

—FLICKER

by Lee Thomas

All that Kathy knew of love came from images flickering on an old television screen. What came from this screen was fiction, and Kathy had discovered the difference between fiction and reality long ago. Fiction was a house in suburbia, cleaned by a beautiful mother who baked cookies, wore pearls and prepared delicious meals. Fiction was a father who worked a steady job in the city, declared his daughter's beauty to the world and fussed over the men who might date her. Fiction didn't show a little girl, bruised and crying, hiding in a filthy basement terrified of the fuckers she called Mom and Dad. But reality did. Reality offered a mother who worked out her boredom with vodka and strange men and a father who expressed frustration with his fists and his cock. Reality offered Santa Monica Boulevard on Christmas Day, waiting for one of Keith's friends to pick Kathy up so she'd have her fix and a warm place to sleep. The company she kept was irrelevant. In this, reality's blindness was equal to love's.

And what did it matter? This wasn't a career, just a means to an end. She had ambitions. Early in the mornings as Keith snored next to her, Kathy laid awake imagining herself on the screen with Mark Wahlberg or Tom Cruise. The dream had followed her from childhood. Like Angelina Jolie or Sandra Bullock, Kathy wanted to be a star and see posters bearing her likeness hung on walls by adoring fans and see her name on movie theater signs. Her parents had laughed at her aspiration. They had no time for her "craziness." So, she'd gone into her basement and mimicked whatever movie she'd seen that afternoon, losing herself in a fiction that effectively filled a vacant childhood—at least for small periods of time. In her basement she became someone admired and loved, became someone strong and heroic, became anyone but Kathy Windman. She'd even played Frankie in her junior high school's production of *The Member of the Wedding*. Of course, her parents had been too busy to attend any of the shows, but her teachers and even some of the other parents had congratulated her beautiful performance. Such an exciting feeling it had been for her, being recognized as an actress.

Sadly, she'd never done another play. Her boyfriend in junior high, Larry, had said it was all so stupid. She'd temporarily abandoned her dramatic pursuits at his request, exchanged them for pharmaceutical dreams. The void she'd once filled with acting was soon plugged by blow, blunts, and a six-pack of Bud.

At fifteen, after Larry dumped her, Kathy hitchhiked from Seattle to the city

where dreams were everything. One night while watching the dollar movies in a run down theater on Hollywood Boulevard, she'd met Keith. He'd given her a place to stay, a purpose and a new relationship with new dreams. These dreams offered needles and a cloudy world where pain was not allowed.

Almost a year had passed since they'd met. And now she waited on a corner for Keith's friend. She couldn't remember his name but he was supposed to pick her up.

She was going to make a movie.

The news had disturbed her at first. Although she wanted nothing more than to see her image on a screen, she didn't want to make porn flicks. She knew what happened to actresses who took the easy way out, who jumped at the money and then got the reputation, an inescapable reputation, as a whore. She didn't want that. She wanted to be a star, with all of the praise and respect that accompanied the title.

But Keith wouldn't hurt her. He loved her. He always told her so. He just had a friend who liked to make home movies. The guy was a voyeur. The movie wouldn't be seen by anybody, especially anyone from Hollywood. It was simply a game that this guy played, and besides Kathy wanted to see herself on the screen, even if the screen were nothing more than that of a high-def flat panel Sony.

As she grew concerned that her ride might not show, a gray Lexus pulled to the curb. Behind the wheel, a well-dressed man with silver hair and a fatherly smile leaned across to look her over. "Are you Kathy?" he asked. His teeth were very white and his skin very tanned. Looking in from the tall curb she could see that he wore white pants, which were pressed into sharp creases, and a crisp cobalt blue dress shirt. The sleeves were rolled up along thick forearms.

She nodded, flipping her hair over her shoulder as she stepped off of the curb. The man pushed open the door. She got in the car and as the door closed, the lock engaged.

"You're Keith's friend?" she asked.

"My name," the man said jovially, "is Desmond Silver. And yes Keith and I have something of a history."

Kathy nodded and stared out the windshield of the sedan as the familiar buildings of her neighborhood pulled behind her. The inside of the car was warm and comfortable after the chill afternoon.

"Merry Christmas," she said uneasily.

"And Merry Christmas to you," he replied.

Light cologne, trapped in the car with them, tickled her nose. It smelled like almonds and reminded her of the movie theater back home. The Marquis, a theater down the street from where she'd lived with her parents, sold really good chocolate covered almonds and whenever she hadn't spent her lunch money on cigarettes or make-up, she'd bought a box of the candy from the concession stand. They'd been especially good with a Dr. Pepper.

Wrapping a thin coil of blond hair around her finger, she studied the driver from the corner of her eye. He didn't talk much. That made her uncomfortable, but nothing else about the man seemed threatening. He had a pleasant smile on his round face and really pretty eyes. They were so blue. He didn't look anything like Keith's other friends. Some of them were old, but they looked different. They looked like lizards, and when they smiled they looked like *hungry* lizards. Most of Keith's friends were