



Prologue

From: Lucy@mysterious.com
To: clare@finis.com; adele@biteme.com;
maddie@crimepays.com
Subject: singles.com date

Hey all,

Tonight is my last Internet coffee date. His name is
hardlunman. I pray he has his teeth.

Wish me luck,
Lucy

From: clare@finis.com

To: Lucy@mysterious.com; adele@biteme.com;
maddie@crimepays.com

Lucy,

Good luck with your research. Hopefully he has his own teeth and own hair and remembers to brush both.

Clare

From: adele@biteme.com

To: Lucy@mysterious.com; clare@finis.com;
maddie@crimepays.com

Looking forward to hearing all about Lucy's hardlunman.

Adele

P.S. What kind of guy calls himself hardlunman?
Is he compensating for something?

From: maddie@crimepays.com

To: adele@biteme.com; Lucy@mysterious.com;
clare@finis.com

Lucy,

For God's sakes don't do it. Serial killers lurk on those online dating sites. It's like shooting fish in a barrel for them. Next thing you know, some guy is wearing your head for a hat.

Love,

Maddie



Mysterygirl: Seeks Man for Mystery . . .

Lucy Rothschild pulled her BMW into the parking slot closest to the Starbucks entrance and shoved the vehicle into park. Rain pounded the hood of her car and bounced off the asphalt as she turned off the Beemer. Her gaze slid to the front of the strip mall and sought the green-and-white Starbucks sign next to the golden glare of Blockbuster Video. Light from within the coffee shop poured out onto the wet side-walk, while the raindrops slipping down Lucy's window smeared vivid color and inky shadows like an abstract painting.

Next thing you know, some guy is wearing your head for a hat. Lucy turned off the car and shoved her keys in the pocket of her navy blue Ralph Lauren blazer. She hated when Maddie said things like that. When she made everyone else as paranoid and freaky as she was. Maddie interviewed psychopaths for a living, but that didn't mean

all men were child molesters, rapists, or serial killers. Lucy wrote about murder too, but she wrote fiction and was able to separate what she wrote from real life. Maddie seemed to have trouble with that.

Lucy grabbed her umbrella from the passenger seat and opened her car door. It wasn't as if she was going to set up a second meeting with hardlunman or was even going to leave Starbucks with him. It wasn't even as if she was taking this coffee date any more seriously than she'd taken the others she'd had during the past few months.

She hit the button on her umbrella with her thumb, and the red canopy opened as she stepped from the car. Like the other 'dates,' tonight was about work. She had her small notepad and pen in her pocket, right next to her little can of mace. She'd brought the pen and paper in case she needed to write down interesting tidbits about hardlunman after he left. She'd brought the mace in case he wanted to wear her head for a hat.

Damn that Maddie.

Lucy paused briefly to shut the door behind her, then moved across the parking lot, dodging puddles on her way. Unless hardlunman was different, she wouldn't even use the pen and paper. Unless he was different from the others, while they waited in line for coffee he'd give her the slow up and down, as if she were an Airedale at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. If she passed inspection, he'd pay for her triple grande skinny latte (hold the whip, please), ask her what she did for a living (although she'd clearly lied on her bio, stating she was a nurse), then proceed to talk about himself (what a great guy he was) and his former wife/girlfriend (and what a dumb bee-yatch she was). If Lucy didn't pass the slow up

and down, she'd pay for her own coffee. Which had only happened to her once.

Bigdaddy182 had been a real cheap bastard with a silver tooth and a neck-hair ponytail. He'd taken one look at her and said, 'You're skinny,' as if that had been a bigger abomination than his beer belly. She'd bought her own coffee, then proceeded to listen to him talk about himself for the next hour. While he'd rambled on about his run to Sturgis and his bitch of an ex-wife, Lucy had thought about different ways to kill him off. Bad, heinous ways. In the end, she'd known she'd have to stick to her female serial killer's MO, but erotic asphyxiation had seemed too good a way for him to die.

Two steps from the sidewalk, Lucy planted her foot in a puddle. She'd almost made it. Cold water rushed over the toe of her black ankle boot and splashed the bottom of her black jeans.

'Crap-ola!' she said and stepped up on the curb. She opened the door to Starbucks and moved inside. The smell of rich, dark coffee filled her head, and the low steady hum of voices coalesced with the sound of the coffee grinder and espresso machine. No matter what city Lucy might travel to, Starbucks always looked and smelled the same. Kind of like Barnes and Noble or Border's. There was some comfort in that.

Lucy closed her umbrella, and her gaze took in the gold walls and the patrons sitting at brown tables and hard wooden chairs. No man in a red baseball hat. Hardlumnman was late.

Lucy shoved her umbrella in the stand by the door and moved to the counter. When he'd e-mailed her and asked her to meet him, he'd written that his real name was

Quinn. Lucy preferred to think of him as hardlunman. She didn't want to think of him or any of these dates as real people. It was easier to kill them off that way.

She ordered her latte, sans whip, then took a seat at a small round table in the corner. She unbuttoned her blazer and smoothed the collar of her navy blue turtleneck.

She supposed it was a sad commentary on her love life that the only dates she'd had lately hadn't even been real dates at all. The only reason she was subjecting herself to men like bigdaddy182 was that she needed research for her new mystery novel, *dead.com*.

Lucy raised the latte to her lips and took a cautious sip. She only needed one last victim for her book. Even if hardlunman turned out to be a decent guy who didn't need to die, Lucy was done with Internet coffee dates. She'd had enough of men who acted like it was *her* job to pursue *them*. Like she had to convince *them* to ask her out again. If this last date didn't prove fortuitous, she'd figure something else out. Like taking all the lying, cheating, needy characteristics of all her former boyfriends and roll them into one. But she'd done that before, and she was afraid her readers might catch on to the fact that the victims in all her books were starting to resemble the same recycled losers.

No, it was time for new losers. She'd agreed to meet hardlunman, as opposed to some of the other candidates, for several intriguing reasons. First, his photo on the dating site was so grainy that it was hard to determine what he actually looked like. It just gave an overall impression of a dark, intense broodiness that she found a little mysterious. Second, in his bio he stated he was a

plumber who owned his own business. Which could be a lie but was probably the truth because, really, why would anyone lie about being a plumber? Third, instead of falling into the thirty-five-to-forty-year-old-never-been-married-or-divorced categories, hardlunvman had stated that he was a widower. Which could be the truth or a sleazy way to score sympathy points and trick women into bed. If the latter turned out to be the case, Lucy had her last victim. Voilà!

The front door swung open, and a man with thinning red hair stepped inside. Lucy recognized him immediately. His name was Mike, aka klondikemike. He'd been her first coffee date, and the first murder victim. He moved toward a blonde woman standing next to a display of mugs, and together they walked to the counter. Mike did the up-and-down thing with his eyes and paid for the two cups of coffee and a bag of chocolate-covered coffee beans. As the two made their way to a table a few feet from Lucy, Mike's gaze met hers, then slid guiltily away. He hadn't e-mailed her again after their date, but she could have told him not to worry. She had no interest in a guy who talked non-stop while popping coffee beans like they were cross tops, and whom she'd left with a plastic bag over his head in Chapter One.

She brushed the red lipstick on the lip of her cup and glanced about at the other tables. She was surprised the recent murders in Boise hadn't slowed down the dating scene. Surprised but relieved, as it suited her own purposes.

In the past few months, three men had been suffocated in their own homes. She'd actually met one of the victims, Lawrence Craig, aka luvstick, at Moxie Java and was still a little freaked out about it.

The police weren't releasing much information, other than saying that all three deaths had been due to suffocation. They weren't saying what *form* of suffocation, only that the perpetrator was believed to be a woman. The newspaper hadn't stated how or where the killer met her victims; Maddie had speculated that the woman probably met them in bars. Lucy figured she was probably right. The fact that Lucy was writing about erotic asphyxiation and men were being suffocated was a huge coincidence, but there were a lot of different ways to die of suffocation. As many as the human brain could conjure, and the chances of life imitating art were too huge to ponder. And besides, she refused to confuse real life with fiction and become as crazy as Maddie.

By the number of couples in Starbucks, men didn't seem worried about meeting women in coffee bars. Probably because like Lucy, they'd met these women via dating sites and had been exchanging e-mails. And out of all the places to meet, Starbucks was safe.

Before Lucy had decided to online date in the name of research, she'd always thought online dating was . . . well, desperate somehow and more than a little lazy. While Lucy could certainly understand why women sought men online, she could not understand the reverse. Why would any reasonably attractive man, who had a job, his own neatly brushed teeth, and did *not* live with his mother have to search for a date online? Wasn't picking up women in bars and restaurants or even in the vegetable aisle at Albertson's in a man's job description?

A month after her first online date, what she discovered was that the men online – like bigdaddy182 and klondikemike – expected her to pursue them. They

also seemed to fall into two categories: those in want of killing, and those so boring she'd wanted to kill herself.

Oh, she was sure that out there somewhere were some great online guys. Nice men who just wanted to meet nice women and didn't meet a lot in their everyday lives, great guys who didn't hang out in bars or veggie aisles. She just hadn't met any of them. In fact, she hadn't met any great guys, online or otherwise, in a very long time. Her last boyfriend had been a charming alcoholic who'd been off the wagon more than he'd been on. The last time she'd had to bail him out of jail, she'd finally had to admit that her friends were right. She was an issues junkie with rescue fantasies. But not anymore. She was tired of trying to rescue assorted lame asses who didn't appreciate her.

Lucy pushed back the sleeve of her jacket and looked at her watch. Ten after seven. Ten minutes late. She'd give hardlunman another five, and then she was leaving.

She'd learned her lessons about dysfunctional men. She wanted a nice, normal guy who didn't drink too much, wasn't into extremes of any kind, and didn't have mommy/daddy issues. A man who wasn't a compulsive liar or serial cheater. Who wasn't emotionally retarded or physically repugnant. She didn't think it was too much to ask that he have sufficient verbal skills, either. A mature man who knew that grunting an answer did not pass for conversation.

Lucy took a drink of her coffee as the door to Starbucks swung open. She glanced up from the bottom of her cup to the man filling up the doorway as if he'd been blown in from a 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' convention. The bill of his red ball cap was pulled low on

his forehead and cast a shadow over his eyes and nose. His tanned cheeks were flushed from the cold, and the ends of his black hair curled up like fish hooks around the edge of the hat. Rain soaked the wide shoulders of his black leather bomber's jacket. The jacket's zipper lay open, and Lucy's gaze slid down a bright strip of white T-shirt to the worn waistband of faded Levi's. As he stood there, his gaze moving from table to table, he shoved his fingers into the front pockets of the worn denim, his thumbs pointing to his button fly.

Mr. hardlunman had finally arrived.

Like his photo on the Internet site, Lucy could not see him clearly, but she knew the second his gaze focused on her. She could feel it pinning her to her chair. She slowly lowered her cup as he pulled his hands from his pockets and moved toward her. He walked from his hips, all long and lean, with a purpose to each step. He navigated his way through chairs and coffee drinkers but kept his gaze on her until he stood across the small table.

The shadow of his cap rested just above the deep bow of his top lip. He raised a hand and slowly pushed up the brim of his cap with one finger. By degrees, the shadow slid up the bridge of his nose and past thick black brows. He looked down through eyes the color of a smoldering Colombian blend.

Lucy was a writer. She worked with words. She filled each of her books with a hundred thousand of them. But only two words came to mind. *Holy crap!* Not eloquent, but fitting.

'Are you Lucy?'

'Yeah.'

'Sorry I'm late,' he said. His voice was deep,

testosterone rough. ‘My dog got into the garbage just as I was leaving, and I had to clean up after her.’

Which Lucy supposed could be true but, she reminded herself, probably wasn’t. Not that it mattered. After tonight, she would never see this hunk of hardlunvman again. Which was kind of too bad, since he was the best-looking thing she’d seen outside of a men’s magazine.

‘I’m Quinn.’ He held his hand toward her, and the sides of his jacket fell open across his chest to reveal hard pecs and abs of steel all wrapped up in his tight T-shirt. The kind of pecs and abs that begged the question: Why did a guy like him have to go online to find a date? It didn’t take her long to come up with the answer. Inside that hard body, there was something wrong with him. Had to be.

Lucy took his hand, and his warm palm pressed into hers. Calloused. Strong. The kind that actually might belong to a plumber. She took her hand back and wrapped it around her cup. ‘Aren’t you going to get a coffee?’

‘I’m good.’ As he sat, his dark scrutiny touched her face, her hair, and cheeks, then slid to her mouth. His voice dropped a little lower when he asked, ‘Are you good?’

Was she good? She blinked several times and asked, ‘At what?’

He chuckled. ‘Do you need another coffee?’

‘Oh. No. Thanks.’ She placed her palms flat on the table and slid them into her lap. ‘I’ve had too much caffeine.’ Obviously. She wasn’t the sort of woman to get all rattled over a good-looking man. Usually. ‘That’s the problem with these late-night coffee meetings.’

‘How many of these dates have you been on?’

Dates? ‘Enough.’ She tilted her head to the side and concentrated on finding a flaw. Just because she was a bit rattled didn’t mean she’d forgotten what this meeting was all about. ‘How many have you been on?’

‘Not many. It’s been a long time since I dated, and this whole Internet, chat room, dating stuff is new to me.’

There it was. He trolled the chat rooms. She’d been right. There was something wrong with him. Something that hid behind those dark eyes and long black lashes and smooth, masculine voice. ‘I read in your bio that your wife died. I’m sorry for your loss.’

‘Thank you.’ He took off his hat and combed his fingers through the thick black strands of his hair. The ends curled up around his knuckles. ‘She died six months ago.’

Which seemed a relatively short time to seek a replacement, Lucy thought. It could mean he was lonely. Or a callous bastard. ‘How’d she die?’

‘Car accident. It was our tenth wedding anniversary and she’d run to the store for a bottle of champagne. I waited at home with two dozen daisies, but she never returned.’

Daisies? Was he a cheap callous bastard?

He laughed uncomfortably and pulled his hat back on his head. ‘Daisies were her favorite flowers.’

Okay, that made her feel a little mean. It was *possible* he was telling the truth. Or it was just as possible he was a scammer. A scammer with a body that scrambled a sensible woman’s brain. ‘You must miss her terribly.’

‘More than I ever thought possible. She was everything to me.’ He looked down at the table, and she

wasn't able to see the emotion in his dark eyes for the brim of his hat. 'Sometimes the pain is so bad . . .' He paused for several heartbeats before he continued, 'Sometimes it's hard to breathe.'

Oh my God, Lucy thought. She should write this down for Clare. Clare wrote romance novels, and this was heartbreaking stuff. Lucy had to admit that it was even working on her – a hard-core romance cynic.

'She had soft red hair, and it used to fan out across her pillow while she slept. Sometimes I stayed awake just to watch her dream.'

Lucy pulled her brows together as Aerosmith played in her head. That was either the loveliest thing she'd ever heard, or he was poaching song lyrics. If the latter was the case, he was really cheesy. 'What was her name?'

'Millie. We started dating our senior year in high school.'

'You were high school sweethearts?'

'Yeah, but we broke up briefly once because I was a dumb ass.' He shrugged his big shoulders, but he didn't look up. 'I was twenty-three and thought I needed to date other women. That lasted a month before I realized Millie was everything I would ever want in a woman.' He cleared his throat and said as if he were having a difficult time getting the words out, 'She was the other half of my soul.'

Again, that was either really romantic or really cheesy. Lucy leaned toward cheesy because there had to be something wrong with a guy who was physical perfection yet trolled the chat rooms for a date. Some hidden personality disorder. 'Perhaps it's too soon for you to date?'

‘No.’ He looked up, and his brown eyes met hers. ‘I have to try and get on with my life. I’m not looking to replace my wife, but some nights I just need to get out of the house. Sometimes sitting at home watching *Cold Case Files* with just a dog for company gets old.’

He watched *Cold Case Files*? *Cold Case Files* was her favorite show, and if she was forced to miss an episode, she taped it. ‘*Cold Case Files* on CBS or A&E?’

‘A&E. I like the real cases.’

‘Me too! Did you see it last night?’

‘Where they discovered the torso in a gym bag?’ He sat back, and the shoulder seams in his jacket popped as he folded his arms across his chest. ‘Yeah, I saw it.’

‘They caught some lucky breaks with that one.’

Quinn slid down a little in his chair and brought his gaze level with hers. ‘Science finally caught up with the criminal.’

‘That’s true. Makes you wonder how anyone can get away with anything these days.’ Lucy took a sip of her coffee and gave up on trying to pick him apart to discover his flaws. Since she would never see him again, it didn’t matter really. ‘But then people do get away with crime every day. They just have to be smart about it.’

His thick brows lowered in thought. ‘Do you think there’s such a thing as the perfect crime?’

Did she? In her books, the mystery was always solved by the last page; the perpetrators brought to justice. But was that true in life? ‘I think if you’re smart and do a little research, you could commit the perfect crime. And even if it’s not so perfect, you could still get away with it.’

He looked at her for several heartbeats, then asked, ‘How’s that?’

‘Most criminals are caught because they have to talk about what they’ve done. Except serial killers. Serial killers get away with their crimes because they don’t usually talk about what they’ve done.’

‘Why do you think?’ he asked.

‘Probably because they don’t have a conscience. Most people with a conscience tell someone about their crime. It’s like a sneeze. It’s got to come out to relieve the pressure.’

‘You don’t think serial killers need to relieve the pressure?’

‘Sure. But for them, the killing relieves the pressure.’ Talking crime was one of her favorite pastimes. When she got together with her friends and they talked about writing, it was more about the process. Each wrote in a different genre, so they didn’t really get into specifics. Well, except for Maddie. She’d get into the gruesome specifics, usually over lunch, and they’d all have to tell her to stop. It was kinda nice talking murder with someone who didn’t look like he was going to get excited about liver temperature.

‘Did you catch the show the other night about that woman who poisoned five husbands?’ Quinn asked.

‘Bonnie Sweet? Yeah, I saw it.’ Bonnie had been the inspiration for Lucy’s fourth book, *Tea By Proxy*. Like Lucy’s murdering protagonist, Bonnie had boiled lilies of the valley into a toxic tea and served it in Wedgwood. ‘That woman just loved to garden.’ The fact that Lucy was having this conversation on a coffee date might seem strange, but it beat the hell out of listening to him bitch about an ex, talk about his motorcycle, or relive his hunting trip to Alaska. She was never going to see Quinn

after she left Starbucks, so what did it matter what they discussed? ‘You gotta give Bonnie points for style.’

Quinn gazed into her eyes as if he were trying to determine whether she was a psycho nutcase or spent too much time alone with her television. The truth was that she was a writer with page upon page of research in her head. Everything from lace to lividity.

He straightened and leaned forward to place his arms on the table. ‘It takes one coldhearted woman to slowly poison someone she supposedly loves. Or did at one time.’

Which was absolutely the truth. Female serial killers were coldhearted bitches. Every last one of them. They were also neater. Smarter. Cleaner and, as far as Lucy was concerned, far more interesting than their male counterparts. ‘Yes, but that’s what makes them ultimately fascinating.’

‘Fascinating?’ He shook his head and laughed without humor. ‘Thank God there aren’t many of those “fascinating” women around.’

‘Maybe they are around and we just don’t know it?’ Lucy smiled and tilted her head to one side. ‘Maybe female killers are just smarter than men and don’t get caught.’

‘Maybe.’ His intense gaze stared into hers, and she got the feeling that he was watching for something. For what, she had no idea. Quinn opened his mouth to say more, but a gagging sound caught his attention. Lucy looked to her left at Mike and his blonde date. Mike’s hands clutched the sides of the table and his face and neck were turning a deep red.

‘Oh my God!’ Lucy stood so fast her chair fell

backward. ‘Klondikemike is choking. Somebody do something.’

‘Shouldn’t you do something?’

She looked at Quinn as he rose also. ‘Me?’

‘Aren’t you a nurse?’

Nurse? ‘What?’ Oh crap. That’s right. She’d lied about that in her bio. Since no one else seemed to be doing anything, she quickly moved the short distance. She didn’t know the Heimlich maneuver, so she did the next best thing: She thumped Mike between the shoulder blades. Nothing happened, and she thumped him harder.

Mike’s date screamed. Someone across the coffee shop yelled, ‘Call 911! A man’s choking to death.’

The noise inside Starbucks went from a low steady hum to a wave of shouting and scraping chairs.

‘Jesus H. Macy,’ Quinn swore. He grabbed Lucy by the arms, picked her up, and moved her out of the way.

He hauled Mike up from behind, and with one abrupt squeeze, a coffee bean flew out and hit Mike’s date between her stunned eyes. Mike took a deep, gasping breath. ‘Thanks,’ he wheezed.

Quinn nodded. ‘No problem.’

The cacophony of raised voices grew even louder as people crowded around Mike to make sure he was all right. Quinn stood with his weight on one leg and his hands on his hips. A frown pulled at the corners of his lips as he watched the commotion in front of him. The gap between the zipper of his jacket widened across his hard chest, and Lucy thought she heard him mutter something that sounded a lot like ‘Nurse my ass.’

*Dick: Seeks Jane for
Fun and Games . . .*

Quinn McIntyre shoved his fingers into the front pocket of his Levi's and blew the air out of his lungs. His breath hung in front of his face, and his eyes narrowed as he watched the tail-lights of Lucy's silver Beemer heading down Fairview. She'd taken her coffee cup with her. Short of wrestling it from her hand, there hadn't been a damn thing he'd been able to do about it, either.

The rain had stopped since he'd entered Starbucks, but inky clouds covered three-quarters of the full moon. Quinn stepped off the curb and headed across the parking lot toward a black Econoline van. Lucy was no more a nurse than he was a plumber, but he'd known that the first time he'd e-mailed her. He'd known all along that her Internet bio was complete crap, and he'd known exactly what she did for a living. By the time he'd met her

tonight, he'd known a lot more about her than the color of her eyes and her blonde hair. He'd known her height was five feet seven inches, and that her weight was one thirty. He'd known she'd been born in the hospital downtown and raised in the North End, where she still lived. He'd known that her father had deserted the family when she was eleven and that that could cause a lot of resentment against men. He'd known she was educated and had sold her first mystery novel six years ago. And he'd known that in the last five years she'd received three speeding tickets and two more citations for rolling through stop signs.

What he hadn't known was that her eyes were deeper blue than they were in either her driver's license picture or in the publicity photo on the inside dust jacket of her books. Her hair had shiny streaks of gold, and her lips were much fuller. Walking into Starbucks tonight, he'd known he was going to encounter a striking woman, but he hadn't been prepared for the full feminine assault. From photos, there's no way he could have known that everything about her, from the touch of her soft hand in his to the gentle sound of her voice, was in opposition to a woman who wrote about serial killers and might be one herself.

Quinn walked beneath pools of artificial light, heedless of the puddles splashing his boots. As he approached the van, the window slowly lowered.

'Did you get all that?' he asked as he reached behind him and pulled his T-shirt from the back of his jeans.

'Yeah.' Detective Kurt Weber's round face appeared in the window. 'Did you get the cup?'

'She took it with her.'

'Shit.'

‘That’s what I thought.’

‘What was all that commotion toward the end?’

‘Some guy was choking on a coffee bean.’ He paused to pull at the transmitter taped to the middle of his back. ‘I think it’s pretty safe to say that Lucy Rothschild not only lied about being a nurse; she doesn’t even have a passing knowledge of CPR.’

‘All that serial killer stuff was interesting,’ law enforcement technician Anita Landers commented from where she sat in the back of the van beside the receiving equipment.

Quinn had thought so, too. He wouldn’t be surprised if by morning Lucy was the prime suspect in the ‘Breathless’ case, the name they’d given to the woman who met men online and suffocated them in their own homes. An ultrathin wire ran up his side to a tiny flat microphone taped to his right pec. ‘Shit,’ he swore as he ripped the microphone from the bare patch on his chest.

‘What was your first reaction to her?’ Anita asked.

Quinn handed the transmitter through the window and glanced past Kurt to Anita’s dark outline in the back of the van. The second he’d spotted Lucy sitting across the crowded café, his first reaction had been purely male and purely physical. The kind of reaction a man got when he focused on a beautiful woman. The kind that reminded him how long it had been since he’d had sex. ‘When I first sat down with her, I thought she was picking me apart, looking for flaws.’

‘Maybe she was picking you for her next victim,’ Anita suggested.

He’d thought of that too. ‘Yeah, maybe.’ As hardlunvman, he’d been on seven online, five chat room, and three

personal ad dates in the past two weeks. Kurt, aka hounddog, had been on about the same number while Quinn had sat in the Econoline, listening to every word. The two detectives' active caseloads had been shifted around so they could devote most of their time to this case.

Lucy had been Quinn's second coffee date that evening, and he was exhausted from trying to remember which lines to feed which woman. 'I'll see you two tomorrow,' he said as he zipped up his jacket. By morning, the Lucy Rothschild tape would be analyzed just like all the others. There was no point in standing around, freezing his ass off and talking it to death.

He moved to the silver Jeep parked a few slots from the van and opened the door.

'Hey, McIntyre,' Kurt called out to him as he fired up the Econoline.

Quinn looked over the roof of the Jeep. 'Yeah?'

'Is that Lucy woman as hot in person as she is in her photos?'

'She's better looking in person.' Which didn't eliminate the possibility that she could be a killer, but it did bring up some interesting questions. Like why would a woman who looked like Lucy and made the kind of money she did seek men online?

'That ought to make your job easier.'

Getting distracted by a pair of blue eyes and soft red lips did not make his job easier. No, it would be easier if Breathless turned out to be his first date of the night, Maureen. But even as he thought it, he recoiled. 'See ya in the morning,' Quinn said as he got in the Jeep and shut the door.

Maureen Dempsey, aka bignassy, was one of the stupidest females he'd ever met. She'd rattled on about her scrapbooks and doll collection as if he'd truly given a shit. She'd kept calling him 'Quint' and had topped it off by telling him that she'd read 'somewhere' that aliens had landed in the Sawtooth Wilderness Area just outside of Sun Valley and were impersonating humans. Thinking she'd surely been joking, he'd made a joke and managed a laugh. She'd been serious, and he'd felt his IQ drop ten points just sitting across from her. But the truly funny thing was, Maureen worked for the state at the Idaho Industrial Commission.

He fired up the Jeep and headed out of the parking lot. A cold blast of air hit his chest from the vents. The heat hadn't kicked on yet, so he turned off the vents. His fingers fiddled with the radio, then he turned it off, too. Within two minutes of meeting Maureen, Quinn had pretty much mentally crossed her off the suspect list. It didn't matter to him that she held a regular job. Plenty of stupid people worked for the government, but a woman who was capable of killing three men without leaving a trace of herself behind wouldn't honestly believe space aliens were living in northern Idaho. Quinn tended to agree with the FBI profiler's report that Breathless was highly organized and had above average intelligence. Quinn just didn't believe Maureen's stupidity was an act. No one was that good an actress.

According to the criminal profile, Breathless was between the ages of thirty-two and forty-eight. Because of the lack of physical evidence, the profiler believed she had knowledge of forensics and police procedure. She had an interest in criminal investigations and believed she

was smarter than the police. She wouldn't be caught by conventional methods and could probably pass a polygraph and withstand an interrogation without breaking down.

After reading the report, everyone in the department agreed that the best way to catch a predator like Breathless was with bait. Man bait. While Quinn could see the wisdom of the plan, he didn't like it. He had a bad feeling he was going to have to take things really far before they had enough evidence for an arrest. He wasn't afraid he'd be another victim. No, he wasn't thrilled about the thought of dangling his Schwanz in front of a psycho.

Quinn turned off Fairview and merged onto the connector. Streetlights lit up the section of highway leading into downtown like a white ribbon. He tried the heater once more, and warm air blasted through the vents as he headed toward Broadway and home.

All of the women the detectives had set up these past two weeks had several things in common that had landed them on the suspect list. They were all dating online and had been contacted by all three of the victims within days of their deaths. They all used the same chain of dry cleaners, and they all lived alone.

All three male victims had had several things in common that had landed them on the perpetrator's list. All had been actively dating, as if they'd been on some mission from God. All had had a long list of women they'd been juggling, going on as many as five or six dates in a week – usually with different women, whom they'd met through online dating services, chat rooms, and personal ads. Judging by the number of books they'd charged at Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Hastings Books and

Music, they'd been voracious readers. The first victim had been divorced, the second a widower, and the third married but posing as a widower. All three had died handcuffed to their beds.

The first victim, Charles Wilson, aka chuckles, had been found in his home off Overland, hands secured with flexi-cuffs and a Westco dry cleaner's garment bag over his head. The case had been classified a homicide, but to what degree had been uncertain. Considering the presentation of the body, it appeared the victim had been playing a fatal game of erotic asphyxiation with a rather kinky participant. The perpetrator had fled the scene leaving little evidence behind, and it was Quinn's job to determine if the kink had accidentally gone bad or the death had been premeditated.

They'd interviewed Mr Wilson's family and friends, who'd all claimed that he hadn't been seriously dating anyone for over a year. His former wife had remarried and lived out of state. Quinn had combed through his credit card receipts and his telephone records. He'd just about eliminated everyone Charles had been in contact with by phone or e-mail when the second victim had been discovered. Two bodies wasn't coincidence. The men's deaths hadn't been accidental, and by the time the third body turned up, they'd known they had a serial killer on their hands.

Charles Wilson had been murdered a month and a half ago, and if the detectives didn't move fast, there would be a fourth victim.

Soon.

Nobody wanted that. And nobody wanted the Crimes of Violence detectives to catch a break more than Quinn

did. He had no qualms about lying to women, and trapping a killer was part of his job. It had been several years since he'd worked undercover, and there had been times when he'd missed it. No, what he absolutely hated was reciting the mushy lines Kurt had written for him.

Quinn pulled his Jeep into his driveway and cut the headlights as he rolled into the garage. He parked next to his white unmarked police car and turned off the engine. Like always, Millie heard him and was waiting for him when he opened the back door. She was one female who was faithful, if a bit overly affectionate sometimes. He flipped on the light as he walked into the kitchen. Her big brown eyes looked up at him with adoration, and the light shone in her silky red hair.

'Hey, girl.' She licked his hand, and he went down on one knee. 'You're a good dog.' He scratched beneath her long ears, and her tongue flopped out of the side of her mouth in ecstasy. Her tail thumped the hardwood floor as Quinn's gaze took in the blinking light on his answering machine and the explosion of feathers scattered about the room.

A frown pulled at his mouth as he stood. Beneath the table were the shredded remains of his pillow. He hadn't been able to take Millie out for a run or to retrieve decoys in a while. She was bored, but at least she'd stayed out of the garbage this time. Not that there was anything in it now.

That was the problem with leaving a two-year-old Irish setter alone for too long a period of time. They tended to find trouble, but at least she'd only shredded his pillow.

He hung his jacket on a kitchen chair, then moved

across the kitchen. The last female he'd left alone had been his fiancée, Amanda, and she'd shredded his life. While he'd been out making a living, making the world safe from bad guys, she'd been screwing Shawn, his best buddy since high school.

Quinn pulled an empty garbage can from beneath the sink and carried it across the room. As long as he lived, he didn't think he'd ever forget the afternoon he'd found them naked in his bed. He'd never forget the look on their faces or the accusations spilling from the mouth of a woman he'd loved.

'I'm always alone,' Amanda had said as she'd pulled up the bedsheet to cover her bare breasts. 'You're always working, and I'm always here by myself.'

He'd pointed to Shawn, who'd jumped out of bed and begun pulling on his pants. 'You're obviously not always alone.' The handle of Quinn's H&K 9mm had pressed into his waist as rage had pounded through his chest with every beat of his heart, clawing at his stomach until he'd thought he might get sick.

'We didn't mean for this to happen,' Shawn had said as he'd grabbed his shirt.

'You didn't mean to shove your dick in my fiancée?' In that moment, Quinn had understood the crime of passion; he'd understood the blind fog and consuming fury that made a man lose control and seek vengeance.

'What did you expect?' Two pretty little tears had slid from Amanda's eyes even as she'd placed the blame squarely on him. 'This is your fault. You're cold and unfeeling.'

He'd laughed, a raucous mix of anger and incredulity. 'Get the fuck out of my house,' he'd said. His hard, flat

voice had filled the room as hate and anger had raced through his body. Years of experience and control had curled his hands into fists before he'd been able to do anything stupid. 'Both of you.' Something in his eyes, or in the tone of his voice, must have shown just how close he'd been to violence, because they'd both grabbed up their clothes and run.

Quinn didn't believe he would have used his pistol on Amanda and Shawn that night, but he couldn't say that if they'd stuck around he wouldn't have beaten Shawn to within an inch of his life just on principle. He doubted it, though, because deep down in the pit of his soul, he knew that there'd been some truth to Amanda's accusation.

He moved aside a kitchen chair and reached for the near empty remains of what had once been his pillow. Millie didn't even bother hanging her head in guilt over the destruction. Instead, she walked through the mess, scattering feathers in her wake. If it hadn't been so wet outside, he would have shut her in her kennel while he cleaned up. 'Out,' he commanded and pointed to the entryway leading to the living room. Her big brown eyes looked over her shoulder as she slowly left the room. Wasn't it just like a female to try and make him feel guilty for something she'd done?

Quinn tossed the pillow in the garbage, and feathers floated up and stuck to his shirt. It had been a little over a year since he'd found Amanda and Shawn together. He'd heard that the two had married and now had a kid, a mortgage, and an SUV. Living the American dream, while he was still living *la vida loca*. Him and Millie. And that was perfectly okay with Quinn. There had been a

time when he'd thought he could have it all. When he'd thought he could have a wife, a few kids, and a minivan, but some shit just wasn't in the cards. Not for Quinn.

He picked the feathers from his shirt and dropped them into the trash. A lot of the cops he knew were on their second or third marriages, and he'd rather be alone than be part of a sad statistic. He had his job and his dog, his mother, two siblings, and seven nieces. That was enough family for anyone. And when he felt the need for female companionship, he knew where to find it. A lot of women found his badge an aphrodisiac. He wanted sex. They wanted sex with a cop. It worked out for both of them. Most of the time, it was enough.

Quinn stood and moved to a coat closet a few feet away. He pulled out a broom and dustpan and pushed Play on his answering machine. While he chased feathers around with the broom, he listened to a recording from the Sears warranty department, advising him the warranty on his refrigerator was about to expire. The second call was from his mother.

'Erin had her ultrasound today,' his mother's voice informed him. Her long sigh filled the kitchen before she continued, 'She's having another girl.'

Quinn chuckled. Erin was married to Quinn's brother, Donny. The two already had three girls. The latest would bring the total females in Donny's house to five. Five to one. Poor bastard. He was doomed.

Another long sigh, then, 'Of course we're happy. But who will carry on the McIntyre name if Donny keeps having girls?'

Quinn was the oldest McIntyre, followed by his sister, Mary, and then Donny. Between Mary and Donny there

were seven granddaughters. Quinn didn't see why he should add any more rowdy children to that mix.

'I ran into Beatrice Garner at Sunday Mass,' his mother informed him as he swept feathers into the dustpan. He didn't even have to guess at his mother's point. 'Her daughter Vicky works at Dillards. In the children's department. She's single and attends St. Mary's there on State Street.'

'Forget it,' Quinn said as he picked bits of down and feathers from the crotch and thighs of his jeans. The day he'd transferred from narcotics to violent crimes, his mother had taken a moment to thank God that Quinn had given up chasing dopers and getting shot at by crack dealers, then she'd promptly taken it as her mission in life to see him 'settled.' Now she was convinced that with the love of a good woman and regular trips to the confessional booth, Quinn would be happy. Whenever he pointed out that the 'love of a good woman' had royally screwed him over, his mother countered that Amanda hadn't been a 'good woman.' Among her many sins, she'd been Presbyterian. He'd given up trying to convince his mother that he liked his life just the way it was and that he was as happy as anyone else on the planet.

Her voice rambled on for a few more moments about Father this and Deacon that before she ran out of steam and the machine clicked off. He shoved the garbage can back beneath the sink and leaned the broom against the counter. He tossed the dustpan on the stove, then grabbed a bottle of Labatt from the refrigerator. Maybe if she worried about her own love life, she wouldn't be so concerned about his. He didn't know how he felt about his mother dating again so soon after his father's death.

Although, when he thought about it, it had been three years since his father had dropped dead while pruning his mother's Roses of Sharon.

He picked up his laptop and files from the table where he'd left them earlier and flipped off the lights on his way out of the kitchen. Millie rose and followed at Quinn's heels as he moved into the living room. With his free hand, he grabbed the remote and turned on the ten o'clock news. He sat on his leather couch and set his laptop and files on the glass coffee table in front of him. Millie sat on the floor next to his knee, and he reached over and scratched beneath her long red ear.

Within the dark comfort of the room, light from the television slipped across the beige carpeting and spilled over the coffee table to the toe of one boot. He watched the weather forecast, which called for more rain. So far, the press hadn't reported a lot of details concerning Breathless. All the public knew was that three men had been suffocated in their own beds. The method used to suffocate the victims hadn't been released, nor had the fact that the police believed she was meeting her victims online. The press were cooperating. For now. If one of them thought they were being scooped, that could all change.

The light flickered as the news programming switched to a commercial about insurance. Quinn raised the beer to his lips and watched a gecko dance around on the screen. He'd been a cop for sixteen of his thirty-six years. The first six of those years he'd spent as a patrol officer before making detective and spending the next six in narcotics. He'd started out eager and naive, thinking he could save the world from drugs and related crime. He'd been raised

with a strong moral compass. A clear definition of right and wrong. Good and evil. Black and white. But within a year of hanging out in dive bars and making friends with lowlives, that definition had changed. The line between good and evil had gotten blurred, and black and white had become a constant gray.

The longer he'd worked undercover, the more *he'd* changed. The more he'd changed, the more the unacceptable had become everyday life until one day he'd looked at himself in the mirror and hadn't recognized the man he'd become. What he'd seen had been a man with long hair and a beard. A man with hard and unfeeling eyes. He'd liked what he'd seen.

Narc cops had to think fast, talk smooth, and have balls of steel. They were smart and arrogant and convinced of their invincibility, and Quinn had been one of the best. For six years he'd lived in a world of drugs and violence, and he'd gotten off on the grit and spit and taste of it in his mouth. Bringing down big-time drug dealers had been a huge rush. Out-badassing the baddest badass had been an adrenaline high that had lasted for days. There had been nothing like it. His life and his job had become so intertwined that he hadn't known where one had stopped and the other had begun. The change in him had alarmed and frightened his family, so he'd rarely shown up at family functions, until one day he'd stopped going at all. He'd lived, breathed, and made love to the job. It had become his whole life, and he'd loved every minute of it.

Until it had all come apart.

Quinn took another drink, then lowered the bottle to rest on his thigh. Her name had been Merry, like she should have been happy and cheerful, but there'd never

been anything in Merry's life to cheer about. She'd been a nineteen-year-old whore with a habit to support. Her drug of choice had been black tar heroin, but she'd had a falling out with her boyfriend/dealer after he'd raped and beaten the hell out of her one too many times. The first time Quinn had seen Merry, her eyes had been black and blue and swollen shut. The second time, she'd signed on to be Quinn's confidential informant and had introduced him to her dealer and supplied him with information.

For the next eight months, Quinn had done what he did the best. He'd laid on the bullshit, slowly making friends with lowlifes. Then he'd gotten a phone call in the middle of the night that had blown him out of the water. Merry's body had been found in a shopping cart in the back of Winco. As he'd stood in a slow, drizzling rain, looking down at her small body and her black chipped fingernail polish, anger had clouded his head and burned a hole in his brain. Eight months of work, down the toilet.

Fuck.

He'd watched a raindrop slide down her forehead and nose. It had dropped on her chin, and something had hit the reset button on the moral compass that had gone horridly off course. A woman was dead, a girl really, and his first thought had been about the job. This time, when he'd looked in the mirror, he hadn't liked the hard, unfeeling bastard looking back at him. He hadn't liked what he'd become.

Merry had been Quinn's CI, and he'd failed her. He'd failed her as a cop, and he'd failed her as a human being. On paper, he'd done everything right. He'd gone strictly by the book, but he should have done more.

In her short life, he'd been just the last man to let her

down. Her grandmother had been the only relative to claim her body, and even though he'd failed her in life, there had been something he could do for Merry in death. He'd paid for the funeral, bought the best coffin, and had been one of only a handful to attend the burial. Every year on the anniversary of her murder, he placed pink roses on her headstone. He didn't even know if she'd liked pink.

Merry had died four years ago, and he still carried the guilt of it in his chest. He figured he always would. A constant reminder to be human, and in a job where he saw the worst in people, it kept him from falling into the us-vs-them mental pit once again.

After he'd put on the suit and transferred to the Violent Crimes Division, he'd concentrated on getting pieces of himself back. Of straightening out his warped view of right and wrong. Good and evil. Black and white. He'd thought he'd succeeded. He'd started to think of maybe having a life outside of work. Of having a wife and a child and one of those kiddie backpacks. But Amanda had proved that some things just weren't meant to happen. Not for Quinn. He was resigned to it and was okay.

He raised the beer to his mouth and flipped channels on the remote. Light flashed like a strobe as he took a long drink. Quinn loved working in the violent crimes unit. He got off on collecting random clues, chasing disparate leads, and gathering seemingly unrelated evidence. He loved piecing them together until they made a complete picture and gave the investigation direction. He loved taking violent criminals off the streets. But it wasn't his whole life. He was able to keep perspective and distance.

To leave it at the office – except this time. Breathless had to be stopped before she killed again.

Quinn had an inherent talent for stepping back and seeing the bigger picture, but this time there just wasn't anything to see. There were few clues, truly disparate leads, and the unrelated evidence proved to be just that. Unrelated.

This case was keeping him up at night. The who and why of it spinning around in his head without anything ever falling into place. Whoever Breathless was, she was one smart female. And if there was one thing Quinn hated above all else, he hated to be outsmarted by criminals. Female or otherwise.

Which brought his thoughts around to Lucy Rothschild. He was a cop. Trained to read deception in a person's body language – and especially the eyes. But several times during the date he'd caught himself staring at her mouth instead of her eyes. Checking out the curves of her body for reasons that had nothing to do with deception and everything to do with the way her breasts filled out her sweater. And in those moments of distraction, the overriding question in his head had been, what made a woman like Lucy date men online? He could understand why men dated online. Asking out women could be intimidating as hell for some guys. But all a woman had to do was stand around and look good. Smile once in a while to let a guy know she was interested. How hard could it be? Especially for a beautiful woman like Lucy.

There was something wrong with her. Had to be. Something hiding behind those big blue eyes. Something that might point to murder.

The only evidence linking Lucy to the Breathless case was her name on the Westco dry cleaner's customer list, one e-mail sent to her from Charles Wilson, aka chuckles, and one known coffee date with the third victim, Lawrence Craig, aka luvstick. It wasn't much, but then, the police didn't have much to go on at this point in the investigation.

The detectives were methodically eliminating suspects, and they had a lot fewer than when they'd started. Yet each begged the same question: what kind of woman would agree to meet a man who called himself luvstick? The police were betting the same kind of woman who would agree to meet someone who called himself hardlunman or hounddog.