Facing him, she recounted the details of his terror campaign in slow, sometimes broken words, but with unbroken spirit.

Realizing that she had defeated him, Anderson changed his plea to guilty on four felony counts, including attempted murder. In May 1995 he was sentenced to not less than 85 years in prison.

Laura Kucera had made good her vow not to let him get away with his crimes.



Bright Beginning

LOOKING RATHER forlorn, my eight-year-old son arrived home from his first day of the school year. He liked his teacher, and his best friends were still in his class, but he was a bit disappointed, he told me: "It's just that the other third-grade class has the cute chicks."

My older son looked up from his magazine and, seeing the startled expression on my face, said, "Think feathers, Mom." —Contributed by *Grace Rogers*

Setting Sales

AT A GARAGE SALE I spotted a handsome antique copper kettle for only \$2.50. It was badly tarnished, so I asked the woman running the sale if the discoloration would come out.

She cheerfully offered to try some copper cleaner on it and disappeared with it into the house.

Reappearing with the gleaming kettle, she handed it to me for inspection. Then I noticed that she had also put a new price tag on it: "Like new—\$10." —Contributed by *Loretta Halwin*

SOON AFTER moving to Virginia, my son drove by a farm stand with a sign saying: "Bi-color Corn, 69 cents a Dozen." He stopped to talk to the farmer and raved about the delicious flavor of this type of corn.

"It's a great delicacy up North," my son said. "We call it 'Butter and Sugar.'"

The next time my son passed the stand there was a new sign which said: "Butter and Sugar Corn, 89 cents a Dozen." —Contributed by *Peggy Norris*