

## Teaser

Dizzying flickers of blue and red bounced across weather-worn walls, coal asphalt and choppy ocean water as Inspector Maggie Snow ducked under the limp police tape. A light mist was beginning to fall so she hurried her pace, wanting to get the crime scene processed quickly in case the mist turned into something heavier. She nodded at Lieutenant Tom Hogan, unsurprised to see her boss surrounded by a gaggle of reporters. This was the fourth apparent drug death in seven days. The media was starting to circle like a school of great whites. They smelled blood in the water, and the police were starting to feel like chum.

Maggie saw a familiar face as she made her way toward the body. Claire Washburn was kneeling next to the victim as the forensics teams circled around her, rapidly collecting any remaining evidence before the rain began in earnest. Flashbulbs were firing off so fast, Maggie almost felt like she was at a nightclub. The strobe effect they created made Claire's movements seem jerky and the slightest bit spooky.

"Dr. Washburn," Maggie greeted Claire cordially, blinking as another flash from a camera nearly blinded her. The medical examiner had thawed a little toward her in the last few weeks, but not enough to Maggie's liking. She wanted to do her best to ingratiate herself with Jill's friends. They obviously meant a lot to the blonde attorney, and since Jill was coming to mean a lot to Maggie, it seemed the only prudent thing to do. Not that a damn one of them was making it easy. At least Boxer wasn't on this case. Maggie took it as a victory in their little rivalry that she'd grabbed this high profile case while Boxer had been toiling on closing some homicides that were under the city's radar. It wasn't that Maggie didn't admire Boxer's skills as a cop, but Boxer was at the top of the totem pole, a place Maggie wanted reserved for herself.

"Inspector Snow," Claire grumbled as she packed up her kit.

"Time of death?" Maggie inquired, deciding her best approach with Claire for the moment would be professional until they were no longer chatting over a corpse.

"About two hours ago." Claire gently covered the young Asian woman tossed like trash from a moving car. "She's barely cold."

Maggie slipped out a notepad and jotted a few immediate details about the scene into it. "Lt. Hogan said on the phone that you think our girl here is another victim of this whacked out batch of Ecstasy that's making my life a living Hell right now. What makes you think that?"

Claire lifted the girl's right arm, picked up her UV light and flicked it on over the back of the victim's hand. The image of a devil appeared in the ghostly purple light. "She's got the mark on her."

"Damn raves," Maggie swore as Claire put the light away. All of the victims had

possessed the stamp on their hands, but it was information the police hadn't released to the general public. "Stupid kids keep going to them even though the media is warning them right and left."

"That's youth for you." Claire tucked the light away and zipped her bag. "They think nothing can touch them. A little danger just adds to the thrill." She stood. "I'll know for sure if she overdosed on this poison once I get the tox results in." She smiled tightly as Maggie handed her the kit. The other woman was at least trying to be friendly, but something about her still set Claire's teeth on edge. It was just hard to get past Maggie accusing her best friend of murder. That sort of thing tended to piss Claire off, and she had a long memory. It didn't help matters that Hollywood, as Lindsay liked to call Maggie, seemed wholly unapologetic about the matter and had picked up her little battle of wills with Lindsay as if the whole Kiss-Me-Not case had never happened.

The situation didn't seem to be a problem for Jill, however, Claire noted wryly as the blonde attorney gave Maggie a beaming smile as she arrived on the scene. "Claire," Jill greeted warmly. "Maggie," the last was said with a hint of suggestiveness that made Claire's gag reflex twinge.

"Hi there." Maggie smiled but didn't return the flirting interest. There was a time and place for it and this wasn't it. At least she figured Claire would feel that way so she decided to act accordingly.

Jill glanced down at the sheet-covered body. Clearly some kind-hearted Samaritans had found the body first and tried to cover the girl up. Jill just hoped they hadn't contaminated any evidence. Bloodstains were already soaking through the sheet, turning the small roses on the surface a darker shade than the designer ever intended. "Do I want to look?" she asked Claire.

Claire knelt again and lifted one corner so Jill could see the once beautiful young face. Her friend winced at the sight of the torn skin and bruises, but then Jill frowned and bent at the waist, angling her head for a better look. "Something wrong?" Claire asked.

"She..." Jill stood up and shook her head. "She looks... familiar."

Claire glanced back down at the young woman's face. "You know her?"

Jill shook her head again. "No. But I've seen her somewhere before."

"Any idea where?" Maggie asked as the coroner's wagon arrived. She shot the vehicle a look before tipping her head back and taking in the flash of lightning overhead. Spring had sprung in San Francisco, and it had been raining on and off for almost a week. The storm and wet ground were going to be hell on any forensic trace evidence if the techs didn't pick up the pace.

Jill ran a hand through her hair. "I can't place it. I want to say work, though."

“You think she worked at the Hall?” Claire asked with alarm as she glanced back at the deceased again, wondering if it was someone she passed at work every day and hadn’t realized it.

The blonde shrugged helplessly. “Maybe. Hell, maybe I just think I know her.” Jill jumped when a clap of thunder sounded overhead.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the reporters behind the crime scene tape and Claire lifted her chin when she saw a familiar redhead among the crowd. “Excuse me,” she told the two unfortunately dating women before shifting her kit to her other hand. “I need to check in with a... colleague.”

Jill turned her head as Claire left, noting exactly where the medical examiner was heading. She smiled in Cindy’s general direction, receiving a dip of the reporter’s head in response. There was no answering grin, however, and Jill tried not to wince at the cool response. Cindy was not happy with her for dating Maggie, and the reporter was none too shy about displaying her displeasure at the relationship. A pang of guilt made Jill’s stomach ache, but she resolutely stuffed the feeling aside and forced her gaze away from her friends.

“Does that girl sleep with Lindsay or a police scanner?” Maggie wanted to know as she watched Claire duck under the police tape just as the medical examiner’s assistants came under from the other side. The ME laid her hand on Cindy’s shoulder and turned the reporter around, but not before Cindy gave a look of stone cold hatred in Maggie’s direction. Maggie gave her a cheeky wave, unable to help herself.

“Cindy?” Jill guessed, pretending not to notice Maggie’s reaction and making a mental note to talk to the reporter over lunch sometime very soon. “Probably both.” Jill knelt as fat drops of rain began to patter on the asphalt and into the ocean just beyond the warehouse they were standing behind. Ships were coming and going in the night, their running lights and the sound of their motors the only evidence of their existence in the darkness and rain. She lifted the corner of the sheet and studied the face of the victim one last time. “Where in the hell do I know this girl from?” she murmured.

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## ***ACT I***

The storm seemed fitting, like something out of a gothic horror novel, Denise Kwon decided as she was led down a long corridor of holding cells. Flashes of lightning came through the barred windows, casting long, eerie shadows across the concrete floor as inmates called out obscenities to one another from the bowels of the prison. Denise was no stranger to this place, but the prisoner who had summoned her here at this hour was not one she had any desire to see.

A guard buzzed her in while two more flanked her on each side. Denise caught sight of the killer in his orange jumpsuit, sitting at a table with his hands shackled and locked to a long chain that secured him to the floor. She took an unsteady breath as the guard unlocked the cell and stepped aside to allow her to enter.

“What?” she demanded in a clipped voice.

Pete Raynor smiled, looking like the Prince Charming Denise had once thought him to be. “Hello, Denise.”

Denise noted there was no other counsel present. She wondered what game Pete was about to start playing now. “You shouldn’t have called me without your lawyer.”

“I’m just glad you came. I refuse to hold on to this information any longer. My conscience simply won’t let me. It was keeping me up at night.” Pete continued to smile benignly.

“What do you want, Mr. Raynor? The warden said you insisted on speaking with someone from the District Attorney’s office...”

“And here you are. Although,” Pete said placidly, “I was kind of hoping to see Jill.”

The mere thought gave Denise chills. She stood a little straighter. “What do you want?” she demanded again, her voice harder and dripping disdain.

“To tell you where you can find a body,” Pete announced with the same serene look still on his features.

Denise had suspected this would be his ploy to drag her out at this time of night. She crossed her arms and tried to look disinterested. “We have enough bodies, Mr. Raynor, to get you the death penalty ten times over. If you think I’m going to strike a deal...”

“I want to talk to Lindsay,” Pete declared. “I don’t need a deal from the District Attorney’s Office.”

“No way.” Denise shook her head for emphasis. “The next time you see Lindsay Boxer will be in court.”

“I’ll only tell Lindsay where the body is,” Pete vowed.

“Then I guess we won’t find it,” Denise said smartly. Privately, she hated that some family out there might not get closure, but she was not about to play games or make concessions for this man. “Right now Lindsay is curled up in bed with her girlfriend on this dark and stormy night,” Denise told him and had the satisfaction of seeing his smug smile falter. “You’re the last thing on her mind.”

“You don’t know that. I’ve marked her for life. I’ll always be in the shadows of her mind, lurking in the depths of her dreams...” Pete’s smile slowly returned. “And she’ll want to come. She’ll want to know where the body is... need to know where the body is.”

“And why is that?” Denise snapped.

“Because I killed Jill’s stepfather, and I’m the only one who knows where the rotting bastard is.”

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“Do we think this is connected to the other three deaths? Did she have the Devil stamp on her? Why do you think she was tossed here?”

“Hello to you, too, skipper,” Claire drawled to Cindy with a tired smile as they moved away from the crime scene as the rain picked up in intensity.

“Sorry.” Cindy brushed a damp lock of her hair away from her glasses. It was late, and she’d been dragged away from a warm bed and an even warmer partner, and she was less than thrilled about it. “I had way too much coffee on the way over here.”

Claire chuckled and lightly scratched Cindy’s back through the thin navy windbreaker she was wearing. They stopped walking out of the line of sight of the other reporters, tucking themselves against a closed delivery door to avoid the worst of the rain. “I’m surprised Lindsay didn’t come with you.”

“Well, she has been on duty for ten straight days. I’m not even sure she knows I’m gone.” Cindy smiled just a little. “I didn’t have the heart to wake her. Besides, it’s not her case.”

“No. It’s the ice queen’s case,” Claire muttered with a glance at Maggie and Jill. She shook her head. “Why Tom gave this one to Snow is beyond me.”

Cindy privately agreed. “Well he can’t give all the high-profile cases to Lindsay and Jacobi. The other cops would complain.”

Claire chuckled. “Got a point there,” she admitted. Her gaze returned to Maggie and Jill. Maggie’s confidence in her skills as an investigator was clear in the inspector’s very bearing. Claire wouldn’t have had a problem with that if Snow had proven that she could walk the walk as well as talk the talk. She watched as Maggie reached up and brushed Jill’s bangs away from her eyes. Claire had to look away, none too pleased to see the affection between the two women. “I really thought Jill’s taste had improved with Luke... but this is a definite setback.”

Cindy snorted faintly. “Well you know how I feel, but if she makes Jill happy...”

“Do you really believe that?” Claire drawled with disbelief clear in her tone and expression, her gaze shifting back to the reporter in surprise.

“I plead the fifth.” Cindy flipped open her notebook with one hand while yawning into her fist with the other. “Okay. What can you tell me?”

Claire gladly changed the topic. Murder seemed a much safer subject than Maggie Snow, unfortunately. “Not much. Not yet anyway. She did have the same mark as the other victims. If she has the same type of Ecstasy in her system, then we’ve definitely got a problem.”

Cindy wiped at the annoying curl of hair again. “So the two things we know are that all the victims were at this devil dude’s raves and that someone gave them some seriously tainted drugs.”

“Whoever gave them those drugs had to know they were going to kill those kids,” Claire argued. “Cyanide only does one thing and getting you high is not it.”

“Ecstasy laced with poison. Too bad the victims didn’t listen to Nancy Reagan and just say no.”

Claire’s lips quirked. “Forensics pulled two pills off the victim. That is not for print, by the way.”

Cindy held up her hands before jotting the information down. “Like the others? Green with a white flower on top?”

“Just like the others,” Claire confirmed. She sighed tiredly. “That’s all I got, sweetheart. I need to get the poor thing back to the office.”

“We don’t even have her name?” Cindy glanced at the scene as the victim was loaded onto a gurney.

“We’ll have to wait on dental records,” Claire murmured.

Cindy watched as the body was loaded into the coroner’s wagon. She shook her head. “The monsters just keep coming,” she said quietly.

“The monsters just keep coming,” Claire agreed.

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A knock at the door wrenched Lindsay Boxer up from the heavy shackles of sleep. She jerked upright in bed, cursing when she felt cold sheets where her usually warm girlfriend should be. Another knock had her moving through Cindy’s apartment, sidestepping

Martha only to bang her toe into the coffee table. More curses flowed from her lips into the dimly lit space. They really needed to find their own place, Lindsay decided. Cindy's apartment was just too damn small.

Lindsay looked out the peephole and frowned at her late night visitor. She had to take a second glance to confirm she wasn't dreaming. "Huh," she muttered as she undid the row of locks and opened the door to a dripping Denise Kwon.

"Hi," Denise said lamely. "I'm sorry to wake you." She glanced down at Lindsay's long, bare legs and blinked before shifting her attention back on Lindsay's dark eyes. The inspector was in nothing more than a long Texas Longhorns jersey and socks. How she could make the ensemble sexy, Denise wasn't sure, but Boxer was pulling it off and rather well at that. The jersey had to be a gift from Thomas because Denise was pretty sure Boxer didn't know an end zone from a goal post. "May I come in?"

Too sleepy to notice Denise's perusal of her lack of wardrobe or to be self-conscious about it, Lindsay moved aside and let her enter. "Need a towel?"

"That would be nice, thank you." Lindsay moved away, leaving Denise to awkwardly pet Martha on the head when the dog came over and sat next to her hand. She couldn't see much in Cindy's dark apartment, but Denise gathered that Cindy wasn't home. The reporter would have ventured out of the bedroom by now, driven by her relentless curiosity.

"Here you go." Lindsay returned in shorts and carrying a deep brown towel.

Denise took it and began wiping her hands and face. "Thomas isn't home?" she asked to be sure.

Lindsay held up a piece of paper she'd found taped to the bathroom mirror. "She got called out on that Ecstasy story apparently."

"They found another victim?" Denise asked in surprise. She hadn't checked her BlackBerry since getting her summons from Raynor.

"Looks that way." Lindsay crossed her arms as thunder rumbled loud and close. "So I take it this isn't a social call."

"It's not," Denise sighed as she draped the towel around her shoulders. She took a breath and bit the proverbial bullet. "Pete Raynor called me to the prison tonight."

Lindsay stiffened and stood a little straighter. Her features hardened into an unreadable mask even as her stomach roiled at the very mention of Pete's name. "Lucky you," she said tightly.

"He wants to see you," Denise added without preamble, wishing she didn't have to be the

bearer of such bad news. It made her feel guilty, to dredge the Kiss-Me-Not Killer back up into the thoughts of a woman who would probably pay almost any price to never have to think of him again.

“I don’t care,” Lindsay replied immediately.

Denise massaged the bridge of her nose. “I wasn’t going to tell you. I was just going to pretend like I never heard what he said to me, but the more I thought about it the more I couldn’t let it go.”

Lindsay shifted her weight, curious and angry with herself for feeling that way. “What did he say? You wouldn’t be here unless it was something major.”

“He said he murdered Jill’s stepfather.”

Denise couldn’t have surprised Lindsay more if she’d shown up at this hour drunk and frisky. “What?” Lindsay reached past Denise and finally snapped on the light, bathing them both in welcome, warm tones.

“I believe him, Inspector,” Denise continued. “He said he would only reveal the location of William Carter’s body to you.”

Tunneling her hands through her hair, Lindsay moved back into the living room and started to pace. The rain picked up outside again, smacking against the window with a clatter that grated on Lindsay’s suddenly agitated nerves. “Sonofabitch,” she hissed. Once the club had discovered Pete was the Kiss-Me-Not Killer, some distant part of her mind had wondered if he hadn’t been behind the disappearance of Jill’s so-called stepfather. Knowing she’d been right didn’t make her feel any better.

“That’s why I’m here. I’m not compelling you to go see him. I’m not even asking. We have enough evidence against Raynor to put him away for life or to see that he gets death. I don’t think anyone would miss Carter except his wife. But...” Denise nibbled her bottom lip.

“But?” Lindsay prompted impatiently.

“I’m here... because I wanted to know if Jill needs this... this closure. We all know what that man did to her. Would she want to find Carter’s body? Would she need that? And what about his other victims? Maybe they need that, too.”

The pacing stopped as Lindsay considered the questions, cursing herself inwardly for thinking more about her own reaction to the news than how Jill would feel about it. Pete had damaged all of them, something she kept forgetting. “I don’t know. It might be enough to know Carter is dead. *If* he’s dead. Pete could be yanking our chains.”

“He told me how he killed him, Inspector. I believe him.”

“I just want this guy out of all our lives,” Lindsay muttered after a minute of silence and contemplation.

Denise knew there was nothing she could say so she remained quiet.

“Thanks for letting me know,” Lindsay finally said.

“I’m sorry to burden you with this,” Denise admitted.

Lindsay shook her head, appreciating what Denise was trying to do for both her and Jill. “You did the right thing telling me. Now I just need to figure out what the right thing is for Jill.”

Denise slipped the towel from her neck and handed it to Lindsay. “Let me know when you do. I’ll keep this just between us until then.” She moved to the door and opened it.

“Denise,” Lindsay called out before the woman was out the door. “Would you want to know?”

The attorney hesitated. “I don’t know. I’m not Jill, and I’m not her best friend. I don’t think I’m the one to ask.”

There was something interesting in Denise’s tone, but Lindsay couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. “You may not be Jill,” she agreed. “But... you sure are acting like a friend,” Lindsay informed the other woman with a weary half-smile.

Denise pursed her lips but said nothing more, closing the door behind her with a soft snick and leaving Lindsay Boxer with a new weight to carry on her already overburdened shoulders.

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“She does not.”

“Does too.”

“Does not.”

“Does too,” Cindy argued lightly as she paced Jill step for step through the long corridors of the Hall, taking almost three steps for every one of Jill’s long strides. “I’m telling you, she’s totally into you.”

“You’re delusional,” Jill replied with a firm shake of her head. She shifted her files to the other arm before shouldering her door open and shoving it inward.

“Denise is completely, absolutely...” Cindy started only to smack into her friend’s back when Jill stopped abruptly. The reporter glanced around Jill. “Sitting right there,” she finished.

Denise lifted one elegant eyebrow as she rose from Jill’s chair. “What am I completely and absolutely, Ms. Thomas?”

Cindy opened and closed her mouth before glancing at an imaginary watch. “Heh. Look at the time. I’ve got a deadline to meet. Nice seeing you, Denise. Jill,” Cindy almost squeaked before turning traitor and leaving her friend alone with her dragon lady of a boss.

“High strung, that one,” Denise commented casually.

Jill’s eyes narrowed as she watched Cindy flee, wishing, not for the first time, that laser vision really had lasers. “Something I can do for you?” Jill asked, ignoring her boss’s jab at the reporter.

“As a matter of fact...” Denise grabbed Jill’s files and flung them onto the floor, spreading them out in a cascade of paper.

“Hey! Wh-...?” Jill started only to be pulled into her office, her words catching in her throat as Denise kicked the door closed behind them and pressed Jill against the wood and glass. Jill didn’t have time to think or react as Denise’s mouth captured hers and her boss’s hands began to blaze a path under her shirt and up her torso.

“D...” Jill couldn’t speak as her knees went weak. Denise’s warm, solid thigh slipped between her own, causing a sweet friction between Jill’s legs. “God,” she got out between rough kisses and gasps for air.

“I don’t want to hear it, Bernhardt.”

Jill blinked as Denise’s voice lowered and smoothed out into the amber tones of Claire Washburn. “Huh?” She jumped when something cold and wet smacked her in the face. The attorney snapped upright, realizing that she’d been dreaming and had apparently fallen asleep with her face on Claire’s desk.

“I do not want to know why you were moaning in your sleep at my desk,” Claire informed her with bemusement as she lounged in the doorway. “I have to sit in that chair.”

The DDA rubbed at her face and then let her hands slide through her short, blonde locks. Her features were still wet and she glanced down at the desk for the source, frowning when she saw a glob of wet paper towels. “Was that necessary?”

“No, but it was fun.” Claire chuckled at Jill’s scowl before crossing to her desk and

perching on the edge. “And you sounded like you needed some cooling off.”

Jill eyed the paper towels. “Those weren’t used to wash up a dead body, were they?”

Claire snorted.

Deciding she was too overheated to care, Jill grabbed the towels and began to blot the back of her neck. The cold felt wonderful against her hot skin. “I must be getting a fever,” she murmured.

Frowning now, Claire leaned across the desk and felt her friend’s forehead. “You are warm. You feeling okay?”

“Obviously not,” Jill muttered. “I just dreamed I was having sex with Denise.”

“Ah-ah.” Claire held up a hand and retreated from her desk. “Did I not tell you I didn’t want to hear it?” She started shooing Jill out of her chair, keeping her amusement out of her voice. Claire was oddly pleased to hear Jill had been dreaming about someone other than Maggie. She decided to take that as a good sign. “Up. Come on. Up.”

Scowling again, Jill got to her feet and moved so Claire could sit. “Did you get cause of death?” She rubbed at one sleepy eye as Claire settled in her chair. They’d both been up nearly twenty hours closing another case when they’d received word of last night’s victim. “If that kid in there died from the same drug...”

“She died from a drug,” Claire confirmed, too damn tired to quiz Jill on why she was having sex dreams about her boss, even though a part of her wanted to pry. “Won’t be sure it was the same one until the toxicology results are in. And that kid is only a few years younger than Cindy.”

“That’s four, Claire,” Jill sighed as she slumped into a chair. Pressing the cold towels to the back of her neck once more, she watched Claire lace her fingers and put them on the desk. “Narcotics needs to get this stuff off the street.”

“Narcotics needs to find out who is pushing this stuff and make them take it,” Claire declared.

Jill bobbed her head once in the affirmative. “That would work,” she agreed dryly. “Save the taxpayers of San Francisco a few bucks on a trial.”

The door to the morgue swung open and a refreshed looking Cindy Thomas came rushing in. “Hey. I’ve got something,” she informed them with a smile and slightly out of breath.

“Way too much sleep from the looks of it,” Claire huffed.

Cindy hesitated as her gaze swung from Claire to Jill. She squinted her eyes as she looked at the attorney. “What did you do to your face?”

Jill’s hand came up and she felt indentations on her cheek where she’d fallen asleep on a spiral notebook. “Shut up, Miss Sunshine,” she growled. “Some of us have been working all night.”

“And some of us have been catching forty winks on my desk,” Claire added. She leaned back in her chair and gave Cindy a weary smile. “What have you got, sweetheart?”

Deciding to avoid a grouchy Jill, Cindy sidled over to Claire’s desk. “Well, we know magnolia is a messed-up kind of Ecstasy, right?”

“It’s a death pill,” Claire argued roughly.

“Wait. What?” Jill asked as she leaned forward. “Magnolia?”

“It’s a green pill with a white flower on the top,” Cindy replied defensively, her friends’ sour mood and lack of sleep wearing on her nerves already. “Someone at the Register mentioned that it look like a magnolia. We had to call it something.” She looked from one to the other but didn’t see any support. “Jeez. You two need coffee.”

“Why do you reporters feel the need to name everything?” Jill complained.

Cindy held out her hands, a reporter’s notepad in one of them. “We can’t just keep calling it that green pill with the flower on top that killed those kids. Just calling it... magnolia... it’s... easier.” She stood up a little straighter as if she expected to have to defend herself some more.

“It does look like a magnolia,” Claire murmured as she looked at the photograph she kept in her desk of the pill that had been keeping her so busy as of late.

“Not helping,” Jill whined.

Cindy smirked. “Anyway... calling it magnolia was actually a good thing.”

“Helped you get your story above the fold?” Jill sniped before slumping back in the chair and covering her eyes with the wet paper towels.

“Okay. Not coffee. You either need sleep or sex,” Cindy stated bluntly. “Maggie isn’t all that, huh?”

Jill extended the middle finger of her right hand toward the reporter who grinned in triumph and turned back to Claire. As cranky as Jill felt, it was still nice to have Cindy smile at her again.

“I ran a search using magnolia and illegal substances,” Cindy explained.

“You found something?” Claire asked in surprise.

“Did I not say that when I walked in?” Cindy teased before retrieving the file she had tucked under her arm. She opened it, laying out the photographs and articles on Claire’s desk. Leather creaked behind her, and a moment later, Jill leaned over her shoulder. “Magnolia,” Cindy said as she handed a police photo to Jill and an article dated four years ago from a New Orleans newspaper to Claire.

The attorney bit her lip. “Looks the same,” she murmured.

“It is the same. They even called it Magnolia.” Cindy smiled triumphantly.

“I’ll be damned,” Claire almost whispered as she studied the article.

“What?” Jill asked. “Sound like our drug?”

“It does,” Claire said. “But that’s not what got my attention.” She handed the copy of the article to Jill and put her hands on her hips as she waited for her friend’s reaction.

“I’ll be damned,” Jill echoed as she studied the photograph of narcotics officers at the scene of a rave gone bad. She glanced up at Claire and their gazes held as long buried history floated up between them.

“What?” Cindy asked. “What?” She repeated when her friends didn’t answer quickly enough.

Jill put her elbow on Cindy’s shoulder and leaned closer, displaying the article for the reporter to see. “See that cop there?” Jill drawled with a hint of a smile. She pointed at a tall brunette who was standing just left of center in jeans and a leather jacket. Her shield and gun were both visible on her narrow waist.

Cindy looked up at her friend when she heard the warmth enter Jill’s voice. The officer was attractive, and Cindy had a moment to wonder if she was another notch on Jill’s legendary bedpost. In fact, the officer reminded her a little bit of Lindsay. “You know her?”

“That’s Nikki Beaumont,” Jill informed her.

“How do you know a narcotics cop from New Orleans?” Cindy wanted to know.

Claire smiled and settled back in her chair once more. “She used to be in the club.”

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A day off.

Lindsay even said the words aloud, wishing she could relish the sound of them. She was soaking in a bubble bath, turning over the angles of the information Denise had imparted hours before. Denise's late night visit had ruined Lindsay's day in every way possible. Instead of planning a romantic evening with Cindy and hunting for a new place to live, Lindsay once again found her thoughts on murder... on *him*.

When Cindy had come home last night, Lindsay had merely wrapped her lover up in her arms and held her, wishing she could share what she knew but keeping the news to herself for now. Lindsay felt like Pete was making both her and Denise complicit in William Carter's murder, but she was struggling to care. Carter had deserved to die for what he did to Jill. Lindsay didn't mourn his passing or the way in which he'd left this world. She was glad he was dead, but damn the fates for letting Pete Raynor be the one to send the bastard on his way.

Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt as the bathroom door swung open with a bang. Martha jumped and scampered into a standing position on the bath mat, barking in surprise at the unexpected visitor at the door.

"Jesus, Cindy. You about gave the dog a heart attack." Lindsay didn't mention what Cindy's entrance had done to her own heart rate.

"I can't believe you never told me," Cindy whined.

Lindsay froze, considering all the things she may or may not have told her lover in the time they'd been together. Had Denise caved and spilled the news about Pete? "Um... sorry?" she ventured hesitantly.

"This is a big deal, Linz," Cindy declared. "I mean... this is unforgivable!"

"Whoa." Lindsay held up her hands as worry began to set in. "What? What is it that you think I didn't tell you?"

"Hello there," Jill drawled as she came up behind Cindy and peeked her head around the corner.

"Hey!" Lindsay slid further down into the tub.

"Relax, Linz, it's not like I haven't seen it all already," the attorney stated a little too gleefully.

"Out!" Lindsay ordered. "And so help me if Claire walks in here..."

"Don't be silly. Claire is at home sleeping." Jill sauntered past an upset Cindy and closed the lid on the toilet before sitting on it primly. "I, on the other hand, just had to

come see this first hand.”

“Would someone tell me what in the hell is going on?” Lindsay demanded peevishly. Wordlessly, Cindy handed her a file folder. Lindsay reached out to take it only to hesitate when water and bubbles dripped from her hand. She flicked her wrist in irritation. “Could someone hand me a towel first?”

Jill did as requested, and Lindsay wiped her hands before accepting the folder and flipping it open. She frowned. “This is about that drug case narcotics and Snow are working?” She was still a little pissed at Tom for giving the case to Snow, but at least she wasn’t the one in the press’s crosshairs this time as victims continued to stack up. Maggie had to be feeling the heat, and Lindsay was secretly bemused at that fact, especially after the other inspector had gloated about landing the case.

“Yep,” Jill answered easily. She leaned down, almost going shoulder to shoulder with Lindsay. “Look at the photo. Third cop from the left.”

Lindsay started to sit up as recognition dawned only to rapidly sink back down again when she felt the cold air brush parts of her anatomy that only Cindy and her doctor were allowed to see.

“Look familiar?” Cindy demanded.

“It’s Nikki,” Lindsay said softly, her voice catching a little on the name.

“The original member of the club. The one I replaced,” Cindy snipped.

Her girlfriend was clearly pissed. Lindsay looked at Jill for help.

“Oh no. Don’t look at me,” Jill said. “I tried to explain to her already that this was no big deal, but Lois Lane here acts like we’re the Super Friends and we didn’t tell her the location of the Hall of Justice.”

Lindsay handed the file to Jill and focused her attention on Cindy. “This really isn’t a big deal,” she promised.

“Easy for you to say. You aren’t the replacement.” Cindy got a funny look on her face and abruptly exited the bathroom as suddenly as she’d arrived in it.

Lindsay looked back at Jill.

“She’s your girlfriend,” Jill helpfully reminded her.

Lindsay closed her eyes, held her breath, and slid under the water.

Just when she thought the day couldn’t get any worse.

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“I don’t know why this is such a big deal,” Lindsay complained ten minutes later as she sat in a robe next to Jill on the couch as Cindy paced in front of them. Her girlfriend was clearly upset, almost to the point of being agitated. The tense set of Cindy’s shoulders made Lindsay hurt just looking at her, but she couldn’t understand why the news was making Cindy so mad.

“I thought I had to work hard to convince you guys you needed a fourth member, but it turns out you already had one and didn’t tell me!” Cindy kept moving, ignoring the look she saw Jill and Lindsay exchange out of the corner of her eye. “You let me think I’d done something I hadn’t. I thought I was the original and now I found out that I’m like... Shemp or something.”

“*Shemp?*” Jill asked with disbelief. “Did you just compare us to the *Three Stooges*?”

Lindsay bit her lip at Jill’s good mood, knowing that she was keeping news from her friend that she shouldn’t. She just wasn’t sure if she was holding back for Jill’s sake or her own. “It was a long time ago, Cindy. Nikki has been gone for almost eight years.”

Abruptly, Cindy stopped moving, plopping down into a leather chair and startling Martha whose head popped up from the rug in curiosity. “I want to know what happened. Why is she in New Orleans instead of here with you? Why am I in her place?”

“You’re not in her place,” Lindsay answered testily. “Nikki is in New Orleans because she’s from there. She went home when her mother died.” It was the truth, Lindsay knew, it just lacked all the ugly details of Nikki’s departure.

“There is something you’re not telling me,” Cindy guessed, her reporter instincts flaring.

“We didn’t part on good terms,” Jill said, finally growing serious. “Nikki...” She glanced at Lindsay. “Nikki was very close to her mom. She didn’t take her death well.”

Cindy fidgeted a little, sensing she’d stirred up some painful memories. “What happened?”

“She started drinking too much, partying too hard.” Lindsay rubbed her bottom lip. “She was missing work because of hangovers...”

“And you let her do that?” Cindy cut Lindsay off in disbelief.

“Even if we had,” Jill countered, “do you really think Claire would stand for that behavior?” The attorney shook her head. “We staged an intervention one night. It turned ugly. Words were said on both sides. The next day, Nikki was gone.”

“And you haven’t talked to her since?” Cindy asked in surprise. “Wow, you guys really know how to carry a grudge.”

Lindsay sighed and closed her eyes before leaning her head back on the couch. They did know how to carry a grudge, but after all that had happened in the last two years alone, what had transpired with Nikki now seemed petty and stupid.

“We were all hurt, Cindy,” Jill said quietly. “And a lot dumber and younger then. Time just kept passing and the next thing you know…”

Cindy digested what she’d been told. She slipped her BlackBerry out of her pocket and looked down at the email icon before clicking on it. “You want to know how she’s doing now?” she asked in a hesitant voice, her brown eyes reviewing the information she’d had several interns digging up since she’d found out about Nikki Beaumont’s existence.

Lindsay and Jill sat up a little.

Cindy took that as a yes. “Detective Nikki Beaumont moved from narcotics to the New Orleans Special Crimes division two years ago. She’s received numerous commendations along with her partner Detective Nora Delaney. She’s known in New Orleans high society circles for her charity work with battered women’s shelters.”

“She got her act together,” Jill said with a hint of pride and relief.

Lindsay looked at her hands, feeling a weight she hadn’t known she’d carried fall away, but the ache that had bloomed in her chest when she saw Nikki’s photo intensified. It was weird how she suddenly missed the other woman so much it hurt. “She ever marry?”

“Why? Did you two date?” Cindy asked with a pointed glance at Jill before looking back at Lindsay.

“No,” both Lindsay and Jill answered readily.

Mollified for the moment, Cindy got to her feet and grabbed her jacket. “Maybe you should call her,” she grumbled. “Sounds like the original four musketeers might need to huddle on this one.”

“Cindy…” Lindsay got to her feet just as her lover walked out the door, slamming it none too gently behind her. Lindsay turned and looked at Jill.

“She has a point,” Jill said after a moment. “But I’m not calling Nikki.”

“It’s not my case,” Lindsay said distractedly.

“I’ll make Claire call,” Jill decided out loud to herself.

They stared at each other for a moment before Lindsay dropped her gaze and moved toward the kitchen. Jill frowned before getting to her feet and following. She lounged in the doorway and watched as Lindsay retrieved a beer.

“You okay?” the attorney asked.

Lindsay bit her lip as she twisted the cap off. She took her time with her first sip so she could school her features into a neutral expression. “Fine,” she answered matter-of-factly when she finally met Jill’s gaze again.

“Is this about Maggie?” Jill sighed. “You guys are really going to have to give me a break here.”

Lindsay shook her head. “It’s not about Maggie.”

“Then what?”

“Nothing,” Lindsay said blandly. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Worst. Liar. Ever.” Jill crossed her arms and glared at her best friend. “Something is going on in that pretty head. Spill.”

“My girlfriend is pissed at me,” Lindsay reminded her, waving her hand that held the beer toward the door Cindy had stormed out of minutes before. “And a time in my life I’d just as soon forget just got dredged up. Is that not enough?”

Jill tilted her head, clearly not buying Lindsay’s excuses all the way. “There is something else.”

Lindsay sighed. “It’s my problem for now, Jill. I just need to work through it.”

“So this is about Maggie,” Jill guessed.

“It’s not about Maggie,” Lindsay grouched. “Do I like that you’re dating Hollywood? Hell no,” she admitted, her Texas accent thickening on the curse. “But I’ve never been able to do a thing about your questionable taste, and I’m not about to change that now.”

“Okay,” Jill said after a moment, trying not to feel stung. “Fine. Whatever it is that’s making you so bitchy, you just keep it locked up inside like the old Lindsay would. But do yourself a favor. If you won’t tell me what it is, you sure as hell better tell Cindy.”

Lindsay did nothing to stop Jill from leaving in a huff. The door slammed for the second time in ten minutes, and once again, Lindsay was blessedly alone. Martha trotted into the kitchen and sat down in the doorway, regarding her master curiously.

“You mad at me, too?” Lindsay drawled at the dog.

Martha made a wuffing sound before turning tail and abandoning her grouchy owner for a patch of sunlight and some snooze time now that the excitement seemed to be over.

“Lovely,” Lindsay mumbled before swallowing another mouthful of beer.

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Feeling wired, pissed and restless, Jill made her way back to the Hall. She knew she needed to crash for a few hours of sleep, but her brain was whirring through subject after subject, never settling for long on any of them. She needed to organize her scattered thoughts, and the only place she'd ever really been able to do that was in her office.

Rounding the corner, Jill spotted Denise coming her way. She managed a smile much easier than she once had for her boss, and Denise dipped her head in curt greeting just as the Acting District Attorney's cell phone rang and she answered it. Jill had to admit Denise looked sharp today, her long black hair pulled back and tied into a loose braid. Her boss was sporting a black suit with an ice blue blouse and killer high heels, and Jill's eyes were drawn to her toned calves as Denise walked past her, chatting with whoever it was on the phone.

A flash of her dream from the night before flickered across Jill's mind in Technicolor, and she averted her gaze, feeling heat crawl up her cheeks. Both aroused and mortified, Jill almost jogged the rest of the distance to her office. She had her hand on the doorknob when a soft cry from the hallway captured her complete attention.

A crack of plastic on marble followed as Denise's cell phone slipped from her nerveless fingers and shattered all over the floor. Jill sprinted toward her boss as Denise staggered into the wall before slumping down it. In her haste, Jill accidentally kicked a piece of Denise's phone, sending it skittering down the hallway.

“Go away, Bernhardt,” Denise gasped out, her hands over her face.

Jill could hear tears in Denise's voice and the sound made the attorney's stomach clench. Shock rippled through her as she grabbed Denise's wrists, her thumbs stroking over the back of her boss's hands. The skin was ice cold to the touch. “Come on. Let's at least get you out of the hallway before anyone sees you.” It wasn't the real reason Jill wanted to help, but she knew it would get Denise moving and it did.

A few moments later, Jill closed the door to her office and led a shaking Denise to a chair. “Sit,” Jill almost whispered, feeling shaken to the core by Denise's loss of composure. She moved to the mini-fridge she kept in a corner of her office and opened it, fetching a bottle of water before returning to Denise and kneeling next to her. “Here.” She wrapped Denise's limp fingers around the bottle. “Tell me what happened.”

Denise looked at her as if she were finally aware of Jill's presence. “This doesn't

concern you...”

“You’re my boss,” Jill argued. “And you’re upset. Like it or not, that concerns me,” Jill retorted.

Denise’s jaw clenched as she clearly willed herself to gain some control. “That was the medical examiner’s office on the phone,” she struggled to say.

Jill took a breath. “Claire?”

A rapid shake of Denise’s head was the answer. “No. Another ME. Ricker.”

Familiar with the name and the man, Jill nodded. “What did he say?”

“The victim you found on the waterfront last night...”

The ache in Jill’s stomach worsened enough to make her wince. She thought of the pretty young Asian woman whose life had ended there. Suddenly, a crystal clear image of the woman’s face came into focus. Jill remembered seeing the victim standing next to a smiling Denise in a beautiful pewter picture frame that sat on the edge of Denise’s desk. It was the only personal memento in her boss’s office. “Oh damn,” Jill breathed.

“She was my sister.”

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## **ACT II**

Jill had called Claire while Denise had freshened up. She hated to wake her friend from some much needed sleep, but Jill suspected Claire would want to be there, and there was no one more compassionate than Claire Washburn when you’ve just lost someone that made your world a better place.

Kelly Yung had been a twenty-three-year-old law student at Berkley when she’d been murdered. Jill wished she could go back 24 hours and shake the girl, order her not to take the drug, warn her that it would be the last thing she ever did. She wanted to yell at her for how much she was going to hurt Denise by her actions. But she couldn’t, and now she and Denise were standing over Kelly’s sheet-clad body.

Claire entered the room, shucking off her light jacket and immediately grabbing a pair of latex gloves. She nodded at Malcolm Ricker, her counterpart on the day shift. He dipped his head in understanding before excusing himself to leave the women alone. Kelly was Claire’s case, even more so now that dental records had identified her.

“Denise,” Claire greeted gently.

Denise glanced up at the medical examiner. “Dr. Washburn.” Her voice sounded tired and strained but her features were devoid of tears at the moment.

“I understand you’re next of kin?” Claire asked for confirmation.

Denise blinked. “No. I...”

“You said she was your sister,” Jill blurted, suddenly feeling foolish.

“She is. My little sister. I’m her mentor,” Denise replied peevishly.

“Big Brothers, Big Sisters?” Claire asked, feeling both relief and pity for the woman in front of her.

Denise nodded as her eyes dipped back down to the white sheet. “Can I see her?”

Claire didn’t hesitate. She rolled the sheet back from Kelly Yung’s recently washed features and did her best not to flinch at the tiny sound that emerged from the back of Denise’s throat. “Is it her?” she asked needlessly, Denise’s reaction already all the proof she needed.

Denise nodded again before turning away. “Bernhardt... I...”

“I’ll deal with your schedule for today,” Jill told her. “If there is anything you need... anything we can do...”

“I need to notify her family,” Denise informed them.

“It’s already been done,” Claire said softly. “They’re on their way in from Los Angeles.”

Denise nodded distractedly.

“Can I give you a ride home?” Jill offered, feeling a desperate need to do something for the other woman.

The kindness seemed to finally be too much for Denise and she straightened before facing both women again. Suddenly she was all business. “I’m fine. I would appreciate it if you kept me in the loop on this investigation. I have to see to a few matters this afternoon for Kelly’s family.”

“Of course,” Claire said easily before Jill could answer.

Denise finally dipped her head at both of them, her gaze lingering one last time on Kelly’s face. Without another word, she pivoted on her heel and left the medical examiner’s office.

“Hell of a week,” Claire murmured into the silence.

Jill nodded distractedly as she turned her head and stared at the doors, wishing that she could follow, wishing that Denise would let her do something to help.

“Leave it alone, honey,” Claire said, guessing the path Jill’s thoughts were walking. “This is Denise we’re talking about.”

“I know,” Jill answered as Claire covered the body once more and snapped off her gloves. The truth didn’t stop the need Jill had to go to the other woman, though. With a sigh, Jill resigned herself to another 24 hours without sleep as she vowed to find Kelly Yung’s killer before he claimed another victim. It was all Denise would let her do.

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Cindy sighed and sat back from her computer at the Register. She had deadlines to meet... stories to write... but all she could think about was Nikki Beaumont. She’d run plenty of Internet searches on her predecessor and had been increasingly impressed with each nugget of information she’d mined. No wonder the club had been so reluctant to let her in. She couldn’t hold a candle to a cop as good as Nikki.

The rustling of a bag drew her attention away from the screen and Cindy looked up into the eyes of her lover. “Hey,” she blurted in surprise.

“Hey,” Lindsay said with a hesitant smile. She lifted the bag she was holding, ignoring the curious glances she was receiving from Cindy’s co-workers. “Fried chicken and mashed potatoes from Mel’s,” she offered. “I figured you hadn’t eaten yet.”

Cindy was ready to lie when her stomach growled loudly at the heavenly smell. She shut off her monitor but not before Lindsay saw a picture of Nikki on the screen.

“Is this supposed to be some kind of peace offering?” Cindy asked as she leaned back in her chair and slipped her glasses off.

Lindsay fidgeted a little, shrugging jerkily before slipping her free hand into the back pocket of her jeans. “Maybe. A tiny one,” she suggested with a slight quirk of her lips. “Honestly, though, I need to talk to you about something.” Jill’s parting words had stayed with her, finally forcing Lindsay to reluctantly leave the apartment and seek out the reporter.

Cindy blinked realizing something serious was on Lindsay’s mind by her tone of voice. Fighting or not, that edge to Lindsay’s voice always got under her defenses and now was no different. She stood and grabbed her purse. “Sure,” she said. “Want to hit the park?”

Lindsay sighed in relief. “That would be perfect.”

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Neither spoke much as they ate, enjoying some of the sunshine they hadn't seen in days. They sat on a park bench overlooking the San Francisco Bay and watched the boats come and go as a gentle breeze stirred the leaves and their hair.

"You heard about the victim from last night?" Cindy finally broke the silence as she wiped her fingers on a napkin. Lindsay slowly lifted her head to look at her, and Cindy felt her stomach flip at the lost look in her lover's eyes. She swallowed, wondering what dark thoughts were torturing Lindsay this time.

"Jill shot me a text message," Lindsay admitted. "Denise has had a hell of a night."

"I once thought I could never feel bad for that woman. I sure feel bad for her now."

"Yeah," Lindsay said distractedly.

Tucking one foot under her, Cindy shifted so she could turn and look at Lindsay. "Tell me," she urged, hoping to simply order out the secret Lindsay was nursing.

"It's not that I don't want to tell you," Lindsay confessed. "But telling you makes you complicit in this mess."

"Complicit?" Cindy asked, her brow furrowing. "Did you break the law or something?" she teased faintly, but her stomach tightened in sudden fear. "I've obviously been a bad influence on you."

Lindsay's lips quirked at that and one of her elegant eyebrows lifted, but she said nothing more on Cindy's penchant for winding up behind bars. "I'm at least keeping the law from being carried out right now." Lindsay sighed and slumped back against the park bench. "Pete called Denise last night."

The warm breeze seemed to turn cold at the mention of Pete Raynor's name. Cindy swallowed again, her irritation with Lindsay about Nikki evaporating into the ether. "I'm guessing he wasn't inviting her over for tea."

Lindsay snorted but there was gratitude in her eyes when she glanced at Cindy again. She reached out and captured one of her girlfriend's hands, lacing their fingers and feeling the contact ground and calm her in a way nothing ever had. Cindy was her touchstone, the one serene place in the life she'd chosen to live. "Pete admitted to killing Jill's stepfather."

"Wow," Cindy breathed after a few shocked moments, a mixture of emotions tumbling through her. She felt a little sick at herself that she was glad the man was dead, but he'd hurt Jill and Cindy refused to apologize for being relieved he would never harm her friend again. "Pete said he killed William Carter?"

Lindsay nodded, watching her lover closely.

Setting her containers of food on the ground, Cindy scooted closer to Lindsay, wrapping her hands around her lover's bicep and leaning her head on Lindsay's shoulder. "He wants to see you, doesn't he?" she guessed. She heard Lindsay swallow roughly. "He won't tell us where he buried Carter's body otherwise?"

"You've learned to read me too well," Lindsay teased halfheartedly.

"Yeah," Cindy agreed. "But I've learned him, too," she murmured. "And he'll use anything at his disposal to get to you. Even this."

Swallowing again, Lindsay watched the boats out on the water. "I know. He'll never stop until time or the needle makes him."

"What are you going to do?" Cindy asked after a quiet moment. "Does Jill know?"

Lindsay leaned her head against Cindy's, breathing in the reporter's familiar soap and shampoo. "No. We haven't told her. I don't know what to tell her."

Cindy took a deep breath. "She would want to know, Linz. I'm not sure if it would matter to Jill where that bastard dumped Carter's body, but Jill would want to know he's dead."

Lindsay fiddled with her fork before tossing it into her Styrofoam container and setting it aside. "I don't know if I can do it, Cindy."

"See Pete?" Cindy guessed. Her upset with Claire, Jill and Lindsay over Nikki's involvement in the club seemed petty now in light of what Lindsay and Denise were dealing with.

"Yeah." Lindsay sighed. "He's still playing games. Even locked up, he's still playing games with all of us."

Cindy considered the situation. "We should tell Jill and then we'll go from there. I'm not sure she'd want you to see Pete, either, sweetheart."

Lindsay felt her stomach flip. Cindy didn't use terms of endearment often, but Lindsay loved it when she did. She shifted and dipped her head, kissing Cindy softly and thoroughly. "I love you," she whispered when they parted.

Effectively turned into a pile of romantic mush, Cindy could only let out a purr of contentment. She cuddled closer to her lover, tucking her head under Lindsay's chin. "We'll figure something out," she promised.

Draping an arm around Cindy's shoulders, Lindsay pulled her closer. "We usually do," she admitted.

"You're still not off the hook about Nikki, though," Cindy reminded her, hoping to ease some of the seriousness of their situation.

Lindsay kissed the top of Cindy's head. "Of course not."

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A hesitant knock drew Claire's attention away from the phone and onto her late afternoon visitor. Even though it had been eight years since she'd last seen that familiar form darken her door, it felt like yesterday. Tall, with dark hair tied back, and sparkling brown eyes that had always, always held a hint of mischief, it was as if Nikki Beaumont hadn't aged a day. Claire blinked, wondering if she was seeing things or if the lack of sleep was finally catching up to her.

"Hi," Nikki said softly as she leaned with forced casualness in Claire's doorway. "Remember me?" She smiled but there was a trace of fear in her brown eyes.

Claire pushed back from her chair, completely unaware when tears gathered and began to stream down her face as she moved across her office and crushed the taller woman against her in a hard hug. Nikki's hands fisted in the back of Claire's lab coat and held on.

"I'll take that as a yes," Nikki's drawled with her familiar southern accent. Her own tears dotted her cheeks at the warm welcome she'd hope for but didn't dare expect.

"I was just about to call you again." Claire stepped back. "Wh...?"

"I got your first message just as I was getting ready to take off from the airport." Nikki stepped back and put her hands on Claire's shoulders. "As soon as someone checked with the department about that damn drug, my old partner called me and let me know. I already had a flight booked." Nikki put her palms on either side of her old friend's face. "You look exhausted."

"And you look so much better than the last time I saw you," Claire countered with a smile. "It's so good to see you looking happy and healthy, Nikki."

The detective blushed. "Took me a while to get my head on straight," she admitted. "But I did. I just didn't know how to say I was sorry for everything that I said that night. I don't know... it almost felt like my penance... to lose all of you."

"Honey..." Claire chided. "I should have called. Hundreds of times I should have called."

They smiled hesitantly at one another.

“I figured maybe I could lay this case to bed finally,” Nikki admitted as Claire stepped back. “And atone for a few of my own past sins while I was at it.”

“You were hurting...” Claire started to argue.

“I was an ass,” Nikki said with a little bit of a laugh. “I was young and stupid and very, very drunk and said a whole host of things I knew would hurt.”

“You wanted everyone to hurt as much as you were hurting, sweetheart,” Claire said in understanding.

Nikki narrowed her eyes and smiled. “How many years did it take before you came to that conclusion?”

“A few.” Claire grinned and bumped the taller woman with her hip. “I have become older and wiser,” she declared sagely and was rewarded with a delightfully familiar chuckle from Nikki. “Come see what we have on the case. You came all this way, I think I can give you a peek at the files as a professional courtesy.”

Nikki cleared her throat. “Is there still a club?” she asked as she followed Claire over to her desk.

“Yes,” the medical examiner confirmed as she perched on the edge and handed the file to Nikki. “We even added another fourth two years ago.”

“Ouch. I’ve been replaced,” Nikki joked as she flipped open the file and began to quickly peruse the contents.

“Never,” Claire vowed. “But Cindy wormed her way in. With one of us even more than the rest,” she added with a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

“Cindy?” Nikki asked playfully aghast. “I got replaced by some California girl named Cindy?” She groaned. “Please tell me she isn’t some valley girl, blonde bimbo.”

“She’s a redhead. And she’s a reporter.”

Nikki’s head rocked back from where she was reading about the latest victim. “A *reporter?*”

“You’ll love her just as much as we do,” Claire promised. “Now please tell me you have a prime suspect with these murders.”

“You bet I do, sugar,” Nikki promised. “Brian Renollet. A high society pain in the ass with a degree in chemistry. I knew it was him then, but I couldn’t prove it before he

skipped town.”

“They’ll be no skipping this time,” Claire said as she picked up the phone. “Keep reading. I’ll call the others and tell them you’re here.”

Nikki watched her friend dial. “Definitely no skipping this time,” she agreed quietly. The bastard was not going to get away again.

Not this time.

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Denise Kwon lay sprawled across her dark brown leather sofa, sipping from a glass poured from the bottom of her first bottle of Shiraz. She’d drunk herself through forgetfulness and was working on the melancholy stage when a knock at her door had her getting unsteadily to her feet. Denise peered through the peephole and swore before unlocking the deadbolt and throwing the door open. “What do you want, Inspector?”

Maggie hesitated, her nose wrinkling at the strong scent of alcohol rolling off Jill’s boss. “I needed to ask you a few questions about Kelly Yung,” Maggie admitted. “I understand you knew her.”

“Ah. Official police business,” Denise muttered, her voice slightly slurred. “Fine. Make it quick.”

Denise moved away from the door, not bothering to wait for Maggie to enter. The police inspector closed and locked the door before following the Acting District Attorney into the living room where Denise curled up once more on the sofa and took a sip of her wine.

“I’m sorry to bother you at this difficult time...” Maggie began, trailing off when she saw smiling pictures of the victim littering Denise’s coffee table. Yung had been a beautiful young woman with a promising career in law until she tossed it all away.

“Spare me the usual platitudes,” Denise spat, angered by the pity in the other woman’s eyes. “Just ask your damn questions and go.”

“Is there someone I can call for you?” Maggie asked.

Denise stared hard at Maggie for a string of heartbeats. “No,” she said firmly, suspecting they were both thinking about Jill Bernhardt but for different reasons. “What do you want to know?”

Sighing, Maggie came around the sofa and settled in the closest chair. “Jill told me that you were Kelly’s mentor.”

“Find job I did of that, huh?” Denise took another sip. “I thought she was making

something of herself and she was going out and throwing it all away.”

“Did she party a lot?” Maggie asked.

“Not that I was aware of. Law school takes a hell of a lot of studying. Not that you would know. I didn’t even know Kelly was in the city.”

Maggie clamped her teeth together and bit back the sharp retort she wanted to make. Denise wasn’t exactly kind sober and they hadn’t gotten off on the right foot to begin with. “Was she dating anyone? Who were her close friends?” Maggie fell silent as Denise reached over and picked up a small notebook from the glass coffee table and handed it to her. “What’s this?”

“Every classmate, friend, teacher or boyfriend Kelly has mentioned in the last three years.” Denise swirled the remains of her wine around in her glass. “I stopped being Kelly’s big sister when she turned 18, but we remained close. It doesn’t make a damn bit of sense that she would do something so foolish.”

Maggie flipped through Denise’s detailed notes, impressed with her thoroughness. “This will help,” she promised the attorney.

“Doesn’t really matter if it will. Won’t bring her back, will it?” Denise drained her glass. “Anything else?”

“When was the last time you saw Kelly?” Maggie asked, careful not to call Denise’s friend “the victim.” Self-preservation told her that would be a fatal mistake.

“Other than in the morgue this morning?” Denise sniped.

“Ms. Kwon...”

“Three days ago. We had lunch. She was over the moon about this new guy she was seeing. Daniel Glass. It’s all in the notebook. I thought she’d gone back to Berkley after that.” Denise looked at Maggie openly, wondering what Jill saw in the other woman. She’d seen Maggie hanging around after hours, watched as Maggie and Jill had left for the evening giggling like schoolgirls with a crush. Maggie was pretty, but the woman had accused Lindsay Boxer of murder. How in the hell did Bernhardt see past that when Denise knew she couldn’t even let it go?

“We’ll start with him then,” Maggie said. Deciding there was nothing else but abuse to be gained by hanging around with Denise in this condition she got to her feet. “I’m sorry for your loss, Counselor.”

“You don’t know what I lost, Inspector,” Denise answered smartly. “I trust you can find your way to the door.”

“I think I can manage,” Maggie replied with her first glimmer of anger. Alcohol might blunt a lot of Denise’s other edges, but her sharp tongue was obviously not one of them. Maggie made a mental note to call Jill as she left Denise’s apartment. Not that she wanted to expose Jill to her boss’ bad mood, but someone needed to check back on Kwon later to make sure she hadn’t drunk herself into a coma. Maybe Jill could manage it on her way to meet Maggie for dinner...

A plan in place, Maggie shut the door and checked to make it sure it locked behind her before heading to the elevator.

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### ACT III

The elevator dinged and the doors opened, but Jill was more than a little reluctant to exit. What she was about to do could be career suicide. Denise could be a bear on the best of days. Jill wasn’t sure she wanted to deal with her drunk and hurting. Her boss might just maul her to pieces. But if Maggie had been accurate in her phone call about Denise’s condition, then Jill knew someone had to be brave and make sure the woman was okay.

With a sigh, the attorney pushed off the rail and left the elevator, stepping out into a long hallway with beautiful cherry wood floors. Denise lived in a nice part of the Bay area, and Jill was silently impressed with the converted warehouse apartments. She would have been more than curious to see the inside of Denise’s apartment on just about any other day but this one; however, it appeared that this was unfortunately going to be the day she got an uninvited peek into the secret life of Denise Kwon.

Jill found the right apartment and took a deep breath, squaring herself to knock. It took a moment for her courage to find its way to her hand and force it to rap on the wood surface.

A silent minute slipped by as Jill waited. She was just about to knock again when she heard locks being thrown and curses being muttered on the other side of the door. Denise was so going to kill her, she decided. At least Claire knew where she kept her will.

Denise flung open the door, frowning when she saw her subordinate on the other side. “I thought you were the pizza guy,” she grumbled.

Jill opened her mouth and just as abruptly closed it. Denise’s normally tame hair was a wild, but rather appealing looking, mess. Her blue silk shirt was un-tucked, the top three buttons undone to reveal an impressive amount of cleavage. Jill swallowed. It was clear her boss was wasted, but a little alcohol obviously did wonders for Denise’s sex appeal. “Did you order pizza?” she finally managed to ask, figuring security would never let a delivery person past the lobby. She only got by because she had a badge.

“No,” Denise said after a moment of consideration. “What do you want, Bernhardt?”

“I came by to see how you were doing,” Jill finally confessed, figuring honesty was the best approach.

“Your girlfriend told you I was boozing it up and suggested you drop by, huh?” Denise guessed.

Even wasted, Jill realized, Denise was still a force to be reckoned with, maybe even more so. “I was worried about you,” she admitted.

Denise’s eyebrows climbed halfway up her forehead. “I see,” she replied, only the faintest trace of a slur to her words belying her intoxicated state. “Go away, Jill. I’m fine.” With that, Denise slammed the door in Jill’s face.

Pivoting angrily away from the door, Jill headed for the elevator only to hesitate in the middle of the hallway. Good sense told her to keep moving, to put one foot in front of the other until she got on the elevator and was whisked away to a waiting taxi and her date with Maggie. Slowly, she turned and walked back to Denise’s door, laying her hand flat against the cool wood. It felt wrong to leave the woman alone like this. Denise might be a bitch on wheels, but she was still human, and Jill had seen the thinly veiled anguish in the other woman’s eyes. She knew that feeling oh so well herself after a year of hurts and losses, and seeing it reflected in Denise’s gaze was upsetting Jill more than she wanted to admit.

Her hand closed into a fist. Jill’s chin came up as determination settled on her shoulders like a blanket. With a quick breath, she knocked, vowing to make up the date she was about to miss with Maggie somehow.

It took a few moments for Denise to reappear, and Jill wondered if her boss was on the other side of the door, sizing her up through the peephole. Just in case, the attorney stared straight ahead, keeping her face benignly neutral.

“Forget something?” Denise sniped when she yanked open the door, but she couldn’t hold Jill’s gaze.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” Jill answered lightly. She brushed past her boss and sauntered into Denise’s apartment, missing the shell-shocked expression on Denise’s face but imagining it with satisfaction nevertheless.

“Bernhardt, what in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Denise demanded as she shut the door and turned to face her subordinate.

Jill took a breath as her eyes skimmed over the earth tones and tasteful furnishings of Denise’s apartment. They had surprisingly similar tastes. She turned and met Denise’s anger head on. “Returning a favor.”

“A favor?” Denise spat. “What favor?”

“Pick one.” Jill came closer to her boss. “How about the time you figured out the Hallelujah Man was David Arnold in time to save my life? Or being there in court when it was all said and done and reminding me of what’s important? Or the time you figured out the connection between Pete Raynor and the Kiss-Me-Not case...”

Denise shook her head and took a step back, surprised and thrown off kilter by the clear gratitude she could hear in Jill’s voice. “I was doing my job.”

“Cindy and Lindsay told me how hard you worked to help find me when Arnold had me,” Jill answered simply. She smiled mischievously. “You have a heart, Denise Kwon,” she teased before sobering. “And I know it’s hurting right now.”

Denise swallowed, the only outward sign that she’d been affected. “You trying to curry favor with the boss, Jill?” she asked coldly.

Jill bit down on her first response and shook her head. “No,” she said through her teeth. “You trying to pretend like Kelly’s death isn’t cutting you up like knives inside?”

Denise’s gaze held Jill’s for a moment longer before dropping in defeat. Wearily, she moved past Jill and into her kitchen. Since she hadn’t been ordered to leave, Jill followed, discovering a bottle of wine breathing on the counter. A single glass sat half empty next to it. As she watched, Denise fetched one more from the cupboard.

“You like Shiraz?” Denise asked in a resigned voice.

“Never met a bottle I didn’t,” Jill answered as she accepted the glass from Denise with something close to relief. She held the stem as Denise poured her a generous amount that had her eyebrows lifting in surprise.

They sipped their wine in silence for a few minutes. Jill was relieved at how comfortable it felt. There was no awkwardness. No desperate need to fill the quiet with conversation. She waited Denise out, deciding her boss would share if and when she was ready. It was a trick she’d learned watching Lindsay in interrogation, and it didn’t take long for Denise to give in.

“Kelly bought me this bottle,” Denise finally spoke. “It was after the Dow trial, in fact.” She smiled, just a fraction of an upturn to her lips. “She was in the galley that day Thomas went after opposing council.”

Jill smiled against the rim of her glass. There were bad memories associated with that day now, but she chose to ignore them in favor of remembering Cindy’s fierce defense of her when she’d been on the witness stand. “You know what Lindsay’s family calls Cindy?” Jill asked, deciding to share a little something with the other woman.

Denise glanced at her, curiosity clear in her dark eyes.

“Spitfire,” Jill drawled, adding a little Texas twang to it for fun. She watched as Denise tried not to laugh and felt charmed by that. “Fits, doesn’t it?”

“Aptly,” Denise replied before taking a sip of her wine. “They’re quite a match,” she said softly once she’d swallowed.

Jill didn’t have to hear Lindsay and Cindy’s names to know they were the ones being discussed. “They are,” she agreed warmly.

“You ever wonder what it would be like?” Denise asked. “To find something like that?”

Jill’s head came up at the hint of yearning in Denise’s voice. Her blue eyes jerked toward the bottle once more, and Jill realized Denise had made more of a dent in it than she’d realized. “I…” She shrugged as she searched for the right words.

Denise snorted. “Forget it. I forgot who I was talking to.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jill demanded.

“Love ‘em and leave ‘em Bernhardt.” Denise took another sip of her wine. “Everyone knows what you’re interested in.”

Was that a note of hurt Jill heard in her boss’s voice? The attorney frowned with confusion and tried to tamp down her immediate angry reaction. Denise liked goading her, and Jill was coming to realize that some of Denise’s iciness was, in fact, a defense mechanism. “No,” Jill said with determination as she set down her glass and reached for Denise’s, taking it away.

“No what?” Denise practically growled.

“No I am not playing this game with you tonight.” Jill stepped closer to her boss as she set Denise’s glass on the counter. “Like it or not, Denise, I’m going to be your friend tonight. You can be as nasty as you want to be to me if it makes you feel better, but I am not going to-” Jill’s words ended abruptly as Denise closed the distance between them and kissed her. Long fingers threaded through Jill’s short hair, tugging her closer and the blonde stumbled into her boss, her arms circling Denise’s waist automatically. Some distant part of her was screaming at her to stop this, but the rest of her was suddenly consumed by the taste of Denise’s wine-flavored tongue as it teased and tangled with her own.

“You want to help me tonight?” Denise whispered against Jill’s lips when they parted. “Then help me forget for a little while.” She closed the distance again and kissed the attorney once more, her fingers pulling insistently at Jill’s shirt, freeing it from the waistband of the lawyer’s skirt.

“Wait,” Jill gasped as she felt Denise’s hands brush her stomach, sending fire racing through her veins. “Wait.” Dizzy with the sudden heady and unexpected rush of desire, Jill staggered backward, nearly falling onto the tile floor. She caught an edge of the counter, keeping herself upright on shaking legs. Her fingers came to her lips, as if the touch would make the last few moments any more real. “Wait,” she blurted one last time.

Her cell phone chose that moment to ring, chirping out a happy tune that sounded completely ludicrous in the sudden thick silence that had settled between herself and Denise.

Denise snatched up her glass of wine. “Better get that,” she practically snarled as she walked away. “Could be a musketeer... or maybe your girlfriend.”

Shaking her head in a daze, Jill could barely believe what had transpired just moments ago. She fetched her cell phone from her pocket and flipped it open, bringing it to her ear. “What?”

“And hello to you, too,” Claire drawled with humor. “Where are you?”

“Um... I’m at Denise’s apartment,” Jill admitted as her fingertips grazed her bottom lip once more. It still tingled, still tasted like wine.

“She all right?” Claire asked with genuine concern.

“I have no idea,” Jill admitted as she watched Denise kick off her high heel shoes in the next room. Her blue eyes were drawn to the toned calves of her boss’s legs and the attorney licked her lips. “I...” She shook her head again through a deepening fog of lust. “What’s up?” Jill hoped Claire didn’t hear the husky tone to her voice.

“I think you need to come to my office.”

Jill scrubbed a hand over her face as she realized Denise was unbuttoning her blouse. The silk slipped from Denise’s shoulders and fell into a light blue puddle on the floor. Jill swallowed hard. “Why?” she almost squeaked.

“Nikki is here.”

Jill’s attention snapped back to the conversation instantly. “What?”

“You heard me. Now get down here and say hello.”

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A booted foot tapped a nervous tempo on the morgue room floor. Claire glanced up from

her computer where she was typing up her final report on Kelly Yung's autopsy and gave her friend a look that made Nikki's toe stop in its tracks.

"Sorry," Nikki murmured with a hint of her southern drawl. She tucked her long black hair behind her ears. "This seemed like such a good idea when I was on the plane."

"Not so much now?" Claire guessed with a sympathetic smile as she leaned back in her chair and regarded her old friend. "Time has been kind," she said gently.

Nikki's head came up and she smiled bashfully. "To both of us." She winked. "At least time has been. I know all our cases sure haven't." She studied her fingernails. "I kept tabs on the whole Kiss-Me-Not thing. I should have called."

Claire felt a twinge of guilt. Nikki had kept up with them even if they hadn't kept up with Nikki. All those years they thought Nikki was at fault for the end of their friendship... Claire realized in that moment that she and the others were just as much to blame if not more so. "Lindsay saw the flowers you sent to her father's funeral."

"Yeah?" Nikki sighed and slid her hands into the back pockets of her worn blue jeans. "Seemed like a copout."

"It meant a lot to her, Nik," Claire promised, the nickname slipping out without conscious thought. "It meant a lot to all of us. I know we didn't end on good terms..."

"What a polite way of putting it," Nikki teased. She turned and sat on the edge of Claire's desk. "Still... I should have been here for Marty... for Lindsay."

They sat in silence for a moment, each thinking about the past and how many different ways and times they could have fixed the damage between them. Nikki sighed again. "It was... big of you... to let me know about this case."

"You're a good cop, Nikki. Even when we haven't been the best of friends, I always knew that. If you can help us bring down this bastard before he claims another life..." Claire trailed off, remembering Denise's shattered composure and the tiny wail that had caught in the attorney's throat. She closed her eyes.

"My daddy eventually jerked a knot in my tail when I got home. He helped me clean up my life. Get my head on straight," Nikki told her in a quiet voice. "It was just... when mom died... I..." Nikki swallowed, remembering how she'd unraveled in the weeks and months following her mother's death. She could barely believe she'd come that unhinged when she looked at her life now. The only thing that could send her spiraling that out of control now would be if something happened to Nora, and that was a thought she couldn't bear to dwell on.

"I know." Claire reached across the desk and captured Nikki's hand, squeezing it gently. They looked at each other, hesitant smiles on their faces, and Claire felt time fall away. It

was like it had been eight years ago when they had been young and idealistic. So much like Cindy was now, all fresh faced and full of enthusiasm. Raynor and Arnold had worn away some of that shine, Claire knew, but Cindy was still just as determined, if not more so, to see justice done.

Nikki squeezed back. "I've missed you."

"We missed you, too."

Jill paused in the doorway, taking a deep breath when she saw the two women holding hands. Nikki seemed to have barely aged a day. She remembered that last night they were together. The screaming, the crying... Nikki had stormed out a mess, shouting the most hurtful things she could imagine.

And Jill knew she'd chosen to be righteously angry and to nurse her hurt rather than see through it to understand what hell Nikki had been in when she'd said what she did. They'd never spoken again.

Jill cleared her throat and warm, familiar brown eyes shifted their attention onto her. Jill couldn't help the smile that split her features. Despite the way they ended things, it was damn good to see the face in front of her. "Hi, gorgeous."

Nikki's eyes teared as she got up from the desk and crossed the room, throwing her arms around Jill and squeezing hard. "Hi, beautiful," Nikki answered, recalling their favorite nicknames for each other. She leaned back and studied Jill's face. "Looking damn fine after having one hell of a year."

"I moisturize," Jill deadpanned and earned a sexy, southern chuckle from the dark-haired woman. "You look good, Nikki."

"Better than the last time you saw me," Nikki joked with the truth. "I hope this is okay... me crashing the party."

"Whatever it takes to catch this guy. His latest victim was someone important to my boss."

"How is Denise doing?" Claire asked.

"She got drunk and hit on me," Jill confessed breezily, trying to forget what Denise's heat and curves had felt like pressed up against her. She'd barely been able to think of anything else in the taxi.

"Whoa," Nikki muttered. "Still a magnet for that sort of thing, huh?"

"She did what?" Claire got to her feet and came around her desk before leaning against it. Crossing her arms, Claire waited for Jill to continue with obvious curiosity.

“Denise was drunk,” Jill said as if that explained everything.

“And libidinous, apparently,” Nikki added with a wicked grin. “You go, girl.”

“We didn’t have sex,” Jill hastily added in case her friends got the wrong idea.

“Was it because I interrupted?” Claire drawled knowingly.

Jill pursed her lips and glared at the medical examiner, earning another chuckle from Nikki. “It was Denise,” Jill reminded her friend. “My *boss*.”

“Who you were dreaming about this morning as you slept at my desk,” Claire added, taking a wicked delight in making Jill fidget.

“What is the world coming to when Jill Bernhardt turns down sex?” Nikki wondered.

“Hey,” Jill replied with heat but still amused. “You aren’t exactly known for your restraint either, missy.”

Claire started laughing. “Lord. The more things change the more they stay the same. You two are still like a pair of squabbling siblings.”

Nikki scratched the back of her neck self-consciously. “Yeah, well... I’m showing more restraint these days... at least... you know... it’s just one person...”

Claire and Jill gaped. “You settled down?” Jill asked in surprise.

The detective shrugged jerkily. “I’m figuring the whole thing out.”

“And how’s that going for you?” Claire asked cheekily.

“Better than you two obviously think it is,” Nikki fired back with a tinge of amusement.

“What’s his name?” Jill demanded.

“Or her name,” Claire added, remembering that Nikki had a fondness for women as well as men.

“Are there pictures?” Jill asked before sidling up to Nikki again. “I’ll bet there are pictures.”

“You so haven’t changed,” Nikki claimed as Jill tried to snatch the detective’s wallet residing in her back pocket. “Still nose-y and still trying to grab my ass.” She swatted at the blonde woman, but Jill still managed to seize her prize. “Give me that.”

Jill spun away and raced toward Claire as if the medical examiner had ninja skills that would protect her. “Let’s see what we have here.”

“Jill…” Nikki practically whined as the attorney flipped the wallet open and she and Claire leaned in to have a closer look.

“Wow,” Jill murmured when she got a look at the honey-blonde woman with the jade green eyes that stared up at her from Nikki’s wallet. “Who is that?”

Nikki grabbed the wallet away from both women who looked up at her expectantly. “That’s my partner,” she huffed.

“Partner?” Claire asked. “It’s developed that far?”

“My partner,” Nikki reiterated. “On the force,” she qualified only to wince when she realized that was the way Nora tended to clarify their relationship to other people in case they got suspicious.

“Too bad,” Jill said sincerely. “She’s beautiful.”

“So the case,” Nikki said to get them off the hunt.

“She changed the topic,” Jill noted.

“Mhm,” Claire agreed. “Highly suspect.” She tilted her head and looked at Nikki. “What’s her name?”

Nikki sighed, not sure why she wanted to keep her relationship with her partner a secret, maybe it was just habit by now. “Nora,” she confessed.

“Seriously?” Jill asked. “Nikki and Nora?” She remembered that Cindy had mentioned Nora Delaney to them, but she hadn’t connected the humor in the names until now.

“Like I’ve never gotten that one before.” Nikki stuffed her wallet in the back pocket of her jeans.

Nikki was saved from further grilling about her love life as the door to the coroner’s office swung open and Cindy came bounding in with Lindsay trailing closely behind. “Hey,” Cindy greeted Claire a little breathlessly. “Glad you’re still here. We needed to chat with you a second.” Cindy smiled at the newcomer and started to apologize for interrupting when her eidetic memory kicked into hyper drive and she went still. “Oh.”

Lindsay hung up her phone after listening to Claire’s voicemail, suspecting what had made her lover go quiet. Her gaze moved from Cindy to Jill and Claire and finally to Nikki, locking onto her old friend’s warm brown eyes with a sense of shock. Seeing Cindy and Nikki in the same space was like watching the past and present collide. “Hi,”

Lindsay greeted everyone when she could think of nothing else to say.

“Hey, Linz,” Nikki greeted cautiously. Her brown eyes moved onto the redhead. “And you must be Cindy,” she said hesitantly as she sized the younger woman up. Nikki offered her hand and noted that it took Cindy a moment to take it. “Nice to meet you.”

Jill and Lindsay exchanged glances wondering if Cindy would behave.

“You, too,” Cindy managed, hoping she sounded more sincere than she felt. She let go of Nikki’s hand and stepped back to stand next to Lindsay. Nervously, Cindy tucked her hair behind her ears. “I take it you’re here about the case.”

“I am.” Nikki noticed the tone seemed to have changed in the room. Her gaze went to Lindsay who gave her an apologetic smirk. Nikki wasn’t sure of the reason for Lindsay’s expression, but at least her old friend wasn’t reacting with anger at her presence. “I’m sorry to just show up like this,” Nikki told them. “But this case has haunted me for a long time. I’d really like to see if I could do something to close it.”

“You really think this is the same case?” Cindy asked.

“Claire let me look over everything. It’s the same case. You got a serial killer who uses a drug as his weapon of choice. He killed seven kids in New Orleans and then vanished. We figured he must have fallen off his boat somewhere and died. The coastguard found it abandoned in the Gulf of Mexico. Now it looks like he was just biding his time.”

“And moving across country,” Jill added.

Nikki went to the bag she’d dropped in the doorway when she’d first arrived and fetched a folder. “The suspect we were looking at was Brian Renollet. He was thirty-seven at the time. A rich boy who very much liked to party.” She handed the folder to Cindy first; sensing that including the reporter right off the bat was a good idea.

Cindy looked at her in surprise but took the file and glanced down at his picture. “Handsome,” she admitted when she saw his wavy brown hair and green eyes. She handed the folder to Lindsay who gave it a cursory glance before passing it on to Jill and Claire.

“Yeah. His looks got him places when his money couldn’t.” Nikki shook her head. “I knew in my gut it was him, but we never could pin the guy down. No one was talking and the underground parties he was throwing were always so damn secretive. Apparently all the attendees had to wear masks. After a time, when we had the information out there about magnolia... people would still take the damn stuff because they knew that they were in for a hell of a sweet high as long as they didn’t get the random tainted pill.”

“Wait,” Claire spoke up. “You’re telling me people at these parties knew some of the drugs were tainted and they took them anyway?”

“Like Russian Roulette,” Lindsay murmured with a frown. “Supposed to make you feel more alive when you cheat death.”

Nikki nodded. “Something like that. I still say this guy is a serial killer, though. He killed seven in my neck of the woods, and I heard he’s up to four here.”

“Eleven people,” Jill said with a shake of her head. “All dying in a quest for the perfect high.”

Lindsay sighed and held up her phone. “As much as it pains me to do this... I should call Snow and Tom, let them know about this.” She knew Hollywood would get her ass chapped to have this info handed to her on a silver platter courtesy of the NOPD, but a lead was a lead wherever it came from.

“Tom Hogan?” Nikki asked with a knowing smile.

Lindsay gave her old friend a version of her laser vision and left the room.

“Um... they’re divorced,” Jill pointed out to Nikki.

“Really?” Nikki drawled. “Please tell me she wised up and went looking for better pickings. Tom is cute as a button and all, but not exactly stimulating in the conversation department.

Cindy bit her lip to hide a smile.

“Actually, Tom left Lindsay,” Claire informed Nikki. “But...” Her eyes slid to Cindy’s and locked gazes with the reporter. “Lindsay’s taste has definitely improved.”

Nikki did a double take when she saw where Claire was looking. She opened her mouth to say something, wondering if she was imagining things when Lindsay came back into the room.

“He’s putting out an APB.” Lindsay focused her attention on Jill. “And Maggie seems to think I’m horning in on her investigation. She had some very lovely adjectives for me.”

“Sorry,” Jill sighed. “I think she’s really feeling the heat on this one. She hasn’t been able to find Kelly’s boyfriend... and I haven’t called to tell her I won’t be joining her for dinner,” she remembered out loud. “Shit.”

“Um... I think I might have filled her in on that,” Lindsay admitted with a grimace. “Because then she had a few choice words for you and Denise.”

Jill rolled her eyes and slipped her phone out of her pocket. “I should call her and

smooth things over.”

Lindsay bit her lip as she looked at Cindy. “Want to go get a jump on the pack, Lois Lane?”

Cindy hesitated, her gaze darting to Jill before swinging back to Lindsay. Her lover gave her a faint nod. “Yeah,” Cindy said without enthusiasm. “I guess I better. Let me know if you guys hear anything. I want to get this guy for Denise. I think we owe her one.”

“That we do,” Claire agreed with a glance in Jill’s direction. Her friend was staring at the floor, a funny look on her features, her cell phone cradled between her palms. Claire frowned, wondering what to make of Jill’s distracted state.

“Nice meeting you,” Cindy managed for Nikki. “I’ll catch you all in a bit,” she informed the rest before heading out, her hand stroking down Lindsay’s arm as she passed.

Nikki watched the touch in surprise but her face remained neutral. Silence reigned when the reporter left as the original members of the club were left alone. The detective cleared her throat, sensing a sudden undercurrent of tension that had nothing to do with her. “I’m going to check in with my partner,” she announced as she slipped her cell phone from her jacket pocket. She hooked her thumb toward the hallway. “Be right back.”

They all watched her leave before Claire and Jill focused on Lindsay.

“What’s wrong?” Claire asked.

Lindsay wasn’t even mildly surprised that Claire had read her so easily. “I need to talk to Jill for a second,” Lindsay admitted, finally deciding that she wasn’t going to play Pete’s mind games anymore.

Jill blinked in surprise. “Is this about…”

“It’s not about Maggie,” Lindsay promised quickly and with a hint of exasperation.

“Although we should probably have a long talk about that soon.”

“Whatever it is you have to say,” Jill told her best friend, “you can say in front of Claire.”

Nodding distractedly, Lindsay sighed, mentally cursing Pete’s name once more for messing with all their lives. “I have some information about William Carter.”

Claire stood up from her desk, her gaze worriedly darting to Jill who’d gone frighteningly still.

“Hopefully you’re going to tell me someone found him dead in a ditch somewhere,” Jill said after a moment, her tone cold.

“Jill,” Claire admonished.

“Sort of,” Lindsay admitted. “Pete claims he killed him.”

Jill could only stare at Lindsay. She felt Claire’s touch ease around her shoulders, offering her wordless comfort and much needed support. “Why?” Jill hissed. “Why would he tell you that?”

“He didn’t tell me. He told Denise,” Lindsay explained. “She came and told me. Denise was trying to do the right thing by both of us.”

Blue eyes closed and Jill swore viciously. “The bastard won’t tell you where he hid the body. He wants to see you...”

“Yes.” Lindsay didn’t bother to deny it. Her friends knew her too well. “But if you need this...” Lindsay began.

Jill shook her head. “I’ll handle it.”

“Sweetheart,” Claire murmured.

“I’ll handle it,” the attorney vowed. “You are going nowhere near that man,” Jill promised Lindsay with conviction. “I’m through with him playing games with you... with all of us. I’ll handle it.”

Lindsay felt guilty for the relief that swept through her, but when Jill stepped forward and wrapped her up in a fierce, hard hug, it didn’t matter. Sometimes you had to let your friends protect you instead of always trying to protect your friends. It had been a hard lesson to learn, but she was making progress. “I love you,” Lindsay murmured into Jill’s neck.

“I love you, too,” Jill whispered as Claire looked on. “You let me take this round with Pete. I have a thing or two I need to say to him anyway.”

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## ***ACT IV***

Two days later, Lindsay stood in Tom’s office and felt like tearing her own hair out. That was a safer thing to contemplate than punching Maggie Snow in the face. “Are you kidding me with this?” Lindsay looked from Snow to Tom. “I am not impeding your damn investigation,” she snarled at both of them. “I haven’t stepped one foot near a single suspect or a crime scene. Where in the hell do you get off...”

“Linz,” Tom interjected. “Inspector Snow isn’t accusing you of impeding her

investigation, but you are meddling in it.”

“Tom, I just got back from a few days off. How in the hell would I be meddling in the investigation? *Why* would I be meddling in the investigation?”

“You brought in your friend from New Orleans,” Maggie reminded Lindsay. “The one who has been under foot for the last two days. She’s walking around here like this is her case.”

“It is her case,” Lindsay fired back. “She was on it first.”

“The New Orleans murders are Detective Beaumont’s jurisdiction,” Tom agreed, “and we should make every effort to allow her to participate in our investigation.”

“But...” Maggie started, practically spitting she was so mad.

“But,” Tom silenced her with a look, “the San Francisco cases take precedence here. You’re in charge of the investigation, Snow. As long as Nikki wants in on this case, she works for you.”

Maggie straightened a little, liking the sound of that.

“Which last time I checked,” Lindsay countered, “Nikki was doing that anyway. What is your problem?”

“My problem,” Maggie answered, “is you and your little club.”

Lindsay crossed her arms and tilted her head. “You’re upset with us for helping you or for the fact we don’t like you dating Jill?”

Tom’s head popped up from where he’d been reading a file and trying to stay out of the crossfire. His eyes widened at the news but he said nothing on the subject.

“I don’t need your help,” Maggie countered.

“Everybody needs help, Hollywood,” Lindsay replied, her voice pitching to its lowest and gravelliest register. “Take it from someone who learned the hard way.”

“Stay away from my case,” Maggie snarled.

“Trade ya,” Lindsay offered. “I’ll stay away from your case if you stay away from Jill.”

Snow shook her head. “Am I dismissed, sir?” she demanded of Tom.

“By all means,” the lieutenant answered, happy to have the shouting over. He waited until Maggie left before turning his gaze on Lindsay.

“What?” Lindsay said in peevish response to the look. “I’m not messing with her case!”

“She’s frustrated, Lindsay. Snow hasn’t been able to locate the boyfriend and she has the media tightening the noose.”

“Hey,” Lindsay volleyed. “She wanted the big case so she gets everything that goes with it. All I did was make a phone call after Nikki showed up. It’s not my fault if Nikki is stomping all over Hollywood’s toes.”

Tom rubbed at his face and sighed. “Hell,” he muttered. “I’d give the case to Beaumont if I could. She wants this one bad.”

“Do you blame her?” Lindsay asked, her voice evening out.

“Not at all,” Tom murmured.

“And what makes Nikki the better cop here is that she wants the case for all the right reasons.”

Tom shook his head. “Maggie is a good cop, Linz.”

“I know that. Maggie has the makings to be a great cop... but she’s cocky and she’s about the glory – not the victim.”

“You used to be about the glory, too,” Tom reminded her gently.

“I know,” Lindsay sighed. “That’s what makes me want to smack her, because I know how much pain she’s going to be in one day.”

“Maybe she never will feel that, Linz. Just because Snow reminds you of you when you were younger...”

“She’s got it in her, Tom,” Lindsay said slowly. “I can see it when she looks at Jill. It turns my stomach to see them together because I really don’t like Hollywood, but she cares about Jill.”

“That is one smoking hot combination to think about,” Tom confessed as he leaned back in his chair.

Lindsay rolled her eyes and headed for Tom’s other door. “You’re such a man.”

“Thanks for noticing,” he called after her with a wicked smirk.

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A slam made Nikki look up from the bullpen. As she watched, Maggie came storming out of Tom's office. The inspector didn't even spare the New Orleans detective a glance as she stalked by and headed out into the late afternoon sunlight.

Nikki pursed her lips. She didn't have to be a cop to deduce the topic of conversation that had gotten Snow so mad. She'd been stepping all over the inspector's investigation since Tom had brought her into it. Nikki didn't blame the other woman for being upset. She knew she sure as hell would have been had she been in Maggie's shoes, but Nikki knew Brian Renollet, and she didn't care who she pissed off to catch him. It was just a shame that Lindsay was taking the heat for her lack of lady-like manners when it came to handling Snow's turf.

Still, it had to be galling for the other detective that Nikki had swooped in and made more progress on the investigation in two hours than Snow had in days. Snow was simply forgetting that Nikki had had several years to stew over the case and that Renollet had already gotten away from her once.

Sighing, Nikki rubbed at her tired eyes as her thoughts spun around the killer they were after. Two days and not a single soul in the city of San Francisco had stepped forward with even a sliver of useful information about Renollet. It wasn't surprising, Nikki decided, given her previous experience with the man, but it was damned annoying. While they chased their tails, Renollet was no doubt mixing up another batch of magnolia. The question was whether or not they could catch him before another kid died.

At least the girls had welcomed her back with open arms which had been the one saving grace of the whole damn trip. Nikki had thought she'd put those hurts and regrets behind her, but now she knew she'd just buried them deep and had really never let them go. Sitting around a booth at Papa Joe's and hearing her friends' familiar laughs the night before had brought tears to her eyes. She'd started blubbering like an idiot.

And that had started the waterworks with Claire. Jill had followed and finally Lindsay was wiping her eyes as well as a bemused Cindy Thomas had looked on and handed them all napkins from the dispenser on the table.

Thomas. Nikki leaned back in Lindsay's chair at the precinct, her fingers toying with the edge of a copy of the Register that sat on Lindsay's desk. The reporter was a tough nut to crack, but Nikki felt like she'd made some inroads with her. At least Cindy would hold her gaze now and didn't bristle every time she walked into a room. Nikki wasn't sure how she'd offended the redhead, but Cindy was wary as all hell around her.

Nikki sighed again as she observed the inspectors in the bullpen. Had she remained in the city all those years ago, she probably would have had a desk here in homicide. Maybe even one near Lindsay. Her life could have been so much different, but she wouldn't trade her time with Nora for anything, not even the friends she left behind. There was guilt with the acknowledgment, but something freeing about it as well. She'd made her mistakes and her choices and learned from both, but in the end, Nikki knew she

was where she was meant to be.

She slipped her phone from her pocket as she waited for Lindsay to come down from Tom's office. Her thumb smoothed across the screen as Nikki thought about her partner. She craved the sound of Nora's voice, the heat of her lover's nearness. Nikki even missed the way Nora smelled, especially when she was taking a deep breath from the curve of Nora's neck. "You got it bad, Beaumont," she chided herself with a little chuckle at her mooning thoughts. Still, she hadn't spoken with Nora since last night and had been unable to reach her all day. Nikki wondered if she was going into withdrawal.

"Something will turn up."

Nikki tipped her head back to look up at Lindsay's partner. He was standing over her, a cup of coffee extended in offering. "What?"

Jacobi smiled. "On your killer. Something is gonna pop soon. You can feel it."

Accepting the cup of coffee, Nikki gave him a hesitant but genuine smile. "From your lips to God's ears, sugar." She winked playfully at Jacobi. Nikki found she'd already developed a serious soft spot for the inspector.

He chuckled and perched a hip on Lindsay's desk. "So I'll bet you have some stories to tell about our mutual friends."

"Mmm." Nikki swallowed the coffee, feeling it warm and wake her. Hours spent reading files and manning phones had her eyes drooping. "Maybe a few," she teased. She opened her mouth to begin a particularly juicy tale when a sharp order cut her off.

"Don't even think about it," Lindsay's voice carried from Tom's office as she trotted down the steps. "Get away from her, Jacobi."

"Somebody's paranoid," Jacobi murmured to Nikki. "You let me buy you dinner before you skip town so I can hear all about what she doesn't want me to know."

Nikki covered up a smile by taking another hit of coffee as Jacobi chuckled and moved away. She looked up at Lindsay as her old friend arrived at her desk. "Anything new?"

Lindsay gave the fleeing Jacobi her laser vision before focusing her attention on Nikki. "I don't know. Hollywood is running this case, and she isn't letting me anywhere near it."

"Even though you brought her the leads that could break it?"

"You brought the leads," Lindsay clarified. "And the fact that you're an old friend and another cop just chapped Snow's ass."

“You sound all broken up about that.”

“Devastated,” Lindsay drawled dramatically before sinking down onto the corner of her desk. “So what did you tell him?”

“Tell who what?” Nikki asked.

“Don’t act all miss innocent on me. What secrets did you spill to Jacobi?” Lindsay demanded.

“What happens in the club, stays in the club,” Nikki reminded her.

“It’s not a club,” Cindy reminded them both as she arrived. She offered Nikki a hesitant smile. It was hard not to warm up to the southern detective even though Cindy had been doing her best the past two days. “I’ve got something.”

Nikki got to her feet. “On Renollet?”

“On Daniel Glass,” Cindy announced.

“Who in the hell is Daniel Glass?” Lindsay wanted to know.

“Kelly Yung’s boyfriend. The same boyfriend Inspector Snow hasn’t been able to locate since Kelly turned up dead,” Cindy elaborated with a smirk.

“What about him?” Lindsay asked.

“I have him in Interview Two. He has some information he wanted the press to know about Kelly, and I convinced him to come talk to the two of you.” Cindy held out her hands. “Am I good or am I good?”

Impulsively, Nikki leaned over and kissed a startled Cindy on the cheek. “I’m in love with you. Now where in the hell is Interview Two?”

“Should we wait on Maggie?” Cindy asked, fighting a blush as Lindsay turned away and headed for the interview rooms with Nikki in the lead.

“You can if you want,” Lindsay teased, spinning around and walking backward as she spoke.

“As if,” Cindy sniffed before racing to catch up.

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“Poor, stupid kids,” Lindsay murmured an hour later. She closed the folder on the statement Glass had given them about the night of Kelly Yung’s death as she settled

against the interview table. Glass had just left, and Lindsay now found herself alone with Nikki, Cindy and Jill who had arrived slightly late to the party.

“At least Denise should be able to find some solace in his statement,” Cindy added softly. “Kelly didn’t take the drug. It was forced on her.”

Jill sighed and sank down into one of the vacant chairs. “I don’t know if it will make Denise feel better or worse to find out Kelly was playing crusader and trying to bring this guy down.”

“I don’t know your boss,” Nikki ventured, “but it would make me feel better. If it were me, I’d wish a million times over that Kelly had come to me and asked for help, but at least I’d know she went out with her heart in the right place and as the type of person I had believed her to be.” She dropped her hand onto Jill’s back and rubbed soothing circles.

“What was that girl thinking?” Cindy asked the others as she leaned against the one-way glass. “I mean, why would she think she was capable of going up against a killer like that? She walked right into a dangerous situation and didn’t even tell anyone that could have helped her where she was going or what she was doing.”

Jill and Lindsay both looked at her incredulously.

“What?” Cindy asked without a clue.

“Hello, pot... this is kettle calling,” Lindsay drawled.

Cindy frowned and crossed her arms. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Uh-huh.” Lindsay turned and slid the folder to Jill as an amused Nikki looked on. “So what do we do? If Glass is right, there is another rave tonight. Your girlfriend isn’t answering her cell phone for any of us, so I say we move on this without her.”

“Maggie will be majorly pissed if you bring this guy down without notifying her,” Jill informed them. “It’s her case.”

“Well...” Nikki added. “Technically it was my case first.” She smiled deviously.

Lindsay motioned at Nikki with a wave of her hand. “There you go,” she said to Jill.

“Didn’t you get yelled at earlier for interfering?” Jill asked Lindsay.

“Hollywood tattled on me? Seriously?” Lindsay asked. “And I didn’t interfere! Well...” Lindsay amended with a one-shoulder shrug. “I hadn’t interfered until now...”

“You just want to get back at Maggie for accusing you of murder,” Jill responded drolly.

Nikki's head bobbed up. "Huh?"

"Well... yeah," Lindsay confessed as she slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. "But I also owe Denise a favor or two," she said with a softer look for Jill. "I'm not gonna wait on Hollywood to show up just because she didn't want to take our calls. We've got a chance to stop this guy. We need to take it."

Jill took a slow breath and looked at all of them watching her expectantly. Maggie hadn't answered her calls either since their quick five minute chat earlier, suggesting the inspector was still mad about their busted date the other night. "I'll get the warrant."

"Almost like old times," Nikki declared before her gaze shifted to Cindy who bristled at the comment. "But better," she amended with a sly smile for the redhead. "Now we're more important and can get more shit done."

"Damn right," Lindsay agreed.

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"Maggie is going to be pissed."

Lindsay snorted at the note of glee in Cindy's voice as she watched the other officers move into position. Strapping on her Kevlar vest, Lindsay smiled as Cindy distractedly helped her with the Velcro strips. It felt rather weird having Cindy help her into her clothes instead of out of them for a change. "You need to get over this repressed anger of yours," she deadpanned as she looked down onto damp red hair with affection. The night was misting, coating their hair and skin and making the hood of Lindsay's Jeep shine in the streetlights.

"She accused you of murder," Cindy reminded her lover while swiping at a loose, damp curl. She tapped her own chest. "I think I have a perfectly logical intense dislike of the woman for that."

"You mean hate."

"That, too," Cindy agreed readily. She swiped at another tendril of hair as Nikki approached, already suited up in her protective gear. Her eyes scanned the crowd of cops for Maggie but there was no sign of her. Cindy felt a tiny twinge of remorse, but she quickly stuffed it down. Maggie should have taken their damn calls.

Cindy frowned when she saw a red sedan pull into the parking lot across the street. She thought it looked vaguely familiar and got confirmation when Denise Kwon emerged from the driver's side. "Uh-oh."

Lindsay and Nikki turned to see what the reporter was looking at.

“Let me guess,” Nikki ventured. “Denise?”

“Dammit,” Lindsay murmured. “Wait here.” She moved away and out into the street, angling to cut Denise off. Jill’s boss looked furious and had her attention zeroed in on Tom and Jacobi who were near the command center truck. Lindsay caught Denise’s elbow, startling the other woman whose gaze swung away from Tom and onto Lindsay with laser intensity. “You can’t be here.”

“Like hell.” Denise tried to jerk away from Lindsay but the inspector’s grip tightened painfully on her arm. “You didn’t even notify me. I had to hear it from the damn janitor when I went in to get some files from the office.”

“We would have called once we had him in custody, Denise,” Lindsay promised as she half-walked, half-dragged Denise back across the street toward her car.

“Jill should have called me.”

“Jill has been busy making sure there isn’t a loophole for this guy to wiggle out of... and she’s doing it for you, so don’t go getting mad at her.”

Denise finally squirmed out of Lindsay’s grip as they reached her car. Her gaze shifted and she caught Cindy and another woman watching her from across the street. “New member of the musketeers?” Denise snarled at Nikki.

Lindsay looked back. “No. An old one.” She opened the door to Denise’s car. “I’ll let you stay, but you have to stay in your car. I’ll put a cop on this door if I have to.”

“I am the Acting District Attorney...” Denise started to protest.

“You’re a victim,” Lindsay cut her off brutally, but she didn’t have time for this. She watched as Denise blinked several times in shock at the title. “You lost a loved one, Denise. This is personal for you.”

“Inspector...” Denise began to protest.

“We all want justice for Kelly, Denise,” Lindsay promised. “Now stay out of the way and let us get it.”

The anger bled from the attorney and her shoulders slumped. “I just...”

“I know.” Lindsay put her hands on the other woman’s shoulders and squeezed. “I know,” she said a little more softly.

Denise stared at Lindsay for a long moment before slowly nodding. “Don’t let him walk, Lindsay,” she pleaded, trusting Lindsay Boxer with a glimpse of the soul she tried so

hard to pretend she didn't have.

"He won't. I promise." A squeal of tires made Lindsay glance to her left and she couldn't help the smirk as she recognized Hollywood's car.

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"Uh-oh," Nikki muttered as she watched Maggie Snow slam her car door shut and make a beeline for Lindsay. Nikki thought Snow seemed like a pretty capable and likable inspector, but clearly Lindsay, Cindy and Claire had some issues with her. Lindsay was sauntering toward Snow while Snow looked like she was ready to start swinging once she got in arms reach.

Cindy turned in time to see Nikki breaking into a jog as she tried to intercept the two officers. "Uh-oh," she echoed before giving chase.

"You bitch."

"Hello to you, too, Hollywood," Lindsay greeted breezily, tension rolling into her tall frame when she saw Maggie's fingers flex into fists. "Finally answer your phone?"

"I was with the family of the victim. I turned it off," Maggie snapped. "You just couldn't wait, could you?"

"This isn't about me and you," Lindsay said as Maggie got closer. Lindsay stopped walking, bracing herself for a fight as other officers quickly started to move in to intercede. She saw Tom and Jacobi approaching and was aware of Nikki closing in to her left. A fight had been brewing between her and Maggie since day one, and it looked like it was about to happen at the worst possible moment. Maggie was a damn good cop, and Lindsay suspected she was a pretty decent person, but she was too ambitious for her own good. She wanted what she wanted and heaven help anyone who got in her way. Part of Lindsay admired the other woman for that. The rest of her remembered being accused of being a killer. Her own rage swelled and she welcomed the chance for a little payback.

"The hell it isn't," Maggie snarled, fed up with Saint Boxer and her little club. She was through trying to impress them, to atone for what had happened with Kiss-Me-Not. They were never going to accept her and that fueled her anger at the one woman she saw standing between her and her ambitions toward the job and Jill.

Maggie swung her arm back to strike the first blow, only to have it grabbed and her feet neatly taken out from under her by someone from behind. She hit the asphalt with a crunch, but her attacker had slowed her fall, keeping her from doing too much damage to herself. She cursed as she was rolled over and straddled, her face pressed into the wet street. Cold cuffs snapped on her wrists.

Nikki stopped next to Lindsay, staring at the scene in shock. The blonde detective who'd neutralized the situation looked up at them both. "Sugar, you really do have the best timing," Nikki laughed almost giddily.

Detective Nora Delaney lifted her gaze and smiled at her partner. "I try. Hope I didn't just crash the party."

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"How was I supposed to know she was another cop?" Nora asked plaintively as Maggie Snow gave her a murderous glance from the command center. The detective had a fresh bruise or two, but was otherwise uninjured.

"I so wish I'd had my camera," Cindy commented with a nervous giggle as she stood next to Nora and her partner. Lindsay also lingered close by as did Jacobi. The police were about to move in on the old warehouse down the street now that they had confirmation that a rave was in process. There wasn't another reporter in sight. She was going to have a sweet exclusive tomorrow, but she would have traded it for the chance to watch Maggie get taken down another peg or two again.

Nora glanced at the redhead and smirked before her green eyes fastened on her partner again. "Did I screw up?"

"No," Lindsay said as she entered their little circle. "Probably kept me from doing something seriously stupid, actually."

Nikki put her hand on Nora's shoulder and squeezed. "This is Snow's case and she thought we were horning in."

"Oh. Well I would have been pissed, too," Nora murmured with another look at the stewing detective.

"She had her phone off and this was the only chance we've had to catch the guy," Cindy explained. She noticed Lindsay's look. "Okay... the only chance for the police to catch this guy. I'm just... you know... observing."

"Cindy's a reporter," Nikki explained at Nora's confused look.

"Uh-huh." Nora licked her lips, having guessed that bit of information already by the notepad in Cindy's hands. "I'd watch your back," she said to Lindsay. "I think your friend is going to want a rematch."

Lindsay looked over her shoulder where Tom was giving Snow a piece of his mind. Lindsay smirked a little at herself, acknowledging that she and Maggie had been kindred spirits once, but somewhere along the way the victims had become far more important to Lindsay than the medals and promotions. Hopefully Maggie would learn something from

all this. Lindsay returned her focus to the group. “God I feel old.”

“I wondered if you saw a little of you in a little of her.” Nikki softened the observation with a smile.

“We’re so not going there.” Lindsay snorted. She turned her gaze on Nora who was watching her with open curiosity. “Let’s get this over with,” she announced. “I want to hear what stories you have on our mutual friend here.”

“Hey!” Nikki protested.

“I bet you have a few as well,” Nora replied.

“Hey!” Nikki repeated with more volume.

“I can do you one better,” Lindsay announced as she watched the milling officers moving with sudden purpose. She leaned over and kissed Cindy on the head. “I have pictures.”

Jacobi appeared, putting his hand on Lindsay’s back. “Ladies, it’s show time.”

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Just the sight of him made Jill nauseous. Pete was watching her with interest as she was led to the interview room; his blue eyes fastened on her as the guards opened the door and let her step inside. She’d let him stew for a few days as she’d gathered her courage to face him. Despite her bravado with Lindsay, Jill was terrified of Pete Raynor, and seeing him shackled to the floor was cold comfort. Not even the two burly guards with her made Jill feel safe.

“Jill,” Pete greeted her as if they were old friends. “I knew you’d come eventually.”

“Did you?” she asked slowly.

Pete smiled. “I’ve always had a soft spot for you. You pushed Lindsay to talk to me. We got together in part because of you.”

Jill choked a little, feeling what she’d forced down at lunch trying to make a return trip. “You know why I’m here,” she answered tightly, ignoring his comments.

“I do.”

“Did you really kill him?” she asked. Her eyes darted to the clock on the wall behind him, realizing that Lindsay and Nikki were probably entering the warehouse right about now. She just wanted to get this over with so she could go talk to Denise, to fill her in on what was going on.

“I really did,” Pete admitted. “Strangled him in his car. He was going to run, you know. He was going to get away with touching another girl. He was going to get away with what he did to you.”

Pete was acting as if he'd done Jill a favor. Maybe he had, some part of her admitted, but the thought made her shiver. “Where is the body?” Jill asked.

He held up a finger and waggled it from side to side. “Now, now. You know the deal.”

“She's not coming, Pete,” Jill breathed.

His blue eyes hardened and the smile fell away. “You'll never know,” he informed her. “Never know where he's buried... if I'm really telling the truth...” The smile returned. “Five minutes is all I'm asking for, and you can put your mind at ease.”

“Put my mind at ease?” Jill's voice had steel in it. “Put my mind at ease? Are you kidding me? I pushed Lindsay at you. I pushed her into the arms of a maniac. You think I'll ever forgive myself for that?” She shook her head, her eyes flinty. “I don't care where William Carter is. He's not and never has been my family. Lindsay is, and I would go to hell and back for her.”

“Jill...” Pete's composure slipped and an edge of desperation entered his voice.

“Screw you, Pete. You want my thanks for killing Carter? Fine, but you will not see Lindsay until she testifies against your sorry ass in court.”

“You need to know!” Pete shouted slamming his hands down on the table and making Jill jump. “You need to see for yourself that he's dead!”

Jill turned and went to the door, her whole body quaking from the conversation but her voice was smooth as ice when she spoke. “Do I?” Without another word, Jill walked away, doing her damndest to pretend like Pete wasn't screaming her name with every step.

She'd won this round with the Kiss-Me-Not Killer, but the satisfaction felt hollow. Jill knew she'd never get back all he'd taken from her and her friends, but she'd take the victories where she could.

As for William Carter, he could rot in hell.

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The music was ungodly loud. Nikki winced as it seemed to throb deep in her veins, making her heart, head and ears hurt. Around her, men and women swayed to the beat, their faces hidden behind garish masks, their bodies melding and moving against each other in and out of the strobe lights. The scene looked surreal enough. Nikki couldn't

imagine what it looked like to anyone who was high.

She could feel Nora behind her, her partner's nearness a welcome warmth, despite the heat coming off the mass of moving bodies. Nora was going to have some explaining to do when they were back out in the coolness of the night and alone, but for now, Nikki was just glad she was there.

No one seemed to notice that the police had arrived and were moving through the crowd, guns drawn. Other officers were pulling the revelers outside in case there was gunfire, but Nikki knew a gun wasn't Glass' style. If the killer thought he was trapped with no way out, Nikki knew he'd swallow his own poison before going to prison.

A touch on her back made Nikki turn her head. Nora motioned at Lindsay who was gesturing toward the left front corner of the room. Nikki shifted her gaze and felt her heart lurch when she saw a devil looking back at her. Their eyes met and locked. She saw the recognition flare.

"Shit," Nikki hissed as Renollet bolted.

"Here we go," Nora drawled as Nikki sprinted into motion after the suspect. She gave chase, plowing through the crowd after her partner. It took pushing, shoving, and a few solid body slams to get people out of the way, but they muscled their way through the revelers, closing the gap between them and Renollet. Nora knew this case had haunted Nikki for years, and she prayed it would end here tonight, but she'd traveled halfway across the country to make sure it ended with Nikki in one piece.

Nora spotted Lindsay and Jacobi pursuing the suspect out the back door ahead of them. She heard Nikki curse between beats as she dodged a couple of toked college kids, elbowing them both aside as she identified herself as a police officer over the cacophony of sound.

They hit the door and tumbled out into the darkness and rain. Nikki drew up to get her bearings, feeling Nora exit just behind her. "Boat," Nikki managed, breathing hard. "He'd have a boat."

"Left," Nora shouted as she saw Lindsay and Jacobi running toward the Bay. Nikki didn't hesitate, taking off after the other detectives, using her long legs to close the distance. "He could have backup!" Nora shouted after her only to swear when Nikki kept running.

Other voices began to reach them. Commands were shouted and flashlight beams danced and bounced around on the asphalt as other officers joined the pursuit. Nikki ignored them, focusing on Lindsay's back through the rain, knowing her old friend had Renollet in her sights. Nikki was determined not to go home empty-handed. She would not face those families torn apart by Renollet and his poison again without the bastard behind bars.

A shot rang out and Nikki poured on the speed, lungs burning as she raced for the water. She watched Lindsay and Jacobi go down into defensive positions, crouching low and raising their weapons to return fire. Nora had been right. Renollet was obviously not alone.

“Nikki. Nikki!” Nora shouted at her partner when Nikki didn’t slow or take precautions at the sound of gunfire. More shots followed, a sudden spray of bullets that originated from the water. Nora leapt out and grabbed her partner around the waist, dragging them both down as bullets whizzed by above them. Nora rolled and returned fire, squeezing off several shots where she’d seen muzzle flashes moments before.

Maggie Snow barreled past them, firing at will at the water. Nikki staggered back on her feet and followed, much to Nora’s displeasure. Nora got her feet under her and chased after them both.

A boat motor caught, and Nikki’s heart lodged in her throat. She passed Maggie, wanting Renollet more than the other detective could imagine. Lindsay rose up and returned fire, hitting the hired gun at the wheel. He rocked back, the force of the impact knocking him over the seat just as Nikki leapt for Renollet. He was still in his devil mask when Nikki slammed into him, taking them both over the side and into the water.

“Nikki!” Lindsay and Nora’s voices overlapped as Nora pulled up inches before going into the Bay.

“We need light over here!” Maggie shouted as she jumped down into the boat, checking the man Lindsay had shot. She moved away from the shooter when she detected no pulse and pointed her gun and flashlight at the water. “Beaumont!”

Lindsay grabbed Nora’s arm, holding the detective in place. She could feel fear vibrating through the other woman. “Wait. Just wait.”

Nora was about to take Lindsay into the water with her when Nikki abruptly surfaced, dragging air into her lungs with a gasp. Nora shook out of Lindsay’s grasp and dropped down into the boat, scrambling next to Maggie as Nikki swam closer, an unconscious Renollet in tow.

Maggie shook her head. “Crazy bitch,” she muttered, but it sounded like a compliment.

Nora dropped to her knees and captured Nikki’s hand, pulling her toward the boat. “I am so going to kick your ass later,” she promised, shaking hard as tension and fear bled from her body.

“He’s all yours, Inspector,” Nikki said to Maggie, pushing the unconscious killer at the other officer.

Lindsay climbed into the speedboat and helped Maggie drag Renollet onboard. “Forgot how fast you run,” Lindsay said to Nikki as Nora eased her into the boat. She shot Maggie a look as the other inspector snapped the cuffs on Renollet. “Looks like you’ll get the glory after all,” she said casually.

Maggie looked down at the now shivering Nikki as Nora slipped off her jacket and wrapped it around her partner. “Mmm. I think I might be able to share a little,” she joked.

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A soft knock on Jill’s door the next morning pulled the attorney’s gaze away from her case notes on Renollet and onto Denise’s familiar form in her doorway. Jill closed the file and got to her feet, a mixture of emotions tumbling through her at the sight of her boss. She hadn’t seen Denise since the attorney had kissed her, and Jill suddenly found all the words she’d planned to say to the other woman vanishing now that it was time to use them.

“Good morning,” Denise greeted hesitantly.

“Good morning,” Jill replied neutrally, deciding it was best to let Denise lead the conversation.

“Renollet is singing like a bird,” Denise told her. “Turns out he played his little death game in Chicago as well. It’s a toss up who will get him first. The feds are making a play for him as well.”

“No surprise there,” Jill said. “I’m just glad he’s off the streets.”

“Yeah,” Denise said softly. “Wish it could have been sooner.” She cleared her throat. “Kelly’s funeral is tomorrow.”

“I’ll be happy to cover for you...”

“I’d like you to come,” Denise interrupted. “I think she’d like it if you came.”

Jill dropped her gaze and took a shallow breath. “I’ll clear my schedule.” She met Denise’s gaze again. “Listen... I...”

“I heard you went to see Raynor,” Denise cut her off before Jill could address what had happened in her apartment.

“I did.”

“Did he tell you where your stepfather is?” Denise asked carefully.

Jill shook her head. “No. I didn’t think he would. I just wanted to tell him to his face that his games weren’t going to work. Not anymore.”

“The warden called me this morning. Whatever you told him apparently sent him into a rage. He had to be sedated.”

A tiny sliver of a satisfied smile appeared on Jill’s face. “Gee. That’s too bad.”

“Well,” Denise said after a moment of tense silence. “I have court. I just wanted to stop by and…”

“You’re going to pretend like it didn’t even happen, aren’t you?” Jill asked bluntly.

Denise straightened, but Jill didn’t miss the flash of panic in her boss’s eyes. “Pretend like what didn’t happen?”

“You kissed me,” Jill reminded her, careful to keep her voice low.

“What?” Denise’s voice quavered as she smoothed a hand through her hair. “Bernhardt, are you crazy?”

Jill laughed without humor. “I knew it. I knew you would pretend to be too drunk to remember that you came onto me in your apartment.”

“I did no such thing,” Denise snapped but she wouldn’t meet Jill gaze. “I am your superior. I would never cross that line.”

Jill blinked, something about Denise’s response making her stomach flutter. The lawyer in her analyzed the wording and she blinked again. “Since when is there a line to cross?”

Denise shook her head and moved toward the door. “You’re delusional.”

Jill intercepted her, grabbing Denise by the elbow and spinning her around while pushing the door shut with her other hand. Before she even thought about what she was doing, she bodily pressed Denise against the door, keeping her from escaping. Anger made Jill dip her head and find Denise’s lips with her own, claiming the other woman’s mouth with a hunger that almost frightened her. When Denise stopped fighting and kissed her back, Jill’s knees nearly buckled. A desperate need for air had Jill finally pulling back as she stared at Denise in shock. She licked her lips and stepped back on shaking legs.

“You gonna pretend that didn’t just happen, too?” Jill asked in a hoarse voice.

Denise took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Opening her mouth to say something, she seemed to suddenly think better of it. Without a word, Denise turned and opened the door, leaving without a backwards glance.

Jill managed to make it to the edge of her desk where she sat down heavily. Thoughts of Maggie flickered behind her now closed eyelids, and Jill cursed herself for the sudden confusion her heart and body were awash in.

“Jill?”

The attorney jumped and opened her eyes, finding Claire watching her from the doorway.

“You okay, sweetheart?” Claire asked.

Jill shook her head. “Most definitely not okay. I just did something really stupid.”

Claire figured it had something to do with the confused look Denise Kwon was sporting as she’d left Jill’s office. Her instincts started purring, and she suddenly had a pretty good idea what had just happened between the Acting District Attorney and one of her best friends. “Good Lord. Tell me about it in the car. We’re gonna be late for Nikki’s going away lunch.”

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“You sure you can’t stay another few days?” Lindsay asked around a booth at Papa Joe’s. She sat next to Cindy and Nora while Jill, Claire and Nikki occupied the other side. They’d had a huge meal and the drinks to go along with it and now everyone could feel their shared time coming to an end. “I’m on desk duty for a few days while the shooting gets reviewed. We could do lunch.”

Nikki laughed. “As much as I would love to stay and show Nora all the lovely sights San Francisco has to offer,” Nikki said with an impish expression directed at Nora, “I really need to get back to New Orleans. I’ve got some fresh cases piling up.”

“Rain check?” Claire asked Nikki with a quick glance at Nora to let the other woman know she was welcome as well.

“Absolutely.” Nikki swallowed around the emotion she could feel tightening her throat. “It’s been so good to see you guys.”

Jill smiled around the ache she could feel in the center of her chest. She didn’t want Nikki to go, to walk back out of their lives again even if it was under better circumstances this time. “We’ll miss you.”

The others nodded, and Nikki was grateful for Nora’s gentle touch on her knee under the table. She looked at Cindy and gave her a watery smile. “You keep an eye on this bunch. Don’t let Lindsay’s laser vision intimidate you.”

Cindy smiled back, feeling like an ass now for being so upset about Nikki in the first place. “I’ll try, but you’ve seen it. It’s impressive.”

Everyone chuckled as Lindsay slid an arm around Cindy's shoulders and kissed her on the temple.

"I only crack it out when you really have it coming," Lindsay teased the reporter.

"Which is usually a few times a week," Cindy admitted wryly. She smiled at Nikki. "It was good to meet you." Her gaze slid to Nora. "Both of you."

"Well it certainly was nice to meet all of you," Nora answered. "Because I have heard some stories..." she taunted playfully.

"What stories?" Lindsay, Jill and Claire all asked at once.

"Ah. Look at the time. Sugar, we should get going," Nikki said as she quickly slid out of the booth.

"I thought what happened in the club stayed in the club," Lindsay said sweetly to Nikki.

Nikki took a breath as Nora stood up next to her. "She's in my club as much as all of you are."

"Hmm," Jill said, amused to see Nikki had turned into quite the romantic. "I don't know, ladies. You think we should maybe start up a franchise?"

The other club members looked at her in confusion.

"I think we should branch out. Have another chapter of the club in... let's say... New Orleans," Jill continued blithely.

"A franchise?" Nikki drawled. "Beautiful, I love you, but you're nuts."

Everyone laughed.

"Then we'll just have to expand the club by two more," Cindy said when the laughter had wound down. She smiled shyly at Nikki who grinned back knowingly.

"That we will," Claire agreed.

They all slid out of the booth and hugs and goodbyes were exchanged before Nikki and Nora left them to their desserts and their days.

"Feels a lot emptier with them gone," Cindy admitted when the bell on the door had stopped jangling after their departure.

"They'll be back," Lindsay assured the others.

Jill smiled. “Yeah. They’ll be back.”

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“Interesting friends you have there,” Nora said as they ducked into a cab for the airport.

The cab pulled away and Nikki turned her head, trying to keep sight of her old friends for as long as possible. As the vehicle turned the corner, she looked back at Nora through her tears. “Now that you’re in the club, I can tell you all about them.”

**THE END**