

# The Private Eye's Secretary

(Five Days in August)

1994

I have seen enough movies to know what a private eye's office should look like, and this wasn't it. There was no smoke spiraling from messy desks, no cheap wooden furniture, no shadows lurking behind obscured-glass doors.

The secretary's name was Elizabeth. She led me down a hall and opened a door to a meeting room and asked that I wait inside. Her voice was not deep and velvety. Her blouse was not low-cut, and she did not have large breasts that could brush against me as I squeezed past her in the doorway. And she seemed reasonably intelligent, efficient, and professional from what I could tell. What a letdown.

A few moments later the door opened again and a man of sixty or so entered. He was not wearing a trenchcoat, like the one Robert Mitchum wore in *The Big Sleep*. There was no smell of cheap booze or stale cigarettes. That is who I wanted working for me. This guy was wearing a well-tailored suit. His appearance was very neat. I hoped that this would be the public relations man, the image that the investigative agency wanted to project in 1993, more modern, more professional; but not my PI that would do the dirty work. I was already certain that I would be wrong.

I had chosen this company after looking through the yellow pages. Triangle Investigations was as sleazy as the names got.

"Mr. Walker," he said to me as I stood. "My name is Philip Dowling."

"John Walker," I told him plainly.

Dowling moved to the other side of the table and uncapped a pen as he sat. He set the pen on a blank pad of paper. "What can I do for you?"

"Well ... I'm not sure if you can help me. I'm uncomfortable doing this sort of thing. You know ... the image of the private eye in the movies ..."

"We're very reputable, John. We do work for large corporations, government departments, and individuals from all walks of life who were initially as nervous as you are now. Why don't you tell me what sort of assistance you had in mind?"

"I want you to find someone for me."

"What's her name?" he asked, picking up a pen.

I raised my eyebrows. "You're certain I'm looking for a woman?"

"Educated guess," he smiled.

"Well, I'm not sure what her name is. It used to be Ellie Barnes. I don't know her married name. I'm quite sure she still lives in the city, or near it, but she doesn't have any contact with her family or old friends. I don't think her family wants to contact her either, for that matter. She got involved with an older married man. That's not the sort of thing her family approves of."

"I see."

"Can you find her?"

"We usually don't have any trouble finding someone. However, I will need more information."

"Sure."

"Is Ellie her proper name?"

"Yes."

"... not a short form?"

"No."

"Do you know her middle name?"

"Claire."

"Did she grow up here?"

"Yes, lived here all her life," I said in a flat tone. It felt very strange to be talking about Ellie after so long. "I haven't seen her in almost ten years."

"Okay," Dowling noted. "Where did the family live?"

"Meadowlands Drive ... west end. Her parents still live there."

"Other family?"

"Yes, a brother, Jim. He's married and living in town. He'd be in the phonebook."

Dowling opened a drawer and took out a telephone directory. He flipped through several pages before his finger came to rest. "There are three James Barnes. Do you know which one is the brother?"

I stood up and looked at the phonebook he had turned around. "The first and third are both apartment addresses, and I know Jim bought a house. This must be him," I said of the second.

I smiled briefly as I sat down, thinking of the times Ellie and I went with Jim and Beth to clubs, or movies, or camping on weekends.

"Do you know Ellie's birthday?"

"Her birthday?" I answered a little surprised.

"That would make it a lot easier. If she drives a car then we can track her through her license at the motor vehicles department."

"I see. Yes, it's July 18. She would have just turned 30. I remember ..." my voice trailed away and I did not finish my sentence. I didn't really have anything to finish, but the words 'I remember' escaped anyway. Dowling watched me for a moment, then went back to his notepad and recorded the information.

"Okay," he said at last. "Let's leave Ellie for a few minutes. About you ..."

"Me?"

"That's right. What is your motivation? Why are you looking for her? I'm not in the business of enabling stalking or other questionable behavior."

I swallowed awkwardly. It had occurred to me that I might get this question. "I owe her an apology. I hope to make the apology in person." That sounded more or less how it had been rehearsed.

Dowling studied me for a moment, but seemed satisfied with that answer. "Okay. What do you want to know about her?"

"Oh, well, I'm not sure ... where she is, I guess, you know, where she lives or where she works, then I could run into her at work. Then I can apologize."

"That's all?"

"I think so," I responded slowly. "Why, what do other clients ask for?"

"Other clients who make a similar request have just come off a long relationship. He just got divorced for instance, and he wonders 'where is so-and-so now? I wonder if she might be single too.'" So we do some surveillance work. We find out where she lives, where she works, but also if she's in a relationship, how solid it might be. You know, is she fooling around, is she out with the girls a lot, are there any secret rendezvous, that sort of thing."

At last some dirt, I thought. Some sleazy PI work. But instead I said: "I don't think I need to know that."

"We may as well tell you, it's all part of the routine. And if you want to see her, we can arrange a meeting. (Dowling saw my face look distressed). No, not a planned meeting. We'll tail her, and when she's in a public location, I'll contact you from my car phone, I just had one installed. If you can get there before she leaves, you can pretend to run into her. She'll assume it's a coincidence."

"I'll have to think about that. I thought I'd just see her at her job."

"Well, you just let me know how you want to handle it."

"Anything else?"

"Yes," Dowling replied. "We'll call you in when we get some pictures of her."

"Pictures? Is that necessary?"

"It is, really. Just to be sure we have the right Ellie Barnes for you. And you want to see how she looks."

"I do?"

"You haven't seen her in, what did you say, ten years? I will be blunt. What if she put on 25 pounds, John? One hundred pounds?"

"It doesn't matter. There were some things left unsaid ten years ago. What matters is the chance to say them now. If she's changed, it doesn't matter. If she's happily married, it doesn't matter. I just want the chance to say hello."

"Okay, but we'll take some pictures anyway."

"Fine."

"Can you describe her physical appearance?"

"Blond hair, blue eyes, about five foot two, three, I don't know ..." I said, holding my hand up to where I thought Ellie's height was. "She was kind of petite."

"What did she weigh?"

"She used to joke that she was a 98 pound weakling, but I think she weighed a little more. Not much though."

"Okay," Dowling said, suddenly in a firmer voice. "All we need is a \$750 retainer. We don't go over that without your permission."

I sighed. "That's fine. Do it."

"What do you have to apologize for after all this time? I don't mean to pry, but I'm curious to know."

"It's all right," I shrugged. "You already guessed part of it, I am recently divorced. I got married in a hurry and Ellie and I hadn't split up very long before. Not long after that Ellie was in some kind of trouble, she wanted to see me, but my wife would have killed me if I helped, she was quite jealous, and I had problems of my own. So I didn't help her when she asked me to, and she slipped out of my life, and away from her family and friends. I should have done something because I wound up divorced anyway."

"How important is this to you?"

"I'm curious, that's all. I want to say a few things. But it's not too important," I told him, not certain how effectively I was lying.

Dowling stood and then walked me to the door. "Elizabeth has papers for you to sign, and you can leave your payment with her. I should have something for you next week."

We shook hands and I went to the reception area again. Elizabeth stood up, and I noticed how pretty she was, though not striking in a bombshell way. She was taller than average, slim, and her hair was short and brown, cut in page-boy style. But her eyes were expressive, and her smile formed easily and was warm. She stood closer to me than she had to as she showed me a set of contracts, and I was conscious of that, and her hand on my arm did not go unnoticed. I found myself leaning close to her to smell her perfume. It crossed my mind that this woman was very sexy, and I smiled to myself for noticing, at the silliness of the recently divorced man, but I would never have the courage to tell her. And I was here for Ellie.

"You can read the papers here if you wish Mr. Walker, and sign whenever you are ready."

I wanted to tell her to call me John, but there was no reason to without sounding corny. "You must be certain I'd be a client if you already had the contract prepared."

"Oh," Elizabeth smiled wider, and pushed her hair behind her ear. "I only had to fill in the name and the date. Besides, once someone comes to the office, they've usually already made up their mind."

"I suppose."

Nodding at the contract she said, "You can go through these papers here in the reception," so I took the stack from her.

"Just sign here once you're satisfied with everything," she explained, pointing to a line at the bottom of each page, and that is when I saw a wedding ring on her finger. Another image shot to hell. The private eye's secretary was supposed to be sultry and single.

I read it quickly, signed, paid my money, and left.

The drive home was weird. The traffic crawled, my mind raced. What if Ellie was glad to see me? What if her marriage really was on the rocks? What if we had another chance? Quickly I shifted lanes and told myself to be realistic. But, what if? No, be realistic I thought again, wringing my hands around the steering wheel, hitting the brake, shaking my head. That was a long time ago. That was one wife, two trips to detox, and three shitty sales jobs ago. That was only ten years ago, but I may as well have been a different man. My youth was gone, chased away by my bad decisions. I was a little hardened now, a little wiser now, hell, a little tired now; enough to grasp the likelihood that Ellie may not want to see me or give me the chance to purge my conscience.

God damn! What if ...

"So, did you do it?" my father asked as I helped him fit a pillow between the small of his back and the back of the chair. The furniture in the retirement lodge could be more comfortable.

I sat in the other chair in his room, next to the window. "Yesterday morning. I told them I wanted to find Ellie, they said okay, I signed a contract, gave them a cheque for seven hundred and fifty dollars, and -"

"Seven-fifty?! Jesus Christ, John, you'd think they had to search the whole country for her. She's here in Ottawa, isn't she?"

"I think so."

"You should put an ad in the paper offering a hundred bucks for someone to tell you where she is. You'd have six-fifty left over to take her away for the weekend. Shit, you turn over seven-fifty like it was nothing."

"First of all," I began to object, though my tone was soft, "I don't want her to know I'm looking for her if I can help it. And second, she is probably married, so we aren't going anywhere for the weekend. I think the money is well spent."

"You figure?"

"Yes, I do," I said quietly, lowering my eyes from Dad's and stealing a moment to remember how gentle hearted Ellie could be to me and to everyone else she knew, how unselfish she was. I remember her beauty so natural, and I melted every time I watched her, and she moved really close, and told me what a great day it was and how wonderful she felt.

I don't know how much my Dad could sense my thoughts, but he said what I was thinking. "You never should have left Ellie."

I smiled, but it was strained. "I know, I know. I regret it every day."

"She reminded me of your mother, you know."

"Everyone I dated reminded you of Mom."

"I meant it with Ellie."

Dad had almost as many memories of Ellie as I did. She was at the house so often, when I lived there with Dad, before he needed the care he gets at the lodge. Ellie and Dad would talk for hours if I happened to be out. She had time for so many. She made us feel good.

"She had your mother's energy," he said, as though it had just occurred to him.

"Yeah, she sure burst into a room," I agreed. "She wasn't loud about it. She didn't have to say a word, it was her sense of well-being, the energy, like you say, that announced her. Her smile that never let you down."

Suddenly Dad set his hand on mine, a gesture I wasn't ready for. Then I realized my hands had been shaking as I reminisced about Ellie. It was hard to accept that I hadn't helped her, that I couldn't.

I looked up at Dad, my eyes becoming moist. "I really fucked up with

her, didn't I?"

"Mind your language, John," he said plainly.

That made me laugh. "You're one to talk."

He patted my hand. "It's what your mother would say. Come on, let's take a walk outside. We can remember young Ellie some more."

I helped him up and we went outside.

The phone rang. I was at work, doing tedious paperwork. I'm sure the boredom could be heard in my voice as I answered.

"John? Philip Dowling here."

"Yes!" I said, instantly alert.

"I think we've found her."

"You have? Where? What is she doing?"

"I can't say more than that. I need one or two more surveillances to confirm some things. But I promised you that I would have some news within the week, so I wanted to call. I'll have you into the office again on Monday to show you what we have. Does she know anyone by the name of Whitelaw on Smyth Road?"

"Not that I know of."

"Would she be doing any volunteer work there?"

"That wouldn't surprise me, that's the kind of woman she is. Why?"

"It's nothing. I'll call you later."

Frustrated, I hung up the phone. I'd not seen Ellie in ten years, and now I was on the verge of finding her. I didn't want to wait until Monday. So many times I'd searched the faces in crowds or downtown streets or in shopping centres, knowing we might have passed each other many times and never known it.

It was all I could think about the rest of the weekend.

Monday morning passed but I had no phone call from Triangle Investigations. At three in the afternoon I could wait no longer, and I phoned them.

"Phillip won't be in until late," Elizabeth told me. "He's at a surveillance."

"Is it my case?"

"I'm not really sure."

"Phillip was going to brief me on everything in my case today," I said, the anxiousness in my voice becoming very obvious.

"Can you come in tomorrow at nine?"

"Sure."

"Even if Phillip isn't here, I'll let you see what we have in the file."

I felt relieved. "Thanks, Elizabeth. I'll see you then."

I was a few minutes early as I stepped from the elevator and to the door of the detective agency. I was about to take hold of the handle of the door when a man's angry voice was raised.

"This is wrong! This is all wrong! Do you know what you've done to me? You were supposed to be discreet!"

It was just like a private eye movie: a significant conversation is overheard through a closed door. I decided to listen.

"Mr. Berger, please," I heard Elizabeth say. "We did nothing out of the ordinary. Phillip said nothing of the delicate nature of the information."

"Delicate? It was more than fucking delicate! He'll kill me!"

"Are you sure you told Phillip the significance ..."

"He came to me. I didn't go to him; he came to me. Do you understand? We had a deal. Look at the names, lady. Aren't they significant enough for you?"

"... well, I don't know ..."

"I do! I do! Someone's gonna fucking pay! I didn't take this risk for

nothing!"

"Phillip will -- "

"Where is he?" Berger cut her off again. There was bang from the pound of a fist on a table. His voice was getting stronger, and Elizabeth's much weaker.

"He, he's out ... I'll call his pager again."

"No! Where is he? Tell me where he went, goddam you! I want him NOW!"

It was time for me to play hero and save Elizabeth; at least that's what I planned. I opened the door suddenly, brazenly, ready to step between them. Then I saw Berger ten feet away and quickly realized that he was a very big man. Why this man needed a private eye to do anything for him was beyond me. I was hoping to protect Elizabeth, but now I hoped he would not turn on me.

Fortunately, I had startled him. He bumped past me and out of the office.

Elizabeth sat down abruptly on her chair. She was pale.

"Are you okay?"

"No, not really. He really scares me. I think he is a very dangerous man."

"I believe it."

"I don't know what kind of deal Phillip would make with the likes of him. And why would he contact him in the first place? Phillip is usually more careful than that."

"I wouldn't know."

"I'm glad you are here early."

"Well, I was eager to get an update on the case."

Elizabeth stood up again and handed me a file. "You can look through that, it's all in there. Excuse me for a minute, I need to get a drink of water."

I didn't answer. I sat down and opened the file.

The first three pages documented what I had told Dowling.

The fourth page gave information on Ellie's current life. Her married name was Guthro. Her husband's name was Paul Guthro. That sounded familiar. Her car. Her address, a nice area of the city. Her job. No children.

The fifth page had photographs stapled to it.

In one photo, Ellie was standing in the driveway beside her house. In the next she was walking to the front door.

The photos were distant and grainy, but I could see it was her. She looked so much like the young girl I hadn't seen in almost ten years. Her face still seemed to radiate the way I remembered. She was a few pounds heavier. Her hair was longer, still blond. Despite any changes, her beauty was unmistakable. My fingers unconsciously caressed the edge of the picture. Only when Elizabeth returned did my fixation end.

I noticed the third photo. A man perhaps twenty years older than Ellie stood on the front door step. He wore an expensive looking suit, his thinning hair was combed back stylishly, and he stared in the direction of the camera. I wondered if he knew he was being photographed. He held a thick cigar in his left hand. The caption stated 'Paul Guthro'. Is this what Ellie settled for? He looked nothing like what she deserved.

The phone rang.

"Phillip!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Mr. Berger was just here and he was really mad ... no, no, I'm okay. Mr. Walker happened to come -- yes, he is here now ... yes, he's reading it now, but, ... but what is so? ..." Elizabeth looked confused and was watching me. "Okay," she finally said.

She held the phone toward me. "Mr. Walker, Phillip would like to speak to you."

I got up and set the file on the next chair.

"Could I have the file back please?" she asked timidly.

"Why?"

"Phillip will explain."

I gave her the file back and took the phone receiver from her.

"John, John. Glad you came in to help Elizabeth when you did," Dowling began. He sounded much different than the other time we spoke. He was trying

to mask the panic in his voice, but it could still be noticed. "I'm continuing the surveillance on your case. Oh, good news. It would seem that their marriage is in real trouble."

"Really?" I blurted, suddenly excited myself.

"That's right."

"You were told?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"How? I mean, how can you do that without someone finding out?"

"Oh, there are ways, John, many ways in this business. But I was discreet ... always sure to do that. I'm continuing to check on this. I think she might be meeting someone at the Whitelaw residence, could be an affair, but I'm not sure yet."

"Uh-huh," I mumble, trying to sound cautious, careful not to let my hopes get too high, but they were. I had convinced myself that I only wanted to speak to her, to correct an old wrong, but not to interfere with her marriage. Even though mine was over, it went against my sense of what was decent. I would be sure not to disrupt her happiness, if that was how she felt. On the other hand, there were all these feelings ...

"John, we have to have the file back."

"Why?"

"Oh ... it's not complete yet. I, I didn't mean for you to see it until it was ready."

"I don't mind. I'll just read what's there. And later--"

"No!" Dowling cut me off. I was surprised by the urgency in his tone. He made a poor attempt at a chuckle. "Just policy John. We're almost done."

"Are you going to be home tonight?" he asked before I could object again.

"Uh ... yes."

"Good. I'm tailing Ms. Barnes after she finishes work. If she stops somewhere, I'll call you from the car. If you can get there fast enough, you can pretend to meet her accidentally and we can get this over with."

"Okay," I said absentmindedly. The events were becoming more cloak and dagger than I expected. I was disoriented, but I agreed again when Dowling told me to be home by five. Then I hung up.

When I turned to speak to Elizabeth, she was reading a file. "What's there that's not complete?" I asked.

Elizabeth glanced up, and she had an odd expression. She looked worried. "Do you really want to find her?"

"Yes, desperately. What does it say in there?"

"What do you expect from her?" Elizabeth continued, ignoring my question.

"Nothing really. Just the chance to say I'm sorry. I really hurt her, made some mistakes."

"Oh," Elizabeth said.

"I can't read my file?"

"No, I'm sorry."

I started to go, but thought of something else. "May I have the pictures at least? For now ..."

Elizabeth smiled, releasing some of the tension in the room. "Sure."

She reached under the file she had been reading and opened another. She extracted the pictures and gave them to me.

I nodded at the file on top, the one she had been reading. "That wasn't mine?"

"No," she answered, looking worried again.

I took the pictures of Ellie and her husband, and left.

I returned home at 4:45. There was a message on my voice mail from Phillip Dowling.

"John, I was hoping you might be home early," it said. "It's just after 4:30, and Ms. Barnes is in a bank on Baseline Road. I'll try you again if she stops somewhere else."

I waited by the phone, a map of the city and keys in my hand. I'd

brushed my teeth and spruced up as best I could.

At 5:05 the phone rang.

"John, a gym at 2775 Merivale Road. It should be about ten minutes for you. I'm in a white Oldsmobile. If you don't get here before she comes out, I'll wait for you."

"But then you'll lose her."

"That's right. Hurry. I want to finish this tonight."

"I'm on my way."

I put the phone down and rushed to the door. Just as it closed behind me, the phone rang again. I hesitated, but decided it might be Dowling, so I went back in.

"Hello?"

"Oh, good, it's Phillip again. She came right back out. I'm continuing the tail. While I have a minute, I have to tell you that I'm not so sure their marriage is in trouble. There was a mistake."

"Oh." I should have felt deflated, but there was so much happening, it became just another incidental detail. "What was it that made you think that?"

He didn't answer me. "You don't know any reason why Ellie visits a house on Smyth Road?"

"No, should I?"

"I'll tell you more later. Wait by your phone," he spoke briskly, and hung up before I could say anything else.

Two minutes later the phone rang again.

"Mr. Walker, the Citizen is offering a special home delivery for only --" I hung up.

At 5:20 the phone rang.

"This time I think we have her John. She's in the Loblaws at Strandherd and Greenbank Road, in Barrhaven. Do you know it?"

"You bet, I'm going."

My pulse raced as I sped my car to the grocery store where Ellie was. I conjured every possible response she might have to seeing me. She might spit at me and walk away. I knew that could happen, and how could I blame her? I had to be prepared for that. Or she might throw her arms around me and hug me. I'm not sure if I'd be prepared for that.

I didn't know what I'd say to her. I imagined seeing her stopped in an aisle, choosing from cans of food. I'd approach her slowly. "Hi, Ellie," I'd say. But I felt a fear of not being able to speak; of looking at her in silence as she met my gaze, then crumpling in regret.

As I pulled into the Loblaws parking lot of the grocery store, I still had not decided what might happen, or what should.

I started running across the parking lot, then it occurred to me she might be outside already, so I walked and looked around. I did not see Ellie, and I didn't see a white Oldsmobile either. The parking lot extended to the other side of the store, but I went inside first.

My heart beat faster as I peered down each aisle. Nothing. Maybe she's down this one. No. Aisle after aisle, but I couldn't see her. She was not in line at the checkouts. I doubled back along the aisles in case I had passed her while she was at the end of a row. I walked faster. I was so close to her, I knew it. But I couldn't find her.

I tried the other parking lot, but Ellie wasn't there either, only three cars. One was a white Oldsmobile, and I could see Phillip Dowling in the driver's seat. When he didn't wave me over, I thought he might not want me to approach him, but I was frustrated at not finding Ellie, so I went over anyway, almost at a jog.

His eyes didn't follow me as I came closer. He vacantly stared at the dashboard. I reached the car and he hadn't moved. I tapped on the window. He didn't react. His door was locked. I ran to the other side. I pulled the door open, and started to lean in, but stopped. I could see the red stain of his blood running through his clothes and onto the car seat. It smelt like something had been burned. His hand still gripped his car phone, lying on the seat, the cord trailing to the post attached to the floor. I felt his hand for a pulse, but there was none.



My first thought was to call the police, or for an ambulance. Then I thought of Ellie, and what would happen when I had to answer what I was doing there, and why Dowling was there, and they would wind up dragging Ellie into it. She would find out she was being followed, and why, without me ever having a chance to talk to her. I couldn't help Dowling anyway. He wasn't getting any more dead. I left him to be found by someone else.

I drove home. There were two messages on my answering machine. The first was from my father. The second was from Phillip Dowling.

"John ... too bad you've left already. She didn't stay here very long either. I'll wait for you here, and we'll have to try another ..." Dowling's voice trailed away and there was a long pause. Then he said in a hushed voice, "... oh, shit ..." Then the call ended.

The murder of Phillip Dowling made the eleven o'clock news. There was little information released to the press. Even his name was not given until relatives had a chance to be notified.

The ringing phone woke me up. I turned on a light and squinted at the clock as I answered. It said 3:50.

"Hello?" I said hoarsely.

"Mr. Walker?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Elizabeth Nelson," she said, her voice partially interrupted by the sound of passing cars. "From Triangle Investigations ..."

"Right."

"Did you know Phillip's been murdered?"

"Yes," I said without thinking. Then I realized what I had admitted, but it was too late to correct it. I sat upright in bed. I was awake now.

Elizabeth did not seem to mind. "I need to speak with you."

"Why?"

"There are some strange things going on."

"No kidding."

"The police just left the office. They kept me there for five hours, asking the same questions over and over."

"Where are you now?"

"At a pay phone. The line at the office may not be safe."

"Really?"

"I can't be sure," Elizabeth said, sounding worried.

"What were the police asking?"

"Well ... who I thought might have killed Phillip ... what cases he was working on ... what he did away from the office."

"Did you tell them what cases he was working on?"

"Not all of them."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you later, when we meet. I didn't tell them about yours."

"Won't they know when they find my file?" I reasoned.

Elizabeth ignored my question. "They also want to know about the break-in."

"What break-in?"

"Tonight, after work. I went back to the office around 6:30 for some things, and I wasn't sure right away, then I realized someone had been there. At first, I thought it was Phillip, but the way the files were scattered, I knew it wasn't. It dawned on me that whoever broke in might still be there, so I got out fast and called the cops from this pay phone. When they got here and we went up, I couldn't believe it. They'd broken in again! This time the glass door was broken, and the office was really messed up."

I shook my head. "You had two break-ins?"

"That's right."

"When did you leave after work?"

"Five, or a little after."

"So you had two break-ins in an hour and a half?"  
"I guess so."  
"What's missing?"  
Elizabeth paused. "... two files."  
"Mine?" I guessed.  
"Yes."  
"Why? There's nothing in mine. I mean, how interesting can it be when you're just tracking down an old girlfriend? What's the big deal?"  
"I don't know yet."  
"Whose was the other file?"  
"I'll tell you later."  
"Why?"  
"There's more. I don't want to be on the phone too long."  
"So, you didn't tell the police anything?"  
"I was going to, but by the time I'd figured out what was missing, they told me Phillip had been murdered. I decided not to. I suggested the petty cash was gone."  
"Why not tell the police? It's better if they know all -- "  
"No!" Elizabeth insisted. "If they ask the wrong question to the wrong person, it could get worse."  
"What could?"  
"It just could."  
"Listen," I began impatiently. "I have no clue what's going on here. Fill me in. This is getting a bit ridiculous."  
"Meet me at ten o'clock, this morning, at the parking lot of Britannia Park. Stop near the bicycle path. Have the car running and leave your passenger door open. And make sure you're not followed." Elizabeth emphasized the last sentence.  
"Followed? Am I in danger?"  
"Phillip's been shot. Your file is missing. Yes, you probably are."  
"Are you in danger?"  
"I can't be sure. I'm not going home, just in case."  
I remembered the wedding ring I had seen on her finger. "Is your husband picking you up?"  
Elizabeth did not answer for a moment. I heard several cars pass. Finally, she said, "I don't have a husband, not really. I'm separated. I'll be okay."  
"You sure?"  
"I'm sure. You be careful too. See you at ten, sharp."  
I did not sleep after that. I maintained a tight grip on the fire poker. I did not like guns, I supported gun control, but I wished I had one now. I felt very vulnerable and I had no idea where the threat was from.  
I was concerned for Elizabeth. She sounded just as frightened.

I circled the block near the park four times to be certain I was not being followed. Just before ten o'clock I pulled into Britannia Park, rolling to a stop at the closest point of the parking lot to the bike path. Moments later, Elizabeth, riding a bicycle, appeared from the path that wound from the trees. She wore a short sleeve shirt, light blue jeans, and sneakers; more casual than what she wore at the office. She let the bike drop on its side at the grass beside the parking lot. She pulled on the car door handle, but I'd forgotten to unlock it. I leaned over and let her in.

"I said to have it open," she said breathlessly.  
"Sorry."  
"Go, go, go," she said hurriedly.  
I stepped on the gas and drove quickly out of the park. "Where are we going?"  
She pointed ahead of us. "Go east on the Parkway, toward downtown."  
I turned when we reached the intersection.  
"I know you're in the dark," she began. "I promise to tell you

everything once we get somewhere safe."

I was about to ask her where she thought safe was, when Elizabeth put her hand on my arm. "John, I'm sorry I was abrupt when I got in," she turned in the seat and faced me. "Thanks for helping me."

It was nice to hear her call me by my first name. "It seems that I am just as involved. I'm only doing what I have to."

"Well, you're helping a lot. You've helped me out of a couple of jams, like with that Berger guy, and you've been nice about it. I wouldn't want you to think that I didn't notice."

"It's okay," I said shyly. Then: "do I keep going straight."

Elizabeth took her hand from my arm. "Head up Island Park, then right on Wellington. Go three lights and you'll see a bank at the corner of Ambrose. That's where we're going."

"Why?"

"Phillip has a safety deposit box there. Any really important information he got he would keep there. I'm the only other person with access to it," she held up a key. "Let's see what's there, then I can fill you in on everything."

"At a safe place ..."

"That's right."

"Where?"

"I haven't come up with one."

"My place?"

Elizabeth glanced at me, trying to hide how unimpressed she was with my suggestion. "Not a chance. You're involved, remember?"

"Sorry. What about my father's place? He's in a retirement home in Perth."

"Um ... I suppose that's out of the way enough. We could talk on the drive. Okay. After we check out what's at the bank."

The receptionist at the bank directed us to a teller who let Elizabeth into the safe where the safety deposit boxes were. As Elizabeth signed the registry, I stood beside her, trying to read when the previous visit had been made, but I could not see it clearly.

"When was the last entry?" I whispered to her.

"Phillip was here yesterday."

The teller looked at me suspiciously, then escorted Elizabeth into the locked area.

She was only there a few minutes. She returned carrying a bulky business envelope. "Let's go," she said, and we hurried from the bank.

"How long does it take to get to Perth?" Elizabeth asked as I started the car.

"About an hour. I have to make one stop though."

"What do you need."

"I have some things to take my Dad."

"Not at your house," Elizabeth rebuked me sharply.

"No, no. At the office. I was supposed to visit him after work today."

Elizabeth hesitated. "... if you have to."

"I'll be quick. And I'll be careful."

"I'm not meaning to overreact, but I'm scared. Someone has killed Phillip, and ... just be extra careful, don't say anything to anyone."

The stop at the office was brief. I made arrangements to miss the rest of the week. I had a feeling I would need at least that long. It crossed my mind that spending time with Elizabeth could be the only redeeming feature of the mess I seemed to be mixed up in.

When I returned to the car, Elizabeth was examining the contents of the envelope. I drove toward Perth in silence and watched what she was reading. On one knee rested a cassette tape. On the other were several photographs, turned face down. She read through some handwritten notes. At one point she let out a low whistle.

I made good time toward Perth. I tucked in behind a red Camaro doing well over the speed limit. The blue Mercedes behind me had the same idea, and we followed, safe in the assumption that a radar trap would get the Camaro, not

us.

After Elizabeth read the last page, she set the contents down and stared out the window.

"Do we have to wait until we get there?" I asked, eager for information.

Elizabeth turned to face me, smiling sympathetically. "No, I guess not. I'm trying to make some sense of it up here," she tapped her forehead. "There are so many bits and pieces, I'm not sure I've accounted for them all." She re-read some of the notes and set them down again. "You found his body, didn't you?"

"Yes. My slip-up on the phone gave that away?"

"Afraid so. Phillip was trying to set you up to run into Mrs. Guthro?"

"That's right. But Ellie was gone, and he was already dead." I told Elizabeth of all the details of the day before, including the final message on my voice mail at home. I told her that Phillip seemed especially anxious to finish with my case that night.

"It makes a little sense," Elizabeth puzzled out loud. "I just can't figure out all the connections."

"Whose was the other file that was taken?"

"Mr. Berger's. I'd bet he's the one who broke in the get his file. I don't know why he took yours though, or who else broke in."

"But they didn't take anything else the second time?"

"No," Elizabeth was firm.

"Maybe they were looking for the same file ... or files."

"Maybe."

"What if they each took one file?"

"That's possible. But who would know about your file?"

"And who would want it?" I sighed, truly perplexed.

"Oh, there are people who would want it," Elizabeth threw out a teaser.

"What do you mean?"

"John, your long-lost love married the wrong guy. Paul Guthro would seem to be an honest, successful businessman, but the rumour is that he wasn't always that way. Phillip mentioned his past in his notes, and in your file."

"What past?"

"Prostitution and drugs."

"Really?"

"He's heavy into money markets, and financing the projects of his friends, but he used to have connections to young girls. Human trafficking. Throwing parties and having underage girls available for his business buddies. He looks legal today, but Phillip questioned whether he'd gone completely clean."

"Prostitution?" I echoed. "Ellie would never get mixed up in that."

"How well did you know her?"

"Better than any woman I've known. There's no way ..."

"I don't know."

"Wait," I remembered a detail from long ago. "Guthro was married when she met him. He couldn't have been a pimp."

Elizabeth shrugged. "Pimps and dealers have lives too. Plus, human trafficking can be different. Supplying young girls to older men that will pay for them. Like an escort agency but the girls are trapped. He doesn't have to fit the image from the movies."

"I guess not." I thought of how little of what I had encountered fit the images I'd been conditioned from television to expect. "So, what connections are you trying to figure out?"

"Well, I don't think Guthro's past is common knowledge. So, how did Phillip find out? I'm thinking maybe Berger told him."

"Berger?"

"Right. Berger is a real bad guy. He does the drug dealing and pimping too, except it's no secret to anyone. And Phillip's notes in the files show he does business with Guthro. I read that in Berger's file when you were at the office yesterday."

"But Berger said Phillip went to him."

"I'd forgotten that. Maybe it was to confirm something, or to get something on Guthro," Elizabeth guessed.

"What else do you have?"

Elizabeth passed me the pictures. I glanced from the road to the pictures, three in all. One looked like a high school yearbook photo. Beneath the smiling, youthful face was hand-written, 'Barbara Ann Wellesley', and the date 'August 7', which was circled. That was exactly three weeks earlier. The other two pictures were of another young girl, standing on a downtown street corner, wearing a halter top, small cut-off shorts, spiked heels, and too much make-up. In one picture she appeared to be getting into a car. The name below these pictures was 'Lori Newington'.

"Okay ..." I said, handing them back.

"Phillip has some notes on these girls. It says 'Barbara Ann Wellesley ... found August 7 ... Ottawa River ... pregnant ...' Then at the bottom of the page it says 'Lori Newington ... get to her before Guthro finds out ...'"

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"It doesn't make any sense to me."

"Let's listen to the tape," Elizabeth suggested, and she pushed it into the tape deck of the car.

We listened.

It hissed. Then we heard a telephone ring above the feedback. It was answered.

"Hello?" came a girl's voice.

"Is it safe now?" a man asked her. It was Phillip Dowling.

"For a minute, I guess. Make it quick."

"I'm a friend of Barb's ..."

There was a long delay before the girl's frightened voice was heard again. "You know Barbie?"

"Barbie. Yes, I know her ... I knew her."

"Fuck off man. You didn't know her. You probably fucked her. Go to hell."

"Lori, wait! I know what happened."

"Yeah, right. The cops know what happened. Big fucking wow."

"No, I mean I really know what happened. I know why. I know the warehouse where they cut her. I know who owns it."

Another pause began. Over the hiss of the tape we could just barely hear Lori sobbing. "They didn't have to kill her. She was just a little fucked up. I told her she was getting way too wasted, way too often, and she got pregnant too. So he made an example outta her. But Tony would'a paid 'em. They didn't have to kill her."

Elizabeth stopped the tape momentarily. "Tony is Berger, that's his first name," she said.

"This is such a different life. It's not very pleasant, not for any of them," I said, probably looking more wide-eyed than I realized.

Elizabeth patted me on the arm. "Working for Phillip exposed me to lots of crappy things. You're lucky to not know about them." She started the tape again.

"I can help, Lori," Dowling offered.

"How?"

"We can make them pay."

"No ... I can't do it. Tony will kill me."

"He'll never know."

"Yeah, right, dream on," Lori scoffed. "What's in it for me?"

"Like I said, we'll make them pay for what they did to Barbie."

"I'll think about it. Who are you? How do I find you?"

"I'll contact you."

"How? Tony will fuckin' kill me."

"I know your street. When someone asks you to help Barbie, get in."

"I'll think about it."

"Lori, trust me. We can ~"

"Hey, man, I said I'd think about it."

"Okay."

There was a click, then nothing. We let the tape play a little longer, but there were no more recordings.

"That was interesting," I breathed, aware of my understatement.

"Phillip picks up on the murder of an underage girl and has an idea who is responsible. But he needs the friend, another underage girl, to make them pay," Elizabeth summarized.

"If he wants them to pay so bad, wouldn't it have been easier to have the police pick her up, and tell them what he knew. Same difference."

"That's not the same pay Phillip was talking about. I don't imagine the cops would help him out."

"What do you mean?"

"Blackmail," Elizabeth stated bluntly. She noticed my surprise. "Don't be so naïve, John. Half of Phillip's income came from little secrets Triangle would uncover."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"Maybe Phillip was going to blackmail Berger," Elizabeth mused.

"But Berger came back to Phillip."

"That's right, that's right. That part doesn't make sense." Elizabeth massaged her forehead as she thought. "I wonder if Phillip had a chance to meet with Lori?"

We moved along the highway and let Elizabeth's question linger for five minutes or more. The Mercedes and I continued the fast clip behind the Camaro; we were getting closer to the nursing home. Elizabeth stared out the window, occasionally looking at the pictures of the young girls.

Finally, I broke the silence. "We've learned an awful lot from that envelope, in addition to what we already knew." My voice was almost chipper. "We're well on our way."

"We don't know who killed Phillip yet," Elizabeth reminded me.

"I'm sorry. You're right, we haven't yet; but we will."

"I hope so."

A few moments later I put my turn signal on.

"We're here?" Elizabeth looked out the window.

I pointed to a long building ahead on the left, next to the highway.

"That's it."

"How long has your Dad lived here?"

"Almost three years. I was worried about whether he would be happy here, but he is. Both my sisters live near here and we all visit him a lot, and we take him out on a day trip if he's feeling up to it. He needs constant care."

"What's wrong?"

"His heart. He almost died a few times."

"So, you drive all the way out here to visit him?"

"Sure," I said as I pulled the car into a parking space. "Once or twice a week, maybe more."

"That's sweet of you," Elizabeth said suddenly, and the remark embarrassed me.

"Thanks," I said in a weak voice.

"I haven't known many kind men," she continued. "My husband was dishonest, a user. I couldn't live with him anymore. He could be abusive too. Not a lot. Not as bad as other men I've known."

"I'm sorry," I said with genuine concern.

"You're not that kind of man, are you?" Elizabeth asked me quietly, a look of vulnerability in her eyes that I had not seen before. "That's not something you would do."

I could not imagine how or why anyone would hurt Elizabeth. "No. I'd never do anything like that."

"But you've made mistakes?"

"Sure, ya ... but not like that. Never like that."

Elizabeth looked down at the picture of Barbie Wellesley. "That poor kid ..." Then she turned to me, the pained expression never leaving her. "Let's go see your father."

Dad was not expecting us. I knocked on his door and he called out to

come in. When he saw me, he said, "Whoa, John, you're here early. Aren't you working today?" He was still in bed in his pajamas and the TV was on.

Then he saw Elizabeth in the doorway. "Oh, shit, here we go. Company's here and I'm not dressed. Thanks for the warning, son."

"Sorry. There are extenuating circumstances, or I would have thought to call. Dad, this is Elizabeth Nelson. She works at the private eye agency I hired."

"Nice to meet you Mr. Walker," Elizabeth greeted Dad, her hand extended.

"The pleasure is mine, young lady. I go by Glen. Come on in. Unfortunately, the embarrassment is mine too, caught here in my jammies. But I never get out of bed until The Price Is Right is over," Dad nodded at the game show on the TV. "I don't know why, Bob Barker looks even older than me. And look at the simpleton trying to win a new car ... Jesus, lady, the soap pads are always less than the mouthwash!"

"Can I turn it off, Dad?" I asked gently, grinning.

"Sure, sure. I'm not watching it."

Elizabeth put her hand on the door. "Would you like some time to freshen up Mr. Walker? I could make some phone calls."

"That would be nice, thank you. If you need a phone, then tell the nurse at the desk who you're visiting and they'll give you a phone to use. Charge it to my room."

"Oh, I'll call collect."

"Please don't. Charge it to my room."

"Thank you," Elizabeth acknowledged and went out of the room.

I watched her go, my face beaming, and secretly I felt proud to have her there to meet Dad, though there was no reason why I should. I admired how she acted as she met Dad, her sophistication, the way she graciously accepted his offer to charge her calls to his room.

Dad made a slow movement to get out of bed. "You shit," he rasped at me.

"What?"

"Bringing a nice young lady to meet your father, and not calling ahead. Look at me." He motioned at his pajamas as he stood.

"I know, I'm sorry. There's a lot going on."

"I'll bet. She's a married woman you said. You know that's not right."

I rolled my eyes. Dad was still up to scolding me. "She's not married anymore."

"Oh ... well, you're golden then."

"It's not like that either."

Dad looked at me, confused. "Well then, what the hell are you doing here?"

"C'mon," I said, helping him toward his washroom. I told him everything that had happened, and what we knew.

When I finished my story, Dad grinned at me as he clasped the last button of his sweater. "And the best part of this little mystery is you get to be with Elizabeth; am I right?"

"Dad ... this isn't a little mystery exactly. People are dead. I could be in danger."

"Well, take care of yourself," he said in a tone that was not overly concerned. He sat in his chair, and the grin returned to his face. "She's a really nice woman. And attractive. Don't you think?"

"Sure."

"So, you going to make a move?"

"Give me a break," I sighed, not interested in pursuing this line of conversation. "There are bigger things on my mind right now. But, yes, she's great; and if I wasn't worried about getting killed, I might have time to think about asking her on a date."

"This is like a date. You're out together."

"Some date."

"Just like you and Ellie back in the day."

"Jeez, Dad, enough. It's awkward as hell meeting her right when I'd dug up all my old feelings for Ellie, but nothing has happened and it isn't the big priority in my mind until we know who killed her boss. Besides, I don't know anything about her."

"Well you're going to find out the more time you spend together." He continued.

"I don't know ..." I said, exasperated. Then I remembered her comments in the car. "She hasn't had good experiences. She said her husband was hard on her, beat her; and other men in her past probably did the same."

"She told you that?"

"Ya."

"Poor woman."

"That's what I think."

"She must need a good man to look after her."

"The knight in shining armour ... " I offered sarcastically.

"If you like."

"I don't think that concept is as fashionable as it once was Dad. A woman might take offence. And Elizabeth isn't necessarily weak. She takes charge. Only when that gorilla Berger threatened her did she back down, but who wouldn't. She'd do a better job of looking after me."

"That's a good idea too."

"Well, thank you for your input," I remarked, sounding irritated.

"You are lonely, aren't you?"

"No, I'm alone. There's a difference."

"You think so?" Dad asked wearily, and I was reminded that he was alone as well.

"Can we drop this subject please. Elizabeth could be back at any moment. I don't need an analysis of my love life anyway."

"You are thin skinned John ... you didn't get that from me."

"I'm sure I didn't."

"Okay, okay, I'll change the subject. Who do you think killed the PI?"

"No idea. He probably knew his killer, from the way it was done and the sound of his message on my answering machine. If he was blackmailing someone, that's a good reason right there. And Berger was awfully pissed at him too."

"What are you going to do next?"

"Whatever Elizabeth thinks is best; she knows a lot more about investigating than I do. She won't go to the police, though I assume she has her own ideas how to find the murderer."

Before Dad could say anything in return, we heard a woman's voice from outside the door say "You don't have to wait, you can come in with me." There was a knock, then a nurse walked in, followed by Elizabeth. I wondered if Elizabeth had been listening to us, and for how long.

"Time for your weekly tests," the nurse announced. From the reaction on Dad's face, she could tell he was not pleased. "Had you forgotten Glen?"

"I had, yes. Do we have to do them today?"

The nurse nodded. She told Elizabeth and me that we had to wait outside the room, that the tests would last about an hour. I promised Dad we would come back and take him out for a late lunch.

We went for a walk rather than wait in the hallway. There was a path through the large field behind the lodge, dotted by numerous trees, mostly pines. We walked slowly, there was no hurry to return.

"Are the tests serious?"

"No, they just have to keep a close eye on him."

"I see," Elizabeth spoke as though she had absently listened. "I never had parents."

"Never?"

"Well, two people conceived me of course, but not since then. They dumped me off with the provincial authorities, and then the province dumped me somewhere different every couple of years until I was fifteen. I took care of myself after that."

There was real sadness in her voice. "I'm sorry things were so



unfair," I said as I turned to face Elizabeth, and I was sincere.

Then she faced me, she even stopped walking. "Thanks for saying."

"That's okay. I am."

As she started to stroll again, Elizabeth talked some more. "I feel really good when someone is concerned about me, and really means it. Just as long it's not pity. I have proven I can take care of myself. I proved that when I was fifteen."

Without a hesitation or any awkwardness, her hand looped on my arm and she clutched me firmly, intently.

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. I just went with it.

She leaned closer. "I sense a will to be kind. You are a decent man. I don't think you would ever hurt me. That's more important to me than anything, especially after everything." Elizabeth stopped talking. Her hand was still on my arm. I had not said a word, I was so surprised, but what she said made me feel good. Surprised, but good. I was newly and distinctly aware that I did not want to let go of her arm. And I knew I would never hurt her, especially after everything that has happened to me.

We walked quietly for a minute or so.

"Were you separated recently?" I asked.

"Why do you want to know?" Elizabeth stopped walking and turned to face me again. By my question I had disturbed the moment.

"Hey, we're sharing a thought. So, I wondered."

"I don't want to talk about him."

"Okay ... " I was hesitant.

"You were married before too?"

"Ya."

"Fine. I don't want to know about that. Are you single right now?"

"Yes." But I must have hesitated, and she noticed.

"I am," I quickly added. "Trust me, I am. You're just throwing me for a loop here, the way this is going."

"You can take it," she said confidently. She moved her hands to her pockets, but her sneakers glided with each step, lightly dancing over the grass and pine needles. She had described a troubled past, hinted at more, but she did not let it show in her aura. She seemed to me to be very confident and happy, and I watched her walk, and admired the harmony in her step.

"So, tell me about Ellie Barnes, Mrs. Guthro. Can you do that?"

"I don't know," I was amused. "That doesn't seem fair."

"I've told you I don't want to know about your ex-wife,"

Elizabeth corrected. "Because you didn't love her. Or did you love her?"

"No, I don't think so."

"See? I don't want to know about that. I don't love my husband either."

"Oh."

"But you loved Ellie, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I can tell. When you're quiet, like when we started walking, I know you're thinking about her."

"I wasn't." I really wasn't.

Elizabeth took no notice of my objection. "Were you with her for a long time?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a long story."

"Then tell me a long story."

"Okay," and I tried to pull together my memories to one place. "I knew her for a long time. I knew her for over ten years, and now I haven't seen her for as long. We met when we were kids, she was a friend of my sister's. That's when I first fell for her. I would say "fell in love", but we were barely teenagers. On one hand, we were too young to know what that should feel like. On the other, the emotions never changed as we grew older, and I've never felt the same feelings since then, since Ellie."

"I was 20 and she was 18 and we spent every day together. I've never felt so loved, it was so easy, so perfect; I just didn't know it didn't get any better. But I was young, I tried to find better.

"You can't find more love than love. Other love ... maybe. It's a crapshoot. Usually you lose. What is the point in replacing one love for another anyway? I didn't realize how ridiculous that is.

"Then she was 21 and I was 23 and our lives were in disarray, even as young as we were. I married the wrong person, on an impulse really. And Ellie met an older man, I heard he was married at the time, so that was complicated I'm sure. Both of us were backed into corners. Mine was a bad marriage. I never knew what hers was, but it was a corner, I'm sure of that. She tried to tell me, but I couldn't do it ... I wouldn't help her. I didn't reach out. I could have. I don't know what I could have changed; nothing, or maybe everything. I'm trying to find that out now."

Elizabeth looked steadily in front of her during my reminiscence. She did not interrupt, or react, or watch me. "When was the last time you made love to her?"

I turned sharply to look at her, but she still didn't watch me, and her pace didn't slow down. I decided it was easier just to answer her than to question why she would ask that. "The only time I cheated on my ex-wife, the only time, was with Ellie, not long after I was married, and before Ellie met the older guy. And it was the only time Ellie and I made love. That may seem strange for lifestyles today, but we wanted to wait. When it was obvious we weren't going to marry each other, it just happened one night after we had met to talk. But I felt so guilty, and my wife was so jealous of Ellie that it was hard to see her anyway, so it never happened again. Just that once, for all the time I knew her."

"You sure managed to make a mess of it ..." Elizabeth summed up.

I felt a twinge of being judged. I was uncertain how to react, I had tried to be open with Elizabeth. "Have you done any better? You're married to a man you don't love." I said accusingly, taking the offensive.

"If you knew what he saved me from, you'd understand why I did it," she replied calmly.

"What did he save you from?"

"I told you, I don't want to talk about him."

"Right," I reminded myself, frustrated that she shut me out. "You weren't in love with him so we can't talk about him."

"That's right."

"So tell me about someone you've loved."

Elizabeth cocked her head to one side and glanced at me for a second. Her face had the odd combination of a half smile and eyes that were sad. "Sorry, I'm not familiar with the feeling."

"Maybe you were and you just didn't know it."

"No, I would know. There was nothing to love about the men I've been with."

There, she did it again, dropping hints about a difficult past, but not saying more. I was sure she'd refuse to tell me more, but I ventured the question anyway. "What was so bad about them?"

Elizabeth smiled, she understood I wanted to know more about her, but still she did not oblige. "I'm not comfortable talking about that yet."

"Okay," I said, though I was desperate to know more.

By this time we had covered most of the field, we had wandered beneath most of the trees. Our direction was turned back toward the lodge. We were both silent for several minutes and I was comfortable with that. I didn't know everything that Elizabeth was thinking, and what she was holding back, but I felt like I would be told eventually, so I didn't mind. There was no hurry.

"Who did you call?" I asked.

"Back at the lodge? Oh, I called to find out about the arrangements for Phillip's funeral. I finally reached his mother and she told me about the wake and the funeral, the day after tomorrow."

"In Ottawa?"

"Yes."

"Are you going?"

"Yes."

"Of course, you would, you worked for him," I scolded myself for the dumb question. "Would you like me to be with you when you go?"

Elizabeth looked at me, studied my request carefully. "No, it would be better if I go alone, until we know what is happening. There will be cops there, maybe even the person who killed him. Your file was stolen, don't forget. We don't know what danger you're in."

"Right," I mumbled, disappointed I could not go with her.

"I'll need someone to drop me off and pick me up." Her suggestion sounded like a consolation prize, but I accepted it. I nodded.

"Did you work for him for long?"

"Mmmmm," she affirmed through pursed lips. She shook her head and appeared to be taking a moment to remember. "A long time," she finally managed.

I changed the subject. "What do you think we should do next?"

"I'm tired, aren't you?" she asked and I nodded, so she continued.

"There are a few things we need to do, but let's take it easy tonight. Neither of us can go home, not safely, so we'd better find a hotel."

"That's fine, I guess. One room or two?"

She smiled. "One. We have to keep an eye on each other."

I smiled back, but didn't press the topic. "What about tomorrow? What do you have in mind?"

"You were telling me about the house Phillip followed Ellie to every day. Let's find out why. We'll watch it and see if she comes for a visit. If she works, then she must do her visiting at lunch. That's my guess. The other thing to do is to contact Lori Newington. She doesn't know who Phillip is, so it will be easy for you to pretend to be him, and get her into the car using that phrase Phillip said to her. Maybe we can find out what she knows. I'd say that should be a full day."

"What about the rest of today?" I asked as we were almost back to the lodge. We walked along the patio behind the lodge, but had to go around to the front to the main door.

"Why not take your father to dinner," she suggested as we turned the corner of the building and came alongside of the parking lot.

"I think he'd like ..." my voice tailed away.

"What is it?" Elizabeth's eyes tried to pinpoint what it was I stared at in the parking lot.

"There," I pointed at a blue Mercedes parked alone at the furthest point of the lot. "That car was behind me the whole way down here, but it didn't pull in off the highway after me."

"Are you sure?"

"There aren't too many blue Mercedes on these roads. I guess it could be innocent, a coincidence."

Elizabeth started to walk across the parking lot. "I don't believe in coincidence," she said in a determined way.

There was no one visible in the car, but the windows were tinted, so it was hard to tell. I was more inclined to stay away than to approach the car, so it alarmed me that Elizabeth was doing the latter. I tried to keep up to her, but she moved briskly in a straight line toward the blue Mercedes.

She was halfway there when a figure in the car moved, like someone was sitting up from a slouched position. The engine roared as the ignition was turned.

Elizabeth broke into a run toward the car.

"Don't!" I called after her, running a dozen steps behind.

The blue Mercedes lurched out of the parking spot and veered away from us, and toward the exit to the highway. Elizabeth sprinted harder to chase it, turning as it turned, but there was no way she was going to catch it. She stopped to grab a rock from the pavement and hurled it at the disappearing car. It fell well short.

"You bastard!" she screamed.

I stopped beside her. We both puffed and tried to catch our breath. Elizabeth paced around beside me, muttering obscenities and incredulous remarks about being followed.

"Did you see him at all?" I panted.

"No."

"License?"

"No."

Elizabeth looked so angry. She looked ready to start running again, ready to chase the blue Mercedes back to Ottawa if she had to. "He followed you."

I felt accused. "I know. I'm sorry, I had no idea."

"It's okay," Elizabeth changed the tone in her voice so that I knew she hadn't meant the anger at me. "But it means you are in danger. They must have followed you from your office."

"Not from the bank?"

"No, I don't think so. Did you notice it from there?"

"No," I sighed. "Only after the office."

"At least our information is safe," Elizabeth tapped her stomach. "I have a security belt under my shirt," she explained when I raised my eyebrows. "We'd better go check on your Dad."

I was apprehensive as we went back inside. I knew it was unlikely that the person from the blue Mercedes would have gone into the lodge, but I was relieved to see Dad was fine, alone in his room now that the tests were over. A game show was on TV.

Before we went to dinner we took my car to my sister's home and put it in the garage. It was best to keep it out of sight, now that the person in the blue Mercedes knew what I was driving. For the next few days I would drive one of my sister and her husband's cars. My sister didn't need a car, and seeing the concern on our faces, I was certain the car would remain in the garage.

Dinner with Elizabeth and my father was a strange experience. So much had happened so quickly, the situation just didn't seem real. I also found myself the focus of attention. Dad bragged about my accomplishments like a father would, my university degree, the trophies I had won playing sports as a teenager, a couple of sales awards from years ago. But he recounted embarrassing little anecdotes from my youth like a mother would. Elizabeth egged him on, but I wanted to be left alone.

He did leave out that in the last nine years I had been too high or drunk to play any more sports, or that the sales awards didn't keep me from getting fired twice for drinking excessively and missing responsibilities, and channeled me to a sales job too crappy to care about my habits. Though I'd been sober for a year now, there was nothing I had done with a clear head that rated any mention; until these past few days, until these five days in August.

Then he asked Elizabeth about her life and interests and he occasionally touched a subject that caused her to stiffen and she guarded what she said and how much. Dad tactfully steered to safer topics.

I talked about the boring and mundane. I didn't mean to, but I was nervous and felt awkward with Dad there, especially after the stroll with Elizabeth in the afternoon and what she had told me. I wanted to be alone with her, to have her to myself. Also, I wasn't confident enough to completely relax with someone else there, even someone as close to me as Dad. I opened my mouth and topics like last week's rain and how the chicken tasted were spit out before I could recognize them for what they were: trite under the circumstances.

Dad was very interested in the murders and there Elizabeth and I had equal vigour inputting all we knew for him to hear. If there was anything that we had forgotten to tell each other, it was common knowledge by the time the dessert dishes were cleared away.

"Good custard," I said, dabbing my mouth with a serviette.

"What will you two do tonight?" Dad asked, having ignored me, though Elizabeth had smiled, sensing what I felt and my struggle to say something interesting.

She turned to Dad. "It's a risk to go back to Ottawa, so we'll get a hotel somewhere out here, then do some detective work tomorrow."

"Be careful," he warned, then winked.

We took Dad back to my sister's house where he would spend the night. Her husband was going to drive him back to the lodge the next morning in time for his routine.

Is anything still open?" Elizabeth wondered as we drove into town to find a hotel.

"You're still hungry?"

"No, I need clothes," she took the fabric of her shirt between her thumb and index finger and held it out. "I'd really like something else to wear. And I need a toothbrush and toothpaste and stuff like that."

Shopping was scarce in a town the size of Perth on a Wednesday night, but we found the basics at a grocery store.

"What do you think of this?" Elizabeth held up a white t-shirt with the print of two puppies nuzzling together on the front. The caption said "puppy love".

"It's fine, but it looks too big for you."

"That's okay, I'm only going to wear it to bed. You don't want me walking around the room naked do you?"

I grinned. There was no safe answer to that question, and Elizabeth tucked the shirt under her arm and looked through more clothes. When we had everything we needed, we paid and left.

We took a room at an older hotel on the Tay River. After checking in, we tried sitting on the balcony that looked over the water, but the mosquitoes were so thick and hungry, we went back inside.

Elizabeth turned on the TV and we watched the last half of a movie. There were two queen size beds in the room and we both sat on the edge of the bed closest to the TV set. I was barely able to watch the movie, all I could think of was the woman sitting a foot away. Her hand rested on her knee and I longed to touch it and curl my fingers in hers. I could smell her faint perfume and I wanted to push my face into the hair over the nape of her neck and breathe deeply. I consciously leaned closer to her. My posture as I sat was like the tower in Pisa, I hoped to get closer to her. When she reacted to an event in the movie, I would turn to check her reaction, not the movie. I shifted so that my arm was close enough to hers that we touched slightly from shoulder to elbow. I could feel her on the hair of my arm, in the ends of my quivering nerves that were desperate to know her touch. I knew when her breath rose and fell. I knew when she moved even the least; but I didn't move. I was riveted to my place, straining to know any sensation from her body so close to mine. I hankered for her. I was completely oblivious to the goings-on of the movie.

More than anything, I wanted to know what was in her mind. She must realize how close I sat to her when I didn't have to. Was she just as nervous and uncertain? Could she feel my arm next to hers? Did she strain for each movement? Could she feel my breath rise and fall? Could she feel my heart beating like a man sprinting in desperation, afraid of losing what ground he had gained? Could she sense my craving?

The movie ended, and one more moment I could have touched her slipped by. Elizabeth had been forward in expressing her feelings that afternoon. That was good. I wanted her to be forward again and let me know just how close we might be, because I was having trouble doing it. But instead she stood up.

"I think I'll get ready for bed," she announced. She walked into the washroom, taking the newly purchased items with her, and closed the door.

I turned back to the TV, with nothing to do but to watch the news begin.

"In tonight's news," the anchorwoman proclaimed as the camera zoomed in on her, "police are asking for the public's assistance with last night's

shooting death of private investigator Phillip Dowling."

A drawing of a man's face suddenly replaced the anchorwoman on the screen. Her voice continued to say: "this composite drawing by police artists was released this afternoon ..." but I was screaming at Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth. Elizabeth! Come out quick! Quick!"

Elizabeth hurried from the washroom.

"... based on eyewitness accounts ..." the newscaster continued.

"Oh, no," Elizabeth gasped.

"... seen fleeing the parking lot where the body ..."

"Oh, shit," I said.

"... anyone with information about the suspect should contact the nearest ..."

Elizabeth slowly sat on the bed beside me. We both stared at the face on TV. It was me.

"Someone saw you," Elizabeth whispered.

"I didn't see anyone, but then I guess I wasn't really looking. I can't believe how close that is to my likeness. I almost feel guilty ..."

"Shhh!" Elizabeth held up her hand to hear the anchorwoman better.

"Police have also told us about a dark blue Mercedes that had parked briefly next to the victim's car prior to the discovery of the body. Again, police are asking for information from anyone having ..."

"The blue Mercedes again," I gasped.

The newscast went to a short interview with a detective Kilmer, who repeated much of the same information and noted that someone must know the man in the drawing, or know someone with a blue Mercedes that might have stopped in the shopping centre parking lot on Monday night. Then another story started.

Elizabeth headed back to the washroom.

"Hey," I called out. "I'm the prime suspect now."

"I still have to get ready for bed," she said, walking back to me. She leaned over me and kissed me on the cheek. "I like you no matter how dangerous they say you are." Then she went back into the washroom.

I unpacked what I had bought at the general store; a golf shirt, underwear and socks, and threw the packaging in the garbage can. I turned off the TV. I watched the crack of light under the washroom door and the reflection from Elizabeth's feet moving from time to time and casting shadows.

After a few more minutes she opened the door. "I'm almost done," she said before pushing a toothbrush into her mouth and vigorously moving it about.

I walked over to the door. She now wore the t-shirt with the puppies on the front. It was big and came part way down her thighs. I looked to where the t-shirt ended, and I admired her bare legs, lean and pretty. I saw how the t-shirt clung to her back but fell forward at the front as she leaned over the sink. I studied her arms, soft and lithe like the rest of her body, extend from the sleeves. But an underlying strength was in her arms, like the rest of her. I changed my focus, and she caught my eye in the mirror, and I realized she was watching me watching her. I did not mind being caught. She smiled, or at least she tried to as she completed the last few strokes of the toothbrush, then rinsed with water. She came over to where I stood in the door. She leaned on one frame, and I on the other.

"There are two beds," I said.

"I can see that," she rolled her eyes.

"Which one would you like?"

"I'll take the one you want."

"Oh, then I get stuck with the other one?"

"Not if you don't want to." Elizabeth ran her hand through her hair and looked at me steadily as she did. She grinned more broadly, and I spotted a little toothpaste left behind at the corner of her mouth. I put one hand on her forearm and spun a slow circle on the tiny hairs. My fingers caressed as they moved up to her shoulder and back again to the elbow.

"You have toothpaste on your lip," I whispered and moved closer. I touched her mouth with my finger right beside the spot of toothpaste. "Right

here," I said and licked it away with a kiss.

"Good?"

"Good toothpaste," I agreed.

"I wasn't talking about the toothpaste."

We were not hurried. The world and the confusing turn it had taken were outside the room, were far away, not in our minds or our impulses, did not touch us as we touched each other. I pushed my face into the hair of the nape of her neck and took in the fragrance of her body and her perfume. She turned her head to let her neck and ear be kissed, and the palms of her hands pressed on my back. The night was wonderful. Elizabeth was wonderful.

"I'm glad we met," she whispered later, lying beside me in the dark.

I nodded. "Making love like this brings us awfully close."

"Not close enough. In time."

The cheap curtains did little to keep out the sunlight when morning broke. The first few rays of the new day reflected into the room and I opened one eye. My first sensation was that of the warm body curled into mine, Elizabeth's arms snug around my waist, her breathing deep and contented. My left arm was under her arm, my right over her shoulder and it held me to her. Our heads rested on the same pillow and our faces had pushed together. It felt like my skin might tear if I moved away, like a tongue stuck to frozen metal, though I had no desire to move anyway. I pushed a little closer to her, pulled her body a little closer to me. She sleepily obliged my movements.

The radio clock on the table behind Elizabeth read 5:35. Her t-shirt with the puppies lay on the table, draped over part of the clock, screening the station frequencies.

Elizabeth sensed the same morning light and her eyes opened as well.

"Good morning."

"Ya, it is."

She moved her head and the bond between our cheeks was broken, but she met my lips and kissed me.

"You feel warm."

"I was thinking the same thing about you."

Our bodies did feel warm together, inseparable as we slept and for this moment now that we were awake.

"Were you awake long?" she asked.

"Only a moment before you."

Elizabeth smiled. "It's nice how close we slept. I woke up a few times and you were so close to me, you held me like I really mattered to you. It felt nice."

"You do matter to me."

"Did you wake up at all?"

"No. I had a really good sleep. I couldn't ask for better."

"We don't need to get up yet. We can stay together longer."

And so we did.

"How's this?" Elizabeth asked as she tucked another new shirt into her light blue jeans.

"You look relaxed, you look yourself." I wrapped my arms around her waist and rested my forehead on hers. "You're so pretty, you take my breath away."

"Really?"

"Every ounce. Every gasp."

Elizabeth leaned up to me and her lips pressed to the base of my ear.

"I like the things you tell me. Please don't stop."

She snuck a glimpse at the time on her watch, glanced at the door and the clothes we had packed and were ready to go. "We have a busy day ahead. I don't know what we'll learn about Phillip's murder or anything else that

will happen."

When she paused, I put in, "I'm ready for it."

There were two Whitelaw families living on Smyth Road. We had not anticipated this when we looked for a street address in the phone book, it isn't a common name. I suggested we each stake out a house so we wouldn't miss Ellie.

"No, you're the only one who would know for sure if it's her. Let's take a chance on the first one. If we're wrong, we'll try the other one tomorrow."

I wondered if Elizabeth was reluctant for me to stake out a house alone, I might see Ellie, or talk to her. She made it clear that we were only to watch this time, I could not contact her until we knew more about the deaths. I could see a change in Elizabeth's posture, her tone. As we planned the stakeout and positioned the car to watch the house, and donned sunglasses, she seemed more rigid. I couldn't blame her. If someone special from her past, or even her husband had walked over to Elizabeth right then, I'd stiffen too.

The Whitelaw home we chose was an old brick house on a big property. We had a clear view of it from where we parked, in a driveway across the street.

As we sat and waited, Elizabeth took my hand in hers and we moved our fingers together with care. It was uncomfortable, waiting for Ellie, but I would not have released Elizabeth's hand for anything.

The stakeout began at eleven and the next hour passed slowly, then the next. Cars and buses passed. There was minimal activity around the house, only a mailman at 12:30 and a few pedestrians on the sidewalk. Buses stopped on the other side of the street, about 100 feet from the Whitelaw driveway. A haggard man in old clothes stumbled to the bench at the bus stop and sat down. He didn't move. No cars arrived at the Whitelaw house.

It was a car we expected. But it was a few minutes past one and it suddenly occurred to me that the figure that had disembarked from the bus and was moving toward the house was Ellie.

I let go of Elizabeth's hand and pointed. "There!"

"I see her," she put her hand on mine and lowered my pointing finger from view.

It really was Ellie. Oh, God, I felt such a rush of emotion and a yearn to shout to her, to tell her it was me, I was sorry and I wanted to be part of her life once more.

But I didn't. I worried that Elizabeth might see how I was feeling, so I sat motionless and tried to mask the strain on my face. Seeing Ellie didn't diminish my new feelings for Elizabeth, it only complicated it. I sat in the middle of two parallel loves, one on the rise and the other that had been forced to wane for years. But you can't know more love than love. I knew that. I could feel it pulling me both ways.

"What do we do?"

"We watch."

Ellie walked quickly. She went into the house without knocking. We stayed in the car and waited. There was no more sign of her until after 1:30 when the front door opened.

Ahead of Ellie a little girl of eight or nine skipped down the concrete steps from the front door. She stopped at the bottom and turned around as Ellie followed her down the steps. They took each other's hand and went around to the side of the house. We could still see them, barely, from the angle we were at, sitting on a bench in the shade. They were looking at what could have been photographs.

"Could we get close enough to hear them?" I asked, and my voice cracked.

"No, it's too risky. You could be seen."

"It appears she really isn't meeting another man."

"Maybe not."

Fifteen minutes later, they stood up from the bench, but they didn't go



back into the house. They walked to the bus stop together.

"Where are they going?" I wondered.

Instead of catching a bus, they stopped beside the haggard man. They talked to him, and Ellie handed him something. The little girl climbed onto his lap and kissed him on the cheek. After a few more minutes, they returned along the sidewalk to the house and went in.

Ellie emerged again almost right away. She went back to the bus stop, but her steps were slower. This was not the energetic Ellie I remembered. Even to Elizabeth it was clear that she was sadder as she left the Whitelaw house than when she had hurried into it. The next bus arrived moments later, Ellie got in and was gone.

I exhaled louder than I intended, but I was fortunate I didn't burst altogether for all the intense emotion I was holding in.

"Are you okay?" Elizabeth asked.

"... yeah, I am ..."

I finally looked at Elizabeth, and my expression let her know that it was okay to do that. She touched the lower part of my right eyelid and a tear dripped on her finger and my face. She brushed it away, saying gently, "Let me help you with that."

"I'm okay," I said.

"Good. Let's cross the road and talk to the bum."

The haggard man was standing up and straightening his coat when we approached him. "That was sweet of that little girl to give you a kiss," Elizabeth said loudly. I was prepared for the bum to be suspicious when he turned around, realizing we had been watching him, but he beamed.

"Ain't she a nice kid?"

"Do you know her name?"

"Sure do, name's Karen ... I think. The two of 'em stop ever' day. I'm John."

"Hi, John," I acknowledged him. "That's my name too, and this is Elizabeth."

"Nice lookin'" John said to me, nodding at Elizabeth.

She received the compliment with a laugh. "They stop to see you every day?"

"Sure do. Been 'bout this time o' day all summer. I guess Karen don't go t' school since it got out."

"Who is the lady she's with?"

"Her mom."

My mouth fell open. "Her mother?"

"'spose so," John answered, looking and sounding surprised that we didn't know that, that we would doubt him. "Name's Emily ... I think. Nice lady. She gives me one o' these ever' day," he held up a five dollar bill.

"You're sure, you're sure she's little girl's mother?" I stammered.

"'course," John repeated, "I ain't lyin'. She calls her 'mommy' and all. Emily's her mom. Why you wanna know?"

"How long have you known them?" Elizabeth interjected in a calm voice, taking the focus away from the confusion on my face.

"From before last win'er. At least as long as that."

"Thanks, John. We'd better go," she took my arm and started across the street. Then she pulled back for a second. Elizabeth reached into her pocket and retrieved a five dollar bill. She handed it to John.

"Thanks," he shook her hand joyfully.

We climbed back into the car and I turned the ignition. "Where to?"

"Nowhere yet," Elizabeth responded quickly, nodding at the Whitelaw house. The little girl was jumping down the steps, a young boy beside her. They were about the same age. They raced to the garage and she touched the door first and we could hear her proud exclaim, "I won, I won". Then through the open front door came a woman in her late thirties. She locked the door and pulled it shut.

The little girl heard the door close and turned back toward the house.

"Mommy!" she called. "Mommy, I beat Thomas!"

The mother said something to her that we couldn't hear when she reached

the garage. She lifted the big garage door and helped the children into their seats. Then she backed onto Smyth Road and turned north.

We followed them to a doctor's office, then a pharmacy, then a shopping centre (where we had the opportunity to buy some more clean clothes). Elizabeth and I discussed the possibilities of the little girl and Ellie. We had no way of knowing what Ellie's interest was and why she went there every day. There didn't appear to be a boyfriend at the house as Dowling first suspected. Elizabeth was partially convinced the little girl had to be Ellie's daughter, but that seemed too incredible to me. It was a possibility I did not want to think about.

Finally, there was a short stop at a grocery store. Three and a half hours after they had left the house, we followed them back to Smyth Road.

We killed the next few hours in the patio section of a restaurant in the market, in downtown Ottawa. The patio allowed me to keep my sunglasses on, which I had to do in case I was recognized from the TV or the newspapers, and not look unusual.

I no longer drank alcohol, but I was amazed at how much red wine Elizabeth was able to consume. She had had several glasses the night before, with Dad and me, but tonight she had the larger portion of the bottle.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

"A little."

"Is it Ellie?"

She shook her head. "You made love to me last night and this morning, not her. I'm not afraid of her. You were too caring for it to have been just a casual encounter."

"I'm glad you know that."

"I do."

"So, why are you nervous?"

"We aren't done today. We have to find Lori Newington. I'm not very comfortable going along the hooker strip, the streets around the market ... all the prostitutes, so many of them are so young, and the pimps lurking in the shadows ..."

Elizabeth shivered, but the evening air was warm. She stared at her wine glass and spun the red liquid so that it came very near to the rim. "But it's something we have to do," she conceded and forced a half smile. "Detective work is the shits sometimes. Better get at it." She pushed her chair back and stood up. She drank the last of her wine and we left the restaurant. I was looking for signs of drunkenness in her, but she was steady as she walked, and everything she said was clear and made sense. The only clue was in her eyes, they were cloudy. But after the way she talked about the part of town we were going to, I'm not sure if that was a result of the wine at all.

I turned the car down Dalhousie Street. The picture of Lori Newington rested on the dashboard and I scanned the faces on the street. It was easy to differentiate between the hookers and the average pedestrian, the hookers stood at the curb, and most wore short shorts, or tight pants, high heels, and low-cut halter tops. They glanced enticingly into the windows of passing cars. Some had been on the streets for years and tried to look younger. Others were new to the trade and those girls tried to make their young faces look older with too much make-up.

Elizabeth was crouched low beside me, out of sight, so that I would appear to be alone, a possible trick. As I watched for Lori, I commented on the prostitute's attempts to look beautiful by revealing flesh and using make-up, an attempt that for me missed the desired result.

"They're little kids," Elizabeth rebuked me sharply. "What do they know about beauty. They should be trying their first beer, or visiting their grandma for the summer, or serving milkshakes at Dairy Queen. They should be talking about boys. They shouldn't have an old fat slob grunting on top of them." She crossed her arms over her stomach and sunk lower. "They just do what their pimp says."

I didn't risk any more judgments or comments of any kind. I turned the car and started around the strip for the fifth time. But this time I saw Lori

Newington right away. "I see her."

"Is anyone else there?"

"No one is talking to her. She's alone."

"No tricks stopped?"

"Not now."

"Quick," Elizabeth instructed. "Drive around the corner and drop me off. Then get Lori in the car and bring her around to me." When I was around the corner and two blocks away, Elizabeth got out. "Hurry," she urged.

I drove around the block some more to come out again on the same side Lori was on. She was still there, not talking to anyone. I slowed down as I approached, then stopped. She leaned toward the open window.

"What ya lookin' for?" she asked.

"I want you to help Barbie."

Her face went white and she looked over her shoulder quickly, then back to me. "Tony's right behind me, in the doorway," she whispered in a frightened tone.

"Get in," I instructed, leaning over and pushing the door open. As I did I saw Tony Berger. And he saw me. I saw the beginning of a quizzical look on his face, as he tried to decide where he'd seen me before. "Get in," I told her again, more urgently.

Lori climbed in beside me. She closed the door, then glanced toward Berger again. She saw him stepping from the shadows toward the car. As I started pulling away, she suddenly lay over the seat and put her face on my lap and rubbed me.

"What the hell are you doing," I tried pushing her up, and I squealed around the corner faster than I'd wanted to.

"Tony was watching. This has to look real."

"That isn't real is it?" I responded angrily.

She observed me for a moment. "You sound different." I didn't answer. "Hey, does Tony know you?"

"No."

"That's why he came toward us!" she yelled in a sudden panic, not believing me.

I could see Elizabeth a block and a half away, but Lori grabbed for the door handle. I held her by the shoulder and pulled her closer to my side of the car. "Don't! We won't hurt you. We really do want to help you and Barbie. You don't understand."

"You're gonna get me killed," she screamed, winning the fight to get out of the car. I sped through a red light, and now was less than a block from Elizabeth, who could see the struggle. Elizabeth started toward us.

"Asshole!" Lori screamed. "Let me go!" With a sudden lunge she pushed out the door and fell into the street, rolling. I jammed down on the brakes and the car spun sideways and jammed against the curb. I leaped out and hurried around to Lori. She was already standing up and starting to run.

"Don't lose her," Elizabeth yelled at me. "Lori! Let us help!" she yelled again.

But Lori didn't look back. She sprinted back the way we had come, toward Dalhousie street. Elizabeth and I ran side by side, darting after her, dodging pedestrians who had stopped to watch, but we weren't making up any of the hundred feet or so between us.

Lori crossed the first street on a red light without looking, as two cars ran the yellow the other way. Horns blared, and both barely missed her. The light turned green for us and we didn't miss a step, but we were the same distance behind.

I noticed trickles of blood on the sidewalk as we chased her. Not a lot, but I knew she'd been hurt jumping from the car. She'd also lost her high-heeled shoes, but she had to in order to run that fast. She rounded the corner at Dalhousie and went out of view. Elizabeth and I rounded the corner a moment later. Suddenly I ran into someone that felt like a brick wall. I fell and rolled, and so did he. I looked up to see Tony Berger getting to his feet beside me.

He glared at me. "You're dead," he growled.

With all the energy I had I stepped toward him and kicked him in the groin. It was the only offense I could think of against a man that large. He screamed and doubled over. I pushed him over four garbage cans that lined the wall at the corner.

"Lori, wait!" I heard Elizabeth's distant call. I saw her turn down one of the little side streets that went off of Dalhousie, narrow passages behind the restaurants and shops that jammed the busy downtown street. I went after her down the alley.

The one alley led to more alleys. I sprinted to a crossing of the narrow roadways and went in a direction I thought I heard feet running. The buildings masked the noise of the traffic and it was strangely quiet here. I ran down another alley, until it met another. I had to squeeze past a pickup truck parked between the walls, next to green bags of garbage. The bags had been ripped and the garbage was strewn in the alley. It stank. A rat scurried under the bags.

I turned around. I called out, "Elizabeth!" but there was no answer. I ran down the next alley and it turned sharply, and I could see the street at the end of this one. I hurried out to the street and looked both ways, but I couldn't see Elizabeth or Lori. I went in the direction of the car. It had been left running with both doors open, so I decided that would be the best place to go next.

Then I heard a terrified scream. It was really, really short, like it had been stopped before it should have finished. It came from behind the buildings, among the alleys.

I doubled back to the alley I had come out of moments before and sprinted in, in the direction of where I thought the scream had come from. I went around the sharp corner and sped down that passage. As I neared the end, I saw Elizabeth. She was next to the pickup truck, kneeling beside the garbage bags, her back to me.

"Elizabeth! Was that you that screamed?" I gasped.

She did not turn around. I slowed to a jog as I got closer. Then I saw Lori, sprawled on her back on the ground. Elizabeth turned just enough that I saw her blood soaked t-shirt, then a switchblade in her hand. Lori's eyes were wide and her mouth was open. Her neck was gashed from ear to ear. The alley was filling with a large pool of blood.

Elizabeth's shoulders shuddered, and she was crying uncontrollably.

"Elizabeth..."

She waved the knife in the air. "They sliced her! They killed her! Just like the other girl, just like Phillip." She shook from sobbing. "We only wanted to help her..."

She dropped the knife on the pavement. "We have to get out of here," she said, her voice all of a sudden in control. It amazed me that she went from overwhelming grief to a commandment in the blink of an eye.

A door opened from a store that backed onto the alley. An older woman looked out and saw the blood on the ground. She closed the door quickly again and we heard the locks being turned.

"I didn't see anyone, and the knife was still in her neck," Elizabeth explained to me calmly as she stood. But she lingered over Lori's body for a moment.

"Let's go," I urged.

She bent over and gently picked Lori up, then rested her body in the back of the pickup truck. "We can't leave her in the garbage," she said.

Elizabeth was covered with so much blood, that she waited in the shadows of the alley entrance while I retrieved the car. There were curious bystanders around the car, but it was still there.

"This is how cars get stolen," one man said to me importantly as I got in. I wanted to ask him how he knew I wasn't stealing it, but I had no time. I drove to where Elizabeth waited and she quickly got in, unnoticed.

"Where do we go?"

"Anywhere," she said desperately. "Get me out of this place."

We drove in silence. I kept a watch on Elizabeth. Her hands rested on her legs, palms up toward her face, and she stared at them. I wanted her to

wipe them off, they were completely red from blood, but she didn't move them.

In thirty minutes we were clear of the city on the highway that led to Montreal. The first time Elizabeth moved was as we approached a rest area off the side of the highway.

"John, can we stop here?"

I turned in and parked at the far end of the little paved area, where it was the darkest under the trees. I turned the engine off.

"Do you want to get cleaned up?"

"Hold me," she said so quietly I barely heard her.

I pushed her seat back so that it was fully reclined and moved next to her in the seat, putting my arms around her. Elizabeth was shaking and sweating and cowering in my arms.

"It's okay," I whispered. "I'm here."

I held her firmly and sank against the seat of the car. It was warm to be next to her, and comfortable, we fit well together in this embrace. She became still, and was still for so long that I assumed she had fallen asleep. Her sobbing and spasmodic shakes had stopped. The sniffs I heard could be in her sleep.

I closed my eyes. It would be okay to sleep like this. I sighed deeply, and pushed my cheek against hers. Then her head moved a little. She turned to face me and she kissed me. She forced her tongue against mine and kissed me aggressively. Her hands moved under my shirt. I stiffened for a second as I felt the blood on her hands. I thought it would have dried by now, but I could feel it slip across my back as her hands brushed my shoulders and ribs and spine. She pushed herself up in the seat and took a more commanding posture to mine. Her hands moved to my pants.

I tried to move my arms, first to touch her, then at all, but she wouldn't let me. She pulled off my golf shirt. Her removal of my pants was almost violent. She ran her hands around on my chest and along my stomach and I saw small reflections in the moonlight of the blood stains left behind. She rubbed my thighs the same way, then my hair and around my ears. I didn't move, I just sat in the seat, unsure what was happening, unsure what Elizabeth was doing, or why. Then she kissed all over my body. The kisses didn't remove the blood, it remained; they were kisses on my skin and the blood. She she crouched lower and started to pull back my underwear.

I tried to move her away with both hands, but she pushed them away. I touched on her shoulder, but she pushed me away again. That's when I pulled myself away and move part way into the next seat.

"Don't you like it like this," she asked in a deep voice that did not sound like Elizabeth at all.

"That's not the point. What are you doing?"

"Are you mad at me?"

"No."

"It's okay to be mad at me. I'll do whatever you want me to," she said, now meek in her tone, but still so different from how she normally spoke.

"Elizabeth, it's me, John. You don't have to do anything for me but be with me. That's all I need."

She stayed crouched on the car floor, one hand on my knee, the other on my abdomen. I could see she was trying to force a smile, but it just wouldn't show.

I reached for my pants but she stopped me, gently taking hold of my hand.

"I'm sorry."

My eyes would not meet hers. I stared at my clothing just inches from my grasp. The most important concern to me at that moment was getting my clothes on, moving to my side of the car, and leaving the rest area. The sudden changes in Elizabeth were strange, and the change I had just witnessed frightened me, revolted me.

"I'm sorry," she offered again. "That wasn't me. Oh, god, John, I don't know who it was. But it wasn't me." Elizabeth cried, and her grip on my hand weakened. I looked at her now, and her eyes had fallen, and she seemed crushed by her grief. She shook with sobbing.

"I don't know what is happening," she cried. "Phillip is dead, young girls are dead. I don't know what to do."

Elizabeth's last statement was only a whimper as she slumped defeated at my feet.

I was beginning to see the wide variance in who Elizabeth could be, but there was no doubt that the stress of the events was making it worse. I had to allow for that. And I had to allow for the feelings for her that were in me and were unmistakable. That feeling helped me reach over to her and take her around the shoulders and pull her from the floor and close to me. It wasn't out of pity, for this was a strong woman, a stronger person than me, I was sure. But she needed some compassion at this moment, and I was the only one there to offer it to her. I was certain there wasn't anyone I would rather offer it to.

She nestled limply in the seat. She sniffled and rubbed her nose and her eyes, and laughed a little. "A woman's tears ... they get you guys every time."

"Your tears do."

"That's a good thing to know. In case I need to use it again."

"I'd only fall for it once."

"No, I don't think so, John Walker. You're the kind of man who would fall for it over and over and over."

"I suppose I'm not a very tough individual," I breathed, wishing I was.

Elizabeth tapped her finger on my chest. "Sweetie ... that's not a character flaw. Not when my tears are real." She glanced at my body. "Are you cold?"

"No, I'm fine."

Elizabeth gripped me so tightly, and shivered in a fear I could clearly sense. "I'm so sorry for this and I know we should move and I know we have someone else's blood on us, but I just can't. Not yet."

"It's okay."

"I just wanted to make love. I thought that would help me."

"I am inside you," I said, cradling her face to my chest. "I am as inside you as I can be right now." And we stayed that way for a long time, more than an hour, just holding each other, just breathing, and her shivering calmed, while my thoughts were searching for some sense to what was happening around us, and inside of us. It was relaxing, but then again, it wasn't at all.

We had to dress in the new clothes we had purchased that afternoon; we couldn't check into a hotel in blood-stained shirts and not be noticed.

Elizabeth did not say anything as we looked for a hotel. I sensed the privacy of the moments as she watched the trees and cars we passed. She did not look upset, but preoccupied. She did not seem distant, just alone for a short time. Her eyes were steady in their gaze out her window at the passing scenery that was partially hidden in darkness.

We found a hotel in Hudson, half-way between Ottawa and Montreal. That seemed like a safe distance. Once in the room and cleaned up Elizabeth immediately undressed and climbed under the sheets of the bed. It took me several minutes longer to join her while I called my Dad in Perth and told him what had happened. I had promised to let him know how I was. Then I began undressing, and the thought struck me: I wondered how close to me she might want to sleep. I imagined that she might lie with her back to me. I didn't want that loneliness to happen to us, not that fast, and hopefully not at all. I glanced at her a couple of times, lying on her side, her cheek resting on the pillow, her eyes open, thinking through a bland stare. But she wasn't watching me, just the wall, or maybe the chair, or maybe the other pillow. When I was ready to lie beside her, I did so with hesitant movements, afraid I should I lose the closeness I'd found.

But Elizabeth didn't let me down. She didn't turn her face away, didn't roll over and out of my grasp. She slipped her arms around me in the posture I'd come to cherish, and kissed me lightly.

"Good night John," she breathed, then rested her head on the pillow and against my shoulder. She squirmed to be closer, so that our bodies touched all the way to our feet, and she looped her ankles around mine. She was asleep in seconds.

I smiled. I beamed. I would have shaken my head in wonder if I could be sure it would not disturb her. I never thought I could feel so much warmth, that it could thaw my coldest extremities, and reach to the farthest interior of my being, to the shivering heart of any man honest with himself; the frosted concerns of being alone too long, or trying to find this warmth in a lukewarm embrace. The warmth blazed about my bloodstream. It strengthened the hold of my arms around her, tingled to my fingertips on her back. I wanted to be in her physically, and just as much to be in her emotionally. It prodded my intellect to determine that no circumstance would ever chill us. And it preserved the contented smile on my lips as I drifted into sleep in her arms, in her warmth.

I felt a tremble and I strained to open my eyes. They would not comply, but I was half-awake anyway. The room was still dark. Then I felt another tremble from Elizabeth's body. I felt the wet drop of a tear fall from her face to my arm. She wasn't lying close to me, as we slept she had moved a few inches apart. My grip on her was still tight and determined, but hers was gone.

Then she spoke, her voice cracking with emotion. "Lori ... "

I opened my eyes.

"Lori ... " she repeated, a little louder, a little more frightened.

"Elizabeth, you're—" I started to say, but she cut me off.

"Don't do it mister," she pleaded, louder still, more panic rooted in her voice. "I'm only fifteen ..."

I shifted so that her head would be moved, and I put my hand more firmly on her arm.

Elizabeth's eyes opened wide. She gasped. Her knee swung up and caught me right between the legs. I doubled up in pain. "You fucking pig!" she screamed. "Get away! Get away!" She pushed in retreat of me and fell off the side of the bed.

I struggled to sit up and catch her. "Elizabeth. What's wrong?" I was on my knees on the bed but holding myself from her blow to my groin. Elizabeth was on her feet and had backed against the wall on the far side of the room.

"You try that shit again and I'll have you cut. Nick will cut your balls off and stuff them in your mouth!" she threatened.

I shuffled toward the end of the bed, in her direction, and I stood. "Elizabeth ... what is it?"

"Keep away!" she screamed.

"This is John. You can trust me. You're not fifteen anymore, Elizabeth."

She didn't answer. I couldn't see her very well in the dark corner, but she straightened up from her cowering stance. Her panicked breathing suddenly broke into grief. "Those girls are dead, John. Those poor girls, they have mothers somewhere, they are real people. What can we do?"

I didn't have a second to answer, she ran to me and threw her arms around me and tackled me onto the bed. Her face pushed against my neck and her hands clenched behind my back and squeezed me. "John, oh John, I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Shhh. I've got you," I told.

She cried for more than fifteen minutes, and she couldn't speak, as I tried to soothe her. I rocked her gently and stroked her hair, I could feel so much sadness coming from her.

"You must not like me," she finally said.

"Of course, I do," I was surprised. "I don't understand everything yet, but I'm not leaving you."

Elizabeth lifted her head up and looked at me lying beneath her. Her eyes studied my own, but they broke contact just as she said, "I used to be just like Lori. I used to sell myself like that."

I tried to say something, but nothing emerged. It didn't feel like it

mattered, but it was a shock and I couldn't form words.

She rolled off me. "You don't have to say anything. I can imagine how you feel. You don't have to stay with me now."

I quickly found words. "No. No, that's not how I feel. I'm surprised, that's all. This doesn't have to change anything."

"John ... do you know what men used to do to me?"

"It doesn't change anything."

"Don't pity me," she challenged, raising her glance to look me in the eye again.

"I'm not," I answered sharply. I did not want her to misunderstand me, I wanted her to realize how deeply I felt for her. "Please don't tell me what I'm doing."

Her eyes softened, and her tone softened. "What are you doing?"

"To be honest, I think I could fall in love here. And I'm trying to understand the woman I'm falling in love with."

"You're falling in love? You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"That's sweet. Me too," she said, as shyly as I had heard her say anything.

"Good."

"I'm pretty messed up."

I grinned. "Yes, you are."

"I'm not sweet and innocent. I've been with so many men, and so many bad things."

"That's over. I don't care who or how many or anything else before me, as long as I'm the only one from here on out."

"I'm not as confident and strong as I pretend."

"Yes, you are. I think you're very close to it. You're many wonderful things. I could never blame you for ghosts that haunt you, that shake your strength or confidence. I don't have the same past so I could never judge. I have my own ghosts I guess. But please tell me and help me to understand it."

"I'm trying."

"I know." I touched a tear that hung precariously on her jaw. "Is that what your husband saved you from, from being on the street?"

"Yes, I was nineteen. Four years is a long time to last and not get cut or OD or kill yourself. He helped me out of all that, off the drugs, off the street, but he never learned how to care for me. He just got what he wanted. He needed a penance for living a dishonest life himself and I was it, the hooker he could save from herself. But that was all he could do for me. I couldn't respect the person he was; he was ruthless and put people's lives in jeopardy. And he wasn't much better than the tricks, forcing himself on me sometimes, hitting me when he'd been drinking. Still, I stayed with him for eleven years. I couldn't leave him for a long time after what he'd done for me."

"How long ago did you separate?"

"Six months ago."

"Did you stay in contact?"

Elizabeth paused. She nodded. "Yes, but only as friends. He understood why I left, but whenever I tried to put some distance between us, he'd remind me that he'd saved my life, which he had, and I owed him."

"Do you still owe him?"

"Yes." Her answer was quick and definite.

"I realize now why you were especially upset about Lori and Barbie."

"Oh, John," Elizabeth's face strained with sorrow again. "They were just kids. They've been passed around to men that should know better. I remember how I felt at their age, doing what they were doing. The confusion and the cruelty we endured, just trying to make it to the next day and hoping that somehow you could get out, but having no clue how to, no guide to help you do it. I wonder if they have parents who are grieving for them right now, maybe grieving the way they did at first when they were runaways, and now their daughters are dead, they were fifteen and never made it past the confusion and pain. That bastard Berger had no right to take their hope away."



"Berger—"

"Killed them," Elizabeth finished. "He killed Phillip too."

"You think so?"

"No doubt about it. Nothing else makes sense. But let's face it. We're responsible for what happened to Lori." Elizabeth put her hand up to her face, a look of distress in her eyes. "How she lived was risky but that was us that made that happen tonight. Berger killed her because of us."

I knew that too but had not wanted to admit it to myself. I nodded.

"Then we have to do something," Elizabeth breathed angrily. "Berger is a killer. Tomorrow we'll start proving it."

"I hope I can move by then."

"Pardon me?"

"You kneed me pretty good."

Elizabeth looked down at my shorts and instinctively touched me. I winced, though I laughed a little despite the pain. "Oh, I did, didn't I. I'm so sorry. I thought you were ... "

"That's all right. I know. Was that a reflex from when you were a teenager?"

"I guess. It came in handy back then."

"You haven't lost it," I remarked.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, but now she was laughing with me. As I laughed, I shook, and the pain was more pronounced. I tried to raise my hand to tell her I had to stop from laughing, but it didn't help.

"Please ... this hurts. You don't look very sorry."

"I am," she insisted between gasps of chuckles. "I'm so sorry."

"Sure you are."

"Well, now I know you won't ever cross me, will you? Now you know what would happen."

"Yeah. Message received."

"Good, we understand each other."

We overslept the next morning. I was feeling much better, having mostly recovered from the pain her knee had caused. During the drive back into the city, Elizabeth filled me in on the plans for the day.

"Phillip's funeral is at two o'clock. I'll need to find something other than this to wear," she commented, pulling out a part of her t-shirt for me to observe. "It would be safer to buy something new than to go back to my apartment."

"Do I need something too?" I asked leadingly. I hoped to be at her side at the funeral. I didn't want to let her away from me. I'm not sure if it's because I felt I could protect her, or that she could protect me; maybe a little of both. Or maybe I enjoyed her too much to be out of her company just yet.

"You can't John," she consoled me in a tender voice. "I have to go alone, and you can't be seen."

She was right, and I knew it, so I just nodded. "What are we doing after the funeral?"

"We'll confront Berger."

"Are you kidding?"

"Both of us. In public. He's not so stupid to try something on a street corner. But we have to confront him, see if he'll give us something we can use."

"Use for what?"

"The police. I don't plan on solving this whole thing by ourselves. We'll need to bring the cops into it, but not before we have something substantial to show them."

"Our suspicions aren't enough? We have the tape, the files, and what we've seen."

Elizabeth shook her head. "It's not exactly conclusive. What we think of Berger won't outweigh the cop's suspicions of you. They are looking for you in connection with Phillip's murder don't forget. You don't have an innocent

explanation anymore."

"No, I don't."

"So it's a plan?"

"It's a plan," I conceded, nervousness in my stomach questioning the sanity of the plan, or maybe questioning my sanity to go along with it.

Elizabeth bought some clothes. I stayed in the car while she shopped. When Elizabeth emerged, dressed smartly in a long charcoal dress, dark nylons and black shoes, I felt a new amazement and appreciation for her outward beauty. She stepped casually, deftly weaving through pedestrians and traffic as she returned to the car; and I watched her every movement. I was aware that I could not have taken my eyes from her, not for anything. In a scant thirty minutes, the time she had been in the shopping centre, I had missed her.

What was this that was happening to me? I had started out to find a long-lost love in Ellie, not knowing if it would vanquish the weakness I felt inside for letting her down those ten years ago. Instead I had found Elizabeth, a woman with enough strength and determination for the both of us, but also the unknown and confusion for more than the both of us. Here is the woman that I now love, and somewhere very close is the woman I had loved.

At one-thirty we drove to within a few blocks of the funeral home. I was prepared to drive Elizabeth to the front door, but she pointed to a metered parking space that was empty. I pulled the car to the curb and rested the gear shift into park. My head hung low.

"I'll only be a little while. If I was sure it would be okay, you could come. But it isn't safe."

"I know," I mumbled, not interested in raising my head.

"You're sulking like a little boy," Elizabeth chastised me softly.

"I know." My answer was plain, I was willing to admit my state of mind.

"How did we ever find each other?" Elizabeth said suddenly. Her statement was odd, so I abruptly turned to face her and was surprised to see her smiling.

"What do you mean?"

"We are both so weak and so strong in different ways. I've never met anyone who fills my need so completely, or whose need I feel so capable of filling. A few days ago, I only knew your name. Today I know your soul. Do you know how that feels?"

"I have some idea."

"Then hang onto the feeling for two hours. That's all I'll be."

Elizabeth kissed me and was gone from the car and walking down the sidewalk. I watched her for three blocks until she turned the corner and she disappeared from sight.

So, I had two hours to kill, I thought. Then I regretted my choice of the word kill. I thought of Lori's lifeless body and the blood that had flowed over her hair and face and torso, and had mixed with Elizabeth's skin, and my own. I checked the creases of my palms for Lori's blood, but it was gone now. I never wanted to experience the feel of blood like that ever again. The danger I felt, the apprehension, made me feel that the next time a body lay in a puddle of blood like that, it could be mine; or it could be Elizabeth. I hadn't loved anyone so intensely as I loved Elizabeth since I had been with Ellie. And yesterday I had seen Ellie for the first time in ten years. What can this mean, I wondered? Why would Ellie marry someone like Guthro? What was his connection to Berger?

Why was Ellie with a little girl who was calling her mom?

I drove to the home of Ellie and Paul Guthro. I'm not sure why ... I had two hours to kill. I remembered the address from the file. I remembered the house from the picture. It was easy to find.

The Guthro house and property were the largest on the street. The house was at the front of the property, and the driveway went down the right of the house and then curved behind it and out of sight, so that I couldn't see from the street if there were any cars at home.

I eased to a stop at the end of the driveway. I stepped out, leaving the engine idling. I kept my sunglasses on, to help a little not to be recognized. Ellie would not be at home, she'd be at work, I told myself. I couldn't be as certain about her husband. I was also aware that a house of this size, and a man of Paul Guthro's power, may have security personnel and what-not. Still, I found myself walking toward the front door.

There was a plan in my mind, in case someone should be home. My degree of confidence in this plan was not great. But I felt compelled to walk into the yard, walk into the life of Ellie Barnes as it was today. This is what Elizabeth would want me to do, I felt, to be a detective, to find out as much as I could about Paul Guthro. Except that I was there to find out about Ellie Barnes ... Guthro. My eyes looked for clues about her life around the yard, but there was little to absorb. There was no landscaping to speak of, no trees or shrubs. Everything was neat, uncluttered, and boring.

The mat on the step of the front door was lettered with a large red "G". I wiped the summer dust from my shoes. I rang the bell.

No one came to answer. I tried to look in the cut-glass window of the door, but the glass did not allow a clear view. I stepped from the front door and leaned a little for a peak through the largest window at the front. The drapes were partially open, but all I saw was furniture; plain and ordinary.

Just as I was turning to go back to the car, I heard the door handle click open. I sensed the door swing.

"What do you want?" a man growled.

Cautiously I turned to face Paul Guthro. He glared at me. He wore a business suit, but it needed ironing, and he hadn't shaved. He carried an unlit cigar.

I opened my mouth and uttered my preconceived plan. "I'm looking to buy the house across the street, and I was hoping to speak with a few of the neighbours," I explained as calmly as I could.

"That one?" Guthro nodded at directly across the street.

"That's right."

"There's no for sale sign."

"No, well, my agent says it's being listed this weekend."

Guthro grunted, put his cigar to his lip, then lowered it suddenly.

"The Deacon's didn't say anything."

"Well, my agent is quite certain. He feels it would be what I'm looking for."

Guthro didn't offer anything else, so I continued, "Do you know the Deacon's well?"

"No."

"What's the neighbourhood like?"

"You're asking the wrong guy. I don't care what's outside my backyard." He turned to go back inside. "Excuse me, I have company."

"Have you and your family lived her for long?" I pressed.

He looked around, his hand on the door. "My family?"

"Yes, your kids ... your wife ..."

Guthro stepped closer to me. "So, you're just going to up and buy the Deacon's place?" he asked, ignoring my query.

"I hope to," I said, choking on my lie a little.

"And you're meeting the neighbours?"

A dot of perspiration slid down my forehead and into my eyebrow, behind my sunglasses. Guthro looked right at it, watched it run. "That's right," I said.

Guthro grinned slowly. "I'm not being very neighbourly, am I?"

"Well, you said you had company. I'll let you go," I offered quickly and started to turn away.

"Nonsense," he said, extending his hand. "Paul Guthro,"

I shook his hand hesitantly. "John Smith."

"Is that so?" he laughed.

"I know. It's common."

Guthro pointed to his left. "Have you met the Maguires yet?" He gestured to his right. "Or the Outrata's, Outrenta's, whatever?"

"No, not yet. I stopped here first."

"I'm flattered Mr. Smith. Of course, my house is the biggest on the street, that would be why you came here first?"

"You are right across from the house I wish to buy."

"Oh, that's right." He made a motion to the driveway leading behind the house. "The Deacon's don't have a pool of course. Allow me to show you mine. You may want to come over for a swim on a hot summer day."

Guthro's hand was still outstretched toward the driveway. I wished I had never stopped. If Elizabeth was with me, she would know how to worm her way out of his invitation. She'd have the inner strength to match him. I didn't know if I was up to Guthro's game; for there was no doubt he was toying with me.

"Please Mr. Smith. I'm being neighbourly."

I followed him along the side of the house. Guthro spoke about the dimensions and temperature of the pool, and he probably knew I wasn't paying attention. Then we reached the corner and I could see two cars parked in the driveway beside the house. One was a dark blue Mercedes.

I stopped.

"What is it?" Guthro asked.

"Nice Mercedes," I managed to say.

Before Guthro could reply, we heard the voice of someone calling out to him.

"Mr. Guthro? Oh, I didn't know you were busy, sir. I'll wait inside." I turned in the direction of the voice. Standing thirty feet from me was Tony Berger!

Maybe it was the sunglasses, or maybe it was because Berger turned away so quickly, but he didn't recognize me. I thought I was going to pass out. I looked straight at my feet until Berger had turned the corner again.

"I should let you go," I said, mustering all the calmness I could find.

Guthro hesitated, and seemed to ponder my suggestion. "Yes, perhaps I should let you go," he finally agreed.

We walked to the front of the house. My relief was indescribable to be in plain sight of the other houses again, and I noticed several people strolling nearby. A taxi had stopped only two houses down the street.

Suddenly I felt like I had pulled it off. I was safe. I felt so brazen that I decided to risk a little more in my answer to the question Guthro now asked.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Smith?"

"I work for a private investigator. Maybe you've heard of him. His name is Phillip Dowling."

I was proud of my bluff, but it didn't work. He appeared to be mildly annoyed, but his face showed no recognition of Dowling's name.

"No. Why would I have heard of him?"

"His name has been in the news the past few days."

"I have people who tell me all the news I need to know. Good day, Mr. Smith."

"What do you do Mr. Guthro?"

"I finance other people's businesses," he answered impatiently. He was ready to turn away again.

"Tony Berger's business is a risky one to finance, isn't it?"

Guthro's face conveyed his surprise, but no real concern. "You really are a PI, aren't you, Mr. whatever-your-name-is."

I tried one more bluff. I stole a line from the real PI, the dead Phillip Dowling. "I know the flush house where Barbie Wellesley was cut. I

know all about it."

This time Guthro's face did show concern, a lot of concern. I watched him crush his cigar in his fist. I watched his face grow purple in anger. The bluff had worked.

"It's your flush house, isn't it Guthro?" I guessed. "Berger gets you the girls. Something went sideways with Barbie so she was his lesson."

Guthro stepped toward me menacingly. He pointed his finger, and it shook with his rage. "You little fucker! No one ... NO ONE ... fucks with my business! You're dead! You won't breathe a word of this to anyone!" He reached his hand inside his jacket.

Being in plain sight of the neighbourhood saved me- I glanced to see the taxi still two houses away. Several people still strolled toward us.

"I don't think so, Guthro. You're not that stupid."

He took his hand out of the jacket, empty. "You won't get home alive. Berger will cut you from ear to ear."

"Berger?" I laughed, playing the role of having him by the balls, and watching him squirm when I squeezed another time. "You may want to have a word with Berger first. Who do you think told my boss? Why do you think he hired him?"

"What?!"

"I'm afraid so. Who knows who else ol' Tony has told about your little business venture."

I opened the car door and got in. "You should have left your past in the past, Guthro. Does your wife know?"

"Fuck you! You're still dead. I'll find you and you'll be dead by night-fall!"

I pulled away from the driveway, from Ellie's house, from Ellie's husband. My heart was ready to beat right out of my chest, and it took a block before I could get a real breath. My mind was trying to sort out the reactions of Paul Guthro to the accusations I had put to him. His guilt was as obvious as his fury, except for Phillip Dowling. He truly did not show any reaction to Dowling's name.

So, this is how a private eye operates. Elizabeth would be proud, I thought. Elizabeth would be proud.

Elizabeth was only a few minutes late in meeting me at the place we had arranged. I saw her emerge from a street three blocks away, walking briskly toward me, but despite the distance, I could see the panic on her face. She shielded one hand near her chest and used her thumb to signal that something was behind her. I saw the slow-moving Ford. Elizabeth was being followed.

At the traffic lights two blocks from me, Elizabeth all of a sudden stopped at a car waiting for the red light to turn. She spoke for a moment, pointed in my direction, then to her right, and then resumed walking toward me.

She repeated the same motions with a man in a parked car less than a block from me. Now she walked in my direction again. She made another motion I understood, and I rolled down the passenger window.

Elizabeth leaned in the window. I tried to speak, but she held up her hand to stop me. "Listen carefully. When I say "now", you point behind you, and make sure those cops see you do it. When I say "now" again, you point past me. As soon as I leave, you circle around the block to that one-way that empties onto Gladstone three blocks behind you. Now! (I pointed) Then turn the car around so you're facing the wrong way. Make sure you can't be seen from Gladstone. Now! (I pointed again) Wait for me, and be ready to drive fast."

"But, how—"

"Do it," she instructed sharply, even though she smiled brightly, and waved as though I had just helped on her way.

As she walked away, I pulled from my parking spot. I was wearing my sunglasses, so I was able to sneak a look at the people in the unmarked police car. A woman drove, and the man in the passenger seat was familiar. He appeared to be the police detective from TV, the one who had been interviewed

after my composite drawing was shown.

It only took a minute to swing around the block parallel to Gladstone, and go down the one-way street. A hundred feet from the corner of Gladstone, I did a three-point turn, and waited, facing the wrong way on Bay Street. I remembered to unlock the passenger door for Elizabeth.

She was there only seconds later. "Okay, go," she ordered as soon as she was in. "They'll think I'm still on foot and won't see us for a few seconds. They're deciding on how to split up right now, but then they'll see the car and come after us."

I was almost at the end of the block when I saw the Ford in my rear-view mirror. Its tires squealed off of Gladstone and started after us, but the chase didn't last long. The one-way street emptied onto Catherine, and rather than take the logical route of the on-ramp to highway 417, I ducked into the bus terminal parking lot on the corner. We watched the police car go onto the 417. I was getting better at this all the time.

I turned to Elizabeth and smiled. "That was easy."

"You think so?" she answered in weary amusement.

"Sure. They didn't even get my license number."

"Fuck, John, they know who you are. They asked me all about you, if I knew who you were. Your picture has been all over this city for the past three days."

"They know?"

"I spent more time answering their questions than anything else this afternoon. These last few hours haven't been easy for me."

I smirked a little like a child with a surprise. "For me either," I blurted. "I was playing detective."

"What have you done?" Elizabeth sounded worried.

I recounted the events at the Guthro house. "The blue Mercedes, Guthro's reactions, Berger there, it all fits. Case solved," I summed up.

"I wonder ..." Elizabeth pondered out loud.

"What?"

"It doesn't add up neatly. There's a piece or two missing."

"Why do you say that? Guthro killed Barbie Wellesley, Berger killed Phillip. Guthro basically admitted it. And the blue Mercedes was there, and so was Berger."

"But we don't know Berger did it," Elizabeth argued, her voice straining as she puzzled over the deaths, the motives and the opportunities. "There are pieces missing. Phillip was onto more than that."

"Prostitution and murder isn't enough? He was going to blackmail them."

"It should be enough. But I'm sure we don't know everything. There are other things ..."

"What other things?"

"Nothing." Elizabeth suddenly went quiet.

I leaned forward and looked her in the eye. "What other things? What are you holding back on me? We are in this together, you have to tell me everything."

Elizabeth turned to face me. There was a funny expression that I couldn't categorize. I felt like she knew something, but was unsure what to do about it. "I can't ..." she began, then her expression changed. Her words became more confident. "I can't put it into words, that's all. It's just a feeling I get from having read Phillip's files, and from the types of questions the cops asked. Nothing specific." She smiled when I didn't take my eyes from hers. "That's all," she reassured.

"Should we go to the police with my new information?"

"No, if I had wanted to go to the cops, we wouldn't have outrun them."

"You didn't know about it when we outran them," I pointed out.

"Not yet. You can't trust them. Don't you realize your neck is hanging out? The cops want you, and Guthro wants to kill you. Don't expect them to go out of their way to help you, or to believe you. They never lifted a finger to help me when I was on the streets, and they won't help us now. If something happens, and they question you, don't let on anything. Don't trust them."

This instruction from Elizabeth went completely against what I would

want to do. When I didn't say anything, she took my hand and squeezed it. "Don't trust them," she repeated.

"I won't," I agreed lamely.

"Trust me."

"Okay," I promised, trying to convince myself that I should. But I didn't feel I had a lot of choice, and trusting her had taken me this far. It had taken me into loving emotions. So ... what was that nagging feeling ...

"I want to try something a little risky," Elizabeth announced.

"You don't want to confront Berger still?"

"No, not that risky. There's nothing to learn from him anymore, Guthro told it all. I want to get back into the office. After everything else that's happened, there may be a file or two that I've overlooked."

"How do we get in there without being seen? Won't the police be guarding it?"

"I don't think our tax dollars stretch that far. They'll have finished their search, and just locked it up. There may be something left behind that they didn't see as significant."

"Like what?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't know. It's just a guess."

"Wouldn't the police have removed all the files?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Another gamble."

"Do we go now?"

"No, after dark. Let's go lose ourselves at a park."

We drove to Vincent Massey Park. We walked to the back of the park, to a quiet spot away from the paths, and lay in the grass of the bank of the Rideau River.

I settled on my back into the long grass, under a mostly clear blue sky. It was warm, and not too muggy. I wanted to watch the clouds, lose myself into a simple pleasure, but my eyes fell shut so easily, and would not open without difficulty. Elizabeth unbuttoned my shirt and put her head on my chest and stomach.

"Your stomach is rumbling like crazy."

"Can you hear it?"

"Yes. And feel it too."

"We haven't had much to eat the past few days."

"Who's had time?"

"Or the appetite."

I put my arms around Elizabeth's shoulders, and gently massaged her back. She curled in a little closer. A bee flew within inches of my face. Though I didn't open my eyes, I could feel its wings furiously beating the air. It wasn't much of a concern to me. I had experienced the intensity of love, and of death, and they had been all around me since Tuesday. What could a bee sting do, even if I could prevent it?

"You've really never been in love before?" I asked Elizabeth.

"No."

"You are now?"

"Yes," she answered softly, rubbing her cheek on my stomach. She sounded sincere. I believed her.

"I wonder if someone in love for the first time knows to make all the right decisions."

Elizabeth propped her head up. My eyes were still closed, but I knew that she was watching me. "What a strange thing to say to me, John Walker."

"It was just something I was wondering," I said nonchalantly.

"Did you make all the correct decisions when you were with Ellie?"

"That's what I mean. The answer is no, and that was my first love."

"Are you sure you wouldn't make those same mistakes today?"

"Not the same ones. Not as many."

"Are you sure you won't make any mistakes today.?"

She had me there. I was silent.

"Regret isn't an exclusive product of the past. Today's actions will produce plenty more of that."

I opened my eyes, and, yes, Elizabeth was studying me carefully.

"Can I trust you?" I asked.

Her eyes held firm to mine, but they had to. If she'd looked away now, I would have known for sure.

"John ..." Her hand moved on my thigh.

My hand quickly wrapped up her fingers and moved them away. "Don't equate sex with your answer ... please."

Elizabeth's eyes widened and moistened. If there was something I felt she was holding back, it wasn't there now.

"I need your love, John. I admit it, I need you. Would you admit that you need me? I think you need my strength. We don't have to be perfect, we can admit that we each have a need. And I desperately need you."

A tear from each eye dropped on my chest. She touched her finger to one, and dragged the moisture to the other.

"I want to be like these tears, and fill the pores of your skin. I want to merge with you like that."

Elizabeth's mouth pursed slowly, and I watched a trail of spit leave her lips and drop on the middle of my stomach. Again her index finger maneuvered the liquid around the texture of my skin.

"Did you just spit on me?" I said a little surprised, but she took no notice of the question.

"Into your pores ... into your pores I go. These are my cells mixing with the cells of John Walker. Is this a good thing?"

"It's good."

"... into your pores I go ..." Elizabeth repeated in a dreamy voice.

I began to raise my hand to touch her face, but she stopped me. She clasped my hand in hers and there they waited in the space between our eyes, waiting for her words.

"Can I trust you?" I said, returning to my question.

"You are all I need. You're also all I've got. You are my first love, you will be my last love. My only love."

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes. You can trust me. I won't let you down."

Elizabeth released my hand. My fingers settled on the side of her face. She smiled, and she cried, and she nodded to me. I thought I might have been crying too, but with the number of her tears that fell on me, it was hard to tell. I felt her tears run across my chest, along my chin, or pool on my stomach. I hoped that every droplet found itself one of the pores of my skin. It seemed to me that every tear that entered my pores would be impossible to remove. That was okay.

"Now can I touch you?"

"Yes," I answered. "But what about the other side of the river? That's the Carleton University campus over there. They might see us."

"That's right, an institution of higher learning and all that. Let them learn a thing or two."

Before Elizabeth could touch me as she had planned, my fingers undid the button of her jeans and lowered the fly. Elizabeth was over me, looking down on me.

"That feels really nice," she whispered. She bit down on her lip "Is your finger getting wet?"

"Oh, a little," I whispered.

"Then there's a bit more of me going into your pores."

We stayed together on the grass for hours, secluded just enough from people strolling by, quietly together and happy. We left the park due only to the combination of needing to go to Triangle Investigations office, and the hungry mosquitoes that came out at dusk and had no shortage of bare skin to attack.

The parking lot behind the two-story office building was small, capable of holding only seven or eight cars. It was lit by a single bulb over the



back door. The lot was fenced in so we could not be seen by neighbouring buildings, houses or the street. There was one other car parked there, but no one was in it and it looked old; it could be parked there semi-permanently until in better running condition. A big garbage bin in the corner of the lot appeared menacing in the shadows, but I supposed anything would look menacing that night. I did not have much of a stomach for break and enter, even if I had seen worse this week.

"That window there," Elizabeth pointed when she got out of the car.

I turned to her, looking a little surprised,

"You don't think I'm going in the front door, do you?"

"No, of course not," I lied.

Elizabeth smiled. "It's okay. This is safer; if the cops are watching anything, it would be the front door."

We carried a couple of boxes from the garbage bin and stacked them under the window. I held them steady as Elizabeth reached for the second story window. It opened easily, and she pulled herself inside. She came back to the window. "Keep an eye out. I'll be as quick as I can. If anything happens, just get away and we'll meet at the park later, same spot."

"I won't leave you here."

"I'm sure you won't have to."

"Be careful."

"You too."

Elizabeth disappeared from the window. I stayed near the back door for several minutes, then I decided the light was leaving me too much in the open. I started to move toward the car when I heard a thump from behind the garbage bin. I jumped six inches off the ground. I stood motionless, waiting for another noise, waiting to act, but there was nothing else. I hoped it was only an animal, but I moved away from the bin cautiously, and over to the corner of the office building, at the parking lot entrance. I would rather wait there. It was closer to an escape route. I could let Elizabeth out the front if I had to. Moving backward, I felt for the edge of the building and crept to the corner, keeping an eye on the garbage bin. I reached the corner and took a quick glance at the street to see that the coast was clear.

That's when I saw it. I had only looked for a moment, but it registered in my mind. I peered around the corner again. I could only see the back end, the trunk, but it was dark blue. Risking being seen from the street, I moved down the parking lot entrance until my angle was sufficient to see the whole car: the dark blue Mercedes!

I doubled back to the window and called to Elizabeth as loudly as I dared. There was no reply, so I started to climb on the boxes to go in after her.

"I knew you'd try coming back here," was the deep, raspy, threatening voice behind me. I spun around. Tony Berger pointed a knife to my chest.

"You'll wish you never had," he said, lunging, and I tried to side-step the knife. The blade entered my right shoulder and ripped the flesh as I tripped and fell against the back door of the office building.

There was no way to move, nowhere to turn. The wound to my shoulder wasn't serious, but it wouldn't matter. The next time he put the knife in me would be the last. Berger put the knife against my throat.

"Now I finish you ... ear to ear ..."

All of a sudden there was a crack and Berger straightened for a split second, then pitched forward on top of me. I screamed. I tried to push him off of me, and I wound up sprawling next to him on the pavement. I was looking directly at him, and I saw the hole over the bridge of his nose, right between his two wide-open eyes. The trickle of blood across his forehead was steady. He was dead.

I rolled the other way, ready to get up, ready to run for cover, but I felt a searing pain in my right thigh. Berger's knife had wedged in there as I had rolled us over. It also didn't feel serious, but I couldn't move immediately. I looked back to the corner of the building, but no one was there.

Elizabeth was the next person I saw. She did not come back out the

window, but from the parking lot entrance. Maybe if I had moved faster, we could have got away. But the police were there quickly. Someone had recognized the gun shot for what it was.

The police took us away in separate cars. They were not as surprised to see us as I would have liked.

As we left the parking lot for the police station, I could not see a blue Mercedes parked anywhere on the street.

I waited with a uniformed officer at the police station. My shoulder and thigh had been bandaged and possibly there was a need for a few stitches but that was all, I was lucky, and stitches did not seem to be a priority to those that wanted to talk with me. Elizabeth had been taken into the depths of the complex as soon as we had arrived. Two hours passed. The officer took my statement regarding Berger's death. Remembering Elizabeth's warning, I was very guarded, though I did confess to being a client at Triangle; and having a confrontation with Berger on Tuesday morning. That was the only explanation I offered for his attack on me in the parking lot. Other than that, my information was only the obvious. We waited in silence until the officer received a phone call. Fifteen minutes later another uniformed officer came out to escort me inside the station further.

I was asked to wait in an interrogation room. I sat on one of the steel chairs that were propped around a little table. Waiting alone caused my anxiety to worsen. I could not be certain how much the police might know, and therefore how innocent of information I should pretend to be.

A half hour passed. I stood up and walked around several times. I heard footsteps, doors closing, muffled voices, but no one came through my door. I was beginning to doubt that anyone would, and that I should go and ask, when the handle creaked, and the door opened. I was joined by a man and a woman. They were dressed casually, but their approach was anything but casual, and I tried to be as alert as I could.

The male officer took the lead as they closed the door behind them. I recognized him from the TV, and from the unmarked police cruiser,

"Mr. Walker ... Detective Kilmer," he said and I shook his hand. "This is Detective Stone."

"Hi," I said.

"Thank you for being patient," Stone said in a disinterested tone. "Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked, already having a cigarette drawn from her pack.

I did not want them to feel more comfortable than I had to. "I would prefer you didn't."

She looked up at me from her cigarette, slightly annoyed.

"... allergies ..." I lied quietly, suddenly feeling sheepish for denying her request.

Kilmer leaned forward at the table, placed a small tape recorder at the centre and turned it on. He watched me, and said very evenly, "tell me what you know."

I laughed nervously. "Everything?"

"A man is dead. Two men now. I want to know what you know about it."

"I'm just as curious about what you know about it," I responded evasively.

"Don't fuck with us," Stone growled in a voice much lower than I expected from her. She did not look at me. She played with her cigarette on the table, twirling it in circles with her fingers.

"I'm sorry. I'm not certain what you want to know. I already gave a full statement about Berger being shot. I feel lucky to be alive. I saw him shot, I didn't see who did it; end of story."

"He was going to kill you," Kilmer said, more of a statement than a question.

"I think so."

"Just for a confrontation a few days ago at Triangle's office?"

"I suppose."

"That seems like a poor reason to kill someone."

"What do I know about what went on in his head? I understand he was not a model citizen."

"No," Kilmer acknowledged simply. "What were you doing back at Triangle's office?"

"Elizabeth went back for some of her things."

"What were they?"

"I'm not sure. Personal things."

"She couldn't use the front door?"

"You guys had it closed off."

"She couldn't ask?"

"You were looking for me."

"How do you know her?"

"We met at the office. We date."

Kilmer folded his hands. He appeared patient and methodical in what he wanted to find out. That worried me. His partner Stone played with her cigarette, occasionally putting it to her lips, seeming completely uninterested. She never looked at me, only watching her hands, the table and cigarette, or the walls behind me. That worried me too.

"I will tell you some of what we know, Mr. Walker," Kilmer said, "Maybe we can focus better. Maybe you can actually help us."

"I'll try," my voice struggled to sound earnest.

"Berger is dead. Dowling as well."

I nodded.

"We already took the bullet from Berger's head. Same gun most likely did them both. Funny coincidence, don't you think?"

I shrugged.

"There's also a third victim we think is linked to all this."

"I wouldn't know about that," I said, probably too quickly.

"You wouldn't know why someone would only shoot Berger, but not you?"

"No."

"Why Dowling was killed?"

"No."

"No clue how these events might be connected at all?"

"No."

"No idea why you're apparently at the centre of it?"

"No. I'm not sure I am at the centre of it."

"Nothing you can help us with?"

"I don't think so."

Stone sighed impatiently. She lit her cigarette. She looked at her partner for a moment and took a long drag.

"Mr. Walker," she began, "do you believe in withholding information from the police?"

"No, I don't."

"Do you understand the penalties for doing that?"

"I have some idea."

"Do you think we should solve these crimes, or should you?"

"... uh, pardon?" I answered, taken by surprise by her question.

She leaned back in her chair and looked at me for the first time since she'd first come in. "Would you like us to find the killer?"

"Well, yes. I guess so." I shifted awkwardly as I answered.

"How was Ms. Nelson affected by the confrontation with Berger?" Stone asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Flustered. Upset. Elizabeth was very intimidated by his manner, his threats. Anyone would be."

"Was she angry?"

"Angry? I guess ... he wasn't very nice. What do you mean?"

"Was she simply flustered, or was she pissed off enough to do something about it?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know of no connection between Berger and Dowling?" Kilmer suddenly cut in.

"No, yes. I mean, Berger was obviously a client, so they're connected. Obviously."

"How else are they connected?"

"I have no idea," I said wearily.

Stone stood up and walked behind me, sucking on her cigarette. "They were both killed by the same person, by the same gun. That's a pretty significant connection."

"I guess," I said. I wondered if she really was right about that.

"And we have a third victim ..." Kilmer began softly.

"She was killed by the same gun?" I asked, thinking I was being smart.

Kilmer looked up sharply and I knew I'd slipped. Stone jumped in front of me and went face to face with me.

"Who said it was a 'she'!" Stone yelled.

"I ..." but nothing followed.

Stone's cigarette was inches from my chin. "How did you know?!"

"He said—"

"Bull shit!" she screamed while Kilmer shook his head. "What are you holding back?!"

"Nothing. Really. I read the paper. I guessed it was her. Who else could it be? How many murders do we get around here?"

I held my breath. I hoped they would believe that.

Kilmer leaned closer to me, really close. Stone was still right in front of me as well. Her cigarette was almost down to the filter. She glared at me from a foot away.

"Tell us what else you know," he said.

"There's nothing to tell," I insisted.

"Idiot!" Stone yelled without warning, and I jumped. She kicked the empty chair beside me, and it rattled against the wall. "You're a fucking idiot Walker!" She turned to Kilmer. "Here he is partner, the next murder victim. This schmuck is trying to play hero while the killer is right under his fucking nose and he won't help us out!"

"Jayne ..." Kilmer started.

"Tell him," she said. "He said he wants to know what we have. Tell him."

I glanced to Kilmer, confused. "Tell me what?"

He shrugged. "Berger and Dowling were both shot with a pistol, a 9 millimetre. It's small. It's the kind of gun a woman carries in her purse. If Berger hadn't got it right between the eyes, and if Dowling wasn't shot point blank, they might sit up in their hospital beds and tell us who it was."

"So?"

"It was a woman's gun ..." he said again.

"I still don't get it," I said again. I had no idea what he was driving at.

"Did you know Dowling was married?"

"No."

"Lots of women kill their husbands, or their estranged husbands. Love is a very common motive you know."

"Uh-huh."

"Ms. Nelson is Mrs. Dowling."

"What?!" I exclaimed.

"It may only be a 9 millimetre," Stone said menacingly, "but it will blow your brains all over your pillow when she stuffs it in your nose."

"Elizabeth?"

Stone leaned closer again. "Are you getting it from her?"

"None of your business!" I said sharply.

"Ya," she scoffed and snuck a look at her partner. "He's sleeping with our number one."

"Help us out Walker," Kilmer said. "There are things you're not telling us."

I didn't answer. I still couldn't believe it.

"Why were you really at Triangle?" he asked.

I stared at my hands, shaking on the table.

"Why did you really hire Dowling? Why were in the parking lot when he was shot?"

Stone added: "Are you helping her kill them Walker?"

"I have nothing more to say."

"Bastard!" Stone exploded again. "We could have this wrapped up right now if it wasn't for assholes like you."

"Either I leave, or I call a lawyer." I said sternly.

Stone stepped quickly to the door and pulled it open so that it banged around to the wall. "Get out!"

"I'll be calling you Walker. Think it over. And watch your back," Kilmer said as I was walking out.

Stone slammed the door.

I felt cold. I shivered. I crossed my arms over my stomach and slowly made my way to the front of the police station.

Little things Elizabeth had said made sense; that she still had contact with her husband, that she owed him, that he was not an honest person, that he had found her working on the streets. I now knew why she wouldn't talk about him, but I couldn't understand it. Why wouldn't she tell me? We were in this together. We were in love.

At the entrance to the station I paused and looked around. I didn't see Elizabeth, and I felt quite certain I didn't want to. Should I scream at her for betraying me? I wanted to shake her and slap her, all the terrible things people had done to her before, actions I would never have considered before now. The cold sting of her hand was across my cheek as surely as she had physically struck me. But mostly I was worried that only a dull gaze would be exchanged, and she'd know I knew, and she'd walk away, and I'd never see her again.

I should have been a little concerned that she might kill me next.

It made no sense that she was a killer. I didn't believe it. How could she try to find the killer if she was really the one who had killed Dowling? But I remembered how suddenly her personality had changed before. Which was the real Elizabeth? Was she just a little mixed up by her past, or had she murdered her husband? Was that Berger's knife she took from Lori's neck, or hers? Would she have shot me if she could after Berger fell on me? And Detective Stone's words stuck in my head. Could I ever sleep peacefully beside her, not worried about a 9 millimetre pointed in my nostril.

"May I help?" the desk sergeant offered when I stood in front of him.

"Elizabeth Nelson," I said hoarsely, and barely any volume was emitted at all.

"What was that?"

"Do you know when Elizabeth Nelson will be out?" I asked more loudly.

He flipped through the large book on his desk. He closed it and replied offhandedly: "She left."

"Left?"

"More than an hour ago."

I couldn't move right away, but the sergeant paid no attention to me anymore. I shuffled back to the door and outside.

The blinding sun of the Saturday morning did nothing to warm me. The chill came from my inside to the surface. I could not unclench my arms over my stomach, it was all I could do to try to warm myself, to relieve the overwhelming numbness I felt.

She had left. There must not have been anything to say, I thought. She must be afraid of me looking into her eyes and confirming her guilt.

I drove away in my sister's car. It didn't matter anymore if I was seen, or if the car was seen; the police knew who I was and where they could find me. I could even go home, there was nothing to hide from. Except maybe from the anger that I had provoked in Paul Guthro. Except from Elizabeth.

After all this time, was looking for Ellie really worth it?

I don't remember everywhere that I drove. The route I took was erratic and slow, and nowhere near any of the locations of the past week. It was more soothing to drive past familiar sites that had nothing to do with murders or the people associated with them. The liquor store at Somerset and Lyon was open, and I bought a bottle of vodka. I wasn't going anywhere to drink it, so I drank it in the car, taking large mouth-fulls and swallowing brazenly, like I imagined the stereotypical hardened private eye would do.

The vodka bottle was almost half gone by the time I reached the other end of Somerset, where I almost rear-ended a station wagon stopped for a red light that I didn't see. The bottle tipped upside down in my lap. I didn't have the energy to right it, and the liquid flowed over the seat and my pants.

A sudden hunger struck me, and I stopped at a Dairy Queen. It seemed like a good idea to have a treat: a banana split with hot fudge and pineapple sauce and double pecans.

Stopped at a light a quarter of a mile later I threw up the banana split, the vodka, and the rest of my stomach's contents on the floor of the car.

I needed someone to talk to. The only person who would understand would be my father. I started the drive to Perth. I didn't care if I was stopped. I didn't care if I flunked the breathalyzer. But the hour passed, and I arrived safely at the lodge.

"Come in," he called cheerfully above the sound of the television. When he saw me, he turned almost as pale, and with the remote he turned off the TV. "Good god, John, what's wrong?"

I could only shake my head. I slumped into the chair in the corner.

"You look awful," he said in a concerned tone. "Christ, you smell awful too. You've been drinking?"

I nodded.

"Where's Elizabeth?"

My lips started to tremble, and I couldn't hold back my emotions. My face fell into my hands and I cried, loudly, uncontrollably, my shoulders shaking with the convulsions of my weeping. I felt my father's arm around my shoulder, and he held me until I could control the tears and lift my head.

"She doesn't love you?" he asked gently.

I laughed. The laugh sort of snorted out through my wet eyes and runny nose and sounded completely inappropriate. "No, no," I said, and surprisingly I felt Dad sigh in relief.

"What is it?"

"The killings, the murders ... the cops think it's her."

His eyebrows went up. "What? That's crazy, she's not—"

"It's not," I interrupted. "It's not. It's not so crazy at all. She was Dowling's wife. They were married."

"No!" Dad put his hand to his chest in surprise.

"She was. She didn't tell me. She could have, she should have said it, but she deceived me. They figure she killed her husband. It happens all the time, right?"

"Is that what you believe?"

"It was a small pistol, a woman's pistol. These cops are pretty sure about the gun, that only a woman would carry it. And it's the same one that killed Berger."

"Berger's dead too?"

"Yes! Shot right beside me! Same type of gun!"

"That isn't conclusive—"

"God, Dad, I found her beside Lori's body, the knife in her hand and blood all over her. She was there every time: Lori, Berger. Maybe this prostitute thing is just a trick, and she set me up to hear the tape, and see Berger and all that, so that when the cops accuse her I can jump up and say 'no, no, it's not like that, there's a much bigger plot at work here'. But there's not. It's just a simple case of a wife who kills her husband then creates a diversion. I'm just part of the diversion."

Dad sat back on the side of his bed. He held one hand to the bottom of his chin. "It doesn't figure."

"No, it doesn't."  
"So, you're upset ..."  
I glanced at him sharply. "Upset? Of course, I am."  
"She used you."  
"That's right."  
"She toyed with your emotions."  
"Right," I quickly agreed again.  
"You were intimate, but she was just acting out a plot,"  
"Right again," but I felt a pain in my stomach as I felt compelled to concur.  
"And you've fallen in love with her."  
I looked at Dad but saw nothing in his face that would tell me what he was thinking. He was waiting for my answer. I felt my mouth open, and I heard the word come out, a word that escaped from well inside me, and a word that was too truthful to control. "Yes."  
"Hmmm. That creates a problem."  
"It does."  
Dad took his hand from his chin and folded his arms. "Yes, it does. Your head sees all the logic in her devious plot and believes she's a killer. Your heart doesn't ... can't."  
I nodded. "I suppose you're right."  
"Which are you going to believe?"  
"I can tell you think I should believe my heart."  
"It's your heart and your head, not mine."  
"You can't cop out Dad, I know you believe in the heart too much."  
He smiled. "It's easier to influence the head than the heart. What you've been telling me sounds very convincing, but it could be wrong. Do you believe your heart could be wrong?"  
"I don't know."  
Dad patted me on the shoulder as he leaned from the bed. "Well, that certainly is something to think about." He pulled on my arm. "You shower, then we'll get some supper from the cafeteria."  
"Okay," I answered reluctantly. My stomach still felt awful after the vodka and banana split combination.  
"Besides," Dad commented as I stepped into the bathroom, "she does remind me of your mother."

After supper with my father, I rejected his suggestion I stay in Perth for the night. It had been four nights since I had been home; and I wanted to sleep there. My only stop was at my sister's house to trade back our cars. She wasn't happy about the mess I had left in the car, but she saw the expression on my face and simply handed me my own keys and told me to be careful.

It was after dark when I turned into my driveway. I had not been home in three days, and there were no lights left on. It was completely dark and looked strangely unfamiliar to me. So much had happened since I was there last, since I had received the phone call in the middle of the night.

The car door shut behind me and I moved slowly up the walkway to the front door, fumbling with my keys to find the right one. There was only a faint glow from the streetlights. I finally found the right key and unlocked then pushed the front door open. I shut the door and bolted it as I flicked on the light at the entrance.

A smell suddenly struck me that seemed out of place. The thought crossed my mind that maybe I had left something out that should have been put away, but that didn't make sense. This smell wasn't of something spoiled, it was ... pleasant. And it alarmed me. I felt exposed standing in the light while the rest of the house was in darkness. I turned out the light and took hold of a sturdy umbrella that rested beside the door.

My eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the darkness again. I

tentatively felt to my right, along the short wall that opened up to the living room. I moved around the corner and looked at the shadows of the furniture and accessories. The curtains were drawn shut, and it was very dark, but nothing moved and all was quiet. Under my breath I scolded myself for being so edgy. I reached for a nearby lamp.

"Hello John."

Elizabeth's voice was calm and soft, but I gasped out loud and straightened up before I could turn on the light.

"John," she began, starting to stand from the sofa. Now I could see her shape moving in the darkness. "Let me explain the—"

"Stay there!" I screamed. "Stay there and don't move!" I held the umbrella up threateningly.

Elizabeth moved a step closer. "Please John. I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you."

I took a step back. "Goddammit, don't move Elizabeth!" I waved the umbrella twice so she would be sure to see it. My hands were trembling so badly, I almost lost my grip. "Not another step!"

Elizabeth stopped. She stood quietly. All I could hear was my panicked breathing. With my sleeve I wiped the sweat away from my lip; it was forming so quickly. Sweat streaked down the side of my face. I took hold of the draw string for the curtains and pulled them all the way open, partly to let in what light there was from outside, but mostly so that a passerby might see us should she decide to shoot me.

"Let me see your hands!" I ordered.

"What?"

"Your hands! Put your hands out for me to see!" I turned on the lamp.

She squinted for a second from the new light and showed me her hands. They were empty.

"I don't have a gun."

"How did you get in?"

"It wasn't hard. I had to see you."

"Keep your hands where I can see them. Don't reach for your pockets."

Elizabeth sighed and lowered her focus for a second. "John," she spoke slowly, "if I really had a gun in my pocket, and I was going to use it, I could have, and still could before you could do any damage with that umbrella. God ... please ... I just came to talk, to explain ... to tell you how sorry I am. I've made a big, big mistake."

I lowered the umbrella. "What mistake was that?" I asked accusingly.

"Not telling you everything. When I asked you to trust me, it was with this in mind. I knew I couldn't tell you then. But I should have. I should have risked it then instead of risking it now."

When I didn't say anything to that, she answered the unsaid half of my last question. "I didn't kill Phillip."

"How do I know?"

Elizabeth shrugged helplessly, then put a hand to the side of her head. "I don't know. I wish you just knew after everything we went through, but I don't blame you. I kept something very important a secret. I owed Phillip a lot, but at the same time I hated him, what he did to me, our marriage, and I couldn't speak about it."

"How badly did you hate him?"

"I didn't kill him," Elizabeth's voice was insistent.

"You had the knife when I found you with Lori Newington's body."

"Lori? God, John, I was like her. I could never hurt her, she was just a little girl."

"And Berger?"

"I was looking through the office when I heard the shot. I ran out the door as fast as I could ..."

"Where were you when Phillip was shot?"

"At home ... alone. No, I don't have an alibi."

"Do you own a gun?"

"No."

"Never?"



"Never. I've never even shot one. I held Phillip's if he left it lying around and I had to put it away, but that's all."

For a moment my mind tried to accept her explanation, it made sense. It was all just a mistake, Elizabeth hadn't done anything wrong at all. I wanted to believe her. I felt my guard coming down, but I was struggling not to let it. I still felt fear.

She held out one hand to me. I sensed the pleading, I sensed her fear. "I really, truly love you," she whispered.

I turned away. It wasn't to reject her words, it was because I was now completely unprotected, those words struck me in the heart and nothing I could do could keep me from her, and she would see that in my eyes. My intellect was only half-convinced she was not a dangerous killer, but my eyes would show that my heart had been thoroughly persuaded.

"Don't turn away, please," Elizabeth pleaded in a voice shaking with emotion. I could hear her sobbing. I felt her step closer, and she spoke again, and her voice was weaker, less sure, trembling so that the words were hard to understand. It was the frightened voice I'd heard before, the one that was unlike her usual sound. "You should hate me. I would hate me. I don't blame you for not loving me."

I had to turn around again. I wanted to tell her it was all right, but I couldn't. I also couldn't look at her directly, in case she saw the love in my eyes, but I realized her head was lowered toward the floor, not at me. Her arms were crossed in front of her, and her hands wrapped around the opposite sides of her neck, clawing at the skin and nervously kneading her hair.

"I'm worthless," she choked as she wavered just inches from me. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. You can hate me. I'm so sorry,"

She looked up and I looked away quickly. "You can hit me if you want to John. If you're really mad. I deserve it."

"I don't want to hit you."

There was a pause and she reached out and touched my hand. I thought she was going to caress it, but she pushed my fingers into a fist instead.

"Hit me John. You hate me, so hit me."

"It's okay," I finally said, trying to soothe her.

"No, it isn't. Hit me." Her fingers tightened on my fist, tight enough to hurt.

"No."

"Don't be weak," her voice started to rise. "I deserve it. You hate me, now hit me."

I looked her in the eyes, but I wasn't afraid to have her see mine. I didn't like what she was doing or saying.

"I don't hate you," I told her angrily. I pulled my fist away from her hand. "Is that what Phillip would do?"

"Phillip's dead!"

"Yes, he is, isn't he?"

"You think I did it? You think I'm fucking with your mind? Then hit me! Come on!"

I raised my hand to point at her, but the fist was still there, so I lowered it again quickly.

"There it is," she called out when she saw the fist. "Don't put it down. Use it on me!"

"What the hell is wrong with you? One minute I think I'm in love with you, and the next I think you're going to blow my brains out. Which is it? Which one are you?"

Elizabeth expression suddenly went soft. "You think you're in love with me?" she stated. "That's all I need to hear. That's enough."

Her eyes locked on mine. I don't know for sure what she saw, I would have thought nothing could get through the exasperated confusion I felt from her changing personalities, but she had grasped those few words and all of a sudden the confrontation ended.

"You are, aren't you?" she said.

I didn't know what to say. My legs felt heavy and I felt awkward standing as we were. I nodded to the sofa, "Let's sit."

Elizabeth took a step back with the intention of sitting. I took a step toward the side of the curtains with the intention of closing them.

There was a small and sudden flash from the front yard: then another, and another, and another. Glass splintered in our direction and around the living room. The sound of the gunfire wasn't necessary to make the danger register in my mind. I fell back onto the floor, and felt Elizabeth fall beside me. Another shot, and another, and another. The sofa made soft sounds as the bullets passed through the cushions. The curtains fell from the rod across my body. I pushed my face against the carpet and felt the sting of glass in my skin. I held Elizabeth's head down, and I could feel her arm doing the same for me.

The last of the crashing debris subsided and the room was silent.

"Holy shit," Elizabeth gasped.

"Are you okay?"

"I don't know."

"I can't tell if it's glass or bullets in me," I said, beginning to lift myself from the carpet.

"Don't!" she pushed her arm down on me. "Stay down. Crawl back there," she pointed to the door to the kitchen at the rear of the living room.

We crept across the carpet gingerly, though I felt more glass cutting my fingers. But I felt no serious wounds and reasoned that I was okay. Inside the kitchen entrance, we sat on the floor against a wall.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Okay." She felt around her body and held up her hands and there was no blood. "I'm okay." She looked at me. "Hold still."

Elizabeth reached to my left cheek, between my mouth and chin. She pulled back and showed me a four-inch long piece of glass. I felt the blood trickling out of the wound.

"Not as bad as a bullet," she commented.

"I'll call 9-1-1," I said standing up, but before I could get to my feet, we heard another shot, and the splintering of wood,

"The front door!" Elizabeth cried. "He's coming in for us!"

There was one more shot, more wood cracking, then I heard the door kicked in as the lock gave.

"Where's the back door?" Elizabeth whispered.

"It's at the side, but he'd see us from the hall."

"Where then?"

"Downstairs." I opened the door to the basement which led from the kitchen, and we fumbled down in the dark. I was desperately thinking of a place to hide where we wouldn't be seen once the light was on, and where I might be able to spring out. On a shelf situated part way down the stairs, I felt for a hammer I knew was there, and took a firm grip.

We were almost to the bottom of the stairs when Elizabeth missed a step and fell on me. We rolled at the bottom and into my bicycle and some boxes. They dropped over each other with a noisy crash.

The door opened above us. I saw his silhouette and could see him reach for the light switch, a switch that would turn on the light right above us. I stood up just as it came on, swung the hammer, smashing the bulb, and we dove out of the way.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I scrambled behind some shelves, and Elizabeth was right behind me. We heard the gunman step cautiously down each stair. Only a fraction of light through the open door illuminated his way. I saw that he was tall and heavy. And I could see the semi-automatic weapon that he carried. It reminded me of the guns the movie mobsters carried.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and moved toward us. I shifted a little and put both hands on the back of the shelves. I don't know if he sensed my movement, but he turned in our direction. But he didn't shoot. He took a step forward, now only five feet away. Elizabeth's hand touched my side, and I felt her apprehension. He took another step forward. It seemed my breathing was too loud, but I was afraid to hold it, should it all escape at once in a gasp. He took another step forward. He couldn't see us, but

where else could we be? I could see his form against the scant light of the far wall. The rifle began to lower right at us. I pushed the shelves as hard as I could.

He leaned back and threw up his arms to protect himself, letting off one round as he did, but it went into the ceiling. Cans of paint, a car battery, gobs of left-over fence material, hoses, broken shovels, boxes of nails, and untold other paraphernalia fell on him along with the wooden shelves. The crash turned to a minor clatter, his yell to a moan, and the dust settled. We stepped around the shelves into the open.

"Is he out?" Elizabeth asked.

I bent over to look when I saw the glint of the gun begin to move. His hand was turning it in our direction.

"Upstairs!"

Bang!

Elizabeth screamed in pain but kept going up the stairs, and I was fast after her. Already we heard the commotion as the gunman was climbing out from under the debris.

At the top I pushed Elizabeth around the corner, intending on going out the front door, but she stopped.

"We need him."

"What?"

She looked at my hand and saw the hammer still clutched firmly. "We need him. Follow my lead."

Before I could object Elizabeth ran across the kitchen and collapsed on the floor. I heard the gunman charge up the stairs, so I ducked just around the corner. His steps stopped as he burst into the kitchen. I peeked around the edge of the wall and could see him looking at Elizabeth, lying prone and still. He took quick steps toward her and aimed his gun.

"Noooo!" I screamed and charged. He swung around quickly, but not quickly enough. The ball of the hammer struck him solidly on the left temple. He dropped to the floor with a grunt, his legs rolling across Elizabeth's. She pushed him off.

"Did I kill him?" I suddenly felt horrified. Elizabeth felt his neck, then his chest, but shook her head. She patted his clothing and extracted a handgun from a holster inside his jacket.

"Tie him up," she instructed, and I retrieved some cord and tied his hands and his feet together.

Elizabeth filled a pitcher with cold water. "We need him to come around before the cops show up." She dumped the water over his head, but he didn't react. She filled the pitcher again and repeated the dousing. This time he shook his head and groaned, and blinked away the water in his eyes. He saw me standing over him with the automatic weapon.

He swore to himself, then mumbled, "you wouldn't know how to use it."

"But I know how to use this," Elizabeth threatened, brandishing the other gun, and he noticed her standing over his shoulder. I noticed her too, and the ease with which she handled the gun. My face tensed, and Elizabeth saw that, but she ignored me. She stepped around in front of the gunman and leaned over him.

"Who are you?"

"Go to hell."

"That's all right, I really don't give a shit who you are. Who sent you?"

He looked into her face for a second, then spit. His spit went to her forehead and ran down. As she straightened up and wiped her face with her sleeve, he growled at her: "Fuck yourself." Then he looked at me. "We won't miss you next time. You're dead."

Elizabeth turned away. I felt certain the police would show up any second, responding to the gun shots.

"It's no use Elizabeth, he won't tell us anything. Let the cops have him."

She stopped at the counter, but faced me for a second. Her eyes were large and hot with anger. Her cheeks emphasized her heavy breathing. "No

one," she began in a raspy, furious voice, "fucks with me like this." She drew open a drawer, but closed it, then opened a second drawer. She reached into it and turned around with a sharp paring knife in her hand. "You spit on the wrong person, asshole."

He seemed unimpressed. "Fuck yourself bitch," he managed to say, but his tone was less commanding.

Elizabeth bent over him and grabbed his right hand from where it was tied. Then she pressed the paring knife to the edge of his index finger, just under the nail. "I should stick this in your dick, but you'll feel it plenty right here ... Who sent you?"

He pursed his lips and wouldn't answer. He didn't look at the knife at his finger tip, he looked her in the eye.

"No more spit in you?" she hissed.

"You're bluffing."

"I don't bluff about PAIN!" and she emphasized the last word as she drove the blade of the knife under his nail all the way to the first knuckle. Two thin streams of blood squirt across the floor.

"Aaahhh!" he screamed and jumped back against the wall, waving his hands and his feet attached by the cord, but Elizabeth clung angry and determined to his fingers and the knife. "Oh Fuck! Stop! Stop!"

I watched in surprise, my jaw wide open, but I said and did nothing to stop her.

Elizabeth yanked the knife back out.

"You fucking bitch! You crazy fucking bitch!" he moaned, starting to rock in pain and grasping his wounded finger as best he could.

Elizabeth gave him only a second. She snatched the other hand by the fingers and put the knife to the fingertip of that index finger, just below the nail.

"You wouldn't," he said, panic showing all over his face,

The knife pricked the skin open ever so slightly as Elizabeth applied more pressure. "Who sent you?"

"Paul Guthro," he offered eagerly. "He ordered the hit."

"Why?"

"They don't tell me. Really."

"On who?"

"Him," he nodded at me. "On Walker. You were just here. I don't even know who you are."

"When?"

"Last night. The order went out last night, but Walker only came back tonight. I called Guthro—"

"He knows you're here now?"

"Ya. I called him from the corner when Walker drove by,"

"What are you supposed to do after?"

He hesitated. "Call him and let him know it's done."

"Bull shit. Where are you meeting him?"

"Listen—" he began, but Elizabeth dug the knife in a little more. A spit of blood dotted her hand.

"Where?!"

"Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Okay, it's at the end of Shefford Road, in the east end. The last building on the road."

"The warehouse," I said suddenly.

He looked at me briefly. "Yeah."

"Who else will be there?" Elizabeth pressed.

"No one. Just Guthro and me. I had the call on Walker. He said to go in the back door."

"That better be true."

"Oh fuck lady," he whined, and I thought he might cry. "It's true. Oh fuck, where are the cops?"

"John," Elizabeth turned to me. "Start the car, I'll be there in a second." When I hesitated, she instructed me again. "Go!"

As I went out the door, I heard him scream in pain again, harder.

I started the car and Elizabeth ran out of the house and hurried into

the passenger side. She moved the semi-automatic rifle out of the way, and dropped the handgun with it. Our arsenal lay between us.

As we sped for the east end, toward Shefford Road, there was tension in the car. I felt afraid of Elizabeth all over again, and I knew that she knew that.

"We had to find out," she said finally, but I didn't answer or look at her. My knuckles were locked on the steering wheel and were turning white.

"We did find out, didn't we?" she asked in a frank tone, no hint of pleading or remorse. She was being rational and wanted my rational response.

But my answer was another question, one of many I had, but this one worried me the most. "Did you kill him?"

"No!" Then she giggled and that shocked me. "No, of course not. I just convinced him he'd never want to come after either one of us again." Then she laughed again and poked me in the arm. "Killed him ..." she repeated in amusement.

"Well, I ..." I started, but nothing followed.

"You what? You thought what?" Elizabeth was smiling. "Sometimes you have to be tough, and I was. We were. He's more likely to die from you clubbing him with the hammer than what I did. The cops will be there soon, before he bleeds to death all over the kitchen floor."

"I guess so."

"Oh, wow, did you ever whack him. What a swing, I thought the hammer was going to stick right there in his head."

"How could you see? You were playing dead."

"I peeked when you let out that war cry." She kissed me on the cheek, the guns clattering as she leaned over them to reach me. "My hero."

I blushed, but I didn't know what for, I didn't know what I felt. I was dizzy from the mystery I found myself in, from being shot at, stabbed, questioned by police, being chased and chasing, and from being seduced by someone beautiful and bizarre at the same time. With every new development in events, my feelings for Elizabeth swung from love to fear and back again.

"And what was that look you gave me when I said I knew how to use a gun?" she chided with a grin, interrupting my thoughts. "Was I supposed to admit that I didn't know how to shoot a gun?"

"I don't know."

"Trust me John," she said, and her voice was remarkably different than a second before. I turned to her, and she was looking at me. The tone of her voice was also there in the depths of her eyes, and in the worried lines of her forehead. "Believe me."

"I'll try," I answered softly, and honestly.

She nodded. "Okay."

"Where's Shefford Road?"

"South-east and off Montreal. Turn right here."

I did, and something about the way a car behind me made the same turn caught my eye. I immediately went left.

"Not here," Elizabeth objected, but saw me looking in the rear-view mirror. She turned around. We watched a blue Mercedes make the same left turn.

My foot slammed down on the gas and I roared around the curving street and made a hard right into a residential area. It wasn't enough, the blue Mercedes had done the same and was speeding after us. Stop signs were ignored once, twice, three times as I considered how I might shake the car behind, my foot keeping the gas pedal to the floor. Then I saw a major intersection ahead, and an amber light. I wasn't close, I couldn't run it safely, but that was what I needed. I shot through the intersection doing sixty-five, swerving to miss a bus that had anticipated the light, and dodged through a gas station and spun into a strip-mall. The car tail spun but I controlled it enough to pull behind the row of stores and we stopped.

Elizabeth exhaled loudly. "No way he followed us through that!"

"You don't think so?" I was ready to grab the handgun, almost expecting the annoying blue Mercedes to roll around the corner and face us.

"Are you kidding? I feel lucky to be alive. He couldn't make the

light; and wouldn't think to check here once he did."

"Now what?"

"We wait two minutes."

"Not longer?"

"Nope. If we fooled him, he's beating it down that road after us, and we don't want him to second guess himself and come back. If we didn't fool him, it won't matter, so be set."

Two minutes ended, and we pulled out and went back to our original route. There was no sign of a blue Mercedes this time. We made our way to the south-east end of Ottawa, to Montreal Road, then Shefford. The road was lined with a series of one and two-story warehouses, and streetlights and lighted parking lots made all the buildings clear and visible, until we reached the last warehouse. The rectangular structure was a little smaller than most of the others, but much darker; there were no streetlights at the parking lot entrance and only a single light on the wall over a steel door. A small parking area was available outside the door, I couldn't see any windows, and no other doors on the two sides exposed to us.

I shut the headlights off and turned left of the warehouse and into the lot of the next closest building. I stopped.

"What do you want to do?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'll check it out. You stay here with the car."

"Are you taking one of these?" she motioned at the guns,

"I don't know how the rifle works, do you?"

"No," she said.

"Then you keep the handgun. I might need to move quickly anyway, and the big one will only be cumbersome."

"You can't just walk in there."

I felt as worried as Elizabeth sounded, but I had come too far to quit. I wanted a confrontation with Guthro. I resented him, hated him. He had married the first woman I'd loved, and now almost killed the other, and me. "I'll be careful. I have the element of surprise."

Before Elizabeth could object further, I was out the door and sprinting to the dimly lit warehouse at the end of Shefford Road. There were no doors on the wall facing the road, and only one under the light by the small parking lot. I moved along the wall to the door and tried the handle. It was locked. I looked back to the car and saw Elizabeth had slid to the driver's side. Then I went around the corner to the back of the building, looking for a place to wait.

A crack of light caught my notice on the back wall. I moved closer and realized there was another door, hard to see since the light was scarce. There was a new moon, and nothing lit in the empty field behind the building. Beyond the field I could hear the running water of the Ottawa River, where Barbara Ann Wellesley was found. My eyes focused on the field. It was blocked by a ten-foot barbed fence that circled around and attached to the end of the wall.

I tried the door. It was unlocked.

For a second I shifted from foot to foot, the same way the debate went back and forth in my mind. Do I wait for him inside and surprise him there, or am I out of my fucking mind and looking to get killed?

The latter argument, which would have meant back-tracking to the car and leaving, was almost chosen ... almost, until I heard a car pull across the gravel parking lot. I did not wait to check, I opened the door and went in.

I had expected a big open warehouse, but it wasn't. It was sectioned off into many different areas: a wide hallway with rooms on both sides leading to a large room at the end of the aisle. Portable walls were erected to divide the building; they were roughly 10 feet high but the warehouse ceiling was much higher so despite the walls I had a rough idea what lay on the other side of them. There was little else there, a few large crates, a couple of chairs with desks, a few glasses and bottles of booze on one desk. The entire warehouse was illuminated by large fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling.

My first step scuffed, and I felt as though it echoed throughout the building. I ducked carefully behind some of the crates stacked along the

hallway wall, but there was no movement anywhere else, no sounds.

When I felt that I had waited long enough, I emerged from my hiding place, and moved farther into the warehouse. I stayed close to the wall and crouched low. I did not think that anyone was there, but I couldn't be sure.

I stepped behind more boxes and this time I took note of the writing; they looked like pharmaceutical supplies. One box had been opened and I could lift the flap and see in: pills. An odor instantly was recognized in my nostrils, the pervading scent of a hospital corridor. The smell had no doubt been in my nose all along, but even though this had nothing to do with a hospital, that's what I smelt and the smell invaded me like an unwanted storm. I felt uneasy and trapped. I felt overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of this predicament I was in. Like a baby being birthed, I didn't like the feeling, I didn't know what was going on, and I was just trying to stay alive.

The first office door was open, but it was empty. The second had a bed in the corner, sheets roughly made, and on the other side of the room was a long, padded table. The third and fourth offices were locked. I crossed the open aisle quickly and hung in the shadows of the walls before trying the next door.

The handle turned easily, and I looked in. I was surprised to see how much room was there, but I realized that the aisle between the partitions was not centered, that there was a lot more room on this side of the warehouse than the other. I stepped into a room and it led to another, and through the open door I could see an emergency exit door, and a red light above it. The door was taped with "ALARM WILL SOUND IF OPENED" just over the metal bar that needed to be pushed to open the door.

I returned to the big part of the warehouse and moved toward the other end, trying door after door. A few were empty, a couple had beds in them, bare, just a mattress. When I reached the far end, I realized that the door to the last room was locked shut with a large deadbolt. This room was the largest of all, judging from the amount of ceiling I could see beyond the 10-foot partitions. A box sat at the door, open, and I saw ammunition, magazine clips, strewn inside. I started to bend down to pick one up.

The main door at the other end of the warehouse opened. I slunk to the shadows and crouched next to three boxes stacked against the wall. I saw Paul Guthro walking toward me.

Guthro stopped for a moment and looked around. He glanced at his watch, and shook his head, then reached for a cigarette from his breast pocket. As he started walking toward me again, he lit it, and threw the match aside.

The boxes were my cover as he approached me, but I knew I would be exposed as he passed me and all it would take would be a simple glance to this left and I'd be seen.

I was ready to pounce on him. Yes, if he looks my way, I thought, I spring out at him and beat on him like a cornered animal, which I was. I wanted to attack him, that's why I was in here. I tensed as he came within ten feet, drawing on his cigarette and mumbling faintly to himself. My knees ached to move, and I thought they would whether he looked or not, but he walked past without noticing me. I had done nothing. He went to the door at the end and rummaged through his pocket for the key to the deadbolt.

Given a moment of distraction, I moved out around the boxes and to the protection of their other side. I crouched again, but as I did my shoulder bumped the top box. It rocked. It leaned and began to tip in Guthro's direction. I reached up quickly to steady it, scraping the box with my nails. It steadied, but Guthro seemed to sense some movement, or the sound of the scraping, and he turned quickly, as I pulled my hand back behind the cover. I could still see him between the cracks of the boxes, and his eyes scanned the warehouse suspiciously and his hand went under his jacket, as it had the day before. I knew what it was he held, but he did not draw the gun. After a moment he turned instead, unlocked the door, and went in. The door slammed closed again.

That was enough for me. If I wasn't going to confront him and try to finish him now, I'd better come back in with Elizabeth, be prepared to use the guns, and we would resolve it together. I scurried cautiously along the wall

and made it to the back of the warehouse unnoticed, and quietly slipped outside. This wasn't the movies, this is the real thing and rational citizens call the cops and let them take care of the bad guys.

As I turned the corner of the warehouse and saw a car parked under the light: I assumed it was Guthro's. But my stride stopped. My car, and Elizabeth, were nowhere in sight. I could see the whole parking lot where she had been, and it was empty. Had she moved out of sight when Guthro arrived?

I started to sprint toward the spot my car had been when I saw headlights turn the corner and came down Shefford Road. I felt relieved; I assumed that this was Elizabeth. Then it didn't look right. That was not my car. I ran back to the warehouse. Going around the corner I stopped to look back. I should not have been surprised to see the blue Mercedes.

The Mercedes stopped in the parking lot, but out of sight. The car door closed, and the footsteps crunched on the loose gravel. I assumed they would go in the main door, then I could escape down Shefford Road, but they kept coming. I heard them start down my side of the building! I had nowhere to go! I could not scale the fence; my only option was to go back inside Paul Guthro's warehouse!

In my rush, the door clicked behind me as I darted in. Whoever was behind me was sure to know that someone else had just gone in ahead.

I was at the wrong end of the warehouse. My mind raced to come up with a plan. I decided to make a break for the main door, even if I came in plain view of the whole warehouse. I would just wait for the other person to start in the back door. I would just wait...

The door did not open. I watched it, crouched behind crates again, but it didn't open. I was being stalked. Whoever it was may have anticipated me going out the front door and may be waiting for me there.

There was only one other way out. The room with the emergency exit. If I had to go out there, the alarm would be unnecessary, they already knew I was inside. I figured that door opened to the river, or maybe close to the parking lot. I didn't care what I had to run through to escape; I was growing more and more convinced that I would not survive the night.

To get to the room with the emergency door, I only had to cross the narrow floor of the warehouse. I should have been able to do it silently, but I didn't. I straightened up for the break and shouldered the top crate from its perch. It was an empty crate, but it broke on the cement floor with an echoing crash. I bolted for the other room, pushed the door and threw myself in. When the door closed again, I rushed over to the emergency door under the lit "exit" sign. I pushed it hard.

It didn't move!

I looked down to the handle and saw the reason. The door was welded shut. I was trapped.

The door to the room opened slowly. I did not turn around. I dropped by head against the metal door. I was defeated.

Then I heard a footstep; only one. Then the room was silent. First, I turned my face. Then I turned my whole body around.

"Hi John."

My mouth fell open for a moment. I tried to step back but I couldn't. "Ellie ..."

"You've been trying to find me ..."

"Y-Yes," I stammered. "Yes I have. How - how did you find me here?"

Ellie smiled a little, but it was a tired smile, a smile that took a lot of effort. "I've been closer than you think the past few days."

"You have?"

"John ... you'd be surprised. Elizabeth hasn't been the only one looking out for you."

"You know about Elizabeth?"

"Yes."

I suddenly felt embarrassed. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Don't be sorry." Ellie paused and her eyes clouded. "Don't let go of it this time."

Those words from Ellie struck an incredible pain inside me, words that



told me what I knew, what I had tried to endure since I had let her down. My insides wanted to cry out for all the turbulence they felt.

But this was the moment for which I had searched for her. This may be the only chance I would ever have.

"Ellie ... the reason I was looking for you ..." then the words felt lame. I stopped for a moment, but she seemed to be waiting for them. I said them anyway. "Oh, Ellie, I was wrong for what I did. I'm a weak man. I couldn't hold up for you when you needed me. I'm so, so sorry."

Ellie nodded. "I know you're sorry. I always knew you would be."

"I loved you then. More than you'll know."

"No, not more than I'll know. I know now."

The words were lame, a little, and there weren't many. But it made all the difference in the world to not just feel them, but say them to Ellie, face to face. My feet felt solidly planted, my eyes in a steadfast trance into the face of yesterday. I stepped closer to her.

But our moment was interrupted by a woman's scream and a man yelling at her to drop it.

Ellie was still standing just inside the doorway and she turned to look.

"Paul, don't!" she yelled.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Paul Guthro shouted back.

"Bring her in here. I have another one." Ellie reached into a pocket and took out a small pistol. She pointed it at me as Paul Guthro came in the doorway, his gun pointed at Elizabeth's neck.

The events that were unfolding were out of my control; I couldn't believe them, and I couldn't do anything to stop them. Ellie and her husband held the guns.

"You," Guthro screamed when he saw me. "You should be dead! You are dead!" He raised his gun toward me.

"Paul ..." Ellie said soothingly. "Wait."

"What?" he looked at her incredulously.

"Just wait."

He grew more angry and his anger was now directed at her. "I don't know what you're doing here! I don't know what he's doing here! Or her! But this is my business. I'll look after this, and you won't say a word about it! Not now! Not later!"

"Or else what?" Ellie asked in a voice so calm despite his screams.

"What?! Or else what?!"

"Yes. Or else what?"

Guthro's voice lowered and he put his face to hers and he looked her in the eye. "You know why you stay with me little Ellie. I told you what would happen years ago. You don't want to lose that little kid of yours, do you?"

"No."

Ellie's answer was soft and firm.

"Then go," he said, and took his eyes from her and turned back to Elizabeth and me.

Ellie moved her raised pistol from me and put it to Guthro's forehead.

"No."

Guthro froze. He turned slowly to face her, and her hand moved with him, finger on the trigger, the mouth of the gun pushed into the flesh of his forehead.

"Easy ... easy there Ellie ..."

"Drop your gun Paul."

"Don't —" he started.

"Drop your gun Paul," she repeated more sternly.

It rattled on the concrete floor.

"Elizabeth," Ellie continued just as evenly, "Pick up my husband's gun."

"I have a child, John, a little girl. Her name is Kara. I visit her every day." Ellie spoke evenly, but with bitterness, never taking her eyes from her gun and Guthro's face. "That was my secret the last time we saw each other, that's why I needed your help. I was pregnant. Then I met this guy in a bar. It was innocent enough and he said he could help, but I wanted to keep my baby. So, he helped me have my baby without my family knowing. But he's

not a nice man, John. He gets teenage girls to work for him, he traps them, and he throws parties, and they service his big shot friends. He used to make me bring in girls, now he just keeps me quiet and has kept me with him for all these years under the threat of killing my daughter."

"Ellie, don't ..." Guthro pleaded in a voice half bewildered, half outraged. "Don't meddle here."

"Shut up Paul."

He tried her tactic. "Or else what?"

"Or else I'll put a bullet right now ..." she pushed the gun harder against his skin. "... right here where I put it into Berger's head."

"You shot Berger?!" Guthro and I both exclaimed at once.

"I told you Elizabeth hasn't been the only one looking out for you. I was almost too late. He almost killed you."

"You were driving the blue Mercedes, weren't you?" Elizabeth suddenly asked.

Ellie nodded. "I was trying to stay close. I thought John was in danger."

"And you shot Phillip Dowling too?" Elizabeth said in a quiet voice.

"Yes."

"He was my husband."

"I know."

Elizabeth looked at Ellie for a moment, and suddenly I was more aware of the gun Elizabeth held. I was not sure how she felt about it, but she abruptly turned to me and put the gun in my hand. Elizabeth motioned at Guthro.

"Phillip Dowling was as big an asshole as this guy."

"Who the fuck is Phillip Dowling?" Guthro demanded.

"You really want to know?" Ellie queried with a sneer.

"Yes!"

"He and your buddy Berger were trying to blackmail you after you killed one of Berger's girls, Barbara Wellesley. Berger told him about it. Only their first blackmail attempt wound up with me by mistake when I decided to drive the Mercedes one day. They had left a note on the seat. Well, I didn't care too much if they did that ... like you say, that was your business. But I sent it back to Berger first, just for fun, and I guess he thought Dowling was going to double-cross him.

"By then you, John ... you hired Dowling to find me, and it was the worst kind of coincidence there could be. Dowling found out who I was, then he found out about Kara. I didn't care if he blackmailed Paul. But now my daughter was going to be part of it. Dowling was going to use Kara as part of the blackmail. All I could think was that this would make Paul finally do what he'd always threatened. I couldn't allow that. Dowling was following me on Tuesday. When I approached him, he only thought he'd just blown his tail. But I had to make sure he didn't kill my little girl ..."

There was a silence in the room. I stood in amazement, staring straight at Ellie. Elizabeth had backed up to me and was holding my hand. My fingers had tightened securely to hers.

Ellie held the gun level and snug to Guthro's brow. It hadn't moved, it hadn't shaken the least. But she had taken her eyes from him. She was looking at us. Guthro must have bet on this moment to lunge at her, when her eyes were away from him. His arms began to raise at her, his foot moved to grip her, and his face started to duck out to the way.

But Ellie pulled the trigger in the blink of an eye. Guthro's head jerked back and he started to fall. Ellie lowered her aim and fired another round before he hit the floor. Both shots took him right between the eyes.

She looked back to us. We hadn't moved.

"I was expecting him to do that," she said expressionless.

She dropped the pistol onto his dead body.

Elizabeth spoke next. I couldn't. My jaw had been wide open for minutes.

"Ellie."

"Yes?"

"What do we do now?"

"I've thought of that. I was prepared for what has happened here tonight.

"First, the gun is registered to me. When the police find it, and Paul, they'll put the pieces together. You two will be safe. By then I'll be out of the country. I have a place to go where no one can get to me. But there is one thing I need your help with."

"Anything," Elizabeth said without hesitation.

"It's a big request, it's important."

I found my voice. "Anything, Ellie."

"There's a house on Smyth Road —"

"We've been there," Elizabeth interrupted.

"You ... you have?"

"We were there Thursday at lunch, when you visited. We were parked across the road. We even spoke to the old man at the bus stop."

"You were there? You saw Kara?" Ellie asked again. "Both of you?"

"Yes."

"What is it you need us to do?" I needed to know.

Ellie held her fingers to her lip. She started to tremble. She couldn't hold back the tears. "The people who live there are very kind people to take in Kara, but Elizabeth ... I want Kara to be with her father. I want her father to look after her."

Ellie's voice quivered so that I could barely hear her. She addressed Elizabeth, but she gazed at me.

Elizabeth nodded. "He will." She squeezed my hand tighter.

"Me?" I asked slowly, quietly. "She's mine ... my daughter?"

Ellie walked closer to me. She touched her fingers to my lips, and I could feel how much I was shaking, and I couldn't control it.

"Oh John," she choked. "It was only once, but ten years ago we made that little girl. I'm not the same person anymore, and now I have to go away. So I need you to be the strong person you can be. It's your turn to look after Kara. Take her to meet her grandfather. And let her see the goodness in you."

I nodded quickly, but I couldn't speak. I felt Ellie's fingers brushing my cheek as my head moved. Then she pulled them away.

She looked to Elizabeth. "Everything is in order. They know, on Smyth Road, the Whitelaws know. They'll be expecting you. I changed Kara's papers without Paul knowing. John is named as her father."

"Will we see you again?"

Ellie winced in pain and a little of her strength crumbled. "I hope so. I'm leaving my daughter with you."

I reached my arm to Ellie and pulled her close to me and hugged her.

"I'll find a way, Ellie," I cried. "I'll find a way. I won't let you down."

Ellie backed away slowly, looking into my face, looking frightened but resolved. Then she turned and left the warehouse. Elizabeth and I waited another few minutes, wiping away fingerprints where we thought they may be. Then we left.

It did not take long for Ellie to contact us. How long does it take someone to miss their daughter? Kara, Elizabeth and I had only just moved into our new house in West Ottawa. Elizabeth and I are working on a brother or sister for Kara.

We will be leaving for our first visit to Ellie in a week. It is a little risky, but Ellie has taken precautions.

What's a little risk anyway? I am stronger than I used to be.