Who would suspect that a family's animals could be pawns in domestic violence? Or that their sad condition might tip off investigators to women in trouble?

A shocking report by BARRY YEOMAN on the terrifying truth about cats and dogs.

Marcella Harb-Hauser, DVM, was doing her morning rounds at a San Rafael, California, veterinary hospital when she first met Malibu. The gray tabby was hunched in his cage, his face swollen and right eye bulging. His lungs were bruised. His ribs were broken. He had a fractured tailbone. When Harb-Hauser examined the cat's mouth, she says, "it looked like an eggplant inside."

An experienced emergency vet, Harb-Hauser tried to make sense of the medical evidence. The cat had obviously suffered a trauma, but there was no sign of a car accident or fall from a window. "This didn't just happen," she told her colleagues. "Something is fishy." The cat's owner, she learned, had brought him in at 5 A.M. and for the past three hours had been sitting quietly in an exam room. Maybe, she thought, the young woman could provide some answers.

Malibu's owner had milky skin and dark eyeliner, with tattoos on both arms. She was barely 30, her face youthful, but her gaunt frame and blank expression suggested a hard life. Speaking in a high, thin monotone, she told Harb-Hauser that she had separated from her boyfriend a year earlier, moving three times to escape him.
only to have him track her down and break into each successive apartment. This morning she’d come home from a trip and found him waiting. Fresh scratches and bite marks covered his arms. The apartment was wrecked, and Malibu was hiding under a glass table, barely breathing.

“I really don’t know how to tell you this, because it breaks my heart,” Harb-Hauser said. “But someone tried to strangle your cat.” For the first time, emotion registered on the woman’s face. She looked up and locked eyes with the vet. “Yeah,” she said. “I really don’t know how to tell you this, because it breaks my heart,” Harb-Hauser says. “But someone tried to strangle your cat.”

The 2006 conversation reinforced for Harb-Hauser what researchers are only now starting to understand: With devastating frequency, animals are the collateral victims of domestic violence. Dogs and cats, lizards and rabbits, horses and other farm animals—abusers torture and kill them, or threaten to do so, in order to maintain control of their spouses. And it works. Because most battered-women’s shelters don’t accept animals, victims are often forced to weigh their pets’ safety against their own. According to various studies, between 18 and 88 percent of shelter residents delayed leaving their tormentors for fear that their animals would be injured, or worse. That doesn’t count the many women who never escape.

“Pets have become pawns in the battle of power and control that marks domestic violence,” says Phil Arkow, head of human-animal bond programs at the American Humane Association. While any victim of battering may be trapped in a landscape of terror, for women with cats or dogs at risk of abuse, “they not only lose the sense of safety and comfort their animals provide but all too frequently feel unable to leave.”

The ultimate goal of the abuser is to strip the victim of everything of value,” says Merck, DVM, senior director of veterinary forensics for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). The batterer knows there’s no weapon more effective than seveng or promising to sever, that last remaining bond. “The ultimate goal of the abuser is to strip the victim of everything of value,” Merck says.

Often batterers will injure animals as part of a threat to do the same to the people in their lives. ‘I have heard accounts,” says ASPCA senior vice president for anti-cruelty initiatives Randall Lockwood, PhD. “‘From victim advocates in all 50 states of a (continued on next page)
AFTER MALIBU'S OWNER blurted out that her ex-boy­friend had been abusing her, Marcelia Harb-Hauser knew she couldn't just treat and release the strangled gray tabby. So she contacted the Marin Humane Society, up the road in Novato, California. Cindy Machado, the society's animal services director, took firm charge. "Hold this cat as evidence," she recalls telling the vet. "Do not let it go out the door." Then Machado invited the victim, who is called Jane Doe, to court documents to protect her safety, into her office for a chat.

She gave "Jane Doe" a photo of the cat on IV fluids, bandaged, saying if Doe did nothing, she'd end up the same way.
"I'm coming, and I'm coming armed," she recalls him saying. "How would it be if I have to hurt people to get to you?" Police arrested him after he showed up at the hospital carrying two kitchen knives and a screwdriver. He eventually pleaded guilty to a concealed-weapon charge and served time in jail.

Until then, Creswell hadn't left because there was nowhere to take the dog and cat that had provided solace during her three-year marriage. At the hospital, though, someone handed her a brochure that mentioned the Animal Safehouse Program at the Rancho Coastal Humane Society in Encinitas, California. Knowing there was a foster home for the animals enabled Creswell and her newborn to make a getaway.

"It may seem bizarre, even crazy, that we stay in these situations because of our pets," says Creswell, who has a new partner and a second child. "But we rely on these animals to give us comfort. It's almost like therapy. You have something you can hold, that you can love, that loves you back. Because those two animals had taken such great care of me, I owed it to them to look after them and not have them subjected to cruelty.

"To know that they were safe meant that I could go forward," Creswell says. "To know that they were being given love gave me the opportunity to reclaim my life.

When police and prosecutors grasp the links between domestic violence and animal abuse, it makes it easier to protect survivors of all species by getting offenders into jail or treatment. An abused spouse might be unwilling to press charges against her partner, "but a dead cat is not going to recant," says the ASPCA's Randall Lockwood. Sometimes, then, the surefire way to prosecute a batterer is on charges of animal cruelty, which, if severe enough, is a felony in many states. "The abuser has so little regard for the animal that he doesn't even realize how serious a crime it is," Lockwood says. "You may even get a confession right there: 'Yeah, I killed the damned cat.'"

As far as the pet victims go, the law has traditionally turned a blind eye. "Many jurisdictions say animals are property," explains Diane Balkin, senior deputy district attorney in Denver. "The climate, however, is changing. Until two years ago, no state gave judges the explicit right by statute to protect animals in domestic violence cases. The courts could order a batterer to stay away from his wife and children, but not necessarily from his dog, even if he had threatened the creature. Then, on a snowy day in January 2006, 50-year-old Susan Walsh drove about 75 miles to tell her story to the state district attorney in Denver. The turkeys and sheep living on their 32-acre farm. "I might possibly have gotten my dogs out, maybe even the cats," she testified. "But I knew any animal I left behind would be dead within 24 hours."

"When she got up and testified, you could hear a pin drop," says Anne Jordan, Maine's commissioner of public safety. At the hearing, Jordan was sitting in front of some opponents of the legislation. "When Susan Walsh testified about what her ex did, I heard the [lobbyists] behind me say, 'We can't testify against this bill.' Two months later, Maine became the first state in the nation authorizing judges to include animals in protective orders. Since then, nine states have followed suit, with more on the way.

Walsh says she won't be content until the law safeguards all women and their animals. "Every state needs to have this protection on the books—and the stronger the better," she says. "Our message to abusers must be firm and unwavering: Threatening or harming animals to hold a partner hostage in a relationship will not be tolerated."

For information on lobbying your own officials, go online to the state legislation pages at the Humane Society of the United States (hssus.org). American Humane Association (americanhumane.org), and ASPCA (aspca.org).