

Teaser

“His lips are sewn shut.”

What she was seeing was as unbelievable as it was undeniable. Stitches, sewn with neat and careful precision, were through David Arnold’s upper and lower lips. Claire snapped off her small flashlight and tried not to recoil at the sight, her hands gripping the sides of the ladder so hard she distantly wondered if she might splinter the wood.

“What?” Inspector Maggie Snow called from below. “Why the hell would someone sew his lips shut?” she wondered aloud. Her gaze went to DDA Jill Bernhardt, and Maggie found her stomach sinking at the look of abject horror on the attorney’s face. “Ms. Bernhardt? You okay?”

Claire scrambled down the ladder. Her legs were shaking so hard when she stepped off the last rung she would have fallen had Jill not been there to steady her. Her friend’s hands felt like ice through the thin material of Claire’s navy windbreaker, and the cold touch snapped the medical examiner out of her shock and back into business mode. She gripped Jill’s shoulders, feeling tremors working their way through the attorney’s body. “Sit down,” Claire ordered, her voice husky. “We both need to sit.”

Jill allowed herself to be led numbly to a pew. Both she and Claire sunk into it without grace, their hands searching out each other’s grips until their fingers intertwined.

Maggie knelt and watched the two women worriedly. “I’m in the dark here. Obviously this is significant somehow, but you need to explain it to me.” Her blue eyes fixed on Claire’s face as she spoke, sensing the medical examiner was steadying much faster than the blonde attorney. Maggie’s gaze darted back to Jill, and she risked putting her hand on the blonde’s knee, hoping the touch offered some comfort.

“The Kiss-Me-Not Killer,” Claire managed after she’d swallowed and taken a shaky breath. “That was his signature.”

“Another serial killer?” Maggie frowned, the moniker sounding vaguely familiar and tickling the back of her brain. She was sure she’d heard the name, but she’d been too involved with chasing LA’s serial killers to worry about San Francisco’s. “You said *was...*”

“He’s dead,” Jill blurted. “Lindsay killed him months and months ago. We’d... we’d been after him for years...” Images fluttered behind her eyelids as Jill closed her eyes and willed herself not to remember. Crime scene photos, forever burned into her brain, clicked through her mind like a sick slide show. Women frozen forever in death, their bodies brutalized, their lips sewn shut to keep them silent for eternity.

Lindsay had tried to keep the victims’ voices alive. She’d tried to speak for them; get justice for them. Jill thought her friend had succeeded when she’d gunned down Billy

Harris.

Blue eyes lifted and gazed at Arnold, no longer seeing him as a killer but rather as the victim of one. The events of the last few minutes made Jill feel like she was suffering mental whiplash. Her head hurt, and anger was fast replacing shock.

“So this is someone’s idea of a sick joke?” Maggie asked. She heard a commotion and glanced away from Jill. Tom Hogan was entering the church with Warren Jacobi in tow. Both of them went still when they saw Arnold’s body posed on the cross above the church. Maggie squeezed Jill’s knee, and watched as those pretty blue eyes looked away from the victim and focused back on her. “Stay here,” she said soothingly. “I’ll be right back.”

Jill merely nodded while huddling closer to Claire. The medical examiner put her arm around Jill’s shoulders and pulled her in tighter as her eyes drifted back up to the cross. Claire felt like she couldn’t breathe. They’d just woken from one nightmare only to descend into another. “When will this end?” she whispered almost brokenly. She closed her eyes, focusing her thoughts on Jill and the two absent friends she hoped were far, far away from the hell they’d found inside this church.

ACT 1

The night was cold, his breath fogging in the glow of the streetlight he hurried under. Pete Raynor kept his head down, his hands tucked into the pockets of his brown leather jacket. He was freshly showered, having felt the need to get Arnold’s stench and blood off him. It had taken more time than he’d liked to mount Arnold on the cross, even though he’d come prepared with all the necessary tools. The priest had been a surprise. Pete had barely managed to escape when the man returned to the sanctuary unannounced. All the clergy were supposed to be away at a retreat while the church was being refurbished. Still, Pete wouldn’t have traded hearing the man’s terrified scream for anything. Nothing like making a man of the cloth quake in terror.

He smiled at the memory.

Pete had lingered, waiting and watching. He’d seen Claire and Jill arrive, but Lindsay and the reporter were nowhere to be found. After two hours, he’d given up, angry and dejected, and made his way home. Why hadn’t Lindsay come? Surely once Claire and Jill had seen the body, the sewn lips, they would have called Lindsay. His inspector should have come running.

He needed to get back to the apartment, the one that held all his surveillance equipment. Hopefully his cameras would tell him why his beloved had not come to the church. Pete hadn’t been to the apartment since he’d come to Lindsay last night. Seeing her so upset had told him plenty. Perhaps she was finally seeing reason; perhaps Lindsay was coming

to the realization that Cindy Thomas was not the love she was meant to live with happily ever after.

She would hurt for a time, but he would be there to heal the wounds on her heart.

Pete let himself into the small room and frowned. Normally the monitors displayed the interior of Lindsay's apartment in a black and white tableau. Tonight there was only static. There was nothing on the audiometers, either.

He played back the recording, stopping the feed once he saw the video image of himself leaving Lindsay's apartment. Pete settled into a chair, watching as Lindsay changed her clothes as she prepared for bed. His fingers touched the screen, wishing he felt the heat of her skin rather than cool glass. "Soon," he promised himself.

Pete frowned again when he saw Lindsay pick up the phone on the nightstand. There was little doubt who she was calling, but to his amusement and relief, the reporter apparently chose not to answer. He watched as Lindsay began to rage, her anger exciting him as he leaned forward eagerly, studying a side to her he'd always known existed but had never witnessed. Lindsay was glorious in her fury.

But then her badge had struck the vent. Pete jerked his hand away from the screen as the camera clattered over, and Lindsay went still.

"No," he whispered. "No, no, no."

The inspector grabbed a chair and pulled it up next to the wall, standing on top of it to peer inside. Moments later, she ripped the vent off the wall and reached inside for the camera. The screen went blank.

"Dammit!" Pete shouted as he shoved the monitor away from him, unaffected when it hit the floor and imploded, showering his legs with glass and filling the room with the scent of melting plastic and burning metal wiring.

So Lindsay had found his hobby. "It doesn't matter," he murmured as the downstairs neighbor pounded on his ceiling in protest at the noise. "I'm tired of watching."

It was time for the next stage of his plan to begin. Everyone was out of the way. Everyone but the reporter.

And soon, Cindy Thomas would just be a distant memory for Lindsay Boxer.

Gravel crunched and slipped under and around the tires of the rented red SUV. There was a full moon high in the sky, its ghostly paleness mingling with the warmer orange of the dashboard light to make Lindsay Boxer's angular features easily visible to an

appreciative Cindy Thomas' eyes. Lindsay was focused intently on the empty road before them and was unaware of her lover's perusal, leaving Cindy to admire to her heart's content.

The reporter had her elbow on the passenger side door, and she stifled a yawn with her fist as the radio played the soft twangs of a country station. They'd been driving a good portion of the evening, and the two o'clock hour was closing in on them. According to Lindsay, however, they were almost there. Cindy was exhausted and couldn't wait to curl her smaller body around Lindsay's long frame, but she was equally as excited to finally see their destination.

When Lindsay had asked Cindy where she wanted to go for their vacation, the reporter's answer had been instantaneous, much to Lindsay's apparent chagrin. Cindy wasn't worried about her lover's anxieties, however. She was too focused on all the dirt she was going to learn about the woman she was moving in with.

Lindsay seemed to sense she was being watched, and she turned her head, her dark eyes sparkling even in the low light as she caught Cindy regarding her. "You okay?" her voice was raspier than normal and sounded as tired as the reporter felt.

"Getting better by the moment," Cindy confessed with a sleepy smile that Lindsay answered with one of her own. "I love you," the redhead said softly, the feeling so intense at that moment she needed to vocalize it or risk bursting from the swell of emotion.

Lindsay held her gaze for as long as she dared. "I love you, too."

Nothing more was said as they traveled several more minutes in easy silence. Cindy continued to watch her lover, admitting to herself that getting away was a damn good idea for both of them. The way things had been going one of them would have wound up fired, jailed, or dead. Dark emotions and worsening depression on both their parts had been weighing them down. At least now, out here in the middle of seemingly nowhere, Cindy felt like they could both breathe. It was a little intimidating, though, the thought of spending an uninterrupted week with her lover. They'd always had cases to talk about. The club was always a buffer. Here they would only have themselves and seven days to see where this thing between them was headed.

The SUV slowed before an old, rusted red gate. Lindsay slid the SUV into park and opened her door, stepping out into the chilly night air. Needing to stretch, Cindy followed, closing her door and trotting after the inspector as she worked the latch.

"Look up," Lindsay told the reporter casually.

"Huh?"

Lindsay pointed heavenward, and Cindy tipped her head back. Above was an explosion

of stars, more than Cindy had ever seen. The night looked like a black blanket showered in silver glitter. Her breath caught and she looked back down at Lindsay in surprise.

“All those city lights,” Lindsay remarked as she swung the gate open. “Hides the stars.”

“I’ll say,” Cindy agreed with another glance at the beauty above her. “Wow.”

Lindsay chuckled at the predicted response. “I still don’t know why you wanted to come here. We could have gone to a beach somewhere.” She blew into her cold hands, trying to warm them.

Cindy tucked her hands into her pockets, hiding them from the February chill. “We could have,” she agreed. “But the beach doesn’t have the Boxer brood.”

“The Boxer brood?” Lindsay shook her head and motioned the redhead back toward the vehicle. They climbed in and shut their doors. “I’m not sure what this fascination is that you have with my family. I think you may come to regret this decision. I know I’m thinking I might.”

“You really worried?” Cindy asked with a slight frown. Lindsay had confessed on the plane that she’d never told her family about the nature of their relationship. Less surprising had been how little Lindsay had shared with her grandparents about the Hallelujah Man case.

The inspector shrugged. “Maybe a little.” She dipped her head and looked sideways at the reporter, grinning just a fraction. “Be a real bummer of a trip if they tossed us out.”

“They’re your family, Linz,” Cindy said with understanding.

As the SUV continued to idle, Lindsay simply stared at the reporter for a long moment. “So are you,” she said in a husky voice.

Cindy’s brown eyes widened under the intensity of Lindsay’s gaze. She didn’t know what to say to that statement, but hearing it made her feel like she was floating among those millions of stars scattered across the Texas night sky. “Erm,” was all that came out.

Lindsay chuckled in victory at having flustered the reporter.

It took another seven or eight minutes to reach the ranch. Outdoor lights were blazing, revealing a sprawling wood and stone structure. Cindy could see cacti, just like in the movies, dotting the landscape. She started squirming she was so excited.

“Relax, Lois Lane,” Lindsay teased as she shut off the engine and took a deep breath. “It’s just my grandparents.”

“It’s not just your grandparents. It’s Texas... you know, with cowboys, horses, spurs...

Oooh. If I bought you chaps would you wear them?"

Lindsay nearly toppled out of the SUV when her head whipped back around to look at the reporter in surprise. She righted herself just as the door to the ranch opened and a tall, slender woman with long white hair emerged. She was in a deep blue robe, her tanned skin glowing as a smile lit her face. She waved enthusiastically.

"Wow," Cindy said again as she got a glimpse of what Lindsay would look like in another forty years. "Good bone structure runs in your family."

"On my mom's side it does," Lindsay agreed, trying to get her mind off chaps and whether or not Cindy was serious about them. "Marty's side is a little less... angular." Lindsay shut her door before meeting her grandmother at the edge of the long porch, slipping her arms around a woman who was into her seventies but gave her a hug with the strength of a twenty-year old woman. "Hi, Gram."

"Hi yourself, stranger."

Cindy hesitated at her car door, watching the two women with undisguised fascination. She swallowed as two sets of dark eyes turned her way. Cindy waved her whole arm in a half circle and blushed when Lindsay chuckled.

"She's darling," Lindsay's grandmother whispered in her ear.

"You have no idea," Lindsay drawled. She held out her hand, and Cindy came hesitantly closer. "Abbeline MacGill," Lindsay spoke as Cindy's cold fingers intertwined with her own. "Meet Cindy Thomas."

Cindy swallowed nervously and extended her free hand, feeling an aged, but strong grip take it. Abbeline's hands were rough from years on the ranch, but there was warmth in her touch. "Nice to meet you," Cindy forced out around the sudden herd of butterflies stampeding in her stomach.

"Call me Abbie," Abbeline instructed with a warm smile that reminded Cindy so much of Lindsay her brain almost melted.

"Thank you, Abbie," Cindy replied bashfully.

Abbie's eyes twinkled, as she looked at Lindsay then winked, keeping all her questions about the pair to herself for now. Lindsay had been vague when she called about the purpose of the visit, but Abbie wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. It had been too long since she'd last seen her grandchild. Abbie had heard about Cindy Thomas, of course. Not a phone call or email went by where her granddaughter didn't mention the young reporter. As time went on, Lindsay's voice had gotten warmer and deeper when she talked about Cindy, and as Abbie saw the two of them before her, she suspected her suspicions about the pair were on the money. "Jack's dead to the world," she told them.

“Couple of the herd broke through the fence down by the creek. He had a time wrangling them up.”

Lindsay winced. “No need to wake him.”

“Come on you two, let’s get you inside where it’s warm. I already made up your room.”

Room, Cindy mouthed at Lindsay behind Abbie’s back as they went to the trunk of the SUV and retrieved their luggage. Not *rooms*, the reporter noted to herself. She grinned as Lindsay predictably blushed. Cindy wondered if Lindsay’s detective skills ran in the family.

Lindsay took in a deep breath of the Texas night air as she followed Cindy inside. It filled her; cleared her head and seemed to put a thin balm on her battered soul. Cindy had been right. This was where they needed to be. They needed time to think... time to heal... time to be whole again.

With one last glance up at the night sky and the beautiful display of the universe, Lindsay smiled faintly and closed the door.

Maggie rubbed at her aching eyes. The sun was peeking over the cloudy horizon, and she spared a moment of longing for her new, soft bed back at her apartment. She’d give just about anything to sink into it right now, but after Tom Hogan had filled her in on the significance of the stitches through the now-deceased Hallelujah Man’s lips... well, sleep was going to have to wait.

Probably for a while.

The inspector looked around the sanctuary once more, baffled that there was no sign of Lindsay Boxer. Two of Lindsay’s biggest cases had just collided on the cross of a small Catholic church, and the homicide detective was nowhere to be seen. It made no sense.

A metal groan made Maggie turn, and she watched with disgust as Arnold and the cross were lowered to the ground. Looking away, her gaze landed once more on Jill Bernhardt. The blonde attorney was now in the back of the sanctuary, her head down as the medical examiner spoke to her in quiet tones. Maggie noted the body language between the two women and felt some relief that they were obviously close. Bernhardt could use a friend right now, and she was glad one was there. With a sigh, Maggie moved toward the two women, settling into the pew in front of them. Jill’s gaze lifted and caught Maggie in its regard, making the inspector’s breath hitch for a brief moment. Jill looked tragically beautiful, and Maggie wanted nothing more than to ease the burden that weighed so heavily on the attorney’s shoulders.

“You should go home,” Maggie suggested when the air had returned to her lungs.

Jill shook her head, a surprisingly determined look on her features. “No,” she croaked. “I’m not walking away. Not this time.”

Claire’s gaze went to the floor, but she said nothing.

Maggie looked from one woman to the other. There was definitely some history there between them with this Kiss-Me-Not case. Maggie just wasn’t sure what it was. “Jill,” she began carefully. “Arnold…”

“I know what Arnold tried to do to me,” Jill replied with tempered heat, guessing what Maggie was about to say. “I don’t need you to point out the obvious.”

Maggie held up her hand. “I was going to say that Arnold is being moved to the morgue. There is nothing else you can do here. Go home.”

Jill ran a hand through her hair. “Sorry. Damn, I’m sorry.” She shook her head and blew out a breath. “I’m just rattled.”

“Understandable,” Maggie said with empathy. “Please. Go home. Try to get some rest.”

“Rest. Right.” Jill gave her a bitter laugh.

“She’s right, Jill,” Claire said softly. “Let me take you home on my way back to the office.”

The DDA shook her head. “I’m coming with you.”

“Jill…” Claire began.

“I’m coming with you,” Jill insisted as she got slowly to her feet.

Maggie stood as well. “Can I ask if either of you know where Lindsay Boxer is?”

Claire shook her head. “She and Cindy took some time. They headed out right after we got the call that Arnold was dead.”

“Took some time?” Maggie asked with disbelief.

“A vacation. Wish I’d gone with them,” Jill muttered.

Claire’s lips twitched, and she felt a trickle of relief that Jill could still joke under the circumstances. Then again, maybe Jill wasn’t joking.

“Has anyone called them?” Maggie wanted to know.

“They turned off their cell phones. No contact for three days. I ordered them, actually,” Claire admitted. “They were both so damned tired. They needed this.”

Maggie nodded even though she was unhappy to hear about this turn of events. Her mind started churning out scenarios, none of which she liked at all. She felt her history rush over her, and a sick feeling settled in the pit of her stomach when she considered the real reasons Lindsay might have left town. “I’ll see you later at the morgue, Doctor,” she told Claire distractedly. “Jill.” She dipped her head at the attorney.

“Maggie,” Jill said with a weak smile.

Even a weak smile was enough to make Maggie’s heart lurch only to double in tempo. Her eyes didn’t leave Jill’s frame until the attorney disappeared from the church.

Olive skin kissed by sunlight was the sight that greeted Cindy the next morning. She slowly opened her eyes, smiling at the naked expanse of Lindsay’s back. Her lover had been too tired to change, simply pulling her shirt and bra off and shucking off her jeans the night before. Cindy was wrapped around Lindsay’s sinuous frame, and she took a moment to savor this little eddy of time they found themselves in.

It was quiet, only their mingled breathing and the distant sound of horses penetrated her awareness. Cindy could smell bacon and coffee, and her stomach perked up in interest, growling faintly. It felt so good to be still... to just *be*. No serial killers to chase... no serial killers chasing them. A smirk eased onto Cindy’s lips when some part of her brain promised that they’d be bored by the end of the week.

Bored was perfectly fine by her. Cindy decided she was looking forward to it, actually.

The sunlight was warm where it hit her back and shoulders as she snuggled closer and kissed the nearest patch of Lindsay’s skin. Liking the experience, Cindy shifted and kissed a little higher. The inspector grunted and shifted, waking reluctantly. Cindy let her hands skim up Lindsay’s ribs, feeling her lover suck in a deep breath as her fingers found more sensitive spots.

“Mmm.” Lindsay’s voice was warm and husky. “Your hands are wandering, Ms. Thomas.”

“Are they?” Cindy asked innocently. “That’s not against the law is it, officer?”

Lindsay rolled, her body almost cat-like as she wrapped around Cindy, sliding a warm, soft thigh between her lover’s legs. “Good morning.”

“It certainly is now,” Cindy agreed as she closed the distance between them and kissed Lindsay with quiet passion.

Lindsay's hands slipped under the light blue t-shirt Cindy wore as her thumbs began to stroke the top of the reporter's hips. Cindy made a sound halfway between a gasp and a moan before her body shifted closer, pressing against her lover, needing to feel her heat everywhere.

"Way better than an alarm clock," Lindsay chuckled as she rolled Cindy over onto her back and settled on top of her. She dipped her head, catching Cindy's mouth in another searing kiss.

A knock at the door broke them apart.

"Lindsay, honey? You girls up?"

Lindsay rolled out of bed so fast she staggered into the wall. Cindy bit her lip to keep from laughing while her lover scrambled to dress herself.

"Yeah," Lindsay called out. "Hang on a sec." She swore as she slipped on her jeans, lost her balance, and fell into the wall again.

"You redecorating the place?" Abbie asked knowingly.

The laughter finally escaped, and Cindy was forced to bury her head in her pillow to keep Abbie from hearing. The added bonus was that Cindy couldn't see the scolding look she was sure Lindsay was giving her.

"Not helping," Lindsay hissed at her lover while she slipped on her shirt and quickly did three of the buttons before throwing open the door. Abbie stood there in her robe and regarded her granddaughter with mild interest.

"I asked if you were up. I didn't say you had to be."

Lindsay ran her hands through her hair and cleared her throat. "We were just talking."

"Course you were, dear." Abbie smiled. "Breakfast is ready in ten if you're hungry. Morning, Cindy," Abbie called out as she walked away.

"Good morning," the reporter called after her, lifting her head up from the pillow in order to be heard.

Lindsay shut the door and leaned against it. Her arms crossed, and she glared at her lover who looked back at her unconcerned.

"What?" Cindy asked innocently.

"You snuck out during the night and conspired with her, didn't you?"

The reporter shook her head before drawing herself up and reluctantly getting out of bed. She headed for the small washroom on the other side of the room. “Maybe she noticed your shirt is on inside out, and she put two and two together.”

Lindsay looked down at herself in alarm and swore as Cindy closed the door.

Claire watched two men wheel the body bag containing David Arnold’s remains into the morgue. Jill was pacing near Claire’s office door, her blue eyes jerking toward the body then away again. “You should go,” Claire told her blonde friend. “It’s late... or early... depending on how you look at it.” She winced at the thought that her kids were probably getting ready for school right now without her.

“Are you gonna start cutting him open already?” Jill asked, her stride faltering.

“No, sweetie. I have to do a preliminary exam of the body first.” Claire nodded her head as the men left, before she went to Jill’s side and slid an arm around her friend’s shoulders. “You don’t need to see him again.”

Over Claire’s shoulder, Jill looked at the body bag where it rested on one of the slabs. “Claire... his mouth...”

“I know,” Claire repeated, only barely able to restrain a shudder. She took Jill’s elbow and led her into the office, settling her friend into a chair before moving to the coffee machine. Thankfully, there was a full pot that appeared to have just finished brewing, and Claire made a mental note to thank whichever assistant had done her the kindness. The medical examiner fixed two cups and returned to Jill, wrapping her friend’s cold hands around a mug before settling into the chair next to her with a cup of her own.

“She’s going to kill us.” Jill’s voice warmed a trifle with her first sip of coffee, shedding some of the icy fear that had gripped her ever since she’d seen the familiar stitches through David Arnold’s lips. “She’s going to kill us for not calling.”

Claire didn’t deny it, and she didn’t need Jill to say Lindsay’s name to know whom her friend meant. “She can’t deal with this. Not now. Not after everything.”

“I can’t deal with this,” Jill admitted with a weak laugh.

“You don’t have to, Jill.”

The attorney shook her head and wrapped her hands more firmly around the welcomed heat of her mug. “No. I have to see this through. I owe Lindsay that much.” Her blue eyes lifted and caught Claire’s gaze. “We both do.” She didn’t vocalize her own need to punish whoever had kept her from getting her justice with Arnold. If Claire thought for a

moment that Jill was going to turn into some kind of vengeance-seeking crusader her friend would have her committed.

“We do,” Claire agreed quietly. “And she is most certainly going to have a cow with a bonnet on it when she learns we kept this from her.”

Jill almost snorted coffee through her nose at the expression. Her eyes watering, she gave Claire a fond look. “You always know when to make me laugh.”

“I try.” Claire sighed. “Cindy and Lindsay need this time,” she said practically. “It’s not only good for them, it’s damn right necessary.”

“I agree.”

“And we...” Claire hesitated and met Jill’s gaze again. “At least I... need to make up for some sins of the past here.”

“We let Lindsay down...” Jill concurred. “The last time. *The last time*... God. I can’t believe we’re back where this whole mess started.”

Claire sighed wearily and rubbed her forehead. Her fingers were warm from holding the coffee, and the heat momentarily eased the throbbing she could feel building inside her skull. “We don’t know...” she began.

“Claire,” Jill cut her friend off none too gently, “Arnold’s lips were sewn shut. Just like Kiss-Me-Not. I don’t know what it means, but whatever in the hell it does, it can’t be good.”

“Harris is dead,” Claire reminded her.

“And none of us really bought him as the killer,” Jill replied.

“What are you saying?” Claire asked. “You think whoever killed Arnold is... what? The real Kiss-Me-Not killer?”

A noise at the door made them both look up. Denise Kwon stood in the doorway, wearing jeans and a red, flower-printed t-shirt. Her hair was back in a ponytail, and she sported a pair of old, scuffed up sneakers. “So it’s true then?”

Jill choked on her most recent sip of coffee when she saw her boss looking not only human, but also younger and something close to adorable. Coffee sloshed out of the cup, and the attorney yelped as it scalded her legs.

“Christ, Bernhardt,” Denise muttered, her skin flushing slightly in embarrassment.

Claire patted a sputtering Jill on the back. “Which part?” Claire asked the attorney.

“Any of it. All of it.” Denise came into the office, slinging a duffle bag that was probably full of workout apparel to the floor. “Was he really strung up on a cross? His lips sewn shut?” She tore off some paper towels from a nearby roll and handed them to Jill who began to furiously blot at her legs.

The medical examiner nodded wearily.

Denise rubbed the back of her neck. “So you’re telling me some Kiss-Me-Not Killer wannabe murdered the Hallelujah Man. Fuck me.”

Claire’s eyebrows hiked at the expletive, but she certainly understood the emotions behind it. This case was going to be a nightmare on too many levels to count. “It didn’t exactly make our day, either.”

“You holding it together?” Denise asked Jill bluntly.

“I’m fine,” the blonde replied, her voice sounding like she might begin coughing again at any moment. She wiped at her eyes. “At least I don’t have to worry about Arnold coming after me anymore.”

Denise regarded her for a silent moment. “No. But you didn’t get the justice I’ll bet you wanted.”

Claire looked at Denise in surprise before glancing at Jill with worry in her dark eyes.

“No,” Jill admitted slowly, reconnecting with the simmering anger that had been bubbling beneath the surface ever since she’d learned Arnold was dead. Seeing the stitches had dampened that anger, but it hadn’t extinguished it. “I didn’t.”

The acting district attorney looked around the room. “Where are the rest of the musketeers? I figured you’d all be down here huddling.”

“Lindsay and Cindy are away on vacation,” Claire informed her slowly, trying to decide if she should feel offended by Denise’s comments, before deciding she was too tired and overwhelmed to care.

“You’re shitting me. One murderer kills another, and the city’s best cop and crime reporter are on holiday?”

Idly, Jill wondered what Lindsay and Cindy would think of Denise’s backhanded praise. “They’re where they need to be,” she informed her boss in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Lucky them,” Denise drawled, unfazed but somewhat amused by Jill’s stern expression. “I’ll see you in the office this afternoon, Bernhardt,” she announced as she snatched up

her bag and threw it over her shoulder.

Her boss was nearly out the door when Jill found her voice. “Wait! You mean I can come back to work?”

Denise pivoted and looked at her. “Did you ever really leave?”

The doors to the morgue swung back and forth, the whap of sound filling the surprised silence in the room. Claire looked at her friend. “I think she’s warming up to you,” she commented before taking another sip of her coffee.

“Shut up,” Jill whined as Claire almost smiled. The attorney groaned at the mess her life had become and let her head drop back against the chair.

The photographs were as gruesome as they were upsetting. Inspector Maggie Snow stared at the crime scene photos blanketing her desk. Women with their lips sewn shut stared up at her, save for the one man in the tableau who hung from a cross, his lips forever sealed. A killer among the innocents.

It was all so seriously fucked up.

Maggie felt a presence behind her, but she didn’t turn. Other cops had been glancing over her shoulder for the past hour as she’d looked at the infamous Kiss-Me-Not Killer’s crimes. It wasn’t hard to see how a case like this could have made Lindsay Boxer obsessed. Maggie just wondered if her fellow cop’s obsession had turned into something darker.

She’d seen it before. A cop pushed too far, becoming the very thing they hunted day after day. Maggie swallowed as she stuffed the memory down and blinked back the unexpected burn of tears. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she fingered the photograph of Arnold and then lifted it to see it better in the light.

“I’d have that one framed if it weren’t for the stitches.”

Maggie turned her head and discovered Warren Jacobi watching her. She motioned to the chair next to her desk and Jacobi accepted it, sitting down with a weariness she suspected he seldom expressed. They had argued at the church, Jacobi insisting Arnold’s case was his, until Lieutenant Hogan had stepped in. The two men had huddled with the medical examiner and Jill Bernhardt for twenty minutes. When they’d parted, Jacobi had merely left in a tired huff, but some of the anger had been bled from him. Maggie would have given up a month of paychecks to know what they’d all been talking about.

The inspector was pretty sure it was Lindsay Boxer.

“You wanted to see me?” Jacobi asked with disinterest.

“I’m not trying to step on your toes,” Maggie began.

“You don’t give a damn about my toes or any other part of my anatomy,” Jacobi called her on her bluff. “And right now, I’m too tired to care. I just want you to catch the bastard who kept Jill from her justice and seems intent on ripping open some very nasty old wounds.”

Maggie shifted, privately impressed with Jacobi’s read on her. “Fair enough,” she said without bothering to disassemble. “Where is Boxer?”

Jacobi paused. “Why?”

“She was one of the original inspectors on the Kiss-Me-Not case. I think I should speak with her. I’m a little surprised she didn’t turn up at the crime scene.”

“I’m glad she didn’t,” Jacobi answered evenly. “That was the last thing she needed to see.”

“And why is that?”

“Why is that?” Jacobi repeated incredulously. “Arnold damn near kills two people Lindsay would have died to protect, then he gets strung up and his lips sewn shut, reminding Lindsay of a murderer that ruined her marriage, haunted her life, and claimed her father and you ask me why?”

Maggie cleared her throat, unnerved a bit by his anger, but she knew from experience she was asking questions that needed to be asked, even if they made her extremely unpopular. “Lindsay seems to have some pretty strong defenders.”

“You’re damn right she does,” Jacobi replied with some heat. “So let her be for a few days. The woman deserves a break.”

“Seems to me she should have taken one before now,” Maggie answered with feigned innocence.

Warren’s eyes narrowed. He clearly suspected she was up to something more than professional interest where Lindsay was concerned. “Am I here to talk about the person who did the world a favor and offed David Arnold, or am I here to talk to you about Inspector Boxer?”

Maggie met his gaze squarely, preparing herself mentally for the explosion she was about to cause. “Is there a chance that they could be one and the same?”

Jacobi sat stock still for an absorbing moment before he shot to his feet. “Lady,” Jacobi

growled. "I don't know what you're hinting at, but you damn well better not be thinking what I think you're thinking."

Maggie took a deep breath to explain only to bite back the words when her boss appeared at the upper rail.

"Jacobi," Tom called down from his office. "I need to see you a moment."

Maggie held the grizzled detective's gaze even though her heart was hammering against her ribs. She could feel the gazes of the other inspectors on her profile as well, and she fervently hoped her face wasn't as red as it felt.

Jacobi slapped a lamp off her desk, and it clattered to the floor, the bulb shattering like a rifle shot. If the other officers hadn't been watching, someone would have surely drawn their gun at the sound.

"That went well," Maggie murmured as she turned back to the photographs and her theories. She picked up another file on the Kiss-Me-Not Killer and noticed an investigator's name and number. With a sigh, she picked up the phone and dialed Agent John Ashe.

Tom winced when Jacobi slammed his office door. "Warren..."

"Don't Warren me," Jacobi snarled. "You know what that new little detective of yours is implying?"

The lieutenant sat behind his desk before rubbing his forehead. "I know. I've tried to sway her off the idea. She claims it's just one in a list of theories."

"Seems like Lindsay is at the top of that list. You don't seriously believe..."

"Of course not," Tom snapped tiredly. "But I'm in a bind here, Jacobi. I'm Lindsay's ex-husband. If I take Snow off the case now, it's going to look like I'm covering something up."

"There is nothing to cover up!"

"I know that!" Tom spat. "See it from my position for a second, would you? Once Claire has filed her report, and we have confirmed time of death that should be enough to clear Linz and get Snow off this stupid track." He rubbed his neck, feeling like it was made of iron bands. "I've tried Lindsay's cell phone, but she isn't picking up."

"I told you before, she turned it off. So did Thomas. They said they'd check in after three days."

“Yeah, that won’t feed Snow’s fire at all.”

Jacobi took a breath, willing his temper to fade. “Why did you give Snow this case?”

Tom snorted. “Hindsight. Believe me, I wouldn’t have if I had known she would look at Linz.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

Tom looked at Jacobi for a long moment before he nodded. “I thought a lot about what this last year has been like for Lindsay after she came to me. Once I got past the shock of her wanting time off... I saw what this case... what the Kiss-Me-Not case and her father’s death had all done to her. She was dying inside, and she loved Cindy enough to do something about it.”

Jacobi watched him, surprised and faintly pleased at his superior’s realization. He held his peace, waiting for Tom to say the rest of his.

“You were there with her for all of it, Warren. Kiss-Me-Not, the Hallelujah Man... you’re as fond of Jill as I am and took it hard when she was taken. Lindsay is doing what she needs to do to get her head on straight. Maybe you should do the same.”

“Are you doubting me as a cop?” A rough edge reentered Jacobi’s voice.

“Not at all,” Tom murmured seriously. “I’m saying this as a friend. Take some time, Warren. Take the week just like Linz.”

Jacobi wasn’t sure what to feel. “This case...”

“Isn’t yours. You’re too close to be objective. That’s why I gave this to Snow. She’s fresh. She doesn’t have the baggage we’re all carrying with Kiss-Me-Not.”

Just because Tom was right didn’t mean Jacobi had to like it. “Are you ordering me to take the time?”

Tom hesitated, clearly deciding one way or the other. “Do I need to?”

Jacobi got to his feet and left the office without another word. The force he used to slam the door was answer enough.

He was gone. His work removed, replaced by another. Pete stood in the middle of Lindsay’s attic and surveyed the photos of Arnold’s victims. The man had enjoyed his brutality, and Pete felt a sliver of kinship with him for that, but no remorse for taking him

from this Earth. He did recall the sounds Arnold had made as he died; the way he'd thrashed in his death throes. Killing him had been a chore, a necessary evil, but now Pete wished he could do it again as he saw that Lindsay had moved on to another man.

Lindsay's attic was supposed to be his. This was the place where she thought of him most. Where her whole soul was focused on nothing but him. When Lindsay had shown him this space... the visceral thrill had been so sweet he'd ached with it. He'd kept his face blank, letting a hint of worry and understanding shine through his eyes. She'd fallen for it; never realizing the very man she sought was in the center of her inner sanctum... had been in her bed.

Pete licked his lips, remembering. Harris had been a means to an end. A protégé of sorts, meant to be sacrificed. But Harris had surprised him and nearly taken Lindsay from him. If his inspector hadn't killed Harris, Pete surely would have.

Finishing what he had come to do, Pete surveyed the room one last time. He would miss this space, but he and Lindsay would find a new one, a new home together. Soon.

ACT II

The scent of coffee lured Cindy toward the kitchen like a carrot before a horse. She followed the rich smell past the log walls and the interesting mix of Indian and Greek paintings and rugs. Abbie was puttering around the space, pouring four cups of coffee into healthy sized mugs when they arrived. Cindy found the woman even more striking in the golden light of morning.

"About time you two met the day," Abbie scolded playfully. "The biscuits are almost done. You're just in time."

"Homemade biscuits?" Cindy almost squeaked as she looked at the ham, eggs and fresh fruit laid out before them. "I think I've died, and heaven is a ranch in Texas."

Lindsay snorted as her grandmother chuckled in delight. Abbie patted Cindy on the shoulder and motioned the young woman to sit, which Cindy did with enthusiasm.

They heard a door close and the stomping of feet followed by a muttering voice. "Damn fool dogs. They're in a mood this morning. Chasing the..." The newcomer trailed off when he saw the three women watching him from the table. "Um... Morning."

"Morning," Lindsay greeted as she got up to give her grandfather a hug.

Jack MacGill was a big man, Cindy mused, taller than Lindsay and three times as broad. His face was tanned and weathered, but his blue eyes were pale and kind. The reporter tucked her hair behind her ears and waited to be introduced, watching the reunion with

fascination.

“Let me look at you, sprout,” Jack said to Lindsay as he pulled back to take her in. He shook his head. “Get prettier every time I see you.”

Sprout? Cindy mouthed at Abbie in disbelief.

Predictably, Lindsay blushed. “You look good,” she told him.

“I look old,” Jack countered. “Which is what I am,” he added with a wink before he turned his attention on Cindy. The reporter sat up a little straighter under his scrutiny. She was a pretty thing, no doubt about it. Her hair was as red as fire where the sun bathed it through the windows behind her. Cindy’s face was open and friendly, and Jack found himself warming to her immediately. “And you must be the spitfire.”

Cindy blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Grandpa,” Lindsay said, her voice sounding chagrined.

“Spitfire,” Jack said again as he tromped in his heavy work boots over to the table and extended his hand to Cindy. Jack was impressed with the reporter’s grip, and the way she met his gaze as they shook hands.

“Lindsay called you that the first time she mentioned you to us,” Abbie explained. “Jack liked it so much it stuck.”

It was Cindy’s turn to blush as she glanced at Lindsay. Her lover was biting her lip and looking at her apologetically. “I’ve been called a lot worse,” Cindy said with a light laugh, secretly pleased at her apparent nickname.

“A lovely little thing like you?” Jack said with teasing disbelief.

“Linz told you I was a reporter, right?” Cindy answered with a grin as her lover returned to a seat next to her at the table. “I get called all kinds of unsavory terms.”

“She’s told us lots about you,” Abbie said as they all finally took their seats. “Not everything,” Abbie added knowingly. “But enough.”

Lindsay glanced sideways at Cindy and cleared her throat, but she didn’t comment.

“That was your opening, sprout,” Jack said gently before picking up his coffee and taking his first sip.

Cindy glanced at Lindsay. It was clear what Jack was hinting at, and it was equally clear Lindsay was going to pretend she didn’t have a clue. With a roll of her eyes, Cindy gave her lover a slight nudge in the ribs with her elbow. Lindsay jumped a little.

“Careful,” Lindsay reminded her. “That’s where I got shot, remember?” As soon as the words slipped out, Lindsay wished she could snatch them back out of the air. She closed her eyes and mentally cursed herself out.

“Excuse me?” Abbie asked, the humor fleeing from the table.

Lindsay sighed, unsure what she was supposed to come clean about first. “Well... I wasn’t... It was just a graze...”

“A graze?” Jack muttered. “A graze as in a bullet grazed your body??”

“It really wasn’t that serious,” Cindy jumped in, trying to help. “Just a flesh wound. A slight burn really... where the Hallelujah Man shot at her when Lindsay was pursuing him.” Everyone was quiet at the table for a long, absorbing moment. “But it’s all right...” Cindy continued, uncomfortable with the silence and babbling to fill it. “He’s dead now. The killer... you know... he’s dead. And I’m just going to stop rambling now and feed my face.” Cindy took a healthy bite of a biscuit as Lindsay tried to suppress a smile at her antics.

Abbie and Jack exchanged glances. “So you’ve seen the wound?” Abbie asked, adding a touch of worry to her voice for effect.

Cindy nodded. “Yeah. It’s right here,” the reporter said as she swallowed, pointing at an area just above the waist of her own jeans. “She got a few stitches. Nothing serious.”

“Cindy,” Lindsay murmured.

The reporter looked at her.

“You pretty much walked right into that.”

Cindy’s brow furrowed.

“That was my grandmother’s way of trying to determine if we’re sleeping together.”

Cindy choked on her next bite of biscuit as Jack and Abbie started laughing. Lindsay patted the redhead on the back.

“Sorry,” Cindy got out between coughs.

“You make a beautiful pair,” Jack said quietly. And they did, he mused. It had taken some time for him and Abbie to come to grips with the nature of the relationship they suspected was happening between their granddaughter and the reporter, but seeing them together set the last of his worries at ease. Lindsay looked radiant with Cindy, and there was a peace to them that Jack had never seen between Lindsay and Tom. It did his heart

good to see his granddaughter so in love.

“I’m sorry,” Lindsay confessed. “I should have told you before now. I just...”

Abbie covered Lindsay’s hand with her own. “It’s okay, sweetheart. We’re just happy you’re happy.”

Tears filled Lindsay’s eyes but she managed by stubborn will not to let them fall. She looked at Cindy who was watching her quietly. “I am. I am happy.”

“Welcome to the family, spitfire,” Jack told Cindy before picking up a piece of bacon and snapping off the end of it between his teeth.

Cindy smiled bashfully, pleased more than they knew by their approval. Her hand eased over Lindsay’s knee under the table, and it took a mere second for Lindsay’s fingers to intertwine with her own and squeeze.

Claire stared down at the naked and freshly washed body of David Arnold. She’d been standing over him for more than ten minutes now, scalpel in hand, as she studied the face of the man who’d caused so much pain. Normally Claire thought of herself as a woman who spoke for the dead, someone who gave them a voice. But she wanted David Arnold just the way he was.

Dead and quiet.

If only Lindsay’s bullets had made him that way. The medical examiner swallowed hard, feeling more than a little sick with herself. She knew she should pass off this case. She was too close. This was the man who had hurt her friends. Arnold would have killed Jill if Lindsay and Cindy hadn’t gotten to her in time. Rather than begin her autopsy and search for answers, Claire found herself wishing she could push Arnold into the incinerator and be done with him.

“Hey.”

Claire turned her head and blinked, startled to find her husband in the doorway. He had a paper bag in his lap and wore a hesitant smile. “Hi,” she blurted, her dark thoughts scattering. “I’m... uh...” She turned back and motioned at the body with a wave of the scalpel. “I was just about to...”

Ed rolled his wheelchair closer so he could take in the dead man. “That’s him, huh?”

Claire took a breath and a step back from the table. She put her hand on the back of his chair and let his presence anchor her. “That’s him,” she confirmed in a faint voice.

“I’m not going to tell you to excuse yourself from this one,” Ed told her.

“You know I wouldn’t anyway,” Claire said with just the slightest hint of weary sass.

Ed smiled. “Be a waste of breath.”

“Damn skippy.”

Ed chuckled and was rewarded with a hesitant smile from his wife. “This has got to be hard on you.”

Claire’s smile fell away. “I’ve never had someone on my table I would have killed if given the chance. It’s a little unnerving.” She felt Ed’s touch on her wrist, just above the glove she wore. It steadied her. “The kids get off to school okay?”

Her husband nodded. “I brought you something to eat. I figured you’d be here all day.” He handed her the bag.

“Thanks, honey,” Claire said sincerely. She kissed him on the head before turning and heading for the fridge in her office.

Ed stared at the body of the man who’d almost killed Jill. Seeing the lips sewn shut rattled him more than he thought it would, so he could only imagine the shock it must have been for Claire to come up on the sight unprepared. He leaned closer, studying the almost surgical precision of the stitches and felt a chill take him.

Claire paused in the doorway and watched him. There was still a cop in him, still a man who felt driven to find the truth. She’d see flashes of that man sometimes, of who Ed had been before a bullet had put him in that wheelchair. Lately she’d been seeing more and more of the man she’d fallen in love with and less of the stricken and depressed soul he had become. Being here with him now made the events of the last twenty-four hours suddenly infinitely more bearable.

Ed felt her eyes on him and he looked back at her. “What do you think?” he asked softly.

“Are you asking me if I think it’s him? Kiss-Me-Not?”

Ed hesitated before slowly nodding.

Claire swallowed and took in a slow breath. “I didn’t tell Jill this, but... Yeah. I do.”

“Harris...” Ed started to suggest.

“What do you think?” Claire asked him, cutting him off gently.

“This feels like him,” Ed confessed.

“It does,” Claire agreed.

Ed moved back from the table then rolled over to his wife. He looked up at her for a long moment. “I... haven’t always been supportive of what you, Jill and Lindsay tried to do with this case.”

Claire said nothing.

“This time it will be different,” Ed promised.

Tears stung the corner of Claire’s eyes as she eased down into his lap and laid her head on his strong shoulder. “For all of us,” she vowed.

Denise took a moment to just watch Jill Bernhardt from the open doorway of the woman’s office. Her DDA was lost in thought, those brilliant blue eyes staring somewhere beyond the window and the skyline that stretched beyond it. Jill looked exhausted but resilient, as if she’d grown a steel spine in the hours since Denise had last seen her. Most women would have crumbled under the weight of what Jill had been through these past few months, but the attorney was bucking up remarkably well. If anything, Denise suspected Jill had finally embraced her anger over the whole situation. That anger was now fueling the other woman and would carry her through to the end of this case. Denise just worried what would happen then.

The acting district attorney rapped slightly on the door. Jill blinked a few times before turning in her chair to look at her boss. “Hey,” she greeted, her voice husky.

“Any word from the medical examiner on cause of death? Do we know when the bastard died?” Denise asked all business, no hint of the worry she felt for her colleague in her tone.

Jill shook her head and rubbed at her scratchy eyes. She felt like she could sleep a week, but the thought of the dreams that would be waiting for her kept her gladly awake and fatigued. “He was killed sometime yesterday afternoon. Claire is narrowing that window down. I expect to get some more news in the next hour or so.”

Denise nodded. “You look like hell,” she finally said when she could think of nothing else to say.

There was no witty comeback from the blonde attorney, just a long sigh. “That’s appropriate, don’t you think?”

Hesitantly, Denise entered Jill’s office and sat down on the other side of the woman’s desk. “You’re pretty sure it’s him, aren’t you?”

“Kiss-Me-Not? Oh yeah.” Jill sighed again and put her elbows on her desk before leaning forward.

“Is that just intuition talking?”

“For now,” Jill admitted. “But none of us ever felt right about Harris.”

“The clues added up,” Denise reminded her.

“They did,” Jill agreed. “And we were so glad to have the dots connect after all that time that we just followed along. But it was too neat. Almost too easy.”

“If that’s easy, I’d hate to see what you consider hard.” Denise pondered what Jill was telling her. She didn’t like the notion that one serial killer had apparently risen from the grave just as another had been sent to his. “So what made him change?” Denise asked. “Kiss-Me-Not kills women. Why did he kill David Arnold and string him up in a church?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he was pissed that Arnold was taking his place as San Francisco’s latest sicko,” Jill muttered as she put her head in her hands.

Denise frowned. “Or maybe...”

Jill looked up at her and waited expectantly. “Or maybe what?”

“Let’s say Kiss-Me-Not really was pissed that someone was stealing his limelight. Why did he wait until now to kill Arnold? Why not do it before Arnold racked up more victims?” Denise leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on her knees.

Jill shook her head. She felt either too tired or too dense to pick up the trail Denise seemed to be following. “Maybe he’s been trying to find him all this time. Maybe he finally got lucky.”

“Kiss-Me-Not became obsessed with Lindsay toward the end of his killing spree,” Denise reminded her subordinate. “He wanted to make her one of his victims.”

“Yeah,” Jill answered slowly.

“So maybe Kiss-Me-Not wasn’t upset with another killer stealing his limelight. Maybe he was upset that the killer was messing with Lindsay.”

Jill leaned back in her chair, feeling like the breath had been knocked from her lungs. She could almost hear the puzzle piece snap into place and wanted to slap herself for not seeing it before. “Jesus.”

“It’s just a theory...”

“It’s a damn good one,” Jill admitted. “As much as I *really* don’t like the idea.” She snatched up her phone. “I’m going to call Claire.”

“Shouldn’t you call Lindsay or that perky little reporter friend of yours first?” Denise got to her feet.

“I don’t know where they are,” Jill admitted.

“I think you might want to find out,” Denise said as she left the attorney to consider this new and frightening spin on things.

“You’re lucky I was already on my way.”

Maggie wasn’t certain she’d used the word lucky to describe picking Agent John Ashe up at the airport. “So you caught the first flight when you heard about the stitches?” she asked as they headed through the parking lot for Maggie’s silver Mustang. She popped the trunk and let Ashe toss his luggage inside. A slight breeze was blowing as the sun beat down on them from directly overhead, but she noticed the agent’s hair didn’t budge. It was both fascinating and disturbing.

“I never thought Harris was the real killer. If I hadn’t been called back to DC on another case...” He trailed off and sighed. “I tried to tell Boxer that everything with Harris was fitting too neatly, but she just hung up on me.”

“When was this?” Maggie asked as they slipped inside the car.

“A day or two after Harris died.”

Maggie paused. “Well, Inspector Boxer was dealing with the death of her father at the time,” she admitted.

Ashe just grunted, and in that moment Maggie wanted to smack herself for contacting him. He was already swooping in and trying to steal her case out from under her. “So I thought we’d swing by the precinct...” she began.

“We need a search warrant,” Ashe cut her off.

“For what?”

“Boxer’s apartment.”

“So you think she could have done this,” Maggie said, searching for confirmation. “You

think she could have snapped and killed the Hallelujah Man?"

Ashe took off his sunglasses and turned to look at her. "Who the hell named a serial killer the Hallelujah Man? Do you know how hard that is to spell?"

"Agent Ashe..." Maggie ground out, not amused that he was toying with her.

"No," he answered flatly. "Boxer is a good cop. I don't like her much, and she sure as hell doesn't like me, but there is nothing that would push her to recreate one of this monster's crimes. Nothing."

"Preliminary time of death puts Boxer in front of a roomful of witnesses," Maggie admitted.

"But you think she might have had help?" He chuckled. "Boxer has friends that would kill for her. No doubt about it. But they all like her too much to let her turn into a murderer."

Maggie took a breath, feeling stung and frustrated. "Then why the warrant?"

"You said she's on vacation. Unreachable."

"She is."

"She may have evidence in her attic that we need to look over. We could just ask one of her friends in that little... club... of hers to meet us with the key, but I don't think they'd be too thrilled to let me in there."

"Club?" Maggie asked as she started the car. She wasn't pleased that Ashe couldn't see her side of things, but she'd either prove him wrong or she wouldn't. She hoped for Lindsay's sake she was as wrong as the day was long, but she had to be sure. It wasn't like she had any other suspects at this point anyway.

"Yeah. The little murder club as I like to call it. The DDA, the medical examiner... that perpetually hyper reporter..."

Maggie took in what he was saying. A picture of Lindsay and her inner circle came into sharp focus. At least Ashe had been good for that much. "Fine," she murmured. "We'll swing by the Hall and get a warrant."

"Make sure you don't ask Bernhardt for it."

"That would be the DDA?" Maggie guessed as they pulled out into traffic. Her stomach soured at the thought of Jill being mad at her. She rather liked the attractive attorney. After giving Jill some time to feel steady again, Maggie had hoped she could ask her out if Jill swung that way.

“Yep,” Ashe muttered as he popped a piece of gum in his mouth and slipped his sunglasses back on, settling in for the long ride back to the Hall.

“They’re really big.”

Lindsay glanced from her lover to the two animals waiting in the corral. “They’re horses. They tend to be big.”

Chewing nervously on her lower lip, Cindy watched the animals that appeared to be watching her back. “Don’t Jack and Abbie have like... a miniature pony or something...?”

Lindsay chuckled before wrapping her arms around Cindy from behind and resting her chin in the other woman’s sweet smelling hair. It felt good to hold her, the late afternoon sun warming them nicely as a slight breeze stirred their hair. “You’ll be fine,” she promised.

Cindy indulgently leaned back into Lindsay’s heat. They were both in jeans and denim shirts. They’d already been into town and bought Cindy a pair of black leather cowboy boots, which the reporter was now happily sporting. Lindsay didn’t mention that her grandfather had gotten the redhead a cowboy hat as well. She could hardly wait to see what Cindy looked like in it.

They stood that way in silence, breathing in the pleasantly cool, crisp air and savoring the sunlight on their skin.

“Feels weird,” Cindy murmured almost sleepily.

“What?” Lindsay drawled. “No homicides to investigate? No deadlines? No serial killers to chase?” she murmured into Cindy’s ear as she started to rock them both from side to side.

“How did you know I was going to say that?” Cindy asked, charmed that her lover could read her so well.

Lindsay shrugged. “This close? I can read your mind.”

Cindy turned in Lindsay’s arms, letting her lover press her up against the wood fence. “I doubt that.”

“Oh really?”

“Because what I’m thinking about right now could get me arrested.” Cindy raised up on

tiptoe and caught Lindsay's lips in a soft, searching kiss. Lindsay yielded willingly, dipping her head and returning the contact in equal measure. When they parted, Cindy's breathing was rough. She licked her lips and looked up into Lindsay's eyes. Her fingers dug into the waistband of Lindsay's jeans, just above the inspector's belt buckle. "We could skip the horseback riding lesson all together and do a different kind of riding..." Her left eyebrow rose suggestively.

Lindsay paused theatrically. "Tempting but no. And you are not seducing me to get out of a ride with my grandmother."

Cindy playfully stomped her foot as Lindsay stepped back. "Tell me you were at least a little tempted."

"More than a little," Lindsay confessed with a grin for her lover. "Now come on. You wanted the whole Texas experience. That means riding a horse. Starlight is a really gentle animal. She won't hurt you." Lindsay climbed over the fence and dropped down into the dirt. She held out a hand for Cindy who sighed dramatically before clamoring over and joining Lindsay in the corral.

"If I die... make sure my obituary makes me look really heroic."

"You're not gonna die."

"Nice horse." Cindy patted the large animal's neck and tried not to flinch when Starlight turned her head and snorted at the reporter. She was a beautiful horse, an inky black with the pattern of a white star on her forehead, hence the name, no doubt. Cindy would have been happier admiring the animal from afar, however. "Nice... very large horse with very big teeth."

Lindsay shook her head and held the stirrup. "Up you go, Lois Lane."

"You know she really is kinda... tall. I'm thinking I'm more a pony girl myself, really," Cindy informed her lover as she motioned to their differences in height.

"Put your boot in the stirrup," Lindsay ordered firmly, but there was an edge of amusement to her voice.

Jack and Abbie had come up from the ranch and were now watching the proceedings from the fence with avid interest.

"I'm gonna get bucked onto my butt," Cindy huffed. "I just know it." The reporter took a deep breath and planted her foot in the stirrup before hopping and reaching for the saddle horn.

Starlight sidestepped away from Lindsay with the reporter now hanging on for dear life, just not in the saddle. Abbie giggled and clamped a hand over her mouth. Jack shushed

her, but there was a wicked grin on his lips.

“Cute as a button,” he murmured.

“Cindy or watching Lindsay watch Cindy?” Abbie asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Cindy’s grip on the saddle horn grew tighter as she tried to swing her other leg up and over. The horse was having none of it, however, and began to shuffle in a circle. “Come on,” Cindy whined at the animal. “Give a girl a break. I’ll feed you an apple.”

Lindsay laughed as she caught Starlight’s reins and held the animal steady. “Okay. Swing your leg over.”

“Easy for you to say. Some of us aren’t built with legs like a supermodel’s.” Cindy finally settled into the saddle, took a steadying breath, and looked down at Lindsay. “I’m up really high,” she realized aloud.

“You climbed up the scaffolding of a ten story building,” Lindsay reminded her. “I think you can handle a horse.”

“Scaffolding doesn’t buck... or run... or gallop.”

“Relax,” Abbie called to the reporter. “Starlight is just having a little fun with you.”

“That right, Starlight?” Cindy asked in a droll voice. “You’re just messing with the rookie?” The reporter smiled, her nerves easing as the horse bobbed her head up and down as if in the affirmative. She patted her neck and watched the skin ripple with pleasure under her fur.

“Be back by dark, okay?” Lindsay told them as Abbie entered the corral and mounted her own horse, a pretty chocolate brown mare.

Abbie merely tilted her head and gave her granddaughter a look.

“Please?” Lindsay asked sarcastically.

“Since you asked so nicely,” Cindy teased. “Lead on, Abbie. I’ll do my best to follow.” Cindy smiled at Lindsay, hoping to ease her lover’s fears just a little. She and Lindsay knew they were being divided and conquered. No doubt Jack would question Lindsay about what had happened on this latest case, leaving Abbie to grill Cindy about her relationship with their granddaughter.

The look worked, and Lindsay felt herself melt. Her lips eased into a grin of their own. She wanted to tell Cindy she loved her, but she held the words back for now. A wave had to do instead, and it felt like a poor substitution.

“Sprout?”

Lindsay tore her gaze away from the departing Cindy and her grandmother and focused on Jack.

“Wanna help an old man brush down some of the horses?”

“Sure.” Lindsay climbed the fence and dropped over the other side, her boots kicking up a fair amount of dust.

“You up to talking about it?” Jack asked as they stepped into the stables.

Lindsay didn’t have to guess what “it” was. “I’d really rather not,” she admitted.

“You know you’re going to anyway, right?” Jack handed Lindsay a brush and motioned for her to take the nearest horse, while he entered the stall next to hers.

Both resigned and touched by her grandfather’s stubbornness, Lindsay sighed. She stepped into the stall and petted the pretty grey mare on the nose before she eased next to it and started the rubdown. “I was chasing a killer. He got too close. He hurt people I love. When the time came and we exchanged gunfire, I shot him... twice. He got away.”

“You haven’t told us about that time. How you felt when he took Jill.” Jack continued his work as he watched his granddaughter through the bars of the stalls.

“What’s to tell? I imagine my emotions must have been pretty obvious.”

“If I had been in your boots, sprout, I’d have wanted that man dead.”

Lindsay’s hand paused mid-brush before resuming, slower than before. “In the end, I guess I killed him. He turned up dead in a church. Probably died from infection from his gunshot wounds.”

Jack made a face at the thought of such an unholy man dying in such a holy place. “And how does that make you feel, Lindsay? Knowing you killed him?”

Lindsay stopped what she was doing and looked at her grandfather. “Empty,” she confessed. “Claire told me he was dead and I just... It’s like I had nothing left to feel. I thought I should go to the scene, but I didn’t want to. It was just habit. Automatic.”

“Your priorities are changing,” Jack guessed. “That little spitfire has something to do with that, I reckon.”

An image of Cindy, her red hair radiant in the Texas sun brought an unconscious smile to Lindsay’s lips and banished some of the darkness that memories of the case had dredged

up. “Everything to do with that,” Lindsay corrected.

“Ass over tea kettle for that one, aren’t you?” Jack chuckled.

Lindsay’s smile broadened. “Shows, huh?”

“Like a ray of light on a cloudy day.”

The inspector shook her head at that and at herself, admitting for the first time just how deeply her feelings for Cindy ran. This thing between herself and Cindy... it was stronger than what she’d felt for Tom. Intense to the point of sweet distraction. Cindy could make her thoughts derail with a look; her knees buckle with a whispered word. The reporter had replaced justice as the most important thing in Lindsay’s world.

“You love her, sprout?” Jack asked softly, spellbound by the look on his granddaughter’s features.

Lindsay looked at him. “So much it hurts sometimes,” she confessed. “But it’s a good kind of pain.”

Jack nodded, satisfied with her answer. “So what happened to that Pete fellow?”

“Uh...” Lindsay blinked, needing a moment to even remember who Pete was. She felt the tiniest bit chagrined by that as she opened the stall and moved to the next one. “We broke it off. Obviously.”

“Obviously. How’d he take it?” Jack leaned on the door to his stall and watched her move about.

Lindsay paused, her gaze focusing on the dust mites floating lazily above the dirt floor in the late afternoon sun. The stables smelled of horse and hay, both powerful scents from her childhood. Talking about Pete here seemed wrong. This was the place that held some of her most cherished memories. Pete Raynor didn’t belong here. She frowned, feeling a chill travel up her spine.

“Sprout?”

Her grandfather’s voice snapped Lindsay back into the moment. “He... not well,” she said slowly. For the first time since they’d left, Lindsay thought about the camera equipment in her duplex. How in the hell she’d managed to forget about it until now was a wonder, but she thought once more of Pete and his possible involvement. “Not... well at all,” she murmured.

ACT III

“Ms. Kwon!”

Denise paused just outside her office door, files in hand, on her way to court. She was startled to see Agent John Ashe with the SFPD’s newest homicide inspector heading her way. Denise frantically searched her memory for the detective’s name and only remembered it just as she was forced to speak.

“Inspector... Snow...” Denise said slowly, relieved when the woman didn’t correct her. “Agent Ashe. What can I do for you?”

“We need a warrant,” Ashe explained without preamble.

“You have a suspect in the death of David Arnold?” Denise looked at Snow hopefully.

“We’re following a few different avenues,” Maggie replied. “This warrant is associated with one of those.”

“I’ll need a name,” Denise said impatiently.

“Lindsay Boxer,” Maggie told her without flinching.

Denise looked from Snow to Ashe who shrugged. “*Inspector Lindsay Boxer?*” she asked, ice entering her tone.

“We have probable cause...” Maggie started.

“What you have,” Denise said cutting her off with venom in her voice, “is about the lowest IQ I’ve ever encounter in the history of the San Francisco PD if you think for one second Lindsay Boxer would string up a serial killer and sew his lips shut.”

“I take it you’re a fan,” Maggie drawled as her hand rested on her hips.

“I’m a colleague who has worked with Boxer on numerous cases over a number of years. We aren’t even anything close to resembling friends, but my respect for the woman is as high as it gets.” Denise leveled a glare at Ashe that would have incinerated him on the spot if it could have.

He held up his hands. “I’m just looking for evidence that I think Inspector Boxer is storing in her attic. This theory that Boxer snapped and played surgeon on your killer’s lips ain’t mine.”

Denise looked back at Snow who didn’t look remotely apologetic or like she was about to back down. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“Take a step back, Counselor, and look at this case like someone who doesn’t have a

personal connection,” Snow volleyed. “If Lindsay weren’t someone you knew... if she were just another cop... you’re telling me you wouldn’t look twice at her?”

“But I do know Lindsay, and she’s not just another cop.”

“And David Arnold worked in this building... swore in your witnesses... not once did you know people were swearing with their hands on one side of the bible while a devil held up the other.”

Denise’s head snapped back at the rebuke. “You’re out of line,” she seethed.

“And you’re letting your personal judgment get in the way of a legitimate line of inquiry, Counselor.”

“Preliminary time of death...” Denise began.

“Is preliminary,” Snow reminded the other woman. “And Boxer could have had help.”

The two women stared each other down.

“Listen,” Ashe hesitantly stepped between them. “Whatever her motives are... I just need a look at that evidence.”

Denise transferred her glare to him. She would have rather had a root canal than give them their warrant, but looking at the situation objectively, she knew Snow had a point. Denise didn’t have to like it, though. “Fine. I’ll have Jill meet you there with the warrant in half an hour.”

“Oh boy,” Ashe muttered before sighing.

Maggie looked shaken at the thought of having to explain herself to Jill. “Don’t you think...”

“Half an hour,” Denise said between clenched teeth. She stepped around Ashe and went toe-to-toe with the inspector. “Know this, Snow. You’re starting off on the wrong foot with this office.”

“Even if it catches me a killer?” Maggie asked with steel in her voice.

“You’re wasting your time,” Denise snarled. She shoved past the inspector, so angry she could barely think. A part of her wished she could go to Lindsay’s apartment to watch Jill rip the little pipsqueak apart. She’d have to settle for a secondhand account... maybe over drinks, some part of her brain helpfully suggested.

“As helpful as I remember her,” Ashe said cheekily as he watched Denise’s toned legs as she walked away.

“It makes sense,” Jill argued from her seat as Claire paced in the medical examiner’s office. “You have to admit it makes sense.”

Claire shook her head and swallowed, praying that she wasn’t about to get ill. The mere thought that the real Kiss-Me-Not Killer had taken out Arnold as some kind of favor to Lindsay... It made her quake inside. “I don’t like this.”

“If he went after this guy for screwing with Lindsay...”

“What would he do to Cindy?” Claire finished the thought. She sat on the edge of her desk, her knees suddenly too wobbly to hold her. “Damn it,” she whispered as she put her head in her hands, trying in vain to find some small reserve of strength to draw on.

Jill watched her with clear empathy. “Look, Harris had to be a protégé. The real killer set him up.”

“Harris hated Lindsay with a passion,” Claire reminded her friend.

“Again, the real killer could have fostered that in Harris. Fed him lies, stories... whatever it took. But it backfired. Harris went after Linz...” Jill didn’t have to remind Claire of the rest.

“Pete,” Claire said suddenly.

“What about him?”

“If the real Kiss-Me-Not Killer is still out there... he didn’t mess with Pete. Maybe he won’t hurt Cindy,” Claire tried to rationalize.

“Pete was only around for two weeks,” Jill countered.

“But they slept together,” Claire argued. “If the killer is that jealous, he’d have gone after Pete. Maybe we’re making this whole thing into something out of guilt, Jill. Maybe some part of our subconscious wants so desperately to make this thing with Lindsay right...”

“No.” Jill got to her feet and stood in front of her friend. She took Claire’s hands into her own and waited for the medical examiner to look at her. “No, Claire,” she said gently. “We know. We both know it’s him.”

Claire closed her eyes and squeezed Jill’s hands. “We need to find Lindsay. She needs to know,” she breathed.

“I thought we were going to wait,” Jill almost whispered, hating the thought of dragging her friends back from the vacation they so desperately needed.

Claire shook her head and opened her eyes. “That was before we suspected a motive in Arnold’s death.”

A rap on the door made both women jump. They turned as Denise Kwon opened the door and stepped inside. The acting district attorney’s gaze went to their linked hands before lifting and locking on Jill’s blue eyes. “I have a warrant for you to deliver.”

“In the Arnold murder?” Jill moved away from Claire and strode toward her boss, reaching for the piece of paper in Denise’s hands.

Denise pulled the page back, lifting it past her shoulder. “You’re not going to like it.”

“Who is it for?” Claire demanded to know.

“I’m giving this to you because I think you could stand to blow off some steam, Bernhardt.” Denise handed Jill the warrant. “But don’t even think about shooting the messenger.”

“You coming?”

Maggie blinked as Ashe got out of the car and headed across the street. The engine had barely shut off before the agent had opened his door and left her sitting there, fumbling with her seatbelt. “Ass,” she hissed as she got her own door open and scrambled after him.

It was easy to see why Boxer hadn’t been a fan of Ashe’s. Maggie felt a pang of regret about what she was doing, about violating Lindsay’s space. She didn’t want to be right about Tex. A part of her genuinely admired Lindsay, but Maggie had been in this place before. She had to know... had to be sure that Boxer hadn’t turned into the very thing she chased. Lindsay would never see it this way, but Maggie knew that part of her drive to find out the truth was out of respect for the other inspector. She believed that Lindsay wanted to be a good cop, and that if she crossed the line, Lindsay would want someone to stop her.

“Ashe, would you wait? We don’t have the warrant yet.” Maggie hustled after him, watching him climb the front steps like he lived there. She could see he was already pulling out a set of lock picks from his back pocket.

A little blue car rounded the corner up the street, tires squealing in protest. Both the agent and the inspector glanced at it and frowned.

“Maybe you want to deal with a pissed off DDA,” Ashe muttered. “I just want my evidence.” He let himself in and closed the door, leaving Maggie to handle Jill alone.

“Bastard.” Maggie sucked in a lungful of air and turned on her heel, waiting for Jill to slam her car into park. The blonde attorney practically leapt from the vehicle and headed for Maggie, anger radiating out of every pore. “This is gonna be fun,” Maggie muttered under her breath, only to have the air knocked out of her when Jill slapped her hard in the chest with the warrant. Maggie stumbled back a few steps, nearly tripping over the curb.

“What the HELL?” Jill demanded as the warrant fluttered to the asphalt between them. “I think that you’re out here trying to track down David Arnold’s killer and instead you’re out to ruin my best friend’s reputation? You stupid bitch...”

“Whoa,” Maggie said as she held her hands out to her sides, struck nearly dumb by the rage rolling off Jill in potent waves. “Let me explain.”

“Screw that. Arnold’s killer is out there. The man who kept me from my justice is running about free as a damn bird while you’re letting your ambition get the best of you.” Jill reached down and snatched up the warrant, balling it in her fist. She’d never felt so angry in her life. Not at the stepfather who had abused her or the mother who had looked the other way. Not even at Arnold for torturing her in a dusty, dank and deserted church. “Lindsay would never... EVER... replicate one of Kiss-Me-Not’s crimes. Not even if you put a gun to her head!”

“Jill...” Maggie tried to grab the attorney’s shoulders, tried to anchor her in her anger so she could see reason. Jill slapped one hand away and stepped back. “Just hear me out. I have good reason for looking at Lindsay. Some rational part of you knows that.”

“Some rational part?” Jill almost screamed. “What’s rational about any of this? Lindsay Boxer is more of a cop than you’ll ever be.”

The words stung. Maggie didn’t deny it. But she’d been here before. She’d been the one doing the shouting and the shoving. And she’d been wrong. Horribly wrong.

“I understand how you feel, but I’m doing my job. I don’t have to like it, and you don’t have to like it, but I’m doing what needs to be done.”

“Claire has confirmed the time of death, Inspector,” Jill spat. “Lindsay was standing right in front of me at the Register, in full view of a room full of reporters and the medical examiner when someone was strangling David Arnold to death.”

“Could she have had help?” Maggie demanded. “Could her ex-husband or her partner...”

“Tom and Jacobi?” Jill almost shrieked. “Jesus, are you out of your mind? Linz wanted Arnold dead,” Jill confessed in her fury, “but she left with Cindy to make sure she *wouldn’t* cross that line.”

They stared at each other for several tense moments before Maggie took a step back. She closed her eyes, relief and guilt warring for emotional preference in the moment. “The medical examiner is sure?”

“Positive,” Jill replied, her tone razor sharp and full of venom.

Maggie nodded and blew out a breath. “You won’t believe me, but I’m glad to hear that.”

“You’re right. I don’t believe you,” Jill snarled. “What in the hell were you thinking?”

“I already got this lecture from your boss, I don’t need one from you,” Maggie said wearily, but without rancor. “You’re entitled to be mad at me. Hopefully when you calm down you’ll let me explain.”

“You know what you can do with your explanation, Inspector Snow?” Jill paused, letting her anger swell. Denise had been right. She’d needed to unload on someone and right now this was feeling pretty damn good. “You can...”

A series of four quick pops ground Jill’s threat to a halt and drew Jill and Maggie’s attention to Lindsay’s duplex as they tried to place the sound. Suddenly, Maggie pivoted, clutching Jill around the waist and throwing them both toward the ground.

Behind them, Lindsay’s home exploded.

The sky rained fire, glass and wood all around them. Maggie blanketed Jill, their limbs intertwined, the inspector protecting the attorney from the falling debris and heat. Jill was aware of the other woman’s dead weight, and she rolled them both, rising up on her knees to better look Maggie over for injuries. The scent of burning wood filled the air, mingling with Maggie’s perfume as Jill dipped her head and listened for the sound of breathing or to feel the stir of air against her cheek.

She wasn’t sure she detected either.

ACT IV

The horse ride had been surprisingly low key. Cindy led Starlight into the quiet stables, hearing the hum of the lights come on outside as the night descended over the Texas sky. Abbie had actually talked more about Cindy rather than asking questions about her granddaughter. Cindy had understood the other woman’s curiosity, but she kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for Abbie to ask the questions Cindy wasn’t sure how to answer.

“You’re awfully quiet all of a sudden, spitfire,” Abbie teased as she eased the saddle off her horse.

Cindy smiled at the nickname. “Just thinking.”

“About?” Abbie led the horse into a stall and made sure she had plenty of hay and fresh water.

Cindy took a deep breath and decided to grab the proverbial bull by the horns. “I guess I’m wondering when you’re going to ask me some questions about Linz.”

“What sort of questions would I ask?” Abbie wanted to know as she took the reins from Cindy and led Starlight to her stall.

“About the shooting. About the case. About me and your granddaughter…” Cindy shrugged. “Take your pick.”

Abbie chuckled as she unbuckled Starlight’s saddle. “You’ve not even been here twenty four hours, Cindy. I thought I’d let you settle in a bit before interrogating you.”

Cindy crossed her arms, trying to warm herself against the encroaching cold. Once the sun had dipped below the horizon a chill had set in. “So you were going to lull me into a false sense of security then pounce on me?”

Lindsay’s grandmother laughed. “Something like that.” She finished with Starlight and shut the door to the horse’s stall door before turning to look at Cindy. “Is there something you feel the need to tell me?”

“Um… no?” Cindy suggested only to suddenly shake her head. “Actually… I do want you to know one thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“That I love your granddaughter more than I’ve ever loved anyone in my whole life,” Cindy said with conviction then blinked, wondering why she’d felt the need to blurt that out. Perhaps a part of her had been waiting to say the words all day, and she just couldn’t hold them back any longer.

Abbie came closer. Reaching up, she framed Cindy’s youthful face between her weathered palms. “That tells me a lot right there,” Abbie said with shining eyes. She pulled Cindy closer, hugging the girl in the quiet of the stables.

Cindy’s hands fisted in the light jacket Abbie wore. Tears burned her eyes and she blinked them away. It felt right to hug Abbie like this. It felt a little bit like home.

“Everything all right?”

The two women turned to discover Lindsay standing in the doorway to the stables. The inspector had her hands tucked into the back pockets of her jeans and was observing them with practiced mild interest.

“You were right,” Abbie told Cindy with a chuckle. “Looks like I’m making cookies.”

Cindy laughed lightly as she wiped at one tearing eye. She accepted a gentle kiss on her cheek from Abbie, feeling a warmth bloom in her chest that chased away some of the darkness that had been living there since Jill had been taken.

Lindsay narrowed her eyes as her grandmother gave her a playful swat on the butt as she walked by, heading for the ranch. Slowly, Lindsay glanced back at Cindy. “What was she right about?”

“We had a bet,” Cindy confessed as she came closer to her lover, playfully kicking the dirt with her new boots.

“A bet?”

“Yep. Abbie thought you’d be waiting for us the instant we got off our horses. I bet that you’d wait inside hiding until we had the horses stabled before you showed up. Wouldn’t want to look like a mother hen, you know.”

Lindsay’s mouth twisted as she tried to keep a busted look from appearing on her face. She reached out and grabbed the nearest belt loops on Cindy’s jeans and pulled her lover against her. “You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” she teased.

Without hesitation, Cindy threaded her fingers in Lindsay’s hair and drew the taller woman down into a slow, thorough kiss. When they parted, a mere inch between them, Cindy looked up into Lindsay’s smoky eyes. “When it comes to you, I’m a freaking genius.”

Dark eyebrows shot skyward. “Oh really?”

“Uh-huh.” Cindy urged Lindsay’s face lower again, turning her head and whispering a few things into Lindsay’s ear. “Am I right?” she asked as she drew back.

Swallowing, Lindsay could feel her whole body heating at the suggestions Cindy had just offered for the evening’s activities. “Don’t be smug about it,” Lindsay answered hoarsely before drawing Cindy into another heated kiss.

“Where is she?” Claire stumbled from fatigue as she entered the ER lobby and was kept on her feet by Warren Jacobi’s sudden hands under her arm. “Where the hell is Jill?”

Claire demanded of him.

“I’m right here,” Jill announced and gave Claire a tiny wave when her friend’s gaze landed on her.

Claire hurried to Jill’s side, sliding into the seat next to her and drawing the blonde into her arms. She hugged her hard before pulling back and gripping Jill’s chin. “Let me look at you. Have they seen you yet? Warren, get a doctor.”

“Easy there,” Jill said with a flicker of amusement in her blue eyes. She gripped Claire’s hand and pulled it away from the scratched skin on her chin. “I’m fine. Stop barking orders.”

“I get a call from Tom who tells me someone blew up Lindsay’s duplex, and that you’ve been rushed to the ER. I’ll bark orders at whomever I damn well please until I stop panicking,” Claire declared.

The two friends looked at each other for a long, steady moment. Jill slowly smiled and squeezed Claire’s hand where it rested between her own. She watched as the tension eased from Claire’s frame, and finally tugged on Claire’s hand, urging the exhausted woman down. Claire’s head came to rest on Jill’s shoulder and both women sighed at the reassuring contact. Suddenly the world was making sense again.

Jacobi shook his head at both of them. “Inspector Snow is in surgery,” he informed Claire.

“Is she going to be all right? What were you all doing at Lindsay’s?” Claire lifted her head and met Jill’s gaze again.

“I was there to serve a warrant,” Jill explained. “Maggie... Inspector Snow and Agent Ashe had gotten a warrant to search Lindsay’s place.”

Claire’s gaze darted around the room. “Ashe?”

“Dead,” Jacobi answered solemnly.

Claire closed her eyes. She swayed a little in place, her body needing sleep so desperately she knew it would shut down on her soon. “Why did they need a warrant for Lindsay’s home?”

Jill explained with the few details she knew. Claire was shaking with anger by the time she was done. “But she saved my life, Claire. I would have been toast if she hadn’t protected me.”

“I know that,” Claire murmured. “That’s the only thing keeping me from wishing she wouldn’t come out of that surgery.”

“Jill.”

The blonde attorney glanced up and into the worried eyes of Denise Kwon. For a split second, Jill saw the concern, the fear for her. For *her* she realized with shock. Then Denise’s eyes shuttered, and the worried woman was gone, replaced by the boss that was always about business. “Denise,” Jill greeted, her voice a rough rasp.

“Glad to see you’re okay,” Denise said primly before sinking into a chair next to Claire.

Jacobi was the only one who noticed the acting district attorney’s legs had nearly buckled in relief. He pursed his lips and shook his head again. He’d decided a long time ago that women, as a species, were a hell of a lot smarter than men. But when it came to matters of the heart, women were just as clueless as the rest of them. “I think it’s time we call Linz,” he informed them. “Where did she go?”

Both Claire and Jill shook their heads. “They didn’t say. We didn’t ask,” Claire replied.

“So we have another two days before we hear from them?” Jacobi sighed.

“What about the dog?”

Claire, Jill and Jacobi all glanced at Denise as if she’d just lost her mind.

“Dog?” Jill asked.

“Didn’t Boxer have that mutt living with her?”

Jill blinked a few times and almost smiled when she realized Denise was worried about Martha. “She’s staying with Jacobi.”

Denise cleared her throat and tried to pretend she wasn’t relieved. “Good. That’s good.”

“Whoever set the bombs in Linz’s attic made sure that no one was home that time of day,” Jacobi informed them. “Apparently he wasn’t out to kill anyone... this time.”

“Screwed that up, didn’t he?” Denise grouched. “Now we have a dead federal agent and a dead serial killer to deal with. Some days I really hate my job.”

No one could disagree with her. They all sat in silence then, waiting for word.

Lindsay lay perfectly still, her elbow crooked and her head on her fist as she watched Cindy sleep. She could feel her lover’s body heat under the blankets they shared, and she ached to move closer, to nuzzle the hollow of Cindy’s throat. She wanted to let her hands

wander over Cindy's bare skin, wanted to draw forth those provocative sounds Cindy always made when she touched her just right.

But Lindsay remained still, just watching Cindy sleep peacefully. The reporter needed the rest after what they'd all been through. Hell, so did she, Lindsay admitted, but she was at least finding a little of her own peace by simply looking at the woman who had barreled into her life and arrested her heart.

It was so tempting to quit the force, to move the both of them somewhere quaint and small with no crime worse than the occasional teenagers tipping cows, but Lindsay knew Cindy loved the city and loved her job. Once upon a time, Lindsay had felt the same. But ever since Arnold took Jill, ever since she'd looked the devil in the face, Lindsay's priorities were out of whack. Or maybe, the inspector realized, she was finally getting them right.

"You're creeping me out."

A smile bloomed on Lindsay's face as she finally nestled closer to her lover's body. "You're supposed to be asleep."

Cindy opened her eyes and turned her head. "How is a girl supposed to sleep when she has someone as gorgeous as you watching her?" She shifted her body, wrapping herself around Lindsay's naked form with pleasure. Her nostrils flared as Lindsay's hands skimmed down her sides and rested on her hips.

They kissed in the predawn light, their lips lingering as hands began to wander with idle pleasure. Cindy moaned softly into Lindsay's mouth when her lover's hands eased to the inside of her thighs.

"Sore?" Lindsay smirked as she started a gentle kneading with her thumbs.

Cindy put her head down on Lindsay's shoulder. "How can sitting for two hours make my thighs and butt hurt so much?"

Lindsay chuckled. "Gram has some ointment. I'll get it from her when she wakes up... give you a massage."

"Promise?" Cindy raised her head and gave Lindsay an almost wicked smile that tempered into something sweeter when one of Lindsay's hands came up and stroked the side of the reporter's face. "What?" Cindy whispered, seeing something in Lindsay's eyes.

"Just glad we're both here," Lindsay murmured. "For a while there I thought..." She lapsed into silence, her fingertips still exploring Cindy's face.

Cindy bit her lip and leaned into the touch, her eyes slipping shut. "We needed this."

“We did.” Lindsay swallowed. “I’m not sure I want to go back.”

The reporter’s eyes blinked opened, and she looked at Lindsay with concern. Her lover’s voice had sounded strangled on the admission. “You’re serious?”

Lindsay hesitated then nodded. “I’m a little messed up right now,” she confessed. “I’m doubting myself as a cop.”

“Linz...”

“I think... I think I might need to take more than a week,” Lindsay murmured. “Maybe when we get back, I’ll go on leave. I have so much vacation time saved up it isn’t even funny.”

“What would you do?”

“Find us a place to live together?” Lindsay offered with the barest hint of a grin.

Cindy offered Lindsay a dazzling smile. “I love you,” she whispered, before dipping her head and kissing the dent in Lindsay’s chin.

Lindsay swallowed, her thoughts going hazy as Cindy’s teeth nipped her chin and then began to graze along her throat. “Love you too,” she got out breathlessly. “Um... you sure you’re okay with the idea?”

“Of moving in with you?” Cindy’s head popped back up. “Hell yeah.”

“I meant...” Lindsay cleared her throat when she heard how husky she sounded. “I meant me leaving the force for a bit.”

“If it’s what you want to do, Linz, then it’s what I want for you. You sure as hell deserve the vacation.”

Lindsay’s hands moved higher, and Cindy shivered in surprise at the touch. “Maybe I can convince you to take a little more time with me...”

“I think...” Cindy gasped and her eyes fluttered closed again as Lindsay’s touch became intimate indeed. “I think I’ll do whatever you want,” she almost moaned.

Liking that idea, Lindsay decided to put that promise to the immediate test.

The phone started ringing around ten the next morning. Abbie swore as she banged her hip against the kitchen counter in her haste to grab the receiver and hush the shrill sound.

“Hello?”

“Abbie?” a familiar voice spoke hesitantly.

Abbie racked her brain for a moment to place the person on the other end of the line. “Jill?” she said cautiously as a smile formed on her lips. “Hi, sweetheart.”

Jill was flattered Abbie had remembered her. It had been a few years since they’d last spoken on the phone or in person. They mostly exchanged the occasional email and Christmas or birthday cards. “How’s Jack?” Jill inquired as she tried to ease them into the reason for her call.

“Jack is Jack,” Abbie replied with a chuckle. “You looking for Lindsay and Cindy?”

“They’re there?” Jill asked hopefully, trying in vain not to sound like she’d just struck gold. “I’ve been trying to track them down. I was hitting all of Lindsay’s favorite vacation spots when Claire pointed out that Lindsay would have taken Cindy wherever she wanted to go instead.”

Abbie chuckled. “Yes, that little reporter does seem to have my granddaughter wrapped around her trigger finger.”

The expression wrung a laugh from Jill, her first in days. “I’m really sorry to bother all of you, but I need to speak with Linz.”

“Something is wrong,” Abbie guessed. There was an odd note to the attorney’s voice. “What’s happened?”

“What hasn’t?” Jill sighed. “There’s been an explosion. Lindsay’s duplex is toast.”

“Oh my goodness.” Abbie sat at the kitchen table and clutched the phone to her ear. “Was anyone hurt?”

There was a moment of tense silence before Jill answered. “An FBI agent named John Ashe. He was killed.”

Abbie put a hand to her lips. She remembered the name, or more aptly remembered her granddaughter taking it in vain. “Hold on. Let me get her.”

Jill sighed and glanced at Claire who was settling on the corner of her desk. “I feel evil.”

“Has to be done,” Claire said sympathetically, but she felt more than a little mean herself.

Cindy felt the bed move and her eyes shot open. She hadn’t thought twice about it when

Abbie had stuck her head in and informed Lindsay that she'd had a call. She'd been too sleepy and sated from the night's activities to give it much thought, but as her eyes locked on Lindsay's, she felt her stomach sink. Lindsay's gaze was grim, and it looked like the weight of the world had resettled on her lover's shoulders.

"What?" Cindy asked softly, afraid of the answer.

Lindsay swallowed and took a slow, shaky breath. "We need to get back to San Francisco."

"Why?"

"Someone blew up my apartment with Agent Ashe inside it."

Cindy sat up in bed, clutching the sheets to her bare chest.

"Apparently he had a warrant, and he and Inspector Snow were going to search my apartment." Lindsay's voice took on a hint of steel.

"For what?" Cindy blurted.

"I guess I was a suspect in the murder of David Arnold."

"Murder?" Cindy shook her head. "Wait. I think I'm still asleep and dreaming here."

Lindsay sighed and Cindy noticed for the first time that her lover was shaking as Lindsay raked her hands through her hair.

"Arnold didn't die from his gunshot wounds. He was strangled and strung up on a cross... his lips..." Lindsay licked hers. "His lips were sewn shut."

Neither said anything for several minutes. Cindy finally reached out, her own hand shaking, and let her fingertips graze the side of Lindsay's face. Her lover leaned into the touch as if she needed it. "Let me pack our things," Cindy said quietly, fear curling around her heart for herself but especially Lindsay.

"Gram is getting our tickets arranged. I need to go talk to grandpa..." Lindsay closed her eyes as her voice faded away. "God," she whispered. "They think it's him, Cindy. Jill and Claire think it's Kiss-Me-Not."

The reporter eased closer and wrapped her arms around her lover. Her mind was spinning with the revelations. "Then we'll stop him," she promised. "This time on your terms. Then we'll come back here and spend as much time as we need."

Lindsay held on to Cindy for dear life, her weary soul wondering if it could bounce back from this latest blow.

“Didn’t think I’d see the likes of you cross my path again anytime soon. Unless you’re here to smother me with my pillow,” Maggie joked without humor. Her head fell back against the pillows as Jill closed the door to her hospital room.

“How are you feeling?” Jill asked civilly, squinting a little as the late afternoon sun slanted through the windows.

“Like I got blowed up,” Maggie muttered. She stared at the ceiling, not ready to face the anger she knew would be in Jill’s eyes. “I heard about Ashe.”

Jill sat in the chair next to Maggie’s bed and studied the injured inspector. Maggie’s own blue eyes looked swollen and red and her usually healthy tan had been replaced by an ashy grey pallor. Her right arm was bandaged where it had suffered some minor burns, but Jill knew it was Maggie’s back and head that had suffered the worst injuries. “Yeah,” Jill breathed. “At least he didn’t suffer.”

“Lieutenant Hogan says there were four small bombs…”

“Can we not talk about that right now?” Jill asked. She wasn’t fond of Ashe, but she hated the thought of what happened to him when those bombs went off in Lindsay’s attic.

The inspector finally risked a peek at Jill and was relieved to see the attorney didn’t look any worse for wear. “You okay? Other than being pissed at me?”

A rueful smile crossed Jill’s features. “Other than being pissed at you? I’m fine. Lindsay and Cindy are on their way back.”

“Thought you didn’t know where they were,” Maggie accused.

“I didn’t. Used up all the minutes on my cell trying to track them down.” Jill put her elbows on her knees and leaned forward. “I wanted to thank you. You saved my life.”

Maggie looked away, focusing instead on the muted TV set in the corner. The early news was on, and she saw footage of Lindsay’s destroyed home. The inspector blinked, not having realized just how complete the damage was. “Part of the job.”

“Maybe,” Jill allowed. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t owe you one.” Hesitantly, Jill put her hand on the inspector’s elbow and waited until those arctic blue eyes tracked back to her face. Maggie really was a beautiful woman, and Jill sensed she could actually have grown to like her quickly if she hadn’t gone after Lindsay.

“You didn’t just come here to thank me,” Maggie deduced. “You wanted to know why I went after Tex.”

“You promised me you’d explain, and I need to understand, otherwise...” Jill took a breath.

“You’ll hate me for life?” Maggie laughed bitterly.

“I will,” Jill admitted. “Lindsay is family to me. Anyone messes with her, they mess with me.”

Maggie smiled just a little. “I’d say you don’t look so tough, but I have an impressive bruise on my chest where you hit me yesterday.”

That made Jill laugh faintly. “Sorry. Got carried away.”

“It’s okay. I was in your shoes once. Yelling a lot of the same things you were.” Maggie went silent, remembering. “My partner in Hollywood... not the last one I had, but the one before him... we were tight. He was one of my best friends. I would have taken a bullet for him without question.”

Jill closed her eyes, suddenly sensing where this conversation was going. “What did he do?”

“We worked a lot of cases involving kids. We were good at them. But there was one...” Maggie’s voice faded away as the memories seem to cloud her eyes. “It was the worst we’d ever seen. Brian... my partner... didn’t handle it well. Had two kids of his own.” She swallowed. “We knew who killed that little boy. We just couldn’t prove it. The bastard was going to walk.”

“Brian made sure he didn’t,” Jill guessed.

Maggie slowly nodded. “I think... I think I could have lived with that. I knew in the back of my mind it was him, but I didn’t want to know. We all looked the other way... until another killer turned up dead. And then another...”

“My God,” Jill murmured. “How many...”

“Six. Six until he accidentally took the life of a little boy when he was trying to take out a seventh.” Maggie fiddled with her sheets, hyper aware of Jill’s hand still on her skin. “We all stuck our heads in the sand, and when cops from another precinct started to question... I reacted just like you did.”

“So you couldn’t just believe all of us about Lindsay,” Jill murmured in understanding.

“Not after Brian. I owed it to myself... and to the cop I think Lindsay wants to be... to make sure. If you didn’t know Boxer... after all she’s been through... are you telling me you never would have looked hard at her?” Maggie looked at her imploringly, needing

Jill to understand, maybe even forgive her.

Jill licked her lips, her thumb unconsciously stroking the warm skin under her hand. “Maybe,” she admitted. “But you needed to understand Lindsay’s history with the Kiss-Me-Not case. I think you had the barest facts and went off half-cocked because of *your* history.”

“Maybe,” Maggie echoed, her gaze fixed on Jill’s angelic features. She managed a wry grin. “It’s too bad,” she said softly.

“What’s that?” Jill asked curiously.

“I ruined my chance before I ever really had one.”

It took Jill a moment to understand, but when she did, the attorney felt heat flutter in her belly, and her fair features flushed. She tried to find words, but she was rendered momentarily speechless.

“Cat got your tongue, Counselor?” Maggie asked with a shy smile. She’d flustered Jill, and she found the blonde’s sudden bashfulness appealing.

“Apparently,” Jill finally answered when she’d found her voice and air had returned to her lungs.

The door to the hospital room opened, and Denise Kwon stuck her head in. Her dark eyes landed on Jill’s hand where it rested on Maggie’s arm before moving on to Jill’s blue eyes. “I need to speak with you.”

Jill frowned at the coldness in Denise’s tone. “I’ll be right there.”

Denise met Maggie’s gaze, and Maggie found herself arching an eyebrow at the acting district attorney. If she hadn’t known better, she would have thought Kwon was trying to kill her with a look. Perhaps she was.

Denise left them alone, and the two reluctantly looked at each other again.

Jill squeezed Maggie’s arm gently. “I think we have some things to talk about.”

Maggie sighed. “It’s all right, Counselor. I don’t expect you to return the interest. Especially after all of this.”

Jill got to her feet and crossed to the door, opening it and lingering for a long moment. She finally glanced back at Maggie and gave her a fraction of a smile. “You know where to find me, Inspector. Call me when the doctors clear you to drink again.”

The door closed and silence filled the room once more. The sudden, huge grin that split

Maggie's features made her head hurt, but she really didn't give a damn.

"You wanted to see me?" Jill inquired politely as she encountered Denise, Claire, Tom, and Jacobi waiting in the lobby.

"Hope I wasn't interrupting," Denise sniped as she flipped open a folder and started rifling through the contents.

Claire and Jill exchanged glances, but neither woman commented about Denise's tone.

"What's this about?" Tom wanted to know. He looked haggard as he scratched two day's growth of whiskers on his chin.

"I was going through the records on the church where David Arnold was discovered, and I found something really disturbing." Denise handed Tom a piece of paper. "Jill and I wondered if perhaps Kiss-Me-Not targeted Arnold because he messed with Lindsay."

Tom and Jacobi both straightened, their full attention now on Denise. "And?" Tom prompted.

"So I started looking at the church. I figured there had to be a reason *that* church was chosen."

"It's two blocks from Lindsay's precinct," Claire finally chimed in, but she was listening intently.

Denise nodded. "I just wanted to make sure it wasn't more than that, especially since your detective was sniffing around Boxer's tree instead of looking for the real killer."

"She had a good reason," Jill interjected, earning her some stunned looks from everyone present. She held up her hands. "Not the part about Lindsay being a killer," she quickly clarified.

Denise's jaw set, and she glanced away from Jill before tapping the edge of the paper in Tom's hands. "This is a work order for the company refurbishing the church. Anything leap out at you?"

Claire and Jill watched both men pale.

"What?" Claire demanded.

Tom's head came up. "Pete. Pete Raynor was the contractor."

The piece of paper was snatched from his hands and everyone held their breath as

Lindsay looked over the document. She'd seemingly come out of nowhere, and the others watched her worriedly as Cindy wrapped her arms around her lover's middle and kept Lindsay anchored in the storm of emotion she had to be feeling.

"Linz..." Jill started, only to stop when Lindsay held up a hand. Lindsay abruptly thrust the paper into Cindy's hands and bolted from the lobby, leaving the others shell-shocked.

Claire started after her, suspecting what was wrong, but Cindy put a hand on her chest. "I've got this," the reporter told them, before chasing after her lover.

Cindy found Lindsay on the floor of the nearest restroom. She'd never seen the other woman so vulnerable, and the sight took her breath away. Lindsay was curled into a ball, her whole frame quaking hard. "Lindsay," the reporter whispered as she eased down next to her. "Linz..."

"He was in my bed," Lindsay ground out. "He had his hands on me. The same hands that..." A shudder tore through Lindsay's body, and she made a choking sound.

Cindy bit her lip and battled back her own nausea. The thought of Pete in Lindsay's bed was sickening enough, knowing what he could have done to all those women was too horrifying to process. "We don't know it was him."

Lindsay's dark eyes fixed on Cindy's face. "The hell we don't. He put the cameras in my apartment. He planted the bombs that killed Ashe." Lindsay fumbled for her cell phone as a sudden realization struck her. She smashed it onto the floor until it shattered apart.

"Lindsay..." Not knowing what to say, Cindy's voice faded into nothing.

The inspector grabbed something small and metallic from the remains of her phone. "A listening device. Son-of-a-bitch slipped it in the night I found the surveillance equipment. I told him where to find Arnold." Lindsay fisted the device in her hand as another shudder of revulsion twisted her stomach and made her body shiver.

The reporter put her head down on Lindsay's shoulder, relieved when her lover didn't shy away from her touch. Every moment Lindsay had spent with Pete now took on sinister tones. "Oh God, Linz..." Cindy felt the tears start, and she couldn't stop them. She was suddenly enveloped in a crushing hug. Cindy held on, squeezing back hard as Lindsay shivered against her. "We'll stop him. He won't get away with this," she promised.

"He butchered those women," Lindsay gasped. "He butchered those women and touched me with those hands..."

"I know," Cindy said through her tears. She leaned back and gripped Lindsay's chin, forcing her lover to look at her. "But he's never going to touch you again. You're mine,

and I'm not letting him have you. Not your mind, your body or your soul. Do you understand me?"

Lindsay's gaze searched Cindy's face for several intense moments before her eyes closed, and she leaned into her lover.

Claire cautiously entered the bathroom with Jill close behind. Both of them drew up short when they found their friends clinging to each other. Claire hesitantly crouched, laying her hand on Lindsay's knee. "Tom and Jacobi are headed to Pete's now. Denise is getting a warrant."

Lindsay nodded, trying to find some shred of control. "I should... I should be there..."

"No, Linz," Jill said emphatically. "You're not going anywhere near that guy." Seeing her best friend like this had to be one of the most disturbing sights the attorney had ever seen. The always-solid Lindsay Boxer was coming unhinged. Guilt, thick and heavy, settled in Jill's chest. She'd turned away from Lindsay during the initial investigation... she'd pushed her friend into Pete's arms for Chrissake. "Linz... I'm so damn sorry."

"Lindsay, look at me." Claire waited for Lindsay's dazed gaze to track to her. "We will get him. He will pay for every life he took. And if the law doesn't take care of him, so help me, I will make him pay for ever laying a hand on you."

Lindsay took her friends in. The shakes were slowly easing from her body, leaving her tired and wrung out. She swallowed and nodded, grabbing a thin slice of calm and holding on to it for all she was worth. "I want to kill that bastard."

"We all do," Jill confessed. "Let the law take care of it, though, Linz. A cage is the worst place for a man like Pete."

"He was right there in front of me," Lindsay murmured as her hand began to stroke down Cindy's back. "He was in my goddamn bed," she whispered.

Jill didn't add that she'd make sure some form of rape charges were tacked on to Pete's long list of crimes. The defense lawyers would claim it was consensual, but Lindsay would never have let him touch her if she'd known. She would have rather died...

Lindsay nodded after a moment and blew out a breath before turning her head to take in Cindy's worried gaze. She leaned forward, letting their foreheads rest against each other. "I'll be okay," she vowed, and felt some of the worry and tension flee the room. "I've got you... all of you..." she added as she turned to look at them. "I'm shaken up... and I'm really feeling fragile here... but give me some time. He won't win."

Claire squeezed Lindsay's knee. "No, he won't, honey," she agreed.

"This time we stop him," Jill promised.

“And then we’ll be free,” Cindy whispered to Lindsay.

“Whatever it takes,” Lindsay agreed.

The End