



Chapter 1

Her white cotton gown ruffled softly at her calves. Small twinkles of moonlight illuminated the woodland path as the breeze swayed the canopy of trees above her head. The night sounds of the woods around her were serene and peaceful, although the tiny hairs at the nape of her neck began to rise.

The woodland path opened into a large grassy area. She looked up at the old house. The full moon that had been filtered by the trees intensified here in the open yard. The house seemed to glow in the moon's iridescence. The house appeared strange at first, then hauntingly familiar. Slowly she meandered across the grassy lawn feeling the midnight dew clinging lightly to her bare feet. The sweet aroma of roses lofted past her on the gentle breeze. She scanned the house, but it appeared to be empty. At the foundation of the front porch, the rose bushes laden down with blooms danced lightly in the gentle wind.

Slowly, as if guided by a delicate hand on her elbow, she turned down the path to the water. The moonlight streamed across the water like a comet's tail across the midnight sky. The aroma of roses mixed with the smell of fresh water as she neared the dock at the end of the path.

Suddenly she was plunged into total darkness. The landscape around her took on an ominous presence as the wind blew her hair forward into her face. She wanted to turn and run back to the safety of the house. Pulling the hair from her face she

turned to look back at the house. An orange light flickered from inside the windows.

Reluctantly she continued toward the dock, propelled sternly by what she hoped was the wind but suspected otherwise. The wind howled fiercely around her. Water sprayed her face as waves crashed against the dock. The waves on the lake roiled like water boiling in a pan. Compelled by some unknown force, she peered down into the water at the edge of the dock. From below the surface of the water, a tiny face appeared. Eyes pleading; mouth open; the last small bubbles of oxygen escaping.

Terror seized Claire Davies' heart. She pulled herself from the jaws of the nightmare. Struggling, she clawed her way to consciousness. Quickly opening her eyes, she saw the familiar soft blue walls of her bedroom. Soaked with perspiration, she lay in bed breathing slowly to steady her racing heart.



Chapter 2

Ken and Claire Davies rode in comfortable silence, taking in the lush forest and rolling countryside littered with trailers in various degrees of disrepair.

“I’ll never understand why people who seem to have all this land around their homes would put a satellite dish smack dab in the middle of the front yard.” Claire mused.

“Well, I suppose if they put the satellite dish in the backyard, the car that’s up on blocks would interfere with the reception.” Ken quipped as he looked to his wife for approval of his wit.

“Suppose so.” Claire followed the contour of the land as they entered a forested area. “You know, I would love to live out in the middle of nowhere. No traffic, no violence, no city shuffle, just the wind in the trees and the birds singing.”

“Sounds more like a lemonade commercial than real life to me,” Ken said realistically.

“Oh, hush. A cool old house around the lake with lots of land for the kids to play on. What could be better?” Claire giggled.

“Winning the lottery and living in Maui six months out of the year would be nice. I don’t think we’ll ever find this dream house of yours. Even if we did, I don’t think we could afford it anyway.”

“You sure know how to dampen the moment. It doesn’t hurt to dream now and then.” The hair on the back of Claire’s neck prickled at the enunciation of the word “dream.” A flash of memory came and went like lightning in a summer storm.

“Why don’t we get off the beaten path a little? Just turn down one of these side roads and see where it goes.” Claire said with a glimmer of adventure in her eye.

“We don’t have a map of the area. What happens if we get lost?” Said Ken.

“We have GPS on our phones if we really need it.”

“What if we run out of gas?”

“We have a full tank of gas. At 20 miles to the gallon and 15 gallons in the car, we can drive for quite some time and not run out of gas.”

“We could go 300 miles, to be exact,” Ken confirmed. “What if the car should break down on one of these lonely back roads?”

“If we break down, we can use our cell phone to call a tow truck, or if we can’t get cell service, we can walk to the nearest house. It’s a beautiful day for a leisurely stroll. I’m sure the farmer knows where he lives. For that matter, he may be able to fix the car making the tow service entirely unnecessary.” Pleased with her quick response and sound thinking, Claire folded her arms across her chest and spied Ken curiously.

She loved this man deeply. He was the most stable person she had ever known, even if he was so firmly planted in terra firma that he was probably buried up to the top of his reinforced gold-toe black knee socks. Ken’s temperament made him the consummate accountant. Everything in Ken’s world was a system of checks and balances, actions and reactions.

“Fine. We’ll just stay on the beaten path, never experiencing the exhilaration of adventure,” Claire submitted with a woeful air of suppression.

“Okay, okay. We’ll give it a try. Far be it from me to stifle your creativity.” Ken said reluctantly. Claire was a beautiful, sensitive woman, but Ken knew he had her completely in the dark. All he had to do was keep her dreaming along for a few more miles, then he would be able to make his turn with her thinking it was her idea all the while.

“Great!” Claire exclaimed once again, her bouncy self. “Where do you want to turn?”

“How about the next road on the left? That way, we will be heading toward the lake area. It should be beautiful. Maybe we’ll find a nice picnic spot.” Ken was beginning to feel the exhilaration of adventure himself.

Two signs marked the next road on the left. One was a sign advertising the Angus variety of bull. The other was a green street sign stating the name of the road, Winslow Manor Lane.

Winslow Manor Lane turned from a poorly paved surface to a one-lane dirt road the width of the average city alleyway within a quarter mile from the rural route. This was not as much a problem as it was an omen in Ken’s mind.

Ken was suddenly sure that he had been sent on a fool’s errand and that there was nothing down this road other than a small chicken farm with no fencing around the barnyard. Ken was also convinced that if he managed to bump his way down this road without throwing the car’s tires out of alignment that one of those wayward chickens would dart directly in front of the car, wedging itself firmly between the tire and the wheel well.

Bouncing down the dirt road, Ken’s mind rambled furiously over the various scenarios that would ensue. A large woman with no front teeth, watermelon-sized breasts resting

heavily on her stomach toting a shotgun the length of a pole vault pole would come “a huntin’” his city butt in retribution for her lost chicken. Or worse yet, a man with no more teeth than the old woman drags Ken bodily from the car, questioning his animal call abilities--a banjo playing softly in the distance.

Ken was snapped out of his horrific reverie by the steady pounding on his right shoulder and the amazed sound of Claire’s voice, “I don’t believe it.”

Ken pulled into a driveway and watched carefully as Claire emerged from the car with the look of someone who just drove up on a space alien. Here, in this place that Ken deemed just slightly north of Hell was the most beautiful Victorian house, just as he had been told. A tree-dappled gravel road meandered toward a house sitting majestically at the top of the hill.

A small gasp escaped Claire’s lips as she stared awe-struck toward the house. Claire turned to look at the view that she assumed was the back of the property when she saw the weathered “For Sale” sign swinging lazily in the breeze.

“Look at this,” Claire sputtered, “It’s for sale. Isn’t it beautiful? I wonder how much they want for it. I wonder...”

Ken stood watching the woman he was married to babble like a child on Christmas morning. It hit Ken again that Claire was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The sun danced playfully off the natural highlights in her auburn hair. Her large green eyes sparkled with curiosity and excitement.

“Jeez, Claire, don’t have a stroke already. It doesn’t matter if it’s for sale or not. A house like that is way out of our league. Not to mention the distance we’ve driven to find this place. Do you know how far I would have to commute to work each day? Do you know how much more it will cost us in gasoline alone? I bet they don’t even have schools out here. What about the children’s education? Have you thought about that? There

probably isn't even cable. How do you expect me to keep up with the world without CNN?" Ken made sure to lament just the correct amount to keep his wife from seeing his pleasure. Looking up at the house, Ken was relieved that it looked to be in good shape. It would be a shame if, because of the age of the house as well as the age of its current occupant, it had fallen into such disrepair that the opportunity of a lifetime slipped through his fingers.

"Let's just drive up the driveway and ring the bell. We can say we just happened upon the place and are curious. Pleeease."

Ken never could refuse Claire anything when she looked at him with those dancing green eyes. He just basically became a mush-like substance and blindly followed her anywhere she happened to go.

"We can't just barge up there on a Saturday. They might have company or something."

"Let's just go to the door. If they have other obligations, we'll call and make an appointment to come back later." Claire knew the rigidity of making an appointment would ease Ken's mind.

"Fine. We'll go up and ask for information, maybe take a look inside if we can. I can tell you already, we can't afford anything like this house. Don't go getting your hopes up." Ken grinned to himself as he slid back behind the wheel of the car.