

'Til Death Do Us Part
By Demeter

The house was eerily quiet when he walked inside and he frowned to himself. Betty and Dina should have been home; he liked his family waiting for him when he returned from business trips, and they knew it. So where were they?

"Betty, honey, I'm back," he called.

Nothing.

He stopped cold when he saw dark red smears on the polished hardwood floor, dizziness assaulting him for a moment, before he shouted more urgently, "Dina! Betty! Are you there?"

There was a scraping sound, and he dropped his suitcase and ran toward the living room door, pushing it open with enough force to cause it to bang against the wall.

Richard Summers froze again when he saw his five-year-old daughter walking towards him, dragging her favorite doll through a puddle of blood.

She seemed unharmed, but she didn't acknowledge his presence at all. "Dina, baby, where's Mommy?"

He quickly closed the distance between them and lifted her into his arms, almost dropping her when his eyes fell on a trail of blood leading up the stairs to the bedroom.

Dina started to scream.

One nightmare was just beginning while another was nearing its end.

Act I

This was what desperation felt like, the mind narrowed to one single focused thought: Lindsay knew she had to get out of the restraints. Yanking hard, she felt them bite into her wrist, but she didn't care about the pain. She wasn't above breaking any bones to achieve her mission and, besides, blood might actually help to slip her hand free. Aware of Cindy watching her anxiously, she gave another frantic pull.

She had no idea how much time they had left or even if their brilliant idea had actually worked out.

She just knew that if she couldn't make it, then she'd have to do whatever was necessary to distract Pete from Cindy.

Anything. It was that simple.

When the door finally fell open, it wasn't Pete Raynor rushing into the room, but a team of local police, their relief at find the occupants alive nearly palpable.

Lindsay never took her eyes off Cindy, so she needed a moment to realize that one of the men was

addressing her, probably not for the first time. She finally dropped her shackled hands to a somewhat less defensive posture, wincing when the metal scraped over bruised skin. "I'm okay," she said impatiently. "If you could just get these off of me?"

The scene felt disturbingly surreal. Truth be told, she was scared beyond reason that this could be another manufactured reality cooked up in a psychopath's brain; she needed to touch Cindy to assure herself that it wasn't part of a dreamscape, that they had truly survived Kiss-Me-Not for real.

"Did you find him?" she asked the officer, her knees nearly buckling with relief when he nodded.

"We didn't expect it to be such an easy arrest. How did you manage that?" he wondered aloud, obviously referring to the fact that their perp had gotten a taste of his own medicine.

"Motivation," she simply said.

Another officer crossed the room and nervously jingled the keys to the heavy restraints. Lindsay couldn't remember moving, but the next moment, Cindy was in her arms, holding on tight, and she found herself assured of her reality. Kissing her lover's cheek softly, Lindsay released Cindy a moment later. Even though, this time, she wasn't the cop in charge of a crime scene, Lindsay was aware of the next steps the officers would follow, but there was something she had to do first.

She held up a hand to ward off the paramedics who had come in after the cops. "In a minute. I just need to take a look."

In order to leave this place behind, both literally and in her mind, she had to see for herself what it was like, had to know it from memory, not crime scene photos. Lindsay walked along the hallway with Cindy trailing behind her. She stopped and looked inside the room with the yellow walls and the oak furniture. It had been the least threatening of all the rooms, but then again it had only been for transitional purposes.

Inside the mock hospital room, the shackles were still attached to the bed rails. Her mouth quirked up in a quick grin at the sight. *Didn't quite work the way you planned it, did it?*

Another door led to a college dorm room, and Lindsay walked on, steeling herself for what she was sure would await her behind the final door. She'd seen Pete's elaborated fantasies depicted in the form of a horrible still life gone bad at every crime scene. He wouldn't stop at some teenaged illusion. His idea had been to shape her into the perfect bride, using every means possible.

Lindsay took a deep breath before she entered the room Kiss-Me-Not had created for his final fantasy, the wedding night. The setup appeared to be some kind of honeymoon suite that put most Five Star hotels to shame, complete with expensive wine in the cooler and flowers everywhere. This elaborate presentation from the man who'd served her a greasy fast food meal on a styrofoam plate.

Roses, red and white on the table, the window sill, and every available surface. *White roses have always been your favorite*, a disembodied voice echoed in her mind. She shivered violently.

A stereo and fridge were hidden behind wooden panels. In the center of the room stood a massive bed with the four posts, the sheets a blinding white.

Ebony, snow and blood, the story of Snow White according to Kiss-Me-Not.

She felt a hand sliding into hers, Cindy's presence anchoring her to the present and reality, and she

squeezed back gently. It was over. After all these years, the nightmare had finally stopped. She could hardly believe it.

"Inspector?" Lindsay turned to the paramedic who had spoken to her softly. "We should go now."

Somehow, she found it touching that he addressed her by her rank, as out of place as it seemed in her half-dressed, half out of her mind state. "Sure." Gratefully, she accepted the blanket he held out to her, realizing for the first time how cold she was.

And after seven years, she walked away from the last crime scene Kiss-Me-Not had ever created... for her.

Walking away a winner.

Having lost half of the day, time had become very relative, so Lindsay was fairly surprised to see Jill and Claire minutes later before they'd even made it out of the building.

"Did you fly here?" she asked, doing her best to make light of the situation. She'd hoped to get out of her stupid wedding dress before Jill got to see her. Lindsay hadn't missed the looks the cops and paramedics had given her, not surprisingly given her state of undress. She would have had her own theories in their place, and the last thing she wanted was for Jill to go down that road.

"Almost." Jill's eyes were bright, but she smiled. "Helps when the driver's got a siren in the car. Maggie sure did some high-speed driving back in L.A."

"I bet."

Jill's gaze was anxious, Claire's attentive. Lindsay felt like she should say something to reassure them but she couldn't quite find the words. Now that the danger was past, not just today's or the past few weeks, but years of her life, she felt herself starting to unravel. It was an uncanny feeling, making her dizzy, and causing her concentration to slip. She couldn't stop it.

"I hope you aren't too mad at me," Cindy chimed in quickly, saving her for the moment. "I couldn't not try."

"Everything's alright," Claire assured her. "We can be mad at you later, now we're just..."

Her voice trailed off, but she didn't need to finish her sentence. Just like that, the world around them ceased to exist for a moment, the voices, the presence of police and medical staff receding into the background, until it was just their circle of four, re-established.

Invincible.

If she was feeling a little melodramatic at the moment, Lindsay thought no one could blame her. "There's something, two things, actually, that I hope you can get me."

"What is that?" Jill asked.

"Some pants and a stiff drink. Not necessarily in that order."

Their relieved shared laughter drew several concerned glances toward them, but none of them cared. This was a beginning if she'd ever known one, and Lindsay held on to that even when the ground started moving underneath her feet and she was pretty sure it wasn't an earthquake.

"What's taking them so damn long? It was just a tranquilizer, *I'm fine!*"

Despite the affirmation, Cindy didn't feel fine, just the opposite in fact. She considered it unnecessarily cruel to be separated from Lindsay for any length of time at the moment. Even knowing Claire was with her lover now just wasn't enough. She could only imagine what Lindsay was going through, and she hated that she was stuck in a hospital room, waiting for the doctor.

Relief had long since given way to many other worries, vivid worst case scenarios on her mind as to what had happened before she'd awakened in the carbon copy of Lindsay's childhood room. She'd seen the IV stand and the mostly empty bag hanging from it in the hospital room Pete had created, and lastly, the fake honeymoon suite. Thinking about the implications made her want to curl up in a corner and cry.

While she was grateful to have Jill to keep her company, she wasn't the person whose presence Cindy craved.

"They just have to make sure that everything's okay," Jill said in a deliberately vague tone.

"I'm sorry," Cindy said, feeling silly. Jill had her own nightmares and worries; being here wasn't easy for her either, and not just due to the fear of her friends in danger. One predator, one fear in exchange for another.

"It's okay." Jill got up and came to sit on the edge of the bed, laying an arm around Cindy's shoulders. "We'll all be glad when we can leave this place."

Cindy leaned into her friend's embrace. "Thank you. I'm trying really hard not to freak."

Jill laughed softly. "Believe me, I know the feeling. And you've got every right to freak."

Footsteps could be heard down the hallway and Cindy straightened a little, gathering her resolve for the upcoming conversation with the doctor. No matter what he said, she had somewhere she needed to be.

Now.

Lindsay knew procedure quite well, except for the fact that she'd only ever been on the other, safer side of it.

Claire had been disturbed at the sight of her friend in the torn dirty gown, legs scratched and streaked with smudges of dirt. She could breathe a little easier after Lindsay had told her how it all had come to pass.

How she'd almost made it out on her own and how she'd managed to crawl through the ceiling after being drugged and tied down for the majority of those fearful hours, Claire couldn't imagine and, at

the moment, she just couldn't bring herself to. For now, she'd be the friend who offered a shoulder to lean on; she'd have her own little breakdown back home.

Then there'd been Cindy's meddling. Without it, they possibly wouldn't have tied Pete to Stockton soon enough, so as much as the young reporter was feeling guilty, she had most likely saved Lindsay's life.

There was no point in worrying about the what-if's instead just being grateful about how lucky they'd been.

Claire was also glad she'd been allowed to stay in the room with Lindsay. The moment her friend had changed from the remnants of the Hogan family's wedding dress to an equally fashionable hospital gown, Lindsay had started to crash and burn. It wasn't surprising. There had just never been any time for it before.

"Now," she chided gently when Lindsay snapped at the doctor for the third time. "You can hang in there for a few more minutes. Cindy's doing fine and probably on her way here right now. Martha will be fine, too." She laid a hand on Lindsay's forehead, not sure if it was her touch or the mention of Cindy that finally calmed her; Claire was grateful for the result in any case.

"Remind me to never marry in white again, will you?" Lindsay mumbled tiredly.

The possible implication made Claire smile. "So you two are planning something?"

"Not really. Unless they brought down Prop 8 in the last couple of days... say, how long was I asleep anyway?"

"Not that long, and unfortunately Prop 8 is still in place, but you could always go somewhere else."

"I guess I'll think about it after the trial and when we've found a place that he hasn't been."

"Sounds good," Claire said, her throat going a little tight. Kiss-Me-Not had left his mark on all of their lives for sure, but for Lindsay and Cindy, he'd invaded their most private space over and over again. They were overdue to find a safer place to live.

"It's cold in here," Lindsay said, almost as an afterthought.

Claire found that she'd run out of distractions, having held her own emotions barely in check. To her relief, the doctor gave a reassuring smile and said, "It's okay. We're going to get you settled, and then you can finally get some rest. Also, there's someone here who really wants to see you."

Cindy only needed three steps to close the space between them. With her girlfriend finally wrapped up in her arms, all of a sudden Lindsay couldn't care less about having to spend the night in a hospital room, even if it was the same setting where she'd awakened to the ultimate nightmare. None of that mattered, not the blushing nurse or the fact that she was beginning to feel really shaky, because they were still here, together.

Alive.

And so was Pete. She'd bet he'd wake up kicking and screaming when he'd realized that his own

brilliant plan had been responsible for bringing him down in the end.

"I'm glad you're alright, too," Jill said. "It's okay, you can hug me later. You don't have to let go."

"I wasn't planning to," Lindsay told her over Cindy's shoulder. "Thanks, though."

Although she'd gratefully let herself be distracted by her friend's joke, the banter couldn't entirely mask the worry beneath. Lindsay didn't think she could discuss Pete and everything that had and had not happened right now when she had hardly sorted it out for herself. It was doubtful that she ever would, all of it anyway. A big part of it she didn't remember, and Pete... well, he had nothing left to lose. He'd enjoy making her wonder.

The cop part of her wasn't completely silenced either; she wanted to know what had happened with him, wanted the reassurance that he was already behind steel bars rather than possibly being treated for a drug overdose. Lindsay forced herself to push any thought of him aside for the moment.

He'd been caught. He was never going to get out. That was all that mattered.

Claire gave Lindsay's shoulder a pat. "I think we should leave you two alone right now and go get you some clothes."

"Very good idea," Jill commented. "We'll be back." For her sake, Lindsay mustered a smile.

When they were gone, Cindy drew back to pull herself a chair. The loss of warmth was almost unbearable, but it was so good for Lindsay to see her unharmed. There'd be no ill effect from the tranquilizer.

Time slowed down as they stayed silent, just their hands touching on the edge of the bed. There wasn't much to say; they were both very much aware of what had been left behind them, and how much worse it could have been.

Cindy leaned forward until her face touched their joined hands, and she started to cry.

It made Lindsay uncomfortable, like there was something she should be able to do in order to end Cindy's grief, find the right words to console her. Like she was responsible. It took her awhile to realize that between the shock of having a man being murdered before Cindy's eyes and the relief of the two of them having been found on time, this release was exactly what Cindy needed. She gently stroked her lover's hair, fairly surprised that the same emotion wasn't true for her at the moment.

"Stay with me tonight?" she asked.

Cindy's gaze when she looked up at her was full of doubt, but longing at the same time. "I'm not sure the nurses will let me – but who cares," she said quickly, obviously realizing that her hesitation had caused a moment of slight panic. She kicked off her shoes and lay beside Lindsay, carefully snuggling into her arms.

Lindsay felt utterly relieved and undeserving at the same time. For a moment, she'd harbored the overwhelming if irrational fear that Cindy might refuse; she'd left her alone once, after all, to run off to her date with a man who'd turned out to be a serial killer.

When Cindy had been shot on the steps of the Hall, Lindsay hadn't been able to sit beside her hospital bed and just let herself cry. She couldn't even do it now, which was, come to think of it,

pretty messed up. However, she was lucky because Cindy loved her anyway.

"I'm so sorry," Lindsay told her.

"What? You couldn't have known that he'd come for me and--"

"Not that. You could have left, like I did. When you got shot, I mean."

Without missing a beat, Cindy raised herself up to look at Lindsay. "I was pretty mad at you for a while. But don't you think we've come a long way since then? If anything, you paid your dues when you didn't leave me to deal with Prince Whacko alone. Linz, come on, you don't think--"

"I never could have--" Lindsay whispered. "I would have done anything to make him leave you alone. Anything."

There was no need for further clarifying. "I know." Cindy pressed a soft kiss against Lindsay's neck. "I love you."

"I love you too." Lindsay smiled, but she couldn't let go of the tension, the feeling that something bad had yet to happen. While Cindy was asleep in her arms minutes later, her own mind just refused to shut down.

She lay awake, scared that if she closed her eyes the dreams that would come might not be her own.

Jill had seen the bridal suite, too, and she'd had a hard time not to let the image overlay with that of a small church, a sad-looking Jesus on the cross hanging above her while she was cold and terrified, battling with the fear of death.

They'd both been lucky, her and Lindsay, but it had been too damn close.

Tonight, as she drove home from the hospital, the temptation of falling back into old patterns, trying to forget, was taunting her. Pick up some company for the night, get just drunk enough to forget about the images that were haunting her, the carefully designed stage for Kiss-Me-Not's final play.

She stood in front of the bar for a moment, indecisive, then pushed the door open. It didn't mean she was going to go back to old habits. A couple of drinks wouldn't hurt and might actually help her forget the fact that she was the only one going home alone tonight.

Jill had barely ordered when a familiar face appeared in front of her. "Mind if I sit here?"

The sight wasn't completely unwelcome, but she was tired, and a member of the SFPD didn't seem like the appropriate company to forget about a horrible day. Not to mention that Maggie had worked on the Arnold case too, and had made all the wrong connections about Kiss-Me-Not and Lindsay. "Maggie Snow, you're stalking me now?"

The inspector didn't seem fazed by Jill's lack of manners. "I wish. Honestly? This was a tough day. I didn't feel like facing my empty apartment, and I was hoping you'd feel the same." She hesitated for a moment. "If you don't... I'll leave you alone."

Jill stared into her glass of gin and tonic somberly. "Excuse me if I don't know what to feel right

now. I'm just glad this is over."

"I'm sure," Maggie said quietly, and they were silent for a while during which Jill pondered her past coping strategies and mistakes made. She winced at the memory of Denise once finding her blacked-out drunk. She wouldn't let her control slip that badly again.

The inspector spoke up, startling her out of her reverie. "Look, I made a mistake, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make up for it. I was hoping you'd give me a chance – maybe not right now, not today, but sometime in the future."

"I'm not sure I'm the person you should be telling this." Jill shrugged.

Maggie gave her a long thoughtful look. "I am," she finally said.

"Fine. Do you get it now?" Jill realized that her tone had all of a sudden become rather snippy, but she couldn't bring herself to care much, not tonight. "Lindsay spent seven years on this case. You've seen Raynor's fantasyland, you saw what he did to her. How could you have ever thought--"

"I was wrong. I guess Lindsay and I didn't have the best of starts... not that it's an excuse."

"It's not." Jill shook her head in frustration; this was not how she had envisioned passing the evening, even though she vaguely acknowledged that Maggie was trying so hard to apologize. It wasn't that she hated the woman; in fact, under different circumstances, she would have certainly enjoyed the company. "How could you not see what happened there?" Embarrassed, she realized how close she was to breaking into tears. Lindsay might have been cracking silly jokes right away, but she hadn't fooled Jill. The expression on her friend's face, of a person shell-shocked, in a daze, had been telling. Jill had recognized that expression immediately.

She'd seen it on herself, in the mirror in the exam room of the Mission Cross North after the hours spent as the Hallelujah Man's captive. She remembered nearly going out of her skin at the touch of strangers, nurses, doctors, as unavoidable as it was in a hospital. Her mind would inevitably be drawn back to the ritual site that Arnold had chosen for her, St. Vincent's. For Lindsay, Pete had created a kaleidoscope of stories.

Cindy had put on a brave smile, but she, too, had looked ready to break, and it was exactly the same way that Jill felt.

"I did, and I'm kind of ashamed," Maggie admitted. "But I also know everybody is kind of occupied tonight, so I just wanted to say, if you need anything... I'm here."

Jill gave her a long look, taking in the inspector's hopeful expression. She had no reason to doubt that Maggie's offer was genuine, yet she was painfully aware of how bad the timing for the two of them was right now. "Thank you. I'm just not the best company right now. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I understand. You've been through hell in the past few months."

"I'm not the only one," Jill said pointedly. Maggie didn't argue, obviously understanding that it would take awhile longer to bridge the rift caused by her accusations against Lindsay.

If ever.

Jacobi came to see her about her official statement the next morning when Cindy was out to get herself some coffee and get out of her sleep-rumpled clothes. "We don't have to do this now if you're not up to it," he began, making Lindsay wonder who of them was more in need of comfort.

She shrugged. "It's fine. It's not like there'll ever be a good moment for this." She didn't tell him what was really on her mind, that those were only words after all which, she assumed, couldn't really do all that much harm to her after the past 36 hours. "Let's get this over with."

It was one way for her to regain control over her mind and body as well. There had been the 'treatment' Pete had created for her, and then there had been exams performed at the hospital, necessary but intrusive all the same. Lindsay knew she couldn't really avoid telling the story once more, but at least she would do it on her terms.

It was a relief that it was Jacobi being there to hear it, not Tom. The final confrontation with Kiss-Me-Not would bring up too much old history between them, their failed marriage, too many things they had never been able to talk about and for which it was now too late. That, and she harbored the hope that Jacobi would be seeing less of a victim of a crime in her than his partner who'd simply hit a rough spot.

She gave him a quick summary of what happened since she'd collapsed in Cindy's bedroom until the moment the police had stormed the killer's version of a fairy tale castle. "Obviously I remember only half of it – I'm going to make a terrible witness."

"There's enough evidence against him," he assured her.

"I'm sure he can't wait to tell the story," she said sarcastically. "Main character in his very own play."

She hadn't missed his frown at that. "Don't you think so? Or is there something else I should know?"

"He hasn't talked at all. To anyone."

The way Jacobi delivered the news showed that he was just as puzzled about this fact as probably everyone else was. They weren't exactly bad news, but unexpected. Even from behind bars, Pete seemed to be plotting... whatever it was, he wouldn't get anywhere with it this time.

"He will, I'm pretty sure. He's too impressed with the sound of his own voice. Anyway, let's get this over with. I didn't realize until I was back in there that it was... Cindy." Describing her attempt of an escape, Lindsay faltered only once. The memory of that moment still had the power to shatter the careful balance she'd managed since the timely rescue.

She finished the rest of her narrative quickly, not wanting to let this get too emotional, and fortunately, he indulged her. Something though was still nagging at the back of her mind. "Did you find the tapes yet?"

Jacobi, immediately understanding what she was talking about, shook his head. Lindsay closed her eyes for a brief moment, breathing a sigh of relief. Pete's meticulous documentation of her life would show up some time, so this could only be a reprieve, but she'd rather have it happen later than sooner. It was bad enough to know that Pete had followed her every intimate moment; she couldn't imagine having them exposed to people she was working with.

They'd never look at her the same way.

"Not yet," he said. "We've been searching every square inch of that damn house, nothing. However, we found how he knew to decorate those rooms just like that."

"Photo albums," Lindsay assumed, sitting up straighter. "The yellow room..." She grimaced. "Tom and I had one like that in the house."

Jacobi nodded grimly. "There's more. There were two boxes, the pictures, clothes..." He paused long enough for the implications to sink in. "Something from every room it seems."

"I don't want any of it," she said a bit harsher than intended. It wasn't much of a guess exactly which drawers he'd been going through.

"I can imagine." There was a moment of silence after he'd turned off the recording, then he asked, "How are you doing?"

"As you can see. Shutting me up is not that easy."

"I'm glad," he said, both amusement and worry evident in his gaze. "You know, if you ever need to talk--"

"I know where to find you," she cut him off as to not make this any more awkward for either of them. As far as Lindsay was concerned, she was pretty much done with talking. Next time in court, and that would be the last chapter of Kiss-Me-Not's mad fairy tales. "Thank you."

"Gonna be a cold day in hell," the woman whispered harshly. She'd said goodbye to that delusion of a marriage long ago; tomorrow, she'd do it for real. No one knew about her plans yet, and she wanted it exactly that way.

She wasn't going to turn from wife into mistress, or the other way around. She'd be making it on her own.

Turning her back to him, she walked out of the room, knowing his gaze was following her.

Since her blood work was fine and being tired the only symptom she could think of – which could have been a result of the past seven years just as much as the drugs she'd been dosed with – Lindsay was finally released from the hospital. To her dismay, the doctors had advised her to take sick leave, watch out for possible side-effects, and come back in a couple of days for additional tests, which meant that everything wasn't quite as clear as she'd hoped.

That was because Pete had known no boundaries in the pursuit of his favorite sick fantasy, not only murdering the scientists who had researched this particular drug but destroying their work, too.

"Don't you worry," Cindy had said. "We'll find a way for you to pass the time."

It wasn't just being bored or having too much time to think, and Cindy knew that, trying her best to distract Lindsay from the dire facts: She could suffer from daytime flashbacks and it was entirely

possible that her memory could be affected. In the doctors' prognosis, they could only rely on their knowledge of substances that came close to the drug Lindsay had been given.

When they finally got Martha back from Dr. Pam, they'd even joked about how she perfectly matched her mistress now, tired and grumpy, but all three were very happy about the reunion.

Stepping into the apartment for the first time since their fight and the subsequent drama that had unfolded, they'd each vowed to find a place that was not haunted with the memory of Kiss-Me-Not, one way or another.

Cindy embraced her lover from behind as they stood in the middle of the living room where, Lindsay noticed, the coffee table was missing. "Do you believe me now?" Cindy asked softly. "I won't be walking away." Leaning closer, she added, "I don't think I could."

"I let him--" Three words that encompassed a world of guilt and shame, even though she knew that the Pete Raynor she'd dated for two weeks and slept with twice had only been a mask that had been shattered the moment it wasn't needed anymore. Even though she'd seen his true face, it didn't make the feeling go away.

"Linz. Just stop it. It's over. Maybe you can't feel it right away, but you will. And I'll be here."

No matter what, she thought.

And Cindy was right; it was hard to remember that the freedom they'd been wishing for so hard was finally here when every place they went seemed to be poisoned by his presence; the hospital room at Mission Cross North that was too reminiscent of the one during her captivity and this apartment. She'd thought she didn't remember at all, but coming back here, there was the flash of an image, and a sensation. Lindsay recalled how she'd wanted to check on Martha. Falling. Hands holding her up.

There was also the memory of yelling at Cindy before they'd parted, making her face heat at some of the things she'd said. "I'm gonna hold you to that." She turned around, and laid her hands lightly on Cindy's arms, not daring to take it any further. The memory of the last time they'd tried to use intimacy to escape unpleasant truths was still too pressing. "Sometimes... I can't believe you still want to be here." She pressed a finger against Cindy's lips when she sensed the protest forthcoming. "I've been all kinds of self-righteous, accusing everyone of giving up. I fooled myself into thinking I could be some kind of advocate for these women."

"You were."

"For a while, maybe. Then he shows up, and I'm... that easy. Doesn't it make you sick to think about it?"

Cindy just shook her head, desperate for the right words to make her understand, and Lindsay felt ashamed for a different reason all of a sudden. Cindy had stayed at the hospital nearly around the clock, she looked exhausted, and neither of them was up to this conversation now. "I'm sorry," she whispered, holding her close. "I'm not doubting you. I need you here with me."

Her confession felt like a free fall, but to her surprise, the ground remained steady under her feet and the world didn't stop.

"That's okay," Cindy said. "I won't be going anywhere. You're safe with me."

Lindsay knew without a doubt that she was telling the truth, because Cindy had been keeping her sane even in her imagination. Someday soon, she'd be able to feel it, too.

The days passed in a blur of friendly visits and phone calls; Jacobi dropped by to share some bullpen gossip, Jill and Claire came by every other evening.

Sleep was mostly eluding her, because she associated the room with the shadow falling over her and the hands catching her when she stumbled over Martha's prone form.

Lindsay lay awake, pondering confusing nightmares of manufactured teenage memories and the less confusing ones that Cindy had, about the officer that Pete had killed, and wondering about her future. She thought about when he'd taken off her clothes to dress her in the gown she'd worn once before, on the day she'd gotten married to another man. Lying still, Lindsay listened to Cindy breathe and for signs of possible intruders. Martha aimlessly wandered the apartment at night, seeming to share her mistress's worries and restlessness.

Lindsay kept her fears to herself until the message finally came: She could go back to work.

On their last shared day off, the sun tickling her face woke Cindy. She smiled at the sight of Lindsay still fast asleep beside her, savoring the rare moment. It could be relief at finally being given the all clear for her return to work, or sheer exhaustion because of the lack of sleep during the past couple of weeks, in any case, it seemed like she was finally getting the rest she needed.

Cindy snuggled closer, thinking fond thoughts of a romantic breakfast in bed. She'd take her time waking her girlfriend with--

The phone rang.

"For Christ's sake," Lindsay muttered, awake without any prompting now as she fumbled for her cell phone on the nightstand. "Boxer."

"This is good news," Cindy murmured to herself, trying to overcome her disappointment of having her agenda for Sunday morning crossed out. "Okay, someone's dead, not entirely good news." Lindsay would be thrilled to go back – so was Cindy actually, but still, couldn't they have waited until after the romantic breakfast she'd had planned?

Reluctantly, she disentangled herself from Lindsay's warm embrace and listened to her talking on the cell phone.

"I'll be there in twenty."

"I'm coming with you," Cindy announced, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

Lindsay just shook her head fondly, but she didn't protest. The day was looking up again. Besides, there was always dinner.

On a beautiful San Francisco Sunday morning, Claire Washburn stood in the expensively and tastefully furnished master bedroom of a three story mansion. She could have almost enjoyed the view if it hadn't been for the blood smeared over almost every surface of the room, its cloying metallic scent, and the woman's body in the center of it.

There had been blood stains along the stairs, starting in the living room; Betty Summers had tried to escape, but her attacker had caught up with her in the bedroom. Aside from multiple stab wounds, there were cuts on her hands; she had fought desperately, but lost in the end.

Claire took pictures and collected samples of fibers and fluids, trying to figure out what was nagging at the back of her mind. Running upstairs. It seemed odd, but there was no saying what went through someone's mind when it was clouded with the fear of death. Betty Summers might not have been thinking too clearly.

Straightening, Claire surveyed the body again. Summers' limbs were at odd angles, showing the extreme violence that had taken place. The killer hadn't opted for quick and clean.

"Not a random killing," a familiar voice said as other conversations in the room were quieting down to whispers in a wave across the room. Claire had an idea why and she couldn't blame them.

"This looks very personal. And Cho, stop staring," Lindsay told the young officer. "Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

The uniforms laughed hesitantly at the quote and Claire turned to her friend with a smile, just on time to see Lindsay rolling her eyes good-naturedly at her somewhat spooked colleagues.

Relief seemed an odd sentiment when in a room where a woman had been brutalized and killed only a few hours ago. However, Claire was relieved seeing Lindsay walk onto the crime scene like nothing had ever happened. Jill would be here soon, too, bravely fighting her queasiness as always, and she'd bet that Cindy was waiting on the other side of the yellow tape.

Claire looked at Betty Summers again and silently added, *"And we're gonna find the son of a bitch who did this to you."*

"Right," Lindsay said as if reading her mind. "What have you got?"

"They were supposed to be here, waiting for me!" The man appeared distraught and desperate, still Warren Jacobi had the urge to roll his eyes. A quick sideways look to his partner showed him that Lindsay seemed to be feeling pretty much the same, not that he could say for sure. On her first day back at work, she certainly had the barriers firmly in place.

He could sympathize. There had been a lot of talk going on behind closed doors, and she couldn't not know about it. The best way to deal with it was to ignore it.

Despite the fact that he had come home to find his wife brutally murdered and his little daughter traumatized beyond imagination, Richard Summers hadn't yet stopped projecting an air of entitlement. He'd been trying to tell the techs what they could touch and what they couldn't, and his lawyer had been on the scene ten minutes after the police, watching the proceedings closely.

"I know what you think," he said pointedly. "The husband's always the number one suspect. But I

loved Betty!" The lawyer, a silver haired man in his sixties, touched his arm in support. His whole demeanor seemed a tad too overdone.

"Mr. Summers has an alibi," he told the investigators in a steely voice.

"That'll help," Lindsay acknowledged curtly. "Mr. Summers, do you know if your wife had any enemies?"

"No! Everyone loved her!"

Lindsay spared a glance toward Jacobi. It was painfully obvious someone didn't love the woman. In the bedroom, they'd found jewelry worth several thousands of dollars and Betty Summers' purse with platinum credit cards and several hundred dollars cash. This wasn't a simple B&E. Most likely, killing Betty Summers had been the intent in the first place; it just became messier than expected.

"How about you? Did you get any threats lately?" Jacobi asked.

"A man in Mr. Summers' position gets threats all the time," the lawyer answered, again in an openly condescending tone. "If they had been serious, we would have reported them to the police."

"Was there anything lately, Mr. Summers? Any new employee or someone hanging around the house?"

"If I knew I'd tell you! Damn it, my wife... is dead! I can't do this now!"

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Mr. Summers, but every single detail can be important," Lindsay told him calmly. The hint of impatience hadn't gone unnoticed by Jacobi.

Summers shook his head. "I can't think of anything right now. I need to see my daughter in the hospital."

"We'll need to talk to her, too," Lindsay informed the two men, clearly not surprised by Summers' reply.

"You want to bother a six year-old child who has just lost her mother?"

"What we want is to find out who killed her. And we will. Okay, Mr. Summers. We'll be in touch."

Both the lawyer and his client didn't seem very pleased with the prospect.

Freedom. So this was what it felt like, Lindsay reflected as she followed her friends outside for the usual impromptu gathering after the first questioning. It was good to be back on the job, to be needed, or so she was telling herself. At the same time, it was a little like one of those dreams where you came to work still wearing your PJ's.

Only worse, because truth be told, she felt rather naked and didn't like the feeling at all.

Jill had paled at the sight of the bloodied body and seemed more than relieved to step outside the ransacked bedroom. For once, Lindsay could sympathize. The air had felt too damn thick inside;

although, for her, it certainly wasn't the confrontation with violent death that had rattled her. It was more the glances of some of her colleagues who had looked like they'd seen a ghost and had seemed just as intrigued.

Across the street from the Summers' mansion, Cindy waved, and Lindsay instantly breathed a little easier, some of the anger she hadn't acknowledged until then dissipating

She hadn't realized how in the past years, every case, every aspect of her life seemed to have been overshadowed by the one killer who had kept taunting her. He'd been building his fantasy around her while she'd kept doing the same, laying it all on the line for this one case. He'd kept watching her.

Now, it was everybody else doing the watching.

"Call me heartless, but I don't like this guy," she summarized matter-of-factly. "He seemed to be more disturbed by the techs making a mess than by the mess made by the killer." The last time she'd recalled seeing a woman stabbed this many times, it had been Melissa Paquin, Kiss-Me-Not's second victim. She only hoped that Betty Summers had found a quicker death.

"I heard the child was inside when it happened. That's awful," Cindy said.

"Let me guess. You've been chatting up poor Cho again and he never knew what hit him."

Cindy just shrugged in an 'I-can't-help-it-if-I'm irresistible' way; Jill and Claire exchanged a smile. Those were the old tried patterns, and that was much better than everybody walking on eggshells around Lindsay and Cindy, not knowing how to deal with them. They were just barely learning how to deal with each other again.

Lindsay knew that her colleagues were speculating about what exactly had gone down in the 'House of Nightmares,' but their talk would die down eventually. She just had to believe that there would come a day when she'd feel less under a microscope, her every step watched, people she'd worked with every day for years waiting for her to crack under the pressure. Maybe that wasn't entirely fair. Most of them certainly didn't think that way, did they?

"Aside from your questionable ways of persuasion--" Lindsay said teasingly, earning a raised eyebrow and a smug smile from Cindy, "We don't even know for sure yet. Summers found her in the living room when he came in. With a little luck, she didn't see the murder... I've yet to talk to her."

"I'm going to take a closer look at Mrs. Summers," Claire said. "I don't think you'll find the murder weapon around here. It wasn't your garden variety kitchen knife."

Jill shuddered. "How about I go with Lindsay and you can tell us all about it *later*?"

"I'll come by later, too," Cindy promised. "What would you like for dinner?"

The casual question prompted some indulgent smiles and a subsequent blush from Cindy.

"Whatever you'd like is fine and..." Lindsay raised an admonishing finger at Jill. "You're just jealous because the women in your life never cook."

"Oh yes." Jill chuckled. "I remember one in particular..."

"Oh no, you won't. She's not up to speaking to the police."

"The longer we wait, the more something she remembers could fade away."

Lindsay had longed for the day when she could finally get to work, and she didn't even mind when it turned out to be a Sunday. What she did mind was her work being hindered by a possible suspect, when having to talk to a little girl about the murder of her mother was bad enough already. She wanted to get it over with, for her and the girl, but it wasn't going to be easy to accomplish.

Summers bodily blocked the entrance to his daughter's room. He'd rubbed Lindsay the wrong way from the start, but his current behavior completed the picture. Summers wasn't just trying to protect his family, he was simply throwing his power around. It made Lindsay wonder how he'd reacted when he'd felt annoyed by his wife or daughter.

"Wait a minute. Dr. Grant, can I talk to you for a moment?" Jill addressed the lawyer. His frown clearly showed that he didn't care to, but he followed her anyway to the corner across the room. The conversation lasted only a couple of minutes, and then they returned. He was clearly unhappy with the result of his chat with the DDA..

"Richard, I think it's better if you--"

"No!"

"I'm sorry, you can't hinder the investigation. If she's seen anything--" Grant tried to explain but was cut off by a fuming Summers. "What the hell am I paying you for?"

Behind the men's backs, Lindsay gave Jill a quick wink, and said, "Thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Summers."

Brushing past the irate man, she opened the door to the little girl's room. Could it be that there was something in his daughter's memory he *wanted* to fade away?

"Hey there, honey."

Now for the hard part. When she'd introduced herself to Dina Summers, there was no reaction, just as the doctor who'd stayed in the room had predicted. Lindsay shivered at the empty look in the girl's eyes, something eerily familiar. She crouched down to be on eye level with Dina.

"Can you hear me?" She practically felt the physician rolling her eyes behind her. They'd told her that the girl wasn't physically harmed, but she hadn't said a word since being admitted. Recalling Isela Quiroga, Lindsay wondered if there was any way to open a door to this traumatized child's soul, too. Personally, she could sympathize. Sometimes things were just too horrible to put into words. It was even worse when you felt partly responsible for them. Talking about it wasn't the first impulse; completely shutting down, sometimes, was the only escape left.

She had to get through to Dina somehow. The girl had probably seen her mother's murderer.

Lindsay knew she had to think like a cop again even when it felt like hypocrisy to her to ask of this child what she wasn't able to do herself. "The doc said that you might hear me. I'm sure that there are a lot of things on your mind, and you don't really want to talk to me right now, but maybe you can help me."

Dina finally acknowledged Lindsay's presence, staring at her with wide, frightened eyes.

"There was a bad man in your house."

And can't I relate to that...

"Maybe you can describe him to me."

Lindsay wondered if the killer was familiar, someone the little girl knew and trusted, someone she would have never expected to turn into the monster he'd really been all the time... There was no answer.

"I know you're afraid, but we're going to find him. He won't hurt anyone else." And, hopefully, her promise wasn't premature, because Lindsay remembered having made a similar promise. She'd kept it, too, but it had taken a lot longer than she'd hoped.

Her eyes fell on the pillow the girl was clutching to her, and she realized what Dina was hiding underneath it. Lindsay groaned inwardly. It should have been placed in evidence long ago.

"You're a brave girl," she continued. "And you took care of your friend, too. Can I see her?"

"It's just a bloody doll," Dina said all of a sudden with enough venom to startle Lindsay. "I hate it. Hate it!" she screamed, flinging it across the room. The porcelain face shattered against the wall, the sound seeming obscenely loud in the confines of the small room.

"Is it okay if I take it?"

Dina didn't answer, having already reverted back to her stupor, rocking back and forth. Lindsay nodded to an officer to bag the literally bloody doll and pieces of porcelain.

"Can you tell me who got you this one? Your mom – or dad?"

Dina started mumbling something unintelligible. Perfect timing for the doctor to declare the interview over. Straightening, Lindsay wondered if the person who'd brought the doll into the Summers' house would lead them to the murderer.

Leaving the hospital with a sigh of relief, Lindsay pushed aside all thoughts of the last time she'd been there, not that long ago, as a patient. Those memories were not supposed to be mingling with the present case. She'd look at them another day.

Cindy had always liked puzzles, the more complicated the better. Maybe that was a part of why she'd longed to leave the Metro desk in favor of something more challenging and why she was attracted to people who were complex and, well, sometimes, complicated. She allowed these thoughts free rein as, for the moment, she felt the need to escape her more obvious ones.

She felt certain that she'd found parts that could be helpful to complete the puzzle, but she was unsure about how much to tell Lindsay. She knew she'd have to eventually tell her lover all of it, because she'd learned the hard way that nothing good could come out of keeping secrets. But still... Richard Summers was the easier one. At one time the Register had run a story on successful businesswomen. She'd actually met Betty Summers once as well as Summers' best friend, Lily Mason, who, as Cindy had just learned, couldn't wait to share her suspicions.

When the story had first run, Summers had nearly sued the paper because of the portrayal of his wife as an independent woman with her own mind. It had been... creepy.

If that particular information didn't open recent wounds, Cindy other investigations surely would. She knew Lindsay didn't care to talk about Pete; she'd given her official statement to Tom, and as far as she was concerned, it was all over and done with until the trial.

The trial that would eventually bring up everything, but Cindy couldn't bring herself to wait that long. She had spent the other half of the day making phone calls and checking facts, and there *was* a connection between all of the victims, which was a relief.

This time, Pete wouldn't be able to pull his ass out of the sling, figuratively speaking, of course.

Literally, she wouldn't have minded that either.

Now, she only had to find the right moment to address all of this with Lindsay.

Act II

"So how is the househunting going?" Claire asked, not missing a beat in her work to sew up Betty Summers' body, which was currently on her table.

Jill turned away from the sight, grimacing. "Yeah. Tell me *something* good this morning."

"There wasn't really a lot of time. The department has a wicked way of cutting my vacations short," Lindsay said, disregarding the fact that her last absence had been anything but a vacation.

Claire straightened, somewhat surprised by the fact that Cindy had remained silent so far, but filed it away for later. She had news to share. "You're definitely looking for a very long knife with a serrated blade. Judging from the angle, our man is left-handed and very strong; some of the stabs nearly pinned her to the bed. See, this is strange. There are a few more superficial wounds."

"Was he taunting her?" Lindsay asked with a frown. "Or hesitating?"

"At this point, your guess is as good as mine. I've got something else though. Lab results came back regarding that doll. They found a blonde hair."

"Dina kept it with her, yet she started screaming when I asked her about it. Any chance it belongs to our killer?"

Claire shook her head. "I don't think so. It's a woman's hair. Unless she was on something, I can't see her pushing the knife so deeply it nearly penetrated through to the other side."

"Thanks for the mental image," Jill chimed in. "By any chance, is Maggie around? Denise said to tell her to get her butt over there. Not sure I'll use exactly those words."

Lindsay smirked. "She couldn't call her? They're not fond of each other, are they? Hey, I'll come with you. I've got to go harass Summers some more; maybe he can tell us who the blonde hair belongs to."

"The babysitter?" Cindy wondered. "It was a school day. Dina shouldn't have been home."

"Summers said they didn't need one since he made her and Betty stay at home on the days when he came back from business trips." Lindsay rolled her eyes. "I'm wondering why the school allowed that. He's probably giving gracious donations." She shook her head in disgust and turned her attention back to Jill. "You need a chaperone with Hollywood?"

Jill just glared at her, not very convincingly, and turned on her heel, motioning over her shoulder. Lindsay chuckled as she followed her friend out the door.

Claire immediately turned to Cindy, who was trying her best to look innocent – and failing.

"Alright, what's up with you?"

"Um... nothing?" Cindy didn't avert her eyes, but she was fidgeting.

"Nothing." Claire nodded. "That's why you barely said a word. Is it something no one but you and Lindsay are supposed to know, or is it something you are keeping from Lindsay?"

Cindy just groaned and hid her face in her hands. Claire put an arm around the younger woman's shoulder and walked her into her office. "Come on. Coffee and chocolate make everything better."

Cindy's gaze was doubtful, but at least she followed without protest.

Maggie hadn't been at her desk, so Jill returned to her office to go over Richard Summers' financial transactions. She'd agreed with Lindsay that something about the way the man seemed to contradict the grieving husband routine. He acted as if he'd lost on the stock market rather than having lost his wife. His alibi might be solid, but people in his position had other ways to make things happen.

"Jill. Hi."

Something about the numbers on the sheet had kept her mesmerized and she didn't look up right away, missing Maggie Snow fidgeting in the doorway. "Maggie, come on in," she said absent-mindedly. "I was looking for you. Denise asked for you to come by."

"That's where I just came from. There was something I wanted to ask *you*."

Now Jill looked up at her expectantly. The other night, she'd called a cab for herself. Jill wasn't very sure about anything between them at the moment, but one thing she was sure of was that she didn't want Maggie to be part of an old dysfunctional pattern.

"I was wondering if you'd like to go out for dinner tonight," Maggie said, her casual tone clearly feigned.

There were various reasons for Jill to tell her 'no', but the smile spread across her face before she could stop it, and she realized she'd been hoping for... something. She'd also stayed in denial as long as she could, because there was no doubt that every step in this direction could only make her life more complicated.

Right now was not the time for Lindsay to think she was letting her down. At least Lindsay was too busy picking up the pieces to care about the accusations that had been made before, but Jill was sure that she hadn't forgotten. Neither had Claire or Cindy. Especially not Cindy.

"I'd like that," she said anyway, because it was the truth, because right now she wasn't half drunk, depressed and in shock of her friends having nearly been killed.

Maggie gave her a brilliant smile. "I'll pick you up at 8 – you choose the restaurant. So... that's great." She hesitated for a moment longer, and Jill simply waited.

"Your friends, they're okay? I mean Lindsay seems to be. Cindy, however, gives me the evil eye whenever I get within a ten mile radius of her, so hell if I know."

Jill tried hard not to smile at the pretty accurate description. "Look, I understand, but I'm not the one who can give you absolution. You just have to give them time."

"Thanks. I'll try. I'll see you at 8, then."

Turning abruptly, she nearly ran into Jill's next visitor, a not-so-amused Denise.

"Ms. Kwon!" she greeted her cheerily. "Have a good day."

"You bet," Denise murmured, before she pulled the door closed behind her. "Jill, there's something we need to talk about."

"This is stupid," Summers declared. "She's traumatized. It has nothing to do with the doll. Hell, it could be from the store where it was sold."

"More likely, it belongs to a witness of the murder," Lindsay corrected him. "So if you can think of anybody--"

"I can't. Now, if you'd excuse me?"

"You went back to work right away," she said thoughtfully.

"Yes, I did. That doesn't make me a murderer. I've got a responsibility to my employees. All 150 of them."

Lindsay thought that with Dina still being treated in the hospital, this said a lot about the man's priorities. She wondered about her own instant reaction towards him. She'd have to remind herself that, for now, they couldn't even attach a motive to him, other than he didn't seem to care much. So he'd shed a few tears, however Lindsay wasn't convinced that whatever he did was anything but putting on a show.

She felt sorry for the little girl who was caught up in a hell of her own with no one reaching out to her, not even her own father. Lindsay had been so much luckier, having the protective circle of her friends, her lover who'd spent the night in the narrow uncomfortable hospital bed right next to her even though she had to deal with a trauma of her own. She could barely imagine going through all of this without Cindy by her side – but Dina Summers had no one.

"I see you take that *responsibility* very seriously."

Before he could answer to the implied accusation, the door opened and a woman in her mid-thirties entered, carrying a tray with two coffee cups. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't know you had visitors."

"The police are here about Betty."

Something changed in the woman's expression, and she hastily made her exit. "Oh right. Like I said. Sorry."

"My assistant, Marian Whedon," Summers explained when she had closed the door. "As you could see, her social skills could use improvement." He'd said it to Jacobi, obviously intending it to be a joke between men.

"You assistant," Jacobi said, unimpressed. "Has she ever been to your house?"

"Well, sometimes, she has to--" Summers realized quickly what the background of the question was. "I know what you're thinking, but no. Why would Marian give my daughter a doll? That's ridiculous."

"I'd like to ask her about it anyway," Lindsay told him.

"You're going out with the woman who accused your best friend of murder? Not a smart move, Bernhardt."

Jill felt unpleasantly blindsided by her boss's snide remark, making her tone impatient. "Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"Sorry. None of my business." Denise didn't sound apologetic at all. "I thought you might want to know about the case this office is putting together against Peter Raynor, but if you're too busy--"

"That's low even for you—" Jill broke off, shocked that the words had actually come out of her mouth. Denise being pissed off with her wasn't so strange after all; she had tipped them off in time as to Maggie's plans to find evidence against Lindsay. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not fond of what she was trying to do."

"So, you're just forgetting about it? Never mind. Like I said, none of my business. But there's this murdering bastard who is, so I could use your help. You did a lot of work on this case."

"Anything you need." Much as she'd wanted to, she wouldn't be the one to put Raynor away in the end. The least she could do was contribute whatever she could do to make that happen. "It's going to happen here, right? They're not going to snatch it from us because of Ashe?"

Denise shook her head. "They're going to have to wait for their moment. All the women were murdered around here, not to mention kidnapping Lindsay and Cindy Thomas--"

The color must have drained from her face. Denise's concerned look confirmed the feeling. She reached out to squeeze Jill's hand briefly.

"Don't you worry," she said. "This time, we'll nail his ass to the wall."

Cindy had prepared dinner as a form of peace offering. Claire had been right; she needed to get this over with as soon as possible, so she barely gave Lindsay time to close the door behind her before she blurted, "There's something I need to tell you."

"I guess you're talking about your homework regarding Pete," Lindsay assumed.

Cindy watched anxiously for any signs that Lindsay was really mad at her, but she didn't find any. They sat down, side by side, on the makeshift picnic blanket in front of the couch. No use in buying a new coffee table to fit into an apartment they'd planned to leave soon.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"I guess I did the same research. Melissa studied architecture. Sarah played at Stockton." Lindsay shook her head. "All this time, I can't believe we never saw the connections."

"You couldn't," Cindy said softly. "You'd have to have known about the company and about Billy Harris. We always assumed he was working alone... You said you didn't want to-- I just had to have some answers before we go to court. To be sure."

Lindsay gazed at her intently and laid her hand on Cindy's arm. "I'm sorry, I keep making this all about me. You saw him kill a man."

"I did." Cindy swallowed hard. "But... and I know this isn't right, but the worst really was when I came home, and you were gone and he'd left--" They had all clung to the fact that Pete was obsessed with Lindsay, that it would give them time, but she'd never forgotten what she'd learned about the other crime scenes, even if she hadn't seen them.

She'd stolen away from the hospital for an hour to throw out the coffee table; Cindy knew enough about Forensics now to be sure that tiny particles of the blood would have remained forever in the wood. The organs might have been bought at a butcher's counter, but she'd never forget what they'd meant. She'd never be able to eat off that table again. Lindsay hadn't commented on the missing furniture, but she'd seen the report, Cindy's statement, so there was no explanation necessary.

What Lindsay didn't know was that Cindy had borrowed an axe from her neighbor and that the table was now in pieces. It had been a little scary, but helpful and very cathartic.

She leaned against Lindsay's side with a sigh. "Anyway. That wasn't the only thing I was going to tell you."

"Been keeping secrets from me?"

"Just this one. You know Summers might not be happy to know that I'm covering the story. That's why I kept my distance at the house."

"Okay. Tell me."

"I swear I was going to tell you, I just didn't want you to think I can't handle this, but Claire said you'd find out anyway and--"

"Stop it," Lindsay said, half amused, half annoyed. "I love you. You took me in when my home went bang, and you were the only thing that kept me sane in the crazy house. It can't be that bad, right?"

Cindy felt her face flush with more than mortification. "Um... I guess not. Okay, get this, when I was doing a piece on businesswomen in the city, I interviewed Betty Summers and her best friend, Lily Mason. Summers nearly went ballistic. He didn't like her being portrayed as a strong, independent individual. In the end, Betty asked us to rephrase. I couldn't believe it."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Summers is a jerk. He'd called the paper and threatened us with lawsuits. I didn't want you to get mad *for* me I guess."

Lindsay leaned back against the couch. "There's something about him that sets off alarm bells. It's hard to stay objective."

"Do you think he did it?" Cindy asked, not sure whether she should be relieved or worried about Lindsay's lack of reaction to the news.

"It wouldn't surprise me, but it's gonna be hell to prove. I think the assistant might know more than she's letting on. In any case, she's slept with him. She didn't say it in so many words, but it was pretty obvious."

"If he did it, we're gonna find a way. You should talk to Lily Mason – she was Betty's best friend."

Lindsay simply nodded. It was understood without words that after what they'd been through this shouldn't be so hard in comparison.

Still, there was something uncannily familiar about Richard Summers who seemed to think that his wife was someone who'd existed just for him.

Marian Whedon was the first to crack under pressure. When she was confronted with the proof of the amount of money Summers had given her for her loft apartment, she confirmed that he'd wanted to divorce Betty and marry her instead. She also admitted to giving the doll to Dina, and that the girl had hated it. Why she'd kept it after the murder of her mother, Whedon had no idea.

The next interview with Richard Summers had a clearly more official presence, with Denise being around for the questioning. He certainly got the significance behind the acting DA's presence.

"I'm not sure you have the right to question me again," were his first words before he'd even sat down.

"Don't worry about it," Jacobi assured him. "We just have a few more questions regarding your wife's death. That's perfectly legal."

"Why are you wasting time while the real killer is out there?"

Lindsay kept reminding herself that the evidence, even though it pointed directly at him, wasn't enough. While she was sure that he'd made many promises to his assistant, it could be that she had taken them more seriously than he had. Still, Marian was right-handed. Summers, alibi aside, wasn't. "We are looking at all relationships that were important in Betty's life. We can exclude a random murder, so it's entirely possible that the person who killed your wife didn't just hate her; they might have had a problem with you."

"That's nonsense, Inspector. The most important relationship is between a wife and her husband."

Lindsay could tell that Jacobi was having a hard time keeping a straight face, even without looking at him. "I guess that's why you had the affair with Ms. Whedon, to emphasize the importance of the relationship with your wife?"

"Betty was just so... independent, you know," Summers said, not even trying to deny the affair. He looked to Jacobi for help. "A man needs to know that a woman depends on him."

Lindsay covered her snort with a fake cough. It was sad that the woman had to live in such an environment; obviously Lily Mason had been quite right in encouraging Betty to leave. "Is that so, Mr. Summers? You cheated on your wife because part of her life didn't revolve around you? My sympathies."

"She was my *wife*," he emphasized, a hint of anger creeping into his voice. The way he acted, the entitlement, the simmering fury ready to erupt when his demands weren't met – it was eerily familiar.

"I understand that. So?"

"She should have thought of my needs, too."

"But she can't now, because she's dead. Did you punish Betty for her independence?" Subtly, Lindsay moved closer into his personal space.

"That's crazy!"

"Is it that you wanted her to be yours and yours only and when she refused to play along with your little fantasy, you killed her?"

"No!" he shouted. "I didn't touch her! Somebody get this crazy bitch off me, or I'm going to—"

"Sue me?" she interrupted him. "Insulting a police officer will not earn you a lot of credit in court."

Denise just smiled mildly. "There is that."

Summers rolled his eyes. "Jesus, no one ever wanted to marry you, right?"

The next seconds passed in a blur and, when Lindsay realized she had him by his collar, she

couldn't quite say how it had happened.

"That's enough!" Tom had made his way into the room, and to her utter mortification, so had Maggie Snow. "Inspector Boxer, my office."

"Lieutenant," she snapped, just barely able to resist the temptation to tell Summers that she'd had some offers on the table, that her currently enraged boss had once married her and a psychopathic serial killer had wanted to as well.

Moments later, she slammed the door as if that could make the looks of their colleagues in the bullpen less interested or shut them up. Wasn't that just the moment they'd been waiting for all along, to witness her snap?

Once inside Tom's office, a few moments ticked by without either of them saying anything. The tension was palpable.

"What do you think you're doing, Linz?"

"My job?" she offered defensively.

"You were out of line. Summers is just waiting for the opportunity to slap a lawsuit on the department, so he can draw the attention away from his own case. We have to be more careful!"

"Okay. I'm sorry." Lindsay was aware that some backpedaling was in order and quick. Unfortunately, she wasn't feeling very sorry, and her tone showed it. "What do you want from me?"

"He's not Raynor."

Tom's words had the effect of a slap to the face, and she resisted the impulse to take a full step backwards. "Thanks so much for the reminder, Lieutenant. Can I go back to work now?"

Her hand was already on the door handle, but Tom motioned her to sit. Growing all cold inside and beginning to realize that her actions could possibly cause more dire consequences than she'd thought, Lindsay did as she'd been told, but damn it, she'd wanted to maintain an objective stance regarding Pete, not give him that much power. "He's a jerk, and he paid someone to kill his wife of sixteen years."

"I believe you're right," Tom acknowledged. "But you're not going to prove it by threatening Summers. Lindsay, I think you're still... dealing..." He'd entered a minefield, and it seemed like he was as much aware of it as she was.

"Let's not go there, alright? I've dealt. I'm back 100%."

"I don't think you are. I also think it would help if you talked--"

"No thanks. I've got someone to talk to, remember?"

"-- to the department psychiatrist."

Lindsay froze, blindsided by the very idea and annoyed with herself because she had expected anything but this. Back in the hospital, she'd sent the counselor on staff away.

Of course, she'd been to Doc Walker's office on a few occasions. With the Hallelujah Man, she'd felt her control slipping and had needed someone to bounce off ideas, or that's how she had rationalized it. When needing to learn about crazy people, who better to consult than a shrink? This, however, was very different.

There'd been no control when she'd been drugged and shackled to that stupid hospital bed.

None, when she'd had to realize that Pete had brought Cindy to that place. She'd wished so badly that it could have been one of his planted delusions, too.

It had been bad enough to live it. She certainly didn't need to bring it up all over again. Life went on, and it was promising to be better than ever. Why jinx it?

"So," she said coolly, "is this some kind of ultimatum? Can't let me loose on the public until I've poured out my heart to the shrink?"

"I'm not talking about the public in general, but you're not going near Summers until you've talked to Walker," Tom said, his tone final, but he could barely look her in the eye. Knowing each other for a decade, more than half of it as spouses, they instinctively knew what the other one was thinking. One thing Lindsay really didn't want was his sympathy.

"Fine," she spat, standing up so quickly she nearly knocked her chair over. "Am I suspended? Off the case? This is getting old, you know."

"Talk to Dr. Walker."

"Sure. Tell him I'm on my way."

On her way out, Lindsay nearly slammed the door again, pointless as it would have been.

She leaned against the solid surface for a moment, looking down into the bullpen. Most of the detectives were out on cases and her gaze fell on Maggie Snow's empty desk, but it was the image of Pete in his prison cell, grinning, that made her clench her fingers into fists. She'd been playing into his hands, because that's what he wanted, to immobilize her, to make it all about him.

As much as she hated to admit it, Tom had been right about Summers if not about the shrink appointment, too. She'd be a lot more cautious with the man; she owed it to his wife who had never stood a chance to escape a madman's delusion, his sick idea of a relationship.

There was a kinship between this woman and herself.

Lindsay would do whatever was necessary to bring her justice.

"You don't have to stand in the doorway," Walker informed her. It was said with barely a hint of amusement; they both knew she didn't want to be here. The plan had been to just make an appointment, but as it turned out, unfortunately, he offered her some time right away.

"I'm comfortable, thanks. I don't plan on staying long."

"I know this is your least favorite part, especially when it's one of those nasty mandatory

appointments."

The familiar dry humor relaxed her some. He was trustworthy, after all, if at times pointing out uncomfortable truths she could have done without. "One word of advice, never work for your ex. It works out for the most part, but this – so I crossed a line. He could have reprimanded me. Instead, he thinks I need someone to talk to."

"Do you?"

"I have friends." Lindsay shrugged.

"Which is good, but we tend to spare those who are close to us, play things down."

"I'm not sure I could even if I tried. They have access to police reports." She finally came into the room and took a seat in one of the chairs with a sigh. "Okay, this is what happened. Kiss-Me-Not, after seven years of playing games and stalking me, decided he wanted to brainwash me into believing we'd spent most of our lives together. When that didn't work so well, he kidnapped my girlfriend in order to quicken the process of making me see reason. You wonder if that was traumatic? It was. I know my anger, I know my nightmares, and hers. Can we be done?"

The psychiatrist smiled wryly. "I'm thinking your analysis is spot-on, but it's okay to take more time than two minutes."

"I don't see why I should be here. I'm dealing with what happened, I'm back on the job. The bastard's in jail now. I've been waiting for that moment for many years, and it has finally come. That seems like a very happy ending to me."

"It's certainly a good thing," he agreed. "I know you're used to putting things behind you rather quickly. In your job, you have to, but this was more than just doing your job."

"Right. This guy just kept pissing me off for too long."

"It gets harder to stay objective when people we love are involved."

Lindsay didn't need long to come up with the precise answer to sum up the situation. "If he had touched her, I don't think I could have lived with that. You want to know how I *felt*, right? I felt like killing him with my bare hands. How's that for objective?" It was surprising to Lindsay to realize how close that feeling still hovered under the surface.

"It's human," Walker offered.

"Yeah, maybe. But it's over now, life goes on. I've got other open cases... I've got to go househunting; I guess you read in the paper why."

"Are you feeling safe?"

Lindsay narrowed her eyes at him. "Why are you asking me that? Kiss-Me-Not is in a prison cell, and he'll never get out again. The world has never been safer."

"Sometimes, the mind needs a bit of time to catch up with the present. Besides, I wasn't asking about the world. I was asking about you."

"My mind is all caught up, believe me." Lindsay sat with her back straight, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. Willing him to buy the perfect, blatant lie exposed by every sleepless night, every nightmare she tried her best to keep from Cindy, because God knew she had enough of her own.

"Okay, how about we discuss today's suspect then? From what you've told me, he seems like someone who feels very entitled, prone to abuse power, especially over women."

It was said matter-of-factly, but Lindsay sensed he was implying the same thing that Tom had, that she was confusing one misogynistic, murdering jerk with another. "I know where you're going with this, but it's not true. I got carried away. Never gonna happen again. I love my job, you know."

"He didn't seem familiar?"

"They all are, in one way or another. That's something I'll have to live with. I can't be idly sitting at home now."

Their conversation ended on a tie, but Lindsay was pretty sure that the psychiatrist wasn't impressed with her. She wasn't either, but for the time being, it had to be enough.

Lindsay had planned to go home straight after rubbing it in with Tom that the shrink didn't think of her as particularly crazy. "Would that be all, Lieutenant?" she said, her tone bordering on cocky. "I've got someone waiting for me with dinner." Actually, she had no idea about that, but she was feeling a little spiteful at the moment.

"I'm sorry, Linz, one more thing. You've got visitors."

"Now?"

She was aware of his curious look and guessed he was wondering about the details of the appointment. Lindsay wasn't about to make a prediction because, frankly, she just wanted to leave.

"It's Mr. and Mrs. Lewis," he said apologetically.

It took her a moment to make the connection, but when Lindsay saw the older couple waiting by her desk, the images came rushing back immediately. Just like the first time, she didn't really want to go down and talk to Elaine Lewis's parents, but also like the first time, she knew there wasn't much of an alternative.

"Okay," she sighed. "But after that, I'm out of here."

There weren't many people in the bullpen with most detectives out on cases and the night shift having not yet started, but after the greeting, Lindsay asked the couple to come into the break room with her. She didn't want to remind anyone of the Kiss-Me-Not case any more than she wanted to be reminded of it, futile as that might have been.

The last time she'd seen Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, they seemed broken beyond any measure of healing by their grief, unable to exist in a reality where their daughter had been brutally murdered; however, they didn't appear to be broken now.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Inspector," Mr. Lewis began.

"It's no problem." Lindsay braced herself. Why the hell did everybody think that talking would

make everything go away, her feelings of failure over the years, and lately, shame? She had contained them and put them away, and looking at them all over again wouldn't help, just the opposite. It was almost ironic, everyone had always been urging her to move on, and now that she needed to, no one seemed to get it.

Mrs. Lewis smiled hesitantly. "We won't keep you for long. We just wanted to thank you."

Her disbelief must have shown on her face, because Mr. Lewis continued, "We saw it on TV that you caught the man who killed our Elaine." His eyes misted over. "I know that won't bring her back. Nothing ever will. But see, for a while, we felt like we had nothing to live for anymore. Knowing that he'll be brought to trial, that he's eventually going to pay – that is giving us a whole new reason."

As uneasy as she felt about the conversation, it seemed to confirm her suspicion about Summers. She'd seen all the faces of grief, known when it was honest. With Elaine's parents, the emotion was painfully obvious, cutting. Richard Summers had shed tears the first time they'd talked to him, and yet, she didn't buy his act. "He is never going to touch another woman," Lindsay promised.

"Thanks to you."

"A lot of people contributed to capturing him." *And letting yourself get caught really wasn't such a great contribution at all. Taking years to put a face to his name and doing it wrong the first time wasn't.* Self-reproach, she'd found, was an odd comfort.

"Of course. I believe we can't even begin to imagine what you've been through. Just be sure we won't ever forget what you did for Elaine."

Lindsay flinched when Mrs. Lewis took her hand. "One thing we've learned," she said, "is that life goes on. Somehow. It will just never be the same." She squeezed gently before she let go. "We'll keep you in our prayers, Inspector."

After she'd thanked them and seen them out, Lindsay tiredly slumped into the chair, the coffee she'd gotten from the vending machine remained untouched. If everybody was willing to give her absolution, why couldn't she?

Her cell phone rang, and looking at the caller ID, she smiled.

"I'm trying to figure out if it's a good day for a cooked meal or would I have to eat it all by myself?" Cindy asked.

"It's a good day. I'm coming home."

Lindsay hadn't known how exhausted she was until she unlocked the front door, and suddenly, the urge to just crash on the couch after a quick shower was nearly overwhelming. Moving on proved to be not as easy as she'd thought it would be after all, it didn't help coming home each night to Cindy's apartment where the finale of her longest nightmare had begun. The temporary solution wouldn't have been necessary in the first place if most of her belongings hadn't gone up in flames.

She walked inside, smiling at the sound of soft music playing somewhere in the apartment, the smells of a home-cooked meal making her stomach growl, a reminder that her last meal had been

some time ago. She knew she shouldn't lean so hard on Cindy to create some air of normalcy, but she couldn't deny how good it felt.

"You're just in time."

Cindy came out of the bathroom barefoot, wearing just a tank top and sweatpants. She smiled, walking into Lindsay's embrace and holding on tight for a moment.

"For what?"

"Come on. It's been a long day, so I thought you could use some time to unwind before dinner."

In the bathroom, the light was dimmed, a few candles lit, a pleasant scent rising from the hot water that filled the tub. "Wow," Lindsay managed. "You're so right." She placed a kiss on the top of Cindy's head. "Thank you." Wrapping her arms around her lover again, Lindsay fought the image that had sprung to her mind just for a split-second, of another bathtub, cold water, and blood, making her shiver. She didn't want to spoil Cindy's surprise.

"You're welcome. Now get in there while I finish dinner." She hesitated for a moment, and then asked, "How did it go with the shrink? Was it bad?"

She'd called Cindy before she'd gone to see Walker. "Bearable. Guy knows when to back off."

"Good." Cindy remained standing in the doorway as Lindsay pulled her shirt over her head.

"You see something you like?"

"Very much," Cindy said quietly.

Lindsay gave a quick wink and sank into the hot water, her muscles instantly relaxing. It felt like heaven. She took a selfish moment to close her eyes and revel into the warmth that melted the tension and aches out of her body. When she opened them again, Cindy was still there, just like she'd known. Hoped.

"Is there a chance you could leave dinner alone for a while?"

Smiling, Cindy finally walked closer, pulling off her shirt as well. "Absolutely."

The ever-present weight of failure finally lifted, and with Cindy warm and relaxed in her arms, resting against her chest, Lindsay allowed herself a moment of peace.

Maybe Doc Walker was right, and the Lewises, too. Maybe she had done all she could. In the safety of this intimate moment, she clicked through a mental slideshow of the past few years, the horrors, the determination, the disappointments. Pete had tried hard to take away everything that had defined her, but he hadn't known that she had something that was stronger than any chains or drugs he could come up with.

Something he'd never be able to understand.

"Linz?"

"I'm okay." She hadn't realized that even with the water temperature, she was shaking.

"You're kidding me, right?" Cindy craned her neck to face her. "What's going on?" she asked softly.

"Nothing. It's okay, really." It would have been more believable if her voice hadn't broken on the words or if she hadn't felt the pressure of tears she'd always forced herself to hold back. She'd been pushing her feeling away for seven years. "Just... don't ever leave me."

"I won't," Cindy promised, tightening her embrace. "And I'll keep reminding you until you finally get it through your thick skull and believe me."

All these years, she hadn't been able to really face her own fears because she had to be strong for those women whose voices had been taken away by a crazy psychopath. She couldn't question herself because she had to believe in the victims of a man who'd thought it his duty to punish whomever he considered to be sinners.

Lindsay remembered how Jill had once told her that she was drowning. It had never been this true, but how lucky she was to be with the one person who was strong enough to deal with this side of her.

Cindy sat on the edge of the bed, watching her lover sleep, brushing the back of her fingers lightly across Lindsay's cheek. She smiled, feeling empty and spent but, at the same time, hopeful. And while she was feeling Lindsay's pain with an intensity that left her exhausted, a little sad even because she could not entirely take it away, it had meant so much that Lindsay had been willing to share it with her.

She wasn't kidding herself either. A new place would help. It would take more than that to make them both feel safe again, but they would get there eventually.

She believed it with all her heart.

Cindy rolled her eyes a little when her cell phone rang and leaned down to kiss Lindsay's temple before she went to answer it. The caller ID was Lily Mason's. Betty's friend seemed to have decided to talk to her once more. The timing was less than perfect, but she was sure that Mason had to share something important about her friend, so she wrote a note, bent to kiss Lindsay once more and the she was out the door, promising both of them that they'd continue this conversation – soon.

Act III

Given Lily Mason's description of the location of the Kelman's house, Cindy expected to arrive there over an hour before she actually did. This delay only added to her nervousness.

"Okay, Lindsay won't like this at all. Get over it and move on," Cindy told herself. *"This might be important and I'll call as soon as I find out anything."* Possibly, Lindsay wouldn't see it that way, and that might just be the reason why Cindy hadn't woken her before leaving.

Joe Kelman, the man who, according to Lily Mason, had been Betty's lover, was around Cindy's age. He opened the door, wearing paint-flecked overalls, and had obviously been working in his

atelier. He was good-looking, tall and dark-haired. It was yet to be determined if he was less of a jealous jerk than Betty's husband. When Cindy introduced herself, Kelman's expression turned into a disdainful sneer. "Did Summers send you to distract you from his own motive?"

"I don't think Summers cares a whole lot about where I go. I talked to Lily. She mentioned you. Can I come in?"

His features softened as he stepped back to let her into the dimly lit house. "I don't know how I can possibly help you. Betty... I just can't talk about her." His eyes were glistening with moisture, and for a startling, awful moment Cindy realized how close she had come to feeling what he was feeling now. That was if he was really being honest about his feelings toward Betty, but it was exactly what Cindy's instincts told her.

"Come on in, Ms. Thomas. I just made some tea."

She followed him along the hallway into the atelier. "Just have a seat; I'll go get it," he said, disappearing behind another door that seemed to be a kitchen.

"I can help."

"No thanks," he called from the other room. "So, what do you want to know? I'm sure Lily already told you about the nature of my relationship with Betty."

"She did," Cindy admitted, turning around to take a look at the huge canvasses that lined the room. Most of them were covered, some showed portraits mostly in dark blues, greens and a lot of black. Kelman didn't seem like the happy type. "I'm not judging you. I was just wondering if Betty ever talked about anyone who was threatening her. I think she might have trusted you more than her husband."

"Betty was... exceptional. I don't think she was in danger from anyone but Summers. I tried to make her leave him."

How hard did you try? Cindy wondered. She lifted the edge of one of the covers to reveal more dark colors and depressing imagery. And then she started at the image of a naked Betty Summers, staring back at her in utter fear.

"You were not supposed to see that!"

She spun around to face Kelman, who was carrying a tray with a teapot and two cups. He looked more desperate than guilty, but the two could be the same.

"I'm sorry, I--" Cindy was disturbed by what she had seen, but still thinking very clearly, she slowly walked backwards. This might be a good time to leave. "I'm sorry about it. I shouldn't have come."

With a sigh, he set down the tray on a small table. "Never mind. Have a seat." He handed her one of the small tea cups with a wry laugh. "Don't you worry. I'm not going to poison you. Actually, I could use someone who believes me."

"You loved Betty."

"More than my life. Look, this is how I saw her. She was tough on the outside, but really living in fear, and she had buried it so deeply that she didn't even feel it anymore."

Pete had thought too that the way he saw Lindsay was the only truth. His creation. "Of Richard Summers?"

He nodded.

"He had an alibi."

"He also had means that people like you and me wouldn't even think of. I told her she had to get away from him. Eventually she believed me, but it was too late."

His grief seemed very real, yet Cindy took a sip of tea with some trepidation. She hated being scared, but couldn't help thinking of the poisoned piece of pastry Pete had left in her apartment. Snow White's poisoned apple. She shivered, angry at herself for letting her thoughts go there once more.

"He's got people doing dirty work for him," Kelman said.

"You're thinking of anyone in particular?"

He shrugged. "Hell if I know." He was silent for a moment, and then the words seemed to just tumble out. "Why couldn't she just see that I loved her?"

He raked a shaky hand through his hair, making his sleeve slide up; that was when Cindy saw the deep cut on his arm.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I really have to go now."

Jill had dropped by for some talk, but somehow Lindsay had known from the moment she'd found Cindy's note that the night wouldn't end with that. Cindy's call confirmed her suspicion. "Please tell me I'm not hearing what I'm hearing. Cindy? How far from him are you at the moment?"

"Halfway back home. I swear, there was no real danger at any time. As far as he's concerned, I'm just sympathetic."

Lindsay was tempted to roll her eyes but worry won. "You come back here, right away," she said, ignoring Jill's decidedly amused expression. "Seems like we should take a closer look at Mr. Kelman, and after I do, we're going to talk about this some more."

She hung up and pointed her index finger at Jill. "And you, don't smirk like that. No real danger! Sometimes I swear I don't know what she's thinking."

"She'll be careful. If not for her own sake, then for yours," Jill said softly. "You two are very much alike that way."

Somehow, the implications of her words seemed a little too much for work environment, so Lindsay brought the focus back quickly. "Right. In the meantime I'd like to take a look at the grieving ex-lover who, coincidentally, seems to have obtained some mysterious knife wound."

Jill looked up at her in surprise. "You're not changing your mind on Summers?"

"I won't," Lindsay said grimly. "But that means needing to eliminate every other possible suspect. After that, I plan to read the riot act to a certain crime reporter, so I trust you to keep her here."

"Not fair, Linz, putting that on me."

"How about you do that for me, and I'll try to convince her that you dating Inspector Hollywood isn't actually the end of the world?"

"You drive a hard bargain," Jill sighed. "I'll do my best."

"I know you will." Lindsay smiled. "Now, let's take a look at Romeo."

"It took Betty a long time to die. That was because she was defending herself – or maybe it was because the attacker was hesitating to deliver that killing blow?"

"What does that have to do with me?" Kelman asked angrily. "I didn't kill her. I wanted to build a life with her!"

Lindsay circled him leisurely, while Jacobi stood leaning against the wall. "Is that so, Mr. Kelman? Mr. Summers claims that his wife would have never left him."

"Of course he's saying that! Betty and I had made plans, but she didn't dare talk about them yet. He would have freaked and taken Dina away."

"So you were losing patience?"

"No!" He angrily jumped up, but thought better of it a moment later, and sank back into his chair. "You want a suspect, go look at Summers. He behaved like her goddamn prison warden. Why am I here anyway? Someone setting me up, that reporter bitch, right?"

Pride for Cindy warred with the impulse to simply slap the guy, but Lindsay had something better for him. "I'd like to know about those knife wounds on your arms, Mr. Kelman."

He threw up his hands in frustration. "Just great. Not like you're going to believe me, but I got mugged."

Exchanging a doubtful gaze with Jacobi, Lindsay directed her attention back to the suspect. "You reported it?"

"No, I didn't. It was dark, I couldn't have given a description anyway, but I can tell you, I thought the guy was going to kill me."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"The next day I heard... about Betty. Then I didn't care anymore." Just like that, he started crying. It seemed a spontaneous, heartfelt reaction, yet Lindsay wanted to be sure. She hardly ever made up her mind in an investigation this early, but she was still convinced that Summers had had a hand in the death of his wife.

"You painted her, naked and with a terror-filled expression. You really want to make us believe it was her husband she was afraid of?"

Kelman looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes. "I wanted to show her. I wanted her to see what he was turning her into, that she could only be free if she let him go. Hell, if you must know, there were times I wanted to kill him."

"You told Ms. Thomas that you suspected him of orchestrating the murder. How do you think he managed that?"

"I don't know!" he said, deep and believable despair in his voice and eyes.

Lindsay sat down across from him. "Did Betty ever mention being afraid – of anyone other than Richard?" she asked softly. "Try to remember, please."

Kelman shook his head, but all of a sudden, he froze.

Come on, she thought. Give me a clue already.

"There was a company doing repairs around the house. Betty thought that one of the men was watching her; she was a bit creeped out by that, but Richard said it was silly. He didn't believe her."

"Did you know the name of the guy?" Lindsay asked, casting a quick glance to the two-way mirror as she knew Jill to be on the other side. The expensive, repetitive repairs around the Summers' house – was that where Summers had found his accomplice?

"No, but I could possibly describe him. He once followed her nearly to my house, pretending to be curious about the house, plans or something."

"That's good, Mr. Kelman. Very good."

"Don't say it!" were Cindy's first words once Lindsay came out of the interrogation room. "Besides, I knew he wasn't the murderer."

Lindsay's glare was more for the record than for real. "Having you go off to investigate *potential* murderers would be bad enough."

Jill took a moment to enjoy the antics between the lovers, and then she said, "Be gentle with her. While you were finishing up in there, we took a look at that company and found the address and name of the owner, who'll be ecstatic to hand over an employee list to you."

Lindsay shook her head at her friends but shared a triumphant smile. "I give up," she announced. "Let's see that address. I want Claire to take a look at those wounds, too. It's not that much of a reach to think that whoever killed Betty Summers had a beef with Kelman, too."

Daniel Grady, the head of the repair company, was very helpful with information, although he claimed that they conducted a thorough background check of their employees. He gave them the names of everyone that had worked on the Summers' estate.

"Now that you mention it," he said thoughtfully as he leafed through the files. "Mr. Kingston called in sick right after the contract was fulfilled, but, of course, I'm sure that's just a coincidence," he added quickly. "You don't think...?"

Lindsay shared a meaningful look with Jacobi and said, "We'll be sure to check that out. Thanks for your time, Mr. Grady."

"Mr. Kingston? San Francisco Police Department, can we talk to you?" There was no answer, but when Lindsay knocked on the door lightly, it swung open. "Mr. Kingston?"

She walked inside the small living room cautiously, her hand on her weapon, Jacobi behind her. Maybe she was paranoid about Richard Summers, but it didn't seem so far off to think he'd get rid of unwelcome witnesses. The financial records were rather vague and not proof enough; if Summers had paid Kingston for the murder of his wife, then the man was the only one who could confirm that suspicion.

The house appeared to be empty, but there were no signs of a hurried departure. Kingston obviously still felt safe in his home. Nothing seemed disturbed either. In the kitchen, she found a block with several knives, each slot filled with the proper sized knife. Lindsay chuckled to herself; that would have been too easy. While Jacobi finished their search on the upper floor, she found a door that led to the backyard and in the back corner, she found a building that looked like a garden shed from the outside. It wasn't locked.

At the sight of the shed's interior, Lindsay's jaw nearly dropped. The kitchen knife forgotten, she remembered Claire's early theory. She'd hit paydirt.

Along the wall of the shed, several swords were lined up, like a prized collection. "I bet you don't cut your grass with those," she said aloud, feeling the presence of another person a split-second before he grabbed her.

Kingston – or perhaps someone who'd found him first. Instinctively, her hands went up to try and pry the attacker away from her neck, not surprisingly to no avail. She kicked his shins and feet as hard as she could and her aim was true, satisfied when she heard a yelp of pain. The vice around her neck loosened, but only for a moment. Damn, but the guy was strong.

Somewhere distantly in her mind, it struck her as curious that the killing of Betty Summers had taken him such a long time, but then again, maybe the fact that she'd known her child was in the house had given her the strength to ward him off as long as she had.

Add to that the fact that this was no moment to deal with theories.

He pushed her hard enough to make her stumble over some garden tools, and then she heard his footsteps pounding across the concrete floor. Jacobi came in from the other side. "Go," she urged. "I'm okay!" Lindsay dragged herself up and followed after him.

It had started raining, so in addition to getting beaten up, she was going to get soaked, but hell if she was letting him get away. Lindsay had more than a few questions for him, and if Kingston really was a cold-blooded killer, why would he run?

The suspect ran across the backyard of a neighboring house and across the street, while Lindsay followed, nearly slipping on the slick grass. Jacobi had started to gain on him when headlights appeared out of nowhere, and then there was only a sickening crunch of metal and bone.

The driver jumped out of his car. He was in his mid-forties, and rambled, "I swear I didn't see him!"

"I know." It came out as a near gasp, as she was still trying to catch her breath.

"Is he...?" The man shuddered, and Lindsay couldn't blame him. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"I'm afraid so," she said.

Jill got out of her car and practically jogged over to where Lindsay and Jacobi stood talking to the driver who'd hit Kingston.

The man was clearly in shock, which Jill could sympathize with after taking one look at the body. The driver never had a chance to stop; he'd hit Kingston full on. When the paramedics took him into the ambulance, Lindsay turned to her, frustration and a hint of defeat in her expression.

"There goes our only chance at proving that Summers paid him," she said tiredly.

Taking in her friends' appearance, the soaked clothes and the smudges around her throat, Jill winced. "You don't know that. There might be proof at his house."

"Other than a collection of swords?" Lindsay grimaced, her hand going to her throat. "He couldn't make this nice and easy, could he?"

Jill gave her a sympathetic smile, reaching up to brush her fingers over the bruised skin. "Doesn't look that way."

"Hey!" Cindy appeared, as usual pretty much out of nowhere and ready to take over the TLC. "I came as soon as I heard... is it really Kingston?"

"Needs a little imagination but yes, it's him," Claire confirmed dryly.

"If only I'd caught him sooner--" Lindsay coughed. "Damn it." Cindy gave her a worried sideways glance, but didn't say anything. "So I guess we'll go over the house, storage shed and surroundings with a fine-tooth comb and see if anything turns up."

It was going to be another long night.

Kingston had assembled quite an impressive collection of swords, so it would take awhile to test them all for DNA. Also, he seemed to have been a messy bookkeeper, because bills, receipts and other documents lay in heaps on top of his desk and inside various drawers.

"Why don't we go home?" Claire suggested when, hours later, none of them seemed to be able to think straight. "I'll light a fire under the lab techs first thing in the morning, and we'll at least be the wiser if he used any of those weapons. Some of them looked like they could match the wounds..."

and possibly the cuts on Kelman too."

"Yeah." Lindsay sighed. "Why couldn't he just keep the bill in a folder labeled 'murdering services rendered'?"

"Because that would be too easy?" Jill returned, picking up a piece of paper from the corner of Kelman's desk. "Confirming a flight from Thailand? That's quite a vacation on a handyman's salary."

They looked at each other, the idea to quit for the day suddenly forgotten.

"Thailand," Cindy said. "That was where Summers flew in from on the day Betty was killed. His alibi."

"I'm going to check with the company. I want to know if Kingston ever got on that plane. We need to find something more to tie him to Summers!"

"Something like this?" Jill asked, holding up the copy of an ID. The man in the picture was clearly Kingston, but all the other pertinent information belonged to Richard Summers. It seemed like a very good place to start.

Act IV

Unhurriedly, Lindsay closed the door behind her and pulled up a chair across from Richard Summers. Even trapped, with the evidence against him mounting, he leaned back in his chair and looked at her with an arrogant smile. She'd seen enough of his type to easily see through his false bravado.

Men like him never thought they could be defeated. That was their weak point.

"How can I help you, Inspector?" he asked with just a hint of condescension.

"You can help yourself," she told him. "We can prove that you commissioned the murder of your wife. We found evidence of your payment, and it's only a matter of time until it's determined which one of Kingston's swords was the murder weapon. If you won't cooperate with us, Marian Whedon surely will, because as much as she loves you, the idea of a life in prison certainly won't appeal to her. Tell me, Mr. Summers, if you wanted to leave Betty, why not just divorce her?"

"Marian." He laughed. "She's delusional, but I'm sure you've realized that, too. I wasn't about to leave my wife. I'm not crazy."

"I agree. A crazy person couldn't have possibly come up with such a devilish plan."

Psychopaths were highly intelligent individuals. They didn't mind meticulous planning, patiently waiting for the right moment to execute their fantasy. Even if it took years. Lindsay held his gaze in silence until he finally spoke like she'd known he would. Eventually, they were just too eager to tell their story. All of them.

"Betty had an affair. I couldn't let that go unpunished."

"I understand. It wasn't the same as with you and Ms. Whedon, was it?"

"Indeed it wasn't." As expected, Summers had been oblivious to the irony in her voice. "Marian, as I said... she didn't matter. But that... that artist?" he spat.

"You ordered a hit on him, too, but it was bad luck that your trusty killer didn't go through with it, and then later was conveniently hit by a car."

"Bloody amateur, I could have done it better myself." Summers seemed more angry at that fact than at having been found out. "He wanted to marry her, a man almost twenty years younger. It was ridiculous."

Lindsay didn't remind him that the age gap was just about the same as between himself and his assistant. This time, she held back her disgust at the man, knowing that the fate that awaited him eventually would be the biggest blow to his ego. Prison: the end of all meddling and power.

"Maybe he cared about her more than you did about Marian. Maybe they were more in love than you could ever imagine."

Emotions, and especially this one, were something people like Summers just couldn't understand. It was what made them jealous, furious at those who could.

He stared at Lindsay for a long moment before explaining why, in his mind, his wife had deserved to die. "Betty belonged to me. I couldn't allow her to be with someone else – ever."

The shiver winding its way down Lindsay's spine was like the touch of a ghost, the sliver of a memory. She was the lucky one though. She had gotten away. "So you made sure she never would."

"I wouldn't expect you to understand, Inspector."

"Oh, I understand perfectly, Mr. Summers. I do."

"Really?" He gave her a long, intent look. "Do you know what it's like – when something that belongs to you, is taken from you?" His voice took on a menacing tone.

"You've got a lot of nerve, Mr. Summers. You're trying to threaten me when you're a step away from the death penalty?"

He smiled. "You should know, Inspector, that I rarely make idle threats."

"What are you talking about?" As sure as Lindsay was that there was no way he could have done anything from this room, she still felt uneasy and her heartbeat quickened. He wasn't that powerful; he was just trying to play her.

"As you said, I haven't got much to lose. Maybe you have."

It didn't matter what his agenda was; Lindsay just had to make sure that his words had carried only empty threats. It took a lot of willpower, but when she stood, she did it slowly so as to not let on how worried she really was. He'd paid Kingston to kill Betty, but Kingston was dead. There were no more strings for Summers to pull.

"Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Summers."

An ominous smile spread across his face. "Marian might be crazy, but in a very good way," he said, knowing there'd be people watching the interrogation from behind the two-way mirror. "There isn't anything she wouldn't do for me."

As she closed the door on Summers' smug expression, the first number Lindsay hit on her speed dial was Cindy's. It only rang twice.

"Hi there," Cindy said, clearly pleased to hear her lover's voice. "Is everything going well?"

Lindsay breathed a sigh of relief. "I want you to come here. Now."

"What's going on, Linz? You're scaring me. Is... is anyone hurt? Are you?"

She hated to frighten Cindy, but with Summers' veiled threat, it was better not to take a chance. "No, everyone is fine. I just need you to be here, okay?" She could picture Cindy's frown of confusion before she answered, "Okay. I'll be right there."

With Jill now standing right in front of her, there was only one other person not yet accounted for. Claire was probably in the morgue. Performing an autopsy on one of the drug-related deaths Maggie Snow was currently working on. Lindsay held Jill's gaze as she hit another number on speed dial.

When her call went to voicemail, she hurried toward the elevator with Jill right on her heels. "Don't you think he's bluffing?"

"I can't take the chance," Lindsay returned, her strides lengthening. Claire had better be elbow deep in a chest cavity.

They arrived minutes later and found the door to Claire's office locked. Some of her staff were working on other autopsy, and looked up in surprise at the intrusion. "Dr. Washburn isn't here," one of them explained. "She went to clear some paperwork for another intern."

"What was the intern's name?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know," the woman said apologetically. "Pretty blonde though."

Lindsay opened her cell phone and, as calmly as she was able, she requested an APB for Marian Whedon's car. Inwardly, her fear was rising, as she remembered Summers witnessed her and Claire hugging in her office a couple of days ago.

Claire kept her hands firmly on the steering wheel, and tried to convey as much of a non-threatening posture as she could to the woman who trained a gun on her with a shaky hand. "Where to?" she asked, a lot calmer than she felt. Marian Whedon didn't seem too clear on her destination – or anything else, for that matter.

"Just drive!" she ordered, seemingly on the verge of hysteria.

So Claire did, but after a few moments of tense silence, she again tried to strike up a conversation, despite feeling cold and scared. Whedon most likely wasn't a cold-blooded killer, but for a person already on the edge, it wouldn't take much to pull the trigger. "This is not helping Richard," Claire

said softly as if she were trying to calm a frightened animal. "The police already know that he paid Kingston to kill his wife."

"And they will let him go," Marian insisted stubbornly. "They better, too, if they know what's good for them."

Claire thought it best not to inform the delusional woman that there was no chance in hell that could happen. "How about you?" she asked. "Do you really want to give it all up for him? You could still get away with a lighter sentence."

"Richard loves me. We'll finally be together."

"Do you really think he cares about you? The way he cared about Betty? He ordered her murder. His own wife. Let's say he does marry you, how long do you think it will take until you do something to make him mad?"

She almost expected Summers' assistant to pull the trigger right then and there, but Whedon didn't. Instead, she shook her head in a desperate attempt to make Claire understand. "You don't get it. She was crazy. His life was hell with her."

"Is that what he told you?"

In her rearview mirror, Claire could see the woman's pale face, her expression showing the uncertainty she was trying to hide.

"It was supposed to be quick!" Marian cried. "One fatal shot and we'd be free. Forever."

"But it didn't turn out that way," Claire said quietly. "Kingston brought a weapon from his own special collection."

The younger woman gripped the gun more tightly as tears streamed down her face. "There was so much blood. I was scared!"

"I understand. What did Richard do?" Claire kept her tone light, but she couldn't feel sorry for Whedon. Summers' assistant had been in the house right after the murder; she'd been in on it the whole time, ready to give Summers an alibi. She hadn't cared about the fact that a woman was going to die until she was confronted with the gruesome, bloody reality of it.

"He said that the police would find out that it was Mr. Kingston who killed her, and since he was kind of stalking her anyway, it would all be over then, but... But--"

"It didn't turn out that way."

In the distance, Claire could hear sirens, the sensation somewhat distancing her from the fact that there was a woman with a gun right next to her, ready to use it, her thoughts instead wandering to the moment when they'd arrived at Pete Raynor's dream theater, the scene eerily illuminated by the flashing lights of police cars. She forced herself to keep her eyes on the road.

"If you put down the gun, no one ever has to know that we had anything but a friendly conversation. Think about it. Richard Summers will never get out of prison. You still have a chance."

Claire felt a drop of cold sweat snake down her spine. It just had to work. They had overcome so

many close calls lately – this couldn't be where the lucky streak ended, right?

"I have two sons." Why she'd felt to need to say it, Claire didn't know. Marian Whedon hadn't had a lot of scruples when it came to making a six-year-old girl an orphan. "Please. You can end it right here."

"I don't want to die!" Marian sobbed.

Claire held the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip, and fought the impulse to slap the woman. As someone who had *knowingly* hooked up with a killer, Marian was one to talk. Never mind the fact that the woman's dream marriage with Richard Summers would have borne a definite health hazard.

"You won't. You just cooperate with the police, tell them exactly what you know and saw that day. You'll be fine." As the sound of the sirens grew louder, Claire eased her foot from the accelerator.

"He was already gone. Kingston, I mean. It was just Richard, and Dina wouldn't stop screaming... he said she wasn't supposed to be allowed to talk to the police..."

From the corner of her eye, Claire saw the woman lower the gun to her lap. Marion Whedon seemed distracted as she recalled the moments after the brutal murder.

Claire held her breath and brought the vehicle to a complete stop as a patrol car edged beside them, another closing in from behind.

"It was never meant to be that way!" Marian pleaded for understanding with wide tear-filled eyes.

"I know, honey," Claire said, forcing a reassuring smile, while she felt sick inside. She thought of Lindsay who was desperate to escape the memory of a relationship with a man who'd only briefly showed a human side and then shed it like old clothes. Marian, however, had wanted Betty Summers out of the way at all costs; she had known what Richard Summers was capable of and had not tried to stop him. "I know," she repeated, holding out her hand. Seconds ticked by, moments on the edge of the knife.

Claire wasn't even sure if Marian was able to reflect the offer she was given, but then Marian gently laid the gun into her hands and whispered, "Thank you", opening the door and stepping directly into police custody.

Claire felt herself starting to shake, but somehow managed to get out of the car, surprised when her legs didn't give way from under her, and then Lindsay was there, pulling her into a close, protective hug.

"Inspector Boxer. Come on in."

Lindsay walked into the room slowly, not sure if this was really a good idea, but she needed some advice. "That sounds like you've been expecting me," she said with just a tinge of accusation.

"Actually, if you'd come five minutes later, I would have been gone, so I can assure you that's not the case."

"Oh, if you need to be somewhere, I could come another time--"

Doctor Walker smiled and gestured towards a couple of chairs. "Have a seat, Inspector. Congratulations on the arrest, by the way."

Lindsay gave him a weary smile in acknowledgement. "Thanks. In fact, my question has to do with this case." It had been on her mind ever since Claire had told her Marian's side of the story regarding the day Betty Summers was murdered.

The psychiatrist gave her a puzzled look as she sat across from him. "Wasn't it pretty clear that the perp paid for the murder of his wife? That's what it said in the papers."

"I know." Lindsay sighed. "I'm not so sure about that. See, the whole point was to punish the woman, for her independence, for her doing something as outrageous as to choose whom she loved. He wanted to see her in pain. Don't you think a commissioned murder seems too clean and distant?"

"You've got another theory," Dr. Walker prompted.

"Yes. I think he did it himself. I also think the daughter saw the murder happen, but she's too scared to say anything. And tomorrow will be my last chance to find a way to get her to open up about it. I thought you might be able to help with that."

"How do you feel about having to pry that out of her?"

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and she shook her head vehemently. "Oh no, this is not about me. Here's a little girl who has lost every belief in a just world, and I'm going to make her admit to seeing one of the worst things that could possibly happen to a person. That sucks. It has nothing to do with me."

"Why are you here then, Inspector?"

"I told you," she said stubbornly.

"There will be a psychiatrist present, right? He or she will stop it in time. You just want to do your job, but in order to do that, you need to protect yourself."

"I need to get through to her."

"It will be easier if you can clearly separate her story from what happened to you."

"I didn't see someone I love being brutally killed. That's easy to separate."

He didn't reply, but gave her a thoughtful look that made Lindsay uneasy, and she wondered about the wisdom of this impromptu visit. She certainly hadn't meant for it to turn into a therapy session.

"Thanks for your time, Doc."

"You're welcome. And, Inspector?"

Already at the door, she turned.

"I agree with your theory. When it's that personal, a killer rarely trusts someone else to do the job."

Lindsay nodded. "Kiss-Me-Not..." Somehow that was easier than saying his real name, especially after her last intimate encounter with the serial killer. "He indulged Billy Harris. Let him do the dirty jobs. But he would have never let him kill the women."

"True. So, speaking of which--"

Involuntarily, she tensed against the impulse to run. "I'd rather not."

"You didn't really answer my question last time. Are you feeling safe now?"

She indulged him, giving the question some thought. "Okay, here's your answer. I haven't had that in seven years – I'm not even sure I would recognize the feeling. Good night, Doc"

Lindsay walked away, not waiting for a reply. She had the feeling she wouldn't like what he'd say.

Dina's expression was one of utter, devastating fear. According to the child psychiatrist, she'd reacted the same way to every visitor except for Lily Mason. Lindsay couldn't blame her; with what they had learned so far and what was yet to be uncovered about the day Betty Summers had died, the girl's life had been shattered into a million pieces. Lily seemed to be the only safe person left.

"Hello, Dina. You remember me?"

Looking Lindsay up and down, Dina nodded slowly.

"Did Lily tell you that the man who hurt your Mommy is gone now?" Lindsay had hesitated for just a split-second to decide against using the word 'dead', but then again, with what the little girl had seen, it would hardly be the worst part of the child's nightmare. Her words produced a shrug that was way too grown-up for a six-year-old.

"How come you're still scared? Is there something else, Dina? Something you didn't tell us?"

A tiny shake of the head.

Lindsay sat down beside her, and they were both silent for a moment. She was very much aware of the child psychiatrist's presence as well as Jill, Tom and Jacobi on the other side of the mirror.

"I can understand. I would be afraid, too," she said. "There was someone I... trusted. He seemed nice."

Dina gave her a quick, curious sideways look before averting her eyes again.

"And I believed the things he told me. There was no reason not to. When it's someone we feel safe with, why should we think they'd lie, right?"

The girl nodded hesitantly.

"He was bad, though. He nearly hurt someone I loved as bad as your Mom was hurt, and he had hurt other people. And the worst is, I kept feeling that it was my fault."

Dina began to cry, and Lindsay gently touched her shoulder. "Whatever happened, whatever you've been told, it isn't your fault. You don't have to believe them anymore."

"I said no." The tiny voice was so soft, it was barely audible and Lindsay leaned in closer.

"Excuse me, honey?"

"I said stop hurting Mommy. He wouldn't."

"Who hurt your Mommy?"

"Daddy did," Dina cried, as she slumped forward into Lindsay's embrace.

Lindsay held the sobbing child close to her, but at the same time, she couldn't help the feeling of relief. Richard Summers hadn't commissioned a hit on his wife, he had done it himself, in front of the eyes of their daughter. Every judge in the city would go for the highest possible penalty.

They had him now.

"Kingston was helpful, although he wasn't too bright." Richard Summers expression was a disdainful sneer. "He was spying on Betty, that's how I got him in the first place. A little money here and there, he was so easy. That day, he got on the plane for me, with the false papers I've had being made for him."

"In your name," Lindsay concluded. "That's why you were on the passenger manifest and he wasn't. You set him up. Weren't you worried that he'd come after you?"

It was a rhetorical question and Summers knew it. He answered it anyway. "Kingston had his tail between his legs. He knew no one would believe him. Those bruises around your neck, Inspector – they look painful. That's how scared Kingston was."

"So you planned it all along. Betty and Dina were waiting for you at home just like always. Marian was meant to distract Dina with the doll while you went inside to kill Betty."

Summers shook his head. "Marian was waiting in the car."

"So you didn't care that your daughter was in the house while you murdered your wife? Did you count the number of times you stabbed her? The medical examiner did. Thirty-two times, Mr. Summers."

Lindsay struggled to stay in the present. *Don't think of Pete, Melissa Paquin and the white dress stained in blood.*

"She had to learn," Summers said darkly. "She had to learn what happens when a woman doesn't obey her husband. The earlier a wife learns about the consequences, the better."

"Thank you, Mr. Summers. That's all I needed to hear."

Summers, however, wasn't quite finished. "You think that's crazy, right? Well, don't be so sure. It's every woman's lesson to learn – sooner or later."

"What I think is that I'm really glad we've got enough on you to make sure you'll never get out of prison. It's every *murderer's* lesson to learn - sooner or later."

Without waiting for an answer, Lindsay turned and left the room.

Cindy sat on the floor in the living room, typing on her laptop, a CD playing in the DVD drive. Lindsay stood in the doorway, watching her for a moment, before she went into the room.

"You got him to confess?" Cindy asked, looking up and setting the computer aside.

"Of course. I'm good at what I do."

"I've never doubted that."

The open space inspired her, and she pulled Cindy up from the floor and into her arms for a slow dance in tune with the soft music. Cindy smiled, the curiosity evident in her gaze, as it was a rare occurrence. Lindsay took her time, brushing a strand of hair back from Cindy's face, leaning in to touch her lips against her lover's neck. Cindy shivered pleasantly in her arms. "What's the occasion?" she whispered.

"Remember when we said that after this case, we'd be free?" It was obvious that she didn't mean Summers. "It's now, Cindy. There's nothing else we have to wait for."

They kissed unhurriedly, carefully testing the waters of a new life that was no longer defined by an ever-present shadow. Running her hands under Cindy's shirt, Lindsay sent one last thought to Pete Raynor.

In blowing up the apartment she'd moved into after the divorce, and with it the attic, he'd actually done her a favor of sorts. She was more than ready to let go of the past, because the future was looking brighter than ever. Someday she'd be ready to let go of the guilt, too, of tormenting herself over the idea that she should have known who he really was. The woman he'd turned her into, she was letting her go, too. He wasn't defining her anymore.

They'd been oblivious to dusk falling and turning into early night. In the dark, Lindsay smiled, her fingers lazily tracing the shape of Cindy's body. They were supposed to meet Jill and Claire in fifteen minutes. There was no chance in hell that they'd arrive on time.

Life was beautiful.

"We're so going to be late," Cindy said, sounding slightly regretful. Lindsay suspected it was more in regard to having to leave their warm cozy place than keeping their friends waiting. She leaned over to kiss her lover softly, intending it as a promise for after-club-meeting activities.

It was good to feel free again. It would be even better once they'd found a new home, and with this case closed, there was now a chance.

"I think they will forgive us... but I'm afraid we'll have to show up at some point."

"That would be so much easier if you kept your hands to yourself."

"I'm sorry," Lindsay said, but she couldn't keep the laughter out of her voice.

"Don't be. We'll just leave early and come straight home, right?"

"You bet."

When Lindsay glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand, she realized that it had been the longest time in what seemed like forever that her thoughts hadn't revolved around Pete and how she should have figured out his identity right away or the dreams he'd planted in the shadows of her mind.

She could almost hear the imaginary chains breaking free.

A dream brought her back to her mother's funeral twelve years ago and, in the dreamscape, Lindsay clearly remembered arguing with her father while her sister begged them to leave it alone for just one day. She'd been sitting in the kitchen, grief and anger battling within her at her father who'd never been there when he was needed, and at Cat who was taking his side.

Contemplating getting really drunk, she missed the door being opened softly, Abbie stepping inside. She didn't judge or try to make Lindsay talk about her feelings; she just embraced her granddaughter, crying for both of them, understanding that Lindsay couldn't.

"What right does he have to show up now? It's too late to care."

"It's okay to be angry," her grandmother whispered. "I'd be if I were in your place. Hell, I am. He walked out on you long ago. But he's grieving, too."

Time and logic were cast aside as the dream image switched to the sound of another door and footsteps coming closer.

It's okay to be angry.

This time, the voice and the arms coming around her didn't belong to Abbie MacGill, but another familiar figure in her life. "Oh Lindsay, I'm so sorry," Pete Raynor said sadly. "I came here as soon as I heard. I'm here if you need me. I'll always be here for you."

Lindsay instantly awoke and sat straight up in bed. She gasped for breath as cold sweat made her nightgown cling to her skin. The images were crystal clear and still vivid in her mind. It was the first time that Pete's manufactured perfect self had found its way into her nightmares. When she'd dreamed of him before, he'd always appeared as the crazy psychopath he was, not the man from any of the alternate realities he'd woven.

She glanced down at a sleeping Cindy and eased out of bed to change out of her damp clothing. First, she walked into the living room, and stood at the window for a moment, staring out into the dark and silent night.

She could easily imagine him in his cell, a smug grin on his face because he still thought there was a way out for him, a way to turn her around.

"Don't count on it," she said aloud.

Lindsay could have done without ever seeing him again, but she knew she'd have to face him, deal with his games at least one more time. She'd survive that, too.

Minutes later, having changed into a fresh shirt, she shivered under the covers and scooted closer to Cindy until the warmth of her lover's skin chased away the chills. She wouldn't let him get to her, not anymore.

Cindy took her hand as in confirmation and whispered, "Just the trial now".

Pete Raynor was feeling depressed, but he realized he had every right to the emotion. He laughed to himself at the thought. *Emotion*. It seemed rather real. After all, the making of his pure, perfect bride had been harshly interrupted. He'd gladly punish the person he considered responsible for the untimely mishap, but unfortunately it wasn't possible right now. He should have done it when he had the chance... too little, too late.

Their story wasn't over yet. Lindsay would soon realize that she was bound to him by invisible ties that weren't so easily broken.

When he'd awakened from his drugged sleep, he'd been in a rage, screaming and tearing at his restraints. When it was all over, however, the calculating part of his brain had won again. He'd refused to talk to anyone, the cops, the DA, the shrink and even the public defender they'd sent to him.

He'd talk to them when he deemed it the right time.

Smiling, he whispered softly, "And they lived happily ever after."