

Prologue

He was hot and tired. It had been a long and exhausting afternoon. Summer was officially over, but still the unseasonable heat dragged on. Although it was late, the sweltering sun still beat down without mercy, causing the sweat to run in rivulets between his shoulder blades as he doggedly kept at his task. He'd been at it for hours. The muscles in his arms and bare chest rippled and bunched with the effort as he shoveled the last of the dirt back into place.

It was thirsty work too. He could all but taste the beer he had chilling in the refrigerator, but he couldn't stop yet, there was more to do. The ground must appear untouched. There must be no discernible telltale signs for prying eyes to see.

Resting a moment on his shovel, he wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and thought about her with regret.

It was always an emotional time when he ended a relationship and he felt drained by the effort, but there'd been no other choice—Lindy had lost her purpose. She'd let herself go, lost interest in her appearance, stopped making herself beautiful for him, even stopped making an effort around the house. Yes, Lindy had become a liability and the time had been right for her to be retired.

He swapped the shovel he'd been using for a metal-toothed rake and began dragging it in long, even strokes over the earthen mound. The heat was oppressive, cloaking him like a shroud, but he shoved it aside, determined to not quit until the ground was level with the rest of the soil surrounding it. A few more drags of the rake should do it.

Edging back a couple of paces, he surveyed his work with a critical eye. The overall appearance was near perfect. A casual observer would never guess what lay beneath. His lip curled upward into a crooked self-satisfied grin, and hoisting his garden tools over his shoulder, he set off to store them in the old shed

before hurrying up to the house for a quick shower and to contact his mentor.

The leather swivel chair was easy on his back as he took a seat at the computer, glad to take a load off. With the push of a button, he booted up the machine, signed into Yahoo Mail, and began typing his message.

Socrates,
Advice taken, action complete.
New project on the horizon!
Sonny.

Pleased with the way the afternoon had panned out, Sonny took the long awaited beer from the refrigerator, knocked off the cap and downed half the liquid in one long, thirst-quenching swallow before slouching on the sofa in front of the TV. With the remote in hand, he pressed the power button and sank back into the leather. His outstretched feet rested on the glass coffee table and he began to unwind.

He was feeling euphoric, having moved on with his life at last and contemplated his next adventure. And my, oh my, what an adventure she was going to be.

He'd seen her running along the beach, fresh-faced and sleek like a cat, a definite ten. A bit of investigation revealed she'd moved to Coronado only a few short weeks ago. Not long enough to make any real friends.

It was then he'd decided to make her his own.

At present, she was unaware of the honor about to be bestowed upon her. Even dismissed his existence out of hand, refusing to speak to him when he phoned, but soon, very soon, she'd change her mind, then she would be his.

There wasn't any rush. He had all the time in the world to pursue her, and pursue her he would ... with a vengeance. He'd made his plans, now it was only a matter of sitting back and letting

them fall into place.

Pleased with himself beyond measure, Sonny moseyed over to the refrigerator to grab another beer when his attention was snatched by the television newsreader.

“A decomposing body has been discovered in scrub two miles off the old highway. The police are treating the death as suspicious...”

“Took ‘em long enough, the useless pricks.” He grunted out loud as he cracked open the bottle and meandered across to the PC to check the screen. The popup box on the lower right corner indicated one new message.

Sonny,
Well done. Destroy all evidence.
Keep me posted on future project.
Socrates.

Sonny logged out and switched off the computer, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. Socrates did not issue praise lightly, and he gave himself a mental high-five as he walked into the bedroom that adjoined the living room. But destroy all evidence? No, that was one instruction he could not follow. He had to have something to remember her by didn't he? Yes, Lindy at least deserved a memory.

Reaching up he began to take down her photographs that decorated the wall and with macabre purpose placed them into a keepsake box with the others. What Socrates didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Chapter 1

Kathy Bellamy shot up from the mattress, going from horizontal to vertical in a heartbeat. The shrill of the telephone had startled her out of a sound sleep. “Hello,” she croaked, clutching the handset to her ear.

Breathy rasps wheezed down the wires. Her heart leaped into her mouth, and fear trickled down her spine, paralyzing her for a nanosecond. It was the fourth call of this type since Monday, but the others had been left on her answering machine in broad daylight.

Just as she was about to hang up the creep spoke, staying her hand. “Were you dreaming of me pretty lady, or were you awake waiting for my call?”

Kathy stiffened. The voice was muffled, kind of smoky and dark. To engage in any conversation was so the wrong thing to do, but the words tumbled out of their own volition. “Who are you, what do you want?”

“What do I want? You of course pretty girl, I want you. I’m your future sweetheart and you’re mine. Not long now till we’re together.”

His menacing words chilled her bones. Slamming down the receiver, she dived under the covers and tugged them over her head. Something she hadn’t done since she was eight years old and a true indication of how spooked she really was.

Minutes passed before she got up the gumption to poke her nose out from her hiding place. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she berated herself for being such a scaredy-cat. It wasn’t like the creep knew where she lived or anything. Fighting back the covers in a tangle of arms and legs, she snatched the handset off the cradle. The dial tone was loud in the silence as she placed it on the bedside table, but it would soon stop. With that done, she settled back on the pillow and regulated her breathing.

The whole episode unnerved her more than she cared to admit, and it was an interminable time before she fell back asleep.

After school that same day, Kathy entered her two bedroom rented apartment and pushed closed the door with her hip. Heading straight to the kitchen, she set down the shopping bags she'd been juggling onto the counter top and whooshed out a sigh. Her week had been long and trying, starting off bad Monday with the heavy breather and taking a nosedive from there. Tuesday, she'd overheard some of the other teachers refer to her as dowdy—petty but hurtful. She'd overslept Wednesday and missed the bus, yesterday there were two of those god-awful messages on the answering machine, and today her planned painting treat had turned into a disaster. She'd only left the classroom for five minutes to take little Meredith Frost to the nurse's office, and in her absence pandemonium broke out.

Martin and Timothy, the Cyclone Twins as she'd dubbed them in her mind, started a fight that, without her presence, deteriorated into a paint war in a matter of minutes. It was over in a blink. She'd regained control upon re-entering the room but got caught in the crossfire and had ended up with purple and yellow splatters down the front of her blouse, making it the perfect crappy ending to the whole crappy week.

Kathy stacked away the groceries and then crossed to the sitting room where her attention was caught by the indicator light on the answering machine. The innocuous flashing red light had taken on a menacing facade, so much so that she was reluctant to hit the retrieve button.

At first, when the calls started, she'd dismissed them as kids playing pranks. But that one in the middle of the night belied that and really messed with her mind, because while leaving school, she had the uneasy feeling of being watched. Her imagination had accelerated. She'd shot a glance over her shoulder but everything was as it should be.

Kathy shrugged at the memory and tried to gain some perspective. She was getting all bent out of shape over what amounted to nothing more than some stupid phone calls, a vivid imagination, and some creep trying to get his jollies at her expense. Seriously, she needed to get a grip on reality and chill or she'd be a basket case, but still, she put off listening to the messages. Kathy realized if she'd stayed in Louisiana, instead of accepting the temporary teaching position in Coronado, her friends would have rallied around, coaxing her out of the doldrums, and together they'd have laughed away her fears. Not for the first time since moving here, Kathy questioned whether she should in fact throw in the towel and return home. But that would be admitting defeat, and she was not a quitter.

With renewed determination, Kathy pushed aside her melancholy and vowed to fulfill her teaching obligations and not be intimidated by stupid calls or snide remarks. Sure, the dowdy comment hurt but honestly, her wardrobe was outdated and in need of an overhaul. Heaven knew there'd been little opportunity to shop in the past twelve months, and the other teachers were trendy. Yes, a new wardrobe might be just the ticket to boost her spirits.

With that decided, Kathy flicked on the TV. Her newfound contentment crashed as the newsreader reported the discovery of a body not far from where she lived, causing her to shiver, like a goose had walked over her grave. It was too depressing. She grabbed the remote and channel surfed for something more upbeat, and then went into the kitchen to start dinner.

While preparing the vegetables and chuckling at the antics of Elaine and Jerry on a Seinfeld rerun, the doorbell chimed.

Kathy was wary as she opened the door a crack and then, squealing with delight, flung it wide—for standing on the threshold was her best buddy Liz. Kathy rapid-blinked back the tears that pooled in her eyes and with a wide grin, hugged her friend tight.

“I can't believe you're here, why didn't you call? I would

have met you at the airport,” she said ushering Liz into the apartment.

“I left a message, didn’t you get it?”

“I haven’t had time to check the machine yet.” The lie slipped out with a guilty unease, but there was no point in worrying Liz at this stage. “Come and put your things in the spare room,” she invited, changing the subject and leading the way.

Liz dropped her suitcase by the bed as they chatted with an easy familiarity. Their friendship had started way back at school and spanned almost twenty years. Of course they’d had their ups and downs, but their relationship was solid and stood the test of time. Kathy guessed Liz was worried about her—she’d hinted as much the last time she’d phoned, forever asking if she was okay, if there was anything she’d needed, and generally just mother-henning her like the good friend she was—so this visit really shouldn’t have come as a surprise.

After treating Liz to the grand tour, Kathy shepherded her into the living room.

“Have a seat,” she invited, indicating the sofa.

Liz flopped into the overstuffed faded couch and glanced around. “This is a cozy little apartment.”

Kathy heard the censure in her voice. “It’s clean, the building’s well maintained, and there’s a bus at the door. It suits me for the moment,” she defended.

“Well, I must say you look great. You’ve regained most of the weight you lost, but tell me Kathy, how are you really doing and be honest?”

Of the two girls, Kathy had always been the strong one, but her mother’s long illness and recent death had completely taken it out of her. Not that she resented the around-the-clock care, but after the funeral she needed to get away. Liz had tried to dissuade her from leaving at the time, arguing that she needed her friends

close. But she'd felt stifled, and was determined to take a break from the norm, which would do her the world of good. Liz disagreed, but it hadn't been her call to make.

"I'm doing fine," she admitted. "Eating healthy and I've taken up running again. A bit lonely perhaps, but each day is a little easier."

"Ian wanted me to say hi from him. He asks about you all the time. I think he's still besotted."

"Don't even go there; you know I'm not interested." Kathy stood and marched into the kitchen, picked up a knife from the bench, and finished peeling the potatoes she'd started earlier.

"You could do worse," Liz said, traipsing after her. Kathy held her tongue. Ian was Liz's friend after all—it was she who'd introduced them. Yes, she could do worse, but she wanted to do a whole lot better. She'd love to have a special someone in her life but there had to be chemistry.

"I know you're lonely, so why not come home where you belong, to people who love and care about you, who..."

"Liz stop. There's no point rehashing this. You know why I made my decision." Her voice had an edge; she took a breath and softened her tone. "I'm going to fulfill my work contract, perhaps after that I'll go home, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

"Okay, okay, I get it. So what do you do for entertainment around here?"

Liz's quick change of subject put Kathy on the spot. She thought about inventing some story that centered on the highlife, but Liz was astute and would call her bluff, so she settled on the truth, such as it was. "I've made two friends at work, Anne Marshall and Len Baker. We've been out for coffee a few times and last weekend we went to the movies together."

"That's it? You're kidding me right? Two months here and that's the sum total of your socializing? Well girl, that's about to

change, time you got yourself a life. Is there anywhere local we can go dancing?”

“Umm, yes, there’s a club close by that Anne and I have been meaning to visit, it’s supposed to be pretty good with a band most nights.”

“Sounds perfect, we’ll go tonight.”

Kathy had been looking forward to an easy night curled up in front of the box, watching old movies and munching popcorn. Now she’d have to change out of her sweats and dress up. She shouldn’t grumble though, Liz had come out of her way to cheer her up, so at the very least she owed her a night on the town.

“It’s a date then,” Kathy agreed, drumming up more enthusiasm than she felt.

The girls lingered over their meal then went to dress for their evening out.

“Wow, you look hot,” Kathy exclaimed, as Liz entered the room wearing a sleek short black dress and a pair of stilettos, quite a contrast to the austere business suit and pumps she’d just discarded.

Studying her friend, it never ceased to amaze her how glamorous but impassive Liz was. She was the epitome of a hard-nosed lawyer by day but dressed in that little black outfit, she was simply stunning. A five-foot ten-inch dynamo with vibrant red hair and a wicked figure, heads turned whenever she walked by.

Kathy wanted to tell her it was high time she followed her own advice and find a special someone, but knowing the reaction that would bring, she refrained and spinning on the spot asked, “How do I look?”

“God, like you’ve just stepped out of a convent. Young, innocent, dare I say it... old fashioned.”

“Gee Liz, don’t hold back tell me what you really think.”

“Oh don’t go all sensitive on me, just wait here. I’ve got the perfect outfit to jazz you up.” Liz disappeared into her room and returned a few minutes later with a turquoise halter neck and a pair of white fitted pants she handed over. “Here, try these on.”

Kathy murmured her thanks and went to do just that. She was a different shape than Liz—shorter, fleshier—so the white pants looked as if they’d been spray-painted on. And the slinky top shimmered and clung to her curves like a second skin, unlike anything she’d ever owned. The outfit made a statement. Kathy gazed into the mirror and didn’t recognize her reflection. Her butt was firm and shapely, and the low cut top showed a hint of cleavage and a lot of promise. Her face erupted into a grin.

Twisting her hair into a French roll, Kathy secured it with a thick diamante clip, leaving wispy curls to frame her face. The upswept style and glamorous outfit made her feel sophisticated, chic. Sexy.

Kathy knew she was attractive in an understated kind of way. Liz always said she was wholesome, the kid-sister, girl-next-door type. The kind that brought out the protective instincts in men, but she thought this new image went a long way to altering that perception.

“So what do you think?” Kathy asked, hoping for a boost to her self-confidence as she pirouetted in the sitting room.

She wasn’t disappointed. Liz couldn’t hide her double take.

“You’ve got the wow factor happening; you sure look the part now. Put it out there and shake that booty girl and I tell you there will be hearts breaking tonight.”

Kathy giggled, she hadn’t felt this light-hearted in an age, but could she really put it out there as Liz suggested?

“Okay then, let’s get this show on the road.”

With a spring in her step and a giggle on her lips, Kathy gathered her purse and keys, doused the lights, and locked the

apartment behind them.

Sonny was impatient to hear her voice again, that sexy Southern drawl of hers was such a turn on. He'd been anticipating the moment when he'd hear her dulcet tones across the telephone wires all afternoon, so was royally pissed when the familiar click of the answering machine cut in.

He slammed down the handset. Damn, she should be home from work by now, so where the hell was she? He crossed the short space to the kitchenette and lifted a beer from the refrigerator.

He'd banked on her being home, counted on talking to her. He had no idea where she could be and that annoyed the hell out of him.

His imagination cranked up.

He threw his head back, drained the can, and then crushed it and, in a fit of temper, hurled it across the room where it landed with a tinny thud by the door.

"What to do, what to do?" he muttered, his anger gusting through him like a hurricane. As he paced the room, he swore a blue streak and wondered again where the hell she was.

Making a snap decision, he grabbed his car keys and stormed out the door, not bothering to lock it behind him.

Sonny parked across from Kathy's apartment at sundown. Although the light was fading, he kept his dark glasses on and pulled the baseball cap lower over his forehead.

He'd arrived at her condo just in time to see her disappearing inside carrying an armful of groceries. His anger abated as quick as it had flared, and he congratulated himself on being one lucky son of a bitch.

It was a safe bet she'd be there for the night, so he decided to

chance it and grab a pizza from the local take- out, then come back and watch and wait for lights out. He had nothing better to do, and at least this way he'd be close to her.

Forty minutes later and munching on the last triangle of pizza, Sonny reminisced about the first time he'd seen her running along the beach. Damn she looked good in her sweats, it was evident she took pride in her appearance. Not every woman did that—take Lindy for example. But no, he didn't want to think about Lindy now, that chapter of his life was over. Finished. Finito.

It was a long wait. The streets were quiet at this time of night; he filled in the time listening to the radio while he waited for her to douse the lights and turn-in. They went out at nine, earlier than he expected. He'd just switched on the ignition when Kathy emerged from the building, accompanied by the tall redhead he'd seen arrive earlier that evening. They were both dressed to kill and he didn't like that. Not one damn bit. He didn't want anyone leading his woman astray.

Sonny ripped off his baseball cap and threw it onto the passenger seat to join the sunglasses he'd discarded earlier. He hadn't counted on this hiccup and was agitated when routine wasn't adhered to. He snatched up the digital camera from the glove compartment and shoved it into his pocket. One never knew when the opportunity for memorabilia would arise. Latching onto his self-control, he closed the car door behind him with a faint click and tailed the women at a safe distance.

The night was balmy—stars twinkled like jewels in the inky sky, a perfect night, a magical night ... a great night for a stroll. The girls agreed to walk the short distance to the club. Ten minutes after setting out, Shenanigans came into view. They could hear the band playing a rendition of Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" the minute they'd rounded the corner.

It was still rather early, the place wouldn't start to fill up until later, so they had no trouble getting in—Liz was vivacious as she made small talk with the doorman, who was without a doubt quite taken with her charms. She had that effect on men; they fell like ten pins. Kathy had seen it many times before, but Liz was impervious to the impact her beguiling smile had on the opposite sex.

The music was a good deal louder inside. The band was belting out another dynamic tune that straight away put the pair into party mode as they looked around with interest for somewhere to sit. Although the lighting was dim, it wasn't so dark they couldn't see—the bar was well lit and cast a muted glow over the rest of the room.

A collection of tables and chairs were scattered on the floor. Some were occupied by couples, but most were taken up with same sex groups of three or more, who were out on the prowl, looking for love or just a good time.

Kathy and Liz skirted the dance floor, weaving a path toward the back of the room, where a number of tables stood vacant. They settled into their seats and ordered a margarita each from the attending waiter, and then Liz caught Kathy up on all the hometown gossip.

Liz's younger sister had become engaged and was planning a flashy wedding.

"You'll come back for that of course, the family will be crushed if you don't," Liz said, lifting her drink for a taste.

"Wow, that's fantastic news. Of course I'll be there." Kathy beamed. She hadn't realized Rachel's relationship was that serious and was over the moon for her. Then her face collapsed into a whimsical expression.

"Oh, p-lease." Liz groaned. "Trash that thought." "What thought?" "Don't play the innocent with me. I know you too well

and I know what you're thinking, so don't even try to deny it," Liz's tone held more than a hint of disgust.

Kathy squirmed. She wanted to be a modern woman, self-assured and sophisticated, but deep down; she guessed she was just an old-fashioned girl at heart with old-fashioned values when it came to sex and marriage. Liz always teased her to join the twenty-first century and rolled her eyes now as she dared her to contradict. "Okay, okay," she said, folding under her scrutiny. "I wish it was me marrying the man of my dreams. There, I've admitted it. I know I'm a freak, but I can't help it. I want to be a wife and mother more than anything, it's what I long for so sue me."

"Then don't just sit there whining, do something about it." "Like what?" "Like I said before, put yourself out there."

"Flirting doesn't come easy to me."

"Well at least stop scowling, you'll frighten off any potentials. Flash those pearly whites instead, so they at least know you're interested."

Kathy bared her teeth. "How's this?" "Be serious."

Kathy smiled prettily. "So, has Rachel set a date yet?"

"Nothing official, but she's hoping in six months. You know, Ian will be there too."

Kathy's eyes clouded—what Liz was about to say next was a no-brainer—and she sent her a warning glare that was promptly ignored.

"He still moons over you like a lovesick calf, it's pathetic. When he heard I was coming to visit, he made me promise to put in a good word for him and I'm a girl of my word so here goes." Liz took a breath. "He's a nice guy and he's keen on you. You could do a lot worse you know, he's loyal, hardworking..."

"Blah, blah, blah. Just because I want to get married doesn't mean I'd settle for any Tom, Dick, or Ian. There's no spark

between us. Never was really. I just wish he'd get the message. It's not like we were ever a hot item, more like a one sided affair. I know he's your friend, but to be frank, on the few occasions we did date, Ian was so pedantic it was starting to bug me. He'd obsess over every little thing, even his tie if it was off center. It was driving me crazy. And before I left town he got even weirder, following me around like a stray puppy. I'd look over my shoulder and hey presto, there he'd be. It was creepy." She finished with a shudder.

"Nonsense, Ian was in all probability just concerned and wanted things to be perfect... he truly is just a sweetie."

"Sweetie! Anal is more like it, but if you think he's so sweet you go out with him."

"Wake up Kathy, it's the twenty-first century and you're still looking for the fairytale ending. Well, let me tell you girl, the Prince Charming's of this world are long gone."

"Gosh, what a cynic you are, relax you're turning sour."

Liz gave an inelegant snort and turned to signal the waiter. She ordered another round of drinks and gave the room the once over.

It was fast filling up.

A group of strapping males had just arrived and staked out a position by the bar. They were a wild bunch, young, handsome, and full of life, obviously with something to celebrate. Judging by their appearance, they were from the local Naval Base. Eight in all, and from the appreciative looks bestowed upon them by the female patrons, the guys were in for a good time.

Liz eyed them with interest. Indeed they were a handsome bunch, but young, not long out of their teens if she were any judge. Her eyes travelled further up the bar and rested on a lone, fair-haired pin-up boy propped up against the counter having a beer. As

she watched, three more guys sauntered in and joined him.

These four were in an entirely different league. Older, self-assured, a powerhouse of muscle, they looked positively lethal. Although less rowdy than the younger men, it was apparent from their camaraderie that both groups were acquainted.

Liz enjoyed an uninterrupted view and decided to taunt her friend. “See any potential husbands at the bar Kathy?” she joked nudging her. Not even in her wildest dreams did she think Kathy would be remotely interested in this crew.

“Bite me,” Kathy said, but intrigued swiveled to check out the guys. Although cute, she dismissed the first group as too young. “I teach first graders, I don’t want to hang out with them as well.” She laughed. Then her eye was captured by a tall dark-haired Adonis, older than the others and slightly removed from the group. He lounged with casual indifference against the bar in quiet conversation with three men more his own age.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Her chest constricted as if the oxygen had been squeezed from her lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

Kathy blatantly stared, sizing him up, oblivious to everything else. She guessed his age to be around thirty. He was tall, well over six feet with ebony hair and a hard, powerfully built frame. The body of a warrior with the face of a god. Dressed in denims and a black shirt, he oozed masculinity. One hundred percent home grown hunk—truly magnificent—she couldn’t drag her eyes from him. It was as if she was a moth and he was the flame.

Shane Jackson a.k.a. Ice leaned against the bar and sucked on a beer. The SEAL trainees were in fine form tonight. SEAL was the acronym for Sea, Air and Land and the SEALs had to be efficient in all disciplines, adept at reconnaissance to demolition

and everything in between.

But tonight was all about fun. This was their first day off since Hell Week and that had been over weeks ago. Hell Week was exactly what the name implied. A punishing week where candidates survived on very little sleep and a truckload of adrenaline. A training session designed to divide and conquer and bring each man as close as possible to his physical and psychological breaking point. It wasn't the first time he'd been through it, but it was his first time as the trainer. He was in great shape though, prime physical condition, and easily rose to the challenges of his job. But tonight was liberty, and judging by the antics going on around him, the trainees were hell bent on making the most of it.

He watched with amusement as a group of young women celebrating a bachelorette's party flirted outrageously with the trainees, and the guys being guys, were lapping it up. Some of the girls were taking photos and flashes were going off like fireworks as one of the trainees and the bride-to-be entertained the crowd with their own rendition of dirty dancing.

Not to be outdone, two more of their group escorted a blonde and a brunette onto the dance floor and initiated some steamy moves of their own. Yeah, the place was heating up, and it didn't take much encouragement for the rest of the trainees to join in the fun. From the smoldering looks and heat being generated on the dance floor, some of the guys were going to get lucky tonight.

Observing the young men, Ice could empathize, clearly remembering experiencing the same hype when he and Frosty were trainees. God, there were days back then when he thought he'd never make it through.

He glanced across at the tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed man beside him and smiled. Patrick Frost, or Frosty to the team, was the only married man among them. A man utterly content with his life and it showed. His best buddy, confidante, and family, ever since

they'd met at SEAL training all those years ago. He recalled it had been a tough time, but with each other's support, they had made it through. The following years and some dangerous missions together had reinforced just how steadfast and reliable Frosty was. Yes, he was a good man to have on his side.

Then there was B. Michael Brannigan, better known as Hawk, propped up against the bar, radar on girl alert, cruising the boundaries and taking in the scenery. Next to him was Zach Buchanan, likeable, easygoing, and rakishly handsome, but an unknown commodity. Ice believed the persona Zach presented to the world was just a veneer that masked the real man underneath. He talked a lot but revealed little and played his cards close to his chest. A computer wizard to boot, the man was smart and careful. His nerves of steel and Hollywood smile allowed him to excel at two things—dismantling bombs and impressing women.

The job never fazed or flustered him, as cool as anyone Ice had ever worked with. Yes, he was cool all right, except of course when it came to the ladies. He had a real knack with women. He only had to crook his little finger and they'd be there in a heartbeat, from the cutesy teens to the grandmotherly types, every last one of them, all eager to do his bidding. Yeah, a real big bad Wolf was Zach Buchanan.

Ice turned and addressed him, "Hey Wolf, I thought you had somewhere else to be tonight?"

"Plans fell through," he grumped. "Yeah, and this is as good a place as any to get laid," Hawk chimed in. Hawk's mind was never above his navel for long. As Ice shook his head and smiled, the hairs on the back of his neck bristled, making him instantly alert. His instincts told him he was being watched. Like a predator, he scanned the room searching for the cause of his unease.

He shifted his head and like a bolt from the blue, the culprit entered his vision. Even in the dim light he could see the prettiest pair of doe eyes staring straight at him, and his attraction was

instant.

Captivated, he held her gaze, ignoring the conversation around him.

“Forget it Ice, she’s too pure for you.” Wolf laughed and slapped him on the back.

“Fuck off,” he snapped, more aggressive than he’d intended, his attention still riveted on Doe Eyes.

“Ho, ho, ho, the old man’s smitten.” Hawk chuckled and rested his elbow on the bar.

Frosty took a swig of beer and sidled up next to Hawk. “Who’s he scoping?” he queried, craning his neck to see the source of Ice’s attraction.

“Hot Tits, at the back of the room,” Hawk supplied, tilting his head in her direction.

“Yeah, she’s a cutie, worth a try,” Frosty acknowledged. “And if I’m not mistaken Ice, she’s scoping you too.”

Ice ignored their banter. His focus unwavering, his eyes clashed with hers. She really was something else, a hot little number who brazenly ogled him back, her eyes beckoned with a not-so-subtle invitation and damn if he wasn’t going to take her up on it. But not before he finished his beer.

Ice swallowed the last mouthful and placed his empty on the bar, but before he could take a step, his plans collapsed like a house of cards in a breeze. Two young men had beaten him to the draw.

Hawk slapped him on the back and commiserated, “Too slow old man, better luck next time.”

“Plenty more to choose from,” he replied with careless abandon, though he was feeling mighty pissed.

It wasn’t like he ever had trouble hooking up, but Doe Eyes was the only one who had captured his interest in the last five

months and he'd wanted her bad.

Kathy watched Adonis turn his head and their eyes collided across the distance.

Caught.

It was one of those moments that stayed in your mind forever, but in actuality it couldn't have lasted more than a minute. Telltale heat burned up her neck until her cheeks flamed. She lowered her eyes, but the urge to follow Liz's advice was overwhelming. She gave into the temptation and gifted him with a smile.

It was spellbinding. Inexplicably drawn by the imposing dangerous force that seemed to emanate from him, it was as if she knew he'd be trouble but now that she'd stepped onto this treadmill, she was powerless to resist.

Kathy read the intention in his eyes. Apprehensive but thrilled at the prospect, her heart hammered in anticipation.

He was going to come over. She knew it. She could feel it.

She picked up her glass and downed the margarita for courage.

"I think we're about to be approached," Liz calmly announced. Kathy grinned, but the smile slid off her face when she realized it was the two young blond guys from the adjacent table Liz meant.

"Hey ladies, mind if we join you?"

Before she had time to protest, Liz invited them to sit. Kathy could have screamed.

She had to make a concerted effort to listen as they explained they were both college students over to spend a weekend by the beach. They were friendly enough and she tried to act interested, but it was Adonis at the bar that held her attention.

The two blonds were stereotypically handsome. Gym junkies with brightly whitened teeth and solarium tans, eye candy but shallow. Their main topic of conversation—themselves. Boring.

To her credit, Liz tried to steer the talk to other topics, but it was an uphill battle and she gave up. Kathy smiled and nodded in all the right places. Liz wasn't listening though—her mind was wedged on Adonis. The urge to turn in his direction was overwhelming and she surrendered to the temptation.

He was still staring. The corners of her mouth tilted upward again, but as they did he turned away and ordered another drink. It seemed the attraction was only one-sided after all. Her face almost crumpled, her disappointment was tangible.

“How about a dance?” One of the guys asked. “Good idea,” Liz replied.

Kathy perked up. She'd had enough of listening to their prattle, so didn't object when Liz hauled her to her feet.

The foursome wove their way through the crowd of dancers crammed onto the inadequate floor space until they found a gap. Kathy swayed in time to the beat, but it took a whole lot of concentration and willpower to stay focused on what her partner was saying—visuals of Adonis still cluttered her mind, despite his disinterest.

When the band struck up a romantic number, Kathy's partner Blondie pulled her into his arms and began moving against her suggestively. Roving hands groped her butt. Annoyed she knocked them away and stepped backward, glaring until he got the message.

For the next few songs he behaved and they settled into spasmodic conversation. Then the band played “Unchained Melody.” Blondie closed the gap. One hand gripped her waist the other splayed her derriere forcing her hips hard up against his groin. His mouth dropped to her neck, his moist lips against her skin and alcoholic breath in her face was nauseating. She placed

her palms against his pecs and pushed firmly.

Ice fumed in silence and berated himself for missing his chance. More often than not, he wouldn't give a rat's, but Doe Eyes had made an impression and he wanted to kick his own ass for hesitating. He wasn't a masochist, but those two were leaving nothing to his imagination as they cavorted and writhed together in slow motion on the dance floor.

Time to split.

Downing his beer in one swallow and without another word, Ice headed for the exit. He made the mistake of shooting a final glance in her direction and wished he hadn't. The lucky son of a bitch had her fanny in a firm grip, kneading those tight ass cheeks and rotating his hips against hers, doing the vertical version of the horizontal rumba right there on the dance floor for all to see. Ice uttered an expletive and marched through the crowded club, out into the temperate night air.

"Quit groping me." Kathy hissed, her low tones masking her annoyance.

"Come on doll face, you know you want it, I can feel it."

The temerity of the guy had her seething. "You are so wrong. I don't want it. You can't feel it, in fact, I'm out of here." She wrenched away and stormed off, leaving her partner standing mouth agape and alone on the dance floor.

"You'll be sorry." His petulant cry carried on the air after her.

Kathy ignored the childish threat. The only reason she had to be sorry was because by dancing with him, she'd missed her chance with Adonis.

Enough was enough.

Scanning the floor she spotted Liz among the dancers right away and threaded a path toward her.

“I think it’s time to leave.” She touched her friend’s shoulder.

Liz tapped her ear with her index finger. Kathy interpreted the gesture and pointed to her wristwatch, then the exit. Liz nodded her understanding and leaning toward her partner shouted, “Thanks for the evening, it’s been fun, but I’m going now.”

The boy’s reaction was quick and he caught her arm just as the band switched to a ballad. “Not yet sweetheart, it’s still early,” he cajoled.

Kathy was standing close enough to hear their words over the lull in the music and she felt bad. He was right of course, it was still early, not yet eleven in fact. Kathy gave him a commiserating shrug as she led the way off the dance floor.

The girls collected their handbags and made for the exit. Kathy though, couldn’t resist a final peep along the bar. Her eyes raked the group, but Adonis was not standing among them. The smile slipped from her face and her disappointment swelled. It was unreasonable; she hadn’t even exchanged a single word with the guy. One of his buddies though winked at her, she lifted her chin and her lips curved upward, he returned the smile and raised his beer in mock salute as she sailed by.

Once outside, Liz declared, “Those college boys were keen.”

“Yeah, you got that right. They must have thought they were on to a sure thing with older more sophisticated women of the world like us.” Kathy chuckled, tongue in cheek as the two girls linked arms.

The night for Kathy had been fun despite the wandering hands, like old times, and she was grateful that Liz had come to visit. It had brightened her up no end, and they were giggling like a pair of light-hearted teenagers as they strolled the three blocks home.

“What was that?” Liz asked, stopping by the park and turning toward the bushes.

“What was what?”

“That.”

Kathy heard it then too, a kind of muffled whimpering. Liz parted the bushes revealing a lumpy moving hessian sack tied with a rope. “Be careful,” Kathy cautioned as Liz unknotted the cord, but her concern was unwarranted as out wiggled a tiny puppy.

“Poor baby.” Liz scooped the little ball of fluff into her arms.

“Who would do such a cruel thing?” Kathy gasped.

“There’s a lot of sick puppies out there, pardon the pun.” The puppy gave a little bark and licked Liz’s face. “I’ll bet you’re hungry aren’t you, Cindy? Let’s get you home and fix you something to eat.”

“Cindy? Home? We can’t take her home—my lease has a strict no animals clause.”

“Here then, heartless.” Liz shoved the puppy into her hands. “You put her back in the sack.”

Liz waited—her expression smug while Kathy fought an internal war. “Okay, all right, I give up.” She threw up her hands. “But just for the night, tomorrow we find her somewhere else to stay.”

“She’s not really a grouch Cindy.” Liz smirked tickling the puppy behind the ears. “She just has a problem with breaking the rules.”

Sonny followed the girls at a discreet distance inordinately pleased with the night’s events. On arrival at the club he’d hung back, obscured in the shadows cast by the surrounding buildings while the redheaded bitch made eyes at the doorman. He was proud of his girl though, she didn’t interact, just watched and

waited patiently until they'd finished, not at all interested in engaging in idle flirtations.

When they'd gone inside he'd followed and taken up a discreet position on the opposite side of the room, content to watch and photograph her unobserved and marvel at her beauty.

When that clown started pawing her on the dance floor, he'd almost flown at him in a rage, but she'd acted true to form and sorted him out quick smart. She was pure, he just knew it. Pure as twenty-four carat gold and she had a kind heart, just look how she'd treated the stray. Yes, his woman was one fine lady, and he could hardly wait until she shared his bed.

Ice's head filled with fantasies of Doe Eyes as he walked home in the dark. He hadn't had a woman in far too long, that had to be the explanation as to why he was so hot under the collar for this piece of tail.

Damn filthy luck he'd missed his chance, he chided himself as he scaled the stairs to his apartment and let himself in. Too dog-tired to be bothered with lights, he headed straight for the bedroom. The street lighting from the open window was more than ample to see by.

After toeing off his boots he stripped, discarded jeans, shirt, and socks in one untidy pile, crossed to the window and drew the curtains, instantly darkening the bedroom. The air was still warm from the heat of the day, too warm for a blanket he decided shoving it to the foot of the bed as he crawled naked between the sheets, but sleep eluded him.

The debriefing scheduled for tomorrow should have been what occupied his thoughts, but instead he kept mentally humping the hottie from Shenanigans, his imagination in overdrive as he envisaged what it would be like to have her snuggled up butt naked in his bed for a week.

She was a honey. No question about that.

Her chestnut hair curled in flippant wisps around her face. He liked the way the back was twisted up and held there by some sparkly contraption that twinkled under the lights showcasing her exquisite neck. She was a sexy wench. And her breasts were amazing as they rose and fell, threatening to burst right through that flimsy top she was wearing.

Teasing.

Taunting.

Tantalizing.

His mind was a swamp. The ribald images were so vivid it was like watching his own private porn flick.

When their eyes met and locked, the atmosphere had charged with desire unleashed. Sexual tension crackled through the airwaves, and her sultry glances confirmed she'd felt the connection as well.

Why had he waited so damn long to make his move? Of course a sex kitten like her would have guys lining up, those two young bucks had moved in like a shot.

He thickened with lust as he fantasized about her soft pliant body lying naked beneath his. She had bewitched him. It was an alien feeling, all the more strange because even as a young man with a raging libido he'd always held himself in check, rarely fantasized.

No way was he going to get any sleep in this condition. What he needed was a cold shower to take the edge off. Ice threw back the covers in disgust, stomped into the bathroom and turned on the jets.

Under the spray he thought about the past. He had gone to great lengths all his adult life to avoid close relationships. Except for the time he'd dated Janine. Twenty-three years old with stars in

his eyes, he thought she'd been the real deal. That is until he'd hopped an early flight one winter's night and lobbed in unexpected at two in the morning.

He'd had no idea, not even an inkling. It had come from left field and hit him like a freight train, and just like that two years of his life evaporated like the morning mist. What made it harder was that he knew the guy, called him friend. Ha, weasel was more like it. In hindsight though the jerk had done him a favor, as it turned out the weasel wasn't the only dude banging Janine while he was away. It knocked him off kilter at the time, but now he struggled to even remember her face.

No more emotional entanglements or long-term commitments, experience had taught him they just weren't worth the hassle. His sex life these days consisted of romps with women who knew the score and were only looking for a good time. Predators, much like himself and that suited him fine. He was happy to oblige.

Of course, they weren't all one-night stands. There had been a couple of women he dated on and off on a semi-regular basis, but they never amounted to anything for either of them, and when he called it quits, no hearts were broken, no tears were shed.

He was a loner and that's how he liked it. He'd resigned himself to that fact years ago, but when Janine came along he thought his luck had changed; it hadn't. Now he was committed to the Navy, work was his life and marriage was not in his vocabulary. If he wanted family, he'd go to Frosty's and borrow his.

Back in bed refreshed from the shower and his ardor temporarily cooled, Ice tried to push all thoughts of Doe Eyes aside. It was easier said than done. She kept slipping back into his mind uninvited, but thinking about her was pointless. He redoubled his effort to clear his head in order to sleep, but it was proving damn near impossible.

Hell, he thought he'd had her, would have taken bets on it, but in his arrogance had waited so had missed his chance. His eyes tracked her every movement though and under the ultraviolet lighting, her tight white pants left nothing to the imagination. He had no problem defining her curvy ass through the thin fabric and what a great ass it was too, she was either butt naked underneath or at the very most wearing a thong. Yeah, he'd sure been on a winner with that one but damn it, he'd fucked up and so junior no doubt was sampling her honey pot right now while he was alone in bed with his dick in his hand. Fuck life was cruel.

Rolling from side to side in his king sized bed, Ice tossed and turned restlessly. It was in the small hours that he finally dozed off, but it wasn't for long. A little over an hour later he was rudely jolted awake.

He cocked his head and listened, trying to identify the noise. High pitched squealing came through the bedroom wall.

Ice dived out of bed and snatched up his jeans, wondering what the hell was going on in that apartment, but in his haste to dress, tripped and cracked his forehead on the nightstand. He swore a blue streak and hauling himself to his feet made for the door, and then skidded to a halt as realization hit him like a ton of bricks. It was a damn dog.

A damn dog that had no business being in an apartment block that strictly prohibited animals. What in the name of Zeus was that scatterbrained woman thinking?

Although Ice had never clapped eyes on his neighbor, he knew she was a woman, he'd seen her name on the mailbox. Miss Bellamy. He could just picture her too. A prissy-assed spinster with nothing better to do than break rules and annoy her neighbors.

Pissed off but satisfied no one was in danger; he stripped and with a don't care attitude, tossed his jeans over a chair and crawled back into bed for a few more hours of shut-eye. That soon proved impossible.

Lying awake in the dark he glared at the digital clock display that registered 03:05, he needed to be sharp for tomorrow's meeting and he'd had less than an hour's sleep.

"Perfect," he grumbled aloud, "Just bloody perfect." He punched the pillow and tried to settle into a comfortable position.

Quietness reigned again and Ice relaxed, but just as he was teetering on the brink of sleep the infernal whimpering started again.

He rolled onto his stomach and grabbing the pillow wrapped it around his ears to muffle the noise, but there was no escape. The whimpering didn't let up, just went on and on until he was ready to explode.

Once again gritty eyes settled on the clock. As he watched it click over to 03:45 his temper boiled and he blew his stack.

Ice flew out of bed like a man possessed, bashed on the wall and bellowed, "Shut that fucking dog up!"

Goddamnit, what the hell was he thinking? Ice was immediately contrite. He'd let his temper get the better of him and would now have to pay the price by apologizing to the old broad in the morning.

Kathy was in paradise having the most wonderful, amazing time. The midday-sun streamed down warming her bikini-clad body while Adonis rubbed suntan lotion into her skin. Waves lapped at the shore, coconut palms swayed in the gentle sea breeze while Adonis whispered endearments into her ear, his words a sensual caress.

An idyllic setting, with a god fondling her in the most delicious way. Suddenly the sky darkened. Black clouds gathered overhead, the wind gusted and blew, froth capped breakers pounded the shore and the palm trees shook so violently that the coconuts fell.

Thud, thud, thud.

Kathy was rudely wrenched back into reality. She blinked open her brown eyes and stared into the darkness. Momentarily disorientated, she slipped out of bed and fine-tuned her hearing. Oh no, Cindy was making a heck of a racket.

Bare footed, Kathy rushed down the hallway to the laundry and slid open the door. She scooped the naughty puppy into her arms and crooned, “Shh, stop that yap...”

“Shut that fucking dog up!”

Kathy’s feet literally left the floor; so unexpected was the intrusion she almost dropped the puppy. “Gee thanks Cindy, see what you’ve done?” she muttered. “Now I’ll have to apologize to that creep in the morning.”

Kathy shivered, whether from standing barefoot on the cold tile or from the verbal assault, either way it was immaterial, she’d broken the rules and would have to pay the price. However indirectly involved in disturbing her neighbor’s sleep, the truth of the matter was, the buck stopped with her. She prayed he’d be reasonable, confrontation of any kind was abhorrent to her, and the aggressor was a formidable man with an intimidating presence. She’d glimpsed him entering his apartment only last week, admittedly it was brief and only from behind, but he was a giant of a man, and she sure as heck had no desire to cross swords with him.

Yes, an apology was called for, and she resigned herself to that fact as she tiptoed out of the apartment and down to the front lawn cradling Cindy in her arms.

The air was crisp and Kathy stood on the dewy grass waiting for the puppy to perform. She prayed no one would see her in her faded and worn nightwear. When Cindy did the expected, she scooped her up and hurried back to the apartment, glad to be leaving the cool night air. Once inside, she was reluctant to leave

the dog alone in the laundry fearing another episode so took the puppy to her room and placed her on the bed.

“Now you behave,” she told the little dog. Cindy obliged, and stretching out, rested her head on her tiny paws. Kathy switched off the bedside lamp, snuggled down under the covers, and fell into a fitful sleep.

The early sunlight filtering through the sheer curtaining hours later caressed and warmed. It was going to be another scorcher.

Kathy tilted her chin toward the open window and reveled in the feeling of the sweet morning breeze on her skin.

Not one to waste the day, she arched her back like a cat and stretched, rolled onto her side and slowly opening her eyes blinked. Her lips formed an ‘O’ and a startled cry almost escaped. Curled in a contented ball on the pillow beside her was Cindy.

With the culprit blinking back at her, the whole frightful episode of the night before was brought sharply back. Kathy cringed; the task ahead was unpalatable. Salvage mode was on the agenda.

She gave the pup a quick scratch behind the ear, tossed back the covers and slipped out of bed. The apology would be made right after her run. No point delaying the inevitable, but it was still early, not quite seven, and the creep probably wouldn’t appreciate being woken at this hour, not even for an apology.

Kathy donned her gear ready for her morning run, a ritual she’d performed since arriving at this quaint seaside town. She pulled on her runners, fastened her hair into a high ponytail, and headed for the kitchen with Cindy trailing behind.

Liz was already dressed and seated at the table sipping coffee when Kathy wandered in.

“Good morning, I didn’t expect to see you up so early,” Kathy greeted her. “How did you sleep?”

“Like a baby, how about you?” she said picking up the puppy for a cuddle.

“Not so good, in fact Cindy and I had quite an eventful night.”

“Whatever do you mean? I didn’t hear a thing.”

“I’m not surprised Liz, I always said you could sleep through a bomb going off!”

Liz listened as Kathy recounted the early morning events. “You wouldn’t believe that such a tiny speck could create such a ruckus as to rouse the neighbours, but that’s just what Cindy did. I nearly jumped out of my skin when he started banging on the wall and shouting obscenities. He was real angry not that I could blame him, it was three forty-five in the morning.”

“Gee Kath, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too, nothing for it now but to apologize and pray he doesn’t make a formal complaint and have me evicted.”

“This is my fault. I’ll make the apology and if any groveling has to be done then I’ll do it, and on my knees if I have too.”

“It’s not your fault, there was no choice so don’t sweat it. I’ll do it when I get back from my run, on a full stomach of course,” Kathy said as she walked out the front door.