

“Little House on the Perry”

Keller McKiernan was a contractor, not a mind reader. How was he supposed to know why a woman from New York City would move to the Nevada desert, sink eighty grand into a sandlot overlooking the Perry River and build herself a mansion?

Sales job of the century, way he and Vic saw it. Billboards claiming there were all manner of recreational facilities nearby and she believed them, never thinking they were talking slot machines in Reno, not ferry rides ‘round the Statue of Liberty nor gilded angels heralding good times at the skating rink in Rockefeller Center.

Neither Keller nor his helper Vic expected Mrs. New York City – Manhattan, they called her – to trek down to the river anywhere near as soon as she did. But ever since she’d flown to Nevada and rented a condo in Reno while her house was going up, she’d been to the site every day since the Fourth of July. Often as not she’d pop up soon as the men did, a little after six each morning, black hair plied with glossy shellac, gold earrings glistening. Her ruby slacks hugged her hips like some Fifties movie star, and at first they thought they’d hit the jackpot, the woman appearing all lush-lipped and chatty, the top of her blouse unbuttoned, like she aimed to please. By Thanksgiving, though, they realized it wasn’t Ava Gardner they were dealing with, but Cruella DeVille.

She all but drove them crazy.

First sign of trouble revolved around the upgrades, which Manhattan told Keller he ought to provide for free.

“That bathroom needs a sunroof,” she said roughly mid-way through September.

“It’s an option,” he told her.

“Why isn’t it included in the base price?”

“Same reason heated floors and marble countertops aren’t included. If I put in everything you thought should be here, you’d go broke in forty seconds.”

“That’s why they call them freebies.”

The woman was exasperating and Keller couldn’t wait to wash his hands of her, but fact was, her house wasn’t halfway done yet. He blamed his and Vic’s tardiness on the late arrival of custom cabinets from Carson City, but mostly on the woman herself. She was a pip, that one. Men couldn’t take two steps forward, for her interference. They had walls to paint and tile to grout, if ever they could lay it, which they wouldn’t be able to do until she decided which of the fifteen samples Keller hauled from Home Depot she liked best.

It ain’t an SAT test, lady, he wanted to tell her; instead, he pointed to a terra cotta rectangle with a rainbow trout leaping from its center. “That there’s a looker,” he said hopefully, longing for even a crumb of a commitment from her. She plucked it from the floor, tilted it this way and that, then plopped it into a pile with what she called the Daniel Boone rejects.

With the holidays approaching, Keller and Vic assumed the woman would head to Vegas or Tahoe, drop a grand or two on trinkets for her husband. But no, she stuck around, rattled a bejeweled finger at a paint can. “You’re sure that’s taupe?” she said when Vic pried off the lid. “It looks like mauve to me.” Right after that, she demanded crystal doorknobs on the bedroom doors, though Vic had already installed fancy brass handles, and buffed them all too. One day she went on about some technological device that automatically flushed toilets without any effort whatsoever on the part of participants, like they had in New York City.

The tips of Vic's ears burned red. "There ain't a commode on the entire West Coast that flushes without a button or a handle," he chided. "You go to the airport, you want a toilet does all that." He glanced up, shot her a look that told her what he thought of her.

"Trust me, they *do* exist, and when you find one –"

Keller shook his head as she blathered ever on. He guessed she expected him to trot on down to some specialty store, clear to San Francisco, then tote her porcelain potty home and install the thing tomorrow. But then she must have spotted that vein on Vic's forehead, throbbing blue with blood, because all at once she said, "Just add it to Willem's bill, will you?" and then clamped her mouth real good.

Willem was her husband. Keller and Vic had no idea when the man was planning to join his missus; all they knew was they might kill her long before he did.

The men had an agreement and the deal was this: Keller picked Vic up at five-thirty each morning, hauled him to the site, then fetched him home again in time for his shows – *Price is Right*, *Family Feud*, and his favorite, *Wheel of Fortune*. In return, Vic made lunch. It was a bargain they'd struck after Vic had gotten himself into trouble with the telephone company; Keller had needed a hand, right about then, so he'd offered Vic a job, knowing full well the man had done a little time for stabbing a phone company executive in the ass with a screwdriver. Keller didn't hold it against him, and in fact told himself if some executive had slept with his own ex-wife he might have done the same.

One evening after work, as they drank their Buds in Keller's driveway, Vic said, "Sometimes I wished I'd shot that man, instead."

Keller understood. Still, he tried to reason with his friend. “Where would you be now if you had?”

Vic didn’t say, just set his can in the cup holder, then built himself a cigarette. He sucked it nice and easy but blew the smoke out hard, like it was something he longed to be rid of.

Keller had known Vic about a year or so, and thought him a solid worker. He handled all the wiring on the phones and most of the electrical too. He also helped with tiling and roofing, and hanging sheetrock and such. Not once had he tried to stab Keller, though he nearly nipped him with a nail gun once, at a job site in Carson City.

They’d had a beer at lunchtime, with their beans and enchiladas, at a place called Taco Shack. The waitress who served them was red-haired and pretty, and smelled of coriander. She gazed at Vic like she knew him, like maybe he knew her too. After she took his order, she told him in a quiet voice it was nice to see him again. He lifted his chin in acknowledgement but never said a word. She chewed her lip and lingered a moment, then turned and walked away.

Keller looked at Vic. “You know that girl?”

“I had her once, in the back of my pickup truck.”

That Vic had shared this news surprised Keller, for the man was tight with details. “She seems to like you well enough, and she’s good looking too. Why didn’t you say hello?”

Vic’s eyes darted over to Keller. “You want her, I’ll arrange it.”

“Jesus,” said Keller. “No. I’m just saying, is all.”

Vic kept his eyes on Keller, like he had something to assess. If he formed an opinion he kept it to himself, but when they were back on the job, some forty minutes later, Vic’s thumb slipped from his nail gun and he missed Keller’s foot by an inch. “Holy Christ,” he said when he did it. “I almost got you, man.”

And then he apologized with all he had, and Keller naturally accepted.

A few days before the start of December, Keller pulled into Vic's driveway a little before sunup, the frost thick on his windshield, the wipers smearing ice around the glass. Vic bounded from his house with what he called his rice cooker tucked under one arm, though it was actually a Crock-Pot he'd bought at a garage sale down to Dayton. He brought it with him to the site nearly every day, and each time he climbed into the truck, he said, "Guess what I got in the cooker today."

"Rice?" Keller would say. Vic would laugh like it was the first time he'd heard the joke, and then he'd go on about the pot roast and potatoes inside.

Occasionally Keller offered to spot him, buy a couple of burgers instead. Vic wouldn't hear it. He really liked that stew. Normal routine was, when they got to the site Vic plugged in the pot, then around noon or one-o'clock he pronounced the meat done and they enjoyed a meal as fine as Keller had ever tasted. Now and then, Manny, one of the sub-contractors, and a few of his Mexican laborers came sniffing around, telling them how good it all smelled, and Vic fixed them plates too.

When they chugged up to the site in Keller's pickup that morning, Manhattan was sitting in her butter-cream Caddy, waiting for them. Her windows were fogged up, telling them she'd been there a while, itching to give them what-for. Keller glanced at Vic, saw the fat blue vein on his forehead hop to attention.

"Good gawd," Vic said, gritting his teeth. "Just once I'd like to start the day without that nut-job breathing down our necks."

“Might just as well tell you she doesn’t like the tile we laid yesterday,” Keller put in, bracing for Vic’s reaction.

Vic heaved the door open with his foot, turned a bit toward Keller. “I spent four days layin that tile, and there’s no way I’m tearin it up, no matter how much money her old man throws at us.” He swung his broad thigh out of the truck, strode over to the Caddy and rapped hard on the window with a hand as big as a bull’s hoof. Whatever he had to say to the woman was only about a third what she deserved, but even so Keller got out, thinking he ought to put a stop to it.

Manhattan powered down the window about three quarters.

“You can’t keep coming here,” Vic spouted. We got a policy against it.”

“What policy?”

“No Site Visits Without An Appointment.”

“Since when?”

“Since Fourth a July, when you first started trottin out here.”

Keller had intended to step in, but he agreed – at least in theory – with his friend’s point of view. He spoke not to Vic but to the woman. “Time is money, and you’re costing us more than we got,” he said. “We need you to back off some – let us do our jobs, give us a little breathing room.”

She flashed a lawyer’s smile. “You can’t enforce that policy. I can come here whenever I want and stay as long as I please.”

“We got a contract,” Vic informed her, “which you signed. This house ain’t yours until we close, and no one’s closin till you get off this property.”

Manhattan glared at Keller. “What kind of boss allows an employee to talk to a customer like that?”

Keller dropped his gaze to the ground, held it there a moment. He wished just then he’d gone into some other business, something that didn’t involve tile or toilets or women strung tight as guy wire. He looked up at Vic. “Why don’t you take your cooker inside,” he said reasonably, nodding toward the house, “get that pot roast started?” Vic clenched his jaw, then threw his shoulders back. He turned on his heels and strode hard toward the garage.

Keller leaned over, spoke directly to Manhattan. “I’m drawing up an addendum,” he told her straight out. “They’ll be no magic toilets and no glittery doorknobs. No sunroof, nor heated floors, nor marble countertops. And we won’t be yanking out that tile tomorrow or any day after it. We’ve had our fill, you hear? You *got* to let us finish.”

“An addendum’s not binding unless I sign it, which I’m not about to do.”

“I’ll call you when it’s ready and you will sign it,” he told her, his voice low, “or Vic will sign it for you.” He looked away then, letting his warning sink in. It was the first time he’d allowed himself to consider what Vic might actually be capable of, and he believed Manhattan saw it too. And when he looked at her, caught her eyes darting toward the house, he thought she’d come to her senses. But then she pinched her mouth and sighed real loud and glared with all she had. Keller half expected her to ram open her door, knock him in the knees, and hand Vic a nice slice of hell. Instead, she threw the Cadillac into reverse, gunned it, and drove backward toward the highway at forty miles per hour.

On the way home that evening, Keller’s thoughts drifted back to the incident with Vic. He wished he hadn’t sent the man up to the house, for his co-worker hadn’t taken kindly to the request. Keller worried that the next time Vic hefted a nail gun he might take better aim, and so

he thought it best, ultimately, to let Vic go. Hand him his pink slip with a sorry farewell, saying it was a matter of money and not at all personal, so as not to set him off.

“Look,” he said, easing in to the conversation. “I’m as sick of the woman as you are, but I’m telling you, she’s spiteful. She’s as likely to walk away from this whole damn deal as she is to stay. Then where will I be?”

Vic didn’t say a word, just sat surly in his seat, squinting against the setting sun.

“You can quit any time you want,” Keller went on, his tone all matter-of-fact, “and I’d be the last one to blame you. But I got to see this through – least ‘til I got her check in my hands.”

“Like to have her neck in my hands.”

“Me too, me too,” Keller agreed, for it was true the woman was a handful. “But if she takes off, I won’t be able to keep you on. I’ll have to let you go.” He paused, then casually glanced at Vic, hoping he’d planted some seed.

Vic stared at him a long while then, like he had at the Taco Shack. “She won’t take off,” he said at last, like it was something he’d already decided.

Vic was waiting in the driveway when Keller pulled up the next morning, stomping in place to stave off the cold, and whistling a game-show tune. He threw his weight into the cab of the truck, bringing the scent of sagebrush with him. He smiled as if Keller had never offended him, nor threatened his livelihood. Situating his Crock-Pot on his lap, he lifted the lid, said, “Hey man, look what I brought you.” He indicated with a flourish the backstrap from an elk he’d shot the previous October.

“It’s not even my birthday,” Keller said, politely playing along. He’d not slept all night for thinking on the man, how best to deal with him.

“Just a little something to make amends for my poor humor yesterday.”

“We all have our moods,” Keller said, though Vic’s were like none other.

On the way to the jobsite, Vic suggested they pick up a cup of coffee over to Hamilton at the market with the new owner. The place was really just an old train depot, abandoned in 1960, a solitary building amidst the sand dunes, the paint all blasted off. There was a rusted-out cooler parked on the porch. *Dad’s Root Beer* was once written across it in white, loopy cursive; now the last “r” was worn off so it read *Dad’s Root Bee*.

The door scraped against a high spot in the linoleum when they stepped into the store. They hadn’t been inside the place since the old owner left, some eleven months ago. Nothing much had changed.

The new guy hadn’t turned on the heat yet and it was ten degrees colder inside than out. Keller blew on his hands while Vic hollered “Anyone ta home?” into a dark aisle that smelled of moldy bread and sweet rolls. A light flickered on, and a man in a flannel shirt appeared from a room in the back. His hair was in need of a comb and he hadn’t yet shaved, but he welcomed them with a “Mornin,” and a drowsy scratch to his chin.

“Thought we could get some coffee,” Vic said, “maybe a pack of those doughnuts, there.” He pointed to a mini package behind the counter with six powdery wheels parked one alongside the other.

The owner plucked the doughnuts from the shelf and tossed them to Vic, then motioned with his chin toward the coffee pot.

Vic poured a cup and slurped a bit at the edge. “It’s cold,” he said.

“Got to warm it in the microwave,” the man told him.

Vic stuck the cup in the oven and pushed a few buttons. “Nothin’s happenin.”

The owner moseyed over to the Coke machine, yanked out the plug, stuck in an extension cord attached to the microwave. “Now you got some juice, boys.”

On the way out, Vic blew on his coffee before taking a sip. “What you want to bet he forgets to plug that Coke machine back in?” he said, chuckling. But then he swore, for he’d burnt his tongue on the microwave-coffee and his doughnuts were stale.

Keller drove along the highway, lost in his thoughts in the morning sunrise as Vic gazed out the window. Keller never knew what was on Vic’s mind, for his friend rarely told. He might have been secretly married to a Martian and the only way Keller would know is if he heard a rumor in town. Every now and then though, Vic brought up something amusing that happened on one of his game shows. His voice took on a wistful tenor when he recollected it, like maybe he’d enjoy being a contestant. Keller told him he ought to go for it, if he was inclined, keeping the part to himself about how some shows likely wouldn’t audition ex-convicts.

Sun was full up by the time they hit the dirt road leading toward the house. The lot sat low, behind a sand hill, and hadn’t much of a view. To Keller’s way of thinking the best thing about it was its isolation. No neighbors yet to drive a man crazy, no weed whackers or lawn blowers or barking dogs named Bailey.

Vic sat up when the truck bounced out of a dip just after the turnoff. “Son of a bitch,” he said when they drove down the hill and saw a car in the driveway. “Tell me that ain’t Manhattan’s Caddy.” He turned to Keller. “Didn’t you tell her we didn’t want to see her out here anymore?”

“Told her yesterday. Said I’d call her when we needed her John Henry on the papers – gave it to her rough too. Guess she didn’t take me serious.” He didn’t add the part about Vic

maybe forcing her hand, but when he looked over at the man, saw his lips blood red and that blue vein hopping, Keller knew there'd be trouble.

Vic didn't even wait for the truck to come to a full stop, just kicked the door open, hopped out and strode to the back of the pickup. Soon as Keller hit the brakes, Vic rifled through the utility box. Keller turned to see what his buddy was doing, his stomach doing a loop-d-loop when he spotted the hammer in Vic's hand. Keller got out and called Vic's name, urged him toward the house. Vic eyed him, pointed the hammer straight at him, as though to properly shush him. Keller closed his mouth.

Vic headed for the woman's car, his stride long and steady. He rapped his knuckles against the driver's-seat window. When Manhattan glanced his way, he smashed the hammer against the glass. She flinched and screamed, then spilled sideways against the seat.

"Jesus Christ, Vic!" Keller jolted forward, then halted abruptly when Vic tossed the hammer and nearly hit him with it.

Vic jerked the door open and made a grab for the woman. She cuffed his ears and he hit her hard, butting her nose with his elbow. She rocked back then, covering her face with both hands. He turned off the engine and plucked the key from the ignition, and when she scooted frantically across the seat, diving for the passenger's side, he snatched her foot and pulled her quick toward him. She kicked with all she had, those ruby slacks scrunching up to her thighs, gripped the steering wheel and hung on hard. Vic shook her like a rag doll, trying to yank her loose. One hand broke free, and then the woman began to sob.

Terror gripped Keller, throttled him hard. He clutched at his pockets, searching for his cell phone, turned and looked at his truck.

Manhattan's sob turned to a wail, low and long and eerie. Vic pried her fingers from the steering wheel, grabbed one foot and dragged her from the car. She clunked to the ground, then scrambled to her feet and took off, skittery as a deer, running toward the road.

Vic looked at Keller, raised one eyebrow. *You with me or against me?*

Keller's voice was almost panicky now. "I thought you were gonna scare her is all – get her to pay up and be gone."

Vic smiled. "She's gone, all right – gone like the wind. Better hope she doesn't hit that highway, Lucy, or you're gonna have some 'splainin to do."

Keller could barely breathe. Manhattan was scurrying toward a rise in the road. Soon as she reached it, all of Nevada would see her. And if someone stopped to help, it wouldn't be Vic alone she pointed to, or the only name she cried.

Keller whipped around, looked at Vic again, saw by the smile on the man's lips he had no intention of making the first move – he'd leave the whole thing up to the boss-man. "Jesus Christ," Keller cried again. He hesitated only a moment more, then took off quick as a rabbit, caught the woman in twenty strides and decked her. Vic trotted over, heels pounding the dirt. Keller shoved himself off the woman and stepped back, skidding on rocks and tripping in the road.

Vic squatted, ground one knee into Manhattan's chest, pinning her to the ground. She arched her head up, gasped and sputtered, hurling both fists against him. Real easy, he closed his hand around her throat, then snapped her neck, like that. Her arms went limp, but her fingers held their shape a long time, unfurling slow as blossoms.

It seemed to Keller that Vic was hardly breathing, and cold as it was, he stood calm as a summer breeze. "Maybe we ought to put her in the Caddy and drive it off a cliff," Vic said, as

though it were a completely reasonable notion. But the closest cliffs were in California, and now that Keller was in it too he told Vic in a shaky voice it might be better to stuff her into the utility box and bury her in the desert. Vic said that suited him just fine.

Keller's hands shook as he stripped the plates off of Manhattan's Caddy, giving it the look of a stolen vehicle, just as Vic suggested. Meanwhile, Vic hefted the woman into the truck. He wrapped her in a sheet of plastic, then stuffed her into the box. The men worked fast, tidying the site before Manny and his men arrived at seven-thirty. Afterward, Vic drove off in the Cadillac, with Keller following in his pickup.

They ditched the car in the deepest part of the Perry, figuring with luck it would freeze over and no one would spot it till spring. Then they agreed to raise a stink in a week or two, let their eyes go dark and complain to whoever would listen that Manhattan had run off and left them with a stack of tile and custom-made cabinets; make sure the cops knew, and her husband too; tell him his wife hadn't shown her face in fourteen days and here they had bills due and sub-contractors to pay, and Christmas just around the corner.

When they had it all arranged, they drove back to the site in Keller's pickup, Manhattan's body still inside the utility box. Come lunchtime, the men sat on inverted buckets, dipped into the Crock-Pot and filled their plates with stew. Fragrant gravy slid down Vic's throat and warmed his belly while Keller's meal grew cold. Vic licked his fingers, laughed.

"What's so funny?" Keller asked.

"Wonder if that guy to Hamilton remembered to plug his Coke machine back in – we might could go and see."

And when they pulled up to the store they spotted the rusty old cooler on the porch. Vic looked at Keller. "I got an idea," he said.

Took longer than they thought for the cops to find Manhattan's body. The nights leading up to Christmas and even those after New Year's were brutally cold, and the days not much warmer. All the while, the woman lay in that cooler, though not as long as her Caddy lay frozen in the Perry. By then they'd filed their complaints and the police had called her husband. Willem flew out soon as they reported Manhattan missing, staked his claim on her condo. And damn if he didn't rent a yuppie mobile, park it in front of the house and start in on Vic and Keller, second day he got there.

"I can't believe my wife approved that siding," he said, two days before closing. "I thought we agreed on Stucco."

The tips of Vic's ears burned red. Without a word, he ambled over to his rice cooker, rested his hand atop it and slowly drummed his fingers.

Keller glanced up, swallowing hard. Real subtle, he shook his head. No way would he go through that again. But then Vic's nostrils flared and his eyes went cold and Keller knew straight off Willem was going down in that Crock-Pot. Maybe it would even be Keller himself one day, steaming away, but no doubt about it, Vic would do the cooking.