

Episode 3: Torn Asunder

The note crumpled in her hand as she curled her fingers into a fist. She didn't need to read it again. The contents... every word... was burned into her brain, playing on an endless loop.

I can't do this anymore.

Tears slipped out and left hot trails down her cheeks as she closed her eyes. How had it come to this? How had it gone wrong so fast after all these years of being so right?

It was an impossible choice she was being asked to make. Wasn't it?

There was a scuffling sound from the doorway, but she didn't open her eyes. The tears came harder when she smelled familiar perfume as her visitor came closer. A warm hand touched her back, and she felt Cindy sink into a crouch next to her. The reporter's voice was hushed when she spoke.

"Claire? What's wrong?"

"I'm being an idiot, aren't I?"

Wide, sad brown eyes looked back at her.

"It's just..." Lindsay searched for the words to explain her anger. "It's... she just..."

Martha laid her head down on her front paws and looked up forlornly at her pacing master. She just wanted her morning dog treat.

Lindsay took out her phone and flipped it open. "I should just call her. I should just call Cindy and..." She flipped the phone closed with a snap. "No. No... I'm not calling her. I'm not gonna cave this time. She always looks at me with those puppy dog eyes... you know the ones." She glanced at the dog. "Exactly. Just like that," she said pointing at Martha.

Martha sighed.

"She could have died," Lindsay said with sudden volume, making Martha's ears twitch. "She risked her life, again. Why does she keep doing that when it makes me crazy? Sometimes I think she does it on purpose to make me crazy. She's a reporter... a story is not worth risking your life over." Lindsay flopped down in one of the kitchen chairs before slapping her phone on the table. "Damn it."

Her fingers drummed on the tablecloth. She ached to hear Cindy's voice. Craved the sight of the girl's sunny smile. Lindsay wanted to look into those warm, teasing brown eyes that got her to open up and say things she normally wouldn't.

There was something about Cindy Thomas that settled Lindsay in a way nothing or no one ever had. It was what made staying away from her so damn hard... what made her so mad that it could have been lost.

You're gonna miss me when I stop coming around, Cindy had said to her once.

Damn it all to hell if the girl hadn't been right.

Lindsay raked her hands through her hair, wishing she knew what in the hell to do.

The phone rang and she jumped, startling Martha who raised her head and barked once in response. Lindsay checked the caller ID.

Cindy Thomas.

Her heart leapt behind her ribs. The angry part of her wanted to let the call go to voicemail, wanted to ignore it all together...

She flipped the phone open. "Boxer," she answered, wincing when she heard how eager she sounded to talk to the reporter, even if it was to yell some more.

There was a pause on the other end, and Lindsay closed her eyes, feeling her heart ache just a little. She wanted to take everything she'd said to Cindy back, wanted to apologize for being an overprotective ass, but Cindy owed them an apology. Not the other way around.

"Lindsay..." Cindy hesitated again, and Lindsay strongly suspected the reporter had expected to get her voicemail. "Um... can you get down to Claire's office ASAP?" Her voice was quiet, strained.

"Something turn up on the Blake or Dellan murders?" Lindsay asked.

"Just... come quick. Claire... Claire needs us for something."

Lindsay felt her stomach sink. "What's wrong?"

"Please," Cindy said softly. "Just come. I can leave when you get here if you want." Lindsay heard Cindy swallow. "Claire needs you."

That was all Cindy had to say. "Give me twenty. I'm on my way." Lindsay started to say more but Cindy hung up, leaving Lindsay with the drone of a dial tone. She felt irrationally hurt which was stupid, she decided, because she was the one who was

supposed to be mad.

Lindsay got to her feet and grabbed her keys off the counter, her thoughts on Cindy and what Claire could possibly need. She jogged to the door, quickly letting herself out.

Martha watched her go before her ears flicked and she sighed again. Suddenly the door reopened and Lindsay came trotting hurriedly back inside. She reached into a cookie jar on the counter then tossed the patient dog a biscuit.

Martha crunched happily as Lindsay left once more.

“So what is this about?” Jill looked less than thrilled with Cindy’s summons. They’d barely spoken since the incident at the school six days ago. She was still mad at the chance Cindy had carelessly taken with her life, but she’d still come running when the reporter had called. As much as she wanted to keep her distance, it was proving hard. She missed Cindy. Missed her damn perkiness. It was annoying.

But Cindy didn’t look perky this morning. She looked exhausted and worried. When Cindy looked worried and wasn’t talking... that’s when Jill knew whatever shit was going on was serious.

“It’s Claire.” Cindy’s voice was subdued. “I came by to talk to her this morning. I found her crying in her office.”

Jill’s blue gaze shot to Claire’s closed door. She and Cindy were standing inside the morgue, relatively alone save for the two sheet covered-bodies she was trying to ignore nearby. “Crying?”

“Yeah.” Cindy shook her head. “She was clutching a note in her hand.”

“What did it say?”

“It’s not like I pried it out of her fist, Jill,” Cindy snapped, her own emotions getting the better of her for a moment. Only Claire had been there for her the last few days as Jill and Lindsay had given her the cold shoulder.

Jill blinked, startled by the flash of heat from the redhead. The last time she’d seen it directed at her, Cindy had wound up bleeding on the courthouse steps with a bullet in her before Jill had gotten a chance to apologize. The memory made her heart hurt and she had to look away. She really needed to sit down and hash things out with the reporter, but she wasn’t ready to forgive and forget just yet. Without another word, she walked to the door, feeling Cindy fall in step behind her. Jill knocked and entered without waiting to be asked. Claire was sitting at her desk, staring off into space. She was no longer crying, but Jill could see the evidence that she had been. The sight shook her.

Claire wasn't supposed to cry. She was their anchor. The well-adjusted one of their overly-emotional and relationship-challenged group. Seeing Claire so upset caused the coffee in Jill's stomach to sour.

"Honey?" Jill said as she came closer. "Are you okay?"

Claire took a breath and looked at them both. She held out the note, and Cindy took the crumpled ball of paper. "Read it," Claire said, her voice hoarse with tears. "Save me from saying it."

Jill went shoulder to shoulder with the reporter, each forgetting their irritation with each other for the moment to focus on Claire. Cindy smoothed the note out as best she could then tilted it toward the light so they could see it better.

Claire,

I can't do this anymore. I can't watch you risk your life chasing after killers. We have two children. What am I supposed to say to them when their mother doesn't come home because she died looking into things she has no business looking into?

I'm not going to let another serial killer into our lives. I won't. You bring home enough death every day with your job. Why do you have to seek out more?

We need this fresh start if we're going to survive, Claire. Please, take the job in San Diego. One way or another... I'm going. I hope it's with you instead of without you.

Ed

Cindy read far faster than Jill. She was on her second pass of the note by the time the attorney read Ed's familiar signature. They turned and looked at the medical examiner, both speechless.

"Now you know," Claire said wearily.

"An ultimatum?" Jill asked. "From Ed?"

Claire nodded. "I was offered a nice position in San Diego. More money, less hours..."

"But you're not going to take it," Jill blurted. "Ow!" She yelped when Cindy elbowed her harder than necessary in the side. "What?" Jill demanded. "She's my best friend. I don't want her to leave!"

"Claire..." Cindy moved away from the attorney and sat on the edge of Claire's desk. "Why didn't you tell us?"

“I didn’t think there was anything to tell,” Claire sighed. “I wasn’t going to take the job. I’m happy here. My friends are here.” She looked at Cindy’s hand where it rested on the wood of her desk. She reached out and took that hand in her own, feeling Cindy squeeze back. “Ed seemed all right with that...”

“Until a new serial killer showed up,” Jill guessed, her voice suddenly subdued.

“And the shooting at the school,” Cindy murmured. It seemed like there was no end to the fallout over that. More collateral damage, her thoughts suggested. The aftermath had already crippled her relationships with Jill and Lindsay.

“We were already having problems before that,” Claire admitted. “You knew,” she reminded Jill.

“I just thought...” Jill shook her head. “I mean... you’re the Washburns. You’ve always been the Washburns. You and Ed are like the only people I know who make marriage work.”

“Apparently not anymore,” Claire muttered. Cindy’s grip tightened on hers. “Nothing has been the same since the shooting... he’s not the man I married. I’m not talking physically,” Claire hastened to explain.

“We know,” Cindy said quickly. “So this... Hallelujah Man showed up and piled another straw on the camel’s back, huh?”

“The who what?” Jill asked.

Cindy looked from Jill’s blue eyes to Claire’s dark ones. Both of them were looking at her like she’d lost a marble or two. “You didn’t see the Chronicle? They named the serial killer. Because of the Bibles, the scripture...”

“It’s a Love and Money song,” Jill pointed out with outrage. “I *like* that song.”

Cindy tapped her chest with her fingers. “Not my paper. Not my problem. I’m just saying... it’s gonna catch on.”

Claire shook her head. A tiny part of her almost wanted to smile at the pair of them. They were like squabbling siblings. The thought segued into images of her own children and her amusement vanished as her heart constricted. “What if he sues for custody?” Claire abruptly asked.

Cindy and Jill immediately returned their focus to Claire. “Okay... let’s slow down here. No reason to get litigious, yet,” Jill said. “You and Ed just need some time... talk things out. There have to be some options here.”

Claire picked up the note where Cindy had laid it on the desk. “I’m out of time,” she said

in an elevated voice. “I either choose the two of you and Lindsay, or I choose my family. There are no other options.”

They were all quiet a long moment. Jill made eye contact with Cindy who wordlessly eased away and made room for the attorney to crouch in front of Claire. Jill licked her lips. “What do you want to do?” she asked with an edge of fear in her voice. She prayed she could put Claire’s needs over her own, but the thought of her friend not being there every day was making her stomach twist in knots.

“The answer should be a given,” Claire said softly. “I should want to do whatever it takes to keep my family together.”

Jill frowned, the lawyer in her reading between the lines. “You *should*...” she said slowly. “Does that mean... you don’t?”

The double doors in the morgue swung open as Lindsay Boxer moved into the room, her considerable presence filling the suddenly too small space. Jill watched as Lindsay’s eyes immediately locked gazes with the reporter she hadn’t seen for a week. For the first time, she could actually see the real potential between them, feeling the undercurrent of sexual energy that flowed between the two effortlessly. Not that either one of her friends seemed clued into the fact, however.

Cindy tore her gaze away from the welcome sight of Lindsay and glanced back at Jill and Claire before sighing. “I’ll...” she motioned at Lindsay with a wave of her hand, resigned to being the one to fill the newcomer in.

Jill nodded just as Claire covered her eyes and tried mightily not to cry again. Lindsay saw the tears and went still before surging toward her upset friend.

“Claire?” Lindsay got as far as the doorway when Cindy grabbed her arm, spinning her away and yanking her toward the hallway and some privacy. “Hey!” Lindsay barked but she went willingly when she saw Jill’s encouraging look.

“We’ll figure this out,” Jill promised Claire as she rubbed her back with soothing circles. She was as scared for the club as she was for her friend’s marriage. Already they were fragmented from the friction with Cindy. What would they do if they lost the one friend who knew how to hold them all together? “We’ll figure this out,” Jill said again, praying that it was the truth.

Lindsay nearly stumbled out into the hallway as Cindy gave her a rougher than necessary push. The reporter might be short, but she apparently had some muscle on her smaller frame Lindsay wasn’t aware of. “What’s wrong?” she demanded before the doors had even closed behind them. “What happened?”

“Claire is upset.”

“No. Really, Lois Lane? The tears didn’t clue me in on that,” Lindsay spat then mentally cursed herself when Cindy flinched and put a few more steps between them. She hated that sudden distance, wanted to eliminate it, but her stubbornness kept her where she was.

“Do you think you could put aside being mad at me for one morning for Claire’s sake?” Cindy looked up at her beseechingly. She watched as some unidentifiable emotion chased its way across Lindsay’s face. She hated this, hated them fighting after the weeks before when they had been growing so much closer. Cindy blew out an aching breath and dropped her gaze to the floor. “I’ll fill you in and leave,” she offered, her throat tight. “Okay?”

Lindsay jammed her hands into her back pockets to keep from touching Cindy. She wanted to draw the reporter into a hug, but instead she felt like she was kicking her when she was down. “I’m sorry,” Lindsay said in a calmer voice. “I just... I don’t like seeing Claire cry. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Cindy cleared her throat, taking Lindsay’s apology as the small victory it was. “She got a letter this morning. From Ed.”

Lindsay could only think of one kind of letter from Ed that would make Claire cry. Her heart went into freefall. “Oh God. What...?”

“He gave her an ultimatum.”

“*Ed?*” Lindsay said in disbelief. She shook her head, trying not to think about Tom, trying not to remember the sudden swell of painful memories that threatened to bring her to tears. No. No, Claire was not going to go through that. Not Claire and Ed...

“Either Claire takes a job in San Diego or...” Cindy trailed off and looked at the floor again.

Lindsay rubbed her forehead before pinching the bridge of her nose, hard. “This is not happening,” she murmured. “Not to them.”

Cindy said nothing. The same thought had been going through her own mind, but it was more about her and Lindsay than her friends. She felt guilty for that. It seemed like so much was falling apart around her, and she didn’t know where to start trying to fix any of it.

“I have to...” Lindsay shook her head and moved past Cindy, returning to the morgue and Claire’s side.

Cindy continued to stand there in the empty hallway. Tears welled up and spilled over and she wiped at them angrily. With one last longing look at the doors, she left the

remaining members of the club behind. This was no time for the friction between her, Lindsay and Jill. The last thing Claire needed was to deal with the tension among them.

She slammed open the door leading to the muted sunlight beyond. She'd come back and be there for Claire later.

Alone.

Lindsay hesitantly stepped into Claire's office. Her friend was sobbing quietly and she felt her own tears well up in reaction. It made the whole world feel wrong to see Claire cry like that. Jill was holding her, the blonde's features stricken as her blue gaze lifted and met Lindsay's.

Wordlessly, Jill handed Lindsay the note and the inspector read it with a sigh. The truth, written clearly in Ed's handwriting, was no easier to accept even with visual proof. "Claire," Lindsay's voice held the ache she was feeling for her friend. "I'm sorry."

Jill rubbed the other woman's back. "It's going to be okay, sweetie." She watched as Lindsay came closer. They shared a look over Claire's bowed head before Lindsay sank to her knees and eased her long arms around Claire's frame.

"He'll come to his senses, Claire. He's just..." Lindsay swallowed. She knew what Claire was feeling. What it was like to have a killer come between you and your marriage. It seemed like stepping away from something so violent, so cruel, should be so easy, but it wasn't. If anything, for a person with any sense of justice, it made stepping away nearly impossible. This was what they did. Stopping monsters like Billy Harris and the man they were chasing now... it was what they were meant to do.

Ed should know that. He'd been a cop. He'd given his legs for the job. Where did he get off demanding this of Claire? Unless it was an excuse... and that thought didn't make Lindsay feel any better.

"Maybe he is coming to his senses," Claire finally said as her sobs wound down. "He's right. I bring death home."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jill answered with a touch of heat. She leaned back and ducked her head, encouraging Claire to look at her. "I've seen you at home. I lived with you. You're a wonderful mother, a wonderful wife... Ed is being the prick of the century."

"Jill..." Lindsay's voice was tight and held a note of warning.

"He is!" Jill shot back without remorse. "Linz, let's stop tip-toeing around this. We all know he's still messed up over the shooting, but this is his way to get attention, to feel like he has some power... to yank her away from the things she loves. I want to be

sympathetic to him, but damn it, this is Claire! I'm not going to sit back and pretend I'm okay with this." Jill turned her watery blue gaze on the woman in question. "He knows you'll go! He knows you'll leave us..." Jill's voice broke and she blinked several times as she fought tears.

Claire was silently watching her. "How can he know that, honey?" she finally asked, her voice hoarse. She was touched by Jill's display of anger on her behalf. She took her friend's hand in hers, drawing strength from it when Jill returned her grip without hesitation. "How can he know that when I'm not even sure?"

Lindsay shifted so she could look into Claire's eyes. "Wait. Just wait... Claire..."

"I don't have anything left to give, Lindsay," Claire confessed, her tone defeated. "I've tried and tried and tried... and the only things that keep me sane are my girls and my boys. I love him, I love him so much I can barely breathe... but right now... right now I can't be with him. What am I supposed to do?"

Lindsay was wide-eyed in response to Claire's revelation. Claire had never looked at her like that before, had never asked for this kind of help from any of them. Her stomach twisted when she realized she didn't know what to say, what to do. Lindsay could only be there for her. *Make me laugh when the chips were down*, she remembered saying to Cindy. It wasn't just her rule. It applied to all of them. "You're asking me for marital advice?" Lindsay managed to joke. "Seriously?"

Claire blinked in surprise then a tremulous smile touched her lips. She reached out and placed her hand gently on the side of Lindsay's face in silent thanks.

Jill's phone rang and the attorney cursed. She unclipped it from her belt and checked the caller ID. "Shit."

"What?" Claire asked as she turned away from Lindsay.

"Denise. I'm late for our prep."

"The Dow trial?" Lindsay guessed.

Jill nodded. "She can wait. I'm ready for this case."

Claire took Jill's hands. "Honey, she's your boss, and we worked too hard to put that man where he belongs."

"I'm not leaving," Jill was adamant.

"Yes you are." For the moment, Claire was back to being the one member of their group that could always see reason. "You're a witness on the stand tomorrow, Jill."

“So?”

Claire gave her a look that made Jill feel like a misbehaving teenager. “I don’t want to leave you...” Jill began.

“I’ll stay,” Lindsay chimed in. “You need to go. Denise will have a cow with a bonnet on it if you don’t.”

Jill hesitated, clearly torn.

“Go,” Claire instructed. “We’ll talk more later.”

Jill shook her head and sighed. Finally she leaned over and kissed Claire on the cheek. “We’re not done.”

“Not by a long shot,” Claire agreed. “I’ll see you tonight at Papa Joe’s?”

Jill’s features softened. “Yeah. Hell, I’ll even buy.” She winked then gave Lindsay a meaningful look before leaving her two friends alone.

“You want me to talk to Ed?” Lindsay asked when it was finally quiet again.

Claire shook her head. “No. I don’t think that would be a good idea.” Her voice was hushed.

Lindsay closed her eyes. “We’re a part of the problem, aren’t we?” She asked knowingly. “The club?”

“It’s not a club,” Claire murmured with weary amusement. She managed a smile when Lindsay snorted. “It’s everything right now, Linz,” Claire said after a moment.

“But we’re not helping. The demands we put on your time...”

“It’s not about that.” Claire pursed her lips then looked at her hands. “He... resents you, Jill, and Cindy. He thinks I put all of you first.”

“You put your kids first,” Lindsay’s answer was swift and hard.

“Second then,” Claire agreed. She looked up into Lindsay’s concerned brown eyes. “I’ve always dropped everything and come running when any of you needed me. When Ed still had use of his legs... he didn’t care, but now... Now it feels like he thinks he can’t help anyone... so I shouldn’t be able to either.”

There was bitterness on both sides, Lindsay realized with a sick heart. How had she not seen what was happening between them? And she called herself a detective... “Why didn’t you say something?”

“When would have been a good time, Lindsay? When Tom was getting married? When you were being hunted by Kiss-Me-Not? After Cindy was shot?”

“Yes,” Lindsay said firmly, trying not to think of any of the unpleasant memories Claire’s words stirred. “During any of those times. Claire, I love you. We all do. You’re always there for any of us. You need to let us be there for you for a change.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” Claire confessed. “It’s much easier to dispense sage advice than to receive it.” She smiled sadly.

“Lucky for you,” Lindsay said as she dropped her head on Claire’s shoulder. “I have several years’ worth of your sage advice stored up in here.” Lindsay tapped her temple. “I can share your own wisdom with you. God knows you wouldn’t want any of mine.”

Claire laughed, just a little. She took a breath and lifted her head as she came to a sudden realization. “Where is Cindy?”

Lindsay’s eyes cut to the doorway. She thought the reporter had followed her in, had just held back to let her and Jill handle the situation. Seeing that the room beyond was empty made her feel like she’d been punched in the gut. Cindy had offered to go and Lindsay hadn’t told her to do otherwise. Apparently Cindy had taken her silence as an agreement. Lindsay swore softly under her breath. “She’ll... be back later,” she promised. It didn’t feel like a lie since Lindsay was fairly sure Cindy would check in on Claire... when she thought Lindsay might be gone.

“Ran her off, huh?” Claire asked without judgment.

Lindsay lowered her head. “Not on purpose,” she confessed, thinking she should have known better than to lie to Claire.

“Lindsay...”

“Look. You have other things to worry about than me and Cindy,” Lindsay told her.

“But maybe that’s something I can fix.” Claire’s voice was soft.

“We’ll be fine,” Lindsay promised. “We just need to get in a room and duke it out.”

“Promise me you’ll do it soon,” Claire pleaded.

“No fair,” Lindsay teased half-heartedly. “You’re using my sympathy for your situation against me.”

“At least something good could come out of this then,” Claire answered honestly. “And don’t pretend like this separation isn’t killing you.”

It was, Lindsay inwardly admitted. It was keeping her up, occupying her thoughts... making her have asinine conversation with her *dog*... "I'm not the one at fault here," Lindsay reminded her. "It was stupid. What she did was dangerous and it damn near got her..." Lindsay swallowed when she remembered coming into that stairwell, seeing that bastard with his hand inching up Cindy's thigh. A shudder racked her body.

"Honey..." Claire took a breath. "If you're going to be that mad at Cindy then you should be just as mad at me and Jill."

Lindsay hated logic when applied to her emotions. It gave her a headache. "It's not the same," she answered feeling lame.

"No... I don't think it is," Claire agreed slowly. "But I don't think you've figured out why, yet." She watched as Lindsay looked at her with confusion. "You think about that, Lindsay. Why it feels different to you when Cindy risks her life." Claire wearily patted her friend on the shoulder as the first of the morning employees began to arrive.

Lindsay sat perfectly still, trying to puzzle out what Claire meant. Her friend got to her feet and moved past her, greeting her staff as if nothing was wrong, as if her life hadn't come apart at the seams this morning. Why was it different with Cindy? Lindsay suddenly wanted to understand, but a fearful voice inside her head seemed to think she was better off not knowing.

"You're late."

Jill moved past Denise who was standing ramrod straight in the DDA's doorway. "I had a personal matter," she explained through clenched teeth. She dropped her briefcase into her chair then looked at Denise expectantly. "Do you want to do this here or in your office?"

"We have a free courtroom for an hour," Denise answered. "We'll do it there."

"I don't need to..."

"You've never been a witness before, Jill," Denise cut her off. "I'm damn sure going to make you know what it feels like to be one before Nicole Honeycutt does."

"Is this really necessary?"

Denise crossed her arms. "We're talking about a man who left another to rot in prison and nearly die for his crimes. A man who would have accosted you and probably much worse if Inspector Boxer hadn't arrived when she did."

Jill really didn't need or want the reminder. "I recall. I was there."

"The Galvans deserve justice for all he put them through. And Tracy Welling deserves justice that is long overdue." Denise's voice quavered the tiniest fraction at the mention of the former DDA.

Jill heard it. She swallowed when she realized she had forgotten that this case had to be pretty damn personal to Denise. She and Welling had been friends. Hell, Denise was sitting in Welling's old office. Reminders of the case... of her lost friend... were literally everywhere. If it had been Cindy, Claire or Lindsay that Dow had raped and murdered...

Their gazes held for a tense moment.

"You're the boss," Jill finally relented with a sigh.

"If only you would remember that more often," Denise sniped before pivoting on her heel and marching off down the hall.

Jill resisted the urge to display a finger at the retreating figure. Instead she followed wordlessly, her steps taking her toward the courtrooms several floors below while her thoughts stayed firmly behind in Claire's office.

"Tom."

Lieutenant Tom Hogan jerked at the light, feminine voice that called to him as he stepped off the elevator. He glanced over in surprise to find Cindy Thomas sitting on a bench in the hallway. The young reporter looked tired and wasn't as fast to jump to her feet as he would have expected. He'd always thought she was pretty, her fiery red hair and warm brown eyes appealing. "Ms. Thomas," he greeted her civilly.

Cindy gave him a pained smile. "I'm about to do something that is going to get me in mondo trouble."

Tom crossed his arms and regarded her with bemusement. "From what I know of you, that won't exactly be something new. Should I call down and get the holding cell ready?"

Cindy winced. "Not that kind of trouble, thankfully."

"All right," Tom said. "Lay it on me."

Cindy took a deep breath and prayed she wasn't about to make a huge mistake. She wasn't especially fond of Tom, but she still thought at the end of the day that he was a good man. It was just hard to get past the knowledge that he'd walked away from

Lindsay when she'd needed him most. That was something Cindy would never forgive him for, even if she and Lindsay never spoke again. "It's just... none of them will ask... especially not Lindsay." Cindy hesitated. "So... I just..." She closed her eyes and screwed up her features, her hands flapping helplessly as she tried to make herself say the words.

Tom lifted an eyebrow at her antics. It blew his mind that his ex-wife was so close to such a spastic person. Maybe Lindsay found Cindy to be as entertaining as he did. "What?" He prompted impatiently.

"It's about Claire and Ed," Cindy got out.

Now she had his attention. "What about them?" he asked more seriously.

"Promise me you won't say anything to Lindsay about me telling you this. I'm in enough hot water with her already."

That was news to him, but Tom merely shrugged. "Fine. What's going on with Claire and Ed?" He listened as she filled him in, understanding why she had come to him with the news and appreciating the position she was potentially putting herself in. "You're sure about this? Ed adores Claire."

Cindy sighed. "I'm sure. I saw the note myself." She glanced at the floor then looked back up at him. "I know you and Ed worked together. Maybe..."

"He'd talk to me?" Tom guessed.

"It's Claire and Ed," Cindy explained.

"Good marriages go bad sometimes," Tom told her, his voice quiet.

Cindy swallowed, feeling unexpected jealousy surge inside her at his words. She frowned, confused, but unwilling to give the emotion the attention it deserved. "Will you help or not?"

Tom regarded her. "Why are you in trouble with Lindsay?"

The change in topic made Cindy pause. "The stuff at the school. She's mad at me for taking chances with my life."

"You were trying to save a child," he said slowly. He'd read the reports and been impressed with what she'd tried to do, even though the cop in him knew she shouldn't have done it. "She knows that."

"Apparently not." Cindy stuffed her hands in her back pockets. "She and Jill are barely speaking to me right now."

Tom frowned. That didn't sound like his wife... his ex-wife... at all. "Really," he murmured, his brain taking this news in and beginning to formulate reasons for Lindsay's actions. His gaze cut to the redhead again and he looked at her speculatively.

"What?" Cindy asked, suddenly feeling like she was under a microscope.

Tom looked at her a moment longer. "Nothing," he finally said slowly. "I'll talk to Ed. See what I can find out."

Cindy fished into her purse then gave him her card. "Would you call me after you do?"

"You're butting in, Thomas," he warned her.

"Hell yes I am," Cindy agreed. "Claire is always there for me. I'll be damned if I don't do everything I can to be there for her."

Tom fingered the corner of the card, reading the neat print before lifting his head and meeting Cindy's determined gaze. He nodded once.

So did Cindy. "I'll leave you to your day then, Lieutenant," she said formally as a cluster of uniformed officers walked by them. Cindy spun on her heel and headed for the elevators, aware of Tom's gaze on her back. She felt like she'd just dug herself an even deeper hole with Lindsay, but there was no help for it.

"Please let this work," Cindy said under her breath as the doors opened and she scrambled inside, not caring if the elevator was going up or down just so long as it took her away from Tom's curious eyes.

Denise crossed her arms and looked at Jill expectantly. Jill sighed and moved past the benches, stepping through the small swinging gate before heading up to the witness box. Empty, the courtroom felt cavernous, every step echoing as Jill made her way to the stand. She sat down in the chair, wishing she were somewhere else, anywhere else than in this room at this moment.

"Take it in, Counselor," Denise ordered.

Jill leaned back and looked out over the courtroom, expecting it to leave her with no impression whatsoever, just wood, marble and the ghosts of cases past. Her mind conjured the images of the jury to her left, the judge on her right, a crowd of people and reporters hanging on her every word to the front. Her heart rate accelerated and she broke into a slight sweat. Her sudden discomfort must have shown in her features.

Denise was smirking.

“So now what?” Jill asked to cover her unease.

“Have you given any thought as to what the defense will ask you?”

“I’m an officer of the court. If they’re smart they won’t ask me anything.”

“Arrogance will sink a witness every time, Jill. You know that.”

Jill sighed, conceding that Denise had a point. “We’re ready on direct.”

“We are,” Denise agreed. “And I have no doubt you could usually handle yourself on cross.”

“Usually?” Jill crossed her arms.

“You were in a school shooting last week, Jill. Not to mention you’re working on another serial killer case after what happened with Inspector Boxer and the Kiss-Me-Not killer. Your focus is off. Your cage has been rattled. I bet you’ve barely thought about this case beyond the time spent in my office prepping for it.”

Jill was uncomfortable with how accurately Denise had her pegged. She could rarely get a bead on her boss. Denise’s personality was constantly shifting and Jill never knew which of the woman’s personas would be on hand on any given day. She didn’t realize Denise was watching her so closely or was so aware of her mental state. “Okay,” she relented. “You’re right.”

Denise cocked her head and the tiniest hint of a smile crooked her lips. “Too bad that wasn’t on the record,” she drawled. She didn’t let the light moment last. “So tell me, Ms. Bernhardt. How many men have you slept with in the last month?”

Jill blinked and felt all the air go out of her lungs. “What?”

“Don’t react like that in court,” Denise told her. She came closer to the jury box, leaning her elbow on the rail. “Two? Five? Ten?”

The lawyer in Jill started turning the angles, trying to see where Denise was going with her line of questioning. She didn’t like any of the destinations. “I don’t see what that has to do with…”

“You have a reputation,” Denise cut her off, much as Nicole Honeycutt, the defense attorney, would most certainly do, Jill admitted.

“I’m single. I date. Neither of which is an invitation to be attacked by Mr. Dow.”

Denise dipped her head once, liking that answer. “You like sex, Ms. Bernhardt. Look at

the way you're dressed. You telegraph it very clearly."

Any good lawyer would object to that, especially since it wasn't a question, but it would serve its purpose. It would put the thought in the jury's heads, draw their attention to her and away from Dow. Jill glanced down at her light blue shirt. She noted more buttons were open than necessary and the gauzy material was admittedly translucent in the right light. *Shit*. She took a breath. "You really think she's going to come at me with this?"

Denise raised an elegant eyebrow.

Jill raked her hands through her hair. "We're going to need more than an hour for this," she sighed before slumping back in the witness chair.

A light tapping on the glass pane of her door drew Claire's attention away from her thoughts and onto her visitor. Cindy stood in the doorway, a hesitant smile on her face, her hands tucked into the pockets of her jeans. "Hey," Claire said quietly.

Cindy stepped inside. "Sorry I bailed on you this morning. How are you doing?"

"No one can blame you for not wanting to wade in hostile waters," Claire replied with a half-hearted wink. She managed a tired smile as Cindy slumped into a chair on the opposite side of Claire's desk. "You're going to have to talk this out with them sometime soon."

"Yeah. I know." Cindy sighed and leaned forward, clasping her hands between her knees. "But I'm not here to talk about me. How are you doing?"

"Still processing," Claire confessed. She frowned as she took a good look at the reporter. Cindy did not look well. Claire hadn't see her this pale since the courthouse shooting.

"Have you talked to him?"

"He won't answer my calls."

Cindy's jaw clenched. "Is it wrong that I really want to go give your husband a piece of my mind?"

Claire's smile broadened a fraction. "Is it wrong that I want to let you?"

The reporter sighed. "I'm sorry about all this Claire. I feel like we let you down. We've been so wrapped up in our own lives we weren't paying close enough attention to yours."

"I think I've been in denial," Claire admitted. "I just thought... if I keep going on the way I have been that things would even out."

“No evening out, huh?” Cindy asked with a sad smile.

“Afraid not, skipper,” Claire said quietly. “As for being wrapped up in your own life... how are you feeling?”

Cindy’s head came up from where she was studying a chipped nail. “Feeling?”

The medical examiner’s gaze lowered to a spot in the middle of Cindy’s chest and she watched with some amusement as Cindy’s hand went over it reflexively.

“I’m... I’m fine,” Cindy said with a shrug, but her normal gusto for lying badly was noticeably absent. “Great.”

“How’s the scarring?” Claire asked gently.

Cindy swallowed and got to her feet before aimlessly moving around the small space. “You’re not getting out of talking about you,” she informed Claire. “I know what you’re up to.”

“I’m up to worrying about you,” Claire told her.

Cindy looked decidedly uncomfortable. “The scarring is no big deal. Battle wound and all, you know?” she tried to joke. “The doctors were pretty careful.” She swallowed again. “Can we please not talk about this?”

“You aren’t sleeping, are you?” Claire pressed on. Claire realized with a jolt that Cindy always blew off any talk of her shooting. Maybe the girl had been traumatized more than she let on. Cindy had probably been holding it together when she’d had her support group, but with Jill and Lindsay, especially Lindsay, out of the picture the last week and the incident at the school so fresh in her mind... Claire suddenly felt heartsick for a completely different reason.

“How did we get on the topic of me here?” Cindy asked with a forced smile. “I’m here to help you.”

“You can’t help me if you’re at the end of your emotional and physical rope.” Claire got to her feet and came closer to the redhead. She put her hands on her shoulders as Cindy’s gaze dropped to the floor, refusing to meet her eyes. “Give me something else to worry about besides my own mess here,” Claire urged. “Talk to me.”

Cindy looked at her then, and Claire could see the exhaustion plainly in her brown eyes. They were bloodshot and dark circles marred Cindy’s usually flawless face. For a moment she ached more for her friend than she did herself, Claire realized. “Talk to me,” she said again.

Cindy took a shaky breath. "I'm still hurting," she admitted reluctantly.

"That's to be expected. You having nightmares?"

Cindy swallowed hard then nodded. She didn't bother to tell Claire they weren't of the shooting. They were of Billy Harris killing Lindsay's father then turning the gun on her friend, filling her full of holes and making her bleed and beg for death. He'd smile. In every dream he would just smile as he held Lindsay down and began to sew her lips shut. Cindy shuddered. This new case... this Hallelujah Man as the Chronicle wanted to call him... it was stirring that hornet's nest of fears up all over again.

"I feel like... I feel like I'm on borrowed time... always... when it comes to the club," Cindy said after a moment.

Claire felt a pang deep in her chest. "Why do you say that?"

Cindy shook her head, all traces of the usually vibrant reporter stripped away, leaving Claire with the most naked and open window to the young woman underneath that Claire had ever seen. "I feel like I'm always screwing up... that Jill and Lindsay are just looking for an excuse..."

"And how does getting shot figure into that equation?"

"It's slowing me down," Cindy confessed. "I want so much to help... to make a difference, but I'm so tired. I'm falling behind. I'm not pulling my weight."

"Cindy..."

"I don't want to be left behind," the reporter's voice shook. "I don't..."

Claire pulled the young woman into a hug. She felt Cindy shudder. "You don't want Lindsay to hate you," she guessed. She felt Cindy nod. "Honey, Lindsay could never hate you. She's this mad because she cares so much about you."

Cindy leaned back, pleased at the thought but not sure she believed it. "How come it's okay for her to risk her life every day but when one of us risks ours..."

"It's harder to watch your friends risk their lives instead of risking you own." Claire tipped Cindy's chin up so they were eye to eye. "She's scared, Cindy. You almost died on us a few months ago. What happened in the school... it brought that back for all of us. You and Lindsay especially." Claire put her hands back on Cindy's shoulders.

"You really think Lindsay is this mad because... of my shooting?"

"I think she was terrified she was going to find you dead inside that school building. She almost lost you once, she's scared that it will happen again with the types of risks you

take with your job.”

Cindy took a breath, her brain sifting and sorting through the notions Claire had left her with. For the time being she set them aside and focused her attention solely on Claire. “All right. We talked about me. Now let’s talk about you.”

“Damn. Didn’t distract you all the way, huh?” Cindy pursed her lips and shook her head in mock seriousness, making Claire laugh just a little. She sighed. “I’m meeting Jill and Linz at Papa Joe’s. You coming?”

“I don’t think I’d be welcome there,” Cindy confessed reluctantly.

“I want you there,” Claire told her. She took a breath. “I need you there.”

Cindy’s head came up and she looked at Claire in surprise. “But Lindsay and Jill…”

“Can get over themselves,” Claire finished for her. Claire returned to her desk where she picked up her purse. “Can we just set it all aside? Just for this one night?”

“We can do whatever you need us to do,” Cindy said with determination.

“Good. Because what I need us to do is get drunk.”

Cindy’s eyes widened as Claire walked past her and out the door.

Act II:

“You’re kidding.”

Jill shook her head as she took another sip of her martini. “Wish I was,” she muttered.

Lindsay just gaped at her. “Denise thinks Honeycutt will come at you with that?”

“Apparently. Either that or Denise has a very odd way of looking into my sex life.” Jill polished off the rest of her drink then flagged the waiter for another. They had arrived at Papa Joe’s fifteen minutes early and had decided to get a head start on the drinks after the day’s events.

“Sonofabitch,” Lindsay rasped, her Texas twang more pronounced than usual.

“That about sums up this day,” a voice floated over them.

They both looked up to see Cindy standing there with Claire.

Lindsay felt her heart kick against her ribs, and she almost choked on the sip of beer

she'd just taken. Her body acted without conscious thought as she scooted over to make room for the reporter. Lindsay saw the look of surprise flicker across Cindy's features before the reporter carefully eased in next to her.

Claire smiled knowingly as she slid into the booth next to Jill.

The waiter arrived instantly and took their drink and food orders before leaving them alone once more.

"Well," Claire said to break the sudden tense silence. "Bitch of a day, huh?"

Her friends all smiled and some of the tension eased.

"When are you all scheduled to testify?" Cindy asked them, sticking to the oddly safer topics of murder and justice and soaking up the chance to be near them all without any yelling.

"Day after tomorrow," Lindsay answered readily. Cindy looked at her and their gazes met and held for a moment before Cindy's slid away.

"Same here," Claire said.

"Tomorrow after lunch," Jill admitted with a sigh.

"So I'm up before you all, huh?" Cindy asked them.

"Makes sense," Jill informed her, setting aside her anger with the reporter for one night. It felt good to have the four of them together around a table again. "You got the case reopened. Denise will show how that happened, how desperate a son was to clear his father."

"Desperate enough to kidnap a reporter," Lindsay added with a slight smirk.

Cindy didn't dare return the teasing, too afraid it would upset the fragile balance they all seemed to be keeping. "So... Denise prepped me. Anything I should know from you veterans? I'm not used to being on the other side of the story like this." She rubbed at the still-healing wound on her chest, feeling it ache a little after the long day she'd had. She noticed all three of her friends' attention zeroed in on the motion and she immediately put her hand back on the table. Claire looked at her knowingly.

"Take the time to think about your answers," Jill told her. "On cross, I mean. Honeycutt is smart. She'll try to trip you up."

"I just don't understand why we're going to trial. Dow signed a confession that night. That stopped the execution." Cindy put her elbows on the table.

“He recanted. Said he was forced to sign it under police duress,” Jill explained.

“Surely they can’t expect that to stick,” Cindy protested.

“Plenty of people want to paint the police as the bad guys,” Lindsay added. “They’ll jump all over it if Honeycutt can give them any reason to buy it.”

“That sucks.” Cindy looked like she’d swallowed something nasty. The waiter chose that moment to set her beer in front of her and a cheery looking margarita in front of Claire. The drink was so incongruous with Claire’s current mood that Cindy almost found the sight funny.

“You have no idea,” Jill murmured as she thought about what lay ahead for her on the stand tomorrow. She picked up her third martini, plucking out the toothpick and olive before taking a healthy swallow.

“Might want to slow down there, ace,” Lindsay pointed out with a smirk. “Don’t want the jury thinking you’re loose *and* a drunk.”

“What?” Claire and Cindy both chimed in.

Lindsay explained what Denise was expecting the defense to try with Jill tomorrow. Both women looked at Jill in mute shock when Lindsay was done.

“Honey,” Claire started.

“Brings new meaning to the phrase ‘I made my bed now I have to lie in it.’” Jill sighed and put her head on her fist. “I can’t believe I didn’t even think about Honeycutt asking me this line of questioning. What kind of lawyer am I?”

“One who almost had to shoot a man last week,” Claire reminded her.

Cindy swallowed, wanting the conversation to drift anywhere but to the circumstances around the school shooting. She stiffened in reaction and felt Lindsay do the same. The reporter took a healthy swig of her beer. “Are you ready for her if she comes at you with that?”

Jill shrugged. “As ready as anybody can be. Can’t say that being painted as a slut on the witness stand is going to help my career.”

“You never know,” Lindsay drawled. “With some of the men and women you work for you might actually move up in the world.”

They all shared hesitant smiles.

Claire sighed. “Okay. Enough small talk,” she said seriously. “No, I haven’t talked to

Ed, he's not returning my phone calls. No, I don't know what I'm going to do about the job in San Diego. And no, I have no idea what I'm going to do when I get home tonight."

Cindy glanced at Lindsay only to find the taller woman already watching her. The sight of those eyes on her hit her system like a jolt from a live wire. They nodded once, a silent truce established for the evening. Lindsay scooted closer and Cindy almost wanted to cry when she felt her friend's thigh brush up against her own. It had only been six days, but she'd missed this, missed being a part of the group. She missed the connection and closeness among them. She missed Jill's smirks and Lindsay's slow smiles.

"What do you want to do?" Jill asked, feeling guilty that she was happy to have Claire's problems to worry about instead of her own.

Claire took a sip of her margarita. "I told Cindy before we came over here that I want to get drunk."

Lindsay and Jill looked at each other in alarm.

"Fortunately for all of you I have way too much sense for that." Claire set the drink down just as the waiter arrived with their food.

"Facing Ed wasted is probably not a good idea," Lindsay agreed with a tiny smile. "In fact," she said more seriously. "Shouldn't you be home right now instead of sitting here with the three of us?"

Claire knew she should be home, and it was probably very telling that she didn't want to be.

"What is Ed going to do for work if he goes to San Diego?" Cindy asked as she sipped her beer. Lindsay's perfume drifted over her and she found the scent distracting. She snuck another quick glance at the taller woman and was surprised to see Lindsay's own gaze skitter away.

"He has a consulting position lined up." Claire picked aimlessly at her salad. "It would be good for him, but he can get something like that here."

"Has he tried?" Jill asked.

"I wish." Claire sighed. "I don't know what to do. I don't even want to go home. If it weren't for the kids..."

"You can stay with me," Jill offered before the others beat her to it. "I certainly owe you one." She smiled as she used her teeth to pluck the olive off her toothpick.

"Thank you, but I need to be the more mature one and face the music here. I might show

up on your door later tonight, though.”

“I’ll leave the light on for you,” Jill teased gently. She nudged Claire with her elbow. “It’s going to be okay,” she promised Claire. “We’re going to help you through this.”

Claire set her fork down and covered her eyes with one hand as a fresh wave of tears threatened. She felt three hands on her arm a moment later and knew without looking that Lindsay, Cindy and Jill were all touching her, doing the only thing they could for her. In that moment, her decision crystallized into hardened resolve. She couldn’t give up the three people who would go to hell and back for her for a man who could barely be bothered to cook her dinner.

Claire revealed none of this to her friends, though. She owed it to Ed, to what they’d once been, to talk to him first.

Cindy watched Jill and Claire drive away like they were in the last lifeboat and she was still on the deck of the Titanic. She slowly turned her head to see Lindsay watching her from where the taller woman leaned against the window outside Papa Joe’s. Six days ago the two of them had fought right here in front of God and everybody. Cindy knew she didn’t have the energy to deal with another round right now. “Well…” she said uncomfortably. “Good night, Lindsay.”

Cindy walked to the end of the block, her keys in hand as she approached Maggie, her little red car. Tears were blurring her vision and her chest felt tight with the effort not to cry. The evening spent with the club had been bittersweet. Now that it was over, though, she was back to her very depressing reality. She heard footfalls coming toward her at a jog and she turned just as Lindsay pulled up and paused in front of her. “Hey,” Cindy said then winced at how stupid that sounded.

Lindsay smiled. “Hey,” she drawled back. “I… um… I wanted to apologize. For this morning, I mean,” she clarified. She wasn’t ready to forgive Cindy for what happened in the school. Not yet. But Cindy had looked so quiet and down during dinner that Lindsay couldn’t let her walk away. Not like this. “I didn’t mean for you to leave this morning.”

Cindy took a breath, feeling a small measure of relief. Her shoulders lost some of their tension. “It’s okay,” she answered. “You two have known Claire a lot longer than I have. I probably would have just been in the way.” She turned to open her car but Lindsay caught her wrist. Cindy’s breath hitched and she felt tingles shoot up her arm at the touch as Lindsay eased her back around.

“You were right,” Lindsay confessed in a near whisper.

“About what?” Cindy asked slowly, sensing Lindsay wasn’t talking about what happened with Claire.

“I do miss you when you stop coming around,” Lindsay admitted hesitantly.

Tears obscured Cindy’s vision and she had to look down at the keys in her hands, noticing that Lindsay’s fingers were still wrapped firmly around her wrist.

Lindsay swallowed. “I’m still mad. And I’m not done yelling at you, not by a long shot.” She felt her own tears burn as she swallowed again. “But... you’re still a part of us... you’re still...” Lindsay took a breath. “You’re still important to me.” She felt her heart constrict when Cindy looked up at her in surprise, tears running down her cheeks. “I just... we need to be there for Claire right now.”

“I know,” Cindy agreed.

“We’ll fight when this is over.”

They both smiled tremulously at each other. Slowly Cindy nodded. “Sounds good to me. Well... not good. You can yell pretty loud...”

Lindsay’s smile got wider. “And I’m going to. Make no mistake about it. There will be lots and lots of yelling.”

Why did that thought make Cindy want to grin like an idiot, the reporter wondered. “Okay,” Cindy said quietly, feeling lighter than she had in a week. She had never looked forward to an argument before, but she knew once they had it then maybe she could come back in from the cold.

Lindsay reached out with both hands and used her thumbs to wipe the tears from Cindy’s eyes. The reporter looked so tired and defeated it was nearly driving Lindsay out of her mind with the desire to just draw her into a hug. Cindy chuckled at her antics and Lindsay felt herself smile again. God, she had missed that little laugh. “Okay,” Lindsay agreed when she finally backed off a step. “Night then.”

Cindy watched Lindsay pivot on the heel of her boots and start walking away. She cursed her brain and her body a second later when both decided to happily chase after the taller woman. “Lindsay!”

The inspector turned just as Cindy launched herself into her arms and drew her into a crushing hug. Lindsay’s eyes slipped closed as she wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and pulled her in close. The scent of Cindy’s perfume and shampoo reached her nose and Lindsay inhaled deeply, going so far as to lay her cheek down on Cindy’s soft hair. It felt so good to hold her it nearly made her weep in relief.

Cindy buried her face in the crook of Lindsay’s neck, her hands fisted in Lindsay’s leather jacket. When she felt Lindsay’s arms come around her back her whole body nearly sagged in relief. Maybe they would be okay. Just maybe.

The house was quiet when Claire let herself in about two hours later. Homework lay forgotten on the dining room table and she took a quick look at it to make sure it was finished before following the sounds of some sort of space war being waged by her two sons by way of their Xbox 360. She lounged in the doorway to their room, smiling as she watched them play.

It wasn't fair, she decided, her smile fading. It wasn't fair what was about to happen to them. Their lives were about to be shaken to their foundations and Claire spared a moment to curse Ed for doing this to them, to curse herself for not finding a way to stop this before things had come to this point. She never once thought her husband a coward until that moment. The cop, the good, solid family man she'd fallen in love with all those years ago... Claire wondered where he had gone.

She'd been so relieved when Ed survived his surgery. Even the news that he was paralyzed was met with a measure of relief. It didn't matter. Better to have his life than his legs, she'd thought. He had survived. That was all that was important to her. But now... now Claire wondered if Ed did survive. It sure as hell seemed like her husband, the man she remembered and loved, had gone into that hospital but had never come out of it.

With a sigh, Claire finally shoved off the doorframe and headed for the bedroom. She paused in the doorway when she noticed her suitcase was out. Ed was in the process of packing his. His arrogance added another layer of ice to her cold, hard anger. He looked up when he felt her presence.

"Hi," he said slowly.

Claire crossed her arms. "What are you doing?" Her voice was low, even, a clear warning sign he should have picked up on and either didn't or chose not to.

"What's it look like?" he asked casually.

"Running?" Claire suggested.

Ed looked away as he stuffed a fistful of socks inside his luggage. "I'm not running. We're starting over. We're getting a fresh start."

Claire swallowed and took a deep breath. Her next words would change her life, the lives of her sons. Everything she knew was on the cusp of change and it would begin the instant she opened her mouth. She wanted to snap at him for assuming that she would just cave to his wishes. She wanted to cry because she couldn't give him what he wanted. "You can go if you want to. I'm staying and so are the boys."

The words fell into the silence that suddenly stretched out between them. Finally, Ed swiveled his wheelchair to look at her. "Claire..."

"No. You gave me an ultimatum. Now you have your answer. The boys stay with me, Ed. You want to run away from everything you go ahead, but you're doing it alone."

"We can fix this. All we need is a fresh start," he said as he wheeled closer.

Claire took a step back. She shook her head. "Moving to another city, giving up the friends I love and a job I enjoy... that won't fix anything. The kids are happy here and you would yank them away from everything they've ever known just because you don't want to face your issues?"

Ed jerked his chair around and moved back to the bed. He began stuffing more items into his suitcase. "This isn't all about me," he snarled in a low voice.

"No, Ed, it's not. Stop making it that way."

He looked up at her. "I need this. I need a change."

"I believe you," Claire said softly, her voice trembling as she felt her twelve year marriage crumbling around her. "But you haven't even tried here. Don't tell me this is about a serial killer, or what happened at the school... this isn't about me and my work. You always, always supported me, Lindsay, Jill and now Cindy as well. What changed Ed? Do you even know?"

His anger went from simmering to white-hot instantly. "Can't you do one damn thing for me?" He bellowed.

"One damn thing?" Claire's voice sunk to its lowest register. "You mean helping you with your physical therapy? Or cooking you your meals even after I've been at work all day and sometimes all night earning the money that keeps a roof over our heads and food in your stomach? Or how about the fact I'm always, always, always trying to lift your spirits while all you want to do is drag mine down into the hell you enjoy wallowing in so much?"

Her bitterness surprised him. Claire could see it in his eyes. "You would just walk away?" He asked softly. "From everything?"

"You may not have the use of your legs anymore, Ed, but you walked away from us a long time ago. You think you can't do this anymore? What about me? What about the boys? I want my husband back. They want their father back. If you want to keep blaming the world for everything, go ahead. I'm done."

"I thought you loved me," he said, his voice hard.

“I do love you,” Claire whispered as the tears she’d been fighting began to fall. “I just can’t be with you anymore. Not like this.” She couldn’t face him. Her whole body shaking, she turned and walked away.

Act III

Cindy took a deep breath. She could feel the morning sunlight on the back of her head where it poured in from the window of the courtroom behind her on the witness stand. The first part of her ordeal was over. Denise had questioned her for nearly twenty minutes, and Cindy had supplied her with the rehearsed answers, taking the jury through the progression of events that had led to Henry Dow’s arrest. Now came the hard part. Cross-examination. Cindy eyed the defense attorney warily as the woman took her time to pour a glass of water and take a long sip before finally looking at Cindy as if she’d just noticed her.

“So Jamie Galvan kidnapped you?” Nicole Honeycutt finally asked as she sat behind the defense table. Her red hair was darker than Cindy’s and pulled back in a severe bun that made her prominent cheekbones stand out alarmingly. She was frighteningly thin, Cindy thought as she watched the attorney stand. Cindy decided the woman needed a nap and a sandwich.

“No.” Cindy kept her answers simple. If she didn’t she knew she’d start babbling. Denise had gotten irritated with her during their prep time together, even going so far as to tell her to shut the hell up more than once.

“He was waiting for you in the back of your car, Ms. Thomas. He claimed to have a gun. You don’t consider that kidnapping?” Honeycutt looked dubious and gave the jury an amused look.

“If I had I would have pressed charges,” Cindy answered easily. “Instead I worked tirelessly to help a man who was desperately trying to save his father. A man your client would have let die for his crimes.”

“Objection,” Honeycutt snapped.

“You asked and the witness answered, Counselor,” Judge Merriman drawled. He sounded like he could be Lindsay’s grandfather with his deep Texas twang.

Honeycutt’s gaze no longer looked amused when it zeroed back in on Cindy. She went after the young reporter with both barrels, hammering on Cindy’s credentials, her sources, every single move the reporter had made during the events that led up to Dow’s arrest. Cindy refused to flinch even though she felt like Denise was leaving her to twist in the wind. She had no idea if she was saying the right thing or just making everything worse. In the end she could only answer with the truth and hope it was enough.

Finally, Honeycutt was finished with her. “Nothing further for the witness, Your Honor.”

“You may step down, Ms. Thomas,” the judge told her.

Cindy stood on shaky legs, feeling nauseous as the adrenaline surging through her system began to ease. “Thank you, Your Honor,” Cindy said with a smile as she stepped out of the witness box and offered a second hesitant grin for the people in the jury box. They all smiled back at her.

Denise was standing next to the prosecution table as Cindy walked by. “Christ, Thomas,” Denise hissed and Cindy shot her a concerned look. “If I had known you could think on your feet like that I would have had you testify first.”

Cindy blinked.

“Way to go, Lois Lane,” Denise murmured Jill’s favorite nickname for the reporter as she stacked her papers and called her next witness.

Cindy glanced away when she felt eyes on her. Nicole Honeycutt looked like she was contemplating a little homicide of her own. Cindy smirked and stood a little taller as she left the courtroom heading for the breakfast her nervous stomach wouldn’t let her eat that morning.

Her phone rang as soon as she stepped out onto the front steps of the courthouse. She flipped it open. “Witness extraordinaire speaking,” she said for the hell of it, not really caring who was on the other end of the line.

“Glad to hear it,” Tom Hogan’s voice replied.

“Tom.” Cindy ducked out of the way of some rushing attorneys, their arms full of legal briefs. “Hi. Sorry. I just finished testifying in the Dow case.”

“I figured. Apparently it went well.”

“Nicole Honeycutt looked like she wanted to run me over with her Mercedes. Then back up and do it again for the hell of it.”

Tom chuckled. “You did good then.” He was quiet a moment. “I talked to Ed this morning.”

Cindy took a breath. “And?”

Lindsay’s ex-husband sighed. “It’s not good. He’s got his head so far up his ass...”

Cindy closed her eyes. “How did we all miss this?”

“I don’t know,” Tom murmured. “But I’m not sure there is anything we’re going to be able to do to stop it.” He hesitated. “Claire took the kids and left last night.”

Cindy felt her whole body go cold in the mid-morning sun. “What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“I... was in court. I...” She glanced down at her phone to see if she’d missed any messages. “No one called me...” The cold melted in a sudden blast of fiery temper. Cindy swore under her breath. “Damn them.”

“What?” Tom asked.

“I’m sorry, Tom. Let me call you back.” Cindy hung up without giving him a chance to reply. She pivoted and ran back inside.

Jill paced the confines of her office. She tugged on the collar of her shirt feeling like it was cutting off her circulation. She’d dressed the part this morning in a black business suit with a white silk blouse that revealed absolutely nothing. On most people the outfit would look stylish and professional. Jill thought it made her look like a nun.

She wasn’t scheduled to testify for another three hours, but her nerves were keyed up and raw. Jill tried to keep her mind off her upcoming testimony... off the angles Honeycutt would undoubtedly work to her client’s advantage. What the hell did the defense attorney care? It was Jill’s career she would ruin, not her own.

She tunneled her hands through her short blonde hair and wished for something, anything to take her mind off the mess she found herself in.

Her prayer was answered as the door to her office slammed open. Jill jumped and yelped in surprise, spinning around to find a very pissed off redheaded reporter standing in her doorway.

“You have got to be shitting me,” Cindy announced by way of greeting.

Jill blinked at her friend’s entrance as well as her language. “And hello to you, too.”

Cindy flung the door closed and Jill winced as the glass rattled. “I know you’re pissed at me. Fine. You can be a stark raving bitch to me if you want to from here until the end of time, but damn it, Jill, I still called you. I still told you when there was something wrong with Claire. I didn’t keep you out of the loop out of spite.”

Jill narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Claire!” Cindy shouted as the days of frustration and hurt boiled up and spilled over. “You couldn’t just send me a text message? It didn’t even have to be a phone call.”

“Cindy,” Jill said calmly. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Claire taking the kids and leaving Ed last night. You’re telling me you had no idea.” Cindy scoffed then rolled her eyes. “Please. You want me out of your life because I tried to help a child. Fine. I’m gone, but you damn well better not try to shove me out of Claire’s.” She spun and moved toward the door.

Jill shook off her shock and sprang forward, grabbing Cindy by the arm and spinning her around. They both crashed into the door, rattling the glass again. Jill spared a moment to wonder what her co-workers were thinking about her and all the noise coming from her office right now.

“Calm down,” Jill ordered. “I don’t want you out of my life, Cindy. I’m pissed at you because you damn near made that happen on a permanent basis.” Jill ran a hand through her hair, brushing a lock of it out of her eyes. “Now what the hell are you talking about? I don’t know anything about Claire leaving Ed last night.”

Cindy went still. “You don’t?” She looked skeptical.

Jill cocked her head and looked at her. She still had Cindy bodily pressed against the door, her own hand on the doorknob to keep the reporter from fleeing.

“Um...” Cindy seemed to wilt, the fire going out of her with a sigh. “Sorry?” Her voice was sheepish.

Jill shook her head and rolled her eyes as she stepped away from her.

“Well what was I supposed to think?” Cindy asked plaintively. “I find out Claire left Ed and took the boys and you and Lindsay didn’t tell me.”

“We didn’t tell you because we didn’t know.” Jill sat on the edge of her desk. “Claire didn’t tell any of us.”

“You talked to Lindsay?”

“No, but I’m damn sure she would have called with information like that. And she would have called us both,” Jill added for good measure.

Feeling like an ass and properly chastised for it, Cindy slumped wearily against the door. “I’m sorry. It’s just...”

Jill could see why Cindy would make the leap in logic so she could hardly blame her for it. A sudden thought struck her. “Wait a second. Who told you Claire left Ed?”

Cindy went rigid then shrugged, the motion jerky. “A source.”

“A source?” Jill said with disbelief. She crossed her arms and merely looked at Cindy. It took less than twenty seconds before the reporter started to squirm.

“I’m a reporter. I have sources.” Cindy fidgeted under Jill’s intense blue gaze. “C’mon. Don’t look at me like that. You know I’ll cave.” She risked another peek at Jill who tilted her head the other way and narrowed her eyes. “Aww, that is low... you’ve been practicing Lindsay’s look.”

Jill slowly smiled. She missed this, missed playing with Cindy like this something fierce. “Spill it, Thomas. You yelled at me.”

“You’ve been... that’s not...” Cindy took a breath and then sighed in resignation. “Tom.”

Jill blinked. “Tom? Lindsay’s Tom?”

“He’s not Lindsay’s Tom anymore,” Cindy answered immediately. She tamped down another odd flare of jealousy at the thought. At some point she was going to have to deal with what they meant but that wasn’t going to be today.

Jill smirked at the rapid response but didn’t share her motivation for the expression. “And how did Tom know this? Better yet, why did Tom tell you and not his ex-wife?”

Cindy shrugged again and bit her lower lip before looking away.

“Oh you didn’t.” Jill rubbed her forehead. “Please tell me you didn’t drag Tom into this.”

“Define... *drag*.”

Jill covered her face with her hands and groaned.

“Tom knows Ed... they worked together,” Cindy started to explain.

“Tom knows Lindsay... biblically. This is not a good idea.” Jill peeked out at the reporter between her fingers. She shook her head. “Lindsay is going to kill you for dragging her ex-husband into this.”

“Tom and Ed are friends. He would have gotten dragged into it eventually. Divorce has a way of sucking everyone in.”

Jill shot up off the desk. “No. Don’t say that. Ed and Claire are not getting divorced. We aren’t going to let them.”

Cindy sighed. “That was sort of my point in bringing Tom in. I’m doing whatever it takes here.” She nibbled on her thumbnail before flapping her hand helplessly. “I’m not sure there is anything we can do here, Jill. I thought maybe a guy could help Ed out. They could talk man to man, you know?”

“And how did that go?” Jill asked dryly.

“Actually Tom said something about Ed having his head up his ass...”

Jill blinked and looked at her in surprise. “Seriously?”

Cindy put her hands in her pockets. “Tom is working with us on this.” She watched Jill shake her head. “It’s not like we can’t use all the help we can get. Even if it is Tom. It’s not like I *wanted* to ask for his help.”

“Have you tried to call Claire?” She walked around her desk and flopped into her chair before reaching for the phone.

“Um... I was too busy seeing red to make out the numbers to dial...”

Jill gave the reporter a sardonic look before picking up the receiver and punching in Claire’s number by memory. After four rings it went to voicemail. Jill frowned as she hung up.

“Not answering?” Cindy asked with concern.

There was a knock at the door. Before Jill could say anything it opened and Lindsay’s head poked inside. The inspector paused when she saw Cindy before her gaze darted to Jill. “Have you seen Claire? Her staff said she called in sick.”

Cindy and Jill exchanged glances.

“Right.” Cindy nodded once. “I’ll see what else I can find out.” She backed up until she almost plowed into a motionless Lindsay before turning to face the inspector. “Jill has something to tell you.” Before Lindsay could say anything more, Cindy ducked under Lindsay’s arm and made a run for it.

Lindsay pivoted and watched as Cindy hustled away without looking back. She slowly turned and looked at Jill who had her lips pursed and was doing her best to look innocent. “So.”

“So,” Jill answered matter-of-factly.

“You two are talking again.”

“Looks that way,” Jill agreed. “We’re still mad at each other, though. Are you worried we’ll kiss and make up before the two of you will?”

“Pfft.” Lindsay waved her off and hoped like hell it was a convincing performance. “So what do you have to tell me?”

Jill’s lips wanted to quirk into a grin at Lindsay’s behavior but they didn’t. She waited for her friend to seat herself on the other side of the desk before hitting her with the worrisome news about their friend. “Claire took the boys and left Ed last night. We don’t know where she is.”

“Who told you that?” Lindsay demanded.

“The little redheaded girl that just left. If you hurry you can probably call security and have them hold her in the lobby.”

Lindsay tilted her head and gave Jill a tame version of the laser vision. “This isn’t funny.”

“Do you see me laughing?” Jill protested. “One of my best friends has disappeared into the ether with her kids and meanwhile I’m set to testify in court in less than three hours. By the time happy hour rolls around my reputation will probably be in tatters and Claire will be in Mexico or something.”

“That’s a little... dramatic,” Lindsay muttered. “Denise must have some faith in you to handle Honeycutt. She wouldn’t put you on the stand otherwise. Just play it cool, don’t let her rile you.”

“You’re giving me advice on the court system?” Jill asked in a dry tone.

“No,” Lindsay answered smugly. “I’m giving you advice on what it’s like to be a witness, something *I* know way better than *you*.”

Jill narrowed her eyes and glared. “Forget me. Where the hell did Claire go?”

Lindsay slumped back in the chair, her leather jacket creaking as she did so. “Where would she go? She didn’t come to any of us.” She frowned. “You don’t think...” Lindsay shook her head. “Nah.”

Jill tipped her head to the side and looked at Lindsay curiously. “Think what?”

Lindsay shook her head again, looking oddly guilty. “Stupid thought. Forget it.”

“Think what?” Jill insisted.

Lindsay studied her fingernails in apparent fascination. “You don’t think Claire would...”

you know..."

"*Cheat?*" Jill suddenly realized what Lindsay was considering. "Be serious!"

Lindsay rubbed her hands over her face. "Okay. Forget I mentioned it. It's just... she didn't come to any of us..."

"So who in the hell did she go to?" Jill sighed. This day was shaping up to suck big time.

"You should call them. They'll be worried."

"I know." Claire sighed and looked at her cell phone sitting on the surface of the kitchen table. Her sons' voices floated in to the room from an open window. They were laughing, a sound that normally brightened her spirits. Today it only dragged her deeper down into the depression she found herself in. Derek and Nate still had no idea that their parents' relationship was splintering and coming apart at the seams. For now they were blissfully unaware, playing kickball in the small open space of Warren Jacobi's back yard.

Jacobi sat down opposite Claire. Rather than his typical suit, he was in jeans and a baggy red polo. He nudged the phone with the tip of his finger in her direction. "At least call my partner. She'll kill me if she finds out I'm harboring you."

Claire smiled weakly. She put her fingers on the phone, drummed them idly. "I'm not ready to face them, yet."

"Why?" Jacobi asked softly.

Claire swallowed, taking a minute to get past the sudden tightening of her throat. "They... sometimes... sometimes I think they believe I'm perfect, that I don't make mistakes, that I always know the right answer."

"No one always knows the right answer except the man upstairs," Jacobi replied gently.

"Why you so sure it's a man?" Claire teased as a way to ease some of her own tension.

He smiled. "Point taken."

Claire continued to let her fingers drum on the phone. "I... I've never failed in their eyes," she confessed.

"You're not failing now, Claire."

Her gaze went to the window and her sons beyond it. “Feels like it,” she whispered.

Jacobi laid his hand over hers, stopping the incessant beat she was tapping out. Her brown eyes leapt to his and he saw tears beginning to fill them. “You are one of the strongest women I have ever known.”

She swallowed again but didn’t answer.

“Claire, Lindsay and I see a lot on the streets everyday. Do you know how many women there are who don’t have a fraction of the guts it takes to walk away from bad relationships? Look at Tina Dellan... her husband beat her and her kids and she stayed.”

“Ed isn’t abusing me...” Claire instantly replied.

“Not physically,” Jacobi agreed, not commenting on Claire’s rush to defend her husband. “But lately he’s taking his frustration out on you. I know you’ve tried your damndest with him since the shooting, Claire. We all have. We’ve all tried to be there for him. He doesn’t want our help. Until he does, there is nothing we can do.” He patted her hand before removing his.

“I just... Lindsay, Cindy, and Jill always look to me for guidance...”

“And you think they’re going to think less of you for this? That they’ll stop holding you up to a higher standard?”

Claire sighed. “When you put it like that I sound like I have an ego the size of San Francisco Bay.”

Jacobi chuckled. “It’s important for you to be there for them, Claire. Goodness knows they need you to be sometimes.”

Claire pushed the phone around on the table.

“And Claire?”

She looked up at him reluctantly.

“Sometimes they need to feel like they can be there for you, too.”

Claire closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Now who is being the coward?” she murmured. When she opened her eyes she saw Jacobi looking at her with complete understanding. She patted his arm. “Thanks for the safe haven today.”

“It ain’t gonna stay safe if Linz finds out you were here and I didn’t tell her.”

Claire chuckled at that. “You didn’t have to take the day off, Warren.”

“Course I did. Lindsay would have kicked my butt if I’d turned you away.”

“So you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t, huh?”

“Something like that.” He picked up the phone, put it in Claire’s hand, and then curled her fingers around it. “At least call Lindsay. Then you can go from there.”

He got up from the table and wandered out into his backyard. The boys shouted with excitement when they saw him and moments later Claire could hear him wrestling around with them both.

She flipped open the phone and dialed.

The bailiff came toward her and Jill felt a bead of sweat trickle down the center of her back. He held out the Bible and for a moment Jill’s mind flashed on scripture painted in blood at the Dellan crime scene. She shivered as her hand came down palm first on the surface of the well-worn book.

“Raise your right hand,” he instructed. “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?”

“I do.” Jill was pleased her voice didn’t quiver.

“Be seated.” The bailiff didn’t spare her another glance as he took the Bible away and returned to his post.

Jill slowly sank into the witness chair, feeling the role reversal keenly as she looked out over the gallery. She took a deep breath when she saw Cindy sitting near the front row. Their gazes locked for a moment and the reporter offered her a hesitant smile. Fighting or not, Jill was damn glad to see Cindy’s friendly face out there. Her gaze reluctantly tracked to Denise as her boss came around the prosecutor’s table and approached the bench.

“Deputy District Attorney Bernhardt,” Denise began. “Let me get right to the point so we don’t waste the jury’s time. What were you doing in the defendant’s apartment on the night he was apprehended?”

For the next twenty minutes, Denise walked the jury through what happened at Henry Dow’s apartment. Jill was surprised by how strongly she remembered her fear in that moment as she looked across the defense table at Dow’s smug face. She knew what he would have done to her if Lindsay hadn’t arrived when she did. The thought was chilling.

Denise stepped between Jill and Dow, blocking her view of him. Jill's attention refocused on her boss. She was thrown by the understanding in Denise's gaze and for a moment she couldn't think. "I'm sorry. What was the question?"

"Why were you trying to get out of the apartment?"

Jill swallowed. The words had come so easily in prep, but faced with the man who would have... She took a breath. "As I said, he was drinking, and I realized that he was the real killer."

"Objection," Honeycutt chimed in.

"I realized that he could be the killer," Jill quickly corrected. "And the way he was... he was getting very close, crowding me... I... I didn't want to end up like Tracy Welling."

"End up like Tracy Welling how?" Denise asked.

"Raped and murdered," Jill answered after a hushed moment.

"No further questions for this witness," Denise informed the judge. She held Jill's gaze for a moment then nodded before returning to her seat at the prosecution's desk.

Jill took another deep breath, her gaze seeking out Cindy once more. The reporter smiled encouragingly then winked. Jill cocked her head. Why did she suddenly have the feeling that Cindy was up to something?

"Ms. Bernhardt," Nicole Honeycutt began, stressing Jill's single title. "That sounds like it was a very harrowing evening."

"It was," Jill answered plainly. "I was fortunate that the police arrived when they did."

"Of course," Honeycutt said with complete insincerity. "It's just... isn't it possible my client simply found you attractive? That you perhaps led him on?"

Here we go, Jill thought sourly. "He's not my type."

The jury chuckled.

"Do you have a type, Ms. Bernhardt?"

"Objection? Relevance?" Denise asked for form, knowing that she would be overruled.

"A little leeway, Your Honor?" Honeycutt asked.

The judge looked at Jill, his lips forming into a tight line. "Very little, Ms. Honeycutt," he answered.

“Ms. Bernhardt... you are single, correct?” Honeycutt sauntered closer, a predatory look in her eyes. She came up next to the witness stand and merely waited.

“Yes.” Jill tried to sound relaxed. Inside she was worried about her reputation... her career. Thoughts of Claire and the boys also plagued her but she ruthlessly shoved them aside. She couldn’t think about any of those things now.

“How many men have you dated in the last month, Ms. Bernhardt?”

“Objection!” Denise said with a little more volume. “Your Honor...”

He held up his hand. “Tread very carefully here, Counselor,” he told Honeycutt.

“Of course, Your Honor.” Honeycutt looked back at Jill. “How many men?”

Jill kept her eyes on Honeycutt’s, not allowing herself to flinch. “Twelve.”

“Twelve?” Honeycutt clearly savored the ripple of conversation that spread out over the courtroom from Jill’s reply. “You get around.”

“Objection!” This time Denise got to her feet.

Honeycutt opened her mouth to respond then snapped it closed abruptly when she heard a voice from the gallery.

“She’s a fine one to talk.”

Everyone in the court looked at the redheaded reporter in the front row. Cindy blinked back at them all blankly. “I’m sorry. Did I say that out loud?” Her gaze went to Jill’s puzzled features before sliding off to Honeycutt’s angry glare. “Please... keep going.”

“Ms. Thomas,” the judge drawled. “Please keep your comments to yourself.”

“Yes, sir,” Cindy replied innocently.

“I wouldn’t want to have to hold you in contempt of court,” he continued.

“No, Your Honor.” Cindy looked at Jill again.

Jill’s eyes widened marginally but she tried to keep her sudden suspicions about what Cindy might be planning off her features. Inside, however, she wanted to warn Cindy off, to not do something so stupid... and she wanted to give her the biggest damn hug around for being a friend Jill really didn’t feel like she deserved at the moment. Jill looked at Honeycutt when the attorney returned her focus to her. “Twelve,” Jill said again with more conviction. “Do you want details?”

“Not necessary,” Honeycutt replied before shooting a quick look over her shoulder at Cindy who was nervously tapping her feet on the floor. “How many the month before that?”

“How far back are we going to go?” Jill asked. “It would be embarrassing to lose count.”

The jury laughed again.

Honeycutt didn't seem to mind. “You like sex, Ms. Bernhardt. It's not a secret, is it?”

Jill looked at Denise who just pursed her lips. “Is that a crime?” Jill asked simply.

“If it is then the defense attorney should be doing time.”

All heads swiveled again to look at Cindy while Jill just covered her eyes on the stand. The reporter glanced up from where she was doodling in her notebook as the judge started banging his gavel. “What?” She looked about innocently.

“Your Honor,” Honeycutt said over the sudden loud murmur of voices. Her face was flushed and her eyes glittering. “I request Ms. Thomas be removed from the courtroom.”

“What?” Cindy said again. “I'm just saying... at least the Deputy District Attorney doesn't pay for it like you do. I mean... the receipts I came across...” She held her hands up, indicating a very tall stack of paper.

The courtroom erupted into laughter and angry shouts as Honeycutt came toward the gate separating her from the gallery. Cindy hopped to her feet just as the bailiff and another guard came at her. She looked at Jill who still had her eyes covered and the reporter couldn't help but smirk. Especially when the bailiff had to restrain Honeycutt from getting to her.

“What?” Cindy asked for a third time. “It's the truth. You can read about it in the Register tomorrow. Police are shutting down the high-end escort service you use, probably as we speak.” The reporter thought Honeycutt's eyes were going to bulge out of her head. “Care to comment, Ms. Honeycutt?”

“That's it, Ms. Thomas. You're in contempt of court,” Judge Merriman shouted. “You're hereby fined \$1,000 and you can stay in a holding cell until someone bails you out.” Cindy let them cuff her without argument. As she was led from the courtroom Jill finally raised her head and looked at her. Her blue eyes were full of laughter but her face clearly telegraphed how unhappy she was with Cindy's antics. The reporter shrugged just before she was led out the door.

“Order!” The judge hammered his gavel again. “Order!”

“Good luck with that,” Jill murmured under her breath.

There were three people in the courtroom that didn't find the events of the last few minutes funny. The defense attorney, the defendant, and one person who was watching the proceedings and thinking someone needed his help to be saved.

Act IV

There was a slight nip to the ocean air that caused Lindsay to pull her leather jacket in tighter around her body. Rain clouds were moving in overhead as she made her way from her parked SUV down to the picnic bench on the beach below. Claire was sitting there alone, looking out at the wind and water making their way through San Francisco Bay.

Lindsay took a moment just to watch her, her heart aching for her friend. Claire was the portrait of loneliness, and Lindsay knew from experience that nothing she said or did to help her was going to change that deep down. Some things you had to weather alone. This was one of them.

But knowing that there was someone there waiting, always, it made the difference. “Hey,” she called out as she plowed through the sand in boots definitely not made for walking in the shifting terrain.

Claire looked up and smiled at her windblown friend. “Hey. Sorry to drag you out on a windy day.”

“What else do I have to do?” Lindsay joked as she straddled the bench next to Claire.

“Catch a killer, maybe?”

Lindsay shrugged. “Lots of killers out there. Only one you.” She smiled.

“That was incredibly sappy,” Claire replied with a tired grin.

“Give me points for trying.” Lindsay sighed and grew more serious. “Where have you been?”

“Promise not to get mad at him?”

“You went to my partner?” Lindsay guessed as she clutched her chest as if wounded. “Ow!” She felt a flicker of satisfaction when Claire laughed at her antics.

“I needed someone objective to talk to.”

“I can be objective,” Lindsay scoffed.

“Right, skipper. You’re doing such a wonderful job of that with Cindy.” Claire smiled again as Lindsay scowled. “You two talked, yet?”

“Sorta.” Lindsay looked out at the choppy waves, breathing in the scent of sand and water. “We agreed that we still care and that we’re gonna yell some more later.”

Claire chuckled wearily. “You two are something else.”

Lindsay rather liked that thought. “So what’s up with you leaving, Claire? You don’t walk away from anything.”

Claire sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. “Am I walking away? Or am I saving myself?”

Lindsay gave that some serious thought. “It’s just... I don’t want you to have my regrets...”

“You and Tom you mean?”

Lindsay nodded. Her finger began to trace designs in the wood on the bench. “Even though you and Ed are nothing like me and Tom. Even at your weakest you’re stronger than we ever were.”

Claire’s breath caught. “Lindsay... that’s not true.”

“Yes it is, Claire.” Lindsay held her friend’s gaze. “Do you still love him?” The tears that sprang to Claire’s eyes were answer enough. “Then don’t walk away from this, from him. I know what’s happening right now... I know you feel like you can’t reach him...”

“I can’t. I’ve tried and tried.” Claire took a shuddering breath and watched Lindsay react to the sound. It was hurting her friend to see her like this. Claire reached out and found Lindsay’s hand, trying to console them both. “And I won’t let him take me from my friends. I need you. All of you.”

Lindsay smiled through her tears. “We need you, too, but you already knew that.” Her grin widened as Claire laughed. “Me, Cindy, and Jill can’t find our way out of an emotional paper bag without you.” Her fingers tilted Claire’s chin up, encouraging her to look at her. “We don’t want you to go, Claire, and we’ll fight tooth and nail to keep you here. But don’t turn Ed loose. Not just yet.”

“Why are you championing him?” Claire wanted to know.

Lindsay swallowed. “Because... at one point... I was Ed.”

Claire went still. “Lindsay...”

“I was... broken... by the Kiss-Me-Not case. I pushed Tom away. I was hurting... obsessed... distant. I was wrapped up in my own little world. And when I finally came up for air I’d damn near lost everything.” Lindsay wiped at her eyes. “I know where he is in his head right now, Claire. He needs you even if he doesn’t realize it. I don’t want this to ruin you both... not when I know you can rise above it. Not when I know how deeply you’ll both regret it if you let go.”

Claire didn’t know what to say. She leaned forward and felt Lindsay’s arms come around her. “I’m just so tired of fighting, Linz,” she sobbed into her friend’s shoulder. “I don’t want to lose him but I’m terrified I already have.”

Lindsay tightened her grip on her friend. “He’s still in there, Claire. Ed is still in there. Just... please. Believe in what you have.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Claire confessed as the wind whipped her hair about her face. “Not anymore.” She looked up at Lindsay beseechingly. “I don’t know if I have any strength left.”

“You’ve got mine,” Lindsay told her. “And Jill’s and Cindy’s... we’re not going to let you fall, Claire. We want to help if you’ll let us.”

“You really think there is still a chance?” Claire felt the first tendril of hope in months swirl inside her.

“I do. I still see the way he looks at you when you’re not watching. He still loves you.”

Lindsay swore softly as her cell phone rang. She unclipped it from her belt and checked the ID. “Sorry,” she told Claire. “I have to take this.” She flipped the phone open. “Are your ears ringing?”

“What?” Tom asked her.

“Nothing. I was just talking about you.” Lindsay enjoyed the shocked silence on the other end of the line a little too much. “What’s up?”

“Where are you?”

“The beach.”

If Tom was upset that she was on the beach while she was on duty he didn’t reveal it in his voice. “I need you to do me a favor.”

“Yeah?” Lindsay glanced at the curiously listening Claire.

“Come get your reporter friend out of my holding cell.”

Tom hung up his cell phone then crossed his arms and looked pointedly at the redhead behind bars.

“That was cold and completely unnecessary,” Cindy grumbled as she rested her wrists between the bars.

“What were you thinking in court today?”

Cindy shrugged. “I was thinking I was making sure the jury was focused on the facts and not Jill’s sex life.”

“That was up to Denise to handle. Not you.”

“And she was doing such a bang up job,” Cindy countered. “I knew I was going to wind up here when I walked in that courtroom this morning, Tom. Nothing you say will make me regret that.”

“And what about Lindsay?” He asked. “You think she’ll make you regret that?”

Cindy looked at the floor. “Probably,” she admitted, her stomach flopping at the thought.

“You’d do anything for them, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Yeah. She would.”

Cindy’s head came up and she took a breath when she saw Jill standing there next to Tom. “Hey,” she said timidly.

Jill winked at Tom. “I got this one.”

“She’s all yours,” he said gratefully. He glanced back at Cindy one more time then shook his head.

“He thinks I’m nuts,” Cindy commented needlessly when Tom was gone.

“He would be right,” Jill countered. She stepped closer and wrapped her hands around the bars. “What were you thinking in there?” Her voice was stern but held a note of wonder to it.

Cindy shrugged. “I was just supposed to sit there and watch as she ruined your name to get that sleazeball off? No way.”

“Cindy, this is serious. There was almost a mistrial.”

Cindy sighed. “It’s not like I was lying, you know. She does pay for it.”

Jill closed her eyes and turned her head so Cindy wouldn’t see the beginnings of a smile gracing her features. “You are such an idiot,” she said when she finally had her amusement under control. “I thought Honeycutt was going to come over the rail at you.”

Cindy smiled hesitantly. “I think she would have if that bailiff hadn’t grabbed her around the waist.” She paused, remembering. “That was a very undignified squawk she made, too.”

A snort of laughter escaped the attorney and Cindy looked up at her, her smile broadening. “I know it was stupid and irresponsible and that judge is never gonna let me near another one of his trials... I just... I had to do something...”

“To get back in my good graces?” Jill guessed.

“No,” Cindy said more seriously. “That didn’t matter. I...” Cindy took a breath. “I love you. You’re like a sister to me. There was no way I was going to sit there and let that woman ruin you when I could stop it.”

Jill looked at her through the bars, tears filling her blue eyes. “Do you understand that goes both ways?” She let her hands slide down to rest on Cindy’s. “Do you understand why I got mad at you for risking your life last week? We almost lost you a few months ago. I watched you laying there... bleeding on the steps... and I...” Jill swallowed. She couldn’t look at Cindy’s suddenly serious features. “What happened at the school brought that all back.”

“I got shot doing my job,” Cindy said softly. “I could have been someone walking by on the street just as easily.”

Jill looked at the reporter, noting the dark circles under her eyes that she hadn’t wanted to see until now. She suddenly wondered what effect the school shooting had to have on Cindy’s psyche and made a mental note to start paying closer attention to her. “I know that. But you willingly put yourself in the situation to have it happen again.”

“I was trying to save a child. This guy came out of nowhere and grabbed me from behind. I wasn’t after the story, Jill.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jill admitted.

Cindy felt her heart freefall. “It doesn’t?”

“No.” Jill took a breath and looked up at her. “I can’t stay mad at you regardless.”

Cindy blinked. "You're..."

"Forgiving you. Yeah." She squeezed the hands under hers. "And I'm sorry for being so distant. The whole thing just brought up some very unpleasant memories."

"I'm sorry, too," Cindy said quietly, feeling relief so profound her legs shook. "I didn't mean to get myself in trouble... again."

"You're a magnet for it, I swear," Jill muttered. They smiled hesitantly at one another.

"So what happened in court?" Cindy asked after a quiet moment.

"Well, Honeycutt didn't want to start over. She thinks her best bet is still with this jury."

"And?"

"And she dropped the line of questioning for me. I essentially got dismissed right after they hauled you off in cuffs."

Cindy's grin took on a satisfied smirk.

"No. Don't smile. You were a bad reporter," Jill tried to chastise her but her humor crept into her voice.

"So we heard," Claire's voice drifted to them.

Jill turned around to find Claire and Lindsay standing there. She sighed in relief. "There you are. Where in the hell have you been?" She crossed to Claire and threw her arms around the older woman, hugging her hard.

Claire closed her eyes and hugged her back.

"She went to Jacobi. Over us," Lindsay grumbled with playful disgust. Her dark eyes zeroed in on Cindy, drinking in the sight of her. The reporter gave her a hesitant wave and a dip of the head. She looked tired but oddly proud of herself given her current predicament.

"I needed to think," Claire explained as she turned Jill loose. "Decide what I'm going to do."

"And Jacobi helped you with that?" Jill asked skeptically.

"No. Lindsay did," Claire said.

All eyes focused on the inspector who blinked and looked at Claire in surprise. "I did?"

“Mmhm.” Claire threaded her arm through Lindsay’s. “You did.” She turned and focused her gaze on Cindy before shaking her head. “Girl...”

Cindy had the grace to look abashed. “Aw, c’mon. Like Honeycutt didn’t have it coming.”

“That’s not the point, young lady.” Claire admonished. “You made a mockery of the legal system today.”

“But...” Cindy looked away from Lindsay who was still watching her without saying a word. She turned her gaze on Jill. “But...”

“What she said,” Jill replied with a nod of her head at Claire.

“You made a mockery of the justice system and got yourself thrown out of court and tossed in here,” Claire continued.

Cindy narrowed her eyes with suspicion, a tiny smile starting to form. “And you’re pissed because you weren’t there to see it.”

“Damn right,” Claire agreed. She walked up to the bars and reached in to cup Cindy’s face with her palms. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“Which part? Get thrown out of court or do it when you’re not there to see it?”

Claire chuckled, savoring this moment of what passed for normalcy in her life. “I would have loved to see the look on Honeycutt’s face...”

“It was pretty spectacular,” Jill had to admit. “Even Denise was impressed.”

Cindy smiled as her gaze slid back to Lindsay. The inspector was still watching her silently, no visual cues on her face as to how she felt about the situation.

Jill and Claire noticed the two women staring at one another intently. They exchanged knowing looks and smiles.

“Um... let me go start the process to get you out of here,” Jill said to Cindy.

“I’ll go with you,” Claire added. They walked away but not so far that they couldn’t watch what happened from a respectful distance.

“They really don’t have a clue,” Jill muttered as she watched Lindsay finally saunter closer to the bars.

“Not a damn one,” Claire agreed.

Lindsay paused just out of reach of the bars. “You’re going to have to start forwarding your mail here at this rate.”

Cindy felt some of the tension ease from her body. At least Lindsay wasn’t yelling – yet. “The thought crossed my mind.” She wrapped her fingers around the bars. “I’m sorry. I didn’t ask Tom to call you.”

Lindsay studied her in the fluorescent lighting and didn’t like what she saw. Cindy looked exhausted, her normally vibrant eyes tired and rimmed with red. “You okay?”

The question was unexpected and Cindy wasn’t sure how to answer. She swallowed and settled on the truth. “I overdid it today. I could really use a painkiller right about now.” She looked up into Lindsay’s intense eyes as the inspector leaned against the bars and looked down at her. “I’ll live.”

Lindsay took a breath. “That’s all I want, you know.”

Cindy looked at her with confusion.

“For you to live. To be happy. To be safe.” Lindsay studied the floor. “That man would have killed you had I not gotten there in time.”

“I know,” Cindy said quietly. “He would have made me wish I was dead before that,” she confessed. She watched Lindsay swallow hard. “I honestly wasn’t trying to get myself into that mess, Lindsay.”

“I know.” Lindsay had to swallow again. “It’s just... I’m finally...” She took a breath to steady herself, fully aware that Jill and Claire were watching them. “I finally stopped having the nightmare where you’re bleeding on the steps of the courthouse. Now you’ve given me a new one.”

Cindy’s grip tightened on the bars. “Linz...”

Without conscious thought, Lindsay’s left hand came up and reached through the bars, brushing a stray lock of Cindy’s hair away from her features. Lindsay’s knuckles gently grazed the soft skin of Cindy’s cheek before the taller woman realized what she had done and withdrew her hand in confusion.

Jill grabbed Claire’s arm. “Did you see...”

“Hard to miss, sweetie,” Claire replied. “One relationship ends and another begins,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” Jill agreed. “Unless you mean you and Ed, in which case you can just shut up. I’m thinking the muffin man is on his way out.”

Claire put her head down on Jill's shoulder, grateful for her warm and steady presence as they watched their mutual friends finally resolve their differences several feet away.

"I don't want to fight with you anymore," Cindy finally managed to find her voice in the wake of Lindsay's touch. Her body had reacted unmistakably to the caress and she found herself shaking. "I miss you."

Lindsay's hands curled around the bars next to Cindy's. "Promise me. You have to promise me... no more risking your life."

"I..." Cindy shook her head. "I don't want to make promises that I can't keep. Don't ask me that, Linz. I don't ask it of you."

Lindsay sucked down a cold breath. "It's my job..."

"I know. But it doesn't scare me any less to watch you risk your life for it."

They looked at each other.

"I can't believe you did that in court today," Lindsay murmured and a small smile finally shaped her lips.

Cindy shrugged. "Yeah well, that's what she gets for messing with a friend of mine." She hesitated a moment. "Do you mean it? What you said that night at Papa Joe's?"

Lindsay wondered which conversation Cindy was referring to. She shook her head in confusion.

"That you miss me not coming around anymore?" Cindy clarified.

Lindsay snorted. "Don't let it go to your head," she warned her. She was rewarded with Cindy's full smile and she felt her heart stutter in reaction. "Um..." Lindsay stepped back from the bars. "Let me..."

"Get me out of here?" Cindy finished for her. "That would be nice."

Lindsay paused before stepping back up to the bars. "I think I'm still going to have to yell at you at some point. I feel like I should be yelling."

Cindy smiled. "Okay. You can yell at me all you want."

Lindsay grinned helplessly. "Don't go anywhere," she joked.

"Haha," the redhead answered.

"Did you kiss and make up?" Jill asked Lindsay innocently when her friend walked over

to them.

Lindsay glanced back at Cindy and the thought of kissing the girl crossed her mind, unbidden. A sudden flush of heat washed through her body and she looked away, her heart hammering. She snorted and moved past them both. “Let me... I’ll just...” She gave up talking since she didn’t seem to be capable of it anyway.

Jill and Claire looked at each other and smiled.

It was late when Claire let herself inside the house. There was a light burning in the kitchen so navigating around the furniture was easy. The air cycled off and the house descended into an unnatural quiet as Claire made her way toward the bedroom. The boys were staying with Jacobi tonight, and she spared a moment to be grateful for his friendship in this mess. He knew and cared for them both and this had to be hard on him as well.

She entered the bedroom and felt her heart sink. It was dark and empty. She closed her eyes and leaned against the doorframe.

A tiny squeak made her turn. There, at the end of the hall, was Ed. His chair squeaked softly once more as he rolled another inch closer. Claire’s breath caught in her throat when she saw the tears on his face, tears he had yet to cry since losing the use of his legs. He looked at her wordlessly then held out his hand.

Claire didn’t remember closing the distance between them, didn’t realize she was curling around him in his lap until she smelled his familiar aftershave and the hint of his cologne. His arms came around her and her own tears mingled with his on the stubble of his cheek.

“Help me,” he whispered.

Claire simply held him tighter.

FADE TO BLACK