

WOMEN'S MURDER CLUB
EPISODE 3.8: 'Monster'
By Misty Flores

"Sometimes you put walls up not to keep people out, but to see who cares enough to break them down."

- unknown

TEASER

Detective Scott was a middle-aged man who wore a crooked tie, crooked glasses, and a crooked smile.

Upon watching him approach, Jill was briefly reminded of the lyrics of a children's rhyme. The smile that emerged from the thought was inappropriate, but welcome.

Standing against the cold metal of the black and white sedan idling on the curb of the San Francisco Airport Arrivals level, battling the chill of a late foggy San Francisco evening in a large black coat that did nothing to protect her stocking clad knees and calves, Jill Bernhardt decided she would take her humor any place she could get it.

Her boss, Acting District Attorney Denise Kwan, who up until that moment had been staring straight ahead and ignoring her completely, quite obviously did not feel the same way. "What's so funny?"

Jill shifted her head to offer a sidelong glance. The profile of Denise was closed in and expressionless. It was aggravating that she was actually curious as to what it was Denise was thinking.

"Nothing," she said. Denise frowned, unsatisfied, but the approach of Detective Scott, who extended a hand forward as he struggled with his shoulder bag, saved Jill from any further explanations.

"Ms. Kwon? Ms. Bernhardt?" His grip was firm, but his palm was sandpaper rough. Jill let go quickly, but offered him the same obligatory smile Denise gave him. "Derek Scott." He nodded slightly. "Thank you for meeting me."

"It's our pleasure," Jill answered, firmly and sincerely. "I wish it were under different circumstances."

Derek Scott's dark eyes were stormy with regret. "Me too."

Denise cleared her throat, eyes narrowing at Jill's in unspoken warning before she nodded to the car. "If you please. Let's get you to the hotel. We have an early start."

"Of course!" Detective Scott shrugged off his shoulder bag and headed for the open

trunk, leaving Jill with Denise's dark brown eyes studying her with the attention and scrutiny of a district attorney.

"What?" she asked, immediately defensive.

"If you can't do this-"

The shiver of irritation that rippled up her spine was automatic and instinctive. "Denise, we've already had this argument. I'm sticking to this guy like glue."

"Not without my authorization you aren't."

Posture stiff, Jill could only glare. She knew damn well that she had no business being anywhere near this guy, for the very reason they hadn't let Lindsay even speak to Detective Scott after his initial call. Emotional investment meant the urge to meddle – and one misstep, one wrong move, would spell mistrial or worse.

The fabulous world of the judicial system.

But it said something, meant something that Denise, hard-nosed and so by-the-book, also knew it and still had allowed it. Allowed *her* to be by her side.

Determined to be anything but the confused woman she had been the last few months, Jill would not, COULD not, read into the minute softening of Denise' dark orbs, the flash of something unidentifiable before a loud, resigned breath exhaled in a foggy cloud from the perfect outline of Denise's lips.

"If you do anything to disrupt this case-"

"What makes you think I would?" Eyes locked again, dark and intense, before Jill ducked her head, breaking the stare and heading for the door of the police cruiser, held open by Detective Derek Scott.

After a moment, Denise followed, attempting to look as dignified as someone could look edging into the seat of a police cruiser and insisting that the larger Detective Scott ride shotgun.

When, thanks to the tight fit, Denise's palm inadvertently ghosted against Jill's fingers, and just as quickly darted away, Jill kept her jaw locked and her eyes on the front of the cruiser, where Officer Thomson sat waiting, bored and obviously ticked with getting the short straw and pulling chauffeur duty.

"I'm sorry Inspector Boxer couldn't be here in person," Denise said, obstinately to fill the silence as the cruiser pulled away from the curb. "But her special status on this case as both a witness and a victim dictates that we keep her as far away from Pete Raynor as possible. Particularly as we build our case for the upcoming trial."

Derek Scott pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, expression grim as he glanced back at them. "From the case file, sounds like you got enough to put him away for a long time."

"Not if we're looking for a death penalty," answered Denise. The acerbic tint that edged the words was surprising. A quick glance from Jill revealed nothing but the best poker face from Denise, who kept her attention on Detective Scott.

"Going all the way, are you?" Detective Scott asked.

"The man is a monster." Through the rearview mirror, Derek sought Jill out, studied her.

"You'll understand if we take this conviction personally," Denise said, drawing attention away from Jill, voice level and firm. "He's victimized not just women, but colleagues. Friends."

The word brought with it an unintentional smirk to Jill's lips, bittersweet and poignant. Her eyes flickered to the space between them, palms resting just millimeters apart.

As if she read Jill's mind, Denise's fingers floated away, back into the safety of her own lap.

"Well, if Raynor is the guy behind my homicides, then you've got yourself three more bodies to add to the list."

Three more bodies. Three more victims.

A rapidly evolving cycle with more and more spokes spinning in place, twisting them into knots and biting at them all, running them over, hitting them in every vulnerable place.

God, when would it end?

"Honestly," she managed. "I almost wish there wasn't."

The words floated into pregnant pause, with a soundtrack of a revving engine and the sparkling ripples of moonlit waves as the car speeded toward the bridge.

"Can't say I agree," Detective Scott said. "Pete Raynor is one sick mother fucker." His tone was resigned as he gazed out the window, eyes on the scenery as it passed by them. He didn't wait for them to respond before he rumbled on, "But he isn't the only one out there. It'd be nice to get this guy locked up nice and tight so I can start finding the next monster."

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Anne Campbell was a light sleeper. It was the reason why she bargained for the bedroom on the first floor, won it away from both Diana and Christy with both pleas and the bribe of doing the extra chore of the dishes twice a week.

It wasn't that Anne was antisocial. It was just that she really liked to sleep. Tucked away in the bedroom just beyond the stairs, she could just close her eyes and not worry about jolting awake at any little sound: exercise tapes or the Killers or gabbing on cell phones or even the click-clacking of a keyboard.

An entire floor underneath her two roommates, she didn't hear a thing until Moxie, her German Shepherd mutt mix, began to growl.

Eyes blinking open, torn from sleep, Anne blindly began to reach in the dark for the fur of her dog, trying to scruff her into quiet.

"Moxie," she whispered. "Shh-"

But then there was a bang – loud enough to shake the room, cause the ceiling to vibrate above her.

Anne jumped, heart spiking in her chest, glancing up as Moxie's low, warning growl became a rough bark.

And then she heard the screams.

Upstairs. Painful, desperate, terrified screams that drove deep into her heart and suddenly paralyzed her.

Her eyes wildly searched the ceiling, panting for breath and gripping to her dog's collar.

And then the screaming just stopped.

Fumbling for the side of bed, Anne's trembling fingers finally found the cool metal of her bat, used on good days for softball.

Hands gripped tight around the handle, so afraid she feared she might faint, Anne pressed her bare feet on the floor and edged toward the doorway.

It could have been a prank. Diana and Christy always loved to mess with her, and if it were a prank, she would fucking kill them –

After she made sure they were okay.

She got to the door, opened it, and then the thunderous pounding of boots on the stairs came so fast she could only watch as a dark figure burst down the landing and headed

straight for the open window.

He never saw her.

Heart racing, Anne dropped the bat, racing toward the stairs and sprinting up.

Swinging into Diana's room, she skidded into wetness, sticking to her bare feet.

Fumbling for the light, she glanced down, and discovered blood, seeping around her toes, a trail leading to the mutilated, distorted form of Diana.

Her hand went to her mouth, the nausea causing her to wretch. "Oh, God," she managed. "CHRISTY! Call 911!" Christy!"

She whirled, stumbling toward the room across the hall.

"Christy!"

Christy lay sprawled across her bed, eyes wide and unseeing, slashed across her face, dripping in blood.

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ACT 1

The teapot whistled, cutting through the darkened early morning silence with a blast of steam. Cindy Thomas turned the knob of the stove quickly, shutting off the heat and the resulting sound as quickly as it had come.

For her girlfriend, sleep did not come easily. It hadn't come easily for either of them as of late, but the events of the past few months had turned Lindsay Boxer into a legitimate insomniac.

The moments, precious and few, when Cindy could feel her lover's rhythmic breathing against her neck, nose buried deep in Cindy's red-haired nape and arms circled around her tightly, signals of a deep, dreamless sleep, were to be cherished.

Nothing, not even a recurring nightmare that chased Cindy from sleep with a hitched breath, a furiously beating heart and a chill off her sweating body, would move her to disturb Lindsay's slumber.

With a dancer's ease, and none of her usual clumsiness, Cindy slipped out of Lindsay's arms and found refuge in a heap of organic mint leaves steeping in a mug, a pile of papers on her kitchen table, and a border collie snoring softly on the tile by her feet.

Sometimes it amazed her how alike she and Lindsay could be. At first glance, first impression, they were polar opposites – the epitome of the 'opposites attract' theory. But lurking inside each was the same drive to obsess, the mind that constantly worked, never rested, not even in sleep.

And Cindy knew that floating in each of their heads was one name: Pete Raynor.

Rubbing at the tight muscles that cramped her neck, she raised the mug to her lips and inhaled the peppermint, letting it drift into her nostrils and seep into her soul.

A small sound, a shuffle, caused her eyes to open, fall upon a sleepy Inspector with disheveled dark hair, a jersey and bare feet, leaning against the doorway.

With a sigh of defeat, Cindy let her hand fall to the table. "It was the whistle, wasn't it?"

A small curve drifted across Lindsay's lips, an intoxicatingly sexy sight. "Actually it was the smell."

Cindy glanced down at the tea and grimaced. "Sorry."

"S'okay. It smells good." Lindsay's voice was rough with sleep, but she still came further into the kitchen. "You don't happen to have some coffee brewing, do you?"

"Fraid not," she answered sympathetically. "You'll have to make do with my weeds."

Lindsay's nose wrinkled as she said begrudgingly. "There enough water for two?"

Cindy nodded, offering Lindsay a smile as the other woman passed by, hand caressing her shoulder on the way for the kettle.

Cindy kept her eyes on the table, busying herself with gingerly sipping the too hot tea, hearing the sounds of cabinets opening and closing, the tinkle of glass.

"You're up early."

Cindy allowed a small, bittersweet smile at hearing the seemingly innocent comment. Months as Inspector Boxer's friend and lover had given her fluency when it came to the language of Lindsay. She knew damn well when Lindsay was starting a line of questioning as opposed to an actual conversation.

"I couldn't sleep," she responded, answering the unspoken question. "Just a lot of... dreams."

There was a beat of silence, and suddenly a mug was placed beside Cindy's, and long fingers pressed into her tight shoulders. The contact on her stiff muscles was a balm, and Cindy exhaled helplessly, eyes closing as her head fell back against the form of her beloved.

"You mean nightmares," Lindsay murmured, digits digging deep into the tissue, causing a hitch of breath that was from both pain and pleasure. "You should have woken me."

"And ruin the first good night's sleep you've had in a week? Please."

Fingers paused, then resumed, as Cindy felt the body behind her shift and a hot mouth skid along her jaw to press against her cheek. When Lindsay's arms came around her, she pressed her own hands on top, holding her lover tightly against her.

"It's because he came in last night, isn't it." Lindsay murmured.

"Don't." Cindy's fingers tightened around Lindsay's wrists. "We promised we wouldn't talk about it."

A heavy sigh fell against her neck. "Cindy-"

"We promised Jill and Claire." It was a promise she was struggling hard to keep. The motion to keep Pete Raynor out of their conversations while Jill shepherded Detective Scott was well-meant, based out of fear that it would push Lindsay and Cindy back into the most traumatic experiences of their lives. And while Cindy had agreed with it, at least for Lindsay's sake, privately, she thought it unfair.

Pete was their own personal boogeyman, the recurring nightmare that would resurface at any given moment. It seemed that any time any of them came close to feeling safe again, there he was, their own private monster, stalking them not only in the waking hours but in their dreams as well.

Maybe on paper they had no business being anywhere near him. True, any contact at all would be giving Pete Raynor's defense team (Pete Raynor himself) the perfect opportunity to spout corruption, and even possibly dig up the cloudiness of Lindsay's father's reputation and use it against them. But they had been in that bastard's house. A house he had built especially for Lindsay, invading her childhood and innocence and trying to pervert even that, drugging her in an attempt to bring her over to his own distorted world.

A press of lips against the corner of her mouth broke Cindy out of her daze. She blinked, eyes refocusing as she realized she had drifted, retreated dangerously into her own mind, her own thoughts, at just the mention of Pete Raynor.

God, maybe Jill and Claire had a point.

Eyes brimming dangerously, she slipped digits under Lindsay's, bringing them together against her mouth, pressing kisses to both sets of knuckles and letting her head fall back into the reassuring strength of her lover.

Lindsay seemed to understand, because her next words weren't a push to discuss Pete or the nightmare that had robbed Cindy of her sleep, but instead a quiet, husk that asked if the papers in front of Cindy were the lease agreement.

Cindy pressed another kiss to Lindsay's hand in appreciation before letting her go.

"That's it," she said, hand on her chin as Lindsay settled down next to her, long slender fingers edging around her steaming cup of steeping tea, dark eyes reading through the fine print.

"So we're really doing this." Lindsay said, after a moment.

Cindy grinned affectionately. "Don't tell me you're getting cold feet now."

Lindsay tossed her a glance, with narrowed eyes and her Texan smirk, in just the way that had captured Cindy's heart so effortlessly the first day she met her. "Please. Like you could get rid of me that easy."

Cindy arched a brow in challenge. "All it would take was maybe a week of not unclogging the shower drain. Then victory would be mine."

The mention of her pet peeve raised like a battle flag, Lindsay gave a most indignant snort. "I still can't believe you insisted the first few times that was me. It's not like I can't

tell the difference between red and brown." She reached forward to tug on one of Cindy's curls playfully.

Ducking the touch, Cindy laughed, ready to respond when a burst of sound cut through the air, coming from the direction of the counter, where Lindsay's phone danced in vibration.

"The Bat-signal."

Lindsay met her glance with an apologetic smile, and rose off the table, leaning forward to offer her a kiss before heading for it. "Boxer."

Cindy looked down at the lease. It would have to wait.

"I'll be right there." The phone clicked shut. "Think I can get that tea to go?"

Another 5AM murder.

Despite the circumstances, Cindy couldn't complain. Petty household chores aside, a distraction was still a distraction, and it was sorely needed.

"As long as you let me meet you there."

Brown eyes met in challenge, before Lindsay nodded slightly and headed for the door. "Take Martha out and you've got a deal." At the mention of her name, Martha's ears perked, head rising and tail wagging against the tile.

A moment later, Cindy heard an addendum added from somewhere in the living room.

"But your ass is staying behind the yellow line!"

Cindy glanced down at the pet and offered her a pat. "Well, it's progress," she told her. "At least now I get to follow her in plain sight."

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To thank God she had been just handed a double homicide seemed enough to buy her a one-way ticket to hell.

If she hadn't been going there already.

Then again, Lindsay thought as she inspected a smear of blood on the wall beside the stairs, this wasn't much better.

"Took you long enough."

Glancing up, she discovered Warren Jacobi, wearing his trenchcoat and a grim smile.

"Morning," she said.

"Good morning to you, too," he cracked, motioning with his head toward the doors. "You ready for this?"

"Depends on what you've got for me."

Jacobi handed her a pair of plastic gloves.

"At approximately 3:15AM this morning, 9-1-1 received a call from an Anne Campbell," he said, flipping open his small notebook to recheck the facts. "She has the downstairs bedroom." He nodded toward the back of the house, just left of the staircase. "Woke up when her dog started growling. She heard screaming. Went to check on things just in time to see a dark figure running down the stairs and exiting out of that window." Lindsay frowned, stepping carefully off the first step and toward the shattered window. "The killer never saw her. Unfortunately, she didn't see much of him either."

Hands on her hips, she turned, eyes narrowing to the almost hidden alcove. "Still. Lucky girl."

"You have no idea." The voice that interjected belonged to that of Claire, mouth twisted in a pained grimace as she waited at the top of the stairs.

The look in Claire's eyes nurtured an uneasy feeling. It was bad then. "They both upstairs?"

"Yeap," Jacobi affirmed. "Diana Gibson and Christina Lopez."

"And where's the witness now?"

"She was nearly catatonic when the ambulance came, trying to give the one with a slashed throat CPR. They've got her outside, gave her something to calm her down."

Lindsay glanced at him. "How do you feel about interviewing her while I go have a look upstairs?"

"Enjoy yourself," he said, and shook his head in disgust. "This is plain sick, Lindsay."

Claire's morose dark eyes that stayed with her until she joined her at the top of the stairs silently agreed.

"That bad, huh?"

"Oh this was personal," Claire sighed. "Whoever it was that slashed these girls obviously

did it to cut them to pieces. Care to see? Mind the blood splatter."

Only in their line of work would that be considered friendly conversation.

Lindsay's half amused head shake stalled the minute she followed Claire into the first room.

"Holy Christ on a cracker. This looks like a scene from *Dexter*."

Blood congealed on the floor, puddled around the corpse of a girl who couldn't have been older than twenty. Her eyes were wide, frozen in death in the terror that she experienced in the last moments of her life. Littering her body were punctures and gashes, over her face, her chest, her arms and even her hands.

Claire pressed in against Lindsay and carefully squeezed her elbow in silent support.

With a swallow, Lindsay straightened her posture and forced herself to notice the details, remove herself from the horror in favor of painting an accurate picture of what had happened.

"He sliced her fingers. She was fighting him off." She glanced at Claire. "It's a him, right?"

"Judging by the angle and the force behind these blows?" Claire nodded. "That or an Amazon on steroids."

"So he came in, killed this one first." Turning on a booted heel, she stepped carefully out of the room and followed the marked spots of blood, the smear of it on the door. "And then went after the other one." In the second bedroom was another horrific mutilation, this time a young Latina.

"He was quick. But he was thorough. He probably didn't even know about the bedroom downstairs or Anne Campbell might have gotten it, too."

"Lucky for her," Lindsay breathed, kneeling down beside the body to study the victim's face. "And for us. We have a witness."

Claire was quiet for a moment, kneeling beside her, before she asked with forced ease. "Where's Cindy? Sleeping through this I hope."

Eyes still on the body, Lindsay shook her head. "She was awake when I got the call. Made a promise to stay outside the yellow line."

"Did she, now?"

"I fully expect her to break in any minute." She shot Claire a small smile. "You can say

'hi' then."

"She was awake at 5AM this morning?" Claire always did notice the details, and though this was neither the time nor the place, Lindsay found herself unable to evade the unspoken question.

"She's having nightmares." Exhaling a troubled breath, Lindsay glanced up in silent plea. "I don't know how to help. Or make them stop. She didn't even wake me up, said I needed the sleep."

Claire's lips pressed together in contemplation and sympathy. "You'll get each other through this. We'll help you." The words were meant to soothe, and they did, but for what seemed like the umpteenth time, Lindsay wished for the strength and certainty that Claire seemed to exude so easily. "And in the meantime, maybe you could both use this distraction. Channel some of those sleepless nights into finding justice for these poor girls."

Lindsay nodded, but unable to help herself, asked, "Heard from Jill?"

After a momentary pause, Claire rolled her eyes and slapped a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Nice try. Let's go, Columbo."

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Regulated to the waiting room of the penitentiary, prohibited from entering the room with Denise and Detective Scott, Jill could not complain.

Despite her determination to see this through, if only for Lindsay, her unchecked emotions and rampant fear of Pete Raynor, serial killer, were still in danger of overwhelming her. Her last encounter with Raynor had left her both shaken and somehow triumphant, but even so, Jill didn't have the strength or the gumption to get cocky. She understood her flaws better than anyone, and when Denise drew the line, told her to wait outside, stay away, she had not argued.

Whatever the complications between them, Denise had proven herself trustworthy. Action upon action had cemented that fact: in how Denise had worked tirelessly to save her when she had been taken by the Hallelujah Man, in every time Denise bent the rules to catch one of their killers, in even the smallest hint of consideration she had taken when she had approached Lindsay after Pete revealed he had murdered her step-father-

No matter what the issues were between them personally, Jill knew she could trust her to act in both her own and Lindsay's best interests.

That certain truth left Denise in a place that was somehow shifting in Jill's mind. Before she could place her as her bitch of a boss, and leave it at that. Now, Denise was eternally occupying her thoughts, not just in work matters, but in her personal – fantasies and

erotic dreams that were completely inappropriate, not only because she knew it was the worst possible idea to get involved with her boss, but because she was in a relationship with an amazing, beautiful woman who deserved better.

And God, it was idiotic. It was idiotic because she was in a penitentiary, brooding and mooning about Denise Kwon of all people.

Pushing out of her chair, Jill sighed raggedly and stepped toward the wall, eyes on the posters and memos that asked visitors to check-in any suspicious items, warned about improper behavior, and stated visiting hours.

When her phone beeped with a text, she was grateful.

The text from Maggie was short and concise, informing her that Lindsay (or 'Tex', as her Inspector girlfriend preferred to call her) and Jacobi had just been assigned a double homicide that, at first glance, appeared so violent and senseless that murmurs around the homicide unit were already whispering 'serial killer'.

To already bandy about that moniker when the crime scene was still fresh meant two things: one, the crime had been particularly brutal, and two, there seemed to be next to no leads.

Neither were good.

"A little early in the morning to be playing gossip, isn't it?"

Despite the fact that she had been doing absolutely nothing wrong, Jill still flushed, lowering the cell phone as Denise approached.

"That's not exactly what I was doing," she corrected, not bothering to toss another barb Denise's way. "It can't be over already. Did Pete refuse to talk?"

Denise's posture was stiff, her expression strange. "Not exactly."

Jill frowned. "What is it?" When Denise hesitated and glanced away, Jill felt her heart clench inside of her. "Denise, now you're scaring me."

Denise stared at her and, suddenly her expression shifted. "I'm sorry," she said, and the words were said so sincerely they filled Jill with something close to dread. "But I think you need to come with me."

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"Don't tell me you're actually playing by the rules."

The rotating lights of a police cruiser played over the kind face of Warren Jacobi as he

stepped toward the yellow tape and a shivering reporter.

Cindy smiled. "It's too early to do anything else." When his brow rose, she sighed and relented. "Plus, I promised Lindsay I'd be good. Just this once."

"Mhmm." He studied her, before uttering a resigned sigh, reaching over and lifting the tape himself, motioning her through it. "Get in here."

Not one to question her sudden good luck, Cindy moved quickly. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Especially to Lindsay. She'll think I've gone soft."

Cindy had never thought the gruff older cop had ever been all that *hard*, but she nodded just the same.

"You? Never."

"Damn straight." The grin they shared was warm and friendly, before a sobbing brunette held in the arms of another woman caught her eye.

"Is that the third roommate?"

Jacobi's glance seemed surprised, and then resigned. "Did Lindsay tell you or did you bat those brown eyes to get it from Cho?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

The chuckle he uttered was amused and disbelieving. "With that look, you could take over the world, you know that?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Be lucky I only use my powers for good."

"I think we're all lucky for that." Soft pressure at her elbow caused her to turn into Claire, who offered her a welcome kiss on the cheek. She smelled of chemicals and perfume.

"Hey, sweetie. I was wondering what side of the tape I'd find you on."

When Cindy glanced at Jacobi, he immediately raised his hands in surrender. "She looked cold!"

"It's so much warmer on this side?"

"Actually feels colder," Cindy said, glancing again at the sobbing girl. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Claire's smile stalled, and instead of answering, she simply wrapped her arm around Cindy's shoulders and reeled her in. "Yeah," she answered. "It's bad. But there is good news. We have a print from a smear of blood he left on the staircase."

"His?"

"Probably one of the victim's," Claire corrected. "But the print is most definitely his."

"I got you something else." Jacobi nodded toward the window as he pulled out a plastic baggie. Inside were three cigarette butts. "Found these outside the window. Had a tech mark the areas and take pictures before he collected them."

"So... DNA?" Cindy asked, taking the bag and inspecting the butts.

"Gold," Claire answered, eyes dancing slightly as she took the bag. "If we work hard enough."

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Peeling off the plastic gloves, Lindsay's steps felt heavy as she moved down the porch and into the madness of the outside world.

She searched the borders of the yellow tape looking for a flash of red, a pale face, but it was Jacobi that caught her eye first.

"Quite the funhouse in there, isn't it?"

She nodded morosely, glancing back toward the townhouse. "Tell me she saw something."

"What she saw was a dark figure and a whole lotta nothing," Jacobi answered grimly. "According to her, he was between 5'11" and 6'3", no idea on race, hair color, she *thought* he was wearing jeans..."

"Alright, I get it." Lindsay closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose for one soldiering moment. "Okay. If he went for Diana first, then he maybe she was who he was after and Christina just got in the way. Is the witness working on a list of possible suspects?"

Jacobi nodded. "Should have it for us by the end of day." He fell silent for a moment, before he stepped in closer, voice lower. "Heard anything from Bernhardt?"

Lindsay stiffened, and with a clenched jaw, shook her head. "Been banned from talking to her until Scott's out of town." He uttered a low, sympathetic whistle. "And yes, it's driving me insane."

"Don't blame you." He pressed his lips together. "Let me know if you want me to try and find anything."

She glanced at him, amused. "What, you wanna spy for me now?"

"Just being a partner, Linds." A surge of affection floated through her, and she clapped her hand on his shoulder companionably.

"Thanks, but I think we've got our hands full."

"You aren't kidding."

Lindsay glanced at the crowd, noting the friend comforting the witness, the crowd that had gathered, and finally landing on a redhead who was nowhere near the yellow tape.

Catching her eye, Cindy waved.

"How the hell did she duck the tape?"

Glancing in the direction of Lindsay's glare, Jacobi let out a low whistle. "No idea."

Her eyes slid immediately to her partner. "You totally let her in, didn't you?"

"It's the big brown eyes," he said immediately. "They're dangerous."

"Careful, partner," she said, amused despite herself. "That one's spoken for."

"Hey, I know my limits."

Their eyes met, held in warm regard, before Jacobi stepped to the side and let her go, boots crunching in the gravel as she made her way to her girlfriend.

"Don't look at me like that," Cindy said, shaking her head at the expression on Lindsay's face. "I can't help it if people think I'm cute and give me special privileges."

"But you can exploit it?"

"Hell yes. I get all sorts of perks that way."

The self-assurance was supposed to be irritating, instead of damned adorable. "Oh really?" Lindsay's arms crossed. "Such as?"

"A hot girlfriend who's fantastic in bed, for one."

Blatant flattery. Lindsay grinned affectionately, until the crowd began to murmur behind them. Glancing back to the house, she saw the bodies, cased up in blue coroner bags, being moved carefully down the stairs.

"I heard Claire got a print." All amused inflection was gone in the face of the sober

reminder of their purpose here.

"Yeah." Lindsay nodded grimly. "Maybe we'll get lucky and get something in the database. Until then?"

"You need suspects." Cindy shouldered her bag. Dark shadows under eyes were cleverly concealed with make-up, but they were there, evidence of her lack of sleep. "I'll have their life stories for you in an hour."

To suggest to Cindy to take a break, get some sleep, would be an insult. Still, the urge to do so was so prevalent; she bit the inside of her cheek. "Thanks."

"They were just sleeping, Lindsay. They went to sleep thinking they were safe, and then woke up to a monster." Cindy's brown eyes caught hers, searching.

The chill that she had kept at bay now spread inside of her, tightening the muscles of her body, resulting in an irresistible urge to touch Cindy. She succumbed, a reassuring palm on the small of her back, fingers curling to smooth a knuckle up her spine. "I know."

The corners of Cindy's mouth crimped. "Do you think we'll ever get used to this?"

Dark brown eyes settled for just a moment on red hued curls, an inquisitive, gorgeous face, and an expression that was both wise and naïve. The ever-enchancing enigma of Cindy Thomas; evolved from potential witness to acquaintance to friend to the love of Lindsay's life.

With an objective eye, Lindsay could very well concede that the last few months, the last year even, had been the worst of her life. The stench of death permeated around them, clung to them with the fear and nightmares of the torture they had all endured.

Cindy, bright-eyed and eager-to-please, had been pulled into this consuming orbit of kidnappings, serial killers, tortured friends and events so horrifying every single one of them carried the scars.

And yet, the single emotion that broke through every hint of darkness was just simple happiness.

It was foreign and frightening and fascinating, but Lindsay Boxer knew better than to question it.

Her look to her lover was bittersweet and unabashedly sentimental. "God, I hope not," she answered, voice gravel rough.

Cindy's smile, imperfect and impossibly beautiful, would never stop taking her breath away.

At that moment, hidden away at a crime scene splattered with the remains of the less fortunate, Lindsay's epiphany was that she was damn lucky.

--

Years of abuse and solitude had given Jill an expertise when it came to building walls. Mentally fortifying herself, distancing herself from emotion and keeping herself impenetrable to her weaknesses had been a key to her own survival.

Standing at the door, eyes fixed on the doorknob, Jill fought frantically to bring back that instinct.

"Jill." The sound of her name brought her to awareness. She realized that her own breath was coming out in shallow pants, her posture had tightened. Her eyes met with Denise's, and the other woman moved even closer. "Just open the door and do your job."

There was only firm authority. No sympathy. Not anymore.

Jill was grateful for it. Weakness wasn't what she needed.

Inhaling deeply, she closed her hand around the knob and turned, pushing forward. Just as she did, she felt the slight push from Denise, a lingering touch on her elbow that could have been unintentional.

Inside the room, a chair squeaked, and Jill looked past Detective Scott to the crystal clear eyes of Pete Raynor.

Her heart throbbed, breath catching in her throat, but she kept moving, coming into the room with a tight jaw and glittering eyes.

Pete smiled widely, showing off his perfect white teeth, greeting her like she was an old friend. "Jill!"

Behind her, Denise clicked the door shut. Jill fought to keep the claustrophobic panic from flooding her. Her eyes remained focused on Raynor. "Pete."

"It's good to see you."

Jill was in no mood to indulge his playful civilities. Her eyes moved to Detective Scott's. "Tell me about the deal."

Scott sat in his chair, glanced back at the killer, and removed his glasses. "Mr. Raynor —"

"The papers say you're going for the death penalty," Pete interrupted. "That's a little rude, don't you think? Considering all we've been through?"

Perfectly still, she eyed with him perfect contempt. "Tell me about the deal."

His teeth glinted when his smile widened. "Detective Scott has a couple of unsolved murders he'd like my help with. Wants me to give him a location of the bodies. Crazy, isn't it? You kill a couple people and suddenly the whole world wants to pin every little crime on you."

"Imagine that."

"It's rude, is what it is," Pete said, speaking only to her, as if they were having a chat over coffee. "But I'm a nice guy. I'm willing to help out, if I can."

"And how would you do that?"

He studied her, leaned back in his chair, the cuffs on his hands clanking as he exhaled in contentment. "It's easy. I confess. Tell you where the bodies are to each and every person you haven't found yet, which may or may not include your stepfather and Mr. Scott's missing persons. In return, you take that death penalty off the table."

She hated her own weakness, the chink on her wall that let him see the flash of pained emotion that crossed her face. He swallowed it like manna from heaven.

"What's the catch?" Denise's voice was curt.

Pete's eyes never left hers. "What makes you think there'd be a catch?"

"Raynor. Spit it out or we walk out of there. All of us."

His smile stalled, eyes hardening as he flickered briefly from Jill to glare at Denise.

"The catch," he mimicked, arms crossing over his chest. "Is that I confess to Lindsay. Just Lindsay. Only Lindsay." His dark gaze locked hard with Jill. "Always Lindsay."

ACT II

At only the beginning of a very long day, Claire could feel the exhaustion in her legs, muscles aching as she slung her heavy bag over her shoulders and headed away from the yellow tape and the flashing lights of the police cars.

Waiting at the morgue was a laundry list of bodies and activities, quite a workload even without the two bodies that were on their way at the moment. Claire was already working things out in her head, delegating, shifting priorities and deciding which cases she could push off for yet another day in order to get Lindsay her autopsies, when her phone rang.

The caller was Jill. Claire immediately snapped it open, raising it to her ear as she glanced back at the crime scene, keeping a watchful eye out for a redhead or a brunette.

"Thank God, finally," she breathed. "Tell me there's good news."

The soft, tired sigh that came through indicated she wasn't going to get it. "In a situation like this," Jill replied, sounding as exhausted as she felt. "Is there ever?"

"What happened?"

Jill was quiet for a moment; a pregnant pause. "How's Lindsay holding up?"

It was clear evasion, but Claire humored her, letting Jill work up her courage. "How do you think she's holding up?" she asked, fingers balling into a fist as she turned toward her car, keeping her expression hidden from anyone who might glance over. "The man who kidnapped her, seduced her, nearly killed her and almost destroyed her life keeps on chipping at her, and now she's got a double homicide of two young girls who look like they've been in a Freddy Krueger flick."

"God."

"On top of that, Cindy's having nightmares."

Once again, Jill was quiet. "The Pete kind?"

"Lindsay wasn't specific, but I'm pretty sure."

"Fuck."

The curse was unexpected – the tone behind it tortured. A trickle of unsettling fear inched up her spine. "Jill?"

"Pete wants to cut a deal."

The statement, said so flippantly, took a moment to process. "What kind of deal?" she asked, but the dread had already begun to seep into her.

"The kind that involves confessing to Detective Scott's murders and taking the death penalty off the table – and confessing only to Lindsay."

Claire sucked in her breath and closed her eyes. "That bastard."

"I'm on my way back to the office. I'll talk to Lindsay then. "

"You can't ask her to do that."

It was unfair to demand that of Jill. She knew that. But to say it had been instinctive – absolute. She *couldn't*. Not after all that had happened. Not after everything Pete had put them through.

"Look, Denise is glaring daggers at me. I have to go. I'll see you at the office, okay?"

Claire pressed her lips together grimly. "Jill-"

But the line had already cut off. Heart in her throat, Claire lowered the phone with a frustrated sigh.

Above her, the sun shone down, the rays soaking her with warm rays that did nothing to dissipate the chill she felt.

--

Leaning against the dirty wall of the penitentiary, Jill fiddled with her phone, eyes downcast as she heard the sharp steps of her boss echoing down the hallway towards her.

"Is he on his way?" she asked, before lifting her eyes up to meet Denise's.

"In the taxi and on his way to the hotel." Denise regarded her in that same careful manner as she had this morning. Like Jill was made of porcelain and would shatter at any moment.

It irritated her so greatly she found herself snapping, "Don't look at me like that. I'm fine."

Denise crossed her arms, and without a word, turned and settled against the same wall as Jill, pressed up just inches from her, staring straight ahead.

"I know we have to do it," Jill said, a moment later. Through her peripheral vision, she could see Denise glance at her, before just as quickly glancing away.

"There isn't another option," Denise answered.

"There's more than enough evidence for the death penalty-"

"Is that all you're after? You'd rather kill the man then give grieving families closure?"

"And what about giving Lindsay closure?"

Denise shifted. The fabric brushed against her shoulder. "Lindsay is a cop. She'll get over it. We have other things to take into account other than Lindsay's tender sensibilities."

She said it callously, meant to sting. Jill swallowed hard, trying to keep her emotions in check, argue with Denise on anything but an emotional level. "Lindsay is just as much of a victim as any of the others."

"No, Lindsay is lucky. She's alive. And as the lucky one and as a cop, she owes them this much. And so do you."

Jill's throat felt tight, choked. Her voice sounded weaker than she wanted when she finally bit her lip and turned. The profile of Denise Kwon was striking. Feeling the heat of Jill's stare on her, her boss finally glanced up, locking eyes with her.

"Promise me," Jill managed, soft and pleading. "That I can be the one to break it to her. That you don't do a thing without telling me. Give me at least this morning."

Inches away, she could see every line, features magnified and eyes richly hued with depth.

"You have my word." Denise said, tone low and quiet. "You can trust me."

Breaking the stare would have taken more strength than Jill had at the moment. Magnetic and warm, it felt like the only thing keeping her standing.

The clap of boots on the linoleum startled her out of her haze like a flush of cold water. Jerking away from Denise, she discovered Maggie striding toward her.

Maggie. Her girlfriend. Her committed, gorgeous girlfriend, who smiled at her with the look of someone infatuated and happy to see her. Jill's welcoming smile strained to be just as sincere, but she was hauntingly aware of Denise straightening away from her as Maggie approached.

"Hi," Maggie said, eyes bright and kind, until she came closer and saw the pale face, the watery eyes. Her smile faded. "What's wrong?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Doing an interview. Heard you were here." Maggie's eyes slid to Denise, hardening, as if blaming her for Jill's obvious discomfort. "Everything okay?"

In no mood to try and explain the complications of the morning, Jill just smiled weakly. "No," she admitted. "But it's fine."

Intelligent eyes darkened with concerned curiosity, and Jill sucked in her breath and stepped off the wall, leaving Denise behind. "Are you headed back to the station?"

"Absolutely. Need a lift?"

Before Jill could respond, Denise pushed away from the wall. "Good. I have a few things to settle here, and I need you to start working on the paper work. Get to work, Bernhardt. And make sure you go straight there."

Without a backwards glance, Denise was already moving away from them, posture stiff and gait fast.

Jill watched her go. "God, she's such a treat," Maggie said dryly. "What'd she do this time?"

Jill exhaled an unsteady breath. "This time it's not her." She forced her eyes away from Denise's departing form and faced forward, to her lover and the exit. "Come on. I really do need to go."

--

Anne Campbell had been living in a nightmare for the past few hours, and it showed. Red-rimmed eyes looked irritated and dull. Her skin, marked with tracks of tears and the exhaustion of a sleepless night, had taken on a pale pallor, and as she tried to form letters on the notepad that had been given to her, her hands shook with the effort. The coffee she'd been given to settle her nerves lay untouched and had long since gone cold.

The pen scratched a short line down the pad, until Anne suddenly lingered. Abruptly, she let the pen drop and buried her head in her hands.

Her shoulders shook with spent sobs. "I'm sorry," she whispered, words barely audible behind her hands. "I can't. I don't... I don't KNOW."

Lindsay's fingers tangled together, eyes falling to the table. The one fallacy in her relationship with Jacobi was that in their partnership, HE was the sensitive one. Considering Jacobi had the sensitivities of a bear on a good day, that wasn't saying much.

With Jacobi pulled out of the room to take a phone call, she was left to her own devices.

Leaning forward, she gingerly reached forward and tugged the notepad away from their witness. Anne had barely managed to scribble Diana's and Christy's names. Beyond that, there was simply that line.

Great.

"Okay," she sighed, feeling a sudden headache. "Maybe we can try again later."

"No!" Anne's hands came down, eyes flashing with emotion. "You don't get it! Christy and Diana – they loved *everyone*. Everyone loved them. Diana was a damn beauty queen! I don't know *anyone* who would want to hurt them. I don't HAVE anyone."

Behind them, the lock chirped, and Jacobi poked his head into the room. Lindsay sat back in her chair and shared a muted grimace with her partner. Jacobi's brow furrowed as he tugged on his tie.

"Miss Campbell," she tried, as patiently as possible. "I understand that you're having a tough time with this. But we need your cooperation and your help if we're going to catch the killer."

"And what can I do?" she asked, genuinely imploring Lindsay with her tear-stained voice and wide eyes. "I can't do anything! God, they were RIGHT up there, and he killed them and I didn't even *see* him." Her eyes shook and she shuddered, as if she were reliving the moment. "God, what if it was some random sicko? Some random sicko who picked our house and the only reason I'm alive is because he didn't think to check the downstairs, too?"

Beside her, Jacobi offered her a subtle shake of his head. Lindsay glanced down to her tangled fingers. The knuckles were already turning white with the force of her grip. With a deep breath, she purposely unlocked them.

"Miss Campbell." Jacobi's voice was kind and reassuring. "Unfortunately, we don't know the circumstances under which this happened. That's what we're doing our very best to find out. If it is a ... random sicko... then we need your help to make sure that this doesn't happen to someone else. You were the lucky one. You lived, and that means you need to help us."

Lindsay's chest rose and fell with the force of her breathing, a sudden agitation at Jacobi's words making her squirm in actual resentment.

You're projecting, Boxer. If Jacobi noticed her resettling herself, he said nothing. His focus instead was on Campbell, who stared at him like a lost child.

"But I seriously don't know anyone," she managed.

"Okay," Lindsay's voice was even, firm. "Then let's start with something easier." From her pocket she produced a baggie. Lindsay placed it on the table and pushed it toward her. "How about getting us a list of anyone you know who might have smoked this particular brand of cigarette?"

Quiet now, Anne studied the baggie, before her eyes flickered up to meet Lindsay's. "Is that his?"

"It could be. It's a Salem cigarette." The stub was white. "Like the kind we found outside your window."

Anne regarded her uncertainly. "I don't know," she managed, voice shaky. "I mean, I know some guys that smoke... but I don't really pay attention to the brands..."

"Try," Jacobi answered firmly. "For us. It doesn't have to be right away, but we do need it soon."

For a moment, Anne just sat, until her lips pressed together and she hesitantly reached up and closed her fingers around the baggie, pulling it into her lap. "Can I go now?" she asked hesitantly. "My friend Margaret is waiting."

Jacobi glanced at Lindsay. "Sure," he said, and like a true gentleman, rose from his seat, already rounding the corner to press a reassuring palm to the back of Anne's shoulder to lead her out. Lindsay stood and followed, stepping outside the door, eyes on the girl as she went to the young woman who was waiting for her on a hard wooden bench. Immediately, she stood and opened her arms. Annie sunk into them without hesitation.

"Think she'll come up with anything?" Lindsay asked Jacobi.

Hands on his hips, he clucked his teeth. "Let's hope." She could smell his cologne as he leaned in closer. "The last thing we need is to have this be a random act. People are already talking-"

Her stomach lurched. "Don't say it," she warned, dark eyes flashing. He frowned. "I mean it, Jacobi. This isn't a serial killer. We're going to find this guy, and he's not going to do it again."

The way her partner studied her made her feel like he was administering some kind of test. When he smiled, small and soft, Lindsay guessed she may have passed.

"Then maybe this will help." He held up a file folder. "Cell phone records for one Diana Gibson. Just got them in."

--

Diana Gibson had just celebrated her 22nd birthday. In the past five years, she had been an Ohio State cheerleader and a runner up beauty queen for Miss Ohio.

A YouTube video of the competition in which a gorgeous Diana, with picture perfect posture, graciously accepted her consolation roses showed why.

Palm hovering over her mouse, Cindy allowed herself a moment of distraction, watching the victim in what would become the prime of her life.

Her cell phone rang, breaking the moment and bringing reality back with it. The buzz of the newsroom exploded with a cacophony of sound – phones ringing and people laughing and talking, and keyboards clacking.

Feeling oddly as if she had just been woken from a dream, Cindy reached for her phone and glanced at the phone's display.

It was almost amusing, how even after all this time, the name 'LINDSAY' on her caller ID sent such a giddy thrill through her. Her body seemed primed and programmed to react to Lindsay Boxer, no matter what the circumstances.

Well, Cindy did like to say they were made for each other, didn't she? Maybe Cindy had somehow been tinkered with when she was still a fetus –had an invisible 'property of Lindsay Boxer' sticker marked on her heart, set to go off when she was in her mid-twenties and laid eyes on the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

It would have been silly if it didn't seem so true. Shaking her head at the thought, she answered.

"Hi."

"You know, I never thought there'd be such a term as a useless witness," came the throaty drawl. "But I found one."

Cindy muted her smile, lowering her head and grinning into her phone. "Honey, she's been through a severely traumatic event."

"And according to her, her roommates might as well have been Disney Princesses living in a cartoon. With fuzzy rabbits that talk."

"No luck on the list, then?" she asked, wincing sympathetically.

"None whatsoever." Lindsay being this crabby might have been adorable under any other circumstance. As they were, Cindy understood the ramifications of not having a suspect after such a brutal crime.

"Well, there's physical evidence, isn't there?" she asked, trying hard to remain optimistic for her crime fighting lover. "The blood smear, the cigarette butts?"

"Claire's checking in with both," Lindsay confirmed. "How are you feeling?"

The softening in Lindsay's voice, the sudden concern, brought to surface her headache, the tension in her shoulders. Her blinking eyes, too, thanks to her lack of sleep.

Swallowing hard, Cindy gave herself a moment to sound convincing. "I'm doing okay," she noted quietly. "Any word from Jill?"

Lindsay was silent. "No," she said. "But it's just as well. What the hell does it have to do with me? I mean, really?"

Everything. Everyone knew that. But this Lindsay, the one who was determined not to obsess, at least not in her presence, brought forth such a surge of love and affection Cindy nearly cried.

"None at all," she agreed, biting down her smile. "And in the meantime, we've got a killer to catch."

"Sure do, Lois. How goes the biographies?"

Cindy smiled, brown eyes moving to the computer screen and the list of information she had gathered. "What do you want to know? I've got clippings, licenses, Facebooks , leases-

"We got the phone records," Lindsay said. "Denise and Jill are still out, but Jacobi got one of the underlings to push it through."

"Score."

"Anyone by the name of 'Morrison' come by in your online rolodex?"

Morrison.

Cindy frowned, the name sparking off a synapse in her brain that had her tilting the phone to her ear and typing fast. "Actually..." She got her hit and sat back, thrilled with her sudden stroke of luck. "Adam Morrison. Diana's Ohio ex-boyfriend, who, judging by his Facebook messages, was NOT happy with the fact that she moved out West without him."

"Damn. The caller's name is Steven."

Cindy clicked on the link, and grinned. "Sweetie, you better thank the Lord that Facebook has decided to completely screw their privacy policy at this very moment because guess who the father is?"

"If you tell me it's Steven, I'll buy you a puppy."

"I prefer kitties, but how about you sign the lease instead?"

There was a shocked pause, and suddenly Lindsay laughed, a low, deep chuckle that sent a shiver of joy through Cindy.

"Baby, I love you," Lindsay whispered, low and privately. Louder, she heard Lindsay

hollering to what could only be Jacobi.

Cindy grinned. "Back 'atcha."

"Can you make it to the station in an hour? Claire might have something by then."

Cindy winced. "Tell her to call me with whatever I can print. I managed to get a few of the names of the people at the crime scene – friends of the victims. Got an appointment to meet a Margaret Tennyson in half an hour to get some quotes and anecdotes for the paper. Lindsay?" she asked, when she didn't hear an immediate response.

"Margaret, as in the girl who is hosting our witness?"

Cindy blinked. "Seriously?"

"Cindy, do not in any **way**, shape or form mention that I asked you to do this, but if you run into Anne over there – do what you do. Be chatty. Be annoying."

"Annoying?!" she sputtered.

"Just try and get to get some names. Any name."

The request, desperate and almost out of character for Lindsay, caused Cindy's smile to fade. "Any name? Why?"

"Just trust me," Lindsay drawled, suddenly sounding exhausted. "With a crime like this, we need for there to be someone specific. If it's random..."

"Then someone starts crying 'serial killer'," she breathed, slumping back into her chair as the implication sunk in. "God, Lindsay. We can't have another one."

"We don't," Lindsay said firmly. "But the sooner we get a suspect in custody, the better."

--

They were three blocks from the station when Maggie made an abrupt right turn, swiveling into an open parking spot and pulling the key from the ignition.

Torn from her heavy thoughts, Jill straightened in surprise, bringing her hand down from the passenger window when Maggie shut off the music and stared at her expectantly.

"What are you doing?" she asked immediately. "Maggie-"

"You have exactly five seconds to explain to me what is going on," Maggie interrupted smoothly. "And why you think its okay to hide it from me."

The expression in Maggie's crystal colored eyes was firm, without compromise, and still, Jill found herself shifting in her seat, head lowering in frustration.

"Maggie, seriously, I have to get to the station."

"Four seconds. And we'll get there as soon as you talk to me."

"Maggie. Please. There isn't time-"

"If you give a shit about me, there's time, Jill."

"Now you're giving me time limits and ultimatums? Really?"

"Is this a relationship or are we just fucking around?"

The statement caused Jill's eyes to widen, her heart to flare. "What?"

Maggie's brow rose, but her expression was surprisingly vulnerable. "I'm serious. If this is a relationship, then you need to trust me enough to tell me what's making you look like your dog died. Shit or get off the pot, Jill."

The panic, the fury, that Maggie was doing this to her NOW, nearly choked her. "Now?! Really? Now is when you want to have this talk?!"

The stare Maggie gave her was unrelenting. Seconds ticked by, and suddenly, Maggie's face went hard. She turned in her seat. "Fine," she snapped, reaching for the ignition.

Helpless, Jill panicked and jerked for Maggie's sleeve. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she said again, when Maggie stared sullenly at the wheel. "I'm sorry, it's just been a bitch of a morning, and ..."

"And what?"

Jill bit her lip, and finally gave up, her body sinking into the seat. "Pete Raynor wants a deal. He wants to confess to Lindsay where the bodies of his other victims are buried."

Maggie let that sink in, listening to the rhythmic breathing of her girlfriend as she processed Raynor's ultimatum. "That's good, isn't it?"

"Not for us," she snapped, gritting her teeth at the very idea. "Not for Lindsay. We gave up the death penalty, gave him Lindsay to fuck with all over again. GOD," she practically shouted, hand smacking against Maggie's dashboard. "I told Lindsay to TRUST me, and I'm giving her to him on a silver platter."

Lost and guilty as hell, Jill let her head fall back against the headrest, eyes on the brick wall of the building on the side of the street, marred with spray paint and graffiti.

When the soft pressure of a reassuring palm pressed against the tips of her fingers, Jill closed her eyes and bit down on a sigh.

"You're right," she heard quietly. "You've had a bitch of a day."

The flippant, dry tone struck her in a place she sorely needed to feel, and Jill began to chuckle, eyes watering as she instinctively maneuvered her palm upright and tangled her fingers in Maggie's.

"I'm sorry," she heard. "I didn't mean to push you. I just... maybe I'm paranoid but sometimes I feel you pulling away. It scares me more than I'd like to admit."

Gripping tight, Jill turned her head, took in the beautiful woman who was staring at her with the gaze of someone who wanted to offer her everything, if she would just take it.

God, seriously, what was she doing? What the hell was she doing, complicating things with Denise when she had someone already – someone amazing who thought she was WORTHY.

"I owe you a conversation," she said, quietly and weakly. "And we will have it. Just not today, okay?"

Maggie regarded her silently, but her fingers tightened and she nodded.

With a smile, Jill shifted in her seat, feeling the leather creak beneath her as she leaned toward her lover. Maggie met her halfway, opening her mouth against Jill's, tongue brushing alongside her teeth with both certainty and affection.

--

"So, despite the fact that we have a witness who didn't actually see the killer, and solely based on circumstantial evidence, we found our first official suspect."

Glancing up from the body of one deceased Christy Lopez, Claire offered her friend an affectionate smile. Lindsay, curved into her doorway, hands in the back pocket of her jeans, wore a smirk that looked both sullen and halfway annoyed.

"And?"

"And although Steven Morrison does admit to calling Diana Gibson from time to time to 'harass' her for breaking his boy's heart," Lindsay confirmed. "He was very much in Ohio at the time, with a very solid alibi. As was his boy."

"Damn," Claire said, nodding as she frowned.

"Double damn," Lindsay corrected, sighing as she came forward, eyes on the body. "Please tell me that medical forensics will be our saving grace and not make us look like we're in a warped version of *Police Academy*."

Claire arched a brow and glanced over to her table. "Well, there is good news. The blood smear's print is a good one."

Lindsay sucked in her breath, eyes lighting up. "Tell me you've already submitted it."

"I've already submitted it," Claire said immediately. "As I did the butt of the cigarette for the DNA. If our guys are in the system, then we've got a shot."

"How soon till we get the results back?"

Claire held her breath, clucking her tongue. "That's the bad news. There's a backlog. Not for a couple days at least."

"Dammit." For Lindsay, who had the patience of a ball-obsessed puppy, that was bad news.

"Sorry."

Lindsay rubbed her palm over her face. "You know Tom's up my ass on this thing, right? We need to release to the media that we have a suspect or else the boy who cried wolf is gonna start crying 'serial killer'."

"Can Cindy help?"

Lindsay nodded grimly. "At least she's holding off on spinning it that way for the *Register*. Did she call you?"

"Gave her the print to lead off," Claire confirmed. "But told her to sit on the rest. At least until we get the results."

Lindsay's palm moved to her neck and began to rub, eyes on the victim all the while. "Well, maybe when we finally hear from Jill, we can get her to push this thing through." At the mention of their friend, Claire sighed. "I know," Lindsay said, eyes frank. "I'm not asking about him. But we just need her now."

"What do you need?" Halfway into the doorway, Jill had a smile on her face, but it didn't reach her eyes. Instead, she looked shaken and pale, and immediately Claire found herself regretting her snap in their last conversation.

"Holy crap, Jill, you look like hell," Lindsay breathed, always much more blunt.

Jill rolled her eyes, strolling forward. "Nice to see you too, Linz." Claire kept quiet,

watching silently as Jill, in an effort to avoid the obviously questioning look in Lindsay's eyes, turned toward the victim. Immediately, what little color there was, drained from her face and she swiveled back toward the door. "Oh, God – you could have warned me."

"Sorry," Claire **said, reaching** for a sheet, carefully covering the unfortunate victim. "It's safe. You can turn around now."

Gingerly, Jill peeked over her shoulder to make sure the coast was clear. "Is that her?"

"It's one of 'em," Lindsay acknowledged. "How was your visit?"

"Lindsay..." Claire began softly, warning in her tone.

"No, it's fine," Jill said, facing them once more, an apologetically grim smile working onto her face. Her eyes were on Lindsay. "I can talk about it now. I actually need to talk to you about it."

The pointed look on Lindsay's face softened instantly. Palms slid into the back pocket of her jeans, and she stared at her uncertainly. "Okay... now you're scaring me."

Claire's heartbeat quickened, her throat closed, as she glanced between them.

The phone at Lindsay's hip began to ring just as Jill began to speak. Lindsay growled, reaching for the contraption instinctively and glaring at the caller ID. "Dammit, it's Tom. I'm sorry – just a minute-"

When Lindsay answered the phone with a curt hello, Jill's eyes rose heavenward and she exhaled audibly, crossing around the autopsy table and heading for Claire, head falling on her friend's shoulder.

"I can't do this," she whispered, gripping Claire tightly. "I can't do this to her."

"Easy," Claire said back quietly. "We'll get through it."

Jill's hold tightened in thanks.

"Tom, can't it wait? I'm getting the autopsy results-" Lindsay's mouth shut, obviously interrupted by Tom. As she listened, her face went ashen gray. "I'm on my way." The phone was lowered as she glanced up, regarding them strangely. "Tom said he's got Denise and Detective Scott in his office – they've made some deal with Pete, that I've been made a part of."

It was a sucker punch that took the wind out of her. Claire swiveled and saw the stricken face on Jill's face. "Linz-"

"Save it," Lindsay snapped and headed for the door, boots clapping on the floor as she

left them.

Jill's nails dug into Claire's bicep, making her wince.

"I thought you were going to talk to her first."

"Dammit," Jill breathed, frozen, a horrified, disbelieving expression on her face. "Denise lied to me."

--

ACT III

The initial reaction was claustrophobic.

Lindsay felt the world closing in on her, walls shrinking with the pulsing beat of her heart, and as it began to pump faster, the emotions ran higher. Through the bullpen, she felt as if the world was watching her, eyes burning through the leather of her jacket, searing her, making her sweaty.

As she ascended the steps to Tom's office, her legs felt weak, like they were made of Jello, as if they would give out at any moment.

It would have been easier if she were angry. Lindsay hoped like hell the anger would

come, because this had hit her in a place she hadn't prepared for, wounding her to the point where there were tears prickling in her eyes, and GOD, Lindsay was a water faucet around Claire and Jill, but she would NOT cry in front of Tom.

Not again.

She got to the closed door, shut her eyes and forced herself to breathe before she offered a tentative knock.

"Come in." Tom's voice was gruff and immediate.

Lindsay felt the chill of the metal doorknob seep into her as she wrapped fingertips around it and opened the door. As she entered, Detective Scott immediately got to his feet, extending his hand.

"I'm so sorry to spring this on you," he said, as she gripped his hand mechanically. "But we're on a deadline line and--"

"And some of us prefer to go over our heads instead of following standard procedure," snipped Denise. The acting District Attorney sat in one of Tom's chair, posture stiff.

Lindsay was uncertain if the obvious tension in the room was real or if she were projecting the emotions tightening her insides at the moment. Lost, she glanced at her boss and ex-husband beseechingly.

Tom's collar was ragged and his tie was crooked, a sure sign he had been tugging. His face was mottled with conflict, and that wasn't good.

"What," she said, flat and anxious. "What the hell is this all about?"

"Again, Inspector. I'm sorry I had to spring this on you--"

"Detective Scott." Tom's voice cut through the apology. "Would you please allow me?" There was no kindness – mere politeness. His eyes softened only when they landed on Lindsay.

Now they were all staring at her, as if she were an animal in a safari – wild and capable of striking. The anger was coming, building in her veins and giving her strength.

"Tom."

"When we visited Pete Raynor this morning, he offered us a deal," Denise cut in. Lindsay's eyes flashed to her, and to her credit, she did not shrink away when confronted by the heat in Lindsay's glare. "He'll confess to any and all murders he has committed, even those that we aren't yet aware of. In return, we don't ask for the death penalty."

Lindsay quickly processed the terms of Pete's deal, instinctively knowing there had to be more, something that included her. "Interesting," she choked, heart in her throat. "So what the hell does that have to do with me?" Denise glanced at Tom. "Denise," she snapped. "Look at me and tell me what the hell this has to do with me."

Denise pressed her lips together. "He wants to confess to you. That's his condition. Just you. Only you." Denise's voice faltered. "Always you."

It didn't seem real. The office became terminally smaller as Lindsay tried to comprehend it, suffocating with the impact as the words repeated in her head and became comprehensible.

"Linz-"

"Are you ordering me to do this?" Eyes locked with Tom. "Putting me on the table like a poker chip?"

"That's not what happened-"

"Oh, it isn't?" she whispered, voice like flint, cutting through Detective Scott and shutting him up. "You really think he's just going to give it all up? He made it so easy, didn't he? Just handed you this little deal and all you have to do is sign me over – the perfect barter."

"Lindsay, enough-"

"Is this an order, Lieutenant?"

Her boss, her friend, stared at her with the conflict of affection. Dark brown eyes softened while a mouth hardened, and when he spoke, there was a trace of regret.

"Do I have to make it one?"

--

"I thought Denise was going to let you talk to her first."

To Jill, it felt like she had been tripped, steamrolled and left gasping on the pavement.

With Claire by her side, she leaned against Lindsay's desk and kept her eyes locked on Tom's office door, waiting for angry shouts, the sound of things being thrown, anything that would tell her what the hell was going on.

"She was," she answered through gritted teeth. "I hadn't counted on the fact that my boss is a hypocrite and a liar."

It shouldn't have hurt as much as it did. Her heart felt seared in two - one part blazing in conscious worry for Lindsay, the other bruised and bleeding because she had been so idiotic as to *believe* Denise when she'd been given her word.

"Maybe there's an explanation," Claire said, voice quiet and compassionate.

Jill glanced at her, met somber brown eyes - a clear indication that she was letting her anguish show.

God.

"Will somebody tell me what the hell is going on?" Jacobi appeared beside them, a grim expression on his handsome, weathered face. "She wouldn't say a word to me, went up there like she was going to her funeral." The expression hit too close to home. The sick feeling in Jill's stomach turned sour.

"Pete Raynor's struck a deal," Claire muttered beside her. "Guess who the party favor is?"

Jacobi absorbed that and uttered a curse beneath his breath. "You're shitting me."

"Fraid not."

"That's bullshit." He stared hard at Jill. "You let this happen?"

She shivered uncontrollably, ready to open her mouth weakly when Maggie appeared as if out of nowhere, with comforting pressure on her bicep, bringing her subtly into her.

"She didn't have much of a choice." Concerned crystal eyes flickered to her. "You okay?"

Jill smiled faintly. "I'm not the one we should be worried about."

As if to remind them, the door above them slammed open, hitting the rail and causing Jill to jump. From Tom's office, Lindsay finally emerged, dark locks bouncing behind her as she clomped down the stairs, heedless of the attention she drew below her.

"Shit," Jacobi breathed. "What the hell is Tom thinking in letting her do this?"

"She shouldn't be alone," Jill breathed.

"I'm on it," Claire breathed, squeezing Jill's arm and letting go just as quickly to weave through the desks, trailing after the rapidly moving Texan.

With a dry mouth and insides that tremored, Jill sucked in a shaky breath.

"Do you need to take a walk?" The breath of Maggie's voice wisped against her ear,

fingers rubbing along her spine reassuringly.

Jill's lips pressed together when she glanced helplessly up to Tom's office door and saw Denise Kwon emerge from it.

"No," she breathed, the anger heating her face and giving her strength. "I'll be fine."

Without a second glance, she jerked away from Maggie and headed for the stairs.

--

"Lindsay!"

Claire would have had an easy time catching up to her powder-keg of a friend if Lindsay didn't have those damn supermodel legs that went on for miles. As she jogged after the stalking Texan, she felt absurdly like a Chihuahua chasing a Great Dane.

"Lindsay!"

She managed to get within two steps and lurched forward, grabbing hold of a swinging wrist and catching Lindsay mid-step. When her friend whirled, Claire saw only red, moist eyes and an expression lost between terror and fury.

"Oh, honey--"

But Lindsay was already shaking her head, stepping away from Claire's embrace. "I'm sorry," she choked and swiveled away, moving away from her.

Claire knew better than to follow. Still, she had made the mistake of allowing Lindsay to brood, to close herself off, one too many times. Instead of merely staring after her retreating friend, Claire squared her shoulders with resolve and pulled out her cell phone.

Pete Raynor, aka Kiss-Me-Not, had proven phenomenally successful at getting underneath Lindsay Boxer's skin, digging into her in a way that shut her off to everyone but him.

He had done it time and time again, but it wasn't going to happen this time.

This time, there was somebody who was better at his game – and Claire had said it countless times, prayed it more than once –

Thank God for Cindy Thomas.

--

The coffee table of Margaret Tennyson was crowded and cluttered with clippings and

pictures of both Christy and Diana, thrown together with both the care and grief of a longtime friend who wanted them to be remembered.

"I thought you might want to use these. You know, for your article." Margaret Tennyson's smile was devastated and watery, watching Cindy carefully as the reporter leaned over to pick up a picture of Diana on the beach, in short shorts and a sweatshirt, hair wet and eyes sparkling with life. "She was beautiful, wasn't she?"

"Absolutely."

Margaret crossed her arms, gnawing at her lip as she glanced toward the closed bedroom door just left of the living room. "God, this is such a nightmare."

Cindy's smile was sympathetic, but her posture was tight. "How is Anne holding up?"

Surprised, Margaret looked back at the closed door, and then back to Cindy. Her mouth opened, then closed, and, suddenly, a dry laugh fell from her lips. "Terrible," she admitted. "God, I guess you reporters really do know everything, don't you?"

The bitterness with which she said it was alarming. Cindy Thomas fought the urge to wince at her own stupidity.

'Be annoying,' Lindsay had told her. Not, 'be an idiot'. Showing every hand in her deck was hardly the way to get a possible character witness to talk.

With a forced easy smile, and a look that pictured perfect innocence, Cindy shrugged. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be intrusive. I have some friends in the justice system. They want to do everything possible to find Christy and Diana's killer. You should know that."

Margaret's moist eyes closed, and she sniffled hard and nodded, rising to her feet. "I don't know why I believe you. I mean, you're a reporter and all – shouldn't you be focusing on 'just the facts'?"

"Good reporters tell the stories behind the facts," Cindy answered softly. "That's why I wanted to see you. It helps to know who they were."

Margaret absorbed the explanation and offered a quiet smile. "Anne said she was working on a list of people that might have wanted to hurt Christy and Diane."

"That's right--"

"She didn't have anyone." Margaret sighed and smoothed her open palms on her thighs. "I guess that doesn't help, does it?"

Movement behind them, the snick of a lock and the creak of a door alerted them to a young man, with scruffy brown hair and dark brown eyes, holding a paper bag to his

chest. He eyed them both.

“What’s all this?”

“David, this is Cindy Thomas, from the *Register*.” Rising to her feet, Margaret immediately moved toward him, smiling reassuringly. “She’s putting together a story on Christy and Diana.”

“Awesome,” said the man dryly, coming further into the room and kicking the door closed behind him. “Diana always wanted an article written about her, and now it’s when she’s fucking dead.”

Margaret sucked in her breath in reaction and glanced at Cindy. “David! God!” Her smile trembled. “I’m sorry. David’s my fiancé.”

“You sure she should be here with Anne like she is?”

“I promise, I’m just here to get some anecdotes,” Cindy said, interjecting carefully when Margaret eyed her uncertainly. “I can certainly appreciate what Anne’s been through. I wouldn’t dream of harassing her.”

“Good, because I’d have a problem with that.” It was a warning that seemed almost threatening when the young man stared at her, dark eyes searing her in a way that gave her sudden chills. “Just saying. She’s been through enough.”

With that, he headed toward the kitchen, loudly opening the refrigerator door and sorting through its contents.

Glancing away, Cindy licked her lips uncertainly. “I’m glad she has such protective friends.”

Margaret laughed.

The odd reaction was almost chilling. “I’m sorry,” she said, eyes moist, wiping away an errant tear. “It’s just... that was Diana and Christy in a nutshell. Protective of everyone. God, they didn’t even want me and David to be together – said he wasn’t ever gonna amount to anything – just two days ago they got into this big fight with him...”

Cindy slowly stilled, posture stiffening as she glanced back to the kitchen where the telltale clinks and clanks of a beer bottle being opened and gulped down could be heard.

“Even convinced me to break up with him!” Margaret smiled through her tears. “Funny, isn’t it? When he found out what happened to them, he came over, was so supportive to me and Anne. They never got to see this side of him.”

An acrid smell suddenly permeated their noses, and Margaret’s lovestruck smile turned

into one of disgust.

“God, David!? Don’t smoke that in here!”

From the kitchen, David emerged, sucking in a lungful of smoke as the tip of the cigarette he held in his hand burned white hot.

“Sorry.” He headed for the front door.

The realization came to Cindy like a punch in the gut – pinpricks of moments of the crime scene flickered into her head, almost as if Claire and Lindsay were in her head, giving her the dots to connect.

Motive? Check. Cigarette? Check.

Breathless, and with a dry throat, Cindy struggled to keep calm as her eyes whirled around the apartment.

“He sounds like a prince,” she managed, eyes frozen on the door.

“I think your phone is ringing.”

Cindy blinked, head swiveling to Margaret, the girl coming back into focus. “I’m sorry?”

Margaret pointed to her purse. “Your phone? It’s ringing.”

Sure enough, her purse was emitting a tell-tale ring. “God, sorry. I don’t know where my mind went-“ she fumbled for her purse and discovered a missed call from Claire. “You know what? I have to take this.”

Outside, David was smoking, in the midst of inhaling as he glanced up and caught her in a lazy appraisal. Shifting on the steps, he asked in a way that seemed overly casual, “They any closer to finding the guy that did it?”

The lump in Cindy’s throat was nearly impossible to swallow. “I’m not sure.” She shrugged flippantly. “Hey, would you mind if I bummed one of those?” she motioned to his cigarette. “I’m all out.”

--

There was absolutely nothing that was not stupid about this.

Jill Bernhardt, in her more lucid moments, would argue that charging after Denise Kwon, her boss, like some sort of raging bull would accomplish nothing but getting her fired.

Logic and reason should have kept her calm, pushed her into her office so she could lock

the door and nurse her wounds in private, call Cindy, track down Lindsay, do everything she could to make sure Lindsay was all right.

Instead, she followed her bruised ego and heart, catching up with Denise just outside of Jill's own office and latching onto her elbow, startling the other woman so badly Denise nearly tripped as she whirled.

"Jill! God, you scared me to death! JILL-" Jill shoved, pushing Denise into her office. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"You gave me your word," she managed, hands against the door as she slammed it closed, eyes burning with emotion and fury. "You PROMISED ME-"

"I kept it-"

"Bullshit!" she spit. "You went behind my back the minute you got back here – went to Tom and Scott and for what? To screw me?" Denise actually looked shocked, eyes wide and mouth open, and the fury in Jill fed on it. "You really are a class act bitch, aren't you?"

That word finally seemed to grab some sort of reaction. Denise winced as if she had been slapped, before she caught herself, and the expression faded away.

"That's what you'd love to think, isn't it, Bernhardt?" Attempting to regain her dignity, Denise's shoulders straightened, her eyes narrowed. "That that's all I am. Just a class act bitch whose life purpose is just to screw you – any way I can, is that it? Get over yourself. The world doesn't revolve around you or your golden snatch."

God, she hated that she had given Denise the power to hurt her like this. Hated the tears that threatened to spill over, the emotion that nearly paralyzed her against her door. The strength that propelled her to bring Denise in here left her, and she now clutched the back of the door for support.

"I thought I could trust you," Jill whispered.

"You CAN."

"Bullshit."

"Fuck you, Jill!" The statement blasted with fury, with heat, as Denise strode forward, fingers curled into fists. "I didn't go to Tom, Scott did. He took a cab and lied to me, came straight here and decided to play bureaucratic tattle-tale. He went over my head, and by the time I found out, Tom was already calling Lindsay." It could have been fast talking – Denise lying about the situation to paint herself in a better light – except Denise wouldn't do that. She wouldn't care enough to do that. "But that didn't even occur to you, did it? You just saw what happened and thought that I had betrayed you. You know

what, Bernhardt?" Denise's eyes flashed, her arms crossed defensively over her chest). "You're the worst kind of hypocrite. Always waxing poetic about trying to see the best in people and looking at the whole person and beyond the flaws and the rules and the first chance you get to paint me as some devil you take it."

As fast as the anger faded, the regret took hold. Jill found herself faltering, staring mournfully at the woman before her, strong and fragile and lost and self-assured – hiding behind her mask of indifference because somehow Jill had actually HURT her.

And, suddenly, she was on the edge of that precipice yet again, heart throbbing as she searched beseechingly at a woman who both terrified and intrigued her.

"I'm sorry."

It was said simply and honestly, so sincerely that it threw Denise off, knocked her out of her fury and left her staring at Jill with a surprise that, for a moment, seemed so vulnerable and hurt, she broke Jill's heart.

Unspeakably and inexplicably touched, Jill could only stare. Rare moments of vulnerabilities from Denise had always been both stunning and unforgettable, but they had never seemed to undo her.

Denise flushed under the attention. Her dark head lowered and she smoothed her skirt down, regaining her icy composure as she walked toward the door. "Like I expected anything else." She wavered at the doorway, eyes rising up to challenge Jill's with an arched brow and a cool glare. "Are you going to let me out of here or do I have to charge you with kidnapping?"

But Jill was beyond help. Her regret and her affection surged to the surface, and she lost control. Her hand once again latched onto Denise the second she touched the doorknob, holding her in place.

"I'm sorry," she said again, into a face now inches from her own. Denise's perfume wafted at her as they were pressed together side by side, the intimacy arousing in a way that felt like she was being drugged. Sighing, her head fell forward, tented against Denise's ear as she whispered again, "I'm sorry."

"Stop." The words were choked, laced with uncertainty, and Jill paid them no heed. Her head angled as she repeated her mantra, echoing her words of apology as her lips skimmed against Denise's ear, her jaw. "Jill."

Her mouth hovered against Denise's lips. "I'm sorry," she whispered, brushing those words against soft lips, feeling the breath of Denise against her own. A millimeter push, and then they were barely kissing, gentle presses of lips against lips, chaste and soft.

When Denise moved her mouth, jerked her head to the side and tilted her forehead

against Jill's, she was panting heavily. "No," she said, firm and ragged. "Jill."

And God, she was right. She was so right. This was so eternally fucked up.

"I'm sorry," Jill said, eyes fluttering closed as she pressed against Denise and breathed her in. Their fingers had tangled together, and there they stood, against Jill's door, panting against each other as Jill waged war with her instincts.

She had just managed to gather enough resolve to let Denise go when the brunette's head tilted suddenly against her, body swiveling until she had pressed Jill against the firm wood and slammed Jill's palms on either side of her. Denise stared at her for only a second, with a glazed look of desire, before she surged forward and opened her mouth against Jill's.

"We shouldn't do this," Jill groaned, in-between kisses that threatened to sear her.

"Shut up," Denise breathed, and curled her hand at Jill's nape, roughly tilting Jill's head and plunging her tongue into Jill's mouth. Instinctively, Jill kissed back feverishly, biting down a moan on Denise's lower lip that only served to make things more frantic.

Denise's fingers untangled from Jill's and Jill's knees nearly buckled when Denise grabbed onto her breast, massaging roughly. Breathing noisily through her nose, sucking Denise's tongue into her mouth, she pushed into the sensation, arching off the door to fumble at Denise's buttons, jerking the blazer open to reveal the tight button down shirt.

When Jill tore away from Denise's mouth to follow a heated path down the arch of her throat, Denise groaned, the sound animal and unique and such a turn on it drove Jill back to her mouth to taste it.

When the door opened, they were halfway to the desk. Denise's fingers had already snuck underneath Jill's shirt, her mouth forming a bruise against the vee of Jill's exposed cleavage.

They sprang apart like children, but it wasn't enough. Maggie had already seen enough.

Jill's girlfriend stared at her, then Denise. After a moment, she silently stepped back out into the hallway and calmly shut the door behind her.

--

If there was one thing that could knock a potential killer out of her head for even a moment, it was a call from Claire regarding Lindsay Boxer. When Claire had told her as calmly as she could that Lindsay had walked away from her, Cindy had immediately hung up and dialed Lindsay's number as she belted herself into her seat.

"I'm at home," said the gruff, rough voice, the moment that Cindy picked up.

“I’ll be right there,” she promised, and then, because she couldn’t help herself, she added, “Don’t go anywhere.”

She hung up before Lindsay could argue.

With the speed of a NASCAR driver, Cindy Thomas jerked the wheel of her little red car named Maggie, and pulled into the parking spot of her apartment complex.

In front of her, in the tandem space assigned to her unit, was Lindsay’s Jeep. The tension that had been building inside her, making her movements jerky, erratic, and if she were honest with herself, her driving not as safe as it should have been, immediately melted inside of her, liquefying and making her feel suddenly light-headed.

She fumbled for the car door, jerking it open as her phone rang in her purse. Any other instance, the call would have been ignored. But the caller was Jill, and despite a flare of irrational anger, Cindy answered it.

“Hi.”

“You sound breathless,” said the soft, strained voice of her friend. “Did you find her?”

“Her car is here,” she said, heading fast for the elevator. “I’m going up right now.”

A rush of air blew into the receiver, Jill’s own relief making itself known. “I know she won’t listen to me, but please tell her I’m sorry.”

“God, Jill.” Cindy’s steps faltered; the blood rushing in her veins slowed, giving her just a little bit more clarity as she detected the very real anguish in Jill’s tone. “It’s not your fault.”

“She was blindsided.”

“According to Claire, so were you.” The elevator button was sticking. Biting her lower lip, Cindy shook her head and headed for the stairs. “You trusted Denise and she screwed you. I’m sorry.”

Jill was silent, and then Cindy was startled to hear an odd, dry chuckle fall out of Jill’s lips. “Right... about that? That was a misunderstanding. I got so hurt that Denise would betray my trust I jumped to conclusions and... Denise didn’t... exactly screw me over...”

“Oh God. Would you two just make out already?”

Another stalled silence. Another bitter laugh. Then, “What are you doing? You sound like you’re running a marathon.”

Catching her breath on the second floor, Cindy reached for the handle and jerked, turning into the hallway. “Stairs,” she admitted. “And adrenaline. Did Denise tell you when Lindsay has to meet Pete?”

Another stalled silence. Cindy frowned. “Jill?”

“Denise and I didn’t exactly... talk.”

“You realize you’re talking in riddles and inferences, right?”

“Long story.”

“I bet.” Sucking in her breath, she released it and moved toward the door. “Jill, I love you but I’m staring at my apartment door and I have no idea how Lindsay is-“

“I’m hanging up. Call me when you can to tell me how she is.”

“Will do.”

She snapped her phone closed and headed fast for the door, inserting the key in the lock and jerking so hard she nearly snapped the thing in two.

“Lindsay. Lindsay-“

Her lover’s name died in her throat when she stepped into the living room and discovered the dejected brunette sitting quietly on the couch, hands in her lap like a chastened schoolgirl. At Cindy’s entrance, dark eyes, liquid with tears, glanced up and met her own, and in Lindsay’s face was such a look of such quiet devastation it nearly knocked her breathless.

Upon sight of her, Lindsay’s throat bobbed with a hard swallow, before she glanced away from Cindy’s still form and reached tentatively for a stack of paper that Cindy recognized as the lease agreement.

“I signed it,” Lindsay offered, in a voice rough as sandpaper. Through the stinging tears that were already beginning to form in Cindy’s burning eyes, she could make out the scribble of Lindsay’s signature, inked in pen on the bottom of the page.

Quietly, she came forward, purse dropping to the floor, and jacket shrugged off, ever closer to her beloved Inspector who just looked so *lost*.

As she sank down on the couch, Cindy kept to herself, watching imploringly as Lindsay’s moist eyes broke away from her, smoothing her hands over their agreement. “I just... I came home and I didn’t know what to do... I couldn’t see anything but him – he was just ... soaked in me, you know?”

Cindy's heart began to thud, hard beats that pumped against her chest with the ache of her own sudden feeling of uselessness. "Lindsay..."

"Then I came in here... and I saw this." Lindsay's fingers continued to trace the line of her signature, retracing it with her index digit, following every loop and curve. "And I could see again. I didn't know what to do, but I knew that I could sign it. So I did. I signed it."

With a loud snuffle and trembling hands, she turned to Cindy and held it out to her. Overwhelmed, Cindy could only take it, placing the papers carefully in order and back on the coffee table.

"Thank you," she said, quietly and sincerely.

Lindsay breathed out deeply, a gush of air that sounded louder than her own voice. She leaned forward and put her hands against her mouth, staring ahead.

"He keeps trying to rob me of my future," Lindsay said, and Cindy didn't know if she was directing that at her or speaking out loud to herself. "Using everything he can. My past. My job. My memories. My friends. He keeps trying so hard, and do you know why?"

Wordlessly, Cindy shook her head.

"Because he knows he won't win. He knows it. This is some sort of last ditch effort to try to dig into me, try to get me to be that person that he wanted me to become before his climatic conclusion. He thinks he's the most important person in my life but do you know what he is? Do you know all he is?" Lindsay's hands moved away from her face, and gorgeous moist eyes took her in. "He's a monster. He didn't destroy me. We destroyed him. Whatever he took away, I have so much more."

Unable to help herself, Cindy reached forward and placed a palm against Lindsay's back, feeling the heat against the cotton shirt rising up into her hand. Sucking in her breath in emotion, she smoothed up until her hand was palming Lindsay's nape, and when the quirk of Lindsay's lips indicated the smallest of smiles, the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I love you," she whispered, because Cindy Thomas always had a knack for words, and had a tendency to run on, but in some cases, even she knew the best way to say things were as clearly and simply as possible.

"I owe it to those people, the ones who weren't as lucky, to find out who they were, where they were. Don't I?"

Not trusting herself to speak, Cindy only nodded.

Lindsay stared at her lover and turned her head until her cheek leaned into Cindy's hand,

her mouth brushed against her thumb.

When Cindy exhaled softly, Lindsay's eyes darkened. Her mouth opened over Cindy's thumb, and she took her in, laving over the digit, sucking it into her mouth.

The tremors of arousal were instantaneous, and Cindy's thudding heartbeat slowed and sped up yet again, as she watched her lover with half-lidded eyes, overtaken.

Fingers snagging one of Lindsay's long dark curls, she curled her fist and pulled, bringing Lindsay over her as she leaned back, until Lindsay was pressed down on top of her, gun digging into Cindy's hip and chest fitted against her own.

Lindsay's dark hair fell around Cindy's face like a curtain, and Cindy reached up simply, smoothing it away from the beauty of Lindsay's face.

"He'll never take this away from us," she whispered. "Not even in my nightmares, he'll never take me away from you."

Lindsay studied her, keened into her touch. "I'm counting on it," she whispered, and then opened her mouth against hers. The kiss was long and deep, tongue plunging into Cindy's mouth with a desperate abandon that was meant to reassure and consume.

She enveloped her lover from head to toe, shifting only to press her knee between Cindy's, sinking in further into the younger woman, groaning as their hips began to rock against each other.

Breathing hard from both the intimate kiss and the pressure of her lover atop her, Cindy's hands smoothed underneath Lindsay's shirt, sliding up soft skin and digging fingernails into Lindsay's shoulder as her knee hitched up around Lindsay's waist, arching into the press of Lindsay's thigh.

When Lindsay lifted up to fit her hand between them, reaching under the elastic of the waist of Cindy's skirt, she encountered the wetness that caused such a shudder it vibrated into Cindy.

"Please," Cindy whispered, because she needed it. Lindsay needed it. Lindsay's tongue plunged into her lover with the same thrust as her fingers. Cindy bucked and whimpered, clawing onto Lindsay's back to bring her further in. They shifted together, sweating underneath their clothes, plastered together as they moved toward their own practiced rhythm.

--

"I'm an ass and the world hates me."

Claire lifted her head from her desk to discover a blonde attorney leaning in her doorway.

Claire found her lips quirking in response. "Have you polled everybody in the world?"

"I have a good enough representative sample."

"Do you?"

Jill collapsed into her chair and closed her eyes. "Have you heard from Lindsay at all?"

Claire sighed deeply. "Fraid not," she answered quietly. "But I did get in touch with Cindy."

"Me too," Jill confirmed. "She said Lindsay was at her apartment and she was on her way to see her."

"Good," Claire answered, more relieved than she wanted to admit. That Lindsay chose to go to where Cindy could find her easily was an extremely good sign. It meant Cindy was still her designated 'safe' zone, and as long as that remained the truth, Pete Raynor was defeatable.

Her eyes fell down to the charts on her desk, then up again at Jill, who stayed slumped in Claire's chair, fingers ticking on the wooden arm. "Don't mind me," she said. "I'm just in here hiding."

"Care to tell me who you're hiding from?"

"How about my best friend who wants to kill me? Or my girlfriend who just witnessed me sucking face with my boss? Or my boss... with whom I very nearly had sex with in my office?"

Claire stared at her friend, so thrown by the last revelation she could only blink. When Jill lifted her head and eyed her, she straightened her shoulders, opened her mouth, closed it, and then tried again.

"You've had a busy morning," she finally managed. Jill grimaced, but agreed, leaning forward and poking at the papers on Claire's desk.

"So, in an effort to completely avoid my completely messed up love-life and try to get back in my best friend's good graces, I'm focusing on the one issue I CAN help with. Lindsay said something about using the power of the DA's office and my awesome cleavage to speed up some tests?"

--

"I'm so sorry I can't just make him go away."

Pressed into the couch with her naked lover shifted into her, Cindy's Snuggie covering

them both, Lindsay encountered a sense of calm that rested between happiness and devastation.

For the moment, the demons had been chased away, but they still hovered, just beyond the shadows of her mind, in corners where even the inextinguishable Cindy Thomas could not illuminate.

Strangely, Lindsay was okay with that. At the moment, her fingers trailed a path along a bare shoulder down a soft, perfectly smooth back. Pressed against her was a woman who was uniquely hers, and though she understood things were as bad as they had ever been, that was all she could actually care about.

Skimming her lips alongside Cindy's temple reassuringly, she breathed out, "Don't be."

"Did they tell you when you would have to see him?"

Cindy's voice was clear and soft, as Lindsay's fingers stilled and the woman plastered to her raised her head and met her with a brown-eyed gaze.

Distracted by the simple beauty of mussed tresses and an inquisitive face, Lindsay reached up to smooth knuckles along Cindy's temple, before glancing up toward the ceiling.

"You know... I kinda stormed out before they quite got to that part..." The imagery of what happened wafted over her – a perfect manufactured image of herself, clomping out of Tom's office like only a disgruntled Texan could. "In retrospect, that might have been a little melodramatic."

Above her, Cindy's brow rose in amusement. "Was it?"

Despite herself, she found herself beginning to smirk. "I stomped down Tom's stairs, in my boots, my jacket flying like a cape."

"This is why I tell you to carry spurs."

The insistent throb in the pit of her stomach unfurled ever so slightly as her smirk widened. "Spurs?"

"Adds flavor."

"Does it?"

"Totally. And I'm still campaigning for the cowboy hat. Partner."

The little drawl Cindy added at the end of the line caused a genuine laugh to erupt from Lindsay, an explosion of emotion that was so welcome she found herself blinking back

tears.

Opening her fingers against Cindy's cheek, she grinned. "You're insane."

"Determined," Cindy corrected softly. "And so are you. Like Wyatt Earp. You always catch your man." Lindsay pulled firmly, mouth slanting against Cindy's, kissing her deeply until her lover suddenly jerked away with a slight 'MMph!'

"Huh?"

But Cindy was already sitting up, pushing against her chest with pinpricks of pressure that caused her to wince.

"Cindy-"

"Oh, God, I can't believe I almost forgot."

Rising to her elbows, Lindsay watched in perplexed befuddlement as her naked girlfriend bent to her knees and began pulling things out of her satchel purse, scattering them.

"Cindy?" she asked, both intrigued and concerned at the spectacle before her. "What in Sam's hell are you doing?"

Cindy paused only briefly, eyes flashing brilliantly before she blew a bang that was obstructing her face and continued her hunt. "I admit – on the Pete front I feel frightfully inadequate, but what if I said I could get you a suspect in your murder case?"

"The ex-boyfriend?" Lindsay shook her head regretfully. "Dead end."

"Not the ex-boyfriend. But a fiancé – who has motive, access, and a penchant for smoking?" Pulling a piece of plastic from her bag, Cindy lobbed it her way. When Lindsay caught it, it took her a full three seconds to process that she was looking at a used Salem cigarette butt. "Meet Margaret Tennyson's fiancé, David."

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ACT IV

It wasn't that she had never actually cheated. Jill had been a notorious cheater – and there had always been excuses for it. And when the excuses had run out, when she had lost Luke over it, Jill allowed herself one night of sobbing and self pity, before she squared her shoulders, decided excuses were for losers, and all she wanted was a good time anyway.

It was a fabulous way to live, if Jill lived in a bubble.

Time, experience and more than a few close calls with death had given her a more sobering reality check, and now, all that really existed beyond Jill's depressing lack of impulse control was shame.

Maggie had turned her phone off. Jill had tried leaving a message, and every single time she opened her mouth, she discovered she had nothing she could say. The words died in her throat, and she could only sigh and apologize and hang up.

Denise, true to form, was avoiding her, and truthfully, Jill was glad. Too much had happened for which she was unprepared – her work life and personal life had collided in such a catastrophic way she wasn't sure which way she could even lean without getting a

whole bunch of crap flung in her face.

Her office was no haven. Sitting at her desk, all she had to do was look up and then she was reliving it, watching with both fascination and a little bit of horror what had unfolded between her and Denise in HD definition replay.

It was arousing and painful and completely inappropriate, and seriously, Jill really did screw things up fantastically this time, because she couldn't even CALL her boss and feign sickness just to get out of there because her BOSS was the one she had very nearly fucked on her own desk.

So, she concentrated on work. Catch the killer. Get the warrants. See a tech with an obvious crush and with a bit of finessing and some legal jargon that made him cross-eyed, push Lindsay's DNA test to the top of the list.

To take hold of that file, physically have it in her hands and walk with it towards the morgue, calmed her. Standing in the elevator on her way to see Claire, Jill reasoned that she wasn't a total piece of shit. In some aspects, her complete obsession with sex and inability to be faithful to anyone was actually quite helpful. It caught bad guys.

Or at least sped tests up. With pervy techs who wanted to see her cleavage.

"God, I'm such a joke," she muttered, pounding at the lighted elevator button again.

The elevator doors heeded her call, sliding open on Claire's floor to reveal a gorgeous brunette.

Eyes on her own report, Maggie didn't see Jill at first. Her head only lifted with the sound of the elevator.

When her eyes locked with Jill's, the fleeting expression on her face betrayed a sudden panic that morphed immediately into a hostile glare, before she glanced away. A nervous tension ballooned upwards from Jill's stomach, making her ill.

Unsure what to do, unwilling to walk away, Jill found herself standing dumbly, staring at her betrayed girlfriend, until the elevator, unable to close its doors, blared a ring in alarm.

Maggie's eyes rose sharply to meet hers.

"Aren't you getting the fuck out?"

The words, spit with resentment and righteous anger, made Jill flinch. Without a word, she nodded hesitantly.

The elevator once again dinged at them. Maggie watched Jill carefully, eyes searching her girlfriend's intensely. "Screw it, I'll take the stairs." She swiveled on her heel.

“Maggie, wait.” The departing form of Maggie faltered, head lowering, shoulders sinking. “I...” Jill searched for the words and found there was nothing she could say.

“I had a nanny when I was growing up. Her name was Blanca. She loved country music.”

Jill exhaled raggedly, heart throbbing as she stepped out of the elevator, one step closer to her girlfriend. “What?”

Maggie sighed and slowly turned, regarding Jill with somber crystal eyes. “The old stuff. I would listen to it in the car with her, when I was little. There was this one song she used to play all the time. ‘It’s Only Make Believe’ by Conway Twitty. Tex might know it.”

Jill’s mouth quirked into a phantom, empty smile.

Maggie seemed lost in the memory. “People see us everywhere,” she began to recite, the lyrics soft and melodic. “ – they think you really care – but myself I can’t deceive – I know it’s only make believe.” The words fell into silence, as Maggie absorbed their meaning. “I always thought it was just so sad.”

Jill’s eyes watered; her shame and guilt consumed her. “I’m so sorry.”

“That conversation we needed to have. Was it about Denise?”

Jill licked her lips, considered her answer as her heart beat furiously against her chest. No, she wanted to say. It was about much more than that. It was about not knowing what she wanted to do and to selfishly want everything while she figured it out. It was about wanting what was so wrong for her and being unsatisfied with what was right.

It was about how much of a fuck-up she was and how Maggie paid for it just because she was the one who loved her at the moment.

With a soft, bitten-in) sigh, Jill nodded slowly, heart throbbing when Maggie’s eyes flashed their hurt. “It wasn’t an affair,” she said, unsure how it would make it better. “I’m not sure what it is.”

The laughter that came from Maggie was low and hollow. “You know what, Jill? I don’t give a crap what it is.”

Caught in her own hypocrisy, Jill could only lower her gaze. “It was selfish. I kept having doubts – not about you – about me, and ... it’s not... on paper this was perfect but...”

“But it was only make believe?”

Jill’s lips pressed together sadly, the meaning in Maggie’s song poignant and irrefutable.

“God.” Maggie shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe we’re doing this outside of a morgue. It’s so fucking ironic.”

Jill exhaled raggedly. “You deserve better than me.”

“No, I don’t.” Maggie’s tone cracked. She bit her words off and snapped her mouth shut, allowing herself a moment. When she spoke again, her voice had regained its even quality. “What I don’t deserve is to be lied to.”

The glance she gave Jill was heated and agonizing. “I’m sorry,” Jill whispered, unable to say anything else.

Maggie’s lip quirked, before her shoulders came up in a defeated shrug. “Shit happens, right Jill?”

Her eyes lingered, one last time, before Maggie turned and walked away. Jill could do nothing but watch her go, hands curved around herself, shivering suddenly from cold.

When the elevator dinged behind her, Jill didn’t bother to look at who it was, until a warm palm landed on both shoulders, squeezing reassuringly. Glancing to either side, she discovered herself flanked by an Inspector and a tiny reporter.

Lindsay’s eyes were dark and thoughtful, following her friend’s gaze to the departing Maggie, who turned the corner and disappeared.

“You okay?”

The tears that were forming spilled over before she could help it, but Jill held her composure, wiping at them quickly.

“We broke up,” she explained, as calmly as she could. “Which is probably the best thing.”

“Why is that the best thing?”

“Because she deserved better than what I was giving her,” she said simply. “And because no matter how hard I deny it and how hard I try to ignore it, I think I’m falling in love with Denise Kwon.” The concern was evident on Cindy’s face, but before she could speak, Jill shook her head. “No,” she said gruffly, before Cindy could get the chance to offer any sort of reassuring words or clichés that wouldn’t do a thing to make her feel better. Inhaling unsteadily, she focused instead on Lindsay. “Are you okay?”

Her best friend, gorgeous on even her darkest days, seemed taken aback by the sudden focus, and a wave of cloudiness flickered over her face. It faded, however, and in its place came a small, sincere smile that took hold of the chill and residual fear inside Jill

and eased it into a the smallest bit of hopeful warmth.

“Fine,” she said, and sighed. “Okay, not completely fine, but I’m okay.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jill said softly, her words sincere and heartfelt.

Lindsay, with her beautiful kind eyes and equally sincere smile, only shook her head slowly. “Don’t be. The only person who did this is Pete, and to blame anyone else would be stupid.”

Cindy exhaled, smiled valiantly. “Are *you* okay?”

Jill resisted the urge to look behind her. “I’m as okay as I can be.” She didn’t want pity. Pity would be too much, and at the moment, Jill didn’t quite feel as if she deserved it. In an attempt to refocus, she clapped her hands together and motioned with her head toward Claire’s door. “We have a murder, don’t we?”

Lindsay and Cindy shared a glance in that intimate, connected way they had learned to share. Just the sight of it both warmed Jill and caused a tiny ache of jealousy and resentment, because clearly, she was never going to share that with anyone.

Lindsay’s gorgeous face focused on Jill, trying to read her. “There’s always a murder,” the Inspector said flatly. “We can put it aside for 5 minutes.”

The statement was so perfectly *Tex*, Jill finally found the strength to smile as she held up the file folder in her hand. “Would you still say that if you knew I had the DNA test results?”

--

It had been an exhausting day, with an excruciatingly early start. Claire had sucked down three cupfuls of bad tech-made coffee and had already phoned her husband to explain why she would not be home to make dinner.

And yet, of the four, she still seemed to have had both the least eventful and painful day.

There was something to be said for the character of her friends, even if they never believed in the unbelievable strength they possessed. Claire had always believed that alone they were amazing, but fallible. Together, it was astounding just how unstoppable they could be.

Case in point – their new suspect – the friend’s fiancé, who’d been placed before them, ready for them to connect-the-dots that would tie him to the evidence.

“We’ve got motive and no alibi,” Lindsay lobbed at Claire. “Tell me you can give me something to pin on him so we can get an arrest and make it stick.”

Claire twisted the knob of her microscope, narrowing her focus on the bit of cigarette that had been placed before her.

“Well, it’s the same brand, same type, down to the leaf,” she said, rising up and scribbling a note on her pad. “But the print we got off the bloodstain was a smear, and unfortunately, what I’ve been able to lift from this is just a couple of fingers.” She turned and leaned against the table, pulling off her latex gloves as she faced her friends. “We need a better print. If that matches? Then we’re solid.”

“To do that we’d need a warrant,” Lindsay said, eyes immediately moving towards Jill.

The DDA, at the moment leaning into the smaller reporter, drew in a breath, head cocking as she squinted. “Iffy,” she said. “Any other day, I could get Denise to push it through a judge with motive alone ... but...”

“But today, considering how she’s ignoring you after you two nearly had sex in your office, it wouldn’t happen?”

When Jill smiled wryly and pointed her middle finger at Cindy, the redhead grinned widely and pressed a kiss to her shoulder.

“Are you sure that really happened?” When Claire shot a befuddled Lindsay a curious glance, she shrugged. “I’m just saying! That’s just... really?! It sounds like a really hot porno!”

Cindy’s head lifted from Jill’s shoulder to half-glare at Lindsay. “How hot, Inspector?”

It only took a moment for Lindsay to realize the amount of trouble she could potentially get into with what she considered to be a highly astute observation. “Not that hot,” she said quickly. When Cindy’s brow only rose further up her forehead, Lindsay flushed and looked almost wildly at Jill. “So... you and Denise, huh? I support that.”

Jill flashed Claire a bemused glance as Cindy let her forehead fall again on Jill’s shoulder, moaning at Lindsay’s complete obtuseness.

“What? She says she loves her and Denise isn’t Hollywood.”

“There is no me and Denise,” Jill answered, tone carefully flat. “Seriously,” she insisted, when Claire’s brow furrowed. “I’m a complete mess. I’m incapable of being in a monogamous relationship without screwing it up completely, and I’ve hurt enough people, including myself. Not to mention, Denise is my *boss*. Just because she likes making out with me doesn’t mean she’s not going to sue me for harassment the next day. It’s time to do the smart thing and focus on myself.”

“How Kelly Taylor of you,” Cindy muttered.

“Did you seriously just *Beverly Hills, 90210* reference me?”

“Darn’ tootin’.”

Claire frowned. “So you admit you may love her, but you’re not going to pursue it?”

“It’s not a good time. And it’s the wrong person.” Jill shrugged, head tilting to press against Cindy’s. “Now, the DNA test?”

Claire’s mouth formed into a sad, simple smile, and she glanced down at the report she had been handed earlier.

“It’s never a good time.” Glancing up in surprise, Claire discovered that it was a thoughtful, quiet Lindsay that had interjected that particular statement.

“I may be the last person on earth to handle giving any sort of love advice to anyone,” she said, when Jill and Cindy stared at her. “But if I’m any sort of example, then I can attest that you can’t wait until you think you’re ready. There’s never a good time. There’re serial killers and monsters and you can be as cracked as a stained glass window, but it’s not going to wait for you.” Her eyes ventured towards her own redhead lover, and the smile she gave Cindy was both affectionate and poignant. “Love just happens to you –whether you’re ready for it or not. You either take it or you don’t, and sometimes, just being with that person makes you better. I’m just saying – if you want Denise, then fight for it. You never know.”

That those words were coming from Lindsay’s own mouth, that she believed them so sincerely, that she stared at Cindy while she said them with such *love*...

It threatened to overwhelm Claire. The report in her hand crumpled as she pressed them against her heart, as she looked toward Cindy and watched as the tear-filled younger woman stepped away from Jill to stare at her girlfriend in wonder.

“Oh my God,” Jill said dryly. “It finally happened. Cindy Lou Who finally made the Grinch’s heart grow three sizes.”

“Shut up,” Lindsay growled, her face flushed, until Cindy launched herself into her lover’s arms.

Jill watched the loving scene quietly, her eyes moist as she battled a smile. Claire grinned unsteadily. “With advice like that, you might have to take it.”

“And be as sappy and disgusting as they are? Shoot me first.”

Between them, Cindy and Lindsay clutched each other tightly, foreheads tilted together in such a sappy, romantic way, Claire felt suddenly as if she were intruding.

“Ahem,” she said, brow rising as two reluctant gazes finally turned her way. “I do have an office.”

“Sorry,” Cindy said, not looking apologetic at all as she took her time sliding out of her girlfriend’s arms, keeping their fingers tangled.

Claire grinned at Lindsay. “You’re such a softie.”

The tips of Lindsay’s ears turned bright red, as she coughed and shifted on her boots, now profoundly embarrassed. “DNA report?” she asked pointedly. “Murder? Suspect?”

“Oh, we’re back to that, are we?” Claire said, hiding her smile behind the folder as she flipped it open. “I have it right here. Thank you, Jill, for the help speeding it up.”

“At least I’m good for something,” their morose friend sighed. For that disparaging comment, she got three sets of glares and a pinch from Cindy. “Hey!”

“Our friend the tech tells us there is no match to the database BUT, based on the DNA evidence, the killer’s DNA is consistent with a Caucasian male with brown hair and brown eyes.” Claire’s eyes looked pointedly to Cindy. “Sound like anyone we know?”

Cindy offered a reassuring nod. “Does the DNA report say he was skeezy, too? Because he was totally skeezy.”

Claire grinned. “Fraid not.”

“Damn.”

“Then we just need a DNA sample and a print.” Claire placed the report down on a nearby table. “If we’ve got both and they match, we wouldn’t even need a confession.”

“Word,” Jill offered airily. “I can probably get you a warrant with probable cause and circumstantial evidence, but we need to establish there’s no alibi first.”

“Great.” Lindsay unholstered her phone and began to punch in a series of numbers. “Then I’m gonna call my partner. Nothing against heading down there to have a **little** friendly talk with our little Romeo as a character witness.”

--

Warren Jacobi kept his eyes moving between the road and his partner sitting in the passenger seat.

“It’s just up the street here.”

“I see it,” he said, and carefully eased into an open space, ignoring the irritated glance from Lindsay as he did so. She could nag him to kingdom come about ‘driving like Grandpa’ but they sure as hell weren’t going to mess up a murder investigation because they got in an accident on the way to the suspect’s house, his hot-headed Texan partner be damned.

Snapping the key and shutting off the ignition, he paused a moment, hesitating.

Lindsay noticed his staring. “What?” she asked, a paranoid expression flitting across her face. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He regarded her frankly, taking a moment to consider his words carefully, before he ventured, “I could talk to Tom, if you want.” Lindsay’s hooded look remained unchanged. Flushing, Warren continued. “About Pete. Get him to see reason, maybe.”

Feeling uncharacteristically awkward, Jacobi fiddled with his keys, unsure of Lindsay’s silence until he glanced up again to discover her eyes watery and a crooked smile on her face.

“Thanks.” Her voice was rough, as she exhaled silently and ventured a look outside the window. “But there’s no need.”

“Lindsay-“

“Seriously.” She turned once again, on her face a look of pure resolve. “We owe it to the victims’ families to find those bodies. If this is the way we get that bastard to do it...”

He thumbed the keys in his hand, hearing the click-click of metal rubbing together. “You’re a victim, too.”

Silently, he waited, until she said, “Only if I let myself become one.” At that, he glanced up. He looked at his partner, with her classic features and firm resolve, and a burst of affection flooded his chest so deeply he felt suddenly like crying like a damn baby.

Damn the woman for making him go soft. “I’m proud of you, you know.”

“Okay,” she said after a moment, tone uneven as she laughed unsteadily, glancing away as Jacobi sneaked a wipe at his eyes. “Let’s get our asses out of here before we turn into a pair of old ladies.”

“Gladly,” he said, and opened the car door, pushing out in sync with his partner, rounding the sedan and heading for the suspect’s apartment.

Loitering in front, smoking a cigarette, with sandy brown hair and dark brown eyes, was a man who Jacobi was reasonably sure was their man.

“David Kilmer?” Lindsay asked, at her partner’s side as they stepped closer, pulling out her badge and flashing it. “My name is Inspector Boxer, and this is Inspector Jacobi. We’d like to talk to you about the murder of-“

That was about as far as she got before the cigarette butt dropped and David sprinted down the stairs and down the street.

“And there he goes,” Warran sighed, shaking his head in resignation as Lindsay cursed under her breath and dug her boots in hard, launching after him.

Jacobi took his time getting his cuffs, watching as the wiry, lean form of his partner chased Kilmer down in less than one hundred yards, before she caught him with a charge into his side, crumpling him to the ground in a move that would rival any left tackle on the Raider’s defense line.

By the time he had made his way to the pair, Lindsay already had a knee in the small of the suspect’s back and one hand gripped tightly in hers, in the midst of reading his rights.

“-assigned to you,” she snapped, breathing hard. “Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?” Dark eyes snapped up to meet her partner’s in a glare. “Would it kill you to chase a suspect down? Just *once*?”

The grin he offered was of Cheshire cat proportions. “And upset the quota?” When she rolled her eyes, he added. “Besides, he’s a smoker. It wasn’t even a race.”

If Lindsay had had a hand free, he knew exactly which finger would have been pointing at him.

He was pretty damn okay with it.

--

“I was drunk,” David Kilmer confessed, looking small and frightened as he sat hunched over the table, words a mumble of a scared man who was barely older than a boy. “You don’t understand, I love Margaret. She and I are meant to be together, you know? And Christy and Diana wouldn’t fucking leave it alone! Just kept eating at her, like fucking harpies. Said I was dangerous and all that shit-“

“And they were so very wrong, right?” Jacobi said wryly.

David’s lips quivered, but he continued, his words barely above a mumble. “They got her to leave me. Don’t you get it? That night at the party, they wouldn’t even let me talk to her. I wouldn’t have – I shouldn’t have – but I was so fucking drunk, and so pissed off... I wasn’t gonna let them keep her away from me.”

There was a sick, twisted feeling in Lindsay’s stomach. “So you solved the problem by

stabbing them to death.”

He stared at her, almost as if he was beseeching her to understand. “They didn’t want us to be together. You see?”

She stared at him, watching the face of a man that,) for a moment, morphed into one of a man who had once told her something very similar.

Outside of the confession room, Lindsay Boxer knew that Margaret Tennyson waited, her friend Anne by her side. Soon, she would know that the man she had pledged to marry was the monster who had killed her friends so gruesomely, and then used their murder as a means to bring her back into her arms.

Margaret Tennyson would be shattered and begin to question every decision she had made, every judgment, for a very long time.

It was an utter perversion of love, and Lindsay now could only look at this young man and discover only a twisted, despicable soul. Nothing more, nothing less.

“No,” she said simply. “I don’t.”

Something that had to have been hope faded at her stone face, and she was glad for it. David Kilmer’s shoulders hunched a little further, before he stared at his cuffed hands and looked at Jacobi, “Can I have a cigarette?”

--

To watch someone being questioned from the other side of the glass usually invited some sort of disassociation, watching a confession like one was watching television.

This time, Jill Bernhardt heard David Kilmer’s words and felt them sink deep inside of her.

Inside the room, Lindsay glanced back at the mirror, straight at her, and though she could not see her, Jill’s returning glance was one of both intimate awareness and searing empathy.

The door opened, and when Denise stepped into the room, Jill tried valiantly to ignore her skipping heartbeat, the way her breath caught. Instead, she maintained her posture, eyes on the scene before her.

“It’s a clear confession,” she said, as Denise quietly closed the door behind her. “David Kilmer is our guy. We don’t have the test results back but we’re 99.9 percent sure they’re going to be a match.”

Awareness of Denise’s eyes burning into her profile caused her breath to hitch unsteadily,

but her arms remained crossed and she stayed facing forward.

“From murder to confession in less than 18 hours,” Denise said finally, at surface easy and flippant. “That’s gotta be some kind of record for that group of yours, isn’t it?”

Jill’s expression soured; her head shook in morose resignation. “Is that your way of saying you’re impressed?”

The other woman kept quiet, but after a moment, came forward, moving to stand next to Jill, hands crossed and eyes on their killer.

“Maybe,” she allowed.

Jill’s lips quirked, but she said nothing else, instead preferring to watch as Jacobi produced a pen, sliding over a paper to David Kilmer. In the small room, she could smell Denise’s perfume, could remember the way she inhaled it when her mouth skimmed across Denise’s neck. The now expected pricks of arousal seemed almost comforting... in a ‘you’re screwed’ kind of way.

“At least it wasn’t another serial killer,” she offered quietly.

Beside her, Denise snorted. “We’ve definitely had more of our share.”

They stood together, quiet, until Jill finally turned her head to find almond eyes staring at her openly. Unafraid, she let Denise look, take in the contours of Jill’s face without expectation or reprisal.

She kept her own focus on Denise’s dark eyes, the even darker flecks in her orbs, the delicate softness of her lashes, until she heard Denise breathe in unsteadily, and they closed, blinking open again a second later.

“There’s a rumor,” Denise said, facing forward again. “That you and Inspector Snow have broken up.”

Jill’s lips pressed together as she battled a sudden ache that mingled with her continued awareness of the woman beside her.

“Rumor confirmed,” she said unsteadily, and shifted her posture, feeling the need to change position.

“I’m sorry.”

At that precise moment, Lindsay leaned forward, a curtain of dark hair obstructing her face as she said something to their suspect. Lindsay Boxer, the woman she once considered her hope, the woman she had once feared was fractured and broken beyond repair, had stumbled into a redhead that on paper, seemed all wrong for her. In reality,

they worked so well that they seemed to define the word soulmate, and it had caused such a change in her one-time lover and current best friend that sage, wise words had flowed from Lindsay with sincerity and hope.

Finding strength in her resignation, Jill turned her head once again to regard the beautiful woman who could break her so very easily. “Are you?”

Denise glanced up sharply, met the searching gaze with something that looked close to panic, before she exhaled quickly and stiffened her stance. “Jill – I’m your boss. You are my subordinate.”

“And I’m a catastrophic mess at everything except my job,” she agreed. “I have no idea why anyone would ever take a chance on me when I hurt everyone that tries. Believe me,” Jill’s smile was small. “I get it. We don’t have to mention it again.”

She glanced away from Denise and moved her focus back to their suspect, who inhaled raggedly on a Salem cigarette that had been procured for him and scratched his confession on the paper that had been provided.

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe all those people think you’re worth the risk?”

Something that felt dreadfully like hope seized inside of her, and almost afraid to move, Jill allowed one small smile.

“That’s kind of you to say.”

A pink tongue darted out and licked at Denise’s bottom lip, as the other woman glanced down at her feet. “I’m aware there are certain...many,” she corrected, “-potential issues between us. But you are an amazing woman, Jill. Flaws and all. I do it see it – professionally, and ... personally.” A flush burned on Denise’s cheek, before she straightened and swiveled a heel toward the door. “Keep me informed on our suspect, and let me know as soon as those tests come back.”

Jill’s heart beat pronouncedly as she watched Denise move to the door. “Of course.”

If at this moment, Denise Kwon walked away, Jill would not fight it, no matter what Lindsay said. On a day like this, she had no strength for grand gestures that would get her fired, and Denise had made it clear there was no room for a personal relationship between them, no matter what attraction there might be.

It didn’t stop Jill from allowing herself the freedom to watch her adoringly the moment her back was turned. Hers was an infatuation that had taken her by surprise, snuck upon her in her weakest moments, blossoming not just from attraction but genuine respect, trust, amazement at the complicated and desirable enigma Denise Kwon had turned out to be to someone who just took the time to discover it.

Maybe that was her mistake: dropping her own mask, allowing her own vulnerable Achilles heel to be so exposed, because even in the midst of all this, she still didn't expect Denise to actually turn around seconds after she opened the door.

When she did, she saw it all.

Caught, Jill discovered she was unashamed. She simply stared, watching, waiting to see what Denise would do in the face of it. She could simply keep going – widen the door and step through it, away from Jill, professional relationship permanently intact – or she could stay.

Jill cleared her throat, and with blue eyes pinned on Denise, she waited.

After a moment that felt like an eternity, Jill watched as the door pressed shut firmly, with Denise Kwon still in the room.

Heart on a precipice, exhilaration floating through her veins and making her soul sing, Jill had two epiphanies of her own.

One, love knew no rhyme, reason, or gender. It came when you weren't ready for it, and the ultimate act of courage was to step up and embrace it without holding back – a risk that she had never taken before.

Two, somehow she knew, beyond all shadow of doubt, that Denise Kwon was worth the risk.

It was simultaneously terrifying and euphoric, but it was the start of the rest of Jill Bernhard's life.

Bring it, she told herself, when Denise's arms came up around her, and her mouth settled tenderly on hers.

--

The day Lindsay Boxer walked into the visitor's room and saw Pete Raynor seated across the chair felt almost anticlimactic.

The man, a man she never knew and yet knew intimately well, had lacquered his hair. He was freshly shaven, and the prison issue clothes he had been given had been pressed and cleaned.

"Lindsay," he whispered, as if her name was reverent, and he smiled that big broad Pete smile of his that lit up his whole face.

She had once thought him charming.

How odd, that not even a shiver of revulsion overtook her now.

“Pete,” she said, drawling out the name and taking a seat across from him.

He looked like an excited boy, practically squirming in his chair as he looked at her, expectations high and feelings joyous.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he told her, and she arched a brow mildly, watching as he tried to rise up to embrace her, only to be shoved down hard by the guards that stood by his side.

The glare he gave them was not missed – ugly and gone in a second, a flash of the monster behind the mask.

Lindsay took it in carefully, filed it, and thought of her attic, how long she had kept it in homage to this man, glorifying him.

“So I’ve heard,” she said. She heard a nervous cough behind her, and she turned her head and gave Detective Scott, their dealmaker, a subtle but damn meaningful shake of her head.

“I knew if I told them I’d tell them, they’d make you come.” Pete was so damn cocky in his giddiness. So damn excited. Over what? Over her? Over his seeming victory?

Lindsay discovered she had lost both her patience and her taste for this man. “No one forced me to come here, Pete. I came of my own volition.”

He was expecting fear, the same respect and reverence she had given him before. Pete was not a stupid man. But he was a proud one. Though the flicker of hesitancy on his face betrayed his momentary pause at her cavalier attitude, his own skewed ego quickly twisted her intentions. The smile on his face widened to cartoonish proportions. “It’ll be our dance, Lindsay.”

“No,” she said simply. “There’ll be no dance, Pete. You’ll give me those people, locations, and you’ll give them to me today. After that, you’ll never see me again.”

The smile faded. “Lindsay.” He glanced uneasily at both the guards and Detective Scott. “We have company.”

“Pete.” Lindsay spoke to him like she would a misbehaving child, firm and without compromise. “Names, locations. If I don’t have them in five minutes, you’ll be in breach and we can go ahead and put the death penalty on the table. Something neither myself or the prosecution is at all opposed to doing. What?” she asked, when his face went ashen white. “Did you think you had all the time in the world? That you would sit here and play with me like we’re in *Silence of the Lambs*? It won’t work that way.”

He was so taken aback he was almost comical, mouth opening and closing like a gaping fish, before those monster eyes narrowed and he became that thing he always was – proud, selfish, a true sociopath who had victimized her like he had done to so many.

“No,” he snapped. “We had a deal.”

“The deal was, I come to you, you confess. You didn’t have the foresight to give any fine print, Pete. And honestly, whether or not you comply makes no difference to me.”

She made him sound impersonal and insignificant, everything he feared being.

“No,” he said, voice lurching into a shout as he slammed his cuffed hands on the table, causing the guard’s hands to clamp down on him, keep him seated. “This is not how it’s going to happen. You do things the way I want, Lindsay.”

“No,” she said simply. “Three minutes.”

And she could see it – the moment when the panic seeped in. “You need me,” he whispered, clinging to his own fantasy and importance. “You need me, Lindsay. Without me, you’ll never find them.”

Without a word, Lindsay again swiveled her head and fixed Detective Scott with a withering glare, warning him to shut the mouth he had already begun to open.

Obediently, face red with uncertainty, he did so. With him taken care of, she once again turned her attention to the person who, in her eyes, had become anything but a man.

“Maybe,” she allowed. “But Pete, you’re operating under a very misguided assumption. You seem to think you’re special. You’re not.” Her brow narrowed, as she spelled things out as plainly as she could. “You’re just one monster out of many, and guess what? That means I deal with bastards like you every single day. And you know what, Pete? You got caught. I caught you. And there’s enough evidence against you to hang you.” She shrugged. “I’m done with you, Pete. I’ve got a life. I’ve got bad guys to catch, and frankly, I’m done wasting my time with you. So you can decide – renege on this deal, face the death penalty, and no mercy from any jury, or give me those bodies and maybe catch a glimpse of me at your trial, if I decide to testify, and live with that Manson kind of fame you seem to crave so much. Either way, once I leave this room, I forget you exist, and I move on.”

The Pete Raynor before her was nothing like the picture he had presented when she had walked in the room. He had been dissolved into his true self, the Kiss-Me-Not killer who would have rather sewn a woman’s lips shut than be ignored by them.

Reaching for the pen and the paper that had been set between them, she pushed both in his direction, and then sat back.

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Tom Hogan was a handsome man. Features symmetrical and sculpted, he had once taken Lindsay's breath away with his actual beauty.

Her current partner and lover could not have looked any more different. Cindy Thomas was tiny and beautiful, with trademark curls and bright eyes that looked like they belonged on a china doll.

Between them had been Jill Bernhardt, who was sultry and sexy, curves that went for miles and bedroom eyes that attracted men and woman like she leaked pheromones.

Judging by outward appearance alone, Lindsay knew that no one would ever consider that she had a type.

But when they stood together, side by side, staring at her with expressions of concern and genuine affection, Lindsay knew that as a whole, her love life had never been as tragic as she would have previously thought it to be.

She had been lucky to have each and every one, would be lucky to grow old with Cindy, because what each of them had in common was an innate goodness and loyalty that, for some reason, had been imprinted on her and never faded.

And here they were, sitting in a visitor's room in a prison, standing together with their varied appearances and various strengths and weaknesses, doing everything they could to make this somehow easier for her in their own ways. Tom, with his glower and his bluster at Detective Scott, making it clear to him that Lindsay's presence here was simply a formality and a one-time obligation. Jill, who stood very close to and spoke quietly and intensely to Denise Kwon, determined to mine every loophole she could to try and protect Lindsay. Cindy Thomas, who wormed her way into the room with fast talking and such obvious love and affection even Tom could not see fit to turn her away, checking her Blackberry and gnawing on her lower lip.

They would never know that in seeing them here, allowing her to see exactly what love was meant to be, they had soothed a balm over an aching wound that Lindsay feared would never be repaired.

It was Cindy who caught her eye first, lowering her phone immediately to head in her direction. "Lindsay." Thanks to her lover's small call, she became the focus of the room and did not care. Her arms immediately came around Cindy, pulled her in tight to feel her heartbeat beating against her chest, inhale the sweet scent of her, and once again thank God that she was, in fact, a lucky one.

Pulling away after a whispered, "I'm okay," Lindsay held up a sheet of paper, and held it out to Denise. "Names and locations," she said simply. "Verify them before you commit to removing the death penalty from a possible conviction."

Hesitantly, Denise eyed it as if she would a roach. “How did you get it so quickly?”

Lindsay shrugged, in no mood to discuss her shift in perspective. “I got it, didn’t I? I did my cop duty, and now, if you don’t mind, Lieutenant.” Her tone was flippant, but her eyes were warm. “I have a brand new apartment I’d like to get moved into.”

To his credit, Tom only seemed mildly stunned, before his eyes followed the hand that reached for Cindy, the smile she gave to Jill.

He pushed out a long breath and nodded shortly, turning away from her, dismissing her completely in favor of a still mildly shell-shocked Detective Scott. “Get out of here.” She did have to hand it to her ex-husband. Every so often, he did seem to get things.

Beside her, Cindy eyed her with a look that was both surprised and proud. “What?” Lindsay asked.

“You’re amazing,” she said simply.

Lindsay absorbed that, and with a smile that was new and fresh, she tangled Cindy’s hand in hers. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

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Cindy knew better than to think that something as simple as a new home could actually magically shift her mental state into a place where the nightmares would no longer come.

Still, as she absorbed the light that streamed into through the windows, stood over the boxes that were marked with both her and Lindsay’s names, in the midst of the clutter that would now be THEIRS, she felt something shift into place inside her. A small glow of hope and peace that was reminiscent of the Cindy Thomas that had existed before - when she believed she could change the world with the story, and that happy endings were absolute.

Two boys, skidding across the hardwood floors and chasing each other with bubble wrap, broke her small moment of introspection.

“BOYS!” Carrying in a box of cleaning supplies, Claire moved fast. “You will NOT run in this apartment. If you break something, I will have your asses.”

“Oh, come on,” Cindy said, tossing the harried mother a grin. “Someone has to break something or it’s not really a home.”

“Well, I’m glad you feel that way,” Claire said, brow rising. “Because I talked to Lindsay and you two will be babysitting in two weeks.”

That was news to her. “Oh we will?” she asked good-naturedly.

“Yes,” Claire nodded resolutely. “Ed suggested a weekend away, just the two of us. I thought it was a good idea.”

And it was. Though Claire remained relatively tight-lipped about her mending relationship with her husband, this was a very good sign.

Cindy threaded her arm through her friend’s and squeezed. “Me, too. I can’t wait. We’ll stay up late and watch football and play videogames – Did I tell you that I bought a new PS3?”

A soft, husky voice interjected, “Did I ever tell you my girlfriend is a 10 year old boy?”

Lindsay’s hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and her face had been scrubbed clean of make up, something she hadn’t bothered with for moving day. That, coupled with the sweet, smirky expression on her face, made for a breathtakingly beautiful woman who looked 10 years younger.

Cindy glanced back to make sure the young impressionable boys were out of range, before she snuggled into Claire and shot back, “I’m not the one with the hidden stack of Playboys. What does that make you? Yeah,” she said proudly, listening to Claire guffaw and watching Lindsay’s jaw drop. “I know about those.”

Lindsay swiveled, pinning their friend Jill with an affronted glare. Jill, sweating as she dropped a box labeled ‘STUFF’ (Lindsay’s amazing organizational skills at work), just shrugged.

“Sorry? It was a girl’s night. We were gabbing.”

The embarrassment on Lindsay’s face was absolutely adorable. She shifted, hooded eyes on the floor, as she mumbled, “They were a gift.”

“From me!” Jill said happily.

“Yeah, thanks so much for those.”

Jill shrugged, clapping Lindsay on the shoulder and studying the mess of the living room. “How the hell did you two fit all this in Cindy’s tiny little apartment?”

“Talent.”

“Well, next time you guys decide to move, save your friends the manual labor and use some of that talent to think of hiring movers.” Jill knelt at a box and read the label.

“‘More Stuff’. Really Lindsay?”

“What?” Lindsay dug her palms in the back of her jeans and shrugged. “It is stuff. And stop complaining. If your new girlfriend had showed up like she promised, we’d have another pair of hands.”

Jill narrowed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. “One, Denise is not my girlfriend. Two, we’ve only been on two official dates. Do you REALLY think I’m going to subject her to this? I actually like her.”

“Good point,” Claire said.

Jill nodded, ready to say something else when her phone rang. She glanced at the caller, and with a look that indicated it was no one other than the Boss Lady herself, she picked it up and left the room.

Claire lowered her voice and whispered to Cindy, “Where are those magazines? I need to hide them before the boys start opening everything in sight.”

Cindy grinned knowingly. “Good luck,” she whispered back. “I think Lindsay labeled THAT box, ‘And more stuff’.”

“Great.” Claire said and reached down to pick through her own box to pull out a bottle of Clorox. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

Cindy eyed her beloved, watching as Lindsay picked through a box Cindy had labeled, “Kitchen Utensils – A-F.”

“Did you ever think Jill would take a call from Denise with that much gusto?”

Her dark-eyed lover glanced up and grinned. “Not really,” she agreed. “Shows how far we’ve come, hasn’t it?”

Cindy crossed her arms and nodded, crossing the foyer to kneel beside her. “I have to say,” she admitted. “I do love where we’re going.”

The smile that Lindsay gave her was like nothing else in the world. When she leaned in, Cindy met her halfway, mouth pressing against hers in a loving embrace.

“Um... guys.” Jill’s voice interrupted the moment. Cindy glanced up. Her joyous feeling immediately fled in favor of concern. Jill looked stricken. And her eyes were on Lindsay.

“Claire?” Cindy called out immediately, voice cracking as Lindsay rose.

Jill’s phone was still in her hand, and she sucked her breath in, watching Lindsay imploring. “Um...” she began breathlessly. “That was Denise. She just got a call from the penitentiary.”

Beside her, Lindsay began to breathe faster, chest rising and falling. Jill took a moment for herself, and finally just began to speak.

“Early this morning, they found Pete Raynor dead in his cell. He had smuggled in a shiv and cut his wrists with it. He killed himself.” Sucking in a harsh breath, Cindy’s palm rose to her mouth in shock. Lindsay did not move.

“My God.” Claire had joined them.

“I’m sorry, Lindsay,” Jill shrugged weakly.

Lindsay remained silent, absorbing the news, as she turned from them all and, with her hands on her hips, stared out the window.

“He killed himself,” she breathed. “The coward just went and killed himself.” Eyes blinking with tears, Cindy remained quiet, jolted suddenly when she heard a small, bitter laugh emerge from Lindsay’s stained voice. “God... one last attempt. One last try to scar me. To try to get at me. It’s...” she turned, and stared at them all. “It’s kind of pathetic, actually.”

And it was. It actually was. Cindy bit her lower lip, arms crossed together, unsure what to do.

But it was Lindsay who moved first, leaning down and picking through Cindy’s box and pulling out a blender. When they all simply stared at her, she just motioned toward the kitchen.

“That’s all he gets,” she said simply. “One moment, and he’s gone. Now, come on. It’s time to move on.”

She moved for the kitchen, leaving them behind to stare at each other in bewilderment. Claire clucked her tongue, and with shake of her head and a mutter under her breath about a ‘crazy Texan’, she moved in Lindsay’s direction with her Clorox still in hand.

Jill caught her eyes and, with a small smile, she shrugged faintly. “Okay,” she said, taking it in stride.

“Okay,” Cindy agreed.

Jill motioned to her phone. “I’m going to call Denise,” she said, voice stronger than before. “I’ll be right back.”

Left alone, Cindy stood in the living room of her new home. Her eyes spied her open box.

After a moment, she shook her head, wiped her tears, and dug through it.

It was time to move on.

THE END