

STRONGHOLD

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“My God, we’ve killed him,” Lynda said.

“I doubt it.” Jack tried to reassure her. “He’ll be shaken up all right, but I don’t think it’s far enough to kill anyone.”

“We’d better get down there in any case and find out.” Lynda moved along the platform to the ladder.

“Careful...”

She found her footing and started down. Jack played the light just ahead of her so she could see the rungs for her handholds. She smiled her thanks. How a scumbag like Franklin got a gutsy lady like her was a mystery for Jack. Like how it was you saw gorgeous women walking along the street with short, bald, overweight excuses for men. He shook his head and followed Lynda.

When he dropped back into the corridor he found Debra comforting Sybella, who seemed to have become hysterical.

‘she heard the elevator crash...we can’t convince her Leo will be okay.’

Jack patted Debra’s arm. “Listen, Sybella. Lynda and I were up there, we both agree Leo will be fine. Maybe a little bruised, but nothing serious. Trust me.”

Sybella turned a mascara smeared face to him. “Sure?”

I hope, he thought. “Sure.”

“So what do we do now?” Tony Franklin asked no-one in particular. That was exactly who answered him.

“Lynda,” Jack said, “Would you say those stairs will lead us to the basement area we want?”

Lynda was smoothing her dress back over her legs. “The elevator went down there, that must be north, so yes I’d say you’re right. Down there somewhere should be the door for the basement.”

Sybella freed herself from Debra’s arms. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

“Lynda, you and Sybella keep together. Use this flashlight. Debra and I will use this one...”

“And we’ll keep together too.” She kissed Jack quickly on the lips in a welcome back gesture.

“And what about me?” Tony asked, though he was starting to sound less and less sure.

“You’d better follow close behind, buddy.”

They all kept close together out of mutual respect for the dark. The stairs in fact led down to a side entrance to the building. Signs at the entrance told them where the basements were and they moved in that direction.

This way led them round by the indoor swimming pool. Covered by a dome of glass, reflections from the blue water painted the glass roof with a shifting pattern of shapes, light and shadow. The flashlights were almost unnecessary under the moonlight, but they still kept a firm hold on them.

They walked single file around the edge of the pool. There was something eerie about the moving water in the silence and the half dark.

Debra watched the shadowed images the water created on the white tile walls. Shapes of men, then not of men. Fluid moving shapes that were there, then gone before she could identify them.

“Oh god!” Sybella broke the silence.

“What is it?” Jack turned his flashlight round to see why she had called out.

She was pointing to the water. "Are they dead?"

They looked into the pool. To Debra it was just like the fish again. Jack could only think of Redmond and his bunched fists.

Floating on the surface were two people.

Both face down, one partially twisted on the steps of the shallow end, their contorted bodies screaming in mute agony at the ceiling. Neither of them wore swimming costumes; it looked like a party about to get wild. Something had stopped it first.

"Are they dead?" Sybella repeated.

Jack nodded. "Looks like it."

"What happened?" Debra said quietly. None of them felt like speaking loudly in the presence of death so garishly portrayed.

"At a guess, when the power failed it caused a short circuit and the pool became live. Water and electricity... a fatal combination."

"Like lobsters in a pot," Tony said. For once no-one argued with him.

Heads bowed in silent homage they stood at the water's edge while the flotsam moved gently, like twigs caught in a ripple. A dead man and a dead woman bumping into each other, apart again, then together. They may have been laughing when they died. They may have been lovers about to embrace, or they may have been strangers about to become friends. Now they were just like dead fish.

Jack turned away and pointed his flashlight at the door to a staircase ahead of them. An arrow pointed down. The others turned to follow him.

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Not long before the two people now floating lifeless on the surface of the pool were cradled in each other's arms.

Slashes of cool light crackled over the glass-domed roof of the swimming pool, the ochre colors mingling with the dancing reflections of playful dots of color from the blue water. The inside of the glass roof was a shifting pattern of shapes, white, blue, pale and shadow. Subdued wall lighting was a pale imitation of the glare of the full moon, hanging like a judge in sessions from the dark sky.

There was something unsettling about the movement of the water in the silence and half dark. Ripples like breathing troubled the surface, lines of age on a flawless face. Soft liquid sounds of gentle movement as water lapped against smooth stone sides. The water seemed to whisper. It almost seemed to rustle, water can't rustle, but to the woman that was the sound she could most liken it to.

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea," Grace Toomey said.

Steve was already half undressed, hopping from foot to foot as his trousers snagged on his ankles. "Of course it is. You're just nervous in case anyone comes in." An office filing room, lunchtime, furtive fumbling with clothing and with feelings, excited by the forbidden fruit, fearful of the consequences. It was always he who reassured her then as well.

Grace watched the shadowed images the water created on the white tiled walls. Then she looked at her husband, frantically disrobing, letting the moon's rays play like mistresses fingers on the hairs on his chest, on the firm muscles of his back. He was almost naked.

"Come on, you're overdressed for a swim."

It had been her idea, as the drinks had given her courage, and the inhibitions had loosened. She had whispered in his ear, and he had squeezed her thigh. Propelled along by this gesture of intimate acquiescence, she had taken his hand and led him from the apartment.

The complex was quiet, still as the night outside, lit with discreet wall-lights, stars in the sky. Everywhere was glass, windows that by day gave light and space, but which at night gave back just their own reflection.

She heard a splash and saw a pair of feet disappear beneath the surface. As quickly as she could she unzipped her dress and let it fall to the floor. She kicked off her shoes and reached behind her to unhook. A sudden feeling overtook her. She was being watched. She spun round but the door was closed, as they had left it. They would have heard if someone had come in. The walls were mainly glass but she would be able to see if anyone was outside looking in. Surely there was no one out there. She even looked up to the ceiling, but only the lonely eye of the moon gazed back at her.

Steve burst from the water in a tangle of droplets and spluttering. "Come on, slowcoach!" he called as he got back his breath. "That's lovely underwear but I'd rather see what's inside it."

"...and don't wear anything underneath it." The little notes he used to pass to her inside files, or "...are you wearing what I bought you?" The enquiries about the outrageous things he would buy for her and expect her to wear under her office clothes.

Grace stripped off the last of her clothing and, abandoning all vestiges of uncertainty, she dived into the pool.

They played like mermaids in the warm water. Splashing as children, swimming in circles, pulling one another under. Ducking, jumping, playing with an innocence that was as natural as the day's cycle. He pulled her legs and floated her in circles; she put both her hands on his head and pushed him under. They hugged and caressed, kissed and laughed.

"Right," he called. "I'm going to get you now."

She swam, half ran, away from him, towards the deep end. He created a shark's fin with his hand and made menacing noises. She screamed with delight. Then he disappeared.

One moment he was there, fooling around, the next when she turned to see why it had gone quiet, he was gone. Everything was still. She trod water, pumping her legs slowly, meandering her hands over the surface, getting nervous.

"You're scaring me."

There was no reply, just the smooth rustling of the water.

"I'm not joking now, I don't like it. Where are you?"

The water lapped teasingly against the steps at the other end of the pool. Footsteps out of the fear, an escape. Still she was treading water, trying to keep afloat and not make any ripples at the same time. Not draw any attention to herself.

Then he burst from the bottom of the pool where he had been holding his breath and showered her in crystals of blue, white froths of surprise. He coughed and held her, laughing and hugging her. Enjoying her naked breasts pressed against his skin.

She pushed him away. "You fool. I was terrified."

"I'm sorry. I was only playing around."

"Well I don't think it's funny. I'm going to have a swim. I've had enough of your messing about." With that she struck out with strong confident strokes, swimming away from him, towards the shallow end.

Deflated, and out of breath from the pressure of waiting a long enough time at the bottom of the pool, Steve pulled out of the water and sat on the edge, feet dangling in, like floats on a fishing line. His body warm from the exertions and the atmosphere.

Grace swam a lazy crawl, then flipped over and did the backstroke for a while before stopping and letting her body float into the shallows near the steps.

Steve looked around the pool, admiring the diamonds of light and reflected water playing on the glass ceiling, and on the white walls. Coated with the black of night the pool was a safe haven.

When he turned back to watch his wife, he saw it immediately. A long gray shape, sleek and deadly, submerged beneath the surface. It was swimming directly for her.

"Get out!" he yelled. "Grace, get out of the water."

Unable to act as fast as his words urged her to she stopped swimming and stood. The water at this depth was just up to her waist. She stood, droplets of silver suspended from her nipples, her hands brushing the hair away from her eyes. Eyes that were half shut from the chlorine stinging them.

“Get out now!” The gray shape was smooth under the surface, moving with economic motions, moving incessantly towards the woman.

He ran towards the shallow end, waving and gesturing for his wife to get out. Calling her, pleading with her, but not actually diving in to assist her.

Panicked now by his tone and actions, she was splashing frantically on the top of the water, causing noise and froth to mask the bottom of the pool, to hide whatever it was he had seen.

Steve moved down two steps into the shallow end, his ankles barely covered by the turbulent waters. His hand reached out and she caught it, first time. They pulled together and she fell into his arms, heart beating with the force of a waterfall. Gradually the water subsided, calmed into a natural stillness.

There was nothing in the water.

“I saw it,” he insisted.

“You frightened me.”

“It was there, I saw it. A long gray shape. It was...”

She pulled a little away from him. “There isn’t anything.”

Their nakedness suddenly seemed inappropriate and they looked for their towels, wanting to cover themselves, Adam and Eve, an unseen serpent causing them to open their eyes for the first time.

Moving off the steps in silence they failed to see the ripple on the surface of the pool. It was followed by a second, and then others, until quietly but with eager urgency the blue water was alive with white froths of movement.

Grace was terrified. The water of the pool was frantic with movement now, gray shapes weaving patterns beneath the surface. Misshapen heads breaking through the clear blue frothing water, droplets of white caught in the rough skin.

The humans never had a chance.