

Beach House

By

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House Series

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1

Ospreys kill often and effectively. Mary Ellen tracked the bird with the binoculars as it swooped from the sky, tucked its tainted wings inward and pointed its head at the Chesapeake. In an unexpected move, it thrust its cutting talons into the water and skimmed the surface. Somewhere below the sunlit waves an unsuspecting creature was removed instantly from the ocean environs. With something now firmly caught in its clutches, the powerful fish hawk lifted its prey toward the scattered clouds. The bird flipped the seawater from its feathers and transported the kill in the direction of the distant tree tops along Binghampton Beach.

Mary Ellen swung the binoculars to the beach house. Su Lee was a woman unafraid to do anything to satisfy her own needs. Tony was home alone and the edge of Su Lee's orange sports car was visible near the beach house garage. She lowered the binoculars, but quickly raised them again. Binghampton Beach appeared shaky under the scratchy cloud puffs, but she steadied her hands. Away from breakers, rock piled jetties, and the silhouetted town buildings, Hazelton Hill came into focus. The multilevel gray contemporary she and Tony bought last summer was nestled within a twisted thicket leading down to the dock.

" Damn her."

She checked the kids; yellow life preservers draped over their shoulders and backpacks at their feet. Across the deck Danny was wedged between Angie and Shane at the boat railing. Mary Ellen let the binoculars dangle around her neck as she closed her eyes. All the rumors about Tony meeting Su Lee at Barnacle Bill's Tavern converged within the tightness now enveloping her throat. She opened her moist eyes, raised her hands over her mouth and looked away from the diminishing shore to the deep blue stretch of Chesapeake Bay.

" Mary Ellen, are you all right?" asked Wilma.

Mary Ellen flashed a quick phony smile as her short, red haired friend hurried across deck. " Wilma, getting sea sick already?"

" I saw you checking. What did you see?"

" Listen, we're off to Sabines Island. Let's enjoy it."

" She wasn't there, was she?"

She eyed the kids and gripped the moist starboard railing.

" My God, it's all true."

" Are you sure?"

Mary Ellen kept talking as she peered at the vanishing landmass across the rippled water. " I saw the car. That stupid orange sports car."

" She's got nerve."

" I could think of another word." Mary Ellen grit her teeth. " I can play her game. I'll fix her wagon, the little tramp."

" How?"

She pressed her lips and shook her head. " I don't know... I just don't know."

* * *

The trees and white sand beaches formed like a downloading web page along the Sabines Island shoreline. Mary Ellen smiled as Kel, having replaced his Hazelton security guard uniform with jeans and red sweatshirt, played charades with the kids in front of the blue vinyl deck chairs. For a few minutes she forgot her husband was home painting the house while the car of a shapely twenty-three year old female bartender from the Barnacle Bill's was parked in the front driveway.

" Mom, this game is dumb," said Danny, kicking a discarded soda can down the deck.

" Pick it up, young man."

" I didn't put it down there."

She raised her brows. Danny rolled his eyes, grunted and headed after the can. Slowly her expression vanished as she scanned the horizon back to Binghampton Beach. Images of Su Lee's, sweeping dark hair swaying across her tight, well toned,

body and red string bikini, converged in Mary Ellen's head. On the beach Tony had cast more than a fleeting glance at her small rounded buttocks. Mary Ellen crushed her hands together when she transposed those thoughts into her second floor master bedroom.

" Mary Ellen? Mary Ellen, you there?" Kel's curly steel hair protruded under the edges of his black and orange Oriole's hat. His green eyes were laced like brown marbled veins. " You look like you're million miles away."

" I wish I was, Kel."

" What's the matter?"

She shook her head. " Same old, same old."

He flexed his well worn crow's peaks and rolled his tongue around his unshaven cheek. " You're not starting that Su Lee thing again."

" Yes, and this time I have proof."

" Really?" She did not like the serious look in his eyes. " I apologize. Maybe I was too graphic about her."

" You were quite explicit about her attraction to men," said Mary Ellen.

" I think we have to give Tony a little more credit. She's only twenty-three. He's got ten years on her."

" Kel, you told me she had a... what did you say? Nefarious background?"

" Well, yeah, but-"

" Her car was parked in front of the beach house garage. She doesn't waste any damn time."

Kel's ground his teeth together as if he were chewing gum.

" Can I use your binoculars?"

" Forget it," she said, folding her arms across her sweatshirt.

" We're too far out now. I already looked. What do you really know about her?"

" Like I said, she's got a reputation." Kel waved to Angie and Shane. Both her daughters produced identical expressions bordering on irritation and friendship.

Mary Ellen held his wrist. " Kel, I just told you the little tramp is parked in my driveway. What else do you know about her?"

" Not important. This may be just an innocent thing. I can't see Tony getting involved with her. He loves you and the kids."

" Right... She's in the driveway the minute we board the boat to Sabines Island."

" I'm may be an old cop from Buffalo, Mary Ellen, but I do know that until you investigate something, your impressions about what it might be... can be completely bogus."

Mary Ellen looked across the bay, but pictured the beach house over the horizon line. " Or impressions might be right on the mark."

2

For a third time Mary Ellen pounded the beach house number into the dock pay phone. When they had arrived on Sabines Island she tried reaching Tony, but only heard her own voice on the counter answering machine. " You have reached the Frescos by the sea. Please leave a message and we'll get right back to you. Thank you."

At the picnic area Kel and Wilma finished the lunch she had packed earlier this morning when Tony was already outside swatting his paint brush across the outside paneling. Why did he decide to paint the beach house himself? His position Omicron commanded a salary well into six figures. The machine beeped. She spoke in a clear and firm voice. " Tony, please pick up the phone. I didn't bring the cellular. Tony.... Tony."

She slammed the phone hard enough to crack the plastic. The blood rushed to her head. She wanted to go back right now and confront them both. When she opened her eyes Kel approached along the dock and his face still reflected a burgeoning concern. " Mary Ellen, listen. As a retired cop, why don't you let me look into this?"

" Oh, then you do think something is going on back there? What the hell do I tell my kids? Your dad is making love to some one just eight years older than Shane? Damn him!"

" You don't know that. Let me take care of it."

" I want to go back."

" You can't. The boat won't be back for two hours on the return trip. I would suggest getting your pack and taking the island hike as we originally had planned."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. " Maybe you're right."

" And another thing. I like Wilma, I like her a lot, but I would watch what I say to her. She likes to gab. You don't want this all over Binghampton Beach."

Mary Ellen nodded once and smiled for the first time in ninety minutes. They started down the dock. " I will hire you to find the truth."

" You don't have to hire me... But there's more to this than I've told you."

" What are you talking about?" she asked and they stopped midway on the wooden pier.

" I've lived down here since I retired eight years ago. Being a guard at Hazelton is just enough work and keeps me in contact with people. And I've become pretty friendly with everybody in town. I have my hangouts. And during that time I've developed a composite on Miss Su Lee."

" What are you saying?"

" I have a ton of circumstantial evidence about this woman."

Mary Ellen stared into his green knit eyes. She wondered if Kel merely was concocting theories because he no longer had the challenge of being on the force back in Buffalo. " What exactly are you talking about?"

" Murders."

" *What?* Kel, haven't you taken the actions of this little whore a bit too far? "

He shook his head. " No, there have been two deaths within the last few years. Two that I know about."

" And the police have implicated her?"

" Well, no. I have found certain evidence that links her with what I can only say is murder."

" Oh, come on, Kel. Why are you telling me this now?" She shook her head before he could answer and started down the dock. Now she pictured the sleek little Su Lee brandishing a huge glistening blade as she approached Tony in the outside garden overlooking the bay. Kel was out of line telling her all this.

* * *

Mary Ellen's marriage was solid until six months ago when Omicron gave Tony the new position. Flying around the country,

implementing new software programs had taken away chunks of time, and left her alone with the kids. All the hours transporting them to school activities and baseball games produced a vacant feeling she could not shed. She hiked behind Wilma at the end of a party of fifteen people on the nature tour through Sabines Island's towering forest. Although Tony's absence made her lonely, she never felt threatened by another woman until last Thursday.

"Chesapeake Bay is an Algonquin derivative," said one of the park rangers. He led them along the trail. "It is pronounced Chesepioc and those of you who enjoy blue crabs and other delights will note this word simply means great shellfish bay. Very original."

Everyone laughed, but Mary Ellen was preoccupied with the situation across the bay. On Thursday night she sent Tony out to Barnacle Bill's for three large pizzas. Even when he was gone close to an hour she was never suspicious and believed his story about chitchatting with the locals. On Saturday morning she first noticed a young Oriental woman in a red string bikini walking from the orange car, parked in the lot across from the town beach. She carried a single white towel and a leather bag was strapped over her shoulder. Not that she exposed more skin than ninety percent of the young things on the beach, but this woman carried herself differently.

Her body had the tone of someone who worked out constantly. Taut, trim muscles fit snug to her arms and legs. Even her solid abdomen lacked a scintilla of fat. Mary Ellen never remembered being jealous, but only amazed at Su Lee's body. Her slanted dark eyes had an unflappable resiliency and confidence was transmitted into her purposeful gait. She crossed Highway 16 and headed toward the lifeguard station. Tony watched her only when she snapped her buttocks as her hips rocked. Mary Ellen held Tony's arm and yanked him toward their spot up front near the jetty. She had not seen him for ten days and wanted his attention.

Five minutes later his eyes tracked Su Lee past the jetty to the marina. Mary Ellen's resentment grew, but not because of pure lust. She sensed something when Su Lee glanced at Tony and a slight smile flashed like a momentary strobe light from her face. When Tony returned an equally surreptitious grin and adjusted his sunglasses, Mary Ellen first suspected he knew her. And that bold, sensuous perfume, Night Sin lingered behind her.

Her fears were confirmed when Wilma heard the rumors downtown. One of her friends and family were having dinner in a side booth when Tony arrived at Barnacle Bill's. Su Lee was bartending and somehow spoke with Tony while he was waiting for the pizzas. Only the social talk extended into a protracted conversation when Tony pulled up a stool, had a few beers and talked to Su Lee as she waited on customers. An hour later he pulled into the

beach house driveway. The kids were starved and fighting and Mary Ellen was angry. Tony, in his own diplomatic way, talked his way out of it and within minutes everyone drank Coke and devoured the pizza from the half warmed cardboard boxes. Even Mary Ellen seemed to forget his tardiness.

Tony admitted to speaking with Su Lee and mentioned something about computer software for her brother's roommate in Annapolis. He even broke down the inventory needs of the roommate's business and Mary Ellen bought the story because she trusted him. Even with his time away she always knew Tony would tell the truth. But the image she had viewed forty-five minutes ago through the binoculars shook her confidence in his credibility.

" Now," said the young blonde assistant along the trail. " You may have heard the theory that the bay was formed by the impact of a large meteorite. That possibility exists because of discoveries of indentation on the ocean bottom. More likely the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age caused sea levels to rise over the ancient Susquehanna River valley."

" Mom, look at this frog," said Danny, thrusting the green slimy amphibian in her face. She leaped back and stayed back.

" Can I take him back?"

" What do you think?"

" Oh, that is gross," said Shane, looking at her sister. They both gave the frog and Danny a dirty look.

" I remember catching frogs when I was a kid," said Kel, studying the frog. " Every boy should have the opportunity to catch frogs."

" See," said Danny.

" Right, you've caught him: Now throw him back."

" Okay," he said, smiling.

" He just wanted to show you," said Kel. " The boy wants his mother's approval."

Mary Ellen winced as she watched her son lower the frog back into the small swamp. " What he needs is his father over here telling him how great the frog capture is. This thing is going to hit the fan before Tony flies back to Seattle."

* * *

Kel insisted she telephone Tony before the boat left for Binghampton Beach, but Mary Ellen saw no point in aggravating herself further nor did she wish to call with Su Lee at the house. She would have to confront Tony when she arrived back at the beach house. Although the skies remained sunny, a stiff wind arrived across the bay. Mary Ellen tied a olive kerchief around her straight blonde hair and stood alone as the surf formed a white gurgling

wake through the darkening blue waters behind the boat. Away from the others she silently cried as she thought back fifteen years to her wedding day. She was riding in a coach, drawn by two powerful dark horses with braided manes. In the late afternoon light Tony's black hair was longer and almost brushed his white tux. His maroon tie fit perfectly within his standing collar and a fresh pink rose boutonniere was neatly tucked into his lapel.

" You're my princess," he said to the sound of clicking horses.

He kissed her lace glove and she smiled. " I want this to go on forever."

His blue eyes brightened. " It will."

Now she wiped tears with her cold fingers and stared back at Sabines Island, knowing as the island moved farther away, Binghampton Beach would get closer. Why would Tony even consider a slut like Su Lee? She was insulted he had not sought someone sophisticated. It made her wonder how he really viewed their relationship.

" Mom, are you all right?" asked Shane.

The air froze the tears on her face. " Just a little weepy."

Her oldest daughter hugged her and dried her mother's tears.

" Did we do something wrong? I know I was a little flip back in the woods."

" No, it's nothing any of you have done. I have a lot of things on my mind."

" Can I help?"

She inhaled the thick salt air and realized she only had a two hour window before Tony left for Seattle. " Thank you, Shaney. No, I'll be all right."

" You sure?"

" Yup. Are you working tomorrow morning?"

" Don't remind me. After two months of waiting on tables and bringing out breakfasts for people, I'm looking forward to school."

" I guess getting you the job at Binky's was a smart idea."

" A good idea once it's over. Mom, do you need help with supper?" she asked.

" We may go out and grab a bite or order pizza. No, I don't want pizza."

" Dad's been working hard painting the house."

Mary Ellen anger churned. " Right. I'm sure your father has taken care of his appetite."

3

She brought Eloise out for a walk almost immediately after Kel dropped them off. The Golden Retriever emerged from the garage and Mary Ellen gazed across the gravel driveway to the thick flower beds. Amidst the smell of fresh paint she had to wonder if she was walking across the spot where Su Lee had parked her new Firebird only hours before. Badgering Tony was not something she wanted to do. Eloise trotted onto the street and quickly veered into the thicket beyond the mailbox. Mary Ellen looked back at Tony's new, paint splattered aluminum ladder lying on the ground beside the angled garage. The blue bay beckoned through the trees. At least he had finally begun to paint the beach house.

The garage screen door slammed. Tony appeared in baggy black shorts and a red Izod shirt. He carried a drink as he meandered up the drive. Mary Ellen wished Eloise would stop sniffing and continue up the road. " Hey, sweetheart. You rushed out real quick."

" Someone has to take the dog out."

" Eloise has been out twice," he said, reaching the end of the driveway.

" No wonder she's not going." Mary Ellen refrained from looking him in the eye. Why was she feeling guilty? Tony was the one hooking up with that young thing. " So, Tony, how the hell was your afternoon?"

Tony hesitated. He brought the drink to his lips and scanned the road. " My afternoon was... productive."

" I bet it was."

" The side of the house and the garage are done."

" That's impossible," she smiled.

Again he seemed at a loss for words as if he had quickly bragged about something leading to other things. Su Lee must have helped him paint. That could be the only explanation. Now Mary Ellen was too scared to start asking questions. Su Lee was with her husband all afternoon.

" So, how do you like my handiwork?"

" Saves us a little money when you do it yourself." The blue leash tightened and Eloise pulled her along the road.

" I like doing the work." He followed her up the road. " You know, I don't think you need to go back to work in the fall."

" I like teaching. I like the kids. Reminds me of when our kids were little. Those days are gone."

" Aren't we the prophet of gloom and doom this afternoon?" Again he sipped the drink, but his hands shook as he lifted the glass.

" You're hands are shaking, Tony."

" All afternoon wielding a brush." He slid his hand over hers and took the dog's leash. " All right, what's your gripe?"

" I have no gripes."

" I know that expression."

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe that orange protrusion near the garage was not Su Lee's car, but she was afraid to be proven wrong.

" It was a long trip to the island."

" Did you want me to go with you, is that it?"

" No."

" You said you wanted the beach house painted before fall."

" I do."

Eloise rustled the leaves and squatted down. Mary Ellen exhaled slowly and the adrenaline rushed into her stomach. She was going to ask him. Her inner thoughts bubbled up. She wanted to know the truth now no matter how much it hurt. " I saw her car out here."

" What?" Tony quickly looked away.

" I said I saw Su Lee's car in our driveway when I looked at the beach house through the binoculars."

" So?"

" Well, what kind of explanation are you going to give me now, Tony? "

" Mary Ellen, calm down."

" Was she back over here to get more software for her brother's roommate? Is that it?"

Tony waited. Maybe he was considering an alternate explanation or perhaps he would deny Su Lee's presence altogether. " I think you're jumping to conclusions."

" You told me that when you hung all over her at Barnacle Bill's. You told me that when you ogled her little ass on the beach."

" Mary Ellen." He laughed nervously.

" Shut up, Tony. I'm sick and tired of your bullshit explanations. " The dog emerged from the bushes and Mary Ellen stepped up to Tony for the first time. " Well, Tony, how was she?"

He said nothing and his eyes hung open as if he were drugged for surgery. Mary Ellen's worst fears were confirmed and she started toward the house, but her legs were so fired up, she stormed past the driveway. Although she did not look back, he must have watched her march down the road. Her stomach wrenched as she gripped the dog's leash and pictured the little trollop naked in her own bedroom. She wondered just what unusual acts Su Lee had performed on Tony. More than being angry at Tony, she thought him a buffoon, a weakened shadow of the man she married. But her anger toward the bikini stringed slut accelerated with each quaking step down the road along the bay.

* * *

Two hours and thirty-seven minutes ago Tony's BMW slowly moved away from the beach house driveway. Her lips pursed and arms crossed over her sweater, Mary Ellen climbed to the third floor, but did not turn on the lights. Through the thin upper windows outside Tony's study, she peered over the moonlit bay. The yellow, luminescent full moon glowed in the darkness. Tony's only comment about his afternoon painting venture involved a vehement denial of any involvement with Su Lee. Beginning in the kitchen, holding his overnight case, he castigated Mary Ellen for thinking he would chase after a twenty-three year old woman. He maintained she had returned the software. He showed Mary Ellen the orange CD ROM case and said he was getting an updated inventory package for the brother's roommate.

The evening breezes tickled her cheeks and she shook her head, not believing Tony was telling the truth. She was determined to find Su Lee, not tonight because the children were sleeping, but tomorrow when Danny was at his game and Shane was working. She could leave Angie with Wilma and track down the woman who had seduced her husband. The wave ripples merged slowly toward the shore, but she traced her eyes across the distant bay waters, wondering like an ancient sailor what lay beyond the obvious.

She retreated from the windows and shuffled near her sewing machine and unused fabric bolts. Maybe Tony was telling the truth and she needed to respect his word. The story about the software and even the painting was easily checked out, but Kel's alluding to the deaths of two men in the area scared her. She picked up the third floor phone, dialed his number and settled into the soft bean-bag chair.

" Kel here."

In the background she heard the Orioles game broadcast from Oakland. " Kel, this is Mary Ellen Fresco."

" I've been thinking about you, kiddo."

" He denied any relationship. He told me she came over here to hand back her brother's roommate's software. You said this woman was suspected of murders."

" No, I said I suspected her. Two men in Binghampton Beach were killed within the last eighteen months. A guy named Roger Trombly lived on Centennial Drive. Trombly was working on his car. He had a 1966 Corvette. The car fell on him."

" *Fell* on him?" Mary Ellen sat up in the chair and put positioned elbow on her knee. " Are you saying she did it?"

" Well, Su Lee was seen in Camden at a place called Willoby's Tavern with Trombly two nights before. The wife caught them."

" But that is a far cry from killing him."

" She likes older, married men."

" How do you know this?" she asked.

" Word on the street. A couple of relationships."

Mary Ellen stood and gripped the phone. " She's sick is what she is."

" One relationship was with an Artie Rankin. Get this: Rankin was a guy who didn't know how to swim. Yet, he fell off a jetty and was washed out to sea. He was seen with Su Lee on the beach."

" Come on, Kel, don't you think you're stretching this a bit?" She started to pace the carpet near the stairs to the second floor master bedroom. " What evidence do you have?"

" Her MO is chasing older, married men. I tell you, you need to speak frankly with Tony. This woman is trouble."

" Maybe she is, but what evidence do you have linking her with either one of those murders?"

" Mrs. Rankin was on her way to the jetty. She saw the Fire-bird parked at the marina."

Mary Ellen wiped her hand over her mouth and leaned on the window sill overlooking the pool. " What did she do about it? Did the local police get involved?"

" She buried her husband is what she did, when his body washed up on Binghampton Beach."

" That proves my point. While there are hints of this tramp being involved with these men. I don't see a murder weapon or anything like that."

" I never pursued it. It's just been a passing fancy. One of the many things you see in your retirement. Things you only speculate about. Wait, let me turn down the game."

Mary Ellen nodded even though she knew he could not see her. She dragged the phone cord along the windows and looked over the bay toward Sabines Island. A year ago Tony had his arm around her and whispered in her ear how much he loved her. He described the night sky, pointing out the various constellations as the children slept downstairs. Now she gazed upward at the stars forming the swan, high above the ocean like a cross in the night.

" Kel, are you there?"

" They lost."

" Sorry."

" A great pitching performance by Mussina, but nobody hit. Except Ripkin, he always gets a hit. Mary Ellen, I'm going to crank this thing up. I like you and I like Tony. I'm just a part time guard at Hazelton. I can grant myself a few extra hours and get out of the trailer."

" Not to mention all those years on the force." She pictured his silver trailer along the beach near the cottages. " But I just don't know if it's a good idea. Maybe I should just go to the police."

Kel laughed. " For potential husband cheating? They'd laugh you out of the station. Not that Hawkins is any great shakes. He never listens to me."

" Hawkins?"

" Hawk... The chief."

" Oh." Along the indefinite horizon the red light of a tanker or maybe a fishing trawler blinked slowly in the night. " Listen, Kel. I can't live like this. I need to know if there is anything going on between Tony and her. Whatever you want to look into... do it."

" Thirty-seven years on the force tells me to mind my own business."

" Then why would you-"

" Thirty-seven years on the force also tells me something isn't right with that woman. I don't mean just that she tries to score with married men. Either way, Mary Ellen, I'm going to find the truth."

4

Mary Ellen stretched out in the master bedroom's king size bed. She shut off the entertainment center TV, but the screen still glowed from the forty-five minutes of late night shows. Tony's smooth pillow reflected a brighter swath of moonlight cutting across the white rug to the third floor stairs. She had not made love to Tony in this bed for four weeks and feared he had taken his attentions elsewhere. For a moment she thought she sensed the presence Night Sin in the air. But the scent vanished when she sat up and surveyed the large room.

Moonbeams poured like silver projector light through the arched window and onto the flowered wallpaper she had chosen last winter. The walk-in closet, adjacent to the stairs, was as large as one of the smaller bedrooms in their first house back in Tuppersburg. Tony now had the high-pressure income and was not afraid to do the work himself. She focused on the green digits on the VCR clock and closed her eyes.

The sound of peepers back in the lowlands blended in with the traffic back along the highway. An occasional stray horn beeped or some smart-ass teenager left skid marks across the pavement as the breakers off shore cracked and the waves sloshed

toward the beach. She and Tony used to lay motionless after making love and tune in all the outside sounds.

Smashing glass from downstairs destroyed the solitude. She rocketed out of bed. For a few seconds she hesitated, but grabbed her robe off the side chair and slipped into the sleeves as she hurried into the hall. It was odd the dog was not barking. Eloise should have barked loud enough to disturb Wilma's high-strung husband by now. Somehow the kids never heard the glass break either. She raced down the sweeping front staircase to the foyer, froze and looked across the kitchen to the garage hallway.

Someone crushed the driveway gravel. Mary Ellen flipped on all the outside spotlights, rushed to the slider and removed the pole, wedging the doors. She cocked the pole and sprinted to the front door. The night air rushed inside the beach house when she opened the door and peered through the screen. Taillights disappeared through the thicket up the road. She scooped up the cordless, ran across the kitchen and opened the garage door.

Glass was chipped and scattered over the cement up to the Land Rover. Kel's line rang on the cordless, but she got the answering machine. " Oh, Damn it, Kel where are you?"

Huge glass swords stuck in cluster form inside the side window. Mary Ellen edged her way around the Land Rover and checked the rear outside door. Kel's machine beeped, but he came on the line before she could speak. " Kel here."

" Kel, somebody just chucked something through my garage window!"

" What?"

" I said... there's glass all over my garage. Smashed, the window is smashed. I heard somebody out front and then saw car tail-lights through the woods. And I can't find my dog. They took my dog. Eloise! Eloise!"

" Stay right there."

" Okay. " May Ellen wondered now if she should have called the Binghampton Beach police station. " Kel, look I'll report this..."

" Don't worry. It's about time Walter Kelly gets back in action. I'll call them. Don't alarm the kids, I'll be right over."

She clicked the line and realized how fast her heart was beating. What if Su Lee was deranged and playing a sick game designed to scare her with Tony gone? She peered around her Land Rover's red fender. The side door was severely dented and a rough edge piece of granite lay on the cement next to Danny's water toys. She tightened her brow as the cool night air produced a slight whistle through the jagged glass and she prayed Su Lee was not involved in the attack.

* * *

Danny was excited about the vandalism. He bounced between the cruiser and the two officers, and asked a raft of questions. Shane and Angie surveyed the garage damage and relegated themselves to a position in the second floor bedroom window. Officer Dasher, a young skinny kid in his twenties tried to convince Mary Ellen the rock incident, as it was now referred to, was a result of young teenagers in the area. The older cop named Butch, pudgy and blonde was engaged in a long conversation with Kel by the stonewall at the end of the driveway. The girls waved at him from the second floor window as he moved to extricate Danny from the cruiser.

" You guys ever fire that gun?" Danny asked, pointing to the wood grained gun butt sticking from Dasher's holster.

" Only when kids that aren't in bed are still up."

" I bet you fired that thing. Bang. Bang."

" Come on, kid. You're mother wants you in bed." He walked Danny toward the front door. " I'll bring him up, Mrs. Fresco."

" Thank you."

" He's cute," said Shane. Both girls giggled and disappeared inside the beach house.

" Girls, they're a pain," said Danny, looking up at Dasher.

" Don't worry, kid, you'll have a change of heart." Dasher opened the screen door.

" You like girls?" asked Danny as the pneumatic tube slowly gushed out air.

" You will, too."

" Yuk."

Mary Ellen stood rigid, straddling the lawn and the gravel drive. She looked toward the side garden and spoke through gritted teeth. During the yard search the pervasive odor of Night Sin, the distinctive palm oil scent, similar to tanning lotions from the beach, remained in the shower stall. The girls recognized the brand and did not know how it ended up in the outside shower. She clenched her fists as Kel said a few more words to the older cop, glanced at her and started across the grass. She thought about calling Tony and voicing a complaint concerning the infamous Miss Su Lee, yet, concurrently, she wanted to deny Su Lee's complicity in breaking the window.

" Mary Ellen, Butch is going to talk with Su Lee in the morning."

" You think she did it, Kel?"

" That's just it. We just don't know. That shower thing bothers me. Although, the perfume could have been from before." He briefly held her wrist. " Are you all right?"

" Yeah, I'm all right. But where the hell is my dog?"

" The dog is probably out on the prowl. She'll be back... Su Lee was in the shower stall. I know the little slut is involved in this. This is ridiculous feeling like this. She's just some bartender."

" Right."

" And I can't believe Tony would be so intellectually void to spend his time with someone of that caliber."

Kel tightened his brow. " I understand..."

" She was in that shower, damn it!"

" Look, tomorrow I start asking questions. I'm heading back to the trailer. Get some shut-eye, kiddo."

" Kel, thanks for coming out. Really. Knowing you're ten minutes away makes me feel more secure."

His moist green eyes darted and he paused as if he pondered other things. Then he nodded once. " I'll get to the bottom of this. I've been sitting around the trailer too long just dreaming up all these theories. About time I got off my duff and did a little bit of old fashion detective work. Maybe score the big one."

5

Mary Ellen vigorously pushed one of the plastic carts through the supermarket's automatic door and the inside air chilled her sun baked skin. All night in bed she had debated whether to call Tony. Vacillating kept her awake and tired. She made an early breakfast and sipped orange juice on her patio overlooking the brilliant bay sunrise. Occasionally, she stared at the outside shower surround, but in a sudden burst, scrubbed the stench with a bristle brush and chemical cleaner. The oily perfume provided enough evidence to prove Tony was fooling around with Su Lee.

A wave of anxiety from the rock incident now encircled her as she rounded the vegetable aisle. Danny had mentioned the gaping window hole a few times on the way to his baseball practice, but her daughters said nothing. Mary Ellen was trapped within her own fears as she maneuvered the cart over the waxed vinyl tiles. She pawed over the apples and loaded half a dozen into a plastic bag she ripped from the dispenser. How could anyone pick up a rock and hurl it through a garage window while a family slept inside? As many times as she tried, she could not put herself inside the intruder's head and justify, or even muster the inner fortitude to carry out the attack.

She slid the cart over to the slanted banana bin. By now Tony had already boarded the plane to Seattle. She lifted two bunches into the top of the cart, but her mind was set on Tony, and she needed to speak with him. Maybe they could put the matter behind them if they discussed the affair openly. A woman in short red pants and a yellow halter top with a mass of long, straight, shiny black hair moved around the corner beyond the end cap of two liter Pepsi bottles.

A quick jolt shook her stomach as she spun away from the bananas. She swerved around an elderly man evaluating bunches of iceberg lettuce and skidded into the meat aisle. A plethora of shoppers were in motion ahead of her, but no one with long black hair. She shot forward and slid to a stop at the end of the first aisle. A young woman with two kids, a guy in a tank top, and an old lady in a red flower dress checked out boxes of crackers and soda.

She quickly rushed to the next aisle and leaned around the corner. A bearded guy with dark hair and shorts checked a hand-written shopping list. " This is insane. Really insane."

A woman in front of the chicken made a sour face when Mary Ellen skirted the corner. At the end of the aisle, the woman with thick black hair was occluded by two guys pulling coffee cans from the shelf. Mary Ellen gripped the cart and scampered past boxes of pasta and glass sauce jars. Her heart thumping, she slowed as she neared the registers. She tried to control her breathing as she held

the cart and stood upright. Nudging the carriage forward around a header of stacked cereal boxes she opened her eyes wide as the woman with long dark hair, but with blue eyes and a wide face, lackadaisically emerged from the coffee aisle.

Mary Ellen tightened her hold on the shopping cart handle, closed her eyes and chided herself, through deep breaths, for thinking the woman was Su Lee. She leaned on the cart as if it were a walker for an elderly patient and stared at the women, now in the 12 items or less line. The sudden noise of her cell phone ringing in her own pocketbook shook her and she fumbled for the phone next to the automatic coffee grinder. " Hello."

" I tried the house," said Tony.

" Tony... where are you?" Her eyes filled.

" Mary Ellen, are you all right?"

" No, I'm not all right. I'm not all right at all."

" Kel told me somebody threw a rock through the garage window last night. Why didn't you call me?"

" Oh, I don't know," she said, wiping her eyes. " I wouldn't want you to be upset."

He paused and she heard someone on an airport public address. " I'm sorry."

" What are you sorry for?" she asked as a rotund lady in a pink flowered dress gawked. " Just tell me that, Tony, will you?"

" I'm... sorry you might have got some wrong impression. Are the kids all right?"

" Yes, they are. I'll tell you, if that little slut threw that rock I'll gouge her eyes out!"

" Listen to me, Mary Ellen. I'm not involved with her. I helped her with the software and that's it. I know it looks bad, but really..."

Mary Ellen pinched the bridge of her nose. Her sinuses filled as if she were having a severe allergy attack. " I would like to believe you, but-"

" I will be back from Seattle Friday morning. We'll straighten this thing out,"

" Going to do some more painting, are you? I know about the Night Sin in the shower."

Again the airport public address system sounded in the background. " I don't know what you're talking about."

" I saw the Firebird!"

" I haven't done anything wrong."

" You may not think so."

" I'll call you from Seattle."

" Don't bother!"

The lady in the flowery dress stared as Mary Ellen dropped the cell phone back into her pocketbook. Tears leaked from her eyes as she started down the aisle again, but she forgot what she wanted to buy and simply pushed the cart. Her husband was on his way

across country without having given a proper explanation for his activities while she was on Sabines Island. She walked briskly by the meats and toward the milk case and tried to rationalize what he was saying, but each time she thought about his words, a queasy feeling overtook her stomach. She knew he was lying and did not want to hear the details.

* * *

The green truck, expansive glass sheets aligned vertically in storage bins, was parked in the driveway. The gray haired man in the striped shirt and navy pants looked up from a trash bin near the garage window. Mary Ellen looped around the brick walk and left the groceries in the Land Rover. The glass man, a yellow piece of paper stuffed in his shirt pocket, crossed the drive. "All done, Mrs. Fresco."

" Good."

" They catch the guy?"

" Nobody has been caught yet." He handed her a scribbled bill for four hundred and fifty dollars. " You take master card?"

" Not necessary, Mam'."

" On the house, eh?"

He produced rapid smile. " Oh, no. Your husband, Mr. Fresco, he has an account at my company. I guess he used it for some mirrors in your bathroom downstairs."

" Okay."

" Nice house. How many square feet?"

Mary Ellen studied her beach house, unfolding in four towering sections like open books stacked upright. " Six thousand, two hundred."

" Man, fit three of my houses in there. Well, window's fixed and the glass cleaned up."

" Thank you."

" You have a good day now."

Mary Ellen smiled and tried to forget how her marriage to Tony was slowly disintegrating. She lifted the cold plastic milk containers from the back seat and walked into the garage. A few stray glass bits were still scattered across cement. She jingled her keys and opened the kitchen door. By now Eloise's gyrating tail would have smacked the mudroom corridor wall. The dog's disappearance was directly linked to the rock attack.

She carried the milk jugs down the mudroom hall, opened the mammoth stainless steel refrigerator and set the milk inside the door holder. Fifty minutes ago when she left for the supermarket the liter of white zinfandel in the wine cooler was nearly full. Last night she opened the bottle and drank a small goblet before head-

ing up to bed. Now, only a minuscule amount of clear wine lay within the elongated bottle. She pivoted and sprinted down the mudroom hall to the garage. The glass guy, cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, backed the truck down the crushed stone driveway. He jammed on the brakes when he saw her waving him down. "Excuse me, did anyone come by while you were working on the window?"

He shook his head and removed the cigarette. "Nobody here while I was working."

"You didn't see anyone?"

"Nope. Why, something wrong?" he asked, looking over to the beach house.

"Oh, I don't know. No, everything is just fine."

She wandered back to the Land Rover and plucked out the two grocery bags as the glass truck looped into the street. During breakfast she used the refrigerator a dozen times and observed the nearly full wine bottle. The glass guy had no access to the house and the kids would not have the opportunity to take the wine during the last hour. She shook her head. The kids would not touch the wine anyway.

Mary Ellen set the grocery bags on the counter. She checked the pole wedged within the kitchen sliders and walked into the spacious foyer. Maybe Su Lee was in the house. She berated herself

for drawing such wild conclusions as she opened the wood stained front door. The outside storm door was still securely locked.

" Somebody was in here. I need surveillance cameras."

She studied the curved oak staircase to the second floor balustrade and scurried up the runner. The kids' bathroom window was closed and the central air pushed through the tile vents. She bounced between all three bedrooms. The shades were drawn and windows locked in Shane's pink painted, neatly arranged room. She stepped over Danny's clothes and soccer equipment and scanned the closed brass locks. Angie's room, covered with rock group posters, was cool away from the sun, but the windows were also locked.

She inhaled, still worried about the dog, and ran her fingers along the smooth varnished balustrade above the foyer. With each step toward her bedroom she wondered about the balcony doors. Sunlight cut through the thin blind slats over the closed balcony doors as she stopped and placed her open hand over her beating heart. She always made the bed perfectly, yet the quilt was slightly out of alignment. Her chest moved quickly as she gulped in air and then swallowed. " No... this can't be happening."

She ran to the balcony doors and unlocked the knob. The sunlight burst into her eyes with the warmer air on the balcony. She gazed at the patio bricks and charcoal pit within the thick green grass. The glass tables and patio chairs were not moved and the

the kid's yellow boom box sat on the table above the wading pool. She leaned over the balcony rail. To gain access to the balcony meant shimmying up the pole supports and physically scaling the outside rail. This scenario required great upper body strength and the house key.

She looked down at the outside shower, freshly scrubbed, and followed the beach trail through the brush to the dock. With the man working on the glass out front, the intruder would have approached along the shore. She backed into the bedroom and ripped the quilt off the bed. Then she attacked the sheets, rolling the cotton fabric into a huge ball. As she headed with the heap toward the second floor laundry room, she sniffed Night Sin in the air. " Sick... This is sick!"

She dropped the bed clothes on the tile and opened the washer top. Quickly she loaded the quilt and the sheets into the huge capacity washer. Frantic, she flipped the water valve, dumped in some detergent and twisted the timer on the machine panel. As water freely flowed into the tub she leaned against the machine and closed her eyes. Only a demented individual would enter the house and slither into her bed, but the possibility of Su Lee having keys to the beach house concerned Mary Ellen the most.

She rushed into the hall and grabbed the wall phone. In a matter of seconds she pushed Kel's, but the line rang longer this time.

" Kel here."

" Kel, she was in here!"

" Whoa... Whoa. Su Lee was in your house? How do you know this?"

" My quilt and the sheets. Saturated with that Night Sin. All over my sheets!"

" You didn't smell it last night?"

" No, that's just it."

" The house was locked?" he asked. The rock and roll music played in the background. She pictured Kel's old stereo system in the trailer. " Mary Ellen? "

" Yes, of course I locked the house. That's the point. I came back from the supermarket... inside... the refrigerator. That liter of wine I open last night is half empty. I had one glass, Kel. One glass!"

" Maybe there's logical explanation, kiddo."

Mary Ellen's voice choked. " How do you explain the sheets?"

" I don't know, but if the house was locked-"

" She has the keys. Tony gave her the keys."

" You don't know that," replied Kel.

" I'm going to track her down. I don't have to stand for this!"

" No, you don't but I would advise you to let me handle this."

Mary Ellen held the sides of her head, stared at the stripped bed and stretched the phone cord down the hall.. " She's sick. Coming here and crawling into my bed!"

Kel had an odd constraint in his voice. " Listen, I'll go out to her condo this morning."

" Tell me if you know anything else about this... or her."

" Nothing else.."

" Kel, you sound like you're holding back. Does she have a murder conviction?"

" Just a ton of circumstantial evidence."

" Like what?" she asked, letting her back slid down the wallpaper and she sat on the hallway rug. " You have two men who were killed and you think she instigated both deaths, correct?"

" Correct. I talk with Bob Colby about Artie Rankin. Colby lives near me on the beach. We're only a couple of hundred yards from the jetty. He saw Rankin with her on the beach after dark. He'd swear to it. Rankin was a big guy. Always wore Bermuda shorts. He worked as a banker in Baltimore."

The washing machine motor hummed as the water gushed into the inner tub. Mary Ellen sat on the floor and closed her eyes. " It's a stretch having her push him off the jetty. Did this guy Colby or anybody see Rankin pushed?"

" I'm working on that. I talked to Rankin's wife in Belvedere this morning. I didn't mention Su Lee, but she was concerned about

the time Rankin would spend walking that summer. He seemed distant to her and concerned about his appearance."

" The classic symptoms of an affair, right?"

" Could be... Now, remember, the cops in their report had her car. She gets a new Firebird every year. She was parked near Cobb's bridge. From Cobb's bridge you can see the jetty clearly with binoculars."

" But you have nothing. Damn her!"

The music stopped and Kel cleared his throat. " And there's Roger Trombly. Lived on Sunset Drive."

" How appropriate."

" He was killed instantly. Apparently his car fell off the ramp in his garage. He was working on the engine. She was seen driving that Corvette prior to the accident. One of the cops investigating remembers her in the Corvette, kerchief around her head, pulling up to the light near the railroad station. The wife remarried and lives in Delaware."

" I just want Su Lee out of my house and away from my husband."

" I understand, but I would advise your staying away from her."

Mary Ellen closed her eyes again. " Then what the hell do I do, Kel?"

" You call a locksmith and you change every damned entry lock in your house."

" Oh, God... Just go to the cops."

" The cops and I have a communications gap. And besides, unless you saw Su Lee in your house: forget it."

She struggled to her feet and the blood rushed away from her head, leaving her tipsy. " New locks. That's a good idea. "

6

Kel had not told Mary Ellen he had left a message for Tony at Omicron. He leaped from his leather chair and scrambled to the counter phone when it jingled. " Kel here."

" Kel, this is Tony Fresco."

" Tony, I'm glad you called,"

" What's up? I'm in Seattle," said Tony.

" Listen, Tony you and I have known each other for a few years. Since you had the rental on the beach. We've play cards together, I've baby sat for you kids-"

" What's the point?"

" Su Lee."

" Su Lee."

" Did Mary Ellen make you call?" he asked. Then he bristled. " I have no damned relationship with Su Lee. I told Mary Ellen that."

" I have a fear Su Lee threw a rock through your garage window last night."

" And how the hell did you come up with that one?"

Kel wiped his mouth. With no proof, maybe he should have kept quiet. " See, Mary Ellen thinks-"

" I know what she thinks and I'm damned sick of it. I'm going to say this once, and you're a retired cop, you can check it out. I got some software for her brother's roommate back in Annapolis. I talked with her for close to an hour in the bar."

" Was she at your house when we were over on Sabines Island?"

Tony's silence made Kel suspicious. " I think my wife is letting her imagination run away from her. I was painting the house."

" What about the orange car?"

" There was no orange car."

" Okay, have it your way, but if she was over there, I'm going to find out."

Tony's voice shifted to a higher pitch. " Why? Why the hell are you involved in this?"

" Tony, this woman is bad news."

" I told you, Kel-"

" I think she may have been involved in the murders of two married men. Married men summering in Binghampton Beach."

Again no words were spoken. " I have to get back to work. I've made arrangements to be back at Binghampton Beach on Thursday night. Don't get her all worked up."

" I'm not the one getting her worked up."

" Why don't you mind your own business?"

Tony hung up the phone and Kel stared at the receiver, convinced Tony had seen Su Lee Sunday afternoon. He grabbed his security guard cap and swiped his tie off the chair. After lowering the air conditioner, he turned off the small 19 inch TV and headed into the sunshine. A few people were on the public beach two hundred yards ahead. How could Tony be so stupid to be involved with Su Lee? Mary Ellen was such a good kid. Yet, as he imagined Su Lee in her bright bikini, he slowly nodded his head. He opened the little Hazlewood security car.

He thought about all the times he had seen her at Barnacle Bill's. Su Lee's charm made her a popular bartender. Her eyes were dark and intense, usually outlined with striking blue mascara. She occasionally wore glossy red rouge. He checked his old diver's watch and realized he had a full forty-five minutes before he had to report on duty to Hazlewood. The hot air burst from the vents for a few seconds when he started the car. He looped the compact around his long silver trailer to the dirt road. Maybe she had arrived early at the Barnacle Bill's.

He raised the dust along the road past the other trailers and the tall grass away from the beach. Then his tires caught the seal coated asphalt. Cars were scattered across the beach parking lot, but in another hour the lot would fill to capacity. He continued up South Neck Road, upset with Tony for not leveling with him. At the

stop sign he rolled right and the engine whined under the strain toward town. He cruised past the shops and parking meters. The marsh river extended to the sea. A gray paneled building with a long terrace and canvas awnings was nestled under spreading green trees atop a rounded knoll.

Kel swung the compact up the short slope and parked out front. He left his tie and hat on the seat, but did not see the orange Firebird out front so he walked around the building. Behind the gray dumpster the shiny sports car was parked along the chain link fence. A slight nervous smile came to his face. He knew the feeling as he prepared to meet a suspect. Eight years ago he was fired for accusing a local hood in a daytime robbery where a three-year-old kid was killed. He had pushed that case on instinct, with no facts, and even though the guy was guilty, he never went to trial. Kel told everyone they gave him an early retirement. Only the local cops knew the whole story. Not only was he rusty in questioning people involved criminal investigations, but he did not want to make the same mistake he had made in Buffalo. He walked slowly up the restaurant's weathered wood plank walk and up to the front door.

People eating lunch under a glass-enclosed terrace treated him with passing glances as he opened the door. The inner area was darker. Several TV monitors showed NFL highlights along a

central bar lighted by overhead copper lanterns. The hostess asked him if he wanted a table in the main restaurant. " Bar's fine."

Kel peered across the darkened booths. Su Lee pushed back her fine black hair and her well formed muscles tensed as she carried a case of liquor behind the bar. She wore a tiny pair of white shorts, outlining her well-formed buttocks. Kel had seen her type so many times in the past. She was young and thought she would always be young. With an almost ruthless confidence she presented a bold assertiveness. He studied her dark eyes and little round face and wondered if he was looking into the eyes of a killer.

She saw him when she turned to speak with a guy in a short sleeve white shirt. Her smile was wide and she again swished her straight long hair from her form fitting red Lycra jersey. Kel walked along the bar and was surprised when she stepped up to him. " Hi."

" Hi. You don't know me."

" Yeah, I know who you are. You're Walter Kelly, you have a trailer on the beach. You work as a security guard at Hazelton Point and you used to be a cop on the Buffalo force. How am I doin'?"

Kel's heart beat quickly. He tried not to stare at her well-toned legs and shorts. " Did I send you my resume?"

" You want to?" She had a clear friendly voice and a ready smile, scary in its sincerity. " This is a small community, Mr. Kelly."

" It is. You're not from here, are you?"

" You know, I started coming down here with my family when I was thirteen years old. Ten years ago." She pushed back her hair again. Kel fought his attraction to her. " We used to party and in the mornings we'd sleep it off on the beach. I love it here. Always have. I'll never leave."

Kel fought to control his carnal thoughts. " Why were you out at Tony Fresco's beach house yesterday?"

She innocently raised her dark brows. " I don't understand."

" Tony Fresco was home alone yesterday. His wife saw your car in his driveway."

Su Lee pushed her lips together and nodded. She dipped her slender body under the opening in the bar. Her smooth hand wrapped around his callused knuckles. " Come with me."

" Now I don't understand." The sharp waves of scented perfume, revved him up even more. She held his hand as her slim torso slinked along the bar and her high heels clicked against the wood floor. Her body was small, tight and she carried herself well. She put out signals of availability and an ability to flirt.

As she opened the rear screen door and strutted down the ramp bordering the outside terrace, Kel could understand how

Tony was taken in by this woman. Although he did not know Rankin or Trombly, they would have succumbed just as he was slowly giving in right now. She hoisted her buttocks onto the pressure treated railing, pushing her shorts higher up on her tight legs.

" Tony's cool. I could easily become romantically involved with him. Mrs. Fresco is jealous. She needs a few weeks in the gym with me. Get herself in shape."

" You know Mrs. Fresco?"

" No. No. No."

" Then how do you know she's jealous?" asked Kel, leaning against the ramp rail. He tried not to look at her tanned legs.

" Tony told me she would be."

" Then you're having an affair with him!"

" A married man? Oh, Mr. Kelly," she said in a low voice, leaning over. He could see a full shot of her pointed breasts as she rubbed her index fingers together. Kel looked away, but wanted to mention Trombly and Rankin. His heart was flying and she probably knew it. " Tony helped me get some software for my brother's roommate. I talked with him for probably over an hour when he came for pizzas last week. I think he was attracted to me. You can't fault a guy for that now, can you Mr. Kelly?"

She moved her hands up through her long hair, tightening the red spandex across her chest. " So, you're saying you were never over to see Tony Fresco yesterday?"

" Wish I had... if the wife was away. I could wear him out. You know what I mean?"

He looked over her tight body. " You were nowhere near the house?"

" Nope. Yesterday afternoon I was sailing."

" Witnesses?"

" None. I took out my boat in the morning and didn't come back till maybe three. Yeah, it was at three. I had to be behind the bar by five. I took a long, warm shower. Lots of body lotion." Kel pondered that image. " And was at the gym for an hour before I got on duty here. I arrived here a little before six."

" There was an orange car in the driveway when we went to Sabines Island."

" My car was in my condo garage." She jumped down and her small breasts bounced quickly, but her shorts still rode up her legs.

" Do you want me to talk with Mrs. Fresco? Tell her that Tony-boy hasn't been naughty?"

" No."

She tugged the edges of her shorts. Her dark, slanted eyes opened wide and she tightened her red rouge lips as she held his wrist. " Everybody needs to be naughty once and awhile, Mr. Kelly."

Kel's emotions shifted and he could not explain it. Her charms seemed more manipulative than seductive. He had forty plus years on this smooth skinned young firecracker with the soft black hair. He knew she was lying but could not prove it. " Listen, I'll speak with Mrs. Fresco."

" She needs to keep her man occupied and he won't go wandering."

" You like men, don't you Su Lee?"

Her shorts brushed his pants she slowly passed. He was convinced it was a deliberate move. Again he stared at her buttocks as she turned. " I'd die without men. Even you, you must be in your fifties."

" You made my day."

" Good. Stop by and have a drink some time."

" I will," he said, looking into the rear lot. " Can I get back out front this way?"

" Sure, walk around the dumpster. Right around my car. You know, the one that was parked in Tony Fresco's driveway."

" I have to get to work," said Kel.

" Couldn't stay retired, eh?" she asked, folding her arms across her jersey.

" Hell no, I'm too restless. Bye."

" Bye."

She started back up the ramp and again he caught sight of her buttocks, but this time his mind overrode his emotions. " Su Lee."

" Yeah?" She turned and bit her lower lip..

" Where did you say your brother lived?"

" I didn't."

" Right. Something to hide?"

" Ron Lee. Annapolis." She dropped something on the ramp and as she started to bend over, Kel reversed direction, walked down the ramp and opened the outside gate latch. His eyes immediately moved toward the fastback orange car parked next to the dumpster. He closed the gate and trekked across the hot asphalt. She had a purple and yellow local radio station logo for WOBC stuck on her rear window. A tennis racket was placed across the white pristine interior along with a cylinder of yellow tennis balls. Kel checked out the black gym bag, but he stepped back. The white Maryland license plate was current. He was about to return to his car, but he caught sight of the chrome dealer logo and he spoke it out loud. He raised his brows.

" Cross Brothers Motors. Interesting."

7

The children were probably asleep when Kel's security car rolled into the gravel driveway. Mary Ellen balanced the decaffeinated coffee cup she had promised him on the phone. He shut off the lights and the engine went silent. Since the sun went down she was frantic about the possibility of Su Lee returning to the beach house. Kel stepped from the car as Mary Ellen opened the front door.

" Ah, nectar of the Gods," said Kel, smiling. He sniffed the coffee and threw his hat through the open window. " You're an angel, thank you, Mary Ellen."

He took the large mug in his hand and immediately raised the hot liquid to his lips. Mary Ellen crossed her arms as she scanned the grounds in the cool air. " You should be home in the trailer watching TV, Kel."

" I need to keep active. You'll understand when you reach my age."

" If I reach your age."

He squinted and sipped the coffee. " You said the bed smelled like Night Sin?"

" I washed the quilt and all the sheets. She had a key to this house. I know she did."

" Did you call the locksmith?" asked Kel.

" All the locks are changed. Do you think she was in the house?"

He held the mug in his hands and gazed at the beach house.

" Yeah, it's possible. Listen, I met with her today at Barnacle Bill's."

" What did she say?"

" I specifically asked her if she was involved with Tony."

" And?" asked Mary Ellen, not really wanting to hear the answer.

" She said no."

" Do you believe her?" asked Mary Ellen.

" She's *very* convincing."

" Come on, Kel." She shook her head and paced in the gravel around the compact. " This woman will say anything. I would think with your experience-"

" I said she was very convincing. She has charm and is alluring."

" Alluring?"

" Well, I mean she works out... in the gym."

" I know what you mean," said Mary Ellen, shaking her head.

" But she's lying. I don't know what the extent of her relationship is with Tony. She did admit to speaking with him in the bar about software for her brother's roommate in Annapolis. I called information. Ron Lee does live in Annapolis."

" Oh, I supposed this funky story is true. Of course it is. It's only a part of the whole picture, Kel. Nothing can change the fact that her car was over here when Tony was painting yesterday."

Kel sucked more coffee into his mouth. " She claimed to be sailing."

" Good cover. You know, I find it hard enough to believe Tony would step out on me, but I would think he's not stupid enough to give her the keys to the house."

" She probably took them."

" So, she can make the moves on my husband, chuck a rock through my garage window, break in to my house and steal my dog! And then she gets off Scott free. "

" That's basically correct. In the eyes of the law she hasn't done anything wrong.

" Tell that to divorce court!"

" He'll be back on Thursday. I suggest you two just settle it."

" Thursday night he lands in Newark and then he's taking the puddle jumper to the airfield outside of town." Mary Ellen kept her arms folded and looked back toward the house. " She must have jogged up the beach this morning."

" She's certainly in shape."

" Sounds like she put herself on display for you."

Kel's head snapped back. " Yeah. Listen, my gut tells me this woman was on the prowl here, but I need proof."

" What about the bed? I don't use Night Sin and neither do my girls."

" Did you ask them?"

" No... Kel, you sound like you don't believe me."

" I want proof. Nothing stands without proof, Mary Ellen."

" Oh, boy. I've got a chunk of granite as proof in my garage and a seven hundred dollar glass bill."

Kel said nothing and finished the coffee. " Listen, I've got a couple of leads I have to follow up on. I think you're safe here with the new locks."

" Add on the locks and that woman has cost me nearly two grand, not to mention being scared out of my mind and wondering if I'm still going to be married by the end of the week."

* * *

Even though she had retrieved fresh sheets from the linen closet and spread a new quilt over the mattress, Mary Ellen refused to sleep in the master bedroom bed. Three hours ago she had walked to the road and searched for Eloise. Then she returned to

the house, but before she locked the garage doors, she threw the granite across the grass into the garden. She turned the garage door locks, double checked all the new locks around the house and retreated to the third floor once all the house window clasps were securely in place. The pull-out couch was comfortable enough and the air conditioning provided an optimum temperature. But she could not sleep and found herself at the windows again, staring across the bay. As the warmer fresh outside air percolated into the cooler inner air, she chided herself for not speaking directly to Su Lee. This woman was very clever, seemed to have the ability to attract men and probably stole the dog.

* * *

Even though she slept in the wicker window chair, Mary Ellen was invigorated after her first cup of coffee. She again walked the dog's route early as she read the Post's top stories. The sun brightened over the bay and leaked through the thicket branches. Eloise's disappearance bothered her as much as Su Lee's presence around the house. Once on the shore she gazed toward Binghampton Beach in the early morning haze and then turned to the beach house through the trees. She checked the sand ripples down to the beach berm, but saw no dog tracks. A plethora of indiscernible footprints were scattered across the beach sand. Kel was right. They

needed hard evidence. Su Lee's prowess was indisputable and she may have contributed to the deaths of at least two married men.

Mary Ellen prayed Eloise was not killed. She scanned the grasses and packed sand for the dog and evidence Su Lee might have left a jogging trail or dropped a piece of jewelry if she used the beach as an entry way to the house. If she indeed worked out, Su Lee's physical strength would allow her to easily trek down the beach and scale the balcony to the second floor bedroom. Mary Ellen started up the wooded trail back to the road, convinced the dog was dead. Su Lee's audacity and ability to take chances gave her a mysterious power.

She stepped over the tree roots and breathed a little faster as she climbed the hill back to the beach house. What in Su Lee's past gave her permission to entrap married men and kill them? It was time to get in the Land Rover and pick up the kids, but she began questioning her own integrity as she veered toward the garage. Was she just using Su Lee as an excuse to rationalize Tony's time away from the family?

" My fault. I should have kept him home."

The beach house baked in the hot sun and the sprinklers sprayed a constant mist across the newly trimmed lawn. She stepped onto the driveway stones and felt the moisture in the air as she looked toward the garden. Last night in anger she had thrown the granite tumbling over the lawn, but now it was gone. She

moved deliberately through the sprinklers and kicked back the brush.

" This is ridiculous," she said and she stomped across the wet grass. Again she looked back. Perhaps, they needed to leave for the summer and return to Philadelphia. As she neared the back door the phone rang inside. She yanked her keys from her shorts and quickly unlocked the door. The ring was louder inside and as the machine tripped she picked up the phone. Loud guitar music blasted into her ear. " Hello? Hello?"

The song had a quick deep base accompaniment and the synthesized, echoing voice of a harmonizing singer came over the line. She pushed the speakerphone and hung up the receiver. Now the tune shook her kitchen. " I want you to answer me!"

She listened to the words.

You never cared about the night scene
You wanted to get out unfazed
Should have left me alone
Should have left me alone
And now you're dead.
Now you're dead.

The line clicked and the room was silent. Mary Ellen's heart pounded as she raised her hands to her mouth. She fell to the floor, leaned back against the counter and cried. "It's her! It's her! Leave me alone! Leave my husband alone!"

8

With the answering machine tape clasped tightly in her hand she maneuvered the Land Rover along Binghampton Beach road, slowing the car occasionally for the sunbathers crossing behind the orange and white crosswalk barrels. Wilma agreed to pick up the kids and bring them over to her house until Mary Ellen returned. Unable to get Kel at his trailer, her anger festered and overflowed. She swung left away from the beach, pumping the brakes when she took the turn too wide. Letting Su Lee shake her inner being was something she would no longer tolerate nor would she let this vamp pursue her husband. On the hill to her left the gray paneled Barnacle Bill's with its front-bubbled dining area and outside terrace blue umbrellas materialized behind the trees.

Still enraged, she only paused at the stop sign and continued rapidly along the telephone poles and marshes, but was forced to stop on Conclave Road before she quickly scooted up the hill. She coasted to a stop in a space next to the building as she panned the parking lot for the orange Firebird. She exited the vehicle with the answering machine tape firmly in her hand. Maybe if she had not sent Tony here for pizzas none of this would have happened.

A tall man with dyed black hair and a thin mustache watched the TV monitor. Mary Ellen leaned over the bar. "Excuse me. I want to speak with Su Lee."

The man smiled at something on the monitor and swung his eyes toward her. "Su Lee?"

"Yes, I wish to speak with Su Lee."

"Not here." He looked up at the TV again and grinned. "That Seinfeld is funny."

"Where is she?"

He continued to watch the show. "Took a few days off."

"Where does she live?" asked Mary Ellen, looking down at the microcassette.

"Su Lee?"

"Right."

"Northgate Condos. You take Route 16-"

"I know where they are," said Mary Ellen, thinking back to the large green and gold sign in the woods north of town. "What number?"

"42B."

"Thanks." She started to the door, but stopped and wandered back to the bar. This time she moved along the bar. "You know a guy named Roger Trombly?"

"Huh?"

"Roger Trombly, do you know who he is?"

" Nope."

" How about Artie Rankin?"

" Nope."

A busboy pouring water about twenty feet away at the restaurant tables held the silver water pitcher and stared at her. He swallowed once and filled the next glass, but kept his back to her and did not look at her again. She turned back to the man behind the bar.

" What about Tony Fresco?"

" Yeah, Fresco. He comes in here for pizza every now and then. Works in Philadelphia You wouldn't be Mrs. Fresco, would you?" Mary Ellen produced a fixed smile and held up her wedding ring.

" Ah, ha. Listen, I won't get in the middle of anything between you and Su Lee."

" Is she having an affair with my husband?" Mary Ellen asked in a loud voice.

" Who knows? Su Lee flirts with everyone."

" But did they-"

" I don't know nothin'. You talk to Su Lee. Capish?"

" Capish."

Mary Ellen thought about using the pay phone in the front lobby, but retreated to the car. Once behind the wheel her emotions charged again and she swung the car around in a huge circle,

nearly hitting a new yellow Mercedes. The downtown buildings temporarily blocked Hazelton in the distance and the wooded hill overshadowed the rural roads back to the state highway. Her rage was directed strictly at Su Lee and in some weird way she had forgiven Tony. In the middle of business out in Seattle he had probably forgotten the viper.

She waited at the Donnelly's Corner traffic light and then shot up the state highway away from town. Bringing up Rankin and Trombly gained her nothing. She rehearsed her line to Su Lee exactly. Stay away from my husband or I'll call the cops. Su Lee would not welcome the cops peering to her history and Mary Ellen believed something else lurked in her past. Maybe more hints or unexplained deaths or perhaps an incident that triggered Su Lee's behavior.

* * *

Mary Ellen rapped a second time on the metal condo door. Her leg muscles were weak and she wrung her hands. She tried to pick a title for that weird song piped into her answering machine. Death was the only word bouncing through her head as she pounded louder now. " Open up this damn place! Open up you slut!"

She kicked the hall door, burst outside and stomped around the building. At the sliders she peered through the opening between the drapes into a darkened apartment with black furniture on a stark white rug. Other chrome framed, black leather chairs added to the modern decor. She grabbed a wide concrete patio brick but slowly lowered the brick and knocked her knuckles on the glass. " Damn you! Damn you!"

With her teeth clamped, Mary Ellen rushed back to the Land Rover. She swung open the door, shaking the car as she hopped inside. With hands squeezed around the steering wheel, she pushed her head forward. Somehow she needed to find this woman. She started the car, but and ground the starter. " I'll fix you, you little slut."

Mary Ellen depressed the micro cassette recorder's play button and the song reverberated throughout the car. She pushed the rewind button, producing a high pitched whine, until the recorder clicked off. Then she reached for her cell phone, and punched the button for Su Lee's number, programmed earlier that morning. Su Lee's name came up on the LCD display and she hit the **SEND** button.

When the line rang, she looked back the white condo drapes thirty feet away. The ringing stopped and a smooth clear voice filled the cell phone. " This is Su Lee. I want to talk. Call me back."

She figured it was odd asking someone to call back. The machine beeped and she pushed **PLAY**.

You never cared about the night scene

You wanted to get out unfazed

Should have left me alone

Should have left me alone

And now you're dead.

Now you're dead.

She ended the call and smiled at the house. " Touché, baby." Mary Ellen shut off the machine when Wilma's voice, from a message two days ago, came over the cassette. She navigated the Land Rover around the building. A brief smile touched her face and for a moment she had gained a slight revenge and satisfaction.

9

Kel, wearing his light blue shirt and navy pants, appeared around the corner of the garage. Mary Ellen set down the Post and stood. Danny turned up the yellow boom box next to the wading pool and he and his friend leaped into the main pool. With the resulting water explosion Kel scooted back along the cement. Angie wiped the water droplets from her bathing suit and turned to her mother. " Do they have to do that, Mom?"

" Danny, cool the cannon balls." She walked the long the edge of the pool, still confident about her triumph with the tape. " And turn down that box!"

In the sunlight his steely hair was grayer and he squinted his lacy green eyes. " Mary Ellen."

" I thought you left town, Kel."

" I did."

" Oh?"

He escorted her back to the glass table. " I made some calls."

" Calls? Why?" He sat in the soft vinyl chairs and she held the plastic lemonade pitcher. " Drink?"

" Yeah, sure."

She poured the pink pulp liquid into a tall clear glass and slid it across the patio table. " I had a little excitement here myself, but I took care of it."

Kel smacked his lips. " Yeah, what happened?"

" She called the machine, she did." Mary Ellen's upper lip curled and she enjoyed grimacing.

" What did she say?" Kel set the drink on the glass table. He looked concerned.

" Nothing. Here's what she did," said Mary Ellen. She sat on the opposite chair, leaned toward Kel and lowered her voice. " She puts this song on my machine. This macabre song."

" How do you know it was her?"

" Of course it was. The song went:

You never cared about the night scene

You wanted to get out unfazed

Should have left me alone

Should have left me alone

And now you're dead.

Now you're dead."

" That's bizarre."

" I fixed her," said Mary Ellen, sitting up straight.

" I don't understand."

" I tried to find her at the restaurant, but-"

" Look, Mary Ellen. I've told you, I don't think it's a good idea, you talking to her. Did she admit to seeing Tony?"

" She wasn't at work. Taking some time off."

" Good." He picked up the lemonade again.

" So I went to her apartment."

" You what?" Kel held the glass between the table and his mouth. " Not a good idea and I'll tell you why."

" Don't worry, she wasn't there. So, I used my microcassette and my cell phone. I piped it right back at her." She picked up her own glass, smiled and sipped the cool ice into her mouth. Still swallowing, she furrowed her brow. " What were you going to tell me?"

" I called Mrs. Trombly, except she's now Mrs. Don Bates. She lives in Delaware across the bay."

Danny leaped into the pool again, splashing his sister. When he surfaced he laughed as he treaded water and Angie bolted with her towel toward the house. Mary Ellen pointed at him. " Fifteen minutes, Dan."

" Come on, Mom."

" You heard her, Mr. Fresco," said Kel in his authoritative voice. Danny pursed his lips, crawled from the pool to the side wicker chair and folded his arms. Kel raised his brows. " Sometimes you need the rough arm of the law."

Mary Ellen smiled. "What did Mrs. Bates say?"

Kel stared at her for a few seconds as if he were holding back. "Trombly used to play darts and meet with his buddies on Tuesday nights. He ran into Su Lee because she was the bartender. This was three years ago. Mrs. Bates caught Trombly with Su Lee down at Sampson's Beach late at night under the stars. They were, ah... it doesn't matter."

"Yeah, it matters."

"They were, shall we say, fooling around on the beach. Trombly had four kids and was thirty-nine years old. Su Lee was nineteen."

"The important word: was... What about the car ramps?"

"Now, that's where this gets interesting. Cops say he had the tire too far over the lip of the ramp, but Mrs. Bates swears Su Lee was involved."

"What makes her say that?" asked Mary Ellen.

"She says her late husband was a perfectionist. He would have checked the position of the tire."

"What did she do, Kel, come in and push the car over herself? She's in good shape but she not super woman. At least I don't think she is."

Kel leaned back in the wicker chair, slowly hoisted the lemonade and gazed over the bay. "Listen, I haven't got anything substantial. I don't even have anything I could go to the local cops

with, Mary Ellen. But I have a gut feeling and that gut feeling tells me Su Lee was responsible for that car falling on Trombly."

"Where was his house?"

"Centennial Drive, number forty-eight. Mrs. Bates sold the house within a few months after his death."

"What about the ramps?" asked Mary Ellen.

"*She has them.* I'm going to see if I can personally look at them."

"Maybe she did something to the tire, Kel."

Kel shook his head and twisted his lips. "I don't know but I saw the police report. The car fell on him."

Mary Ellen clenched her fist and stood. Danny called out about going back in the pool. She waved him back and did not notice whether he did another cannon ball. "How do you arrange for a car to fall on somebody?"

"I've been thinking about that for hours and coming up short. I've got a message into Rankin's wife. And the next question will be: How do you arrange for a guy to fall off a jetty, bump his head on the rocks and be swept out to sea?"

"Sabotage the rocks so he slips."

"I have that report, too. Nothing out of place. Damn, this is so frustrating. Listen, I have to get to work but I have the next few days off. My advice to you, young lady, is to stay the hell away from Miss Su Lee."

Kel's eyes were luminescent within his tanned wrinkled face. She squeezed his hand. " Maybe we're just imagining things because of what Tony did."

He thought for a time and glanced at Danny before he looked back. " I don't think so. Here's the thing: Su Lee is very clever and secretive in her relationships with married men. That's a damned fact. About the only fact we have in this case. The other fact is that two men she was seeing on the sly died in freak accidents. If she killed them, she executed the murders perfectly."

Mary Ellen nodded and wrapped her arms over her chest. " You've convinced me. I won't confront her."

" You already have with that tape routine."

" I know. The person I need to confront is Tony when he comes back here Thursday night."

10

Several times Mary Ellen drove by Barnacle Bill's but did not see the Firebird. Kel called and said he finally connected with Mrs. Rankin by phone, but she was reluctant to speak about her husband's untimely death. Although she never found Su Lee with her husband, reports from the bar and a resort in the Pocanos placed her husband with Su Lee during a winter weekend getaway eighteen months ago. Mrs. Rankin did not suspect Su Lee was involved in Rankin's death, but was sorry she and her husband did not resolve the affair before he died. Kel talked about driving to the Pocanos.

On Wednesday evening Mary Ellen and Wilma brought the kids to a concert under the tent downtown. The rock band was louder than Danny's boom box and the bass shook her, but the kids seemed to like the music. As she scanned the group inside for Kel, her cell phone buzzed in her pocketbook. " Hello."

" Mary Ellen, this is Sylvia."

Mary Ellen's eyes popped open at the sound of her Tupperburg neighbor's shrill voice. " Sylvia, finally decide to spend a few days at Binghampton Beach?"

" The sand and me don't mix and salt water is so sticky. Listen, I think you should know I called the cops."

" You what?"

" I called the cops."

" What?"

" Well, it all started two nights ago when I saw the car, actually Harold saw the car."

Mary Ellen turned in the creaky wood chair and spoke in a lower voice. " What car is this?"

" The orange sports thing."

" Firebird?" Her heart caught up with her emotions. " An orange Firebird?"

" Yes, that was the car."

She stood and told the kids she would return. " What was the car doing near my house?"

" Well, I don't rightly know. The first night the car keeps turning around in the cul-de-sac. That's when Harold got suspicious. We didn't call the police until tonight."

Mary Ellen stepped under the tent flap near the support pole. The bright halogen lights atop the creosote coated telephone pole lighted the grassy field. " Did they get her?"

" Get who?"

" Su Lee."

" Suzy who?"

" Why did you call the cops tonight?" asked Mary Ellen, standing between two of the tent support ropes.

" Harold told me to."

" I mean *why*?"

" The car. It was parked in your driveway for a good fifteen minutes and I know you're in Binghampton Beach for the summer and Tony, he left for Seattle. So, Harold asks, and rightly so I might ad, why is this car in the Frescos' driveway?"

" Well?"

" It was gone when the cops got here."

" Did you see her?" The adrenaline shot into Mary Ellen's stomach. " Did you?"

" We didn't see anybody," said Sylvia.

" Then you got the plate number?"

" Well, no. Harold didn't want me to go outside until the police got here."

" Damn her!"

" Damn who?"

" Never mind. Sylvia, you have to call me right away if you see the car again. Did the cops go in the house?"

Sylvia paused, probably afraid to tell Mary Ellen what she had done. " I let them in. Is that all right?"

" Yes, that was the right thing to do. Yes. And did they find anything out of place?"

" Well, they just called the beach house a few minutes ago, I know that. No, everything was okay."

Mary Ellen closed her eyes and thought the jolting news might cause her to lose her footing. " You did... the right thing. Thank you, Sylvia."

" Oh, good. Harold and I were concerned we may have overstepped our authority. And I will call you if we see that car again. What was it a Firehawk?"

" Firebird," said Mary Ellen, her eyes still closed.

" Right, right. Everything is okay here. Don't you worry."

" Thank you."

" Night..."

Mary Ellen ended the transmission, but she stood rigid, gripping the phone as if she were going to crush it. She kept her eyes closed as the music rocked behind her and the warm bay breezes brushed her face and hair. Her first concern was Tony's safety and whether Su Lee had arrived at the Tupperburg house to perform some act of sabotage, resulting in Tony's accidental death.

" Mary Ellen." When she opened her eyes Kel stood in his Oriole's cap, jeans and some brightly colored silk screen emblazoned over his black jersey. " You all right, kiddo?"

" No. No, I'm not all right at all, Kel."

" What's the matter?"

She threw her arms around him. His upper body was stronger than she had realized. " That damn bitch is in Tupperburg! My next-door neighbor just called the cops because the Firebird was in the driveway. The second night in a row Miss Su Lee was cruising the cul-de-sac."

" Then they got her?"

Mary Ellen stepped back and put the cell phone in her jeans pocket. " No, of course not. She's too slick for that. What was she doing in Tupperburg?"

" I don't know."

" Oh, I know. She's trying to kill my husband is what she's trying to do. I don't want Tony setting foot in that house. I want him to fly directly from Buffalo to Binghamton Beach."

Kel stroked his chin and glanced into the concert. " You know that's probably not a bad idea."

" And I'm calling the cops here and in Tupperburg."

" No, let me handle this." She wanted to argue, but she was eager to defer the responsibility. " I agree about Tupperburg. Let the cops search that house, look specifically for things that might be booby trapped. But let's not talk about it."

" Why the hell not? It should be pretty obvious what she's up to!"

Kel's tense eyes told her something else was afoot.

" I've been trying to open the two accidents as murder cases and I have been turned down flatly by Chief Hawkins here in town. They can't see it. What these guys need is proof."

She partially closed her eyes as she shook her head. " How can this be allowed to go on, Kel? That woman is a murderer."

" We don't have absolute proof she killed those two guys. But I'm working on it. But I do think it's a good idea to get Tony directly back here. I don't want to get a phone call saying he fell down the stairs and broke his neck."

" If she tries anything, I'll kill her myself. I will."

11

Mary Ellen, determined to place her marriage back on course, waited alone inside airport's tiny terminal west of town. She had not told Tony how the Tupperburg police had searched the cul-de-sac house after reports of Su Lee's car in the driveway. Kel spoke with Chief Hawkins in Binghampton Beach for only a few minutes, but his request to bring Su Lee in for questioning went unanswered. Mary Ellen did not understand why Hawkins and the others seemed to take a natural dislike to Kel. Any theory or advice Kel offered was immediately rejected.

Maybe Su Lee did not have time to find a way to kill Tony back in Tupperburg. With her husband not yet back from Seattle Mary Ellen discounted any romantic rendezvous explaining Su Lee's presence in Tupperburg. A couple of times she parked the Land Rover near Su Lee's condo and had waited for the orange Firebird to return from Pennsylvania. But Su Lee's car never arrived; thwarting Mary Ellen's eagerness to confront her about the dog, Tupperburg, and passes she made at Tony.

In the terminal she spotted the tiny propeller driven plane over the ocean, north of town. The wings glided through the air currents and the tiny white and maroon plane finally dipped to-

ward the airfield. With the accumulating emotion about Su Lee, an anxiety wave swept over Mary Ellen, and she prayed the aircraft would not crash. The spinning propellers' buzz saw engines grew louder as she searched for Tony inside the dark, side portal windows. The forward tires hit the runway first, the plane bounced, but the brakes stiffened, screeched and the craft slowed to an eventual stop along the runway.

She needed to bury whatever happened at the beach house last Sunday afternoon. The plane taxied on the asphalt and her dark haired husband waved through the plane's second oval window. Maybe he, too, wanted to forget whatever Su Lee had thrust upon him.

* * *

Tony never mentioned Su Lee and neither did Mary Ellen. Nor did she reveal Kel's theories about the two accidental deaths in Binghampton Beach. She even kept the Firebird's sojourn to Tuppersburg from her husband as she glanced down at the assortment of mums and daisies Tony had purchased in the airport. A new revitalization swept through the relationship as she held husband's hand. Tony turned to her as she drove past the tent downtown. "I wasn't going to tell you this."

Su Lee's round face and deep black hair flashed into her head.

" Tell me what?"

" I did a lot of thinking in Seattle. I called the company and told them I was taking the next two weeks off to be with you guys at the beach house."

" Come on," she smiled through misty eyes. " What did your boss say?"

" He extended his congratulations on the Seattle deal and said to take as long as I want."

She smiled a lip smile and squeezed his hand. " Tony, that's wonderful. That is so *great*. Danny's going to be ecstatic. With baseball ending, he needs someone to play ball with him."

" Sign me up. I'm ready to take the field. And you and I will get away for a few days. Maybe go up into Calvert Country and stay at a bed and breakfast. How does that sound?"

" That sounds... just great." She caught sight of Barnacle Bill's, but did not mention how she had also cased the parking lot for the last few days.

" I never did anything with her."

She looked into her husband's dark eyes. " I just want to forget it."

" She was a lot of fun. Great personality. But I never responded to her advances."

" Then she did try and lasso you in."

" She did. Yes. But I'm telling you, I told her I wasn't interested."

" That's behind us now."

" Okay."

As they moved past the downtown buildings, he seemed relieved she had not grilled him, but she was still unsure whether his story was a cover. Kel's words about no man being able to resist Su Lee's charms continued to plague her. She made a bold attempt to obliterate any thought of Su Lee and a possible affair. Now was the chance for her to start over with Tony and maybe this whole Su Lee thing might have a positive effect.

* * *

Under the outside spotlights, with the yellow boom box behind the wading pool, Tony belted the volleyball into the darkness above the outside lights. Danny lunged to his right, leaped and hit the ball straight up. Angie watched the ball spin upward and slowly drop to the grass. Danny shot to his feet and chided her for not trying to hit the ball. " You let it drop. You just let it drop!"

" Don't be so uptight," said Shane.

" I hit the ball right to her," replied Danny.

" Cool it, Dan. You guys are still up by five points," said Tony.

" Come on you get one more point and it's all over. Then we'll go inside and have some chocolate sauce and ice cream."

" Fattening," said Shane, bolting off the court. She moved through the kitchen sliders.

" Good riddens," said Danny and Tony smacked the ball again. Danny made another diving hit, this time sending the ball over the net to Mary Ellen. She slapped her ball to Tony. Tony swung his hand through the air, but the ball bounced against the net. She wondered as Danny cheered, whether Tony had purposefully lost the game. Danny ducked under the net and Tony gave him a high five.

" Nice game, Dad... You really gonna be here for two weeks?"

" Yes, sir. You want to help me paint the house?"

" Can I, Mom?"

Mary Ellen ruffled his hair. " Maybe, we'll see what the schedule's going to be." She looked at Tony and smiled as Danny ran across the patio to the kitchen sliders. " I'm glad you're back."

Tony put his arm around her and they walked together behind Shane to the sliders. " It might be good for Danny to work with me painting."

" I don't want him up on the ladder."

" No," said Tony, pulling open the slider. " I'd keep him on the lower panels. If he wants to."

She stepped into the air-conditioned kitchen. Danny already had the white striped ice cream tub out of the refrigerator. " You don't waste any time, hot shot."

" Bowls or plates?" asked Tony at the cabinets.

" Bowls," said Mary Ellen. The yellow light on the answering machine flashed like a ship's distress beacon. Her stomach fluttered and Su Lee's weird musical lyrics resonated in her head.

" Chocolate Slam Ice Cream?" asked Tony, taking out the scoop. Mary Ellen kept staring the pulsing light. " I haven't had ice cream in months. This looks good. Mary Ellen."

" Yeah," she said turning away, but it was as if the light sent a wireless signal into her nervous system. She tried not to look back.

" Chocolate Slam is a new flavor at Thompsons."

" I should charge you guys for this soda fountain work," said Tony, scraping the chrome scoop into the creamy solid ice cream. He plopped the first rounded chunk into Danny's dish.

" I want the whole thing," said Danny.

Mary Ellen fought the temptation, but finally succumbed.

" Listen, maybe we can eat this out on the patio."

" It's too hot out there," said Danny.

" It's a nice summer's night."

" Come on, Mom," said Shane.

" Yeah, come on, Mom," added Tony, continuing to scoop.

She nodded and walked away from the machine. Su Lee must have returned to Binghampton Beach. Would she be so brazen to put the music back on the machine? Mary Ellen hugged Tony and smiled, but she was debating whether to tell Tony about the music and the Firebird back in Tupperburg. " Tony, we need to talk."

" Sure, sweetheart. We've got two weeks to talk about anything. One scoop enough?"

" Yup."

" Hey, there's somebody on the machine," said Shane.

Mary Ellen gulped and was about to call out, but Shane hit the playback button. She gripped the counter as the tape rewound and closed her eyes. The cassette clicked and readjusted inside the answering machine and for a moment a hiss spewed through the speaker.

" Hi, Mary. This is the summer baseball League. Just letting you know the final cookout is this Saturday at Norton Field." Mary Ellen exhaled. " Now, in response to your question, don't bother bringing anything. We have hot dogs and burgers. Plenty of soda. See you there."

" Well, I'm looking forward to that," said Tony " You had a good season, didn't you, Danny?"

" Yeah, I did all right."

" Led the league in home runs."

" I wished I had seen more of the games," said Tony.

You never cared about the night scene
You wanted to get out unfazed
Should have left me alone
Should have left me alone
And now you're dead.
Now you're dead.

Tony held the scoop and his eyes focused on the machine. His brow deepened. He slowly set down the scoop as Danny made a sour expression.

"What was that?" asked Shane, staring at the machine.

"Hard Rock Raunchy. Song called: And Now You're Dead.," said Tony.

"You listen to that?" asked Shane.

"No, I don't." His face contorted and he stepped back from the counter. "Excuse me. I'm going upstairs. I need some privacy."

Mary Ellen looked deeply into his eyes for only a second as he passed and started down the front hall. He leaped up the front stairs two steps at a time. Again she peered at the machine. Tomorrow she would go one of the downtown stores and purchase a caller ID.

"Who would put that on our machine?" asked Shane.

" I don't know," said Mary Ellen. Tony had easily identified the music and headed upstairs. Her hands tightened as she looked toward the stairs and imagined crushing the answering machine tape.

" Mom, can I have some more ice cream?" asked Danny, the scope in his hand.

" Sure..." She wandered down the hall and gazed at the light bending across the second floor carpet. Her throat tightened as she placed her foot on the stair runner. Something held her back from bounding up the stairs. All the doubts about Tony now resurfaced as she finally trudged up the stairs. Five steps away from the second floor she heard Tony's voice from the third floor. His words were not clear but his tone was defiant and words booming. As she neared the third floor staircase, the end of his conversation gave her hope.

" ... Just get out of my life!"

The ceiling shook when he slammed the phone. She backed along the balustrade and retraced her steps to the first floor. Danny was now eating from the ice cream container. " Daniel Fresco!"

" Oh, no." Danny gripped a large spoon and chocolate ice cream rimmed his mouth.

" I told him, Mom.," said Shane.

" All right." Her hand shook as she retrieved a face cloth from the drawer and saturated the fabric under running water. Tony's

words were both confusing and frightening. Was he telling his lover not to call again or was he telling a demented young woman to stay off his answering machine and out of his life?

" Well," said Tony, appearing in the hall. His face was unusually tense. " What do you say we see what's on TV tonight?"

Mary Ellen dragged the wet face cloth over the smudged chocolate on Danny's face. She wanted to confront him about Su Lee. " What do you suggest?"

" How about something classic?" asked Tony.

" Classic is boring," said Shane.

" Where's Angie?" asked Tony. " I want this to be a family activity."

" Angie's in her room listening to the Girls Night Out," said Danny. Mary Ellen set the face cloth on the counter. " I hate the Girls Night Out."

" No comment," said Tony. Mary Ellen could see him looking in her direction. " What would you like to see, Mary Ellen?"

She looked up with moist eyes and swallowed once. " Whatever you want."

" Well, let's check what we have."

As he retreated into the family room Mary Ellen slipped around the corner and opened the sliders. The outside air remained warm and the moon had risen over the bay. She knew Tony would follow her onto the patio. More than his potential involvement with

Su Lee, his scolding on the third floor phone confirmed the tramp had indeed left the music on the answering machine. Mary Ellen clamped her arms over her chest and contemplated how far this woman would push.

" Mary Ellen, are you all right?" asked Tony, poking his head through the sliders.

" Sure."

He closed the sliders behind her and she felt his warming hands on her shoulders. " You heard my phone call."

" Yeah," she said, trying to hold back the tears.

" Listen, this woman is bad news. There's something about her that won't stop."

" I don't want to hear this, Tony. I want to just forget it!"

He held her arms and slowly turned her in the moonlight.

" She came after-"

" Tony... I'm doing my best," she said through the tears, " to get through this. To move beyond this. I don't think I want to know any more."

" She is not a normal person. I'm telling you I'm innocent. I'll admit I was taken by her personality at the restaurant, but I never invited her over here."

" Then she was over here? You were lying to me!"

" I didn't want you to think something else went on," he said, releasing his grip.

" And am I supposed believe you now? I saw the damn car in the driveway and you made me look like as fool!" She stomped across the patio, but he trailed her and grabbed her shoulders again. " Leave me alone! Get you're hands off me. Where else have they been?"

" I'm telling you... the truth. She came over here while I was painting. And... and she picked up brush to help. I'm telling you that I repeatedly told her to leave."

" Then why didn't she?"

" Because she's crazy..." Tony's teeth crunched as he spoke. " She keeps painting and I'm getting madder."

" So, what's the big secret? Why couldn't you tell me this?"

" Because she puts down the brush about fifteen minutes later. She has paint all over her shoulder. She takes... off her top and heads around the house. I hear the outside shower going. How could I tell you this?"

" You're telling me this bitch was naked in my outside shower?"

" Listen, I stayed out front. I just kept painting. She came out of the house later. Maybe fifteen minutes later."

Mary Ellen folded her arms. Su Lee had ample time inside the house to locate a set of keys. " Well, I want you to know that she was in this house after you left, Tony. She had the keys to the house! All the locks are changed. I don't know if I believe you about

being on the ladder. You keep changing your story, letting out bits and pieces."

Tony clenched his fists. " I tell you. It's the truth."

" And do you know she was in our driveway in Tupperburg?"

" What?"

" Sylvia called me. The police have been involved. How would she get our address? There's more going on here, Tony. You were making love to that woman."

" No."

She stormed along the pool and onto the scrub brush trail. Her shadow followed the stark silver moonlight on the bushes as Tony moved behind her. She reached the sands a few seconds later, sliding as she marched parallel to the cracking waves off shore. Tony remained a distance behind her, but when she stopped, he ran across the sands and held her. She released tears and did not stop as her arms locked around his chest. Her thoughts were muddled. In the frenzy, making judgments about his confession was ludicrous. Maybe it was time to close up the beach house, leave Binghampton Beach, and go home to Tupperburg.

12

At the glass patio table Mary Ellen squeezed the clear cup filled with black coffee. A sleepless night exacerbated her insecurity and exaggerated the Su Lee threat. Tony had said nothing as he walked her back to the house and apologized later. Still she carried a quilt to the third floor couch. At first she drifted off, but suddenly woke near midnight, her heart racing and anxiety pushing against her skin. She crossed the third floor, positioned her arms on the window ledge and for the next five hours stared at the white caps across the bay waters.

She feared her marriage to Tony was over. If only he had admitted Su Lee was at the house Sunday afternoon. Tony had made overtures to her during breakfast, but she remained silent and retreated outside. He mentioned taking the kids in town later after he finished some painting. Mary Ellen watched him lift the long aluminum ladder over his shoulder and head out front. She wanted to leave and leave soon. Binghampton Beach, a summer retreat once so dear to her heart, was now an open wound. She only wished she had the opportunity to confront Su Lee directly.

* * *

Mary Ellen sat rigid in the vinyl beach chair and rolled the small rocks in the sand with her toes. Shane lay asleep on the blanket as Danny played with friends in the water. Angie was over a Susan Welles' house for the day. For two hours Mary Ellen weighed the possibilities of divorce and how her kids would be affected by a breakup. What Tony did with Su Lee was not easily forgiven. The kids would need therapy and would see Tony only during visitation time. The thought of going through a divorce trial scared her.

Numerous sailboats sliced the bay's deep blue waters as jet skies and faster craft shot across inner shoreline. Tony had always talked about getting a boat, but sailing these waters seemed as improbable as her future with him. She took in the salt air and checked the enclosed phone booth back at the concession stand. Even without her cell phone, in ten minutes she could easily book a flight back to Philadelphia. In two hours they could be on the connecting flight. In six hours she could be home in Tupperburg.

As she stood in the sand and stretched, wispy strands of black hair appeared near the colored surfboards lined against the cinder block wall. Su Lee, sporting her red bikini, strutted toward the north end of the beach. "Shane, I'll be right back."

"What?" Shane asked, raising her head.

" I'm going to the concession. I'll be right back."

Shane nodded and put her head down on the towel. Mary Ellen clenched her fists and skidded across the hot sand. Su Lee's tiny form blended into the parking lot haze and she gravitated toward the mass of cars across the beach. Mary Ellen kicked up the loose sand as the sun cooked her skin and she breathed rapidly next to the barrier fence. " Su Lee!"

Su Lee stopped but did not immediately turn. It was as if she knew Mary Ellen was running along the fence. She had a coy smile across her thin lips when she did turn and her perfect form was only enhanced by the sheen of her midnight hair. " Are you calling me?"

Mary Ellen caught her breath as she crossed the street.

" Yeah, I'm calling you."

" You're out of shape."

" Shut up."

" You have a lot of balls telling me to shut up, lady!" She moved closer to Mary Ellen until the Night Sin mixed with the sultry salt air.

" Then why don't you stay the hell away from my husband?"

" Oh, the little woman..."

" Where's my dog?" asked Mary Ellen.

" You have a problem with your dog?"

" You slut!"

" Nobody calls me a slut," she said, grabbing Mary Ellen's windbreaker. " You're as frumpy as he described you."

" My husband would never say that."

Su Lee released her grip and rolled her lips as she spoke slowly.

" You'd be surprised what your husband would say... and do."

" Liar!"

" Oh, really? I can't help it if frumpy can't hold onto her man and he goes out seeking fresh game."

" You were in my shower. You were in my bed!"

" Your husband likes soap rubbed all over his body."

Mary Ellen raised her hand to strike her face, but Su Lee moved quickly, caught her wrist and wrapped her muscular leg around Mary Ellen's knee. With her other hand she pinched Mary Ellen's chin. Her dark eyes were fiery and her teeth perfect and white. " He's mine."

Su Lee shoved her shoulders. Mary Ellen stumbled, hit the hot tar hard and scraped her hands. Su Lee walked briskly to the Firebird, parked along the stockade fence, and smiled as she opened the door. She started the loud engine and backed out fast enough to trace the tires across the surface. In a few seconds she raced around the lot and swerved out the front entrance.

Mary Ellen slowly sat up. She knew she wanted to kill Su Lee as the car flew along the telephone poles down the highway. Her

hands were stinging and red, but she managed to stand. She inched her way into street and headed back to the beach. Tony unexpectedly appeared by the lifeguard chair and jogged up the beach. Mary Ellen grit her teeth as the Firebird rounded the bend near the tidal ponds. "Damn you! Damn you!"

Several people on the beach looked up and Tony, still wearing his painting shorts and tank, top called out. "Mary Ellen, what were you doing in the street? What's the problem?"

Her faced flushed, she choked on her words. "What's the problem? Her! She was just here! She threatened me and called me frumpy! Sound familiar?"

"What?"

"She told me how she used the shower and how you like the soap rubbed on your body. That's sick!"

"Forget about her."

"Just like that."

"Yes. The reason I came down here was to tell you I called Bromby's Cafe and they're sending quiche and an entire meal at five."

She closed her eyes and formed a fixed grin. "Don't you think you're a little late, Tony? You think you're just going to pick everything up like nothing ever happened? Well, that's bullshit. I'm out of here and I'm out of this marriage."

" Wait," he said, grabbing her arm. " I haven't done anything wrong."

" Maybe in your own head. I'm booking a plane out of here right now and I'm taking the kids."

" Oh, no. God, no."

" You should have thought of that before you dropped your drawers." She stomped across the burning sand again, seeking shelter below the concession overhang. Tony remained staked in the sand, his hands on his hips as she lifted the pay phone and punched in 411. " I want Delta Air Lines number." She removed a pen from her pocket and jotted the Delta number on a grocery sales receipt. Tony moved behind the cinder blocks. She hesitated, but the image of Su Lee naked in the shower snapped back to her head. Mary Ellen pushed the toll free number. The time had come to leave Binghampton Beach.

* * *

Back in the chair, the sun having passed behind her, Mary Ellen stared at the magazine and then threw it in her plastic beach basket. Danny was busy near the incoming tide, constructing a huge sand castle with his friends as Shane stood past her knees in the water and talked to several of her girlfriends. Mary Ellen leaned back in the chair and studied the clouds smattered several

thousand feet above her. Each elongated cloud merged with its rotating and swirling partner, and formed new, more elaborate patterns. She imagined a puffy cheek angel blowing the wind across the sky.

" Penny for your thoughts," said Kel, his Oriole's hat silhouetted against the sun, a few feet away.

Mary Ellen shielded her eyes. " Kel, we're leaving Binghampton Beach at six o'clock."

" Do your kids know this?"

" No."

" I think you're jumping the gun, kiddo. I talked to Tony on the ladder no more than an hour ago. He swears he never came on to her or did any funny stuff."

" Sure."

" He was supposed to come over here," said Kel, sitting down in the sand.

" Oh, he came over here with that dinner routine. Did you tell him to do that?"

" Nope."

" Well, it's all over."

" You're not going anywhere," said Kel.

She crossed her arms. " Oh, really and just who the hell are you telling me that?"

He leaned closer than he ever had and his tone was harsh.

" Someone who thinks this woman was after your husband and couldn't get him, so she kept after him, broke into your house and tried to make him look bad with the perfume in the bed and the damned music."

" I confronted her."

" You did?"

" And she grabbed me and pushed me to the pavement. I hate her. I hate what she's done to my marriage."

" Any witnesses?"

" No."

" There never is... I'm going to talk with Hawkins." Kel squinted and his cracked lips almost touched. " Listen, I have some preliminary stuff. I've been working on. Seems that nine years ago, Su Lee was involved with this older guy. She was only fourteen and this guy was thirty-three. I know he dumped her but I don't know what else happened."

" Kel, I don't care any more."

" Suppose he was the first victim. I'm trying to track down his address."

" Good, you have fun. We're leaving."

" Give me a couple of hours. I'm going to put an end her she-nanigans real fast."

" I told you I don't care. I don't care about Trombly. I don't care about Rankin. Maybe she did something, maybe she didn't. Go investigate it. My marriage is over."

Kel bit his lower lip and stood. His thatched green eyes were bold as he spun in the sand. She closed her eyes and did not watch him leave. Why had she let her anger spill onto him? The tension tightened in her temples as she sprang from the chair and marched down to the ocean. The cold salt water rushed up the berm and soothed her tired feet. Kel was doing his best to save the marriage and she could not fault him. She wandered deeper through the waves as they broke near shore and stood in the chilled water up to her thighs. No matter what Kel said, the facts had not changed. She shook her head, but her resentment with Tony would not go away. He had failed the relationship, his kids and had let her down.

" Mom," said Danny, washing the sand off his hands. " Can we go home now?"

" We are going home, Danny."

13

Mary Ellen had doubts as she drove the Land Rover slowly through the two rock towers at the Hazelton entrance. Maybe Kel was right. She should give Tony another chance and look into Su Lee's past. Something about Su Lee aroused an intense anger and she was intrigued by the link between Su Lee and married men. Finding out the truth about Su Lee and possible links to murder would bring her to justice. She rounded the bend onto Durango, near Wilma's red ranch and drove through the thicket toward the beach house. Danny continued a chorus about being hungry he had begun back at the concession.

She reached the top of the hill, but applied the brakes quickly. A black Binghamton Beach police cruiser, blue lights flashing, blocked the road. More cruisers and Kel's security car were parked along the grass and in her gravel driveway. Her heart pounded as one of the officers near raced toward the Land Rover. "Mrs. Fresco?"

"What happened?"

"I think you should step outside here, Mam'," he said, looking at the kids in the back seat.

She left the engine running and burst out the door. "What the hell is going on?"

He trotted along with her until they reached the cruiser and the assortment of amplified voices blasting over the police radios.

"Your husband... he had an accident."

"Oh, God. Oh, God. She did it. She finally did it!"

"He fell from the ladder. I'm sorry. We found him dead."

"Tony!" As she ran from the cruiser, she spotted the ladder still propped against the beach house adjacent to the garage. Kel turned from the officers and jogged up the gravel driveway.

"Tony!"

Kel darted like a defensive lineman after the quarterback and placed his hands on her shoulders as she struggled in the loose stones. Over his shoulder a green plastic body bag was dropped on the garage cement like a quick UPS delivery. A dented silver paint bucket lay in front of a huge pool of gray stain extending to the splattered concrete. The wide paintbrush lay in the gravel. "Come on, Mary Ellen, let's get you out of here."

"No, no... Tony!"

"There's nothing we can do right now."

"She did it! You know she did it!"

"We don't know anything. The ladder is up there. There is nothing wrong with the ladder. I think he just fell."

" No, God, no!" She flipped her head wildly and Kel shook her. " It's all my fault. I should have listen to him. I should have listened to you!"

His muscles tensed and he physically dragged her down the driveway. Danny was now out of the car. " Danny, get back inside!"

" What's the matter, Kel?" he yelled, still standing next to the open door.

" Just get back inside," said Kel. He turned to the officer at the cruiser. " Can somebody get the neighbor, Mrs. Bloomenthol?"

" Good idea, Kel."

" Something happened to Dad," said Danny.

Kel tightened his eyes, but Mary Ellen broke his grip and sprinted away. She pivoted at the driveway and did not attract the attention of the cops until she was within fifteen feet of the body bag. A husky guy with a blonde crewcut leaped away from the other cops and halted her progress. " My husband! My husband!"

" I'm sorry, Mrs. Fresco."

" Give us a few minutes here," said the older cop.

Mary Ellen looked up at the aluminum ladder, splattered with gray stain. " That ladder was sabotaged! "

" What?"

" I'm telling you she did something to it!" Mary Ellen closed her eyes. The strain was pushing her endurance to the limit. " My

husband wouldn't fall off a ladder! I just talked to him on the beach!"

The cop pointed to the ladder. " It's an aluminum ladder designed to hold somebody who weighs three hundred pounds. It's held together with metal rivets. I'm sorry, Mrs. Fresco, he must have lost his footing. There's nothing wrong with that ladder."

Another cop moved down the driveway. " Mrs. Fresco, we've located your neighbor, Mrs. Bloomenthol. She'll take your children into her house. I parked your car off the road."

He handed the car keys to her. Mary Ellen gripped the keys and stared at the body bag. Somehow she wanted to bring Tony back. She wanted to tell him she loved him. Going back to Tuppersburg was just an angry reaction to last Sunday. She wanted to listen more attentively to what he had to say about Su Lee's presence at the beach house.

" Mrs. Fresco, why don't you let Officer Grinwald bring you to your neighbor's house?"

" Okay..." She turned away from Tony's body and started with Grinwald down the driveway, but she stopped and faced the older officer. " I need to tell you about a woman who broke into my house."

* * *

Kel skidded from the Binghampton police station lot. For three hours, even after he had stopped Mary Ellen from screaming into Su Lee's answering machine, and sent her and the kids on the propeller driven plane back to Philadelphia, he pleaded with Hawkins to bring Su Lee down to the station. Hawkins had no evidence to legally bring her in and question her. The chief knew Kel's record in Buffalo and how he was reprimanded and forced into an early retirement for not having evidence. Kel was convinced he was right in that case eight years ago and now he was more certain Su Lee liked to get involved and murder married men. Hawkins told him to go back to his trailer.

Kel pictured every inch of the ladder as he drove under the streetlights toward Barnacle Bill's. He checked that ladder and the cops had checked it. The ladder was covered with gray stain drips, but structurally intact. As he braked for the Conclave Road, he was also certain Su Lee killed Tony, but he could not figure it out how she did it.

He gnashed his teeth as he marched to the door and thought of the sedated Mary Ellen leaving on the plane. The kids were hysterical. He yanked back the restaurant door and his eyes caught Su Lee. She wore a tight pink top and blue shorts and set two beers on the counter. Kel stormed past the patrons as she smiled and pushed back her long hair. She did not spot him until he was almost at the

end of the bar. If she had heard about Tony's death, she never showed it on her smooth face. " Mr. Kel."

" You low-life little bitch."

" Watch it, Pops," said a stocky guy to his right.

She never flinched and spoke in a calm voice. " This is a public place. You high?"

" Oh, you're good. You're the best." Kel pointed at her and leaned between two guys at the bar. " I don't care how long it takes. You might as well set your talons on me because I'm not going to rest until I prove what you did."

" I don't understand." She wiped the counter clean and moved from behind the bar. " Is something wrong?"

Kel stared into her dark eyes. " I'm telling you. You're sick. That man was married and his kids are devastated right now!"

" Are you talking about Tony Fresco?"

" How did you do it?"

" You seem to think I have these magical powers," she said. " I'm sorry he's dead. I enjoyed talking with him. He was an entertaining man. And I'm sorry for his kids."

" Yeah, I bet you are. Did you distract him like you did on Sunday? Maybe that's when you really wanted it to happen. Maybe took off your top and marched around under the ladder. Except I talked to their neighbor. You smartened up. Your car wasn't out there today."

" Cut the bullshit, Kelly. I didn't kill anybody. Why don't you leave before I call the manager. I have to get back to work."

Kel watched her shapely torso as she tiptoed behind the bar. She moved up to a couple of woman along the side and took orders for drinks. He staggered back and found a seat in the booth. He ordered a beer from one of the waitresses and wondered if his presence here would rattle Su Lee. In his imaginary scenario Tony was dipping his brush into the bucket hooked onto the ladder. Maybe she arrived from out back along the dock trail or she could have parked the car further down the development. He would question everyone in Hazelton until he was sure she did not drive the Firebird into the development. Just one witness would prompt Hawkins to begin the investigation.

He stared at her relentlessly but she had the discipline never to gaze across the bar. She knew he was there and she knew he was aware she killed Tony and the other men. The murder handle was exactly the same. He thought back to Trombly under the car. Even if she had distracted Trombly, her presence, no matter how alluring and captivating would not cause the car to collapse off the ramp. How could she hide tampered ramps from the police and the investigators?

He downed the rest of the beer and ordered a second mug. What about Rankin? Getting him out on the jetty would not require elaborate planning, but making him fall into a surging ocean and

drown was masterful. He started on the other beer. Each of the men who died was at risk. Rankin stood by a raging sea, Trombly was under a car, and Tony was thirty feet up a ladder. Sabotaging the rocks, the map, and the ladder was the only answer.

14

Kel promised Mary Ellen at the funeral he would purge the perishables from the refrigerator and pack things on a list she had faxed him from Tupperburg. The drugs made her appear stoic. Danny was with Mary Ellen's sister, but the two girls stood beside her, caught in a wave of tears as the casket was wheeled into the church. Kel kept thinking about the other deaths. Although he could not find answers, he had decided to pursue the lead about Su Lee's lover from nine years ago.

Early, the day after Tony was buried, Kel drove slowly through Binghampton Beach's quaint downtown and signaled for a space next to Bradbury's Hardware. Two days ago he met an old guy combing the beach for money with a metal detector. They talked about Tony's death and he mentioned Su Lee. The guy told him a man named Ronnie Chico dated Su Lee briefly years ago, but the relationship went sour.

Kel dropped a quarter in the meter and looked up at Bradbury's orange and green sign. Rows of shiny new lawn mowers were perfectly aligned along the clear sheet glass windows. He pulled open the aluminum-framed door and stepped into a store bulging with stock and pegboard lined aisles. The buzz of a key

machine and the whirling of the overhead fans were punctuated with the occasional ring of an old fashioned, mechanical cash register. Kel checked his notebook and pen, and adjusted his Oriole's hat as he headed toward a hefty man with black rim glasses behind the front counter.

" Hey, how ya doin'?"

" You Ronnie?" asked Kel.

" Not unless Ronnie put on a hundred pounds. They call us Mutt and Jeff." He had a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket and probably wanted to smoke one right now. " You wanna talk ta Ronnie?"

" Please."

" Hey, Ron-nie," he yelled toward the back room. " Ron-nie."

" I hear you, Joe," returned a muffled voice. " I'm finding that toilet ball."

" You gut people out here."

" Thanks," said Kel, holding his notebook. He glanced around the store and scanned the tools on the rear wall pegboard, but two yellow car ramps caught his eye in the first aisle.

" Hey, Joe. See those car ramps."

" What about them?"

" How well are they constructed?" asked Kel.

" Those babies are form cast steel. You'd half to put a building on them. Hell, even I couldn't crush them.... What are you a reporter for one of them consumer magazines?"

" No." Kel headed down the aisle and leaned over. He grabbed both sides of the heavy gauge steel ramp. The likelihood of such a ramp collapsing was remote.

" What the hell's with the notebook?"

Before Kel could answer, a lanky man with buzzed blonde hair, ducked his head around the back entrance. He carried a small white box with large blue stock number on the side. " What's happening?"

" Ronnie, my name is Walter Kelly. Can I speak with you for a few minutes?"

" Sure, what are you selling?"

" I need to ask you a few questions."

Ronnie looked at Joe and Joe raised his bushy brows. " Hey, I need to step outside and have a butt anyway. " Bad habit, Joe."

" Yeah, so what's the big news?"

Ronnie smiled as Joe waddled toward the front door. " What can I do for you, Walter?"

" Su Lee."

A slow smile covered his face. " Su Lee... She mention me?"

" No."

" Was a lot of years ago we went out. She after you? She's likes older men."

Kel leaned on the counter. " She's not after me but she was after a friend of mine. A married man."

Ronnie shook his head, but his thoughts seemed distant..
" What do you want to know?"

Kel pushed his lips together, surprised Ronnie did not challenge why a stranger was in the store asking questions about Su Lee. He gestured with his pen as he spoke. " Nine years ago. She was just a young kid. She went out with an older man."

" Edward LaTrobe. Guy from Long Island. He was maybe forty-five. She was, oh, God, she couldn't have been more than thirteen. You're talkin' child rape."

" Su Lee told you about all this?"

" Yeah, but I haven't talked to Su in maybe a year. I don't hang out at Barnacle Bill's anymore. I have my wife and kids. Su Lee's not the kind of woman you want to bring home to your kids. You know what I mean?"

" I know exactly what you mean," said Kel. " So, this guy was tapping her? You're right. He would have been ruined."

" I don't think so. He had money, was a banker in New York City. He promised Su he'd marry her when she got old enough, but he was just using her."

" Where is he now?"

" Hell, he must be still in New York. I think Long Island. That was just one summer in this guy's life, but she really loved him, the bastard."

Kel tucked the notebook in his pocket. La Trobe's name was not going to readily leave his consciousness. " She must have been pretty angry."

" Yeah, I don't blame her."

" But she kept coming back here every summer with her father. He was older and she had a brother. Smart kid. He was odd. A geek."

Kel squinted and thought about the Firebird and the dealer insignia on the back. " Where did she live?"

Ronnie's mouth turned downward and he exposed his yellowed teeth. " Gee, I don't know. I just know she always came down here every summer. Her father was kind of quiet. Spoke with an accent. I'm pretty sure he worked in a factory or shop. Very polite."

" Su Lee go to school, I mean college?" he asked as Joe moved back inside the hardware store.

" No. She settled here. The father died a few years back. She worked at Barnacle Bill's since she was maybe fifteen or sixteen. She was a nice girl, Walter, but there was always something behind those dark eyes. A mystery. Very exciting. I don't regret any of the time I spent with her."

" Thanks for the info," said Kel as Joe squeezed behind the counter.

" Sure." Kel shook his hand and his blue eyes focused for the first time. " Walter, you be careful."

Kel shook his head. " I will."

" So who the hell's going to unload those tools?" asked Joe as Kel turned and started toward the front door. He tried to form a picture of a middle aged Edward LaTrobe having wild summer fling with an under age girl.

" You're supposed to unload that stuff, Joe," said Ronnie as Kel opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk.

He looked down the long row of parking meters extending to the beach parking lot. As he searched for the orange Firebird, he wondered about Edward LaTrobe and whether he was still alive or did he die as the result of an accident? Again he tried to jettison the image of Mary Ellen plunked down in the front church pew, solid as a statue and irreparably hurt.

* * *

Kel clicked onto the search button on the computer and stared at Edward La Trobe's name. The computer swept through some internal program from a far away data base and sounded like a baseball card flipping against rapidly moving bicycle tire spokes.

He stood, grabbed his cold, dew-laden bottle of beer and leaned out the trailer window. High above the osprey surveyed the bay. When its wings were spread, it looked more like a hawk than a sea bird.

He looked back to the computer. Matches for the name Edward LaTrobe lined up on the screen. He gulped a mouthful a cold beer and hurried back to the monitor. Fifty-six matches were assembled by the data banks. Methodically, he scanned the listings in twenty segmented increments. He had nearly finished the beer when he found an Edward LaTrobe at East Hampton, Long Island. Maybe Su Lee never spared this guy either.

He lifted the beer bottle and drained the remaining liquid into his mouth. His fingers danced over the old green Princess model phone's digits. The line shifted and rang. He leaned back in his chair and studied the identical parade of names pasted across the monitor.

A young woman, out of breath, answered the phone. " Hello."

" Yes, Mr. LaTrobe, please."

" Excuse me. I just this minute came off the tennis court.

Grand Dad?"

" Is your father there?"

" My father died eight years ago when I was six years old... In a hunting accident in Vermont."

Now Kel was anxious. " I'm so sorry. I must have the wrong ... LaTrobe."

" Okay."

" I am sorry." He slowly placed the phone back on the receiver and pushed the chair back. His mind formed images of Su Lee hoisting a high-powered rifle butt against her shoulder and placing the unsuspecting LaTrobe within the cross hairs. The shots must have echoed throughout the forest when he went down. She had repaid him for the heinous things she perceived he had done and began a series of murders over the next eight years.

He pushed opened the trailer door and stepped into the beach sand. The osprey was out of sight now, no doubt having snatched its prey from the bay waters and returned to the high nest along the beach marshes. Proving Su Lee was in Vermont nine years ago would be as useless as proving she was near Trombly's garage when the car fell off the ramps. He need to concentrate on Tony's death and how she booby-trapped the ladder.

He did not lock the trailer as he pushed his sandals into the sand and meandered up the beach. The rock piled jetty, where Rankin slipped into the sea, looked like a giant finger pointing into the bay. Moving the rocks around prior to his arrival would assure his slipping. He dismissed anything else as pure coincidence as he neared the jetty and stepped onto the large granite boulders. She had the strength and the will to set it up. Rankin probably trusted

her and may have even loved her. She could have promised him anything to get him out on the rocks. Prearranged rocks would have tumbled into the raging sea, taking Rankin with them and no one would have ever known.

The surf hit the lower green glazed rocks less than ten feet below. Kel backed toward the water and studied the extended granite stones, stacked toward the point. During high tide another five rocks, maybe more, were covered. To precisely bring Rankin to the point where she had dislodged the rocks, just like the ramp collapsing and Tony's ladder falling apart, seemed impossible. Kel stroked his unshaven chin and squinted into the morning sun. The surf hit the rocks below him every ten or fifteen seconds, supplemented by the outer breakers, unraveling like falling dominos up Binghampton Beach.

The gulls gliding across the sky cried out as Kel positioned himself on the upper rocks. Salty air entered his lungs and he gazed toward Sabines for the osprey. He leaned his elbows on his propped knees and he was beginning to sense Su Lee had some surrealistic invincibility or pure luck. No one, especially the police, had questioned three other deaths, and no one assumed foul play in Tony's death.

15

Kel believed somebody was following him when he drove over the metal plate separating the ferry and the asphalt at the eastern shore of the bay. For forty-five minutes up the Delaware highway a maroon van, special with tinted windows and a high bubble roof, maintained a marked distance behind him. He had seen everyone on that ferry and talked to some of the people on the upper deck. Neither Su Lee nor the van were on the ferry.

He slowed at the traffic light outside of Harriman, banked left onto Grove Street and immediately he checked the rear mirror. The road's concrete slab dipped for over a mile along open fields and telephone lines, but he did not see the van. He checked the mailboxes and numbers on the houses, and then spotted the name stenciled on a black mailbox. A woman, probably Mrs. Bates, stooped over in the flowerbed along her split-level ranch. She looked up when Kel swung into the driveway and held a yellow handle trowel in her hand. The expression on her round, smooth face reflected a sober concern. She flipped off her work gloves and stood. Kel leaned out the window. " Mrs. Bates?"

" I am she."

He opened the door and stepped outside with his clipboard.
" Thank you for meeting with me. I'm Walter Kelly."

She squeezed Kel's extended hand and then wiped sweat off her brow with a thin red handkerchief. Her blue eyes looked skyward as she spoke. After a few preliminary words about Kel's trip over on the ferry, she launched into her relationship with her late husband. " Roger and I met each other in high school. He never gave me a bad day." She tightened her brow. " Do you know what I mean?"

" I think so," said Kel, glancing down the highway for the van.

" I refuse to believe the rumors about him and that Japanese woman."

" Actually she was born here. She's Korean. It doesn't concern me in what I'm doing to prove any relationship between your husband and Su Lee. I want to know everything I can about those car ramps he used."

" You can take a look for yourself."

" Thank you."

" I mean I have the ramps in the cellar."

" Absolutely. Sure I want to see them."

" Okay, come with me. Can I get you an iced tea or Coke?"

" Sure. Iced tea is fine."

" Good." Kel could still smell asphalt sealer on the newly coated driveway as he followed her under the shady trees to the louvered glass porch door. " I'm sweating like crazy."

She opened the door and he moved into a cooler breezeway with thin knotty pine slat walls. He peered out the window as she opened an old avocado refrigerator and removed a bulbous ice tea pitcher. The ice cubes rattled as she poured the tea into two flowered glasses. " You know, Roger and I brought the kids to Binghampton Beach to swim and have a good time. I never imagined he would die there."

She handed Kel the cool glass. " Thanks."

" I've thought about this over and over. I've checked the ramps. They're solid. He must have driven the car over the side of the lip." She motioned him to a hallway door across from the wall phone.

" Roger was very meticulous and knew cars. He cleaned his tools and the ramps every time he used them. Very neat man. So, for him to drive the car up the ramps and leave the car on the edge of the ramp lip makes no sense. It never did."

She creaked opened the door, pushed the cellar light button upward, and Kel moved with her down the wooden stairway. A dehumidifier hummed below series of white fluorescent tubes. She led him onto a red painted cement floor, past metal shelves, and a long well worn work bench covered with paint drips. In the dark-

ened corner, under a blue tarp, the edges of the yellow car ramps protruded onto the cement.

" I'm glad you kept the ramps."

" They're yours, Mr. Kelly. You're the answer to my prayers. I don't have the money with three kids in college to be hiring a private investigator."

" I understand." She pulled the overhead bulb cord, illuminating the corner. Kel helped her unfurl the tarps and he dragged the piggy backed ramps over the cement. He separated the ramps and set them side by side under the light. " If the car fell of the ramp, wouldn't the ramp have flipped and banged against the garage floor?"

" Yes, that is exactly what I thought. Look for yourself. Do you see any scrapes?"

Kel squatted, put on his bifocals and leaned the ramps back. " The only thing I see is the spot where the ramps were placed on top of one another." He stood again and stroked his chin. " You know, it's almost like the car was on another ramp."

" I don't understand."

" Well, I'm just speculating. Maybe I shouldn't until I check it out. What if somebody placed an unsafe ramp with the second ramp. Now Lord knows how you make steel unstable... I don't know. But suppose the ramp collapses, Roger was working under-

neath and the car fell on him. Somebody comes in, removes the bad ramp and placed the old ramp on its side next to the car. Perfect."

With her eyes set on the ramps, Mrs. Bates shuffled forward. " Yes, yes. Why would anyone question that scenario?"

" They wouldn't. That's exactly what it is, a scenario. Oh, you can argue that the scrapes on the ramp might be caused by the car collapsing. I think that's what happened. And there's a way to prove it."

" How? You said your husband was meticulous. If he cleaned the ramps from the day before and a new ramp was substituted, only one of these ramps would bear a full tire tread impression."

" You should be in law enforcement, Mr. Kelly."

Kel tucked the glasses back in his case. " I was. Listen, let me take these things back to my trailer in Binghampton Beach. I'll run the tests. Finding tire treads and a smooth surface won't take long."

* * *

The ramps rattled as Kel chugged down the highway. For fifteen minutes he debated what he would do with his newly found evidence as he surveyed the rural road in the rearview mirror. No doubt existed. Su Lee caused a separate ramp to collapse. At first he thought weakening steel required heating, but heating would have destroyed the paint. Pinpointing areas of structural weakness

by applying an acid might work. Yet, he wondered whether she could have controlled the exact amount of acid. A better explanation, he thought, as the blue and white sign for the ferry appeared in the field to his right, would involve placing a metal saw blade on the underbelly of the ramp and gnaw away the structural integrity. A simple straight line precisely burrowed would easily cause the metal to falter under the car's weight.

" Fifteen miles." He passed the ferry sign's blue outline of a boat on the water.

But how could he blame Su Lee for the accident? She would have ditched the newly purchased damaged ramp and replaced it with the original. He stared at Trombly's old ramps. The ramps would contain fingerprints if she had not worn gloves. He did not put much credence in Su Lee's callousness.

A subtle thumping behind Kel's rear inner tire developed into a bumpy repeating thud. As he approached a long stretch of farmland his little car was impossible to control and he pulled onto the gravel shoulder. He looked back in the side mirror as a behemoth truck careened down the highway and the surrounding air jostled his car as it passed. Then he thrust open the door and ran around back. The dust coated rear tire was deflated and crushed on the dirt.

" Damn." Kel took one step toward the trunk and stopped. He looked down at the convoluted rubber mass and immediately sus-

pected her. With no sign of the maroon van he moved around the car and opened the front door. He pulled the hood latch, thrust up the hood and shook his head as he went to recover the jack and lug nut wrench. Once before he had change a tire on this car, but the flat occurred overnight in front of his trailer.

He reached forward, above the front tire housing and behind the radiator. The jack was in place, but the lug nut wrench was missing. He gripped the jack and checked around and below. Quickly he slammed the hood, put his hands on his hips and checked the road and fields. Su Lee had figured it out. She knew he was going to Delaware to visit Mrs. Bates and she got under the hood. The rest was easy, he thought, taking off his sweat-lined cap. Now he had to get to a phone and call someone to fix the tire. Quickly he opened the trunk and hauled each ramp from the back seat and placed them safely next to his golf clubs. He checked his watch. It was still possible he could be back in Binghampton Beach by evening.

* * *

He did not say much to the tow truck driver. Hiking two and a half miles to a pay phone had stiffened his legs and aggravated an old ankle injury from twenty years ago. He marveled at Su Lee's planning and her ability to creep behind the scenes.

" You'll make the five o'clock ferry," said the young, unshaven driver.

" Yeah... I will."

" You sound like you're from Buffalo. You have that voice," said the driver.

" You have a fine ear. " Kel pressed his lips as they crested the hill and he saw his car along the field-lined slope ahead. " Can I ask you something?"

" Shoot."

" You're obviously mechanical... I just had a guy I knew very well... die."

" Sorry."

" Thanks. My question involves sabotaging a ladder. You know the kind you would use to paint a house. Aluminum. I think this guy was murdered. How would you-"

The kid raised his finger. " The rungs or the side supports where the rungs fit. You'd have to loosen the rungs and maybe hack saw the supports or rivets underneath."

Kel nodded as they approached the car and the tow truck's loud warning beeps sounded. " You a cop?"

" Was."

" So your friend fell?" The kid left the motor running and they both moved outside.

" Snapped his neck." He eyed the flat tire, convinced they would find a nail or screw embedded in the rubber.

The kid worked quickly, loosened the lug nuts and raised the compact with ease. He successfully removed the lug nuts and asked Kel for the trunk keys. Kel fished the keys from his pocket and pinched the trunk key between his fingers. The kid took the key, but as he inserted the key, a spreading malaise captured Kel's consciousness. The lock clicked and kid raised the trunk. His golf clubs were exactly where he had left them, but the ramps were gone.

" Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch!"

" What's the matter?"

Kel rushed around the trunk and stepped across a mass of glass chunks. He leaned inside the broken side window. The rear seat was pulled aside, exposing clearance to the trunk. She had dragged the ramps into the back seat and had safely driven away. He stood upright. Her going to the ferry was too blatant. Kel turned back to the highway as the kid pulled the spare tire from the trunk. The road stretched out like veins under the skin and trying to track Su Lee around the bay could take hours.

" Ain't nothin' in this tire but a puncture hole."

" Right. Of course, neat and clean." Kel closed his eyes and hurled his cap to the ground. He looked up the highway, but could not stop shaking his head. His first and only piece of evidence link-

ing Su Lee to Trombly's death was now gone. He had underestimated her and would not make such a faulty judgment again.

16

At the end of the dock Mary Ellen locked her arms across her navy windbreaker. Kel leaned on the incoming ferry's deck railing. In the cooling twilight breezes she waved in slow motion as he raised his right hand. A certain security soothed her beleaguered soul upon seeing his silver hair curled around his orange and black baseball cap. The massive ferry's low-pitched horn resonated through the marina and the water gushed and sloshed around the wood dock as the inflated rubber side bumpers glided into docking position. She wandered along the boat as Kel shouted from above.

" Why did you come back here, Mary Ellen?"

" I had to come back."

" No, this isn't a good idea. "

" Why not?" she asked as the boat rocked into place.

" I just don't think it's a good idea." He moved a few steps back so he was directly above her. " How did you know I would be on the ferry?"

" You left word with the Hazelton office. When I didn't find you at your trailer I called the office."

" Very clever, but you need to go back to Pennsylvania."

" No, I need to come back. I have to find the truth." She pictured the bright flowers cascaded over Tony's grave. " I need to prove she did it."

" Oh, she did it all right," said Kel.

" How do you know this?"

" I have to get my car and I'll explain," he said and gestured as his voice grew louder. " I don't think you know what you're dealing with here."

" If she did it then I want justice!"

" Stay right there! Don't move. I'm getting my car out and I'll be with you ASAP."

Mary Ellen folded her arms across the windbreaker again. She was convinced as she peered into the murky water, reflecting the overhead halogens, Kel had found some new information. Lights twinkled across the bay and along the shore and she thought of Tony as she gazed upward at the distant stars. In her deepest longings she sensed Tony wanted the truth to come out.

* * *

She handed Kel a cup of coffee from the marina bagel shop.
" What was so important in Delaware?"

Kel sipped on the coffee, but his eyes moved like a surveillance camera. " Listen, can you just trust what I'm saying? I don't think you should be back here. Where are the kids?"

" Kids are with my sister in the Berkshires. Massachusetts. Kel, you're starting to make me damned nervous."

" You didn't call her again, did you? "

" Nope. "

Kel scratched his neck and took in more coffee. " I went to Delaware to talk to Mrs. Bates about Trombly's car ramps."

" How did you make out?"

Kel stared at her. " Not good. I figured out what Su Lee did and I think it relates to Tony's death. See, I think she bought another set of identical ramps. She substituted a new ramp, but it wasn't the same."

" You mean she rigged it to break."

" Exactly. And when the car fell on Trombly, she brought in the first ramp and tipped it over. I saw the ramps. There were scratches but nothing like you would expect if a car weighing several thousand pounds flips the thing onto the cement." He lifted the coffee to his mouth and again surveyed the dock. " She gets the new ramp out of there and everyone thinks the car fell on Trombly. So damned clever."

" You need to get those ramps."

" That's another story. Mrs. Bates gave me the ramps."

" You have them?" asked Mary Ellen.

" This is why I suggest you go back to Pennsylvania. Besides some maroon van following me up the state highway, on the way back my tire went flat in the middle of nowhere. I placed the ramps in the trunk. Locked. When I came back, the side window was broken, the back seat pulled back, and the stupid ramps were gone. I wanted to find a tire tread on the first ramp, but none on the second."

" Su Lee."

" No doubt about it. I checked every inch of this ferry and couldn't find her or the van. She's not going down easily. And I'm telling you, she switched Tony's ladder with one that was wrecked and then got that ladder the hell away from the beach house, put the other one back and voila! We have an accident."

Mary Ellen's anger, though contained, swirled inside.

" Okay, then that ladder must be near the beach house."

" Who the hell knows?"

" It's bulky," said Mary Ellen.

" She's in great shape. That ladder is long gone, believe me."

" You're wrong."

" Why am I wrong?" asked Kel.

" I don't doubt she could lug the thing around, but think about it, Kel. Wouldn't somebody have seen her transporting that thing around town?"

Kel frowned and shook his head. " Okay. You're right. Maybe the ladder is around. But where did she buy it?"

" We'll find out."

" We won't find anything because you're going back home ," said Kel.

" No, I'm not."

" Don't be foolish. She's killed and she'll kill again." He chucked the cup in the trash bin. " I can't let you stay here."

" But you can't stop me either."

" No, I can't."

* * *

Mary Ellen sat in the front seat as Kel drove the Land Rover into Barnacle Bill's parking lot. Her stomach tensed when she thought about confronting Su Lee. Kel, now wearing a shoulder strap and pistol under his jacket, circled the restaurant. As they neared the dumpster Kel banged the dash. The orange sports car was parallel parked to the red dumpster. " Oh, man."

" I thought you said she was in Delaware."

" She was. It had to be her in the van."

" Unless she has accomplices," said Mary Ellen as he shut off the car.

" No way." Kel opened the door, but did not shut it. He walked around the Firebird and put his hand on the hood.

" What are you doing?"

" Engine's a little hot. This thing hasn't been sitting here all day." He looked inside the driver's window and moseyed back to Mary Ellen. " You know the earlier ferry was at four. I got to my car with the tow truck driver at twenty past four. She sure as hell didn't make the ferry and she didn't drive around The Chesapeake."

" Nor did she necessarily have to go to Binghampton Beach. Other ferries go to other towns."

" Right... Where did she get the van is my question."

" Rental?" asked Mary Ellen.

" Possible," he said, getting back in the car.

" Aren't we going inside?"

" No... That's what she's expecting. She wants me going in and wondering how the hell she could be in two places at once. I don't know where the van is or how she got it, but the ramps are gone. She is so damned clever."

Kel backed up the car. Mary Ellen was just as happy not to go inside and see the woman who probably killed her husband. Kel pulled around the building and started down the slope back to the street. In her mind she walked the property around the beach house. Su Lee might have easily stashed the ladder in the scrub

bushes for several hours before making the switch. The ladder needed to be splattered with paint, just enough to not have Tony question climbing. When Tony met Mary Ellen at the beach, the timing was perfect for Su Lee to transport the ladder up the dock trail and lean it against the house. Tony's original ladder was placed nearby. When Tony returned and climbed the ladder again, it snapped or bent forty plus feet above the house. He never had a chance.

" You thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Kel as he drove along Main Street.

" About the ladder?"

" Yup... I think she brought it in by night. Could have sailed from anywhere on the bay."

" But where did she store it?" asked Mary Ellen, signaling toward the water.

" I don't know... Don't bring me to the trailer."

" Why not?"

" I'm sleeping downstairs at the beach house. I don't trust her. Until we have something credible for the cops, we'll have to handle this on our own. She has probably already anticipated my next move."

" And what might that be?" she asked, continuing along Main Street.

" Finding the ladder. But I don't know where to look. She wouldn't buy it in town..."

" Maybe she already has her own moves in place."

" One big chess game," he said, looking out the window toward the marina docks. " I'm going down to the police station tomorrow morning and see if I can convince these clowns to start looking into this before it's too late."

17

The baseball game blasted from the countertop radio as she played poker with Kel in the kitchen. Mary Ellen knew spending the night in the master bedroom would bring back thoughts of Night Sin and Su Lee. Maybe she would sleep on the third floor. Kel dealt another hand, keeping his grainy green eyes fixed on each card, discarding when appropriate, and displayed a new side of his personality she had never known. His sinewy gray hair curled upward from his baseball cap rim and his tanned face was solid. He pushed his red poker chips across the table without giving any indication of the cards he possessed or the intention of his next move.

" You have a lot in common," said Mary Ellen, holding a meager hand of six's and threes.

" With who?"

" Su Lee."

" I take exception to that remark. I'm your security guard and friend, Mary Ellen, don't insult me."

" No, I've been watching how you play the game. You're totally intense but its all contained. When the intensity surfaces it's in the form of a bold, unanticipated move."

" Good analogy. I guess that's the only way to play poker. Bet the sure thing. Sometimes I bet what I hope."

Mary Ellen put her cards on the wood. " Six's and Three's. The sure thing."

" Three ladies and a pair of jacks."

" That's incredible," she said, leaning forward to double check the hand he had just placed next to her cards. " That *is* incredible!"

" No, that's luck." He leaned back in the chair and grabbed his beer glass. " And you're right about Su Lee. This game she's playing is well calculated and she never flinches."

" She's elusive. I've only spoken to her that one time when she pushed me in the beach parking lot."

Kel poured more beer from the amber bottle into his glass and the suds rose to the top. " In my career I met thousand of people. Little old ladies, naive and bubbly. I met the hardened criminals who would blow you away if you looked at them funny. Guys who were certifiably nuts and would come at you with both fists swinging."

" How many years were you on the force?"

" Forty-three. My wife was a very tolerant woman."

" What was her name?"

Kel smiled and his eyes brightened. " Margaret... Margi. Margi seemed to accept it. But you know she must have worried. I'm sure it was one of those things you carry around with you. You know there could be a tragedy, but you file it away because there's nothing you can do about it. Margi never made it to Binghampton Beach. She and I used to travel down here years ago and stay at a cottage for a week. She would have liked it here." His eyes swung toward Mary Ellen. " She just had a heart attack and died. Unbelievable."

" You have kids?"

" My son is in the Peace Corps... South America. Harry is a good boy. We talk regularly. He's due back next month. I think he might be home to stay. Might work in Washington which would be good."

" You miss him."

" Yeah." Kel stood and brought the beer bottle over to the waste basket. She never bothered to tell him about the glass recycling bin and he dropped the bottle in the basket. " Listen, maybe it's time to get some shuteye."

" How are you going to nail her, Kel?"

Kel remained in the dim light near the waste basket. " She's like the superb poker player, you're right. I don't count on her making a blatant mistake. Look how she handled the ramps. She must be always thinking. Always plotting about what she's going to do.

She figured out how to get over there, get the van, and the flat tire stunt was brilliant. Damn. I underestimated her or I would have carried those ramps up the highway to the pay phone. And then she gets back to Binghampton Beach in time to get on the night shift." He shook his head as he walked into the light near the kitchen table.

" And the thing is, when you talk to her, she is so alluring...charming. Just the poker player, she never reveals what she's up to."

" How do you outmaneuver a good poker player, Kel?"

" Play equally as well and hope you get lucky."

* * *

Mary Ellen stretched on the family room pull-out couch reserved for company and the kids' friends. She pulled up the blanket and positioned herself so she could see Kel asleep under the quilt on great room sofa. The mantle clock's chimes were shut off but the Roman Numerals were evident from reflected moonlight through the kitchen sliders. Two in the morning was a miserable time. The longing for Tony stirred her stomach and she sat up.

So many times she and Tony had entered the beach house through the huge paneled front door. He had wanted a metal thermal door while she left the more aesthetically pleasing natural en-

trance in place. Leaving the spreading crystalline chandelier over the foyer was also her idea. Tony always stated his position strongly, but would back off and let her have her way every time. She smiled a sad smile. Somehow in the midst their busy lives she never appreciated the way he had yielded.

Kel made an odd nasal noise as he turned on the couch. She grinned, but was relieved he was here and armed. Su Lee's cleverness and her bold actions were both overwhelming and awesome. Mary Ellen visualized her lugging the ladder up to the garage. Trying to find out where she bought the ladder might never be possible. Her amazing ability to not only think about sabotage, but to actually carry it out mechanically, was even more astonishing.

Again she leaned back on the pillow and stared at the full moon shining through the glowing blinds. Kel would speak to the cops in the morning and follow Su Lee later. She thought about the kids up in the Berkshires. Coming to Binghampton Beach on a whim denied them their mother when they had just lost their father. Five hours ago both girls cried on both phone extensions and Mary Ellen promised to fly up there tomorrow night. Her eyes slowly closed and her body wound down. In the half conscious realm she could almost believe Tony was still alive. She could pretend he never had the affair with Su Lee and could believe she was younger and the world was right.

The slider glass exploded and something splintered the cherry wood coffee table. Kel rolled on his belly and ordered her on the floor. With little concern for his own safety he held his gun and crawled on the floor into the kitchen.

" Kel, she's going to kill us!" cried Mary Ellen, spread on the Berber with her hands overhead. " My God! My God!"

Somehow he flipped on the outside spots and bright light filtered through a massive hole in the kitchen sliders. With his gun in the air he pushed up the light switches and the entire yard was brighter than the moonlight. " Stay down, Mary. Stay down!"

" She's out there! She's going to kill us!"

" Su Lee!" he shouted through the broken glass. " I know you're out there!" The wind whizzed through the glass. Mary Ellen remained rigid on the rug. Kel ran forward and helped her up.

" We're going to prove this!"

" How?" she asked.

" Out to the Land Rover."

" Land Rover? Why?"

" She has to go back to the condo. We take the cell phone and the Land Rover and nail her with the cops."

" All right."

He led the way to the garage and she chucked the keys to him. Once she was inside he started the engine and opened the garage door. He backed out quickly across the gravel into the street.

Mary Ellen gripped the side handle as he skidded down the road.

" Dial 911."

" Okay," she said, punching in the digits. She handed the phone to him as he raced out Hazelton toward Main Street.

" I think she came in by the water. Probably down the beach."

" Then she'd be on the beach now," said Mary Ellen.

" She could head out anywhere along the beach," said Kel, gripping the wheel as he held the phone. " Yes, I have an emergency situation in Binghampton Beach. Hazelton. 16 Durango Drive. Rifle bullets through the sliders. No, I'm a retired Philly cop. Suspect is a young woman named Su Lee. Northgate Condominiums, condo 42B, Building 2, Binghampton Beach. We are headed out there now. No... She may be on Binghampton Beach. My cell number is 555-4562. Sure. No, we'll stay back." He set the phone back in the holder. " They're calling Binghampton now and sending out state cruisers."

" Good. To the beach, too?"

" Yup. My bet is she's already in her car."

Kel veered away from the few stray cars parked along the shore as Mary Ellen scanned the beach through the back window.

" We can catch her coming right back to the condos."

" I don't know. She's very clever." He looked at the car clock's green digits. " Two fifteen in the morning."

" She was aiming for me. The bullet hit the coffee table."

Kel yawned and started out of town. " The bullet hit?"

" Yes, I heard the wood crack."

" Good, a piece of physical evidence. I'd bet that was an automatic weapon. It sure sounded like an Oozy. I wonder if the slug matches the one found in La Trobe's body in Vermont."

" That was years ago."

" I know... She almost got you in low light. She sniped at La Trobe and killed him. You don't shoot like that without having been trained."

" How do you find that out?" she asked. The sign for the condos appeared around the bend.

" We checked local gun clubs. Her background. People at Barnacle Bill's." Kel's sneaker slapped the brake pedal and at the corner. He slowed the car at the speed bump and moved along the long unpainted clapboard buildings. A series of garages paralleled the condo building, but Kel turned right.

" Why here?"

" We wait over here." He rolled into the lot and swung the Land Rover around. Then he backed up and shut off the engine and lights.

" Do you think she's in there?"

" I think she'll be back." He pointed upward. " Third apartment from the end. Ground level."

" They have to listen to us now. They have to. That woman tried to kill me."

* * *

Mary Ellen watched the police cruiser silently, and without lights flashing, round the corner. Kel started the Land Rover and tapped the light switch. The cruiser stopped and he quickly drove out to the main condo road. The blonde cop from Tony's accident stepped from the cruiser. " She here, Kel?"

" We've been here fifteen minutes, Butch," said Kel , shaking his head. " She never pulled in. She's not here."

" Okay, you two stay in the car. Why do you think she fired at your house, Mrs. Fresco?"

" I think she killed my husband."

" I know," he said, looking back at his partner. " Did either you see her out at your house or did she threaten you?"

" She broke in the damned house!" said Kel.

" Oh?"

" Well, we think she did."

" Kel, while I may believe you, Hawkins has this thing about you're being let go in Buffalo. You just don't have the credibility."

" Roger Trombly was killed and so was Mr. Rankin."

" But did you see her fire a weapon at the house in Hazelton?" asked Butch.

" Butch, the slider is shattered. There's a slug in the coffee table!"

" But you didn't see her. Kel, I don't even know if we should go in there."

" Don't bother. She's not in there," said Kel.

" Well, if she is here, then she couldn't have fired at the house, right?"

Kel chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. " Fine."

Butch got in the cruiser and shut the door. His partner brought the cruiser into Su Lee's lot, the taillights came on and they parked near the courtyard.

" Kel," said Mary Ellen, leaning over. " What if she's in there?"

" No way. You're talking maybe two minutes before we headed down the road. Even if she had her car out there, we would have seen her."

" Better check the car," she said. " Like you did before."

Butch and his partner moved up the walkway toward the common hallway door. He opened the door, but his partner lingered in front of the unit buzzers. Mary Ellen's heart beat quickly as she leaned back against the vinyl seat. " There has to be a way

to prove this." She looked up when Su Lee's condo lights illuminated the drapes. " No."

" How can she be in there?" Kel's nose crunched up and he pushed his teeth together. He elbowed open the door and started across the lot toward Butch. Mary Ellen pulled up the door handle and trailed him. Kel reached Butch at the door. " Butchie."

" She's in there, Kel," said Butch. " Come on get back."

Mary Ellen bolted with Kel for the garage. " I'm beginning to think she's invincible."

He grabbed the garage door handle and raised the door upward. " Why would she leave this door unlocked unless she was rushing?"

Mary Ellen ran up and put her hands next to Kel's hands on the cold hood. " Car wasn't used."

With an incredulous look on his face Kel stuck his hands on the car, and for a few moments he could not speak as he looked around the bare plaster walls. " Maybe, I'm wrong. Maybe she didn't do it. Maybe there's somebody else."

18

Hawkins' desk chair creaked when he leaned back and folded his hands on his navy tie. He shook his head. Mary Ellen remained in the doorway as Kel raised both arms. " Hawk, what more do you want?"

" Kelly, the woman was asleep in her bed. Does the woman have a record? That's the only question I want to know."

" Did Lizzy Borden have a record?"

" What about the ramps?" asked Mary Ellen.

" Somebody took those ramps. They broke into your car, Kelly. That is a fact. That shot in the beach house is a fact, but that's it. You're linking it all together... All this talk about Roger Trombly and Rankin. *Come on.*"

" I want that bullet compared to the bullet that killed La Trobe," said Kel and he walked up to the desk. " You'll find it was fired from the same weapon."

" And on what basis do I order that?" Kel pinched the bridge of his nose. Hawkins pointed at Mary Ellen. " Mrs. Fresco, I want you to go back with your kids."

" Why do you want me to go back if she's innocent?"

" Because somebody fired at your house. Listen, I'm getting damned sick of this," said Hawkins, banging the desk.

" I have people who saw Su Lee with all these men," replied Kel.

" Kelly," he said as he stood. " Listen, I know retirement must be boring."

" Cut the bullshit, Hawk! I came up here to fish... to relax. I don't need this." He looked over at Mary Ellen. " Her husband is dead because of a switched ladder."

Hawkins exhaled slowly and yawned. " Kelly, I think you're doing everything you can to redeem yourself because of you're being canned up in Buffalo. "

" I was right then and I'm right now. I didn't have the evidence."

" Sounds like a familiar story, " said Hawkins. " You go ahead and do your thing. Just don't cross the line. "

" I will, but I'm not giving up on this. " He stepped closer. " You're wrong and I'm going to prove your wrong. "

" With a flick of his head he motioned Mary Ellen outside. She glanced at Hawkins and Butch in the corner and headed into the corridor behind Kel. Kel held the water fountain and slurped water into his mouth. Then he wiped his chin. " I don't blame them."

They started down the station corridor. " What happened in Buffalo?"

Kel's eyes moistened. " Drive-by. I had the guy. Seventeen years old and he blew away a three-year-old kid. Witnesses were vague, but this guy was bragging about it. I went on the basis of what he was saying, but nobody came forward to verify he was in the truck and fired the rifle. And that little girl is dead." His voice softened and shook. " They let the bastard out and he killed again. Now he's locked up, but eligible for parole in three years. Unbelievable. Who are we protecting?"

" I'm sorry, Kel," she said, holding his wrist. " Hawkins won't help us."

" Nope and we have any proof. You and I know she fired the gun. She could have gotten back by bike. Ditch the bike and enter the condo through the front. She never used the car. Perfect. We're just assumed she wasn't going to be at the condo. I have to change my attitude. Just like the ramps. I assumed again it as an either or situation. Either drive around the bay. Or take my ferry. But she took the third alternative. Just like she did last night."

Mary Ellen opened the front door and squinted as she scanned the shore. " I don't want to go."

" You have to."

" What difference does it make?" she asked. " If she wants to kill me, Kel, she can get me in Tupperburg."

He walked across the asphalt, stroked his chin and turned in slow motion. " You're right. But I don't want you out of my sight. And you keep those kids in the Berkshires with your sister."

" Agreed. How are we going to find the truth?"

" Let's get some lunch. I have a few ideas."

* * *

Kel rested his silver pen on the yellow lined pad. Between dissecting the bacon, eggs and hash browns on his plate, he had studied copious pages of scribbled notes through his reading glasses. " First we start with hardware stores."

" Why even try the hardware stores around here?" asked Mary Ellen, gently cutting into her bagel and cream cheese. " She wouldn't be that stupid."

Kel thought for a moment. " The one thing I've noticed about her is that she bucks the obvious. We need to check every place from here to Walla Walla who sold Aberdeen Ladders."

" Is that the name of the ladder?"

" Yeah, I wrote it down after the accident. The company is in Tennessee. They all have little orange plaid stickers on them. I'm sure they have a master list of distribution, but trying to obtain that list will be next to impossible. I'm sure-

" I'm afraid she's going to strike again."

Kel held the pad and peered over his reading glasses. " No, I've thought about that. She's under the eye now. To do something else would start shifting everything toward her. I say she lays low and does whatever she does surreptitiously. She might even go away for awhile. If this woman has gotten away with murder *again* she might let down her guard."

" I wouldn't assume that about her," said Mary Ellen, finishing the bagel. " I miss my husband, Kel. I miss my kids."

" Then go see your kids. Spend what's left of the summer with them. Let me handle the investigation back here. Plus, I just don't want you at risk, Mary Ellen."

" I thought you said she might leave for awhile."

" I did, but I just listened to you, too. You can't assume anything about her. I say we book you to the Berkshires."

Mary Ellen grinned for the first time in four days. " The Berkshires don't have any airport. The Berkshires are hills or mountains depending on your perspective, in Massachusetts. I'd fly into Hartford and taken the bus up to Northhampton where Kathleen will pick me up. Good... I can't say it's great staying here now."

" That's the right decision. In the meantime, I'll start scouting around for car ramps and ladders."

" But where's that second ladder now?" she asked, swishing the mango juice around her mouth.

" Oh, yes, the present whereabouts of said ladder." He pinched his chin and removed the reading glasses. " I think the safest place to dump that ladder would be the ocean when nobody saw you dump it."

Mary Ellen nodded, but her mind was back with the kids in Massachusetts. " Then it's a lost cause."

" No, I think it right in the bay near the beach house. She would have wanted to get rid of that thing right away. Why take it anywhere else when you simply dump it immediately?"

" Then you think she went by boat?"

" I don't know how she originally got the ladder to the beach house, but she probably carried it up the beach in the dead of night and stashed it in the bushes. You know how thick those bushes are. She switches ladders twice; before and after she killed Tony. I doubt she deep sixed the new ladder in daylight. Too risky."

" I agree. So, she comes back later in the night, while I'm back in Pennsylvania and sinks the ladder."

" Maybe." Kel looked out the window as he thought and nibbled on end piece of his glasses. " Well, she would have to bring a boat out for that one. "

" Does she own a boat?" asked Mary Ellen.

" She told me when I was in Barnacle Bill's she went sailing that afternoon, but the chances of finding the ladder over how

many square miles of bay is slim to none. I have to prove she bought an Aberdeen Ladder."

19

Kel's greatest accomplishment was getting Mary Ellen safely on the plane and off to Massachusetts. He watched the aircraft bank over the bay and trek northward to Newark for the connecting flight to Hartford. She had insisted he stay at the beach house, but he wondered how much time, he would actually spend there while he searched for the ladder. The plane shrunk out of sight into the gray sky and he started back to the Land Rover. Across the field, behind the forest's plastic retaining fence he spotted an orange blotch within a pine cluster, but he kept walking toward Mary Ellen's car.

He figured if the Firebird was parked out there and Su Lee was observing him through binoculars. Yesterday Mary Ellen had alluded to a chess game. As he opened the driver's door and slid onto the front seat he wondered about Su Lee's next move. Would she leave as he had anticipated or merely go about her business in Binghampton Beach? He gazed into the rear view mirror as he quickly drove away from the airfield. The woods were too far

away across the high grass to see the car or Su Lee, but he sensed she was there.

He continued down the dirt road and out the airfield entrance. Now what would she do? The telephone poles lined along the field sounded like a fly swatter being swiped through the air. He stopped at the end of the service road and headed through a narrow connector to Main Street. Bradbury's Hardware's brick building was directly ahead and lawnmowers were lined up perfectly on the sidewalk. The Land Rover bounced over the half paved road before he swung onto Main Street and parked at a metered space across the street.

After depositing a quarter he faced the connector road and gazed back to the airfield. A pickup truck passed on the outer road as he crossed Main Street. Ronnie was outside next to the stacked grass seed bags. He held a clipboard with a perforated computer sheet and checked off items on the paper as Kel stepped onto the sidewalk.

" Hey, there, Kel."

" Ronnie. Big sale?"

" As a matter of fact grass seed is going on sale. September is a good time to be planting seed."

" Do tell," said Kel.

" Heard about the latest at Hazelton."

" Yup, shots right through the sliders. I'm glad I was there."
He put his hands on his hips as he looked back to the airport.

" Scary."

" Who the hell would do that?" asked Ronnie.

" Cops are clueless."

" What else is new? No offense. I know you were a cop, where in Long Island?"

" Buffalo."

" Oh, yeah... "

" Listen, Ronnie. You carry Aberdeen Ladders? "

" Yup. And I know Tony Fresco was using an Aberdeen. They ain't gonna sue, are they?"

Kel shook his head. " Oh, no... no."

" That is a damned good ladder. I sold it to Tony last spring. He wanted the forty footer to reach the peaks. I told him he should have somebody to that for him. Being up that high is risky and look what happened."

" He didn't listen, did he?" asked Kel.

" Nope. You fall forty feet and you're all done."

" I guess his neck broke and he was killed instantly."

Holding the clipboard, Ronnie crossed his arms. " What's she going to do now?"

" Unknown."

" Nice girl and good kids. I wish he had been more careful."

" Me, too," said Kel. " Ronnie, I need to ask you something and you've got to keep you mouth shut and don't ask any questions."

" Okay." He looked up from the computer sheet as if he already anticipated the next question. " What do you want to know?"

" Who else bought those ladders lately..."

" Why?"

" Don't ask any questions, remember?"

Ronnie swallowed. " I've sold four ladders this month."

" To whom?"

" Two went to Henry Langdon. Local painter, the guy I wanted Tony to use for his house. One to a guy north of town. I saw him out there this morning. David Geresey or Gurney. Bought it yesterday. And let's see I know I sold four."

Kel wanted to blurt out Su Lee's name. " One more."

" Oh, yeah. The local telephone guy. I told him you can't be using an aluminum ladder on poles. But he wouldn't listen to me either. He'll probably get juiced."

" And that's it? Nobody else this summer?"

" Nope."

" And Tony bought the ladder last spring." Kel exhaled and folded his arms. " The telephone guy. Did he actually use the ladder?"

" Yeah, the moron was out at Doris Wilson's house this morning. "

Kel was about to step off the sidewalk and was still reluctant to mention Su Lee. " Su Lee, she ever shop in here?"

" Why you think she had something to do with the accident?"

" I thought I said no questions."

" No, she never comes in. If she did I'd personally wait on her though. She is still one hot-"

" That's very true there, Ronnie old boy." He patted Ronnie on the shoulder. " Thanks for the info and keep your mouth closed please."

" What about other stores that sell Aberdeens? Don't you want to know about them?"

" You have a list?"

" Mental list. Need to know my competition. I can write it up for you."

" Great..."

Ronnie flipped over one of the computer sheets and scratched out a list of six hardware stores. " I know they're all over the blipping country, but my competition is within fifteen miles. See, I could sell more ladders, but I want to make money. You don't make money you have no cash flow. No cash flow and you're out."

" True."

Ronnie handed the list to him. Kel recognized a paint store along the state highway, but was unsure about the other places. Ronnie had written the addresses below. " This is great. Thanks, Ron. "

" I won't ask any questions and the mouth is sealed until you say otherwise."

" Thanks." Kel shook his hand and turned. The road was clear to the airfield. He stared at Ronnie's list as he crossed Main street, thinking she was too bright to purchase the ladder near Binghampton Beach. But he had to check out each of the stores.

* * *

Kel locked the Fresco's beach house's front foyer door and turned toward the kitchen. The glass company had fully replaced the shattered slider glass and the floor was swept clean. As per his request and, as a part of the investigation, the coffee table and the bullet were presently at the county lab, but he was not overly optimistic identification of the round would help him at all. Even if in the future he was able to match La Trobe's bullet to the same weapon, retrieving the weapon from the allusive Su Lee would prove difficult or impossible.

He clicked the overhead table light and headed to the refrigerator. With his hand firmly wrapped around a chilled beer can, he pulled out a seat at the long pine table and popped the tab.

pulled out a seat at the long pine table and popped the tab. Traveling to Ronnie's competition had proved tedious and futile. No one had seen Su Lee and most of the clerks were not as congenial as Ronnie. He let the beer linger in his mouth until it warmed and drained down his throat. He was certain as he gazed out at the moon rising over the bay, Su Lee had purchased an Aberdeen ladder somewhere.

He crossed to the sliders and ran his fingers along the glass glazing. No doubt she would have killed Mary Ellen if he had opted to stay in his trailer. He raised the slider latch and moved the door top the left. A few leftover pieces of glass crunched in the track as he thrust open the screen door. He gripped the beer can and inhaled the salty night air. Like a computer tracking down a file he reviewed everything about Su Lee and any relevance to the four murders.

The moon produced a sparkling display hundreds of yards off shore. He could not help thinking the ladder lay submerged somewhere out there. Someone at Barnacle Bill's might have information or perhaps neighbors back at the condos saw her with the ladder. Trying to formulate witness summaries could take time and he was losing time. Su Lee would not tolerate him exploring her murderous trail. Kel sat in the dew laden vinyl chair and placed the beer can on the patio table. He leaned back and followed the Milky Way. Although he did not see the osprey, he wondered

if the bird left the nest at night. He pulled the adjacent chair closer with his feet and then propped up his tired legs. Finding the ladder meant getting inside Su Lee's head and by hitting all the local stores, he was again thinking from a logical perspective. Nothing was logical about Su Lee except what made sense to her.

A tiny satellite moved steadily across the pin dot stars. For a few seconds he had trouble following it, but caught it in the corner of his eye. He felt a deep relaxation descending over his body and he struggled to keep his eyes open. The phone ringing in the kitchen rattled him. He dropped his feet on the ground and jogged across the patio blocks. " Hello." Music deafened the night.

You never cared about the night scene

You wanted to get out unfazed

Should have left me alone

Should have left me alone

And now you're dead.

Now you're dead.

He hung up quickly. Was she going to start this nonsense with him, too? Maybe she did not know Mary Ellen had left for Massachusetts. He stared at the yellow wall phone and moved outside again. With his hands in his pockets he paced the patio as his hostility toward Su Lee intensified. He would not tolerate her har-

assessment and was determined to make her pay for what she had done to four men.

* * *

Kel awakened from the nightmare with a fear he had not felt since he was avoiding bullets in jungle combat. He leaped from the patio lounge and sprinted forward. The moon was back over the house by now as he hiked the beach trail and through the scrub brush. In his dream he was a tiny man, smaller than an insect, and the orange Firebird loomed like a hundred story skyscraper over a city sidewalk.

His heart caught up with his thoughts as he stepped onto the cold sand. In the quietude the breakers rolled in off shore and a few aberrant dabs of moonlight caught the waters. In the dream the behemoth car had chased him down the highway and the prodigious dark rubber tire tread occluded the sunlight. He was nearly crushed as he awoke. He trudged up to the ocean's edge and took in the dank air.

The dream was something he must have filed away in his brain. But something stood out. The rear chrome mounted dealership plate had reflected the sunlight into his eyes as the car first backed up.

" Cross Brothers. Where the hell is Cross Brothers in Maryland?"

The phone rang two hundred feet back at the beach house. He chided himself for not taking it off the hook, but he was incensed enough to spin in the sand and start up the trail. The ring grew louder as he passed the little bushes where he figured the ladder was initially stashed. It grated in his ears as he looked into the darkened house, lit only by the yellow digits from the microwave oven. He ripped open the screen and tried to control his breathing as he yanked the phone off the wall.

" Kel?"

" Mary Ellen."

" I'm sorry... I couldn't sleep. She hasn't tried anything has she?"

" Everything A-OK here. " He took off the cap and wiped the sweat from his bushy brows and temples. " How are the kids?"

" A mess. This whole thing is a mess. Shane keeps thinking she's going to see her dad again. Oh, God, this is so awful."

" No. I'm going to find out where that little bitch lived before she came to Binghampton Beach."

" How?"

" The car. I had forgotten. Cross Brothers. Somewhere in Maryland." He raised his finger in the darkness as he looked across the bay waters. " It's just a hunch, Mary Ellen, but I wonder if she bought that ladder back where she used to live."

" No, no, no. She's too clever."

" Is she? This whole thing is compulsive. She was ditched by LaTrobe and killed him. Maybe she bought the gun at the same place she bought the ladder and the car ramps. In her hometown."

" You don't know that."

" No, I don't. But I won't know unless I check it out. I can't sit here waiting for the bullet to be compared. She'd kill me by then."

" I'm glad I left Binghampton Beach. And if you're driving up into Maryland, I'll be glad you're out of there, too."

" I'll second that because I just don't know what the hell she's going to do next. Listen, I know this therapist-

" *You* saw a therapist?" asked Mary Ellen.

" No, we used this guy in a lot of cases. Whenever you get back I'll get you his number. I want the kids to have the best help. "

" Thanks. Kel and thanks for everything. "

" Hey, I'm not complaining. I get to be a cop again. "

" And score the big one? "

" Score the big one. "

20

Kel drove the Land Rover steadily along the interstate and thought about how the congenial sales manager back at the GM dealership honored his request to track down Cross Brothers. As he waited Kel talked with some of the locals getting their cars repaired, watched TV on the overhead monitor and went through three cups of soured coffee, lightened with artificial, powdered cream. Around noon, the sales manager walked in from the front showroom. With a large grin on his face, he seemed quite proud of himself when he announced Cross Brothers was located in the Maryland town of Haydenville. Within minutes Kel was back in his car and speeding out of town.

He was not quite sure what he would find when he reached Haydenville. The little village, three hours from Binghampton Beach and near West Virginia, was hardly a scratch on his regional map. He assumed she used the maroon van to transport the ladder, either on top or disassembled in two pieces inside. Where and how she did the damage to the ladder was less certain. The condo provided no space for mechanical work nor would she risk being seen sabotaging the ladder.

The Land Rover easily cruised over the long mountainous stretches. Only a few cars and an occasional monster truck passed him along the hillsides. Through the uninhabited forested hills, he gained an intuitive sense how Su Lee would desire the more exciting life along the beach. Small town naiveté often led to expectations of a glamorous future at some distant point of demarcation.

* * *

The town was cradled naturally in the hills. A few smoke stacks jutted up across the valley and a winding river cut through eroded rock cliffs south of the main town. The developments became forest again only a few miles to the north. He signaled and smiled when he saw a McDonalds at the off ramp. Cross Brothers was located diagonally from the off ramp stop sign, but Kel was not looking to prove Su Lee bought the Firebird at that GM dealership. The Land Rover crawled along the hillside street bordered with brick houses and asphalt shingled store fronts. He scanned the cracked sidewalks and vacant lots. At the corner traffic light atop the hill was a good-sized hardware store. Municipal Hardware was emblazoned in sun drenched white letters on a sun dulled, aqua border.

Kel slowed and stopped at the bright red traffic light. He peered into the store's wide window span. Rows of faded wallpa-

per bins bordered an assortment of Venetian blinds and aqua shelves housed rows of assorted paint cans. The light changed to green and he veered left. Pale green pegboard shelves covered a portion of the window down from the entrance to a small parking lot. He rumbled into the lot and peered around the building's yellow bricks at a long row of ladders stacked against the building. He recognized the orange Scottish sticker on the side, but had no direct proof Su Lee bought the ladder here.

He parked in the lot behind the main building and walked cautiously through the gate. A few guys on the dock, loaded feed and grain bags into battered pickup trucks. Again he stared at the ladders, varying in size from fifteen feet to the larger forty footer owned by Tony Fresco. Su Lee could feel safe in the world away from Binghampton Beach.

"Can I help you?" asked a man about his age and the hardware store name stamped on his blue striped uniform. A couple of days of gray stubble coated his wrinkled face.

"Yeah, can you take these ladders apart to transport them?"

"Sure, but why the hell would you want to do that?"

Kel realized his mistake and smiled. "Don't mind me, I'm not mechanically minded."

The man rolled his brown eyes and tugged on his suspenders. "Then why do you want a ladder?"

"I don't... Just a question. I have another question."

" Yeah... I figured you would."

" Su Lee, you know her?"

" I only work here part time."

" I didn't ask that. This is a small town."

" I'm from Buford Junction. I've worked here since I retired from the railroad. I don't know any guy named Su Lee."

" Okay. Thanks," said Kel as he headed toward the door next to the dock. He figured the guy was watching him as he climbed the dock stairs.

" Where you from?" he called from the lot.

Kel turned on the dock. " Buffalo."

" I wuz there once."

Kel nodded and walked into a massive plumbing section. Bins overfilled with copper connectors, joints, brass spigots and copper and plastic tubing was hung on wide clips along the green wall. Several guys passed him as he squeezed into the aisle leading into the main portion of the store. Three new digital cash registers up front looked as if they had been beamed in from the future. The deep smell of paint opened his air passages as gallon cans vibrated on shakers under the counter.

He wandered behind the wallpaper bins and passed oil cases stacked to a windowless automotive department along the main street side. The ramps were located somewhere in the department, but something scared him about this section and the whole store.

Although Su Lee was nowhere within a few hundred miles, Kel felt her presence. Maybe the gunshots and the phone calls had left him more edgy than he wanted to admit.

He moved around the cases and looked at a wall of oil and air filters. Plastic wrapped spark plugs hung on the pegboard above yellow plastic antifreeze containers and blue windshield washer. He neared additional cases of oil along the rear wall. Somebody entered the department. He spun around, only to see a guy browsing amidst an assortment of light bulbs and car head lamps. His heart flew and again cautioned himself against thinking Su Lee was around.

He continued along the back wall, but stopped when he saw car jacks and yellow car ramps. Slowly, he crept up and put his fingers on the smooth yellow paint. Weakening this gauge metal would require considerable skill and the proper tools. Whether she gave Trombly the original ramps or he bought them here was not clear, but these ramps matched Mrs. Bates' ramp. With tension in his shoulders and back he started up the aisle again. "Excuse me," he said to the red hair woman behind the counter.

"Sir?"

"I'm looking for some information."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do," she said with a large smile.

"Su Lee, you know her?"

Her smile dropped like a rock into the sea. " Why do you ask?"

" That's not important. She used to live here, right?"

" It's been awhile. Her father worked in the machine shop. He was very good."

" *Machine* shop... Is it still there?" he asked, positioning his elbow on the smooth counter.

" Ain't there and Zuam died a years ago. Smoked. One after another. He never learned English but he was mechanical. Knew French though. Why are you asking about Su Lee?"

" She ever come back here?"

" She does, but the brother don't."

" Is the mother alive?" asked Kel.

The woman looked him over and he thought she might stop talking with him. " The mother died after they come from Korea. Su Lee comes back here a few times a year. She was here over the week end. You're either cop or private investigator."

" Both. She was in here to buy a ladder, right?"

" Right." Kel's knees weakened as his stomach jolted. The clerk leaned forward " What did she do? She was always such a nice girl. Is she in trouble?"

Kel was stuck on Su Lee buying the ladder. " I don't think she's in trouble. I'm just doing a little background check for a client."

" Oh, good. I thought something was wrong."

" Well, how much trouble can you get into buying a ladder?"

The smiled returned. " Well, that's true. I can only say she was a good girl, very smart."

" She ever go to college?"

" I don't think she did. She went to the technical high school..."

Kel's mind filled with images of Su Lee learning a number of mechanical skills during her time at school. But he wondered how she ruined that ladder and the ramps. " Where did she stay when she was back here?"

" Zuam's little house by the river is still there. Yes, she has stayed there before because she used Zuam's van to-"

" *His what?*"

" His van to haul off the ladder."

" Oh, yes, the maroon van," said Kel.

" Right."

" I guess she was very mechanically inclined like the father. She ever buy car ramps up here?"

" Don't know," she said as a woman with two kids and three rolls of wallpaper appeared at the other end of the counter.

" Whoops."

" Oh, Mam'," he said as she started down the counter.

" One other thing. Where's Zuam's house?"

" North Street, right by the Kersage River, before the bridge. The name is still on the mailbox."

" Thanks. You've been very helpful."

She waved and talked about pattern matches and wallpaper styles for the woman's kitchen. Kel had the proof he wanted about the ladder, maybe enough for Hawkins to get off his rump and look into Tony's death. As he moved along the paint cans again, he realized he had to travel out to Zuam's house. Zuam, if he worked as an expert in a machine shop, would have left his tools behind after he died. Kel was not sure how Su Lee wrecked the ladder or the ramp, but he was going to find out.

21

The narrow road bordered a newly blasted, clean rock ledge. Cool air blew from the air conditioner vents as Kel waited behind a long line of cars and a shiny red pickup truck. In the late afternoon sun he watched a skinny guy in a blue tee shirt maneuver an oversized front-end loader with tires bigger than the Land Rover. Kel propped his forearms on the steering wheel. The stocky woman in faded jeans, yellow hardhat and orange vest waved a luminescent green flag. The pickup truck nudged forward and each car in line started up the hill. Kel pushed the accelerator and followed cars around the bend. Near the metal arched bridge a green and white sign for the Kersage River was directly across the road from a dull corrugated mail box with faded black stencil.

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The loud beeps from the massive, yellow front-end loader diminished as he passed a second woman waving a similar green flag. Biting smoke from her hanging cigarette wafted inside the

Land Rover. In the mirror the skinny guy parked the front-end loader in a scalloped cliff alcove off the road. Kel signaled and moved around the mailbox, but braked as the smooth dirt driveway dipped down quickly.

A few gray, scraggly dead trees were scattered in the uncut grass and a larger hickory spread over the porch's aluminum roof. To the right a long weathered shed with bays bordered the hill's angled banks down to the muddy, fast flowing river. Once on the level dirt, Kel maneuvered the Land Rover between the lengthy shed and house. He swung the car behind the shed and onto the grassy edge overlooking the river and hills on the far side.

With stomach acid bubbling up his throat, Kel pulled the car keys and stepped into the high grass. On the highway the guy leaped off front-end loader as the project shut down for the day. The river churned behind the sheds and echoed through the forest canyon walls. He turned, keys in hand, toward the overgrown bushes along the house's dark, dirty windows, but watched highway, and prayed she had not followed him. Pressing his lips, he slipped into the first shed bay and peered inside the door's cracked window.

The sun, like heightened laser, pierced the barn board cracks at the far end of a loft. A car motor was positioned from cables below. Tools and a more engines were stacked into the darkness. He jiggled the door, and wondered about the wood ladder constructed

to the loft. All the bay doors were locked as he shuffled along the weathered wood.

"Damn!" He glanced at the deserted highway and kicked the first door, moving it easily. He gazed up to the loft again, stepped back and rammed his body against the door. The inner latch snapped and the wide door creaked open into stagnant air. Kel checked the road again as a green state truck pulled up and the highway workers crawled into the truck bed. He darted inside, moved diagonally to the loft ladder, and scrambled as if he were on an obstacle course back in the service.

The floorboards were spongy. He waved his hand through the darkness to find a light cord or switch. In the dim light the outline of a light bulb appeared above him and he caught the string. The light pull clicked when he yanked on the cord and an oversized clear tungsten bulb illuminated a machine shop. Tools were neatly lined on a long work bench and a central drill, calibrating devices, and a number of other tooling machines were positioned on the wall. An oily residue lingered in the air.

He walked toward a table saw. A number of serrated blades were stored in tiny slots above. The saw had an adjustable swing arm and metal router. This machine or one of the others could easily cut a stress line under Roger Trombly's ramp, eventually the collapsing the ramp in a garage hundreds of miles away. As he wandered through the musty shop, he pulled another lamp cord.

Pipe cutters and stainless round blades were hung on hooks above the paint splattered workbench. He stroked his chin and pictured her wrapping the cutter around the ladder rungs. An infinitesimal cut near the side supports would weaken the rungs.

He marveled at her prowess at taking both the ladder and the ramps to this isolated shed to cunningly set the weakened trap. Su Lee was mechanically inclined and had technical training. She was in superb physical condition and bold enough to carry out her demented plans. Kel pulled the second cord chain and headed back. He extinguished the other bulb and moved deliberately down the rough edged ladder. Hawkins would have to listen to him now.

A phone call placed in Haydenville seemed the most prudent course. He headed with great alacrity toward the last bay door, grabbed the edge and moved with the door until it swung back in place. With a uneasy feeling he focused on the huge yellow front end loader on the deserted road. He jogged along the shed, fished out his keys and continued to the Land Rover. No doubt existed now about Su Lee's complicity in the accidental deaths. As he leaped inside, he now wondered if the beach house bullet would really match the bullet lodged in Edward La Trobe's body.

He rolled down the window to release the interior hot air. The cascading river clatter below the steep slopes was overridden by the racing engine. His only thought now concerned getting to a phone to call Hawkins. He backed around the shed, shifted and ac-

celerated up the red dirt driveway. The car dipped, but his eyes were blinded by the bright evening glare through the trees beyond the far river bank. The highway the sun was occluded by the shadow of the fast moving front-end loader.

The metal scoop scraped the asphalt and he stopped. The powerful engine resonated as the machine advanced and pushed under his front bumper. Chrome hydraulic tubes whooshed as the blade now locked under the Land Rover bumper and black diesel exhaust billowed into the twilight from the rusted pipe next to the canopy. The car flipped up against the dirt. His head slammed against the roof and he blanked out for a few moments. Dazed, he opened his eyes from an upside down position. The machine's engine cranked and the car rose into the air.

He pushed on the driver's door, but it was jammed into the metal blade. Trying to squeeze out the driver's window was also impossible with the edge of the car so close to the metal. He crawled on his belly across the padded roof, lifted the passenger door lever and pushed both hands against the door. The door rapped against the outside metal, as the front-end loader's push arms lifted the blade containing the Land Rover upward and the car tilted. Kel rolled back as the door closed.

He sensed the forward movement toward the river bank. Again he crawled over the roof and kicked the passenger door. He opened the door but the blade dipped back, hurling him against

the inverted dash. Through the crackled windshield the river cascaded several hundred feet below the foliage. The car slid, hit the bushes and whipped over. He was flung into the back seat as the car tumbled and bounced off the hardened river banks. In a half-conscious state he heard the splash and the subsequent loud river's roar. Blood crept down his forehead and his ribs were crushed. Water seeped in the side windows, windshield cracks, and the car was taken by the currents.

22

Two hours ago Mary Ellen protested when Danny wanted to go swimming. The tiny pond proved a nifty swimming hole for youngsters in Bradenton and the surrounding mountain towns. Kids leaped from the rocks, cannonballed into the clear cool water. Mothers and aunts gathered in a shaded area off shore and bragged about their children's great accomplishments during the summer, but most anticipated school starting a few weeks from now.

Kathleen's chatter with a few friends sent Mary Ellen back to the blanket with her daughters and the sun warmed her face. Her thoughts returned to Tony in the good times and she could almost feel his hand as she walked Binghampton Beach again at twilight. Back then she could talk freely, unrestrained by hidden innuendoes and a list of unanswered past grievances. He always told her how much he loved her, yet within a year's time everything had disintegrated.

Kathleen's tone was ebullient and precise, unfettered by any substantive challenge in her life. Unlike her sister, Mary Ellen's head was cluttered, she meandered in and out of sleep and wondered where Kel's investigation of Su Lee had led. He had not

checked in with her since yesterday morning, unusual for him, and within her cavalcade of worries, she prayed for his safety.

" Mosey." Kathleen's voice grew louder as she held Mary's Ellen's shoulder. Mary Ellen forced opened her eyes. " Mosey"

" The sun feels so good."

" We're going to the church supper tonight. There should be some games for the kids and great food. You want to go?"

" I don't know." She wanted to close her eyes and drift back into the sunlight's warm security. " I'm tired."

" You need to get out, be among people."

" I know," she said, sitting up. " Half of me wants to run away, but if I isolate myself, everything just gets worse. I'm trapped in my own self pity, Kathleen."

" I take that as a yes," said her auburn haired sister.

" Yup."

She looked over at her long framed daughters, still asleep on the gray blanket. Stability would collapse without Tony's influence in their life. She heard Danny arguing with his friends in the water as she fell back on the blanket and her hands tightened. Fatigue and emotional overload prevented her from dealing with it. At least Tony knitted the family together even when things were strained. How would she face life alone?

* * *

A warm shower and change of clothes gave her a temporary reprieve from the emotional undercurrents tearing her apart. She looked at the dark circles shading her haggard blue eyes. The bright red jersey and clean washed jeans contributed to her fresh attitude. It was time to take control and not let the family falter. Somehow she would ease her daughter's pain and steer Danny in the right direction. Tony would have wanted his family to remain strong. She opened the bedroom door. Kathleen and Don both turned in the kitchen. Sandy talked with Shane and Angie on the deck as Danny threw a baseball with Allen.

" Mosey, you look great," said Kathleen.

" A good facade. I figure I might as well put up the facade. Better to act it out rather than get stuck within myself."

" I do that in business all the time," said Don. " You just act like your having a great time with a client, even though you might want to be back here in the mountains. Can I get you anything, Mose?"

" No, I'm okay. Looking forward to getting out."

" Good," said Kathleen, hugging her. Kathleen's touch infused Mary Ellen with a security her own thoughts could never provide.

Mary Ellen smiled and acted perky. " I want to keep busy. You need somebody to work around the house, rake the yard, make dump runs?"

" How about jogging? Come jogging with us in the morning," said Kathleen.

" I just may start that. Can I use your phone?" She had told them nothing about Su Lee nor how Kel was attempting to prove her complicity in four accidental deaths, including her own husband's death. " I want to call Kel in the trailer "

" Sure, go ahead," said Don.

Mary Ellen walked into the hall and lifted the receiver. She pushed in the long distance number and tapped her foot on the floor as the line rang. Four previous calls had resulted in mounting confusion. He should have returned to the trailer by now. Maybe he had uncovered more information and was adding to the case against Su Lee. As she lowered the receiver she feared something had happened to him. Her hands shook as she leaned against the wall.

Kel was armed and had spent his entire adult life involved in investigations in the heart of Buffalo. More than likely he would be back at the trailer soon and have information incriminating Su Lee. She held her head up and started down the hall. " Okay, let's go."

Don turned from the sliders. " You talk to your friend?"

" Not back."

" I think you should eventually go back to the beach house," said Don, opening the door. The kids were already in his van.

" I don't know."

" Really. You need to erase what just happened. The only way to do that is to grieve. Begin new memories."

" You sure you're not a psychologist?" she asked.

" I know you and I know you have to go on," he said.

" I know." Mary Ellen dipped her head, climbed into the back seat and Don slid the door shut. She knew he was right, but she did not know how she would ever build a new life.

* * *

The white steeple of the New England church poked through the oaks and maples at the top of the hill. Tents were set up next to amusement rides and a number of games carnival games in the open field. Mary Ellen stayed behind in the green and white striped tent with Kathleen and a few of the women from town. She finished a second bowl of tapioca pudding and licked the home made whipped cream off the cold spoon. " This is good."

" You want some more?" asked Henrietta Smead, a stout woman with blue curly hair.

" No, I'd better stop," she said, taking another sip of hot coffee.

" There always plenty of food at church events," said Henrietta.

" No argument here." She looked to her left as Danny carried a stuffed black and white panda bear into the tent. " Wow!"

" Hey, Mom look. I sunk the basketball. Nobody else did it!"

She wondered what Tony would do right now. " I'm proud of you, Danny."

His dark eyes brightened, but she knew he wanted Tony with him right now. " I'm going to win everything! Everything!"

" You just do your best."

" That's what Dad used to tell me," he said. " Thanks, Mom."

" Okay..." She squeezed his hand. " Go get em, sport." Danny hugged her and retreated with his friend back into the carnival.

Mary Ellen caught Kathleen's eye. " He's a good boy."

" You' ll make it, Mosey."

" Thanks."

Kathleen stretched. " Well, I don't know about you ladies, but I need to walk off what I just consumed."

Mary Ellen stood, grabbed a brownie off the table and stuck it in her mouth. " I'm going to weigh a thousand pounds by the time I leave here."

" Never stopped me," said Henrietta.

The women laughed and moved through the open tent flap. Mary Ellen surveyed crafts and additional games ahead. " I'd like to look at the crafts."

" Sure," said Kathleen. " Maybe try the frog ride."

" Frog ride?" asked Mary Ellen. Kathleen pointed to a small roller coaster with six frog seats. " Oh, no. I'll stay on solid ground thank you."

" I'll treat."

" No way."

Mary Ellen shook her head. Across the field at the beginning of the church cemetery, Shane and Angie talked with Sandy and another local girl near the first gravestones. Kathleen held her wrist.

" It's good they talk."

" I know. But I just worry about them. They don't say that much."

" They're teenagers, what do you expect?"

Mary Ellen nodded and they moved along the craft tables. She checked Danny at the basketball hoop game. " You know the worst part is going to come later. When they're back in school after some months go by and they realize Tony isn't around any more. "

" Have somebody good talk to them, Mose. There are a lot of quacks out there."

" Yeah, that's what I mean." She looked down at a complex rendition of a house composed solely of wooden matches. " Four hundred dollars?"

" A little steep," said Kathleen. " It must have taken years to construct."

" And years to pay off," quipped Mary Ellen.

She made Kathleen and the others laugh. Kathleen held her wrist. " I guess you look at it more as a donation to the church."

Mary Ellen nodded and glanced back to the basketball game. Two other boys were trying to sink the basketball into the small orange hoop. She checked each game, but did not see Danny. " Where's my son?"

" What's the matter?"

" I don't see Danny," she said, stepping away from the craft table.

" I'm sure he's just wandered along with the other boys, Mosey."

Mary Ellen crossed the asphalt along the main tent. She surveyed the area like a Secret Service man preceding the President, first returning to the greasy haired guy at the basketball hoop. " Have you seen my son?"

" I see a lot of people, Mam'."

" Short kid, wide face, dark hair, crew cut," she said in rapid succession.

" Yeah, he was just here. Didn't win this time. Good shot though."

" Well, where did he go?"

He turned to his left. " They were walking back toward the church, but I'm busy with the game here. Sorry.

Mary Ellen looked at Kathleen as she approached. " The church."

" Mosey, it's all right. He's just being a boy."

Mary Ellen trotted toward the clapboard church, but panic overtook her. A few people strolled under the church yard oaks and maples and the cars were parked to the street. But she did not see Danny as she faced the large dark church windows. " Excuse me," she said to an older couple, strolling the grounds.

" Yes," said the gray haired woman.

" A little boy. A little boy ten years old. Did you see him?" Her taller husband shook his head as a dog continuously barked around the other side of the church. " His name is Danny."

" We just got here," said the woman.

" I have to find Danny," said Mary Ellen as Kathleen hurried around the building.

" Any luck?"

" No, they haven't seen him."

" I'm sure he's just playing," said the woman, smiling and she continued along with her husband.

Mary Ellen closed her eyes. " Oh, God, where is he?"

" Let's check the church," said Kathleen.

" Right, the church. The church."

She ran ahead and thundered up the stairs. With her hands on the wide wood handles, she pulled open the wooden doors and stepped into the narthex. Her voice echoed along the colorful stain glass windows. " Danny! Danny, are you in here?"

Kathleen appeared in back. " Is he here?"

" No, he's not answering. It's her, she has my son."

" Her?" asked Kathleen, squinting and looking Mary Ellen in the eye.

" Her... She killed Tony. She killed Trombly. She killed Rankin and LaTrobe and now she has my son."

" Listen, Mosey. I don't know what you're taking about."

Mary Ellen sandwiched tears between her lashes. She ran up the main aisle, checking all the varnished pews as she passed. Maybe Danny was playing a trick on her or maybe he was back outside at the games. She rounded the front pew and could hear Kathleen calling from the nave as she sprinted past the altar and to the darkened alcove's outside door.

She burst into the evening light and from the cement stairs panned the church yard. Another group of boys shot the basketball. She cased each ride, each game, and even the craft table, but Danny

was not in the yard. Mary Ellen turned as Kathleen put her hand on her shoulder. " Kathleen, Danny's not here."

" Okay, where's the boy he was with? I think he was with Kevin Berick."

" No, I need to speak with a cop!" As she again checked the church yard, Mary Ellen was convinced Su Lee had somehow found out she had taken her family to the Berkshires. She tried to regain her composure, convincing herself Su Lee would have no overt knowledge of her trip. " I'm so scared."

Kathleen embraced her. " Listen, we'll find Joe Wyzinski. He was directing traffic earlier. Joe will know what to do, who to ask."

Mary Ellen nodded as Kathleen also studied the grounds. She pointed to the long parish hall's clapboards. The shot haired, uniformed officer smoked a cigarette and spoke with a couple of men from the parish. " There's Wyzinski. Come on."

" Thank God," said Mary Ellen as they descended the steps and started back along the tent.

" Let me do the talking," said Kathleen.

" Okay."

Holding her sister's hand, Mary Ellen skirted the craft tables and traversed the extended parking lot. She could hear Wyzinski and the other men speaking. Wyzinski, a middle-aged man with a dark mustache and short silver hair smiled as they approached.

" Hello, Kathleen, enjoying the carnival?"

" Well, actually Joe, we have a little problem. My sister's boy-"

" His name is Danny!" said Mary Ellen.

" Danny is missing. He's ten years old. We can't find him,"
said Kathleen.

Wyzinski dropped his cigarette on the cement and snuffed it out. " What does he look like?"

" Dark hair, dark eyes. Short dark..." Mary Ellen clutched Kathleen. " Not Danny. Danny is an innocent little boy!"

" Where was he last seen?" asked Wyzinski, putting on his police hat.

" Back... back at the basketball hoop. But they don't know where he is!"

" Okay," said Wyzinski in a soothing voice. " We'll find your son. Everything will be all right. Kathleen, why don't you get your sister some coffee?"

" Good idea."

" Need some help. Joe?" asked one of the townies.

Wyzinski's voice faded as Kathleen walked Mary Ellen back toward the tent. " Yeah, let's not make this too obvious. Get a half a dozen men."

Mary Ellen was secure with the idea of someone else assuming responsibility for finding Danny. Her thoughts flipped between Su Lee lurking in Bradenton and Danny and his friends merely exploring the area. Kathleen sat her at the tent table as Don appeared

at the side flap. He spoke in undercurrents and glanced at Mary Ellen as Kathleen mixed the coffee. Mary Ellen clutched the large Panda bear.

" Mose," said Don as he moved over ahead of Kathleen. " I'm going outside with Joe Wyzinski. I'm sure Danny is just being a boy and snooping around."

" What about that Berick boy?"

Don looked at Kathleen as she set the coffee on the table.

" Danny was with Kevin Berick."

" Okay, we'll find them both. " He squeezed her wrist and spun back toward the flap.

" Oh, God... Where is Kel? I need to talk to Kel."

" You're neighbor on the beach?" asked Kathleen.

" Yes..." Mary Ellen lifted the coffee to her lips, but her queasy stomach caused her to lower the cup back to the table. " I want to call Kel."

" All right. Sure. There's a phone in the parish hall."

" I have to call him. You don't understand."

" Okay."

She grabbed the Panda bear and exited the tent ahead of her sister. Maybe Kel had answers be now or at least could confirm Su Lee was still in Binghampton Beach. She looked to her left. Wyzinski and nearly a dozen men were buzzed around the carnival and

talked with people at the games and rides. Other men were down near the cemetery.

" Wait! Where's Shane and Angie?"

Kathleen's face tightened. Her words were compressed and sharp. " I don't know."

" I don't see them down back. My kids!" she screamed and many people at the carnival turned. " My kids! That woman has my kids!"

" What woman?" yelled Kathleen, grabbing her shoulder. " Mosey, it's all right!"

" No! No!" she cried. " She's going to kill my kids just like she killed Tony!"

A few woman from the crafts table and one of the men rushed into the lot. The older man moved over. " What happened?"

Mary Ellen screamed and wailed. " Oh, God! Oh God, no!"

" What woman?" asked Kathleen, looking toward the cemetery.

" Su Lee!"

" Who is Su Lee?"

" She killed Tony! She killed him! Just like she did the other guys! Sabotaged the ladder! Now she followed me. I know she did!"

Kathleen pulled her closer and patted her hair. " It's all right. We'll find them, Mosey. We'll find them."

23

The moon hid behind an intricate pattern of leaves and sent bright triangular projections across the church parking lot. Mary Ellen turned from the window, the coffee cup from an hour ago still firmly in her hand, and she watched the clock's red minute hand sweep upward toward two-thirty. For nine and a half hours they had searched for the kids. The disappearance now brought in TV stations from Springfield, Massachusetts and a half dozen radio and print people. To the credit of the local and state police, the media contingent were kept at bay in a small house adjacent to the church.

" Mosey."

Mary Ellen looked up at her sister. " If it's bad I don't want to hear it, Kathleen."

" Nobody knows anything. They've searched a five mile radius."

" She took them away."

" You keep mentioning that Chinese woman," said Kathleen. She pulled up the chair next to Mary Ellen. " Who is she?"

" Korean."

" Whatever. Who is she? Why would you think she took your kids?"

Mary Ellen closed her eyes. " It's a long story. And nobody is going to believe it. I told Wyzinski, but he took off with the state cops. I thought they might make a call for me to Binghampton Beach. Nobody there wants to believe me."

" Then you tell me."

Mary Ellen set the cold coffee on the table. She began with Su Lee's background in Maryland and for the next fifteen minutes detailed every accident, beginning with La Trobe. Kathleen nodded politely until she spoke about the car falling on Trombly. The additional information about Kel and the ramps in Maryland seemed to ignite her curiosity. Mary Ellen relayed Kel's suspicions about Su Lee rendering a second ladder unsafe and replacing it with Tony's original ladder.

" This is bizarre. What about the local police in Binghampton Beach?"

Mary Ellen chuckled. " Right. Unless they had proof, they wouldn't believe Kel. He was given an early retirement because he didn't have evidence in a case. Now Hawkins, the Binghampton Chief, won't believe anything he says. And they dismissed what I was saying. And these guys are too busy out here."

" Where is Kel now?"

" Good question. He was supposed to be in her hometown looking for clues. He thought she might have bought the ladder and the ramps back there."

" You have to call Binghampton Beach again," said Kathleen.

" Where are my kids? What did she do with my kids?"

" I don't know..." Kathleen seemed to agree with Mary Ellen's way of thinking. " But why take the risk?"

" She's very clever." Mary Ellen stood and leaned on the table. The flashlights shone through the moonlit wood, but she feared her children were hundreds of miles away. " I am going to kill her. I'll kill her and she'll never kill again."

Kathleen stood and immediately tried to hold her, but Mary Ellen slipped away. " Mosey, you're just-

" I'm just what?" she asked, spinning around. " I'm just what?"

" You're in an emotional frenzy. These feelings will pass."

" Sure, woman murders my husband and now has my kids. I'm going to let these feelings pass? Oh, no," she said, smiling. " It's all over for Miss Su Lee! When I find her. I'll kill her."

Wyzinski and three state police officers moved through the parish hall doors. " Mrs. Fresco. My name is Lieutenant McNair. Sergeant Wyzinski has mentioned a woman in Binghampton Beach, Maryland."

" You haven't found them, have you?"

" No, Mam' we haven't."

Mary Ellen lip smiled and crossed her arms. She rolled her eyes as she spoke. " If by the grace of God they are still alive they might be back with her."

" The woman?"

" Su Lee," said Kathleen.

" I've been trying to tell you people for nine hours!"

" You tell me what you know about this woman, Mrs. Fresco and I will personally make a call to Maryland."

" What about the search?" asked Mary Ellen.

" We have over a hundred people checking every square inch of this town... Now you tell me what you know."

* * *

Mary Ellen leaned back in the jeep. The sun cut across her eyes and the mountain wind assumed a biting autumn chill with the ferocity of a bear just awakened in the cave. Wyzinski, now in his denim jacket and jeans, shifted up the long hill and into Bradenton. The kids were not located and the Binghampton Beach police found Su Lee asleep in her condo two hours ago. She was questioned extensively about the children and denied having anything to do with their disappearance. The cops also found her Firebird

cold in the garage and she had not worked at Barnacle Bill's the night before. But they still brought her downtown.

" Let me get this straight," Mary Ellen said into the wind whipping through the open jeep. " The tracking dogs found no trail. There are no witnesses and no sign of foul play."

" Yeah... I don't understand it. Listen, I've been thinking about what you said about Su Lee. And I've thought about the distance from Bradenton to Binghampton Beach. She could have made it down there with time to spare."

" I'm convinced she did. And I've convinced she has them down there. They're not here. She's got them as insurance if everything else collapses."

Wyzinski pulled onto the road shoulder. " Okay, how does she lure your kids from separate locations at the carnival? What does she say to get them to leave? That just doesn't make sense."

" Force," she said, realizing she was more angry than fearful. " And I think they're still alive. She knows Kel is onto her and wants to cover her little ass."

" Then you say the abduction was like bargaining chips. "

" She knows Kel was onto something back in her hometown."

" Cops can't find him," said Wyzinski.

" That's not a good sign either. She knows Kel and I figured it out with the ladder and the ramps. And her killing the other men."

Wyzinski shifted back on the highway. " You don't think she went after this Kel, do you?"

" He was armed... But why hasn't he called me? Why isn't he in his trailer?"

" I don't know..."

They moved down a long, winding bend with pressure treated ties and cables separating the gully from the road. A few branches already had bright red and orange leaves. Mary Ellen clenched her fists as she braced for the call from Su Lee. The kids would be used to secure her safe passage somewhere. Wyzinski rolled in front of the three-story brick police station across from the new elementary school.

He shut off the engine and rolled up the curb. They both left the jeep and entered the station through the aluminum-framed doors up front. Wyzinski rounded the counter and someone buzzed them both inside.

" Joe," said a black haired deputy with a pug nose.

" What's up, Ted?"

" We just talked to Binghampton Beach. They released the woman. Insufficient evidence."

" Damn. I think Mrs. Fresco has a point. This woman sounds dangerous."

Ted shrugged his shoulders. " Yeah, but she was asleep."

" So, she says," replied Wyzinski. He looked at Mary Ellen. The fatigue was overtaking her. " You all right?"

" Yeah, other than I haven't slept. I need to get back to my sister's house."

Wyzinski nodded. " Anything else?"

" Nope. The retired cop, Kel," said Ted.

" What about him?" asked Mary Ellen.

" Hasn't returned to his trailer."

Her throat tightened as she prayed Kel had not met the same uncertain end as Su Lee's victims. But she believed the kids were still alive and would be used as collateral once the evidence piled up. Wyzinski escorted her out the front door and tears glazed her eyes as she panned the forested hilltops. In the quietude of the late summer afternoon she had lost everything important in her life. The tension inside threatened to snap what was left of her emotional fabric.

She grabbed the side support pole and swung herself into Wyzinski's jeep. The exact distance from Berkshires to Binghamton Beach mattered not as much as the time factor. Nine hours passed from the time the children were abducted until the Binghamton Beach cops knocked on Su Lee's door. With the car still in the garage, she probably used the van. " The maroon van."

" What?" asked Wyzinski as he shot down the side street toward Kathleen's house.

" Su Lee had access to a maroon van. I don't know if she owned it or who it was registered to. I'm sure it was Maryland plates."

" How do you know this?"

" Kel told me a maroon van followed him in Delaware. But that doesn't help us. Even if somebody saw him take the kids. Oh, God, why is this happening?" Wyzinski turned into the driveway and the tears leaked out. " What did I ever do to this woman?"

Wyzinski held her shoulder. " Listen, maybe you'd better get some sleep."

" You know what the upshot is in all of this? Nobody can prove anything. She has covered herself so well."

" No, don't think like that. You can't." He looked her in the eye. " I don't care how clever she is. Sooner or later one mistake crops up. Or maybe an accumulation of mistakes. But it's enough to make the whole story unravel. And when it does-

" She'll know she's cornered."

" Maybe or maybe she won't have any options left," said Wyzinski. " Come on, you need some rest."

" Then promise you'll wake me."

" I'm going to get some sleep myself, but I'll make sure somebody calls from the station. Okay?"

" Okay..."

She did not smile as she wiped the tears away. He walked around the hood, helped her out and brought her toward the door. Kathleen and Don both rushed outside. Mary Ellen hugged her sister as the two men talked on the front porch. Wyzinski said, although it would be time consuming, his department would attempt to question everyone around the church carnival.

" Here," he said, handing the Panda bear to her.

Kathleen thanked him and helped Mary Ellen toward the downstairs bedroom. The strain of staying awake all night and the emotional swell of having her children taken, decimated her. Kathleen helped her to the double poster bed, but Mary Ellen fell forward. She felt a quilt or bedspread cover her body and heard the blinds clatter as the room darkened. Kathleen kissed her hair. The room spun slowly. She snuggled next to the bear and had trouble thinking rationally about anything.

* * *

The sun cut through the edges of the drawn blinds. Mary Ellen closed her eyes again and rolled over, but as she adjusted the pillow position, something crinkled underneath. Having only drifted out of sleep her eyes still ached. Again she heard something. She leaned her head against the wall and picked up an eight by ten gray envelope with both hands and detected the faint odor

of Night Sin. Her heart raced as she quickly ripped open the seal flap.

A large sheet of manila paper was pasted with magazine letters and formed a threatening message.

**MY DEAR EST M A R Y E L L E N ,
Y O U R K I D S A R E A L I V E .
H A V E O N E H U N D R E D
T H O U S A N D R E A D Y B E F O
R E D A W N A T B E A C H H O U S E
O R T H E Y ' R E D E A D .
N O C O P S .**

Y O U R B E S T F R I E N D

" My God..."

Light crawled up the wall as she pulled the blinds cord. She debated calling Wyzinski, but figured any police involvement up here would result in a call to the Binghampton Beach cops. She could not risk endangering her children's lives. Su Lee would kill the kids if anyone found out about the letter. Carefully she slipped into her shoes and tucked the envelope in her shorts. The afternoon sun covered an unfettered path across the backyard to the trees.

Once in the woods she could get back to the road and call a cab from a pay phone.

With one quick twist she unlocked the clasp and checked the closed bedroom door before she raised the window. She imagined the kids imprisoned by Su Lee in some hotel room around Binghampton Beach. With her thumbs and index fingers she pinched the storm window screen and lifted the aluminum frame from its track. She held the bear, glanced at the door one more time before she stuck her legs out the open window.

Once on solid ground she lowered the blinds first, then the window and finally she set the screen back in place. She bolted for the woods and was soon securely hidden in the maple and hemlocks. With the envelope folded in her hand, and bear under her arm, she leaped through the wooded area as if she were a combat soldier on patrol. By plane she could be in Binghampton Beach by nine or maybe ten o'clock. Getting the money would be impossible right now, but she would have time to save her kids.

24

The wrinkled plastic bag dripped a clear liquid into a long tube connected at needlepoint into Kel's arm. He knew from the numbness, drugs were easing the pain evident in his head, ribs and legs. The nurse behind the bag turned as he sat up. " Hey, where the hell am I?"

" Mr. Kelly, you're awake."

" You're damned right I'm awake. The last thing he remembered was snooping around Su Lee's father's loft." The pipe cutter and the various tooling machines were stark images in his mind under the single incandescent bulb. He had nailed Su Lee with enough evidence for the cops to start looking into the case. " Why am I in the hospital?"

" Your accident."

" What accident?"

" You know, your car in the river."

" My car was in the river? My car was in the river... I have to get out of here," he said, moving his legs around. He grabbed at the sharp pain moving across his lower ribs. " Damn."

" I think you should stay in bed, Mr. Kelly."

" No, I need to get this thing out of my arm and I need to get to a phone," he said scanning the little room. " Doesn't this hospital have phones?"

" We can arrange to have one brought to the room on a per diem basis."

" Yes, yes. I have to call... but where am I calling?" For a moment he did not know whether Mary Ellen was in Binghampton Beach or with her sister in Massachusetts. But he needed to talk to Hawkins and the rest of the Binghampton Beach police.

" Sir?"

" Yes, get me a phone."

He leaned back on the pillows as she left the room. It all made sense now. Su Lee bought both the ladder and the ramps at the local hardware store. He pictured her driving back to her father's house by the river. Then the river bank flashed into his head along with an uncertain anxiety. The river was so loud and so far down from the shed. She made the proper cuts precisely. With Tony's ladder, the rungs were loosened sufficiently by the pipe cutter. As he climbed higher to paint the upper portions of the beach house, the pressure increased on the rungs. When the rungs collapsed, he fell forty feet to his death. And somehow she switched the ladder back. He wondered what happened to the second ladder.

" Where the hell am I anyway?" he asked the nurse returned.

" You're in St. Luke's Hospital in Charleston. And the phone will be up here within an hour. Somebody just called the nurse's desk about you. I wish they had left their name."

" I was in Maryland. I don't remember any accident." Kel looked up at her. " Somebody called? Male or female?"

" Female, but-"

" She did it... This accident."

" Your car went over a river embankment." Kel sat up and found a comfortable position. " You are lucky to be alive, Mr. Kelly."

" But how? How would I go over a river embankment?" He sensed the churning water all around him, but had no visual image.

" It's normal in trauma cases like this to not remember details before an accident."

" Su Lee. She did it. She did it."

" I'm just a nurse here. Do you want me to call the officers back here?"

" Cops, yes. I am a cop. Was. Get me the cops. " Kel grit his teeth and held his left hand to his aching temple. " You need to get them back in here and I need to talk to the police in Binghampton Beach when that phone gets here."

" Binghampton Beach?"

" Any cops. Any cops. I don't care. This woman has committed murder. Who knows where she'll stop next?"

" Somebody tried to kill you?"

" Su Lee. Tell them Su Lee."

Kel had no direct evidence Su Lee tried to kill him. He sifted his brain for any recollection of the accident. He closed his eyes, but still kept returning to the shed loft and all the tools. Every time he tried to venture ahead in time, he was blocked by the accident's tremendous shock. Yet, he knew she was capable of anything now, and even though confined to a hospital bed, he was compelled to stop her at any cost.

* * *

" You listen to me, Hawkins," he yapped into the tableside phone. " You need to send somebody up there to that house and shed. You'll find all the tools there."

" Look, Kelly. You don't know what just happened?"

" No."

" Mary Ellen's kids are missing in Massachusetts. You've got her so stirred up, she called down here blaming Su Lee," said Hawkins.

" Where the hell are those kids?"

" Well, it's a damned wrong assumption. And I don't know where the kids are. But Su Lee was sleeping in her condo when we went up to check."

Kel moved his feet around the edge and fully sat up. " Did you search the condo?"

" For what?" asked the chief.

" For the kids."

" Listen, I don't know what happened up in Massachusetts, but that woman would have to drive at ninety miles an hour to get back here. Her car is in the garage and the engine is cold, buddy."

Kel dared not share his feeling about Su Lee's complicity in his accident. " I think those kids are around there."

" And just where the hell are you?"

" Not important," he said, again holding his ribs as a well-dressed man in a blue suit walked in ahead of two younger guys in suits. " Mr. Kelly?"

" Yes."

" I'm detective Edward Farrell. I was on the scene when they pulled you out of the Kersage River."

Kel nodded and spoke firmly into the phone. " I'm coming back to Binghampton Beach."

" Thanks for the warning."

" I'm telling you those kids are in that condo or somewhere in Binghampton Beach."

" And let me tell you. You harass Su Lee and I'll lock you up."

Kel looked at the receiver and hung up. He gazed up at Farrell's slick black hair. " Thank you for coming over, Detective Farrell. I have no recollection of any accident."

" You were close to drowning, but the position of the car... on an angle saved you."

" How did it happen, Detective? I haven't got a clue."

" From what my people tell me, you drove off the embankment near an abandoned work shed. That car dropped eighty-seven feet. Frankly, you shouldn't be alive."

" Sorry to disappoint you."

Farrell smiled and glanced at his men. " According to the nurse, you are claiming," he said, looking down at his notebook, " a woman from Binghampton Beach, Maryland may have contributed to your accident."

" Yes, sir."

" I'm all ears, partner. Why don't you tell me how this alleged woman accomplished what you say she did?"

" I take offense at what you say. There's no alleged woman. Her name is Su Lee. And it's not just my accident. I have proof she used that machine shop in the work shed to sabotage a ladder and a car ramp."

" Why?"

" To make murder look like an accident. She's sick. "

" Why would she come all the way up here from Binghampton Beach?" asked the young man behind Farrell.

" You check. She used to live in Haydenville. Right in that house next to the shed."

" Bold accusations," said Farrell.

" Maybe, but it's time she were brought in for questioning."

" Yet," said Farrell, " you can't remember how she pushed you into the river."

" I'm assuming she did."

" But you didn't see her? Is that correct?"

" Yes, it is. I can't remember what happened."

Farrell moved around the bed. " Listen, Kelly. We checked your background. You were-

" Fired?"

" Well, early retirement because of inadequate evidence, so this stupid speculation means nothing to me, mister."

" No!" He forced him self to sit up. " I tell you, you can look for yourself. The tools are there."

" Where are the ladder and the ramp?" asked Farrell.

" I don't know."

" *Great..*"

Kel leaned forward and looked into his gray eyes. " Do you believe me or don't you believe me?"

" No, I think you've grasped at straws in some murder case down on the bay."

Kel pointed his finger at Farrell. " Listen, Su Lee killed her Mary Ellen Fresco's husband and took her kids."

" Missing kids?" asked Farrell.

" You'd better stop that woman before more people are killed."

" Listen, why don't you just get some rest, Mr. Kelly?"

" I don't need any rest. Has the whole world gone bananas? "

" I'm sorry for what happened to you, but just back off. Be glad you're alive and let the police do their work."

" Those kids did nothing," he said as Farrell turned.

" They're probably lost in the hills up there. You get some rest."

25

Don scurried across the living room and swiped the phone off the hook.. " Hello."

" Yes, my name is Walter Kelly. I'm a friend of Mary Ellen's."

" Mr. Kelly. Yes. This is Don Ellis. I'm Mary Ellen's brother in law. She's been trying to track you down. It's just awful what's happened up here. Awful."

" Well, I've had a few major league problems myself."

" The kids..."

" What happened?"

Don choked on his words. " They... they..."

" Take your time. I know those kids like they were my own kids."

" We were at a church carnival when they disappeared. All three of them. We've been searching for over twenty-four hours. Mosey is still sleeping.

" Su Lee..."

" That's what Mosey said, but this Su Lee is in Binghamton Beach. We checked with the police back there."

" No. I mean Su Lee is in Binghampton Beach now, but she tried to kill me. She must have the kids. Somebody has to do something."

" How could she have the kids? Even if she was up here she would have to drive at bottleneck speed to get back to Maryland," said Don.

Kelly cleared his throat on the other end. " Listen, we're not talking about the space shuttle here. Figure out the time. I'm telling you she did drive from Massachusetts to Maryland and she has those kids. "

" Why would she take the kids?"

" When she learned I was still alive. I know she called the hospital checking on my condition. She's cornered, oh not right now, but she knows I know. And she probably figures Mary Ellen knows."

Don furrowed his brow and fell into one of the kitchen chairs.

" Knows what?"

" Knows that Su Lee caused Tony to fall from that ladder."

" What proof do you have of that?"

" I have proof she bought a duplicate ladder and I have located the place where she sabotaged it."

" What? But she couldn't have driven back here."

" Yes, she could have. It's possible. We're talking no more than nine hours driving time," said Kel.

" How did she try to kill you?"

Kelly paused and his voice was reduced to a mumble. " I can't remember. Head injury. But-"

" I think the main thing is to find the kids, Mr. Kelly."

" I agree. I'm at the airport, against doctor's orders, and taking the next plane out of here. I'll call Mary Ellen when I get to Binghampton Beach."

The line clicked and Don stared at the phone and hung up. For a few minutes he sat at the table and wondered about this Su Lee.

He heard his own kids out front as Kathleen burst through the front door. She raised her brow. " Anything yet?"

He shook his head and stared at the receiver. " Nothing."

" Where are they" She looked toward the side bedroom. " I'm going to wake Mosey. Donnie, I've got a gut feeling about this Su Lee, but I just can't prove it."

" Listen, that retired cop, Kelly. He's alive. He's in a hospital in West Virginia. Said Su Lee tried to kill him. He's on his way back to Binghampton Beach."

" Really? Maybe she did. Who knows?" asked Kathleen.

" You think she's working with the brother?"

Kathleen raised her index finger. " Or maybe just the brother is involved." She opened the bedroom door and stepped inside.

Don wanted to sleep but he knew this night would not end soon.

Kathleen tripped on something in the bedroom and then raced out the door.

" Donnie, she's gone. Mosey's gone!"

26

Mary Ellen spotted the coastal lights only minutes before landing at Binghampton Beach. Even at night she recognized the familiar patterns and thought she had actually looped over the beach house. The plane pitched and yawed above the shoreline toward a linear stretch of blue runway lights. She closed her eyes as the craft neared the ground. Fears about her children were trapped within a confused frenzy and she now wanted to call the cops when she landed.

The plane touched down with a quick jolt. She squeezed the panda bear as the airplane whipped along the concrete. As they slowed the approaching hanger and tiny lighted terminal glowed in the night. She questioned whether Su Lee was aware she had returned to Binghampton Beach and immediately she checked for Su Lee or the Firebird in the darkness beyond the airfield lights. Maybe the cops could help. She wanted her kids back.

* * *

The image of the pasted letters on the white paper, tucked inside the gray envelope, remained vivid as she studied each person

inside the terminal window. She was dealing with an unstable, psychotic mind; a person who now wanted to extort money and disappear. Perhaps calling the police was not a good idea. She opened the terminal door and veered to the pay phone near the concession stand. A few cars lined the canopy outside the front doors. She quickly punched out the number to a local cab company, but stopped. What if she were headed into a trap at the beach house? Su Lee could be waiting in the lurch. She closed her eyes, still clutching the phone, and inhaled. In a shaky low voice she stared at the phone and then finished dialing. " *She has the kids. She needs the money.*"

They advised her a taxi was in the area, but Mary Ellen was uneasy about loitering outside and remained near the automatic door. Again she longed for outside help. The cops could figure a way around this situation. As professionals they knew how to handle such delicate matters. But she shook her head as she surveyed the circular drive beyond the canopy. A few headlights passed through the blackness along the road leading away from the airport. She checked for the taxi one more time and retreated back to the phone.

She tried Kel's trailer. The line rang three times and the machine kicked in. She closed her eyes and slumped next to the phone. Kel's voice repeated the same refrain, the machine beeped, and she

hung up. Her eyes ached as she held the edges of the pay phone enclosure. " Kel... Where are you, Kel?"

A single set of car lights swung around the outside road and shined directly into the terminal. She carried the bear and folded envelope out the door. The green station wagon taxi came to an abrupt stop under the canopy. The automatic door startled her. She walked slowly across the corrugated foyer mat, but her intuition told her to stay away from the beach house.

" You Mrs. Fresco?" asked the little driver.

" I am."

" Where can I bring you?" he asked with a smile.

Her voice quivered. " Hazelwood."

He looked back at the bear and the envelope. " Bags, Mam'?"

" Nothing."

He opened the back passenger door and Mary Ellen reluctantly got inside. She settled against the cold vinyl seat amidst the stale smell of spent cigarettes. Again, she contemplated contacting the police. The station lobby was only minutes away. The driver closed the door, shifted and quickly moved around the semicircle. Mary Ellen's hands shook as she peered out the side window and the air conditioner blasted a stream of cool air from the dash vents. She checked along the fence and into the parking lot for the Firebird or the van Kel had talked about in Delaware. She wished Kel were around now.

In the darkness along the side road she kept praying the kids would be all right. Maybe Su Lee would deliver the kids to the beach house once she had the money. A few streetlights flashed into the car as the downtown buildings slowly moved by and the driver followed a pickup truck along the main road. The truck signaled and turned. The cabbie talked about the hot weather as he continued toward the beach. Again she wanted to call the police. She picked up the envelope and opened the clasp. Between the alternating streetlight flashes she stared at gray envelope.

Maybe they were already dead. She pinched the bridge of her nose and then clenched her fists as she tried not to think about it. Su Lee would not kill them without taking the money, but Mary Ellen would not have access to money until morning. Images of her children, playing on the beach when they were younger, haunted her as the driver neared the wooded hills around Hazelton.

"Where in Hazelton, Mam'?"

"Number 16. Durango"

She opened the now wrinkled envelope and read the letter.

**MY DEAR EST M A R Y E L L E N ,
Y O U R K I D S A R E A L I V E .
H A V E O N E H U N D R E D
T H O U S A N D R E A D Y B E F O
R E D A W N A T B E A C H H O U S E .
O R T H E Y ' R E D E A D .
N O C O P S .
Y O U R B E S T F R I E N D**

" *My best friend.*"

" What was that?" asked the driver,

" Nothing... nothing at all.

She repeatedly told herself they could not be dead. The driver entered wooded hills. Her stomach knotted as the cab pulled up the street and the silhouetted beach house came into view around the corner.

" Nice house." Mary Ellen peered through the windshield at the indistinct edges of the massive house. She pictured Tony with the real estate agent last summer. The driver turned around. " Can you wait until I get inside?"

" Okay."

He moved outside opened her door. She took the panda bear and stepped onto the gravel. Again, she followed the beach house's murky outside contours as he leaned inside. " Mam'."

Dazed and uncertain, Mary Ellen turned. " Yes?"

He held up the envelope and grinned. " You forgot your baggage."

" Oh, God... thank you."

" I'll bring you to the front door."

" Thanks..."

As he walked her up the gravel she scrutinized the outside bushes and the side lawn toward the beach trail. Her heart finally caught up with her fears or maybe she had not noticed how it rocked her chest. She stepped cautiously up the brick walk and climbed the two stairs to the front door. " I guess I owe you some money."

" Six bucks for the fare."

She pulled a thin wallet from her jeans and retrieved a ten dollar bill. " Keep the change."

" Thank you, Mam'. I'll wait until you get inside."

" You're most kind..."

She nodded and rifled the wallet for the spare key. The taxi headlights allowed her just enough light to see the chrome lock. Her hand shook as she clumsily inserted the key. With a forceful twist the lock popped and the door opened slowly into the down-

stairs foyer. The car headlights projected through the upper windows and cast sparkling shadows from the upper chandelier onto the wall. She pushed the button and the chandelier light blazed up the stairs toward the upstairs bedrooms.

" Are you all set now, Mam'?"

She considered asking him to stay, but feared Su Lee's repercussions. " Yeah..."

" You have a good night." He nodded and turned. She was tempted to chase this man, whom she did not even know, and hold him. He looked back from the open taxi door and got inside. Tears formed in her eyes. She wanted her husband and children back in this house. The taxi backed across the gravel onto the road. She followed his taillights along the road and through the branches. The car engine faded into the sound of crickets chirping and the surf behind the house cracked with each approaching breaker. The moon had not risen and the yard loomed within a myriad of shadows, tantalizing her already frayed imagination. She flipped on the outside spotlights and the green grass brightened. Even in the shadows, the unseen webs of bushes along the house were dotted with bright flowers.

She kicked the front door shut and immediately turned the lock. As she darted across the foyer, she smacked each light switch, illuminating the extensive kitchen, and raced forward. Seconds later, the entire backyard, pool and trail toward the beach bright-

ened. She grabbed the wooden pole wedged between the sliders and turned toward the cellar stairs. Su Lee could not enter the house with new locks installed on every outside door, yet Mary Ellen could take nothing for granted now. She opened the cellar door and also pushed up every light switch on the downstairs panel.

The gray walls stretched out before her and she slowly moved down the wood stairs as piles of boxes and old lawn furniture materialized to her left. In a slow methodical march, she rounded the perimeter, stopped at the latched metal bulkhead doors. The outside breezes rattled the doors and she heard the surf down at the beach.

How many hours would she have to wait for her kids? She scampered up the cellar stairs and but left on the lights as she entered the kitchen. Again she checked the first floor as if she were taking a quick series of photographs, but her eyes focused on the sweeping stairway banister and spindles to the second floor. " If you're in here. Come out and give me my kids!" She inched her way down the hallway, the wedge pole still in her hand. " Can you hear me, Su Lee? You don't give me my kids, I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

She stepped precariously up the foyer stairs and cocked the door wedge pole. Once on the second floor she lit the hallways and bedrooms. With her free hand she ripped open every closet door,

scoured the bathrooms and walk-ins, and turned on the master bedroom lights. Tony's khaki pants, sports shirt, socks and briefs, neatly spread across the bed. " Sick! You're sick! You hear me, you're sick!"

Gritting her teeth, she spun around and rumbled into the walk-in, ready to swing the wedge stick. The other clothes were slotted neatly on two hanging levels and the shoes lined up on the floor. She rounded the corner into the bathroom. The black sink and the orange soap were undisturbed, but the faint hint of Night Sin emanated from the tub. " *No! Not in my house!*"

Mary Ellen slipped on the tiles, but quickly crawled onto the bedroom rug. She hyperventilated and paused to catch her breath. On the far bedside table the second phone line's green answering machine light flashed. As if she were jump started, she leaped to her feet and took giant steps across the rug. She poked the button. The tape rewound and clicked to play. A odd hissing was abruptly transformed into music.

You never cared about the night scene

You wanted to get out unfazed

Should have left me alone

Should have left me alone

And now you're dead.

Now you're dead.

" No, you're dead! Where are my kids?" She stomped into the hallway overlooking the foyer below and gripped the balustrade. Another voice came over the machine and she retreated into the bedroom.

" Mrs. Fresco, this is Sergeant Daniel Green of the Haydenville, Maryland police. I need to report that your vehicle was involved in an accident in the Kersage river yesterday afternoon. The driver, a Mr. Walter Kelly remains unconscious at St. Lukes Hospital in Charleston."

" Kel..." Her eyes wandered to the stairs, leading from the bedroom to the third floor. " I'm going to kill you, Su Lee! Where are my kids? " The machine beeped, she bent her head and hit the switch with the wedge as she clawed her way up the third floor stairs. " You killed my husband!"

She ran into the playroom and quickly looked into Tony's study. Her eyes caught the tiny side attic door. She walked slowly across the blue tiles, but tightened her arms and slammed the stick into the door. The door knob was stuck when she tried spinning it. Her teeth bared, she pivoted and bounded down the opposite hallway stairs. She slid around the balustrade and peered down into the foyer again. For a second she paused, wiped the sweat from her brow and moved then deliberately down the first floor stairs.

At the front door and she backed up slowly toward the kitchen. The mantle clock neared ten o'clock and the pendulum swayed steadily. Another seven hours separated her and the first rays shooting into the morning sky above the bay.

27

Kel's stiff back was aggravated from the cramped propeller driven plane he had taken from Washington. Images of the yellow front-end loader parked in the rocky alcove near the highway floated through his mind as he dozed on the flight, but he could not fully remember how he landed in the river. He walked stiffly from the cab, his ribs still bruised, and shuffled to the police station door. Hawkins and Butch were in the side office as he moved up to the glass. Hawkins closed his eyes and pinched his brow when he saw Kel, but looked more sympathetic when he stepped to the window.

" You all right, Kelly?"

" Yeah... Mary Ellen Fresco's kids are still missing."

" Listen, she pointed the finger at Su Lee. We went out there and found Su Lee in bed sleeping."

" I understand that," said Kel, holding the counter with his outstretched hands.

" You want to sit down?" Kel nodded and Hawkins personally pushed the buzzer. Kel opened the door and went inside, and Hawkins pulled back a seat. " I talked to personnel up in West Virginia who said you almost died."

" I woke up in the hospital. Don't remember anything, but I do remember finding a whole work shop full of tools and machinery in Haydenville, Su Lee's home town."

" I told you he'd find something," said Butch.

" Kelly, the same old story. Where's the proof?"

" Su Lee's father's tool shop," said Kel, settling into the chair.

" Well, that doesn't mean anything," said Hawkins. " Look, Kelly. I'm sorry you got banged up-

" She did it."

" You don't know that," replied Hawkins.

" I'm sure of it. Listen, I walked into a hardware store in downtown Haydenville. I do have witnesses who will corroborate what I've been saying. Su Lee bought an Aberdeen ladder two weeks ago. There is also car ramps, matching Roger Trombley's car ramps in that same store."

" You're telling me she bought a ladder in her hometown?" asked Hawkins, pulling up a chair.

" Absolutely."

" Whoa."

" What about the tool shed?" asked Butch.

" I found pipe cutters. You could cut a ladder rung easily. That's her thing, boys. Murder a married man she's had an affair with and make it look like an accident."

Hawkins' thick brow wrinkled and he stroked his chin.

" Somebody saw her buy an Aberdeen ladder?"

" Yup."

Butch's wide brow tightened. "Then where the hell is the ladder?"

Kel shook his head. " I don't know. But I do know somebody lifted those ramps out of my car in Delaware. That machine shop had a hundred tools that could be used to weaken the ramps. Listen, I think she took Mary Ellen's kids."

" Why? Give a good reason and give me a good reason how she was asleep-"

" It's not out of the question to drive from the Berkshires to Binghampton Beach in less than nine hours."

" The car was cold," said Butch. " Stone cold. It hadn't gone anywhere."

" What about the maroon van?" asked Kel.

Hawkins pursed his lips and then turned to Butch. " All right, all right! Butchie, see if she owns any other vehicles. And call Brantenton, Massachusetts. " For the first time he thought Hawkins believed him. " Just find out what they think about the kidnapping."

" I loved those kids like they were my own," said Kel.

" I'm sending somebody out to watch that condo," said Hawkins as he quickly disappeared out back.

Butch typed something into the keyboard and then leaned in front of the computer screen. " You know Kelly. I owe you an apology. We both do."

" Let's just find the kids."

Kel leaned back in the chair until his ribs were comfortable. By using the maroon van she could easily have transported the children, but he was not sure where she would bring them. Nor was it clear why the children would agree to go anywhere with her. He needed to speak with Mary Ellen. " Can I use the phone, Butch?"

Butch nodded as he typed. " Sure, go ahead."

Kel dragged the phone across the desk and removed his little notebook from his shirt pocket. Without his reading glasses he had difficulty seeing the number, but managed to hold the notebook out and dialed Mary Ellen's sister's number. The line rang as Hawkins rounded the corner. " I've got a cruiser heading out to watch that condo. Who you calling, Kelly?"

" Mary Ellen. She was sleeping when I called a few hours ago."

" Hello," said a weakened female voice.

" Yes, this is Walter Kelly."

" Mr. Kelly, my sister is missing." Her voice was charged.
" She's gone! They've got here, too!"

" Wait a minute. I thought she was sleeping!" He sat upright in the chair. " How can she be gone?"

" We went in to check on her and she was gone."

" What happened?" asked Hawkins.

" Mary Ellen Fresco is missing," said Kel covering the receiver.

" We've had the whole town out looking. Just like the kids. My God... I can't take much more."

" She has to be around there somewhere. She probably went out looking for the kids."

" I know. We're checking out things down here."

" Where are you?"

" Binghampton Beach," said Kel.

" They should bring Su Lee in for questioning."

" I agree to that," said Kel. " We'll find out what happened. Mary Ellen is okay. I know she is. She probably just stepped out to look for the kids."

" I wish I could believe you."

" Call the police station down here when she comes in."

" I will."

The line clicked and Kel shook his head. " Where the hell is she?"

" Hey, Chief look at this," said Butch.

Hawkins gawked at Kel. He moved forward and leaned over the screen. " Well, isn't this interesting?"

Kel gripped the desk, winced as he forced himself up. " What did you find?"

" That van doesn't belong to her," said Butch.

Kel balanced himself on the desk and walked upright toward the computer screen. Butch kicked out a chair. On the screen in bright green letters he saw the readout.

1986 Chevrolet: Maroon

Serial: 65Dmg078937

plate 38D2984

Ronald Zuam Lee

67 McAllister Street

32Annapolis, Maryland

" So, we have an accomplice," said Kel. " You'd better call the Annapolis boys, Hawk."

" That explains the cold car," said Hawkins. " Maybe he's the killer. She just got the ladder for him."

Kel shook his head. " No, she had relationships with the murdered men."

" So what?" asked Hawkins as he picked up the phone. " Suppose this guy is a psycho? Sees the sister with somebody and sets up the guy to be killed."

Kel shook his head. " Listen, the only thing I know is that van was in Delaware and took the ramps. She could have been driving it or he could have helped her from getting nailed. We have no proof Ronald Lee has done anything here."

Hawkins immediately placed the call to the Annapolis police. Kel walked over to the window overlooking the lights along the beach. He worried about Mary Ellen. Ronald Lee, if he was in the Brandenton area, easily could have taken her away. As Hawkins explained the situation to some sergeant up in Annapolis, Kel stroked his chin and leaned against the glass. The front-end loader flashed into his mind and he was upside down in the Land Rover.

He turned from the window. Hawkins was still on the phone as Butch tapped the keyboard. Somebody had scooped up the car and deposited over the river bank. He strained to remember, but had pushed his memory to the limit.

" This is interesting," said Butch, briefly looking up. " The car belonged to the father Zuam Lee. Apparently the guy died five years ago and Ronald Lee got the van."

" Who the hell is this guy? Tony Fresco told me he had a discussion with Su Lee about getting some software for this guy's roommate."

" We'll let Annapolis find that out," said Hawkins, setting down the phone. " Now this *is* getting very interesting,"

" I'd like to know how the father died," said Butch.

Kel nodded. " Then Ron Lee must still be in the Berkshires if he got Mary Ellen. "

" She must know," said Butch.

" Su Lee?" asked Hawkins.

" Right. She must know something if she bought the ladder."

Kel slowly sat in the seat. " I still think she did it. She killed Tony and the rest of them. I don't know what happened in Massachusetts or in Haydenville. You need to bring her in, Hawk."

Hawkins nodded. " Damned right."

28

Mary Ellen cupped the cold kitchen tap water over her face and dabbed a soft terry cloth on her skin. The refrigerator motor started behind her and she dropped the cloth. Her heart struck a loud and steady beat as she picked up the cloth and set it on the counter. A plate with crumbs from a frozen coffee cake and a milk coated glass sat on the kitchen table as the mantle clock ticked slowly. Two hours had passed since she entered the beach house. She peered out the window at the single street light illuminating rhododendron bushes bordering the road and agonized about calling Su Lee.

She cut across the tiles and reached for the wall phone. For a moment she hesitated, but when the dial tone hummed through the earpiece she accessed Su Lee's number. She waited for the machine to activate, but the line kept ringing.

" Crazy..."

As she set down the phone something crashed outside on the patio and the sound of breaking glass made her retrieve the wood wedge again. She opened the slider. The bells and chimes rocked in

the wind and competed with a trumpet from the wading pool boom box's jazz music, and huge glass chunks, from the overturned patio table, were strewn across the patio bricks. With the wedge in hand she stepped into the brisk cool wind and in the bright light saw the table and umbrella fallen next to the outside wall. The gust blew back her hair as the metal chimes chattered and the copper bells clanged. She looked up to the roof pitch and wondered if someone had tried to climb on the roof and enter the house through one of the third floor windows. Maybe some of the windows were unlocked. She quickly raced against the wind back into the kitchen, secured the sliders and looked at the foyer stairs. Maybe no one was in the house. Maybe the wind had knocked over the table.

" I want my kids back, Su Lee!" she shouted toward the stairs.

The refrigerator motor shut off and the outside wind now dominated the stillness. She clutched the wedge and walked slowly off the tiles. Thoughts of the crashed table, a mere twenty feet behind her outside, stayed with her as she crossed the rug and sat on the soft sofa cushion. She pulled back the curtain, checked the streetlight and stood alone and afraid..

The telephone startled her. She spun around the sofa and gripped the wedge as the answering machine message tape replayed her own voice, the message beep sounded, and the bass guitar rocked the walls as the refrain began again.

You never cared about the night scene
You wanted to get out unfazed
Should have left me alone
Should have left me alone
And now you're dead.
Now you're dead.

The dial tone hummed loudly in the kitchen. Mary Ellen covered her ears until the machine clicked and rewound the tape.

"Where are you?"

Upstairs she thought she heard someone walking across the floor, but she was not sure whether sound emanated from the second or third floor. With the wedge in hand she sprang from the sofa and hovered next to the coffee table. Her voice was shaky and words crept out between staccato breaths. "I have the money, Su Lee. One hundred thousand. I'll take it out as soon as the bank opens."

She must have imagined the noises upstairs. Her hands were tight on the wedge and she knew with little provocation she could swing the stick mightily into Su Lee's skull. She gazed up the foyer stairway and debated whether to hike to the upper floors. In her fatigued state, maybe she had only dreamed she heard someone crossed the floor and she backed up toward the sofa. This time she

opened the downstairs linen closet and pulled out a heavy quilt, and dragged it across the rug back to the sofa.

Outside the sliders the moon peeked over the bay and cut a thin bright slice across the kitchen tiles and the living room rug as she settled under the spreading warmth next to Danny's panda bear. She clutched the wedge and wondered whether luring her to the house was a clever rouse to frighten and eventually kill her. Once again the phone ring jolted her. She threw off the quilt and sprinted to the kitchen, and yanked the answering machine plug from the wall. The light stopped flashing, but the phone kept ringing. She covered her ears and marched back to the quilt. The ring was long and echoed over each extension in the house. She dragged the quilt over her head and packed the fabric between her ears and hands. This time Su Lee would not play her sick game.

* * *

" She's not there," said Kel from the side desk. Butch emerged from the back room with a computer sheet in his hand. " What have you got, Butch?"

" I just got this posted off the computer. Yesterday Ron Lee was given a motor vehicle violation on the New Jersey Turnpike. Eighty-five in a sixty-five zone."

" The kids couldn't have been inside that van because the officer stopping the van would have heard them. Why the hell was he going so fast?"

" Good question," he said as the radio sounded in the dispatcher's room and one of the cops called him inside. Butch set the computer sheet on the desk and hurried across the room. " Chief has Su Lee. He's bringing her in."

" Any resistance?" called Kel without leaving the chair.

The officer inside said something into the mike and a garbled signal filled the dispatch room. " Chief says she came willingly."

" I want to know what she did with those kids," said Kel, holding the sides of the desk. " Innocent children."

" We need to find out whether the New Jersey State police saw them," said Butch. He picked up a phone and sat on the desk. Kel listened as he navigated through the police station phone system. " That's not good if the kids weren't in the van."

" We don't know that for sure. I was just speculating," said Kel, knowing he was trying to rationalize every fact in the case. Being impartial is why he used to remove himself from cases involving family and friends.

Butch connected to someone in Newark. " Then let me see the report, Krebs. You know as well as I do we need to know if those kids were in the van. Yeah, I know the FBI is involved."

Kel picked up the desk phone and pressed the lighted extension. The gravely voiced Krebbs spoke within a cluster of noise.

" Who is this?"

" My name is Walter Kelly. I'm a retired Philly officer looking into this whole thing and know these kids personally. What the hell is going on here, Krebbs? That speeding ticket is important."

" It was a speeding ticket not a bank robbery arrest. Nothing unusual was reported. If the kids were in the van the officer would have seen them. It's no big deal."

" Oh, really? We need to speak to the officer who issued the ticket. It could involve a kidnapping of three kids!" yelled Kel.

" Why can't it wait until morning? The guy is asleep. It's past midnight."

" Then I'm calling the damned FBI, you stupid son of a bitch! Three kids lives are at stake here! "

After a short silence the officer came back on the line.

" Okay."

" Good. I'll be here waiting. If I don't hear from you in ten minutes. Then I'm getting on the horn to the FBI."

" I'll call you."

Kel slammed the phone. " Little bastard. I'll have his ass if he doesn't call back in five minutes."

Butch moved over to the side window and looked through the blinds. " Here comes the Chief."

" Good." Kel stroked his chin. Many possibilities existed now. Su Lee and her brother may have worked in conjunction... in all the accidental deaths. Or maybe she just used his van to track Kel into Delaware and kidnap the kids. " Where the hell are they? Where is Mary Ellen?"

He picked up the phone and placed another call to Massachusetts. Almost immediately Mary Ellen's sister picked up the phone. " Hello."

" This is Walter Kelly. I'm sorry to be calling so late."

" That's all right. Nobody is sleeping here. Did you hear anything?"

" No, that's why I'm calling. I just called the beach house and the phone rang," said Kel.

" I tried both lines. You know, Mosey has two answering machines."

" Maybe she disconnected them before she left for Massachusetts."

" I don't know..."

Kel looked out the window but did not see Su Lee. " I have to tell you, we are about to question Su Lee. They're bringing her in now."

" Has she said anything yet about the kids or if Mosey-"

" They'll have her in here in a couple of minutes."

" You call me right back when you're done or if she says anything about this."

" I will."

As he hung up the phone, Kel heard a door open out back. He looked at Butch and then pushed himself up. He stretched his back and the pain briefly crossed his ribs as he walked to the back corridor. Hawkins' voice bounced around the hollow cinder block hall. Through the half drawn blinds Su Lee sat in a single chair in front of two office desks. She wore a white sweater and jeans and Night Sin palm oil scent was prevalent in the room. When Kel moved into the doorway she tightened her brow. " I suppose you're responsible for this outrage."

" I'd like to think so," replied Kel.

" I haven't done anything wrong. And where the hell do you get off saying I tried to kill you outside my father's house? What were you doing up there anyway?"

Hawkins stepped forward. " We will ask the questions, Miss Lee."

" That man has been trying to frame me for months!"

Hawkins glanced at Kel, but did not refute her accusation.

" Were you in your Haydenville, Maryland two days ago?"

" No."

" Really? Then where were you?"

" I don't have to answer any of your questions without a lawyer present."

" Then get a lawyer!" shouted Hawkins. " I think you were up there. Where are the Fresco children?"

" I don't have a clue."

" Liar!" screamed Kel.

" Kelly, cool it," said Hawkins. He spun back to Su Lee. She crossed her arms over the sweater. " Where are those kids?"

" I told you I don't know. You keep asking me and I tell you I was here in Binghampton Beach."

" With no witnesses?" asked Butch.

" I have no comment. Tomorrow morning I will get a lawyer."

" Tell us about your brother," said Kel, sitting in the seat behind the desk. He propped his elbows on the desk.

" My brother lives in Annapolis with his roommate."

" He owns your father's old van, doesn't he?" asked Kel.

" Yes, he does. So what?"

" I saw that van in Delaware when I went to visit Roger Trombly's wife," shouted Kel.

" See," she said, pointing at Kel. " He's trying to say I was involved in Roger's death."

" That van was in the area when the ramps were stolen out of my car!"

" Oh, come on? Why would you have those ramps unless you were trying to frame me?" She shook her head, crossed her legs and turned away. " I went out with Roger and we had a relationship. I fully admit that."

" Really?" asked Kel. " What about Artie Rankin?"

" What is this, a review of my lovers? Is that what you want, Kelly? You're sicker than I thought."

" How about Edward La Trobe? He died in the woods. Somebody shot him."

" I loved him. I wouldn't kill him."

" And Rankin just happened to fall off the jetty rocks?" asked Kel.

" Do I control the tides and the storms, too?"

" This is very interesting," said Hawkins. " Three men, all your lovers and all died by accident. And now, Tony Fresco falls of a ladder at his house. His wife and kids are missing. "

" You have nothing on me. I was home."

" You used a pipe cutter," said Kel in a low, almost mystical voice, " to loosen those rungs. And I have a witness who says you purchased an Aberdeen ladder from the Municipal Hardware Store in Haydenville. That was less than a week ago."

" And if you checked my father's work area, you would have found it. I don't deny it. Work needs to be done around that property. My brother and I are going to sell it."

" You were in that front-end loader! You lifted my car over the river bank and tried to kill me because you knew I was getting close!"

" *What?*"

" And you've got a damned answer for everything!"

She evidenced a slight smile. " I want to go back home. I'm calling my lawyer in the morning."

" So, you're saying you know nothing about the kids?" asked Hawkins.

" Absolutely nothing. I will say that."

" Where is your brother now, Su Lee? Or even the roommate. I tried calling his house," said Butch.

" I don't keep tabs on my brother."

" Where is the ladder?" asked Kel, staring into her dark eyes, but she looked away.

" I told you where the ladder is. I could get you for trespass."

" Be my guest, baby. You be my guest."

She smiled and exhaled. " You like all this, don't you, Kelly? You like the excitement," she said as her eyes opened wider and she pushed back her long dark hair. " The thoughts of what I did with those men."

" All right, that's enough," said Hawkins. " Butchie, stay back here. Kelly, come with me."

Kel's ribs ached as he stood and he thought she grinned at his pain. He walked into the corridor with Hawkins and past the drawn +blinds. " She's lying her little ass off, Hawk."

" Well, what the hell do I hold her on?" he asked as they reached the front room.

" Suspicion of murder. Three murders," he said.

The front dispatcher looked out the door. " Chief, three FBI guys will be here at nine tomorrow morning. They want to question Su Lee."

" Well, that's good news," said Kel. " Just hold her on anything."

" Yeah, then some hot-shot lawyer gets a hold of it and twists it around. I have to let her go. We'll keep somebody out at the condos."

" Bad move," said Kel.

" We have to turf this to the FBI anyway." Hawkins pursed his lips and look up at Kel. " I owe you an apology."

" You owe it to me to lock up that woman."

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Mary Ellen again thought she heard creaking on the second floor. Her fatigue racked body demanded sleep, but the influx of adrenaline into her system pushed her consciousness to the edge. She dropped the quilt and dragged the wood pole into the kitchen. The spotlights still blazed across the grass and the shimmering pool waters. The bells clanged in the wind as a slight mist sprayed against the sliders. The upstairs noise stopped. Maybe the caffeine in a drink of would stabilize her sludgy mind.

She opened the refrigerator door and removed a plastic soda bottle. The green digits on the microwave clock passed one a.m. as she slowly unscrewed the cap and poured the bubbling caramel liquid into the clear glass she had used earlier in the evening. The soda ticked her lips, leaving a carbonated trail down her throat. She wandered across the kitchen toward the sliders, swished the soda around her mouth and dissolved the bubbles.

The hours of waiting proved too excruciating. She stared at the yellow wall phone and wanted to call the police. Why did she think she could trust Su Lee? A shaking thud shook the sink and dishes in the cabinet. She spun from the phone and backed along

the sliders. Distinct in the outside light a thin Asian man with stringy black hair, a long thin face and terror in his eyes, raised a patio chair toward the sliders. Mary Ellen screamed and tripped over the counter stool. She hit the floor hard as the man smashed the slider. Angled glass chunks ticked her neck and arms and as the moist bay air pounced like a mountain lion over her shoulders.

She scrambled on the floor as he leaped through the jagged opening and for the first time heard a distinctly American accent. " You have been alive too long, Mrs. Fresco." Then he chuckled as she raced into the foyer. " You are going to be *brutally murdered*..."

Mary Ellen used the banister to propel herself up the stairs, but she could hear him mumbling as he kicked the counter stool across the kitchen. She lifted her knees into the air as if she were running the high hurdles in track competition. Running to the third floor would box her in and the only escape would be through the outside windows. She pivoted at the corner and sprinted into the master bedroom.

She slammed the door shut and turned the lock, but knew he would easily topple the door. Maybe he did not know about the narrow staircase to the third floor. She stormed past the walk-in closet and rounded the carpeted stairway upward. The outside spotlights glow reached the upper stairway. She could see the third floor windows as she neared the top.

He jumped into the third floor doorway. His dark eyes were heavy and his elongated white teeth bared as he placed his wet, cold hands around her neck. She pounded her closed fists into his face, seemingly with no effect, as he pressed his thumbs into her windpipe. Choking and already losing strength, she fell to her knees, pulling him down, but his forward momentum sent him tumbling over her shoulders. His grip lessened and his thumbs were gone. Air gushed into her lungs as she clung onto the carpeted stair tread.

He wailed as he crashed into the wall and flipped down the stairs into the bedroom. On her belly, lungs chugging like cylinders in a car engine, she catapulted onto the upper rug. She clutched the couch arm and staggered toward the end table phone. With her left knee propped on the couch, she swiped at the receiver, reeled in the coiled cord and frantically dialed 911.

With the phone at one ear, she listened for any movement upstairs. But the line was not ringing. She hammered down the receiver and tried again, but when she heard nothing, she tracked the phone line, swerving like a snake across the rug. The plastic junction box was smashed on the moonlit floor. " Oh, God..."

She let the phone fall onto the rug. With no sound from the bedroom below, she bolted toward the central stairwell. She grasped the banister and leaped several stairs at a time to the second floor. The cool salty air crept up from the foyer as she nudged

against the balcony rail. In a matter of seconds she could be out the front door. She rushed to the first floor stairs, glanced into the dark bedroom and raced downward, but her sneaker slid on the wet rug. Her shoulder impacted the stairs spindles at an angle and her cheekbone smacked the tile.

" Now, you're dead." His blurry, half lighted image towered at the top of the staircase. Mary Ellen pushed with her feet as if she were in the water and slithered along the tiles as he bounded down from above. With her left hand she clasped the end of the wood wedge. She tucked and rolled as she planted her feet on the tiles. Her cheekbone throbbed. With both hands securely around the pole, she swung the stick at her approaching attacker.

She caught him in the stomach, but quickly retracted the pole for another swipe. He screeched like a bird injured in the forest, dipping his head as he grabbed his abdomen. Mary Ellen grazed his chin and he fell back against the front door. She gripped the pole but sprinted to the sliders.

He stood behind her and sang out the words of the song.

" You never cared about the night scene

You wanted to get out unfazed

Should have left me alone

Should have left me alone

And now your dead.

Now you're dead."

The boom box blasted the same Hard Rock Raunchy song across the yard as Mary Ellen hacked the slider glass and leaped onto the patio. He slowly chanted each word with the music as she checked the beach trail and the lawn around the house, but continued toward the pool. Over her shoulder she saw him crash through the open slider. His face was bloodied and swollen at the mouth, but his eyes still possessed the kind of savage fury only an injured killer could muster. He closed in near the pool tiles. Again she swung the pole, but he this time he easily dodged the attack and laughed as she back up.

"Where are my kids?"

"Safe keeping. They'll rest a long time," he said with glassy eyes as he tilted his head.

"You bastard!" She batted the pole, but he caught it and wrenched it away. His eyes opened wide as he hit the pole against his hand like a policeman tapping a Billy club against his palm. Mary Ellen's legs brushed against the rough edge diving board and she attempted to remain on her feet. "I did nothing to you! *Murderer!*"

"Murderer? Isn't that harsh, Mosey?"

"How do you know my name? *How?*"

"I know all I have to know."

" You killed Tony," she said, stepping around the pool corner. The aqua water lapped the tiles below her. " You killed the others. I thought you wanted money. I have money and I'm prepared to give it to you. "

He tightened his brow, stepped over the diving board and leaped onto the tiles." I don't want your money, lady. I want you to leave my sister alone!"

Mary Ellen backed toward the kids pool and the boom box. " I have the money. *Please.*"

His eyes were fixed, his lips straight, and the protruding veins on his hands reminded her of what he did to her throat upstairs. With each deliberate step he narrowed the distance as Hard Rock Raunchy resonated from the boom box. She guided her hand on the tiled wall near the pool and scrambled as he darted left. Then he smiled the smile of a killer about to complete his task. He set his foot and sprinted around the pool, but he slipped on the smooth surface and bashed his shoulder and head against the tiles as he slid forward into the wading pool.

His head never fully went under. She looked at the kids' yellow boom box on the side table and reversed direction. Within seconds she lifted the box into the air and as his eyes jammed, she tossed the box into a gentle arc above the pool. The frightening lyrics and loud bass ceased, sparks crackled across the water, and

electricity surged into his body. Mary Ellen backed across the pool tiles as he cried out in agony.

Silence overtook the night. A series of outside lights, beginning at the children's pool, and finally all the house lights blinked out, leaving only the emerging moonlight across the yard. She moved away from the board's gritty surface as alternate wind gusts chilled her sweaty skin. In the reflected light his water soaked his maroon shirt drifted across the tiny pool's surface and a sickening cooked flesh odor was swept away with each gust.

The wind and water currents moved the corpse in an indeterminate fashion. She raced away from the gruesome sight, around the pool, but she slowed near the table and collapsed in the patio chair. Tears cover her face as she now faced the dreadful thought of her children dead somewhere. She pictured Danny's bright eyes as he ran through this very yard just last week and the image of her two daughters, approaching maturity remained in her thoughts. Calling the police was her only alternative now and she prayed this crazed lunatic left her children alive.

Without looking back at the wading pool, Mary Ellen moved directly to the smashed sliders, but as she neared the kitchen, bright headlights swung into her driveway. She stopped at the sliders, worried now about Su Lee. Carefully, she reached through the broken glass edges and pushed up the latch with her index finger. The glass splintered and crunched in the slider track as she

rushed inside and raced over the to living room window. Kel's tiny security car was stopped out front. " Thank God, Kel. Thank God." He moved in a stilted manner from the car. She hurried into the foyer and thrust open the front door. " Kel! Kel!"

His head jutted to the right. " Mary Ellen! I had a feeling you might be here... The kids... are gone."

She ran down the brick walk and embraced him.. " Oh, Kel. I don't know where they are. I don't... But he's dead! He's dead!"

" Who's dead?" he asked, taking her by the shoulders.

" The guy... Must be her brother."

" You killed him?"

" Yes.. Yes, he had his hands around my throat. He chased me through the house! When he slipped into the wading pool I threw the boom box into the water..."

" Ronald Lee. Are you sure he's dead?"

" I'm sure," she said, wiping her eye.

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Kel held her hand and they cautiously approached the murky pool. Ron Lee's maroon jersey floated on the surface, his arms dangled like a weightless astronaut and his dark hair formed wisps within the chunks of moonlit water. Kel stared for an inordinate time. Mary Ellen's hands shook and she again held him as she turned away from the dead man. " Oh, God."

" I still can't figure this out," he said, swinging her away from the tiny pool. " I think this guy was in Delaware, but I'm not sure. The van was the father's and then Ron Lee owned it."

" I told him I had the money."

" What money?" asked Kel, stopping midway down the main pool. He pulled the boom box plug.

" Somebody left a ransom note for the kids under my pillow in Bradenton. Old magazine letters blocked and cut out. They wanted a hundred thousand dollars. I was supposed to come back here to the beach house. " She glanced back at the pool. " He called me Mosey. Only my sister and her family call me Mosey. He must have been in Massachusetts."

" Unless he talked to her," said Kel.

" And he told me to leave his sister alone."

Kel stroked his chin and looked back at the beach house's darkened windows. The gray facade was stark white in the moonlight. " What else did he say?"

" He said my kids... my kids would rest for a long time and were in safe keeping."

" Then they are alive."

" And he said I was harsh when I called him a murderer."

" Maybe he's not," said Kel as they started moving again. " Maybe he was defending his sister, I don't know."

Mary Ellen grit her teeth. " He had his arms around my neck!"

" I know, I'm sorry."

He brushed back the broken slider glass with his sneaker and brought her back into the kitchen. " Where's the box?"

" Box?"

" Circuit breaker box."

" Oh. " She pointed to the cellar door and grabbed a flashlight from the counter drawer. " Down here. I kept hearing noises, Kel. I checked the whole house. Somehow, he hid upstairs."

She handed the flashlight to him and he flipped the beam against the glossy white cellar door. " I'm sure the guy was very clever." He opened the door and the cellar air filtered upward.

" Whether he was responsible for my accident I don't know."

" What happened?"

They started down the stairs. " I'm sorry, your car was ruined. Somebody in a front-end loader, scooped up the car and was so gracious to deposit it over a river bank. But that's not important. Su Lee is still involved in this. She bought a ladder matching Tony's ladder right in the hardware store in her home town of Haydenville, Maryland. I have a witness."

" What?" They reached the bottom of the stairs and she guided the light to the elongated gray metal box in the corner.

" So, she did it. She killed Tony!"

" Well, I don't know. They also sold car ramps at that same store. Listen, she is so very clever." He pulled at the box handle and swung the panel open. " Before I landed in the river I was in here father's work shed. The guy was a machinist. Tools everywhere. What I think she did was use pipe cutters to loosen the upper rungs on the ladder."

" When Tony put his weight on the rung, it collapsed."

" Exactly. Then she switched the ladders like we thought. Just like she did the car ramps."

" Then you were right," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. " You found the evidence and you were right."

" Yup." He pushed up on the main power lever and turned back toward the kitchen, but nothing happened. " What the hell is going on now?"

" What's the matter?"

" The power is still out," he said and he snapped the lever several times. " The short circuit must have damaged your wiring."

" Well, I for one don't want to hang around here."

" We need to call Hawkins and Butch. You'll have to let them interview you." He motioned the flashlight back toward the kitchen stairs. " My only concern is finding your kids now. I don't care about nailing her for anything. Get the kids back."

" Where could they be?" she asked as they started up the stairs. " I mean, Kel, if she's not saying anything."

" I think she sent that note and I think she wanted the money. If she hadn't been taken in for questioning she might have been out here."

Mary Ellen stepped onto the kitchen tiles, her eyes fixed on the outside moonlight covering the patio and trail to the frosted beach.

" Then why did he come out here?"

" Maybe when he knew we were going to question his sister. Who knows what went through his mind?" Kel rounded the counter and lifted the wall phone. Then he banged on the hook.

" This is ridiculous."

" Is the phone really out?" asked Mary Ellen, scanning the yard. Then she turned to the living room and peered out the front window. Kel's little car was parked squarely on the gravel. " She did it."

" Nah, the short circuit must have affected the phone line. Come on, let's get out to the car. We'll either call from a pay phone or go right down to the station. I don't think Mr. Lee is going anywhere."

" Okay."

Kel held her hand again and walked her to the foyer. He opened the heavy front door and the moonlight swept across the tiles. She moved by him, grasped the storm door handle and pushed. Once outside she yawned in the night air. " I think this guy was on the outer edges. Covering for her."

" Possible, Mary Ellen. Very possible."

As he stepped onto the brick steps, three quick shots pierced the screen and splintered the front door. Kel yanked Mary Ellen back as additional bullets ripped into the foyer walls. He slammed the front door and removed a large hand gun from a hidden side holster. Mary Ellen screamed and he forced her to the floor. " She's out there! She's going to kill us!"

" No, that's not going to happen." Kel leaped to the door side-light and separated the sheers with his gun. " She has to be shooting from the woods across the street."

" Oh, my God. She's crazy!"

" I've about had it with this!. She knows she's cornered or she wouldn't have asked for the hundred grand. She knows eventually even Hawkins will figure this out. "

" We have to escape, Kel. Down the beach trail."

" No, in the moonlight, we're sitting ducks. She'd just plug us off. She knows the power and the phone are out or she wouldn't be trying this stunt right now. We need to get to my car."

" How? She has the front covered!"

" Then we go out the back garage door." Kel looked out the sidelight. " I figure she'll loop around."

" We step out there and we're dead."

" No. I'll bet she's heading out back and I'll bet she knows her brother is dead. She's not the cool and collected killer now. She's angry and subject to mistakes." He turned from the sidelight and knelt down next to her. " We're going right out the front door again. We're heading right for the car and drive out of here."

" She'll fire at the front door!"

Kel took out his keys and held the gun in his other hand.

" The one thing I've noticed about her is the ability to be deliberately inconsistent once she's made consistent moves."

" What does that mean? "

" It means she kills with the same handle each time. She sets up the guy the same each time. But she's never where you'd think she's going to be afterwards or even during the staged accidents."

" You staking our lives on that theory, Kel."

" I'm not waiting for her to enter the house." He opened the front door deliberately. Her heart fired a quick beat as he grasped

her hand and pulled her up. Somehow she trusted his instincts as she quickly followed him onto the steps. He ran beside her with his gun thrust up in the moonlight, down the brick walk, and no shots were fired. She opened the security car's side door as he ducked around the hood.

One inside he advised her to stay down as he inserted the keys in the ignition. She lowered her upper body down to her knees. Her lungs ached from hours of deep breathing. Kel turned the keys and the engine produced a rapid clicking. "Damn, she got the starter!"

"Quick, out your door! One your belly!"

More shots cut the night air and shook the car. The driver's side window blew apart as Mary Ellen dove into the gravel and wondered if Kel was hit. "Kel!"

He raised his gun over the fender as two bright flashes cut the darkness and he fired toward Wilma's house. "Let her keep shooting. Somebody will call the cops."

"If we're not killed first!"

"We need to get back in the house," he said, taking her wrist.

"Are you crazy? Let's make a run for it. Down by the beach, in the woods, anywhere!"

Kel shook his head. His bushy brows were tightened over his moonlit blue eyes. "No, she's the one out there. She can circle around or do anything. We need protective cover now."

Mary Ellen did not question his taking her hand and rushed with him up the front walk. All the while she waited for Su Lee to aim the gun and shoot her. Kel whipped open the storm door and they careened through the doorway. Again he kicked the door shut. " She'll find a way in here."

" The only ways in here are the garage, the sliders, and this door."

" No," said Mary Ellen , crying. " She'll get in here. She'll kill us."

Kel's lack of response actually bolstered her confidence in him. He walked her into the kitchen, pointing the gun toward the sliders, but headed for the garage. She moved with him as he checked the rear garage door and retreated back to make sure the garage doors were locked. " Stalling her is the answer. By now somebody has notified Hawkins about the gunfire."

He brought her back into the kitchen and had her sit on the floor next to the refrigerator. " She's *evil. Evil.* How do you overcome such evil?"

" Don't let your emotions get the best of you. She's one person. One clever person whose prowess is to cover murder by accident and to be evasive later. That's it. She's human just like the rest of us."

He had just finished the sentence when the shot cracked from the pool area. Kel reached up and was thrown back as Mary Ellen was sprayed with a mass of blood and tissue. " Kel! Kel!"

She scrambled to his frame, spread across the tiles. An expanding blood puddle reflected the moonlight and his eyes glowed like two luminescent marbles. " Oh, God! Oh, God!"

She grabbed his heavy hand gun and crawled on her knees across the floor tiles and into the living room shadows. The ground shook as if horses were trampling the property. Stones tumbled over the patio blocks and glass chunks hit the side of the house. Mary Ellen grabbed the newel post and crawled up the foyer stairs. More shots flew into the kitchen and into the foyer as she zipped along the balustrade.

" You're dead, Mosey. And now you're dead." Mary Ellen looked into the foyer and heard someone step through the sliders. The glass rolled across the tiles. " One down, Mosey. You listen. You listen." Four shots in rapid succession followed. " Don't count on seeing your buddy again, *Mosey*."

Mary Ellen tried not to think about what the bullets did to Kel's body. The gun rattled in her hands as she stood near the wood rail and slid toward the staircase. She wondered whether she could even fire the weapon. The floor creaked in the kitchen and heels sharply tapped out the ever present stride of Su Lee searching for her prey. Mary Ellen swallowed and inched up the stairs. In order to avoid being killed she would have to shoot Su Lee or leave the beach house through the upper windows, but the drop was

higher to the patio tiles than the distance Tony fell from the rigged ladder.

Su Lee's laugh bellowed through the downstairs hall and up the stairs. " Mosey, I shot up his head! It's bone and goop."

Mary Ellen's hands vibrated and she tried to squelch images of Kel's body decimated on the first floor. On the third floor she crept across the carpet and peered out the window to the moonlit ground over forty-five feet below. Jumping would disable her or even kill her. She held onto the sill until her knuckles hurt. For the longest time she heard nothing and prayed Su Lee had not started up the stairs. She quickly turned and headed for the attic alcove surrounding the upper floor. Su Lee produced a muffled laugh from below and shots blasted downstairs. Mary Ellen forced the knob around. She flung open the little door and ducked into the darkened storage area.

She slithered and rotated on the plywood until she faced the closed door. Then she sat up, held the gun in her lap and slowly brought her breathing under control. With her finger loosely around the trigger she lifted the heavy gun up in blackness. The wind raced through the side vents and the first signs of moonlight appeared as her eyes adjusted. More bullets shook the floor as Su Lee shot up the beach house. Where were the cops?

" You bitch, come out! I'll kill you just like I killed your kids!"

Mary Ellen clamped her teeth and rubbed her finger over the trigger seam. Su Lee had to be lying. The kids were still alive. They had to be alive. More gunfire splintered the windows above the attic entrance. She aimed the gun where she thought the attic door was located. It would only be a matter of seconds before Su Lee fanned her automatic at the door.

She silently whimpered and wiped her eyes with her sleeve as more shots sounded below her on the second floor. Su Lee needed money. So, the kids were alive. An immense swell of anger proliferated from within her tormented soul and she crawled to the half door. A louder series of shots popped downstairs. "Murderer," she whispered as she marched with the gun outstretched in both hands across the third floor and glanced out the window at the moonlit bay as she passed. Numbness settled over her body and the gruesome reality prompted toward the second floor stairs. With Tony gone and the kids possibly dead, she no longer cared about her own life and only wished to inflict pain on Su Lee.

"Mosey," Su Lee called from the foyer hallway, only a few feet away.

Mary Ellen's hands shook like a car engine revved to the limit. Su Lee emerged from Shane's bedroom. She wore olive green combat fatigues and carried a semi-automatic weapon. In the corner of her mouth was the red glow from a smoldering stogie. She scanned the downstairs and the unleashed another few rounds into

the foyer. Mary Ellen clung onto Kel's hand gun and nudged her way back to the staircase.

Su Lee kicked the hallway wall and bedroom door. The stogie smoke trail wafted up the staircase. Mary Ellen stood firm, the gun barrel pointed toward the staircase, and anticipated Su Lee's forward movement. Another eruption sliced apart her dresser, shattered the windows, and chewed up a haphazard trail across the flowery wallpaper. Bullets punctured the mattress, the sound muffled as the inner fabric was ripped and shredded. The attack ended as quickly as it had begun and Su Lee screamed down the hallway. " I want to kill you! I want to kill you!"

The staircase rumbled as Su Lee raced up the third floor stairs. Mary Ellen slipped into the dust-laden bedroom and tiptoed across the rug, but as she entered the foyer hallway, Su Lee bounded down the stairway again. Mary Ellen sprinted for the stairway and reached the tiles as Su Lee jumped into the hall. For only a second her dark eyes glared at Mary Ellen, she raised the rifle, and Mary Ellen dove into the kitchen. The glass from the exploding sidelights rained across the tiles and the front door was splintered as the rifle popping intensified. The hand gun spun away as Mary Ellen slid and her fingertips touched the cold blood pool near Kel's head.

She could not look at his bullet torn body as she scrambled toward the gun. Su Lee landed on the tiles near the front door and

slowly turned with the surly, crazed look of a demented killer. Mary Ellen swung the gun around as Su Lee bared her teeth and clicked the rifle trigger. Then she smiled. " You won't kill me... because you don't have the nerve."

Mary Ellen growled in a voice so grating her throat hurt. " You murdered Tony! You think you're so smart! You and your ladders and ramps..."

Su Lee held the rifle in a diagonal position as if she were in a military drill. She smiled the same cute smile usually reserved for Barnacle Bill's. " You know I couldn't even bed your husband. I tried, but he had this odd attraction for you. This loyalty. I stripped off all my clothes in the shower. He looked at me and he did nothing!"

" Where are my kids?" asked Mary Ellen, again thrusting the gun outward.

" You've never shot a gun before, have you, *Mosey*?" asked Su Lee, reaching for the ammunition clip on her belt. " And you don't know quite well if you'll kill me, do you, *Mosey*?"

" Tell me where my kids are!"

She tilted her head back and laughed into the wind blowing through the house as she grasped the ammo clip. Like an automated assembly line machine she disengaged the first clip, clicked the new one into position and swung the rifle. " You couldn't do it!"

Mary Ellen fired once, but the gun propelled her in reverse. Su Lee grabbed her thigh and fell back, but fired the automatic upward. Again Mary Ellen aimed and squeezed the trigger. Su Lee careened against the front door, released the rifle and the lit stogie dropped to the tiles. Slowly she slid down the door and held her bloodied stomach.

In the dim, reflected light Mary Ellen stared at the blood oozing out the corner of Su Lee's open mouth. Her dark eyes widened, but shut quickly. Mary Ellen trained the handgun at her and moved forward. Su Lee's blood soaked olive tee shirt showed no signs of movement. She grabbed the heavy automatic rifle, but as she retreated across the kitchen, the outline of Kel's fallen form materialized near the center kitchen counter where she prepared her summertime meals.

She backed out the sliders into the night air and pulled the weighty weapon over each patio block. When she reached the edge of the pool she dropped the handgun and hoisted the rifle over her head. She ran forward and hurled it into the air. The resulting splash and water gush into the chambers now effectively destroyed the weapon. Within the silver spreading ripples, bubbles rose to the surface. Mary Ellen staggered to the granite bench and gently lowered her aching, exhausted frame.

While she still believed her children were alive, Kel lay dead no more than fifty feet away on the kitchen floor. Su Lee's complic-

ity in the accidental deaths would have remained hidden without his persistence. In the distance back to Binghamton Beach the wail of the police sirens unlocked the night's stillness. She wiped the tears from her cheeks. Su Lee's words about Tony not succumbing to her advances repeated like the breakers beyond the beach trail. Mary Ellen had castigated Tony, convinced of his guilt, but he was guilty of no offense.

She removed the excess moisture from her eyes and sat up. The stars seemed to advance in unison across the black sky and the crisp moon was directly above her. The sirens were louder now. The police would help find the kids.

A shadow crept over the moon and a looping thin line dangled briefly over her chin and tightened around her neck. She looked up at Su Lee's heavy eyes and blood-lined teeth back lighted by the moon. Mary Ellen choked and grabbed her throat. Air to her lungs was effectively cut as the line ripped her skin.

" Now, death comes... *swiftly*."

Mary Ellen rocked violently, her fingernails under the stinging, frayed nylon rope clamping her windpipe. She slipped and her back and scraped the bench's granite edge, but Su Lee held onto the rope. Mary Ellen used the downward momentum to thrust her body onto the pool tiles. When she rolled forward Su Lee retained her grip like a tiger's massive jaw closed around fallen prey. Mary Ellen pulled at the rope, squirmed and kicked. The police sirens

were louder now and the stars blurred as she bucked toward the pool.

Su Lee's blood dripped onto her face. Mary Ellen tightened her upper body, fell forward, and they splashed into the water. Coolness enveloped her skin and the chlorine stung the abrasions under the tightened line around her neck. Su Lee stuck to her as they both sank into the depths. Mary Ellen's muddled thoughts vanished in huge blocks of time. Her knees brushed the bottom cement and her body bounced at an angle through the weightless water. The lack of air taxed her pain threshold, but the rope loosened. Su Lee's hands were no longer against her neck. She pulled the rope from her throat, but water rushed into her lungs. All feeling left her. For a moment her kids flashed into her thoughts as everything stopped.

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A dull pink glow covered her eyelids and she heard people talking. The light was too intense to keep her eyes open for a sustained period and her throat felt as if it were sliced by knife blade. Police radios broadcast loudly somewhere within the brightness and a rounded cup of cool clean air surrounded her mouth and nose. Again she opened her eyes. Several EMT's gawked down at her.

" Can you hear us, Mrs. Fresco?" She nodded quickly.

" Good, good. We're going to take you to the hospital."

" I'm all right," she said in a raspy voice. She pulled the air mask away from her mouth and nose. " My kids. Where are my kids?"

" Chief Hawkins!" called the mustached little man.

The trees above the back yard came into view and the moon had descended over the roof top, but it's glow and the twinkling stars remained. Hawkins' voice grew louder across the patio. In a sweatshirt and jeans he squatted down next to Mary Ellen. " Mrs. Fresco."

" My kids..."

" Your children... and your dog are being transported by state police cruiser from Annapolis."

" Oh, God, thank you, God!"

" Ron Lee told your kids Tony was still alive and lured them in the van. His roommate picked them up on the New Jersey Turnpike. The roommate held them as Lee headed south to force you to withdraw money to help Lee and his sister escape. They knew Kelly had uncovered the machine shop."

" Kel..."

" I didn't listen to him and now he's dead," said Hawkins.

Emotion surged within her. Her eyes moistened as she whispered loudly. " He scored the big one. "

" Yeah, he scored the big one."

* * *

The osprey made yet another swoop above the bay's azure face. Mary Ellen smiled and wrapped her arms around Shane and Angie as she followed the bird's outstretched scalloped wingspan across the smooth blue sky. Eloise sat next to Danny as he scooped up a bucket of compacted sand to add to the castle wall he was constructing away from the approaching tide. The osprey disappeared over the beach house as the cooler breeze shifted direction. That very afternoon she accepted an offer from a New York couple to

purchase the beach house. Tony would have marveled at her ability to conduct the sale with the broker and attain a more than adequate price for the property. She missed him and she regretted not having told him she was wrong about his actions with Su Lee. And even though Kel was buried back in Buffalo next to his wife, his spirit hovered with Tony's essence over the Chesapeake, like the ever freshening wind: evolving, cleansing, and new.