

The Episode 10: Repeat Offender

INTRO/TEASER

It was well past seven thirty in the evening when Deputy District Attorney Jill Bernhardt tossed her pen on the desk and pinched the bridge of her nose in a feeble attempt to alleviate the pressure that had been building behind her tired eyes.

“Bernhardt, go home.” Denise Kwon’s voice broke the silence of the relatively deserted fifth floor.

Slightly startled, Jill looked up to find her boss leaning against the bookcase just inside her doorway. “Jesus Denise, you scared the crap out of me. How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to see that you’re exhausted. You’re of no use to me if you can’t keep your eyes open in court. Now go home, I’ll see you on Monday.”

Jill opened her mouth to deny the other woman’s claim, but before she could utter a single word, Denise had turned on her heel and left the office, leaving the DDA to stare at the empty doorway.

“They must be having a snowball fight in Hell right now, but who am I to argue,” she mumbled to herself as she reached under her desk to grab her purse. With a soft sigh, she pushed to her feet and started for the door. She couldn’t wait to crawl under the covers of her bed, but little did she know, her night was only just beginning.

As she rounded the corner that led to the bank of elevators, Jill heard the muffled ringing of her cell phone, and digging it from the bottom of her bag, she glanced at the caller ID, expecting either Lindsay or Cindy. Surprised when she didn’t recognize the number, she answered it anyway, her professional tone automatic.

“Bernhardt.”

“Hello Jill, it’s Nicole Honeycutt. I was wondering if you might have a bit of time to meet me for drinks tonight. I have something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“If this is about one of my cases...” Jill started, not in the mood to discuss anything with the other attorney, especially if it was case-related.

“No, this has nothing to do with a case,” Honeycutt interrupted smoothly, before the other woman could go off on her. She’d been expecting resistance from the DDA, but hoped her carefully constructed plan would at least earn her a face-to-face meeting.

“What? Did you max out your credit cards on male escorts? If you’re looking for a date, try the phonebook,” Jill snipped, inwardly pleased with her ability to formulate a witty, well-aimed remark and especially in her exhausted state.

“Ouch, so I guess it’s safe to assume you’re still mad about the Dow trial.”

“Mad, why would I be mad? You only tried to ruin my career. Just what could you possibly want to talk to me about anyway?” Jill didn’t bother trying to hide her irritation, although if she were perfectly honest with herself, she was all kinds of curious as to why Honeycutt was seeking her out, which was precisely why she hadn’t already hung up on the other woman.

“Well, if you really want to find out I suggest you meet me in . . . let’s say a half hour at the Element Lounge? I reserved a table,” was the curt reply. Nicole smiled to herself; she knew Jill wouldn’t be able to resist not knowing why she’d called.

“What the hell, I could use a drink. That’s on Geary, right?” Jill relented, allowing her curiosity to get the better of her.

“Yes, between Van Ness and Polk. Just tell them you’re with me. See you soon.”

Twenty minutes later, Jill arrived at Element and was quickly escorted to a private booth where Nicole Honeycutt sat in her designer suit sipping on a dirty martini.

“Jill, so nice to see you.” Honeycutt motioned to the booth opposite where she was sitting. “Have a seat, won’t you?”

“Seeing as how the last time we saw each other you were trying to make me sound like some kind of whore, I can’t really say the feeling is mutual, but I never turn down a free drink,” Jill quipped as she eased into the booth and tossed her purse on the seat next to her.

“I guess I deserved that, but in the end it was my reputation that ended up suffering, thanks to that damn reporter.”

Jill couldn’t stop - nor did she care to - the smile that spread across her face at the mention of Cindy’s antics in the courtroom. Nicole had been completely blindsided.

“You know it was nothing personal, right?” Honeycutt assured as she motioned their server over to the table.

“Evening ladies, my name is Kristie. What can I get for you tonight?” the pretty brunette asked as she smiled sweetly at Jill, her eyes straying momentarily to the undone top

button of the DDA's white silk blouse and, specifically, the creamy expanse of skin on display for all to see.

Noting just where the waitress was looking, Jill smiled back, ordered herself a bourbon, and waited for the young woman to leave, before returning her attention back to Honeycutt.

"So, as much as I enjoy a free cocktail, I'm curious as to why exactly you wanted to see me."

"Promise you'll hear me out before answering."

"Okay..."

"I've had my eye on you for a while. A ninety-eight percent conviction rate on cases where you were lead, your dedication to the job..." Honeycutt began, pausing momentarily as the waitress returned with Jill's bourbon.

"Thanks, Kristie," said Jill, offering up a wink to the younger woman as she reached for her glass.

"No problem, you need anything else just let me know...and I do mean anything." She smiled seductively at Jill, her green eyes sparkling even in the dim light of the club.

"I'll be sure to do that," Jill purred, enjoying the flirtatious innuendo. She couldn't help but watch as the younger woman walked away. "Nice ass," she commented quietly, more to herself than her tablemate.

"Wow, so I guess it's safe to assume you don't discriminate between the sexes as far as bedmates go." The redhead grinned around the rim of her martini glass, its wide lip not able to conceal her obvious amusement.

"Look, if you've invited me here to get more information on my sex life you can just..."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean anything by that. Honestly, I was just surprised is all," Nicole interjected before Jill could finish her train of thought. "I'll get right to the point, Jill; I asked you here to offer you a job." She quickly held up her hand to stop any interruptions to her proposal and continued, "Now before you turn me down, think about it. You work your ass off for that unappreciative bitch Kwon for a mere pittance. You're worth more than that. A lawyer as impressive as you is wasted in the DA's office. Think of all the people you can help working for the defense."

"You're joking right? The kinds of clients you represent are far from the type of people I want to help." Jill took a healthy sip of her bourbon. Just the thought of representing the same lowlifes she put away on a daily basis made her skin crawl.

“Doesn’t every person, guilty or innocent, deserve the best representation they can possibly get?” the defense attorney reasoned, knowing full well she’d need more than just a simple plea that everyone deserved justice to convince Jill.

“Yes, but I don’t think I’m the person you’re looking for.”

“I’ll triple what you are currently making, full health benefits, six weeks paid vacation, and as a sign-on bonus, I’ll even throw in a new Mercedes. If it makes you happy, you can even choose the cases you want to work.” With the loaded cards laid out on the table, Nicole sat back and waited, hoping the appealing package she’d presented would be enough to entice the DDA to accept the new position.

“You can’t be serious?” Jill replied, more than a little bit stunned at the generous offer.

“Dead serious, Bernhardt. I don’t want an answer right now though. Take some time and think about it. No hurry, you know where to find me when you decide.” Standing, she tossed a hundred dollar bill on the table and shouldered her purse. “I’ll leave you to your night; as much as I would love to stay and chat, I have a date. Stay and have another one or two on me. Maybe you can get lucky - our waitress hasn’t taken her eyes off you since you sat down.” Honeycutt grinned and then turned toward the bar, heading straight for a well-built hunk in an Armani suit.

Jill was so wrapped in thought she hadn’t noticed the woman standing next to her table until she spoke.

“I’m off in a half hour, will you still be here?” The waitress asked, hopefulness evident in her voice.

Two hours and more than a few drinks later, the two women stumbled into the alley behind the bar. It was dark and private, the only light coming from a single bulb just outside the door. Jill could smell the stench of garbage wafting from the bins a few feet away, but she ignored the atrocious odor, one that usually sent her scrambling away in favor of fresh, clean air, and focused her full attention on why she’d come into the alley in the first place. Pinning the younger woman against the brick wall, she kissed her hard, tasting the whiskey the brunette had been drinking as her tongue explored hungrily.

The soft moan that escaped Kristie’s lips was all that was needed to spur Jill’s already overactive libido into overdrive. With one quick motion, she lifted the waitress’ leg around her waist and thanked whichever god had been responsible for Kristie’s decision to wear a skirt – quick and easy access to wherever she chose to roam, just what she liked. Breaking the kiss and pulling away slightly, Jill looked into beautiful green eyes that mirrored her own need.

“Tell me you want me,” Jill purred as her hand roamed up a muscled thigh, her arousal increasing ten-fold when she realized Kristie wore thigh high stockings, her touch unexpectedly going from smooth silk to even smoother skin.

Pulling Jill even closer, Kristie captured her lips again in an almost bruising embrace. “I want you,” she practically moaned her reply as Jill eased away once again.

Unable to control the overwhelming need that coursed through her body, Jill shifted slightly, allowing enough room for her right hand to slip between their bodies. Once again, she found the younger woman’s kiss-swollen lips, kissing her roughly, as she expertly slipped her hand into silk panties. Quickly finding the warm wetness she was searching for, she snaked her other hand underneath Kristie’s white button-down blouse and zeroed in on a swollen nipple, tugging hard and rolling it between her fingers.

Trailing kisses down the brunette’s neck, Jill suddenly latched on to the creamy white skin and thrust her fingers deep inside welcoming warmth. Fast and furious, she continued her piston-like motion and smiled at how quickly the young woman began to tighten around her fingers. Moving to recapture Kristie’s lips, she increased the speed of her thrusts, sending the beautiful brunette over the edge. Jill reveled in the feeling as the younger woman’s body tensed and bucked against her. Continuing to support Kristie’s weight as she returned from her state of bliss, Jill cursed aloud at the realization that her phone had begun to ring.

“Damn it! I’m sorry, I really have to get that.” She reluctantly released her hold on the other woman and reached for her bag, which she’d haphazardly thrown at their feet when she trapped Kristie against the wall.

“Bernhardt,” she answered, hoping she’d been able conceal her arousal from her caller.

“Hello Ms. Bernhardt, this is Officer Mitchell, we have a man in custody for assault who is claiming to know you. He insisted I call you. His name is William Car...”

“William Carter,” Jill finished his sentence and swallowed hard. “I’ll be there shortly.” With a shaky hand, she snapped her phone closed and turned her attention back to Kristie. The warmth from her earlier arousal had suddenly vanished as if a bucketful of ice water had been poured over her head. She shivered, the thought leaving her feeling chilled to the bone.

“I’m sorry. I have to go. I’ll call you.” Jill smiled apologetically and gripped her purse. Without another word, she quickly headed for her car, leaving a stunned Kristie behind to gather herself and wonder if the blonde had meant what she’d said.

Once she was tucked safely inside her car, tears began to pool in Jill’s blue eyes, and she concentrated with all her might to get her trembling hands to dial Lindsay’s number. Laying her head against the seat, she closed her eyes and listened to the ringing, fully expecting to hear her friend’s usual business-like greeting.

"Boxer," Cindy's familiar voice answered, having already recognized Jill's number on the caller ID, and immediately started in on the conversation. "Hi, Jill. What's up?" Wondering when her friend was going to call her on her attempted joke, she listened carefully for a reply, but none was forthcoming.

"Jill?" asked Cindy, worry creeping in to her tone. She'd realized the other woman was crying even before Jill was finally able to form her words.

"I'm sorry, it's late, and... is Lindsay there?"

"Sure. I'll put her--"

"No, don't bother. Please, just tell her... um, tell her that William Carter has been arrested on assault charges. I need to see her at the Hall, my office."

"But don't you want to talk to--"

Jill hung up before Cindy could finish her sentence. Shivering slightly, Cindy felt a bad feeling rising within her, like a premonition of sorts, and turned toward her lounging lover.

"Jill said to tell you that a William Carter has been arrested. Assault..." She broke off her words when she saw Lindsay go pale.

"Damn it!" The expressed sentiment was obviously more anger than shock. Without giving any further explanation, Lindsay jumped out of bed and reached for her clothes, moving at a speed that had Cindy blinking.

"Who is this guy? And why was Jill crying so hard she needed to break off the phone call?" Cindy waited quietly, expecting Lindsay to elaborate, but it never happened.

"Bad news," Lindsay said in a dark tone, her long strides taking her through the bedroom door before Cindy could formulate any more questions.

ACT I

William Carter had worked a lifetime to get to this day. Twenty years as a NASCAR pit crew chief had allowed him a very comfortable retirement at age fifty-five. After years of constant travel and adventure, settling down into a quiet retirement was in no way going to be satisfying for him. Never one to just sit around, he and his wife had relocated to San Francisco eight months ago in the hopes of opening their own training facility for young drivers and mechanics. With the help of a partnership with his former employer,

NASCAR driver Mark McMurphy, he now stood at the edge of his dream, anxiously awaiting the opening festivities that would take place later that afternoon.

“Looks like it’s going to be a nice day.” Catherine Carter smiled lovingly at her husband, as she joined him at the edge of the racetrack. Her blue eyes sparkled brightly in the morning light, her fair skin flushed pink in the brisk January winds.

“We got lucky. No rain in the forecast.” He wrapped his arms around his wife and kissed her forehead, pulling back slightly to look into her eyes. “Mark’s plane will be landing in about an hour; I should probably head for the airport,” he informed his wife with a genuine air of regret. Even after twenty-three years of marriage, William Carter still found his wife beautiful and always hated to have to say goodbye, even for just a few hours, but to realize his lifetime dream, he knew he had to. A successful first day would be the telling tale and paramount to whether the business would sink or swim. In the end, however, it appeared all his worrying had been unfounded.

The grand opening of Carter-McMurphy Racing Academy had gone off without a hitch; the first semester was already at capacity, and thanks to the day’s festivities, the weekend kid’s camp sign-ups were filling fast with only a few slots left. After a long day of meet-and-greets and tours around the facility, Mark had convinced William that a night on the town was exactly what they needed. Not that it took much convincing after months of stressful planning and construction issues, and a night out with Mark McMurphy was never boring.

The two business partners ended up at a typical sports bar on a Friday night; crowded, with bad lighting, a few pool tables, and ESPN on every TV in the place.

“Well, it seems that our little business venture is going to be a success. Time to celebrate.” Mark slapped William on the back as they grabbed two seats at the bar.

“Too bad you have to fly out tomorrow morning. I was hoping we would be able to get in at least one game of golf. Cathy won’t go out with me if the temperature is less than 60 degrees,” William joked, a smile forming on his face in memory of just how he and his wife usually spent those chilly mornings instead of teeing off.

“You’re a lucky man, Billy, you know that? A beautiful wife who loves you and supports you in whatever you want to do. Hell, she basically worships the ground you walk on. A lot of guys would kill for that.” Mark spoke honestly, the pain of his own recent divorce only just starting to abate.

“Yeah, I know I’m lucky. I’m really sorry about you and Julie. I still can’t believe it.”

“Think about how I felt when I walked in on her and the pool guy. I mean really, the pool guy? Couldn’t she have been a little more original than that?”

“At least you were smart enough to get her to sign a pre-nup.” William tried to lighten his friend’s mood.

“I guess it was a good idea putting that infidelity clause in there. She left with nothing more than she came with. I just thank God we never had kids,” Mark replied as he took another swig of his beer.

“Yeah, I hear ya there; kids can complicate everything.”

“Why didn’t you and Cathy ever...” before Mark could finish his thought, he felt William jab him in the ribs with his elbow.

“Looks like we’re about to get company. Maybe they can help cheer you up.” William pointed out two scantily clad college girls heading directly toward them.

“Excuse me, aren’t you Mark McMurphy, the race car driver?” The well-endowed brunette in the too tight red top and skin tight jeans asked, as she ran her hand up his chest.

“Yeah, that would be me.” He smiled warmly and gestured to the empty bar seats. “You and your friend care to join us?”

“What the hell is going on, Linz? Why did I have to follow you here?” Cindy asked in concern as she got out of Maggie. Locking the door, she raced to catch up with Lindsay, who was already making her way to the parking garage’s elevator.

“Jill might need a ride home,” Lindsay offered in reply as she punched the up button on the panel in front of her.

“Who is this guy?” Cindy stepped in next to her girlfriend and pressed the issue further as they watched as the doors slowly closed.

“As much as I want to tell you everything, I really think that’s a question you need to ask Jill.”

“It’s that serious?” Cindy felt her stomach sink. If Lindsay was insisting that she hear the news from Jill, it had to be something grim and, more than likely, quite complicated. None of the club members ever had it easy when it came to secrets and problems from their past.

“Yeah, it’s that serious,” Lindsay conceded as she took Cindy’s hands into her own and faced her. “Don’t push her though, Cindy. She’ll tell you when she’s ready.”

Lindsay's cryptic response did little to help fight the inexplicable feeling of dread that had her insides tied in tight knots since answering Jill's call. As the doors quietly slid open, Cindy slipped her hands from her lover's and silently followed behind through the deserted hallway to Jill's office.

"Should I wait out here?" Cindy whispered as Lindsay knocked on the door twice before opening it. Tilting her head around the taller woman, she peered inside, her breath hitching at the sight of Jill sitting at her desk, her fingers threaded haphazardly through blonde hair as she rested her head in her hands. She looked broken.

"Maybe you..." Lindsay started to suggest that perhaps it would be better if Cindy waited in the hallway, but the younger woman had already darted around her, heading directly for Jill. However, she pulled up short when a blonde head snapped up and blue eyes fastened on her darker ones.

"What are you doing here? I asked for Lindsay," said Jill sharply, immediately regretting both her tone and her words when Cindy visibly flinched. She was so tired and stressed she didn't know if she was coming or going, but she did know Cindy hadn't done a single thing to deserve her wrath. "Damn it, I'm sorry." She swallowed around the lump that had been steadily growing in her throat since she'd gotten the phone call informing her of William Carter's arrest and softened her expression.

"I'm here. I brought Cindy along to drive you home." Lindsay eased forward and placed her hand on her lover's back, rubbing gentle, reassuring circles. She'd seen the hurt look on Cindy's face when Jill had snapped at her, and even though she knew Jill hadn't meant anything by her words, the overwhelming need to protect and comfort Cindy wouldn't allow her to react any differently.

"Oh no, I'm going with you," insisted Jill, her focus now on Lindsay as she struggled to her feet and reached for her purse. Her adrenalin was quickly wearing off, and her legs threatened to turn to liquid at any moment. She gripped the edge of the desk tightly to keep from toppling over.

It only took Lindsay a moment to assess the situation – Jill looked as if she was about to fall flat on her face. Stretching to her full height, she readied to stand her ground. "You're going home. I'll take care of this. You don't need to get involved."

"I want to make sure that son of a bitch doesn't worm his way out of this!"

If Cindy hadn't been looking directly at Jill, she'd have never believed the amount of vehemence and pure spite that had sprung from the other woman's lips. She had absolutely no idea who William Carter was, but she could already tell that she despised the man. Anyone that elicited that kind of reaction from Jill was definitely no good in her book either.

"Jill . . ."

“Don’t ‘Jill’ me, Linz. I’ve waited my entire life for someone to finally nail that bastard. I want my time to gloat.” Jill suddenly seemed stronger, almost as if a second wind had come her way and pushed her back up to stand firmly on her own two feet. She’d not be denied her chance to witness Carter’s fall from his high and mighty pedestal – one built solely on his lies.

Lindsay glanced briefly at Cindy and then looked over at a very determined Jill. She knew this was a battle she’d never win.

“All right, but I’m going to be with you every step of the way.”

“Me, too,” piped up Cindy without hesitation. She was ready to stand beside her friend despite having no real clue as to what she was offering her support for. Feeling two sets of eyes boring into her, she quickly amended her statement before her friends could demand that she stay behind. “Um . . . just to the station. I’ll wait in the lobby.”

Jill smiled slightly. “I’d expect no less.” Moving her gaze to Lindsay, she added, “From either of you.”

White linoleum, worn with age and excessive use, appeared almost gray under the fluorescent lights that lined the ceiling of the narrow lobby from its entrance to the tall, equally worn, oaken desk that stretched across the far end of the room. On each side, high-backed wooden benches had been securely fastened to the floor and placed strategically between doorways to maximize seating while still allowing for adequate passage into the different offices. Cindy sat on the edge of one such bench and leaned an elbow on its end as she stared across at the large bulletin board on the opposite wall.

The bench itself reminded the young reporter of a church pew, but that was as far as the analogy had gone as photos of America’s most wanted stared back at her instead of the usual sacred statues that graced the interiors of most churches. Rapists and murderers, who’d managed to escape the long arm of the law, were a far cry from Jesus, Mary, Joseph, or any other saintly statue for that matter. A chill ran down Cindy’s spine at the thought of another criminal who was still at large, one who just happened to use religion to serve his own twisted purposes. She instinctively wrapped her arms around her middle and glanced over at the closed door that led to the holding cells, wishing, not for the first time, that she’d been allowed to accompany Lindsay and Jill through the glass doors that seem to hold all the secrets.

She’d kept quiet on the drive over to the nearby precinct, which was actually an easy thing to do seeing as how Lindsay had ushered Jill into her Jeep and instructed her to follow. The two had driven away into the bowels of the twisting and turning garage with Cindy practically glued to Lindsay’s bumper. In her mind, it was the only way she could

keep close to a situation she had no control over, but that didn't stop her mind from churning with all sorts of possibilities.

Had William Carter been someone who'd committed a heinous crime, only to get off on some technicality? Had Jill fought tooth and nail to keep him behind bars, but then ended up having to stand helplessly by as he strolled through the doors of the Hall, a free man? Had he taunted the DDA with his words? Or perhaps done something worse?

Cindy sighed and shifted to a more comfortable position, her overactive imagination back and smoothly shifting gears. Or had Carter been an old lover of Jill's? Some guy who she'd fallen hopelessly in love with, promising her heart and soul until death do them part? Had he ripped her heart out and left her all alone to deal with the aftermath? Was he the reason Jill was so terrified of commitment?

Focusing her attention on the glass doors, she watched and waited. She'd give anything to know how Jill was faring.

"You sure you're up to this? No one would so much as bat an eye if you decided not to face him," said Lindsay, stopping just outside the last set of floor-to-ceiling bars that separated her and Jill from the holding cells. "I can tell him that you're not available," she paused long enough for her voice to drop to its lowest register, "*ever.*"

"Thanks, Linz," whispered Jill, reaching over to squeeze her friend's forearm. "But I'd rather tell him myself." Her pale coloring and shaky voice belied her words, but Lindsay held her tongue and smiled reassuringly as she nodded to the guard to unlock the steel-barred door. Placing her hand in the small of Jill's back, she guided her through the final barrier.

The walk to the end cells was eerily silent, save for the rhythmic clicking sound of Jill's heels against the patterned concrete floor. Lindsay could feel the tension radiating from the DDA as it slowly intensified with each step they took, but she remained silent, instead offering support through her touch.

Jill's ramrod-straight posture stiffened noticeably midway to their destination, but she continued forward, her head held high, determined to see this latest nightmare through to its end, an end that was now upon her as there were simply no more steps to take. With one final deep breath, Jill stopped in front of the last cell and turned to face the bars and the man she'd hoped to never have to lay eyes on again.

The interior of the cell was unlit, the two circular light fixtures, dangling from high above, extinguished due to the lateness of the hour and allowing for occupants of the holding cells to get a chance at some sleep. It took Jill several moments before her eyes were finally able to adjust and see into the darkness as the low lighting from the ceiling between the two rows of cells crept through the bars and projected just far enough to see

inside. She focused on the still figure lying on a narrow concrete bench that was affixed to the wall and studied features that had suddenly become crystal clear.

William Carter lay on his back with his knees bent and feet flat on the makeshift bed, the bench way too short to accommodate his tall stature. He appeared to have maintained his well-built physique, the only obvious change in his appearance the gray that now peppered his once midnight-colored hair. Jill shivered in memory of just how much he'd towered over her, dwarfing her smaller size, and she felt the cold tendrils of fear gripping at her wrists and ankles. She took an involuntary step backward just as dark green eyes shifted their gaze from the ceiling above to focus on her blue ones.

A rough, gravelly voice, ruined by too much smoke and drink, cut through the silence like a knife and had Jill inching further away, the delicate hairs on her arms and neck standing on end. She almost stopped breathing.

"About damn time you got here," said Carter, swiveling his body around into a sitting position. He rubbed his face vigorously with his hands, before returning his full attention back to the DDA. "This place reeks of piss and is hotter than Hell."

Jill spoke slowly and chose her words carefully, thankful to have somehow found her voice amid the anxiety that threatened to swallow her whole. She'd later realize she'd drawn her strength from the intense anger Lindsay had silently projected toward Carter – all in her name.

"Sounds like the perfect place for you, if you ask me."

"Cut the crap, Jillian, and get me out of here. These trumped up charges are bogus," said Carter calmly and in a non-threatening tone as he slowly pushed to his feet and moved toward the bars. His smooth, easy gait and calm demeanor made him look less intimidating, but Jill knew firsthand not to judge this particular book by its cover.

"According to the police report, a witness saw you strike her friend. And then you had to go and make matters worse by getting physical with the arresting officers. Certainly doesn't sound bogus to me." Jill had taken a step closer to the bars, closer to Lindsay as well, but at least she'd made a bit of progress in confronting her fear.

"That little tramp? She's lying to cover her own ass, afraid her reputation will be tarnished if her friends and family find out she's nothing more than a whore. Both those girls were all over Mark, ready to screw him right there at the bar. It was me who suggested getting a room in the hotel next door. Hell, I saved their reputations," said Carter, waving his hands in the air as he extolled on his magnanimous gesture.

His chosen words lit a fire inside of Jill, and she saw red.

"So, what were you doing in the alley?" Her anger brought her to the edge of the cell. "Oh, let me guess – you just happened to be passing by, heard crying, and went to

comfort the poor girl and her friend. Nothing happened though, right? Those girls made everything up, read too much into your act of kindness, and wanted you so badly they fantasized everything.”

Jill was breathing hard, her chest heaving with the surge of emotion. She felt trapped as the room seemed to close in around her, the walls threatening to crush her. She needed out of there; she needed air.

“Find someone else to sing your lies to. As far as I’m concerned, you can burn in Hell.”

Holding back the tears that threatened to escape, Jill forced herself to maintain eye contact with Carter for a long moment, before she turned and walked away. She quietly swallowed sob after sob as she made her way to the exit, ignoring his voice as he called out to her.

“Jillian! Jillian, come back here!” Carter pressed his body flush against the bars, trying to see the DDA, but she’d disappeared from view. Only her rapidly receding footsteps kept him apprised of her location until, finally, silence reigned. He was all alone – except for the tall brunette and the uninterested man in the cell across the way.

“Karma’s a real bitch sometimes,” drawled Lindsay, speaking her first words to the man she hated more than any other, including Kiss-Me-Not and the Hallelujah Man. “I can’t think of anyone who deserves it more than you.”

Carter clenched his jaw and stared at the dark-haired inspector. If she hadn’t shown up, he may have been able to talk Jillian into helping out, but the bitch had stood by like some kind of watchdog, threatening to attack if he stepped over the line. He wisely chose not to waste any words on her. Lindsay, however, wasn’t of the same mind.

“Don’t you *ever*, and I do mean *ever*, call Jill again.” She locked eyes on him, her lips curling into a feral smile. “If you do, I’ll spread the word in whatever prison you land in and let the other inmates know exactly what you are. Let’s see how you feel when the tables are turned.”

With one final look of disdain, Lindsay broke off eye contact and walked away. She’d follow through with her threat whether Carter abided by her warning or not.

The night sky was pitch black, without a single star to offer any kind of hope to those who sought it out. Cindy sighed dejectedly and stepped back toward the building’s entrance, pushing through the doors and retaking her seat on the bench. She’d gone outside seeking a sense of peace and calm, having already tried to keep her mind occupied by counting all the ceiling tiles and the floor ones, too. Not that Lindsay and Jill had been gone that long; it was just that the reporter was out of sorts; her worry for Jill was so great that she’d not been able to focus on anything else.

A flicker of movement behind interior glass doors caught Cindy's attention, and she flew to her feet when she spotted Jill on the other side. Her worry increased tenfold when she got a good look at her friend's lost expression etched on a pale, pasty complexion, and she wished, for about the hundredth time since she'd arrived at the precinct, that William Carter had chosen to break the law in some other city.

Jill burst through the doors and didn't break stride as she headed directly for the restrooms across the hallway. Her stomach roiled violently, and she felt as nauseous as she'd ever been in her life, even when compared to gruesome crime scenes that were notorious for making her green around the gills. She barely made it inside a restroom stall, and falling to her knees, lost every drop of alcohol she'd consumed earlier as well as the bag of chips she'd gotten out of the vending machine – her makeshift dinner when she'd been too busy to go out and get something more substantial.

“Jill?” asked Cindy, pushing the door open and standing half-in and half-out of the room as she kept an eye out for Lindsay. A retching sound drew her focus to the center stall, and she released her hold on the door and hurried inside. Racing through the swinging stall door, she leaned over and placed a gentle hand on the nape of Jill's neck, rubbing the damp, clammy skin soothingly. “You okay?”

If Jill hadn't felt like death warmed over, she'd have rolled her eyes dramatically and offered up the perfect comeback. Instead, she closed her watery eyes and leaned into Cindy's welcomed touch. She just wanted this day to end.

“Hey, you guys in here?” asked Lindsay, sticking her head in the doorway and glancing around the room. She burst forward as if she'd been shot out of a cannon when she'd spotted one of Cindy's better features poking out from the middle stall. “Jesus, what happened?”

“You tell me,” said Cindy, swiveling her head around, still a bit miffed that she hadn't a clue as to what was going on. She did, however, continue her soothing, stroking motion. Now wasn't the time to be petty. “We need to take Jill home, but I don't think she should stay by herself.”

Jill stirred at hearing the exchange. “Just take me home. I'll be fine.” She placed an unsteady hand on the toilet seat to hoist herself up, but Cindy had already slipped an arm underneath her friend's and gently lifted as she stood to her full height. Jill finally managed to get her feet under her and pushed the rest of the way up. She felt like a newborn colt standing for the first time, but at least she was standing. Blowing out a shaky breath, she allowed Cindy to lead her out of the close quarters where Lindsay stood by, waiting to take over.

“You're going to my place, no arguments,” said Lindsay, wrapping a protective arm around her friend, and with Cindy bracketing Jill's other side, the pair started for the door

as a grumbling DDA struggled to keep pace. The last thing she wanted was to infringe upon her friends' time together.

"Just drop me off at Claire's. I can crash on the couch."

"Uh uh, Claire had a date tonight, and I'm not going to be the one to interrupt her if she happened to get lucky," said Cindy, opening the restroom door for the trio to pass through. She started forward but was jerked to a stop. She could've pulled a stunned, weak Jill along with her, but Lindsay had planted both feet on the floor and wasn't budging.

"A date?" asked Lindsay, sliding her hand to Jill's waist just in case the DDA felt faint. "What do you mean a date?"

Cindy looked into dark eyes filled with concern and felt a twinge of guilt for her rather poor attempt at humor. "Ed... her date was with Ed."

"Don't scare us like that," said Lindsay as she started forward once again. Jill just shook her head and followed along. It looked like she was going to Lindsay's apartment after all. Keeping her eye on the tiled floor, she concentrated on her steps.

As they arrived at the exit to the precinct, Cindy reached out to push the door open when a stunning blonde hurried up the front steps and yanked the door back. She held it open wide and waited for the three women to clear the opening, before she stepped through, followed by a gentleman in a three-piece suit, and headed for the desk sergeant. Cindy turned back to thank the sharply dressed woman, but the blonde had already walked away.

"Okay," said Lindsay, veering towards Cindy's car, "I need to check with the arresting officers. I'll meet you two back at my place in about half an hour."

"Sounds like a plan," replied Cindy, easing away from Jill's side to open the passenger door. Jill stepped from Lindsay's grasp and climbed inside, gratefully sinking into the seat. She fumbled with her seat belt as Lindsay shut the door and turned toward Cindy.

"I'll be as quick as I can." She looked through the tempered glass at Jill. "See if you can get her to eat something. Maybe some soup and crackers."

"I can handle Jill, but I need you to promise to fill me in on this Carter character. I'm tired of being in the dark."

"I promise." Lindsay hoped that Jill might fill in some of the blanks on the ride over to her apartment, but if not, she planned to fully disclose everything to Cindy later. Her lover had definitely earned the right to know.

With a firm nod, Cindy jogged around her car and opened her door. She gave Lindsay a quick wink before disappearing inside and fastening her seat belt. Easing from the curb, she drove away from the precinct.

Lindsay waited until Maggie's taillights disappeared from view, before she finally turned and headed back inside the precinct. She furrowed her brow when she caught the tail end of the desk sergeant's words to the two individuals standing in front of his desk.

"...Mr. Carter can be released on ROR. A summons to appear in court to face the charges for assaulting a police officer will be mailed out and will denote the time and date for his appearance. The charges for the assault on Miss Anderson are still pending at this time since the victim hasn't been able to give her statement." The mostly gray haired police officer glanced over at the well-dressed lawyer. "Your attorney will need to contact the DA's office for more information."

"I'll be sure to do that," said Malcolm Abbott, knowing full well what the procedures were, but it was late and he really wasn't in the mood to dress down a desk sergeant. His presence tonight hadn't really been necessary anyway; he'd only come along with Mrs. Carter as a favor to his old friend, Mark McMurphy.

"DA's office, you say? My daughter works for the DA, she's . . ."

Before Catherine Carter could divulge the name of her daughter, a low gravelly voice sounded from behind her, the speaker edging closer and closer with each word.

"You don't have a daughter. You gave her up for a lying, abusive bastard. Well, he's going to get his now. I'm going to personally see to it." Lindsay towered over the shorter woman, and despite the obvious similarities to her daughter, she ignored blue eyes that so closely mirrored Jill's and forged ahead. "Still think he's innocent?"

"Now wait just a minute," said Malcom Abbott, stepping between the intimidating inspector and his client's wife. "You can't threaten her like that. What's your badge number?"

Lindsay clenched her jaw and pushed her leather jacket aside, revealing a shiny, gold shield. She rattled off the number etched along its edge from memory and then eased her jacket back into place. It wouldn't be the first letter of reprimand she'd ever received, and it certainly wouldn't be the last, but one thing was for certain, it would be the most satisfying.

"Tell your husband not to get used to life outside. It'll make it that much harder when he has to go back in."

Turning on her booted heel, Lindsay headed for the door.

ACT II

Sliding her key into the deadbolt, Cindy unlocked the door and eased it open, reaching a hand inside and feeling around for the light switch. A quick flick of her finger and the room was awash in a soft glow, revealing a silently waiting Martha. The border collie sat quietly on her haunches and stared at the newcomers, her tail wagging slightly as she recognized the redheaded woman's scent. Her eyes immediately fell on Cindy's hands, searching for any sign of a white paper bag that usually meant a nice, juicy bone.

"Hey girl, sorry I don't have anything for you tonight," said Cindy apologetically as she moved to the side to allow Jill to enter. Pushing the door closed when the other woman stepped across the threshold, she took the blonde by the elbow and ushered her to the couch. "Why don't you lie down for a bit while I heat up some soup?"

"I'm not really hungry," lied Jill, her stomach practically eating away at itself. She felt weak and dizzy, mostly due to lack of nourishment, but she was scared she'd only lose anything she tried to force down.

Cindy sat next to her friend and took hold of a hand that had lost all its warmth. "You've got to eat something. You're going to get sick." She cradled Jill's hand between her two palms and rubbed gently. "I think you'd feel better if you changed out of those clothes, too. There's a pair of sweats on the second shelf in Lindsay's closet and some socks in the top drawer of her dresser. I'll fix you something light to eat while you change."

Jill opened her mouth to protest but closed it just as quickly. It would feel good to put on something comfortable, and it certainly wouldn't hurt to eat a spoonful or two of soup to pacify Cindy. Then maybe the younger woman would leave her alone, and she could curl up on the couch and try to sleep away the bad memories.

"Okay, but just a small cup." She slowly eased to her feet and started toward the bedroom, calling over her shoulder, "Don't come back with a tureen of the stuff either." Jill knew Cindy all too well; the girl didn't know the meaning of moderation.

"Deal," said Cindy, standing and moving in the other direction. "Meet me in the kitchen after you've changed." With a huge smile, she hurried into the other room, Martha right on her heels.

In the bedroom, Jill hesitated in the doorway before moving further into the room. She ignored the unmade bed, its covers thrown back carelessly and its pillows nestled closely together, and tried not to imagine what she'd interrupted when she'd made her call earlier. She knew one thing for certain though, it had held much more meaning than the half-drunken encounter she'd had in the alleyway with Kristie. It was little consolation that she'd at least remembered the woman's name.

Pushing her troubled thoughts away, she stepped in front of the open closet and zeroed in on the sweats Cindy had referred to, grinning slightly as she lifted the pants free and held them up in front of her – average length and fairly new, definitely not Lindsay’s. She efficiently stripped down to her silky bra and panties and slipped into the comfortable sweats, making a quick stop at the dresser on the way out to grab a pair of socks. Her nose, and specifically the aroma that had wafted her way, led her directly to the kitchen.

“That doesn’t smell like any canned soup I’ve ever had,” said Jill, following the enticing scent to stand next to Cindy. “Is that homemade?” She stared down into the small pot, ninety-nine percent certain that neither Campbells nor Progresso had been responsible for its contents.

“Lindsay doesn’t like canned soup,” offered Cindy, ladling a scoop of the hot soup into a small bowl. She cradled it carefully as she carried it to the table.

Martha watched from the doorway as the blonde human followed her new person. The woman called Jill wore an expression much like Martha always did whenever there was a bone involved.

“Thanks for coming with Catherine to the precinct. I really appreciate it.”

Standing beside a dark blue sedan, William Carter held his wife close as he shook Malcolm Abbot’s hand. He knew his release had been sped up because of the attorney’s presence and was grateful to the man for getting him out sooner than he’d expected.

“I was glad to be of service,” said Abbott, returning the firm handshake. “I’ll contact the DA’s office tomorrow, and we’ll get this all sorted out.”

“I don’t know why that girl lied. She certainly was happy when Mark was buying her and her friend all those drinks.” Carter shook his head. “Guess she figured to take things further and got mad when Mark didn’t go along.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Carter; no one’s going to believe a drunken college student over a world-class race car driver. It’s obvious she’s just out to try to ruin his reputation.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it?” said Catherine with a soft sigh. “People are always out to get the good guys.”

Abbott offered up a smug grin. “That’s why there are lawyers like me who make certain they don’t get away with it. Now, you two go on home and don’t worry. I’ll make this, and the scuffle with the police officer, go away.”

“Thank you, Mr. Abbott; thank you so much.” Catherine smiled her thanks as she watched the attorney walk away.

“So, Mrs. Carter, what do you say we go home?”

Pushing up on her toes, Catherine kissed him sweetly.

“Now I know why Lindsay keeps you around,” teased Jill as she stretched out on the sofa. She’d eaten two bowls of Cindy’s homemade soup, before retiring to the den and the comfortable couch.

“Somebody has to make sure she’s fed.” Cindy smiled and reached down to pat Martha on the head, the dog having forgiven her for not bringing home a treat. Of course, the two dog biscuits had helped soothe most of the pain away.

Jill closed her eyes and sighed tiredly, hoping to finally get some much needed rest, but the image of William Carter, lying in the holding cell, pushed its way forward, and in a single second, destroyed everything Cindy had accomplished in ridding her conscience of his memory. She shivered uncontrollably.

“Are you cold? Do you need a blanket?” asked Cindy, reaching for the neatly folded afghan that lay on the back of her chair. She’d moved to the couch and had already thrown the cover over Jill before the other woman could respond.

“Thanks,” whispered Jill, burrowing under the blanket and purposefully keeping her eyes closed in hopes that her friend would decide to leave her to sleep. But a touch to her hand and the quiet rustling of Cindy situating herself on the floor next to the sofa told the DDA that the young woman wasn’t going away.

“Jill, please tell me what’s going on with you. I want to help, but I can’t if I don’t know what I’m fighting against.” Cindy spoke softly and with emotion. “Trust me. Please?”

Biting down on the edge of her lip, Jill opened her eyes and started when she felt a weight on her legs. She looked down the length of her body to see Martha’s brown eyes staring back at her. The dog kept eye contact as she slowly inched forward, stopping only when her head was resting on Jill’s chest.

“Carter’s been charged with assaulting a young college girl,” said Jill softly, reaching out to run her fingers through Martha’s soft fur. “He said he didn’t touch her, that she’d been drinking and made the whole thing up.”

Cindy sat perfectly still, too scared to move or say anything that might distract her friend. Instead, she offered her support with a gentle squeeze of her hand, the change in touch seeming to spur Jill on.

“I know better though; I know what he did. He’s the one who’s lying. He’s the one who pushed his body hard against hers and whispered how *special* she was as he fondled her and forced himself inside of her.”

A single tear eased its way to the corner of Jill’s eye, holding steady until it finally lost its battle with gravity and spilled over, slowly falling down a pale, smooth cheek. Cindy instinctively reached out and caught the droplet before it could roll off the edge of her friend’s jaw, and gripping Jill’s hand tightly, she silently stood guard against the threat of more. She hadn’t realized she’d need to guard against her own tears as well.

“He’s my stepfather, Cindy.”

Pulling her Jeep behind Cindy’s car, Lindsay switched off the ignition and rested her head against the seat. She hadn’t be able to track down Carter’s arresting officers as they’d been called for backup on a robbery gone bad that had left one policeman injured and a suspect dead, but she figured time was no longer of the essence anyway, seeing as how Carter had made bail. She just had to make certain that the assault charges stuck and that Carter’s attorney couldn’t poke any holes in the victim’s story. Jill would be devastated if the bastard managed to beat the charges leveled against him.

As she reached for the door handle, she paused, her thoughts turning to her encounter with Jill’s mother. It was strange how, had she accidentally run across the woman on the street, she’d probably not have made the connection. But once she’d overheard the woman, known who the woman was, the similarities between her and Jill had been eerily uncanny. Although, considering their blood relationship, Lindsay shouldn’t have been surprised.

It was just that she already had a visual image of Catherine Carter in her mind: tall, thin, with high eyebrows, drooping eyelids that covered coal black eyes, a turned up nose and pointy chin, and symmetrically two-toned hair - black on one side and white on the other. In other words, a true-to-life Cruella de Vil. With the Disney character imprinted firmly in her head, Lindsay crawled from her vehicle and started toward her building; Catherine Carter would always be Cruella to her.

Half-way up the sidewalk, she glanced up at the light that glowed softly from her apartment window and wondered how Jill was faring and if she’d confided in Cindy. Lindsay would follow through with her promise to divulge the details of Jill’s painful past, but she truly believed it needed to come from Jill. Cindy needed to know that every member of the club trusted her enough to reveal even the darkest moments of their past. Lord knows Lindsay was trying; it was a constant uphill battle to force herself to confide in her lover, but she was improving every day, or at least in her mind she had.

Lindsay eased her apartment door open and peeked inside, before stepping into the room. Martha raised her head from Jill’s chest to eye the intruder, but she softly laid it back

down when she recognized her master. Cindy, on the other hand, hadn't noticed her lover's presence, so focused on the blonde head that lay in her lap as she gently eased a lock of hair from the sleeping woman's forehead.

Tip-toeing toward the touching scene, Lindsay whispered softly, "Did you get her to eat something?"

Cindy glanced up and smiled sadly. "Yeah, I fed her some of your soup." She looked back down at Jill. "She told me about William Carter."

Lindsay closed the distance and crouched down next to the couch, placing a hand on Cindy's knee. "She's been through so much, but she made it. Jill's a survivor."

"Yeah, but she shouldn't have had to," said Cindy, lifting her gaze to meet Lindsay's. "Parents are supposed to protect their children."

Lindsay flinched slightly, but kept her focus on the subject at hand. "She looks like she's resting comfortably. Why don't we leave her to sleep?"

Nodding, Cindy very slowly and gently eased out from under Jill, and with Lindsay's help, soothed their friend back to sleep. Hand-in-hand, the two lovers spared one last glance at the sleeping blonde, before retiring to the bedroom.

Martha watched her humans walk away and then turned her focus back on her charge. She'd keep guard through the night.

Just before dawn, when the darker edges of the sky had begun to lighten to a shade of pink, a phone chimed loudly, disturbing the quiet and the two women who slept entwined together. Lindsay groaned and blindly reached out to the nightstand, slapping her hand around the small space until she finally located the annoyance.

"Boxer," she said with as much irritation as she could possibly interject into her voice. She'd barely gotten two hours of sleep and someone had to pay.

Cindy smiled against warm skin and snuggled closer, her eyes popping open wide when she was almost thrown from the bed as Lindsay unexpectedly sat up and dislodged the young woman from her comfortable spot.

"What?" Long, bare legs were thrown over the side of the bed. "When?" Lindsay reached toward the footboard and grabbed a pair of worn sweats, shimmying into the pants and tugging the shirt over her head as she alternated the phone from one ear to the other. "I'll call Claire." Without so much as a goodbye, she flipped her phone closed and gripped it tightly as she ran a hand through tangled locks.

“What’s happened now?” asked Cindy, scooting closer to Lindsay and lightly rubbing her lower back. She held her breath, hoping the Hallelujah Man hadn’t struck again.

Lindsay reached back and patted her lover’s hip, before she pushed to her feet. “I need to jump in the shower. Can you make some coffee? We’ll need to wake Jill when I get out.”

Cindy scrambled out of bed and slipped into her clothes, hurrying after Lindsay who’d already left the room. Veering toward the kitchen, she spared a glance at a soundly sleeping Jill, and wondered what else could possibly go wrong. Minutes later, she found out.

“Jill?” said Lindsay softly as she reached out to lightly touch her friend on the shoulder. Martha stood to the side of her master and watched the proceedings closely, not at all happy at being removed from her comfortable position.

“Hmmm…” murmured Jill, her eyes still firmly closed as she hovered between wakefulness and sleep – that place that held no problems, no pain, and no nightmares, only peace and serenity. Had she known what awaited her she’d have chosen to stay there, but the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee pulled her into full consciousness.

“Oh, that smells divine,” said Jill, pushing against the end of the sofa until she was sitting upright. She reached out for the steaming cup Cindy held and cradled it in her hands, inhaling the rich scent before taking her first sip. “God this is good. I just love hazelnut.” She snuck another sip, before teasing, “You’re one lucky woman, Linz. I’d snatch Cindy up for her coffee-making skills alone.”

Smiling at the firsthand knowledge of Cindy’s other skills, Lindsay leaned forward and placed her elbows on her knees as she clasped her hands together loosely. Jill had awakened in a surprisingly good mood, and she hated to be the one to have to burst her bubble. Sometimes, life really sucked.

“Jill, Tom called,” she hesitated momentarily, before pressing on, “The girl didn’t make it.”

“What?” asked Jill, halting the mug halfway to her lips, her brain not quite awake despite the few sips of caffeine. “What do you mean?”

“The girl Carter assaulted,” said Lindsay, careful not to refer to his relationship with Jill. “There were complications. Tom has assigned the case to me and Jacobi. I’m going to meet Claire at the morgue.”

Tossing off the blanket that lay across her legs, Jill moved to stand. “Okay, just let me finish this cup and give me a few minutes to dress. I’ll ride with you.”

“You’re not going with me. Cindy will drive you to your apartment for a shower and change of clothes. I promise to keep you informed.”

Jill glared at Lindsay, noting the steel of resolve taking root in the other woman’s posture. There was no sense in trying to argue with Lindsay. It would only make them both tired and frustrated. Besides, there was something much more important that she needed to do. Something she’d waited a lifetime to do.

“What’s her name?” she asked, sinking back into the sofa’s cushions and taking another sip of coffee, resigned to be left behind with Cindy, but only because she knew it would take time to get everything in order.

“What?” The question completely threw Lindsay. She’d expected a knock-down drag-out, or at the very least, more of an argument from Jill.

“The girl who died? What’s her name?”

Lindsay knitted her brow in confusion. “Why? What does it matter?”

“I need her name for the murder charges I’m going to file against Carter.”

“Um, Jill? Don’t you think . . .” started Cindy, leaving her unfinished question dangling in mid-air, the edges of her words scorched from the look that was being directed her way. She was frankly amazed she was still breathing.

“I’m still a DDA in this city. It’s well within my purview to file any charges I see fit, regardless of the crime or the criminal,” said Jill in a hard tone, daring either of her friends to dispute her claim.

Cindy wisely kept silent, while Lindsay made a mental note to call Denise to fill the acting DA in on the murder. She just had to figure out a way to explain the situation without actually ‘explaining’ the situation. Denise could be a real pain in the ass when she wanted to be, which was usually whenever she was breathing.

“Kayla Anderson. I’ll send you more information as I get it.” Pushing to her feet, Lindsay allowed Jill to believe she’d won this particular round. “And eat something before you go to the office.” She softened her tone. “You still look pale.”

Pleased with the compromise and touched by the caring shown by her friends, Jill offered a lopsided grin and turned toward Cindy. “Okay, Paula Dean, what’s for breakfast?”

“What’ve you got?” asked Lindsay, skipping over pleasantries and jumping right to the autopsy findings, as she walked into the morgue and headed directly for the slab that held the body of Kayla Anderson. She gazed down on the youthful, innocent-looking face and

clenched her jaw in anger. The co-ed had had a chance at a long, successful life until it had been snatched away by a man who should've been thrown into prison and the key tossed away years ago.

“First, hello to you, too, and second, why didn't you call and tell me what was going on?” Claire stood from her bended over position and glared at her friend. “I had to find out what had happened from the police report. It took me a few minutes to put it all together.”

Lindsay visibly flinched and shrugged apologetically, her leather jacket making a light crinkling sound when she raised her shoulders. “Sorry, Claire; everything happened so fast, and then Cindy said something about you getting lucky and I thought that if Ed had been able to . . .”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” interrupted Claire, her cheeks beginning to glow. “You can stop right there.” The coroner smoothly changed the subject to their friend's mental state. “Is Jill alright? How's she holding up?”

“Just as you'd expect. She's all over the place; I don't think it's fully sunk in yet. Cindy is handling her like a pro, even got her to eat something last night and again this morning,” said Lindsay, her focus straying to the victim's blonde hair. She didn't dare ask Claire the color Kayla Anderson's eyes.

“Good for Cindy and good for you, too, for keeping Jill out of the morgue. She doesn't need to see this, at least not for now anyway.” Claire inched the sheet to just below the victim's shoulders and waited for Lindsay to zoom in on the bruises that lined Kayla's neck.

Angling her head to get a better view of the purpling marks, Lindsay jammed her hands into her pockets and balled up her fists tightly to keep from hitting something. “Were those caused by someone's hands?”

“Yeah, big ones, too,” replied Claire, splaying her hands as wide as she could and comparing her span to one that caused the bruises. “Way bigger than mine.”

“So, he strangled her?” Lindsay swallowed the fury that threatened to choke her and asked the question she always dreaded. “Was she raped?”

“Bruising suggests that it was, at the very least, rough sex,” Claire explained, hesitating momentarily before adding, “Oral and vaginal.” She gestured toward an angry-looking head wound. “However, the cause of death itself wasn't strangulation, it was blunt force trauma. The witness' statement says the victim was struck across the face and then she fell. Whatever she hit when she landed caused extreme swelling which, in turn, led to an aneurysm that eventually caused her death.”

“Any way to prove she was forced and that it wasn't consensual?”

Claire nodded and pointed to the victim's shoulder. "Here and here..." she waited for Lindsay to note the small indentation types of bruises and clarified, "Someone pushed her to her knees. And there's more." She lifted the sheet that covered the lower part of the victim's body. "Look at her knees – they're scraped up pretty badly. She didn't get banged up like that kneeling on her own."

"We've got to pin this on Carter. Please tell me you've got DNA."

Claire grinned smugly. "I've got DNA."

Freshly showered and wearing her favorite jeans and sweater, Jill strolled through the mostly empty corridor that led to her office, her head held high and projecting an air of confidence she didn't actually possess. Had it been during the regular work week instead of a Saturday, Jill wasn't certain she'd be able to pull off her false bravado and found herself grateful for small favors.

A slight smile creased her face in memory of the fierceness and tenacity a certain redhead had displayed during the night and into the morning light, determined to do whatever was necessary to offer support in any way she possibly could. Cindy had wanted to accompany the DDA to her office or, at the very least, to the elevators, but Jill had insisted that she was fine and that the reporter had better things to do than baby-sit a grown woman, unless the woman just happened to be a dark, brooding inspector, she'd teased, earning her a light blush and causing Cindy to actually stutter. She neglected to mention to her friend how badly she needed to face this particular part of her nightmare alone. It was important that she be the one to strike the first blow to slay the demon.

Stepping into her office, she walked briskly to her desk, easing around its edge and lowering herself into her chair. The stack of files she'd been working on the evening before stood to the side, a stark reminder of what a difference a night had made. Her thoughts were suddenly flooded with images as they flipped through her mind like a bad slide show: Denise at her office door, a brief phone call morphing into drinks with Nicole Honeycutt, the enjoyable encounter with Kristie cut way too short by the call that started her downward spiral, the . . .

"Jill, you look like hell," said Denise, her arms folded comfortably across her chest as she leaned against the office's bookcase, her voice startling Jill from her thoughts and causing her to jump in her chair. Placing a shaky hand over her rapidly beating heart, she stared at her boss who stood in the exact same spot as her flashbacks had begun mere seconds ago.

Jill squinted to rid the image, but Denise remained solid, no signs of even a shimmer. Had she dreamed the whole thing? Had she fallen asleep at her desk and allowed her

ultimate nightmare to play itself out into something much worse than she'd ever imagined in her conscious state?

The apparition pushed off the bookcase and started forward, speaking aloud as it moved. "Damn, you are out of it."

Blinking rapidly, her eyelids fluttering as frantically as a pair of baby bird's untested wings, Jill focused on the moving object as it neared, noting casual black pants and a soft, cream-colored cashmere sweater. She looked down at herself to see faded jeans and her favorite red woolen sweater. It hadn't been a dream after all.

"So what's all this fuss about filing a simple murder charge? Lindsay called and said I needed to push the paper work through ASAP," said Denise, having come to a halt inches from Jill's desk as she refolded her arms over her chest. She looked less than amused.

"Er," Jill stuttered, struggling to break free of her trance. "It's ... um, nothing I can't handle."

Denise raised an elegant eyebrow and looked at the DDA in disbelief. "If that's so, then how come Lindsay felt the need to call me? She's certainly never bothered to consult with me before. You've always been her go-to gal, so why was she worried enough to call me for help?"

"You'd have to ask her," Jill replied with a shrug, easily continuing her lie, "I have no idea what she's thinking."

"So then, I don't guess it has anything to do with the fact that this Carter guy insisted that you be called, specifically asking for you by name," said Denise accusatorily, not believing for a second that Jill didn't know what was going on in Lindsay's head. The all-girl clique knew everything about each other. "What's your relationship to him? An old lover?"

Jill went perfectly still. Just the insinuation that she and William Carter were lovers made bile rise in her throat, its thickness almost choking her. She swallowed hard and prepared her line of defense.

"He's married to my mother."

"He's your stepfather?" asked Denise, barely able to contain her surprise; however, she didn't allow it to distract her from her doing her job. "Bernhardt, you need to distance yourself from this case – now. If this goes to trial, it'll be thrown out before opening statements can be made," she spat, furious with her DDA for crossing the line.

"Carter is *not* my stepfather," Jill spoke slowly and very deliberately, her face etched with raw pain and her blue eyes smoldering with unbridled anger. "And don't ever refer to him that way again."

There was no doubt in Denise's mind that the threat wasn't an idle one and definitely one that warranted further explanation. She knew perfectly well that Jill would never come right out and tell her though; she'd have to do a little digging on her own if she wanted answers, but for now, she needed to calm the waters.

"Look, I'm sorry if I offended you, but there's no way in hell I'm letting you anywhere near this case. I can't take the chance that you'll have a change of heart and go soft on the guy. With Mark McMurphy involved, it's likely to get high profile status and not one we can afford to lose. Emotions can't get in the way of a win." She relaxed her stance to temper her words and to appear less threatening, but that was the only concession she intended to make.

"You think I'd deliberately tank a case?" asked Jill, her anger finding a new place to rest. "Do you really believe I'd let anything get in the way of a win, or justice for that matter?"

Denise stayed silent, internally assessing the situation. Jill Bernhardt was her best asset; she was smart, dedicated, well-researched, always prepared, and extremely wily when she needed to be. If the Carter case did go to trial, she'd need someone of Jill's caliber sitting in the prosecutor's chair, but her relationship to the defendant trumped every single one of her positive attributes unless...

"If you want in, you're going to have to sit second chair... to me."

"How'd it go last night?" asked Cindy with a toothy grin as she slid onto the bench seat across from Claire. The two were the first of the club to arrive at Papa Joe's for another one of their impromptu meetings, and Cindy was glad for the time alone.

Caught off guard - although she should've known Cindy would ask about her evening with Ed - Claire fought back a blush and answered simply, "Fine," and then she belied her grossly understated reply by shifting uncomfortably in her seat. She attempted to shift the conversation as well. "So, tell me everything about your night and, specifically anything that had to do with Jill."

Lindsay had been vague at best in her recap of the previous night's activities, but with Cindy's eidetic memory and storytelling ability, Claire was counting on the reporter to recount every single minute Lindsay had left out. She'd forgotten about Cindy's tenaciousness when it came to getting answers to her own questions, but not for long.

"In a minute," said Cindy, still wearing her grin, "tell me about your date first. I want to hear all the juicy details." She paused and thought for a moment at just how juicy the details could get, especially from someone with a medical background and years of experiences she didn't possess. "Well, maybe not every single one." She leaned forward in anticipation. "Just the good ones."

“We had a nice dinner and then we went home.” Claire pushed against the back of the booth, folded her arms across her chest, and put on the face she used with Nate to indicate their discussion had officially ended. Although usually, with Nate, there hadn’t actually been a discussion at all, just Claire saying no to whatever inane idea her son had come up with. “Now, tell me about Jill.”

Cindy stared across the booth and noted her friend’s stiff posture and determined expression. Claire could be as stubborn as a mule when she put her mind to it, and from all indications, it appeared that her mind was gearing up for her to dig her heels in. With a sigh, the younger woman gave up, but only for now; she’d catch Claire in a weak moment and ask again later.

“I think she’s doing remarkably well, considering the circumstances. Of course, I wasn’t privy to the circumstances until she’d already faced William Carter and then gotten sick in the precinct’s restroom.” Cindy frowned. “Come to think of it, I didn’t know much then either.”

“Sick?” asked Claire, relaxing her posture and slipping effortlessly into her doctor mode. “Lindsay didn’t say anything about Jill being sick.”

“That’s because she wasn’t sick ‘sick,’” drawled a low gravelly voice as the third member of their group slid into the booth next to Cindy. “It was just a reaction to seeing that asshole after so many years.”

Claire shot an irritated glare across the table at the dark haired inspector as she processed the new information. “If Jill was sick for any reason, you should’ve phoned me. What if she’d contracted that virus that’s been going around the Hall?”

“It wasn’t a virus, and besides, I told you why I didn’t call,” said Lindsay, “I didn’t want to interrupt you and Ed, in case you were having sex or something.”

Cindy smiled; she hadn’t expected the topic to crop up again so soon. Quickly readying herself to dive in head first, she didn’t bother to worry if there was a net to catch her. One didn’t waste golden opportunities, especially with a fellow club member. “So *did* you and Ed have sex?”

“Is that all you two think about?” accused Claire as she glanced from Cindy to Lindsay, mentally taking stock of their respective reactions. A huge grin broke out on her face, and she took a moment to add festive decoration to the table she’d skillfully, albeit accidentally, turned and set. “It is, isn’t it?”

Cindy’s face reddened even more, coming very close to matching the color of her hair, while Lindsay fiddled with the edges of a napkin, wishing she was intimately familiar with Origami so that she could lose herself in the art as her fingers smoothly worked the intricate folds. Her thoughts, meant to distract her, instead morphed together with the

subject of Claire's question, and she hurriedly pushed the napkin toward the center of the table as if it were on fire.

"No," Lindsay blurted out, a little louder than normal, causing her to wonder if perhaps there was a smidgeon of truth in Claire's accusation. If she'd been interrogating herself, she'd have immediately suspected guilt as she'd certainly sounded as if she'd protested much too quickly. A change of topic was definitely in order.

"So, um, lab results back yet?" she asked in her best inspector's voice, despite the slight stumble at the start, and even managed to maintain a steady gaze at a clearly amused Claire. She watched the other woman carefully and noted the exact moment Claire decided to let her and Cindy off the hook. Of course, it may have had something to do with the fact that Claire wasn't exactly bubbling over with excitement to discuss her sex life with Ed either.

"Not the one you're hoping for. I don't have a DNA sample for comparison," reported Claire, a touch of frustration creeping into her tone, "and nothing unusual popped up in any of the other test results. Her blood alcohol level was high though, and with her stomach contents indicating that she'd had very little to eat, I'd say she'd have been quite intoxicated." She sighed audibly and shook her head. "Not good for our case."

"Yeah, just 'cause she was drunk, it's not rape or murder anymore. She was asking for it," said Cindy, disgusted at how easily opinions could be swayed, her own included when she thought back to the Hammond case. Now, she realized the point Jill was trying to make about how a jury processed information when it came to circumstances that could influence a case. It shouldn't matter though. When it boiled right down to it, rape was rape, and murder was murder, plain and simple.

"Good thing there's an eye witness who saw Carter strike the victim. Maybe that'll balance the scale," said Claire, hoping she'd spoken the truth but knowing it would take a stellar testimony to rid the jury of certain preconceived images. She did, however, have every faith in Jill to ask the right questions that would lead the witness to take the blame off the victim and put it back where it belonged – squarely on the shoulders of William Carter.

Having similar thoughts as Claire, Lindsay also had another. "If the victim was intoxicated, chances are the friend was, too. Cross-examination could pose a real problem."

"I'm sure after Jill preps her, she'll do just fine," said Cindy, her recent testimony having gone much more smoothly than she'd first thought it would. The assessment of just how well she'd done had barely registered in her mind when it was verbally confirmed by someone who was a much better judge of testimonies and their impacts on juries.

"Maybe you should give her some pointers," said Jill, aiming a teasing smile at her friend as she settled herself comfortably beside Claire to relay her news. "William Carter will

be officially charged with the murder of Kayla Anderson.” She paused just long enough for the good news to sink in before she turned a stony glare on the woman who sat directly across from her.

“Care to explain to me why in the hell you went over my head and called Denise?”

ACT III

Two hands, entwined together, rested on a denim-clad knee; a fine-boned, delicate one engulfed by its larger counterpart. The physical contrast was as stark as the hands’ actions with the smaller one fidgety and restless, while the bigger one appeared relaxed and content just to be holding the other, offering protection by its sheer size alone.

“Sorry to have to put you through this, Cathy. I should’ve just left when Mark hooked up with those girls,” William said with a sigh. “Of course, I’d be free of this whole mess if Jillian had just done her job and had those bogus charges dropped. I mean, I did push that cop, but I was so upset that they believed that other girl. This whole thing is a huge misunderstanding.”

“I’m sure Mr. Abbott will take care of everything,” Catherine assured him, placing her free hand on top of their joined ones and patting her husband’s gently. “You should’ve known Jillian wouldn’t lift a finger to help. She’s so damn headstrong, and besides, it would’ve meant she’d have had to admit that she lied all those years ago. That girl is nothing but trouble, always has been. Daniel was the only person she’d listen to. She worshipped the ground he walked on.” She squeezed her husband’s hand. “I know that you tried to get closer to her, but she’d never allow anyone to take his place.”

William thought back to when he’d first seen Jillian Bernhardt. He’d noticed the beautiful blue-eyed blonde little girl, sitting in a window booth of an ice cream parlor, her concentration obviously on her two scoops of ice cream. He’d watched as she’d used her tongue to effectively work one side of the cone and then the other, before he’d shifted his gaze to the woman who’d sat across the booth. He knew immediately where the girl had inherited her looks.

“I thought that she might have had a change of heart after all these years,” said William, truly believing in the possibility that his step-daughter had let go of the anger of her youth. She hadn’t been at all happy when her mother had started dating him within months of Daniel Bernhardt’s death, and the news of their impending marriage after a short three month engagement had sent the young girl down a road of destruction, acting out at every turn with him as her main target. It had made it increasingly more difficult for him to force her to accept his presence in her life.

“Well, I’m just glad we don’t need her help; I don’t ever want to be beholden to her for anything. Mr. Abbott will get the charges dropped, and then we can put this all behind

us,” said Catherine, offering another reassuring pat. If worse did come to worse, she’d talk to her daughter on her husband’s behalf, but until then, she planned to avoid contact with Jillian at all costs. Her unpleasant thoughts had barely taken root when a youthful sounding voice chased them away.

“Mr. Abbott can see you now,” said Connie, the attorney’s secretary, with a smile. “If you’ll just follow me please.” Turning on her high heels, she started for the massive oaken door that stood well behind her desk, expecting the Carters to follow her as she went through her usual routine, rapping twice on the door before turning the handle to allow passage inside. With her hand still on the doorknob, she pressed her shoulders against the structure and motioned the clients to enter. “You can have a seat in the chairs in front of Mr. Abbot’s desk. He’ll be with you momentarily; he’s just finishing up signing a few papers.”

“Thanks,” said William, placing his hand on the small of his wife’s back as he ushered her inside. He smiled and winked at the pretty blonde secretary, angling closer and brushing against her when he passed, the touch causing a shiver to run down the young woman’s spine. There was just something in the way he’d looked her over as he’d walked by that had unsettled her.

Malcolm Abbott moved his pen across the last document with a flourish, not bothering to glance up to greet his new arrivals. “That’ll be all, Connie.” His dismissal was just what the secretary had been waiting for as she quickly closed the door and headed for her desk, grateful to be away from the roaming eyes of William Carter. She couldn’t help but wonder if yet another guilty suspect would walk away a free man, courtesy of her boss.

“I’m still waiting on the DA’s office to get back to me,” informed Abbott without any preamble as he laid his pen down next to the signed papers. “I’m sure it’s just because of the weekend.”

“So, you don’t think they’re stalling for some reason?” asked Catherine, not ready to divulge her relationship to a certain DDA and inwardly hoping she wouldn’t have to.

Abbott shook his head confidently. “No, I don’t, although the acting DA isn’t exactly my favorite person.” He chuckled. “In fact, I don’t think she’s anyone’s favorite person.”

“Will you be dealing with her directly?” asked William in a hopeful tone. He really didn’t care who got along with whom as long as Jillian wasn’t involved in any way. “Is she at least fair?”

“Fair?” Abbott frowned. He’d never really thought of Denise Kwon as anything but a heartless bitch, but he supposed she could be considered principled when it came to following the law. “Well, Denise knows when the law’s on her side and when it isn’t.”

“Good enough for me then,” said William, figuring the law would be on his side once Abbott got involved. Mark had said Malcolm Abbott would fight tooth and nail to defend him. Losing was simply not an option to the attorney.

“Okay, so where do we...” started Catherine, the question dying on her lips when the door to the office flew open with a loud bang. She turned her attention to the rude individual and was surprised to see the inspector who’d more or less threatened her the night before. Connie was just seconds behind the two uninvited guests.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Abbott, I told them you were in a meeting and weren’t to be disturbed,” the secretary explained, suddenly wishing she hadn’t been called in to work today. Saturdays were usually so peaceful though, and she’d needed the extra cash, but now it appeared that she may very well lose her job.

“That’s okay, Connie. I’ll handle this,” said Abbott, immediately spotting the shiny badges attached to the officers’ pants, man’s casual and woman’s jeans respectively. “What can I do for you, Inspectors?”

“William Carter,” said Lindsay with a touch of smugness, as she moved further into the room, Jacobi shadowing her but allowing his partner to take the lead. “You’re under the arrest for the murder of Kayla Anderson. You have the right to remain silent...”

“Wait a damned minute!” shouted Carter, pushing to his feet and turning to face the two inspectors, giving every appearance as if he was waiving his rights in lieu of verbally, and perhaps physically, attacking his arresting officers. “You have got to be kidding. I didn’t murder anyone.”

“Tell it to the judge,” said Jacobi, easing around Lindsay and pulling his cuffs free. He’d seen the look in his partner’s eyes when Carter had turned on her, and with a prominent attorney as a witness, he didn’t want to take the chance that Lindsay might take ‘physical’ offense to the way the suspect had reacted. She’d been on edge ever since they’d climbed into the car and was just looking for a reason to explode.

“I assume you have the proper paperwork for this arrest, Inspectors,” said Abbott, calmly pushing to his feet and walking around to the front of his desk. This latest turn of events would just make his job more difficult, but certainly not impossible. “I’d like to see it.”

Keeping a hard glare pinned on William Carter, Lindsay reached into her jacket pocket and pulled the arrest warrant free from its leather confines. Gripping it tightly in her hand, she crossed the room and thrust it into Abbott’s hand. “There ya go. Signed, sealed, and delivered.”

“You’ve got to be...” started Carter again and giving every indication that he was indeed heading toward another charge of resisting arrest. Abbot interrupted with a voice of reason.

“Go peacefully, William. I’ll call Kwon and get this settled.”

“Good luck with that,” said Lindsay, watching as Jacobi handcuffed a slightly more amiable Carter. Denise was the one who’d given them the heads up that Abbott wanted to speak with someone in the DA’s office before his clients showed up at his own. She knew exactly where Carter would be for the arrest to be made.

Catherine Carter finally found her voice. “This is Jillian’s doing, isn’t it? Well, we’re going to sue her and this city for harassment and false arrest.”

“Jillian?” asked Abbott. Hadn’t Mrs. Carter been listening when he’d referred to the acting DA as Denise?

Moving in closer to assist her partner in escorting Carter from the room, Lindsay was more than happy to inform Abbott to just what he’d become involved in. “Oh, didn’t she tell you? Catherine gave her daughter up to Social Services when she was thirteen.” She took hold of Carter’s elbow and started for the door, calling back over her shoulder. “Mrs. Carter is the mother of DDA *Jill* Bernhardt.”

Abbott watched silently as the trio disappeared through the door. The case had just become a lot more complicated.

Hair, so blonde it appeared almost white, blended in perfectly with the pages of a law book, the ends of the silky strands just barely tickling the edges of the thick tome while blue eyes, once alert as they’d scanned through various cases looking for any and all precedents that could be used, had finally grown heavy and closed. Jill had only intended to rest for a few minutes when she’d laid her head down on the pages of the book she’d been reading, the warmth of the page soothing her chilled skin. Instead, she was out like a light in seconds and never heard the soft clicking of heels heading her way a good half hour after she’d slipped into a deep sleep.

Denise slowed her steps as she neared a doorway just down the hall from her office, her mind a myriad of thoughts and emotions. She hadn’t meant to delve so deeply into Jill’s past, but with the sudden appearance of the DDA’s step-father and Jill’s strong reaction to this particular crime, she’d made it a point to look into her colleague’s distant past, rationalizing her actions by telling herself that since Jill was sitting second chair she didn’t want any surprises by the defense involving her second. Truth be told, however, she’d always been curious about Jill’s background.

Stepping into her DDA’s office, Denise opened her mouth to ask if Jill had found anything they could use, but she snapped it shut and stopped dead in her tracks, the papers she held almost slipping from her grasp. In sleep, Jill Bernhardt looked so peaceful, so calm, and so beautiful. Denise shook her head to rid her last thought, neither certain nor comfortable with where it had come from. Perhaps she was still overcome by

anger on the blonde's behalf at the travesty of justice suffered by a young child who'd had no one on her side. To be cast aside and tossed into the system by her own mother had to have been the worst pain and betrayal she'd ever endured. How could a mother just throw away her child?

"Mmmph," groaned Jill, struggling to open her eyes against the light of the desk lamp that shone on her fair skin. She blinked owlshly and tried to focus on the far wall as she inched back into consciousness, slowly lifting her head from its resting place and grimacing at the pain that had settled in her neck. Cursing herself for falling asleep in such an awkward position, she was, however, grateful that she hadn't drooled on the page where she'd slept so soundly. Her peripheral vision picked up something to her left, momentarily distracting her from her critical self-incrimination, and she turned to find her boss standing just inside the doorway and wearing an expression Jill had never seen before. It was gone before she could put a name to it.

"You should go home," said Denise, pleased that her voice had sounded strong and confident. She'd been afraid her turmoil would cause her tone to waver as badly as her insides had when she'd finally realized what Jill had had to endure and at such an early age. "The arraignment won't be until Monday morning. We'll have plenty of time to prepare a case after that. Besides, we've got an eyewitness that actually saw Carter strike the victim. It'll be hard to discount that kind of testimony."

"Claire said the victim had been drinking. Chances are the witness had been too. Abbott is going to jump on that. We need to be prepared," said Jill, trying not to focus on the arraignment and the realization that Carter would more than likely await his trial in the comforts of his own home. "I'd like to talk to the witness."

Denise nodded in understanding; she couldn't wait to talk to the witness either. "I appreciate your concern, but to my knowledge, no one thought to give her a blood-alcohol test. I've arranged for Jane Tompkins to come in Monday morning after the hearing. We'll both sit down with her at that time." She hesitated briefly, choosing her next words carefully. "There's nothing we can do until then, so let's get out of here and worry about the case when the time comes." She opted to include herself in her suggestion so as not to appear overly concerned about Jill's well-being. She should've realized the DDA would choose to focus on only one particular thing she'd said.

Jill smiled at the news about the blood-test. "We need to talk to the bartender, too. Maybe she didn't drink as much as her friend." She was also hoping that perhaps the same bartender hadn't served the drinks or, if it had been the same person, that he or she'd not kept tabs on the witness' consumption. Things were suddenly looking much better.

"I'll get Simmons to go talk to him before we meet with Jane Tompkins. It'll give us a better idea on how to proceed with her," said Denise, planning to call the attorney as soon as she returned to her office and emphatically impress it upon the young man just how important the bartender's information was to their case.

“Simmons? Pimple-faced Simmons?” asked Jill, her face contorting into a grimace much more painful looking than the one she’d just displayed when she’d awakened with a sore neck. The kid was one of the best researchers the office had, but she wasn’t sure about letting him out in the real world, especially with something so important. “Okay, whatever you think, Denise,” she said, a plan already forming as she worked up a fake yawn. “I think I’ll take your advice and go home to rest. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Denise narrowed her eyes and studied her DDA. Jill looked beyond exhausted, but that wasn’t what had caught her attention. It was the gleam that glinted in tired blue eyes. She knew exactly what the other woman was planning.

“Go home and set your alarm for eight,” said Denise, sparing a quick glance at her watch and mentally calculating the time. “That’ll give you several hours to get in a good long nap. I’ll pick you up at nine.”

Jill’s eyes got huge. “Wha...”

“To go talk to the bartender,” interrupted Denise. “I know that’s what you’ve got planned. Well, you’re not going without me.”

Cindy sat cross-legged on the couch, Martha lying snugly against her hip and sleeping soundly. The reporter’s fingers rested on the home keys of her laptop’s keyboard, completely still, as they waited patiently for her brain to fire the proper synapses to put them into motion. They waited and waited and waited...

“Where do I start, Martha?” whispered Cindy, careful not to wake the dozing canine, although if she’d thought the dog could offer her advice, she’d have spoken more loudly and perhaps even shaken Martha into wakefulness. “I’ve always had more information on a story than I’ve been allowed to reveal, but this is just so hard. I want to tell the world how sadistic and evil William Carter truly is.”

As if sensing the young woman’s agitated state, Martha whimpered, and Cindy ran a hand through the dog’s fur, soothing her back to sleep. She continued to stare at the blank screen, her fingers starting a rhythmic up and down beat on the keys, but not pressing hard enough to cause the appropriate letters to appear on the screen. It was as if they believed the motion alone would jump start the reporter into writing her story on the senseless murder of a local co-ed, but they were saved from their restless tapping when the sound of a key turning in the door had Cindy abandoning the keyboard and quietly closing her laptop.

“Hey,” said Lindsay, stepping into the apartment and closing the door behind her. She smiled at the very domestic scene her girlfriend and dog presented. It was one she could

very well get used to coming home to, but it was much too soon to even think about her and Cindy living together. She'd never been a fan of the U-Haul theory and planned to be sure it was what they both wanted before leaping into such a permanent commitment. She'd seen far too many relationships fall apart due to rushed decisions and hastily made plans.

"Hey," replied Cindy softly, placing the laptop on the other side of her and carefully easing away from Martha as she slowly pushed to her feet. She headed directly for Lindsay, not adjusting her stride or pace, even as she drew near; she just kept moving one foot in front of the other and trusted her lover to know what she needed. Lindsay instinctively opened her arms and Cindy melted into the warm body, pressing her ear against the other woman's breast and closing her eyes at the sound of the steadily beating heart. The two women stood silently in their embrace and drew strength from the other. It was the first time they'd been truly alone since Carter's initial arrest.

Lindsay selfishly hung on a bit longer before she gave Cindy a squeeze and then eased away, slipping her hand into the younger woman's and heading for the couch, each woman taking a seat on the opposite side of Martha, who'd awakened and wagged her tail at being bracketed by her two humans.

"Carter's behind bars again," said Lindsay, using her free hand to scratch under Martha's chin. "I should've told Jill that I was calling Denise." Lindsay could still feel the fierce glare Jill had directed at her. It had felt as if a knife had pierced her heart.

"You were just trying to help. Jill would've gone ballistic had she known you planned to go to Denise," Cindy said, trying to offer reassurance. "You did the right thing, Linz. Jill shouldn't be involved at all."

"Yeah, well, it's done now." Lindsay sighed sadly and glanced up at Cindy. "She'll probably never speak to me again."

"Don't you worry; Claire and I have everything worked out." Cindy smiled knowingly, having hatched what she conceived to be a marvelous plan with their other club member.

"Oh God, what now?" groaned Lindsay audibly. "You're not planning to lock the two of us in Claire's office, are you?"

"Nope, although I'll keep that one in mind" said Cindy in a teasing tone. "You're just going to have to wait and see."

A ghost of a smile edged Lindsay's lips. She didn't want to wait, and she knew just what to do. "A secret, huh? I bet I can worm it out of you."

"No, you can't." Cindy grinned. "There's nothing you can do to me that will make me talk."

“Nothing?” asked Lindsay, leaning over the top of Martha until she was mere inches from Cindy’s lips, her breath hot against the other woman’s skin. “You sure?”

Cindy swallowed hard and licked her lips.

“Yep.” Her tone was far from convincing.

Lindsay inched closer and helped her lover moisten her lips as she slowly swiped her tongue from one edge of Cindy’s mouth to the other and then back again, stopping long enough to tease the tip of a pink tongue that had come out to play. “You sure?”

“Huh?” asked Cindy, closing her eyes in anticipation of what she hoped was to come. Martha anticipated as well as she slipped from the couch and headed for the bedroom. She knew she’d have hours before she’d be chased away from the comfortable bed. So intent in hurrying to her next sleeping place, she didn’t pay any notice to the clicking sound inside the air-conditioning vent that had barely been audible to even her ears.

The camera lens zoomed in and out several times, finally focusing on the couple on the other side of the room. The brunette had managed to position the smaller woman flat on her back as she slowly lowered herself until she was lying hip to hip against the younger woman. Easing a hand her underneath her lover’s shirt, she deepened the kiss.

The red light on the camera blinked rapidly, appearing to pick up speed, as it took in the scene that would be ready at a moment’s notice for another’s eyes: damp skin sliding against damp skin, hands mapping familiar territory, and mouths drinking in the sweetness each woman had to offer. The watcher would be less than pleased.

“You sure you don’t mind taking the boys out tomorrow afternoon and evening?” asked Claire, her tongue-in-cheek tone apparently detectable to her ears only. Cindy had made certain Ed wouldn’t blink an eye when it came to taking the boys on an outing to ensure the club had the house all to themselves.

“Are you kidding me? Front row seats to the Warriors game? Taking Derek and Nate to that greasy pizza place they like with those loud video games after the ballgame is a very small price to pay to see Ellis Vanderholt in person,” said Ed, his expression changing from disbelief at Claire’s question to a broad smile in anticipation of the next day’s game. Vanderholt was his favorite NBA player.

Claire returned her husband’s smile. He’d absolutely flip if he knew Vanderholt was the very person responsible for the game’s tickets. When Cindy had called, Ellis had been thrilled to be able to help out, even promising to autograph a basketball and present it to Ed after the game. It took everything she had not to spoil the surprise.

“I kind of figured you wouldn’t mind, but I just had to make sure. It’s really important that ‘us girls’ spend some quality time with Jill. She’s having a tough time right now.”

“Well, you take all the time you need, and if they’re still here when the boys and I get back, we’ll sneak in the back door,” offered Ed. “In fact...” His words died on his lips as a loud knock caught his attention. He frowned as he turned toward the doorway that led from the bedroom. “It’s kind of late for visitors.”

“I’ll get it. You go ahead and get ready for bed,” said Claire, kissing the top of his head as she passed by on her way out the door. Arriving at the door just as another knock sounded, she placed her hand on the deadbolt and peered through the peephole, focusing on her well-lit porch. She froze and then blinked - twice - but the figure’s appearance didn’t change. Forcing her hand to work, she threw back the lock and opened the door. She had no idea she could achieve such a high octave with her voice.

“Denise?”

The normally in-control-acting DA glanced nervously over her shoulder at her liquid platinum, Infiniti M45 parked next to the curb, its passenger concealed by its tempered windows and the darkness of the night. She turned back toward Claire.

“Jill’s drunk,” she stated simply, always one for directness when it came to drinking situations, but this time she managed it completely sober.

“You and Jill went out drinking?” The previously never-before-achieved octave went down in a ball of flames as Claire accentuated her latest feat with the raising of eyebrows above eyes that had grown as large as saucers.

“No!... um, I mean, yes... but it’s not what you think,” stuttered Denise uncharacteristically. “We were working a case.”

“At a bar?”

“The bar just happened to be the workplace of someone we needed to talk to,” explained Denise, glancing over her shoulder once again, her nervousness turning to worry over her graphite leather and African rosewood interior. “Can we just get Jill and bring her inside? She can explain everything to you when she’s sober.”

Claire squinted toward the street and tried to make out the silhouette of her friend, but it was simply too dark. She’d just have to trust Denise that Jill was inside the vehicle.

“Why don’t you give me the short version?”

“Can we at least get Jill out of the car?”

“Not until I know why she’s in there.”

Denise grimaced. She hated being stuck between a rock and a hard place, but she hated the thought of her car's interior suffering because she'd not acted quickly enough. The short version was all Claire would get.

"We went to talk to the bartender, but he wasn't on for another hour. Jill wanted to wait, and I didn't see a problem in getting a drink until he showed. So, I ordered a Cosmopolitan and Jill had a Mojito, and then she had another and another and another. I knew that she's . . . um, had a bad weekend, so I didn't see the harm." Denise shrugged slightly in her defense. She'd hoped the short explanation and her apologetic shrug was enough to entice Claire into taking Jill off her hands.

"What did the bartender have to say?" asked Claire, suddenly focused on the case. She knew he could very well be the key in ascertaining the soberness of their witness.

"We waited two hours, but he never showed," said Denise, sparing yet another glance at her car. "We really need to get Jill inside."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Claire was forced to swallow a chuckle. She knew exactly what Denise was worried about. "C'mon; you can fill me in on why you decided to bring her here while we wrestle her from your car." She started for the curb and hesitated slightly. "You do know Jill gets violently ill when she's been drinking?"

Denise shot past and headed for the passenger side door, a chuckling Claire following behind. She caught up to the other woman just as she'd opened the passenger door. Apparently, Denise had taken Claire at her word, quickly explaining just why she'd shown up on the coroner's doorstep.

"I couldn't take her home, and I certainly couldn't take her to my place," said Denise, not offering a reason as to why the latter wasn't possible. "I called my assistant and had him look up your address and Lindsay's. You were the closest."

"Ah, a win by proximity," replied Claire, watching in amusement as Denise tried to talk Jill from her vehicle. She remembered the first time she'd had to pull her friend out of a car. Jill had come to in a state of confusion and had planted one right on Claire's lips, apparently confusing her friend with the woman she'd been flirting with when the club, pre-Cindy, had gone out one evening after a rough case. She'd never told Jill about it, figuring one of them being embarrassed was enough. Fearing a repeat with Denise as the recipient, she acted quickly, figuring the DA wouldn't be quite as forgiving. "Here, let me."

Denise gratefully stepped aside and allowed Claire access to the passenger seat. The sooner Jill was out of the car, the better. She'd only had the car for two months, and so she watched with great interest as Claire reached in and unbelted the DDA.

“Jill? Sweetie?” said Claire, keeping her distance as she lightly shook her friend’s shoulder. “Let’s go inside.” She was pleased that Denise had made sure Jill had been belted in on the drive over from the bar.

“Mmmphhh,” groaned Jill, screwing her already closed eyes even tighter. She had no desire to move from her comfortable resting place. “Don’t wanna.” She wiggled in the seat and sighed. She was very content in her nice, comfy spot.

“So, you don’t want to go crawl under my nice, soft blanket and lie on my big, ol’ sofa?” asked Claire, knowing just how to entice Jill from the car.

“Hmm…” said Jill dreamily as she successfully pried one eye open to look up at her friend. “With that fluffy pillow?”

Claire chuckled. “Yes, with that fluffy pillow, too.”

Jill closed her eye and shifted on the seat, weighing her options. To Denise, it appeared as if the other woman had no intentions of moving.

“She can’t stay there,” she stated the obvious.

“She won’t,” replied Claire, counting to ten. On exactly ten, Jill opened her eyes and leaned toward the curb, trusting Claire to catch her. The coroner took hold of Jill’s shoulders and easily guided her friend from the car, and with Denise moving to Jill’s other side, the pair led the DDA up the sidewalk and into the house.

Once inside, Denise released her hold on Jill and stood near the door as she watched Claire expertly maneuver the blonde to the couch, and she wondered how many times this particular scene had played out: Jill compliantly lying down as Claire left the room, returning moments later with a garbage can, a damp washcloth and a bottle of water. Claire placed the receptacle on the floor, the washcloth on Jill’s forehead, and the water on a nearby table, before she once again disappeared, returning with a soft-looking blanket and a fluffy pillow. Denise watched as Jill smiled sweetly when the pillow was placed under her head and the blanket thrown lovingly over her body. She suddenly felt very out of place.

“Okay, you sleep now, and we’ll talk tomorrow,” whispered Claire just loud enough for the forgotten onlooker to hear. Pushing a stray hair from Jill’s face, she moved to stand, but a hand shot out and kept her close.

“I can’t get it out of my head,” said Jill softly, swallowing hard and closing her eyes against the tears that threatened to escape.

Claire eased down on one knee. “What, sweetie? What is it?”

“That bastard raping that girl in the alley,” she said, choking back a sob. “And at the same time, I’m screwing some waitress in an alley behind Element. How sick is that?” No longer able to hold it in, she allowed the sobs to wrack her body.

Claire pulled Jill into her arms and held on tightly. Neither woman heard the click of the Stryker plate as the front door softly closed.

Three different sized pots sat on three separate burners, one empty while the other two contained spaghetti sauce and soup, respectively. A freshly-buttered and garlic-seasoned loaf of French bread lay on a cookie sheet on the counter above the oven, waiting for the precise moment to be placed inside. Claire absolutely hated cold bread.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Cindy as she watched the other woman pull a food scale from a lower cabinet and place it on the counter. She frowned as Claire tore off a sheet of waxed paper and set it on top of the scale, before she carefully cut off the end of the package of spaghetti and removed some of its contents. Her eyes widened in horror when she realized what the coroner had planned.

"Eww . . . please tell me you aren't going to weigh that spaghetti like some dead person's organs." Her eyes shifted to the stove and, specifically, the drops of sauce that dotted its surface. They seemed to turn redder and redder as she recalled Claire mentioning that she'd slaved over the stove all morning. "What exactly is in that pot?"

"Some of the best spaghetti sauce you'll ever taste," said Lindsay, arms laden with heavy bags, as she stepped into the kitchen and headed toward the table where Cindy sat. "Trust me, after you've had a taste, you won't give a damn what she put in it." She gently placed her load on the table and started rummaging through the nearest bag. "What in the world did you bring?"

Cindy shrugged innocently. "Just something for us to snack on." She knew she should have gone to retrieve the bags from her car, but Lindsay had been so sweet when she'd offered that Cindy had forgotten exactly how much she'd bought.

"Ho-Hos? Are you trying to tell us something?" Lindsay tossed the miniature chocolate cakes to the side and reached for the next item. "White chocolate covered Oreos? M&Ms? Miniature Snickers? I think I'm sensing a pattern here." Now she knew why Cindy had insisted on meeting her at Claire's instead of sharing a car. She'd thought the younger woman had planned to stop by the Register before their club outing, but it appeared that Cindy had gone to the store instead. Lindsay wondered if there was anything left on the shelves.

Her curiosity piqued, Claire abandoned her quest to accurately measure just the right amount of spaghetti for their meal and moved in next to Lindsay. She peered down in the bag closest to her. "No popcorn?"

"I bought popcorn," said Cindy in her defense. Movies just weren't movies without popcorn. She just wasn't sure what kind of popcorn her friends liked, so she'd improvised.

"Oh my Lord, did you ever," said Claire in astonishment as she began to pull box after box from the bag. "Is Orville Reddenbacher in here, too?"

"Ha-ha," replied Cindy, watching as her friend stacked the boxes higher and higher on the table. It hadn't seemed like she was buying that many different varieties at the time, but she just wanted to make sure she bought something Jill liked. The thought of the other woman had her gazing toward the empty doorway. "Claire, what was it you wanted to tell us about last night?"

Sparing a quick glance at the door, Claire walked over to peek into the den to spy a soundly sleeping Jill. She eased the door closed and moved back into the room. "I'm worried about Jill."

"We all are," said Lindsay, removing the last item from her bag of goodies and plopping down in the chair next to Cindy. "Did something else happen?"

"Other than getting drunk and forcing Denise to have to show up on my doorstep to take her off my hands?"

"What? Jill went out with Denise?" asked Cindy. Even with her over-active imagination, she couldn't visualize the two of them riding in the same car, much less sharing conversation at a bar.

"It was case-related," replied Claire, lowering the temperature on the sauce and making her way over to join in on the round table discussion. "They went to talk to the bartender about the witness' alcohol consumption."

"What did he say?" asked Lindsay, hoping his testimony wouldn't hurt their case. Without their witness, the case was fairly weak. They needed eyewitness testimony that William Carter had indeed struck the victim.

"He wasn't there, so they waited and drank," said Claire, glancing back at the closed door. "Or rather Jill drank."

"Are you worried about her drinking, her drinking partner, or both?" asked Cindy, clearly worried about all three. If Jill had allowed herself to get drunk while in the company of Denise Kwon, she was much closer to falling into the deep end than Cindy had realized. Although, she'd always been a little concerned about Jill's drinking habits, but this situation with Denise inched her worry meter up several notches.

"Actually, it's something she said that caught my attention," explained Claire, her face crinkling in thought as part of Cindy's query sunk in. She'd not actually seen Denise leave last night. Was it possible...?

Lindsay's quick reply of concern distracted Claire from focusing on Denise, just as Jill had the night before. "It has to do with Carter, doesn't it? Damn it, we've got to make sure he doesn't slip through some loophole."

"It'll be hard to contest actual DNA. Jill and Denise were able to secure a warrant for a sample so I'll have something to work with soon," said Claire, adding, "But we'll be back to the witness' word again. DNA will only link him to the victim sexually; it won't be able to confirm that he actually raped her."

"Did Jill say something about the witness?" asked Cindy, her entire focus on whatever it was that Claire had started to tell them and not on the subsequent questions and discussions the something had led to. "What is it? What did Jill say?"

Claire hesitated momentarily and sized up the situation. She was, in effect, about to divulge information Jill had confessed when she'd been extremely vulnerable, an indiscretion of sorts that she may not have divulged had she not been riding an emotional rollercoaster of heartache and pain mixed together in an unhealthy form of Mojitos. She needed to talk to Jill first.

"Remember the Collins case?" Claire acted quickly so as to avoid suspicion from her friends as to why she hadn't answered Cindy directly. Lindsay's attention would be easily diverted to memories of Jill's downward spiral to behavior that bordered precariously on destructive while the reporter in Cindy would grab hold of the proverbial bone like a hungry dog looking for a meal and ask about the past.

"Who's Collins?"

"A child abuse case Jill drew years ago," growled Lindsay, remembering the cute little brunette girl with the big brown eyes. "Jacie Collins' mother defended her boyfriend to the bitter end. He beat the case."

"So, what happened to the child?" asked Cindy, her heart going out to both Jill and the abused little girl. She imagined Jill had taken it very badly and that was probably what Claire had been referring to. With Carter back on the scene, this case could prove to be much worse than any other Jill had ever encountered.

Lindsay stared at the chocolate treats in the middle of the table. Jacie Collins had had a very sweet tooth. "She died. The asshole boyfriend threw her out of a moving truck. The mother took a lesser charge and confessed to everything. Jill took it very hard." Lindsay glanced over at Claire. "We all did."

A deadly silence hung in the air as the three women were lost in their thoughts: Lindsay and Claire recalling the days and weeks that followed the tragedy, in particular Jill's reckless behavior as she'd turned to binge drinking and countless sexual encounters to try to bury her pain, while Cindy wondered what would have happened to Jill all those years ago had she been returned to her mother's care.

None of the club members had noticed the figure leaning in the doorway until she spoke.

"Guess I should be thankful I ended up in the system. Who knows what Carter may have done had I been sent back home."

"Is this legal?"

William Carter glared across a worn-looking table at a redheaded woman dressed in a white lab coat and watched with great interest as she opened a black kit and removed a wooden stick-like apparatus that had a plastic covering on one end. He'd been sitting in the small room, waiting for his lawyer when she'd entered and identified herself as a technician for the San Francisco Police Department's lab.

"Yes, a warrant has been issued for your DNA," she said, flipping the cover off to reveal a swab. She started forward but stopped when the muscled man folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm not giving up anything until my lawyer gets here."

Accustomed to this type of reaction, the woman slipped the cover back over the swab and smiled as she took a seat at the end of the table. It didn't matter to her when she got her sample, just as long as she got it. And she would, the warrant was her insurance. Her smile grew larger when the door opened and revealed a handsome man with a million dollar grin. The lawyer had arrived.

"Mr. Carter, I'm Jason Abbott. My father was delayed so he sent me in his stead." The younger Abbott confidently crossed the room and held out his hand. Carter hesitated only for a moment before reaching out to grab hold. The lawyer didn't flinch when he gripped as tightly as he could. Carter smiled. The man had passed muster.

"So, what's this about a DNA sample? Do I have to comply?"

Abbott nodded and explained, "You'll be held in contempt of court if you don't, but you have no reason to worry. My father is currently involved in a meeting that'll make this all go away."

The lab tech sat back and listened to the back and forth conversation. She'd seen and heard the same thing through the years and often wondered how many times the attorney

had been telling the truth. For now, she'd just collect her sample and be on her way. The rest would fall to the District Attorney's office.

"So, okay to proceed?" she asked, keeping her seat until she was sure she'd be able to procure her sample. Looking across the table, she waited for Carter to agree.

"Alright, but I don't like this one bit," said Carter more to his attorney than to the technician. "This better not come back and cause problems later."

"It won't. Trust me," said Abbott Jr., his pearly white teeth, set against bronze-colored skin, gleaming under the fluorescent lights of the room. "I'll be surprised if this even goes to trial."

Carter stared at the confident young man and then motioned the tech over. "C'mon, let's get this thing over with so I can get out of this place as quickly as possible."

The redhead stood slowly and made her way over to the suspect, flipping back the lid with a light snick-like sound. "Open wide."

ACT IV

"Pass me some Whoppers, would you?" asked Jill, keeping her eyes glued to the screen as she eased her hand from the bag of popcorn and lifted it to her mouth. She wasn't about to miss a single Rosie scene. As far as she was concerned the British actress stole the show whenever she was on-screen.

"You've already eaten them all," informed Cindy, holding up the empty milk carton that once held chocolate-coated malted milk balls. "You're going to be sick." Frankly, Cindy couldn't understand why Jill wasn't already sick. Claire's cure-all soup was definitely going to go to waste.

Leaned comfortably against the edge of the sofa, Lindsay swallowed a chuckle. Cindy had been in a mother-hen mode ever since Jill had stepped into the kitchen and pretty much ended their conversation with her astute presumption, and she'd been right, too. Life with Carter would've killed Jill one way or another.

"Jill has an ironclad stomach when it comes to movie nights," said Claire, crinkling up her nose as she watched the woman in question reach out blindly for a Ho-Ho. Normally, she'd make some crack about 'you are what you eat,' but Jill's words of the night before slammed into her teasing nature and held it at bay. The next time she was alone with Jill, they were definitely having a heart-to-heart, but for now, they needed to put painful memories aside and having a few hours of carefree fun.

"Just be thankful she hasn't joined in on the singing or else we'd be the nauseous ones," Lindsay teased. "Pierce Brosnan's singing could easily pass for one of the three tenors when compared to Jill's."

"Hey!" Jill's protest was backed up with several poorly aimed tosses of popcorn, all missing their target and landing harmlessly on the floor beside the couch. Lindsay figured there'd be enough for an entire bag of popcorn by the time the movie had ended. She smiled. This movie idea of Cindy and Claire's had been just what they'd all needed to calm the rough waters that had surrounded them and threatened to pull them under.

"What? You don't remember Martha's howling last year when you tried to sing along with Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*?" asked Lindsay with a grin. She watched in amusement as Cindy's face broke out into a huge smile and settled more comfortably in her seat for a round of teasing she knew her lover was quite capable of delivering. She wasn't disappointed.

"You have a secret Julie Andrews crush, don't you?" Cindy teased, bumping shoulders with a red-faced Jill. "Or is it a nun fetish?"

"What?" asked Jill, sitting up abruptly and almost displacing the tub of popcorn from her lap. "No!" She resettled the bowl, trying to ignore the vivid memory of a college Halloween party involving a brunette dressed like a nun. "To either of your accusations. I just like musicals."

"Yeah, me, too," agreed Cindy, easing back against the sofa and reaching her hand into the bowl of popcorn. A huge grin crossed her face when she recognized the upcoming scene where Rosie and Tanya would try to coax Donna into joining them in song. She winked across at Claire and then leaned in closer to Jill.

"Friday night and the lights are low," she crooned softly.

"Looking out for a place to go," followed Claire with emphasis on 'go' as she pushed to her feet and struck a pose, waiting for Lindsay to belt out the next lyric. She frowned when all she received was a raised eyebrow from her friend, but Cindy came to the rescue, jumping from her seat and moving to join Claire.

"Where they play the right music, getting in the swing." She bumped hips with Claire and the rendition was on, the pair dancing and singing in perfect harmony with the players on the screen. Lindsay waited patiently, watching Jill's feet moving up and down with the music, and smiled widely when her friend could no longer stand it and practically leapt over the coffee table to join in the fun.

Tomorrow, the William Carters of the world would be back to terrorize their victims and they'd still be no closer to finding the Hallelujah Man, but for now, there was only the *Dancing Queen*.

Claire rounded the corner that led to the courtroom, her brisk steps in perfect sync with the woman who walked beside her. The scene was a familiar one, but her walking mate was definitely not. She looked down at the white folder held securely in the other woman's hand, the edges of the silver clasp fastened flat against the envelope and keeping the important findings tucked safely inside. The DNA had come back as a positive match to William Carter, but she'd had to hand over her report to Denise Kwon instead of Jill. It felt strange; it felt wrong; it felt as if she had betrayed her friend. With a sigh, she continued down the hallway, her eyes narrowing perceptively when she spotted Nicole Honeycutt hurrying after a blonde woman who was currently making a beeline for Jill and Cindy.

“That can't be good,” muttered Claire, picking up her pace and heading for what she knew to be trouble. Denise increased her stride, too, only she had no idea why other than trouble seemed to always follow Honeycutt. This time, though, it appeared Nicole was following trouble and losing ground fast.

“You vindictive little bitch!” the older blonde woman spat out, pulling to a stop directly in front of Jill. “We wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for you.”

“Who are...” Jill started, unconsciously taking a step backward at the sudden attack. She stared into deep blue eyes brimming with intense anger and realization had her taking another step back, feeling somewhat comforted when she'd felt Cindy ease in beside her.

“Hey! Back off!” shouted Claire, arriving on the scene just as the older woman threatened to invade Jill's space once again. The excitement in the usually quiet hallway had garnered the attention of several groups of people, including the court officer who stood outside the courtroom that would soon host Carter's arraignment hearing.

Catherine turned her wrath on Claire. “This doesn't concern you. This is between me and my worthless daughter.”

‘Daughter?’ Honeycutt mouthed more to herself than the others as she turned her full attention to the stand-off, glancing back and forth between Jill and her colleague's client and immediately noting the physical similarities. Abbott should've warned her when he'd asked her to escort Mrs. Carter to the Hall. She absolutely hated to be blindsided, especially when it concerned someone she was trying to woo into their firm.

“Daughter?” echoed Claire, only aloud. “You're kidding, right?” She couldn't believe the gall of the woman, who was obviously Jill's birthmother, to have the audacity to bring up any kinship after tossing Jill aside in favor of a child molesting husband.

Jill watched the exchange between her mother and Claire in stunned silence. She hadn't seen her mother since the woman from Social Services had taken her away at her mother's behest, and in all probability, she wouldn't have recognized the other woman in

any other circumstance, but she vividly recalled the stony expression her mother now wore. She'd never forget those cold blue eyes glaring at through the car window as she'd been driven away from her mother and the only home she'd known.

"Yes, my daughter," said Catherine, projecting that same familiar glare on Jill. "She almost ruined my life all those years ago, and now she's back to try again. Well, I'm not going to let that happen." She took a step forward toward a cowering Jill, the move eliciting two separate responses, both of which surprised the hell out of Jill and Cindy.

First, Denise, looking very much the professional in her crisp cream-colored suit, eased in on the other side of Jill and gave every appearance that she was ready to rumble, and second, Claire grabbed hold of Mamma Carter's elbow and yanked her away from Jill.

"She ruined your life?" asked Claire, her tone oozing with sarcasm and her expression one of complete disbelief. "Lady, you are a piece of work."

Pulling out of Claire's grasp, Catherine turned her pent-up anger on the coroner. "You have no idea the disgrace I suffered; I had to leave the city. I had to sell my home." She pointed accusatorily at Jill. "All because that little tart decided to lie about my husband. She's nothing but a whore!"

SLAP!

"She was a child!" Claire's reply was only seconds behind the blow she'd inflicted on the other woman's cheek, leaving a bright red imprint of her hand on smooth alabaster skin. "You were supposed to protect her!"

"Whoa," said Nicole, her usually quick mental processes slowed considerably by what she'd just witnessed. She did at least have the wherewithal to step between the two women and usher Catherine back a few feet, while Cindy managed to coax Claire to withdraw as well, the coroner still shooting a death glare at the older woman. Jill and Denise could only stare in disbelief.

"Let's calm down, shall we?" Nicole attempted to be the voice of reason, but Catherine wasn't buying what the attorney was selling.

"That woman attacked me. I want to file charges."

"Attacked? Honey, that wasn't attacking. I can show you attacking if you'd like," boasted Claire, bowing up and preparing to back her words if necessary. The bitch was going down.

"Is there a problem here?" A male voice asked as the court officer entered the less-than-quiet discussion. He'd started toward the fracas the moment he'd witnessed the slap.

"Are you alright, Ma'am?" He addressed his concern toward Catherine.

“Um, oh no problems at all, Officer,” said Cindy with a nervous smile. “It’s just a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding hell,” piped up Catherine, “I want that woman arrested for assault.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, Mrs. Carter,” said Nicole, knowing the judge wouldn’t be happy to discover that the wife of the man being charged with murder had practically incited a riot outside the courtroom. Besides, if what she could put together from the conversation was true, the older woman deserved the slap.

Catherine glared at Claire and then spared a glance at her daughter, before making her wishes known. “I want her arrested for assaulting me.”

The officer nodded and reached for Claire’s elbow. “Dr. Washburn, you need to come with me, please.”

“Ms. Honeycutt, perhaps you should explain to your client’s spouse the ramifications that could arise from this action,” said Denise, finally snapping out of her trance-like state. She was quickly finding that spending time with her DDA, the coroner, and the reporter, who always seemed to be around, was never boring.

Nicole wanted to explain that neither Catherine Carter nor her husband were her clients but figured the acting DA would consider the reason moot. She tried to reason with the angry blonde. “Mrs. Carter, we need to give the proper appearance to the judge if we want him to rule in our favor. In fact, we need to hurry along.”

Denise frowned, as did Jill, at the odd wording. Rule on what?

“I’d think the judge would want justice for all crimes. I’m not changing my mind.” Catherine turned toward the officer. “What do I need to do to file charges?”

“Um, well,” he started, suddenly feeling intense heat from the stares boring into him. “I can direct you after the arraignment if you’d like.”

“What happens to her until then?” Catherine gestured toward Claire, who’d kept quiet in the aftermath of the alleged ‘assault.’ She hadn’t wanted to make things worse, but she’d definitely slap the woman again if the situation warranted it.

“I’ll take her to a holding cell,” said the helpful officer, much to the other interested parties’ chagrin. He did, at least, offer an apologetic smile to the coroner he saw almost on a daily basis, but he was saved from having to verbally apologize by the sound of a voice from the doors that led into the nearby courtroom.

“Honeycutt! Hurry along, we’re going to begin soon,” called out Abbott, clearly not happy with the delay. He wanted Catherine Carter sitting front row and center when the judge took the bench.

Denise gripped the report she held and turned toward the courtroom, miffed at herself for allowing the drama to take all of her attention. Judge Moore hated to be kept waiting.

Honeycutt and Carter followed closely while Jill hesitated, torn between wanting to help Claire and making sure her step-father didn't make bail. Cindy immediately picked up on the indecision.

"Jill, you go on ahead, and I'll call Lindsay to see about getting Claire out of jail." She smiled broadly, hoping to add a little levity to the situation. "It'll be nice to stand on the outside of the bars for a change."

"Quit gloating," muttered Claire as she paced back and forth in the tiny holding cell. It hadn't truly hit her that she may be in for some trouble until the bars had closed with a sharp clang. All at once, she envisioned having to clean out her desk and start looking for another job. Ed wouldn't be one bit pleased with her actions that had landed her in the clink.

"I can't help it." Cindy was beaming, her entire face actually glowing. "Besides being ever so grateful to be on this side of the cell, I'm so very proud of you."

A pink blush spread its way across Claire's face and burned away any unpleasant thoughts concerning her future. If the same circumstances presented themselves with the equally ensuing same results, she wouldn't hesitate to slap the righteous bitch, only she'd be sure to add a little more force to the blow. She'd actually known that deep down, but Cindy's words had sent the knowledge bubbling up to the surface. "Thanks," she said with a smile. "You're just mad you weren't closer."

"I'm not." A low voice sounded from just over Cindy's shoulder. "I'm not sure my inspector's badge could work its 'get out of jail free' magic again."

"Are you saying I'm stuck here?" asked Claire, stepping closer to the bars and wrapping her hands around the cold metal. She presented a picture perfect 'innocent prisoner' pose. "Ed's going to kill me."

"Good thing one of his best friends just happens to be a lieutenant," said Lindsay, moving toward the cell with a set of keys dangling from one hand. Gripping one of the bars with her free hand, she slid a key in the lock and turned. A loud clicking sound was soon followed by the cell door swinging free as Claire hurriedly slipped through before Lindsay could change her mind.

"Thanks, I really don't like closed in spaces," she offered in appreciation, her thoughts settling back on the truly important issue of the hour. "Now, what happened with the arraignment?"

Lindsay released a heavy sigh. “Think of the worst.”

“You’re kidding? The judge released him of his own recognizance?” asked Cindy, figuring the set bail would more than likely be attainable, especially with Mark McMurphy available to help out, but to just release Carter without bail was unconscionable.

“Worse, much worse.” Lindsay placed her hands on her hips and looked down at the floor; she still couldn’t believe what Denise had told her on the phone. Claire immediately clued in on what had happened.

“He dropped the charges?” She looked as if the wind had been let out of her sails. “On what grounds?”

“The witness recanted her statement.” Lindsay glanced up and met Claire’s gaze. “She said she didn’t get there until Kayla Anderson was already on the ground. She said she couldn’t be certain when Carter had arrived on the scene.”

“He let him go? Scot-free?” Cindy reached back for the chair she’d been sitting in earlier and plopped down. This couldn’t be happening.

“Yes, and as you’d expect, Jill’s taking it very hard. Denise said after the judge made his ruling, Jill walked right out of the courtroom and out of the front doors of the Hall. She has no idea where she went.” Lindsay wondered how long it would take to check every bar in the city. Just as she was about to ask Claire and Cindy their opinion on how to find the missing DDA, a uniformed officer stuck his head around the corner and called to her.

“Inspector Boxer, you have a phone call.” He motioned to a nearby desk. “You can use that phone – line two.”

Lindsay nodded and crossed the distance, picking up the receiver and pushing the second button. “Boxer.” A frown immediately worked its way onto her features. “Where? . . . Okay, I’m on my way.” She hesitated but finally added, “Thanks.” Placing the receiver back onto its cradle, she turned toward her friends. “That was Nicole Honeycutt. Jill’s at Element over on Geary.”

“Nicole?”

“Honeycutt?”

Claire and Cindy asked simultaneously and almost in the same perfect harmony as their *Dancing Queen* number. If the situation hadn’t been so grave, Lindsay would’ve laughed. “Yeah, I didn’t ask any questions. Sometimes it’s better not to know.”

“True,” said Claire, glancing around and wondering where her personal effects were being held. “Why don’t you two go find Jill while I locate my purse? I’ve got something I want to check out, too.”

Lindsay tilted her head in question, but Claire shooed her away, not yet ready to fill the others in on her idea just in case it failed to produce anything. “It’s probably nothing.” She watched her friend crinkle her brow in thought and quickly quashed any questions before they could form. “Really, it’s nothing. Go get Jill, and if she’s still got her faculties, bring her to my office.”

The two old friends stared at each other until Lindsay finally broke off and relented.

“Okay, but if your nothing pans out, I better be the first person you call.”

Claire nodded her promise to share any pertinent findings and then waited until Lindsay and Cindy had left the room, before she went in search of the patrolman who’d locked her up. She was banking on her hunch to turn up something they could use to bolster a case against Carter.

“Thanks for calling, Kristie. I really appreciate it.”

Nicole Honeycutt sat in a corner booth and watched from a distance as Jill downed her second beer. She’d been surprised when the waitress had called her, forgetting that she’d given the young woman her card the evening she’d invited Jill for drinks. She actually couldn’t remember why she’d passed her information along, but that wasn’t important now. What mattered was that Jill not do anything stupid, especially something that could possibly end up getting her disbarred. Nicole really wanted the DDA in her firm.

“Well, I figured something was wrong. She’d definitely been crying and wanted George to keep her supplied with Crown and coke. I talked her into starting with beer.” The waitress had actually been tempted to try to talk Jill into something entirely different to take her mind off her troubles, but she’d figured the other woman needed more help than what a mindless fuck could offer.

“You did the right thing. I’ve called some of Jill’s friends...” Nicole broke her words off when she caught sight of a tall brunette dressed in jeans and leather entering the bar. She smiled. Lindsay Boxer would take care of the problem. Sliding a crisp fifty dollar bill into Kristie’s hand, she eased from the booth. “The cavalry has arrived.”

Kristie looked over toward the bar to see a brunette and a smaller redhead bracketing Jill’s side. When she’d turned back, Nicole was long gone.

“Drinking during hours?” asked Lindsay as she eased onto an empty bar stool. “Or are you meeting someone?”

Jill stared at the label on her bottle, the pain of the judge's ruling numbing her senses enough that she didn't even feel guilty about her clandestine meeting with Nicole a few nights earlier. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"I'm taking a vacation day," said Jill, lifting the bottle to her lips and taking a healthy chug. She mentally cursed the bar's deliveryman for being late this morning. She needed something with more of a kick.

Cindy took a quick inventory of the bottles: two empty and a half-full one in Jill's hand. They'd arrived in time. "Did you bother to tell anyone?"

"Didn't think I needed to."

A hand reached out and stopped the bottle from making its familiar trek. "Well, you did. People worry." Lindsay dropped her hand back to the bar's surface, her tight grip bringing the bottle and Jill's hand to the wooden surface as well. "Jill, we'll find more evidence. This isn't over."

A sardonic laugh flowed from Jill's lips. "It's over, Lindsay. The witness was all we had."

"Maybe someone else was around," said Cindy, wondering if the arresting officers had talked to every possible witness or if they'd just jumped on the first available one.

"It doesn't matter. Carter wins... he always wins." Jill's voice was filled with a sad tone of resignation and defeat.

"Only if you let him." Lindsay waited patiently for her words to sink in, the resulting reaction quick and expected. First came the narrowing of blue eyes, followed shortly thereafter by an angry glare. A pissed off Jill was exactly what Lindsay wanted.

"If I let him???"

"Jill, Lindsay didn't mean anything by her . . ." Cindy bit off the rest of her sentence when Jill swiveled her stool and her dark blue glare her way. "Um, what were you saying?"

Lindsay took advantage of Jill's distraction to push the beer bottle out of her friend's reach as she slipped off the stool. "This isn't the place for this conversation. Let's go see if Claire's found anything."

"Found anything? What was she looking for?" asked Jill, already grabbing for her purse as she eased from her stool. She hadn't been aware that there were findings still unaccounted for and had thought Claire had already exhausted every avenue. She held out a slim hope that it wasn't some ploy by Lindsay just to get her to leave the bar.

“I have no idea,” replied Lindsay as she turned for the exit, expecting the other two women to follow. Jill was only seconds behind her, while Cindy took a moment to fish into her wallet and throw a twenty on the bar, before she quickly rushed after her friends.

Kristie watched the trio hurry toward the exit and hoped all would be well for the gorgeous blonde.

Claire sat completely still in her chair and stared open-mouthed at her computer screen. She'd had no idea what she'd find when she'd decided to run Carter's DNA through the national database, but ten years worth of unsolved rape cases, spread far and wide across the nation, was not what she'd been expecting.

“Oh my God,” she clicked the mouse repeatedly and stared at the different cases that flashed across the screen. During the first five years, there seemed to be only one rape a year with all victims around the age of 12. After that the numbers increased to two or three a year, but the range of the victims' ages shifted from 18 to 22, and each woman who'd been assaulted had been intoxicated at the time of the attack. Pulling out a legal pad, she began to make copious notes, and so intent in her charting of the crimes, she lost track of time and never heard the door to her office open.

“Claire?” Lindsay pushed the door open and waited to be acknowledged, finally shrugging to the two women who followed her and stepping into the room. Making her way to the coroner's desk, she glanced down at the filled in notepad. Claire had made multiple columns on the white, blue-lined page and seemed to be lost in the numbers. “Claire?”

“Huh?” Claire started, almost sending her pencil through the center of her carefully constructed table. Looking past Lindsay, she spied Jill and Cindy standing just inside the door. She really wished Lindsay had come alone. “Sorry, I didn't hear you come in.”

Lindsay zeroed in on the column headings: Date, City, Victim, Age, and Circumstance, and then at the number of entries below. Her eyes snapped up to meet Claire's. “Is that...” She left her question dangling in the small space between them and felt an intense rage swell up from her gut when a sad nod confirmed her suspicions. “Son of a bitch!”

Jill tilted her head and frowned. “What? What is it?”

Stepping closer to her friend, Cindy took hold of the other woman's hand and squeezed. She had no idea what Claire had found, but judging from Lindsay's strong reaction, Jill was about to have the rug pulled out from under her yet again.

Claire pushed to her feet and walked across the room, the legal pad left behind on the desk's surface. She didn't need the specifics anymore; she had them memorized. "Jill, honey, let's sit for a minute."

"What now? It can't be worse than having the charges dropped," said Jill, allowing Claire to lead her to the couch anyway. What she wouldn't give for a magic wand right about now. The Bahamas sounded wonderful – a sunny beach, clear blue waters, a never ending supply of mojitos, and someone to share a blanket.

Cindy refused to relinquish her hold as she followed her friends to the worn leather couch. A moment of awkwardness was quickly remedied as Claire directed Cindy to move to the other side of Jill before the trio ended up in an impromptu game of Twister. Lindsay watched the human puzzle untwist their limbs without any of the women releasing their hands and then reached for the abandoned legal pad. A dark eyebrow hitched up to her hairline when she realized the chart had continued onto a second page.

"I had an idea and went with it," started Claire, glancing over at Lindsay for moral support and finding the other woman completely engrossed in her reading. "Um, I ran Carter's DNA through the national database."

"Oh, that was brilliant," offered Cindy, stopping herself from leaning over Jill and pumping Claire for information on what she'd found. It was painfully obvious from Claire's expression and Lindsay's preoccupation with the coroner's notes that the discovery had been nothing short of mind-boggling.

"Yeah, well, it certainly panned out," said Claire, angling her body until her knees touched Jill's. "Carter is more despicable than we ever imagined."

"I doubt that," replied Jill, knowing her imagination had no bounds when it came to William Carter and what he was capable of doing. She jumped in her seat when a legal pad was thrust in her direction. "Shit, Lindsay; don't scare me like that."

"You think that's scary? Read this." Lindsay held the pad out in front of her, offering it to Jill. The DDA stared down at the penciled-in writing and very slowly reached out to take the pad into her own hands. Cindy inched closer and had already started to read Claire's writing before Jill had time to read the column headings.

"Oh my God," Cindy echoed Claire's earlier sentiments as she quickly worked her way down the page, itching to flip the pad to the second page, but holding back to allow Jill time to process the information.

A hitch in her breathing and a hard swallow were the only sounds Jill made as she read line after line, victim after victim, until she'd reached the end. She finally looked up and made eye contact with Lindsay, surprising all three women with her calm voice and her astute legal findings.

“We can’t try him here. These are all out of our jurisdiction.” She flipped back to the first page. “They aren’t even in this state.” She moved back to the second page and zeroed in on the third name from the bottom. “Except for Darla Evans.”

The victim’s name had barely left Jill’s lips when her cell began to chime out a familiar tune. Not bothering with caller ID, Jill flipped the phone open and said, “Yes, Denise?”

Cindy bit down on her lip hard enough to make it bleed. The situation was much too dire to remark on Jill’s choice of ringtones for the acting DA. *The Bitch was Back*, indeed. She, Lindsay, and Claire waited silently for the call to end.

“I’ll be right there,” said Jill with a slight smile as she closed her phone and slipped it back into her purse. “You’ll never guess who just left Denise’s office.”

The three club members could only look at their friend expectantly, each daring to hope for some good news. This rollercoaster ride they’d been on for the past few days was taking way too many turns for their liking.

“Darla Evans was in court this morning. She’d seen a photo of William Carter in an ad the Register ran for the grand opening of Carter-McMurphy Racing Academy. Then she happened upon Cindy’s article and saw the arraignment was today. When the judge dismissed the charges, she decided to take control of the situation that had practically crippled her all these years. She caught Denise as she was leaving the courtroom.” Jill tried to stay guardedly optimistic. She couldn’t take another blow this close to her last one. Denise certainly sounded upbeat though.

“What’s the plan?” asked Lindsay, looking forward to arresting Carter for a third time, although, technically, she hadn’t been in on the initial arrest. She just hoped it went like the old saying and three would definitely be a charm.

Jill grinned again. “Get Jacobi and meet me in Denise’s office.”

Lindsay started for the door and grabbed the legal pad from Jill’s hand as she held out her other hand in invitation. Jill didn’t hesitate to take hold and allowed her friend to lead her from the room. Maybe this time she’d get the justice she deserved.

A figure crept silently through the front door of a two-story house and carefully eased the back door closed, relieved that he’d managed to sneak away unnoticed. With a visual sweep of the area, he hurried to his blue sedan and tossed his bag into the passenger seat, before crawling inside and closing the door. He ducked his head below the mirror and glanced through the windshield to get one last glimpse of his house as he slid the key into the ignition. After a quick stop at the bank, he’d head straight for Mexico. He’d seen the

blonde woman approach the acting DA after the arraignment and had recognized her immediately. There was no way he was spending one more minute behind bars.

A motion from behind caught his attention, and he tried to turn around, but the person who'd been hiding in the backseat was quicker and easily slid the garrote around his neck and pulled him back against the seat.

“Thought you'd get away with it?” A low voice whispered softly in Carter's ear as he struggled against the wire that had already begun to cut into the skin of his neck. A gurgling sound was the only reply the choking man could manage.

“I thought you liked choking?” The man laughed and tightened the wire, grinning almost manically at the noises coming from Carter. One last hard jerk tore into soft flesh and put an end to the sounds as Carter went completely still.

Moments later, the man crawled from the backseat and opened the driver's side door. With a quick glance at the silent house, he pushed Carter across the console and into the passenger seat as he slipped into the car and turned on the ignition. He eased the car into gear and inched down the driveway. No one would ever hear from William Carter again.

“What do you mean you couldn't find him?” Jill had moved from the comfort of her chair and now paced back and forth in front of her desk. “Where have you looked?”

Lindsay glanced over at Cindy and Claire, who she'd brought along for moral support, and took a deep breath. “Everywhere – his home, the Academy, and his usual haunts. He's nowhere to be found.”

“How can that be?” asked Jill, rubbing her hand gently across her forehead to try to rid the headache that had been building ever since she'd received Lindsay's phone call informing her that William Carter had disappeared from the radar.

“Um, I'm not actually sure,” said Lindsay, shifting her weight nervously. “But, I think it's entirely possible that Carter saw Darla Evans talking to Denise after the arraignment. He probably recognized her and got nervous.”

Jill cursed under her breath and stopped her pacing. Leaning her hip against the edge of her desk, she asked the question that had been brewing in her mind. “What did Mommy Dearest have to say?”

“She said she has no idea where he is. He said something about going to check something at the Academy, and he never returned.”

Jill took in Lindsay's explanation and worried at her lower lip. “Do you,” she started, hesitating briefly, before forging ahead and speaking the words that burned in her throat.

“Do you think she’s telling the truth?” She hadn’t meant for her voice to waver, but it had nonetheless. Was her mother covering for Carter again even with this new information coming to light? Would she ever believe the man was evil?

“Actually, I don’t think she has a clue, Jill. She seemed genuinely surprised.”

Not able to stand idly by any longer, Claire crossed the room and perched next to Jill on the desk, sitting hip to hip with her friend as she eased her arm around a slim shoulder. “You shouldn’t care what she thinks, Jill. Let’s just concentrate on figuring out a way to find Carter.”

“Yeah, there has to be someone who knows where he might have gone,” said Cindy, moving to stand next to Lindsay and slipping her hand into her lover’s. Lindsay gently rubbed her thumb across the back of Cindy’s hand, its motion soothing and comfortable as a ghost of a grin inched its way into the corners of her mouth.

“I think I know someone who can help.” Giving Cindy’s hand a squeeze, Lindsay offered a smile to her friends. “I’ll be right back.” Ducking through the doorway, she disappeared from view.

Cindy could only shrug.

“I don’t understand.”

Catherine Carter fidgeted in a wing chair that was positioned directly across from the acting DA. She’d been asked to come in for questioning and had been escorted directly to the office of Denise Kwon. Crossing one stocking-clad leg over the other, she nervously shifted in her seat.

“It’s very simple. You’re covering up your husband’s whereabouts, so I’m going to have to charge you with obstruction of justice.” Denise sat back comfortably in her chair, enjoying watching the older woman squirm. If she couldn’t have the satisfaction of knowing Carter was behind bars again, scaring the missus would have to do.

“But I truly don’t know where he is!” Catherine shouted, her upset finally bursting forth. She’d been completely gobsmacked when Inspector Boxer had shown up at her door, armed with a warrant for a local rape and pages of crimes that were linked to her husband. How could she have been so blind?

“Put yourself in my place, Mrs. Carter,” said Denise, hesitating for just a moment for the other woman to contemplate her position. “You’ve covered for your husband before, believed his lies, and even went so far as to give your only daughter, your flesh and blood, away to strangers in favor of him. What would you believe?”

Catherine ran an unsteady hand through golden locks and licked her dry lips. She'd thought of nothing else once she'd seen the names and names of victims the inspector had taken great delight in showing to her. The places all sounded familiar to her, as well they should, different cities that hosted various NASCAR events during the years, events she knew full well that William had attended, events he'd attended without her by his side, insisting that she'd grow tired and bored. She'd been played for a fool, and she'd played the part magnificently.

"I don't know him at all," she whispered, lost in her memories and seemingly to have forgotten where she was. "I believed him. I was so lonely when Daniel died, and William showed up out of the blue and swept me off my feet. He was so handsome and fun and loving, just exactly what I needed."

Denise, being Denise, broke through Catherine Carter's memories to remind the woman exactly where she was sitting and why she was there. "Maybe you should've taken some time to consider what your daughter wanted instead of inviting a child molester to live under your roof. Perhaps some time behind bars will help to remedy that oversight somewhat."

Blue eyes snapped up to focus on dark ones. "Haven't you been listening? I don't know where William has gone. What can I say or do to convince you?"

Denise smiled; she'd been waiting for those exact words. "You could drop the assault charges against Dr. Washburn." She pushed an official-looking document across the desk, complete with a black pen resting on top, and watched as blue eyes widened in exactly the same manner as someone else's she knew. They narrowed just as similarly.

"Fine. I probably deserved that slap and more." Catherine leaned forward and snatched up the pen, signing her name next to the line indicated by the yellow sticky arrow. "Anything else?"

"You might want to tell your daughter the same things you just told me," said Denise, reaching for the documents that would clear Claire Washburn. "That's just a suggestion, though."

Catherine eased to her feet and nodded at the acting DA. Breaking eye contact, she turned and headed toward the door, stopping just outside to glance down the hallway where her daughter's office was located. She took a tentative step and then another as she slowly made her way toward a conversation with Jillian. She pulled up short when she spied Inspector Boxer disappearing into the office Catherine had been heading for, but she couldn't stop herself from moving closer to listen in.

"I've called in a favor," said Lindsay, gravitating once again to Cindy's side. "I sent Claire's findings to John Ashe. Let's sic the feds on Carter's ass and see how he likes it."

“Smart, Linz, very smart,” said Claire, pulling Jill closer to her side. “They’ll turn up whatever rock he’s hiding under.”

“I’m just glad he’s finally been exposed for what he truly is. I just hate that so many others had to suffer, especially children,” Jill spoke the last two words softly. A chill ran down her spine in memory of the abuse she’d suffered at Carter’s hands and her heart went out to the other victims who’d had to suffer as well. She leaned against Claire and allowed the other woman’s warmth to ground her until the ringing of her office phone drew her attention.

“Bernhardt.” She listened carefully and then ended the call with little fanfare. “Okay, thanks Denise.”

“They find him?” asked Cindy, wondering if they could be so lucky.

“No, Denise just wanted me to tell Claire that all charges have been dropped.” She smiled at her friend and teased, “Ed doesn’t have to visit you in prison now.”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” quipped Claire sarcastically, not letting on how relieved she was to be free of the charges. “Did Denise say what prompted the change?”

Jill shook her head. “Nope, just that the paperwork has already been taken care of.” She reached for her purse; she needed some air. “C’mon, let me buy you guys a drink.”

“Papa Joe’s?” asked Cindy, figuring their local hangout would be the perfect place for them to regroup after everything that had happened.

“Sure, sounds good to me.” Jill shouldered her bag and started for the door. She’d been about to suggest they go to Element in hopes that Kristie might be working, but Papa Joe’s sounded better. Familiarity was just what they all needed.

In the hallway, Catherine watched from around the corner as the group of women walked away, their arms wrapped around each other in such a way an onlooker had to squint hard to see where one woman’s arms stopped and another’s began. She noted the order with the redhead and Jillian in the middle and the coroner and inspector bracketing the ends. She was certain the order changed from time to time, but felt what she was currently seeing was the norm – the two outer women offering their strength and protection to the ones in the middle. It seemed that after all these years, Jillian had found her family.

Long minutes passed before the older woman stepped from her hiding place, certain that the foursome had now reached the floor that would take them from the building. Catherine took just a moment to peer into the sanctuary of her daughter’s office, another achievement Jillian had accomplished all on her own without the help or approval of her mother. She’d managed to overcome the horrors of her youth to become a successful young woman.

A sharp pang pierced her heart and Catherine had to look away. Maybe one day, she'd return to try to piece together a life she'd broken all those years ago, but for now, she needed time – they both did. With one last look at the etching on the door that bore her daughter's name, Catherine Carter turned and walked away.

FADE TO BLACK