

Episode 6: Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

Intro

On the ground floor of the San Francisco Hall of Justice, a room – one that was usually bustling with activity – sat deathly quiet. A stainless steel table located in its center lay bare, all the nearby counters had been wiped clean and held only the minimum of items, and the overhead lights were turned to their lowest setting. The most used and intimidating room in the morgue appeared almost serene and inviting, the smell of death and gory visual evidence of the medical examiner's autopsies effectively and efficiently eliminated with sterile wipes and an industrial strength air fresher.

Behind the glass pane of the room's observation window and just past its closed wooden blinds, Claire Washburn sat at her desk and slowly worked through a small stack of papers, carefully reading each document before firmly gripping a black ballpoint pen and scrawling her name across the bottom line. Paperwork. She absolutely hated it.

"Hey, what's up?" asked Jill, her hand resting on the knob of the medical examiner's office door as the DDA leaned her full weight against its solid surface. She glanced over her shoulder at the autopsy tables and shuddered lightly, creeped out by how quiet and empty the morgue seemed.

Claire jumped in her chair and placed a hand over her chest. She looked up sharply. "Other than you just about giving me a heart attack, you mean?" Claire scolded, but there was some amusement in her voice.

Jill grinned lazily. "You mean you didn't hear me coming in these heels? This place is dead tonight."

"No pun intended," Claire murmured as the pen twirled between her fingers.

A blonde eyebrow rose and fell, but Jill made no further comment on the matter. "I'll tap dance next time."

"Now that I'd like to see."

Jill raked a hand through her white-blonde hair. "So seriously, what's up? I'm ready to head home and hit the hay."

"No date with Maggie?" Claire inquired with an innocent tone.

"Not tonight," Jill responded almost singsong.

"Denise, either?"

Blue eyes narrowed. “Do not make me regret telling you what happened between me and Denise. She was drunk... I was stupid... it’s not going to happen again.” Jill cleared her throat and tried to pretend like the thought didn’t make her stomach ache.

“Hmm,” was all Claire said in response, her expression saying much more.

“You’re in an awfully good mood,” Jill realized with a hint of suspicion. She shook her head. “So, what did you need to see me about?” Jill pushed off the door and crossed the room, settling in comfortably on a worn leather couch. “Not that I’m not happy to be here just to visit.”

Claire tossed her pen onto the center of her desk and leaned back in her chair, resting her elbows on its padded arms as she studied her friend. “You seem to be in a decent mood yourself. Any particular reason?”

“Pete’s in jail. Nikki is back in our lives. I have a beautiful and very hot girlfriend...” Jill smirked. “What’s not to be happy about?”

Claire grinned in return. “I’m not crazy about Hollywood,” she admitted, using Lindsay’s favorite nickname for Jill’s girlfriend. “But I’m glad she’s making you happy.” She watched Jill’s cheeks turn a rosy shade of pink and her smile grew. “That good, huh?”

“What’s good?” Cindy asked, the club’s reporter having overheard Claire’s question as she stepped into the room a couple of strides ahead of her lover. Lindsay just shook her head and followed behind quietly, her ear pressed against her cell phone as she listened to her messages before snapping the phone shut and sliding it into her back pocket.

“Jill’s love life,” Claire teased playfully. “Sounds serious, if you ask me.”

Cindy plopped down right next to Jill. Her eyes danced with excitement for her friend, but then she went completely still when she realized just who it might be that had Jill blushing like a school girl. “And there went my appetite for dinner.”

“Hey!” Jill protested, both pissed and simultaneously amused. Cindy was damn lucky she was so adorable.

Lindsay bit down her lip and looked away. Cindy would never accept Maggie and there was something about that fact that tickled Lindsay to no end. She knew she should try to get her lover to be more accepting of Jill’s girlfriend, but Cindy’s dislike of Maggie stemmed from her love for Lindsay, and Lindsay just couldn’t bring herself to try to change that.

“Sorry,” Cindy proclaimed, sounding anything but. “I adore you, but I’m not crazy about your taste.”

“I dated your girlfriend,” Jill reminded her with an insincere smile. She wondered what Cindy would say if the reporter found out how torn she was between dating Maggie and wondering if there was any way she and Denise could ever make a go of things. Would the reporter think she’d lost her mind, or would Cindy throw her wholehearted support behind Denise? Jill knew it was stupid to think such thoughts about her boss, but it certainly didn’t help that her favorite pastime as of late had been mentally replaying kissing Denise over and over in her mind.

“Oh, yeah.” Cindy sat back and frowned at that realization, not sure what to make of it.

“But Hollywood? Seriously?” Lindsay moaned pitifully and scrunched up her face as if she’d bitten into something bitter. “I just don’t get what you see in her. Unless you like the fact she wants to either arrest me or punch my lights out.” It had taken Lindsay awhile to understand Maggie’s motives and grudgingly accept – kind of - the department’s other female detective as a colleague, but that didn’t mean she wanted to hang out with her after hours. She was pretty damn sure Maggie felt the same way. “Please just say it isn’t so.”

“It isn’t,” Jill said truthfully, quickly turning her attention to Claire and hoping for a successful run around or whatever the hell the deceptive football play was named. She had no desire to discuss Maggie or the two kisses she and Denise had shared, even if her boss had been drunk the first time. “You going to tell us why you called us here?”

Claire stared across at her friend and hesitated briefly before allowing the change in subject and opening the top side drawer of her desk. Reaching inside, she removed an 8”x10” photo and stretched her arm across the length of her desk, laying the picture down on the far edge and turning it around for best effect. There’d be plenty of time to discuss Jill’s love life in the next few days.

“What’s this?” asked Lindsay, turning a trained eye on the photo. She quickly scanned it from top to bottom and left to right, taking in every single detail. “Is this some kind of crime scene?” If it was, she certainly couldn’t spot where any violence had taken place. It was picture perfect, a Utopia of sorts. Nothing was out of place.

Intrigued, Cindy pushed to her feet and crossed the room to stand beside her lover, her hand sliding across Lindsay’s back. “Wow, that’s gorgeous. Are you and Ed taking a vacation?” She moved her gaze from the quaint cabin to the tall luscious trees surrounding it to the bright sun reflecting off waters of a calm, clear lake. Serenity at its purest.

“No, Ed and I aren’t,” Claire paused dramatically and waited until she’d had her friends’ undivided attention. Lindsay was the first to make eye contact, then Jill, and finally Cindy, who had used the brief interlude to take a giant leap off ‘Jumping to Conclusions’ cliff.

“You’re going on vacation with someone else? I thought you and Ed were making progress.”

Claire held back a grin and went with the misconception. “As a matter of fact, I am going with someone else.” She waited for the anticipated gawks and squawks, her friends not disappointing her expectations. Lindsay was the first to react.

“Seriously, Claire? You’re going to throw everything that you’ve worked so hard on away?” She looked down at Claire with disbelief and a healthy dose of disappointment. “Who’s the guy? Someone you work with?” She figured it had to be someone who worked in the building. Claire spent all of her time in the morgue, at home, or with the four of them.

“I’m not going with a guy,” Claire replied matter-of-factly, keeping her facial expression blank. She sunk down deeper in her chair and rested her chin on a balled fist. Never let it be said that she’d pass up a chance to have a little fun at her friends’ expense.

“A woman?!?!?” Cindy squeaked, her eyes growing large and her eyebrows scaling into her hairline, looking every bit like a surprised Anime character. “So we’re what?” Her hand flitted around the room, like an exited gay Queen dishing the dirt on someone, and gestured to the four of them. “A lesbian club now?”

Three sets of eyes fixed on the city’s medical examiner and anxiously awaited Claire’s reply. It hadn’t been exactly how Lindsay or Jill would’ve phrased the question, but it had served its purpose.

Claire’s expression remained neutral. “Actually, I plan to spend the next four glorious, stress-free days in the company of...” She paused and finally allowed a grin to break free – a huge shit-eating grin. “...*three* other women.”

“Three?” Cindy started, her jaw slacking comically and putting the finishing touches on her animated look. She snapped it closed the moment she realized the three women Claire had referred to included herself. “Oh,” she said, “well, that’s different.”

“Glad you think so, skipper.”

Lindsay’s brief chuckle gave way to a deep frown. “The place looks wonderful, Claire, it really does, but I’ve missed too much work lately. I can’t possibly ask Tom for the weekend, much less the Friday before and Monday after.”

“Me either,” Jill chimed in, wishing that wasn’t the case. She really needed time to think, time to just get away for a while and try to make sense of her conflicted feelings and emotions, and she certainly couldn’t ask the one woman who was directly responsible for her current state of confusion to give her a couple of days off. Her fingers toyed with the edge of the photograph.

“Yeah,” sighed Cindy in disappointment. “That would’ve been great.”

“Sooo...” Claire purposely drew out the one syllable word and crossed her arms comfortably over her chest. “If you all could, you’d go?”

“Yes.”

“Sure.”

“You bet.”

Claire’s big grin was back in full force, the light shining from her desk lamp appearing dim in comparison. “Then you better go pack your bags, girls, we leave bright and early in the morning.” She moved the signed documents to the center of her desk and pushed to her feet. “I’ve already cleared it with Tom,” she looked at Lindsay and winked. “Denise,” she smiled at Jill as she walked around her desk. “And your editor, too, Cindy.” With a pert nod, she started for the door and called her parting words over her shoulder. “You’re driving, Lindsay. Pick Jill up at 5:00 and then come around and get me. We’re going camping.”

The stunned trio watched in silence as Claire disappeared through the door, her laughter floating across the silent morgue and filtering back into her office where the three club members stood motionless and stunned.

“We’ve been had,” Jill spoke out loud the exact words the other two had been thinking.

Act I

“Okay, explain to me again why we have to leave at such a God-awful hour?” Lindsay grunted in an exaggerated fashion as she angled a medium-sized suitcase against the back seat of her Jeep in an attempt to maximize packing space. Spatial reasoning had never been one of her better qualities. She’d always left the packing to Tom. He’d seemed to think it was his job anyway.

“Oh stop it, Linz. It’s not like you’ve never been awake at 5AM before,” Cindy chastised her lover, even though she could barely contain the smile that threatened to spread across her face. She couldn’t wait to get away and spend some time with their friends. They needed this. They needed to get away from the city, from their jobs, and most especially from the last year of hell they’d all endured. A weekend in the woods sounded like heaven and Cindy was struggling to contain her enthusiasm around her grumpy partner.

Mumbling a few choice obscenities, Lindsay just tossed their last bag into the back of the Jeep, making sure to leave enough room for Martha to lie down comfortably. She could reorganize their things after they’d arrived at Jill’s.

“Wait, you forgot this stuff,” Cindy said, smiling sweetly as she handed Lindsay a few more bags. Lindsay just stared down at her cargo.

“You can’t be serious. Cindy, we still need to get Jill’s and Claire’s stuff in here. It’s only four days, not four months.”

“Well, I like to be prepared. I was a Girl Scout, bet you didn’t know that?” she responded seriously as she placed some bungee cords in Lindsay’s hand and kissed her lover lightly on the cheek.

“Well, that explains a lot,” Lindsay muttered, finding herself smiling against her better judgment. She fingered the colorful straps and frowned. “What the hell are these for?”

“Wow, you are slow in the morning, aren’t you, Inspector? You figure it out while I take Martha for a quick walk.” Cindy turned to walk away but glanced back momentarily to check on Lindsay. The older woman continued to stare down at the cords in her hand. Laughing out loud, Cindy waited until Lindsay looked up, and then she pointed at the roof of the SUV.

“You have got to be kidding me. Why do I get the feeling this is going to turn out like some National Lampoon’s Vacation movie?” Lindsay grumbled as she started heaving bags onto the roof.

Cindy’s light chuckles came to a screeching halt, and she frantically sought out Martha. The dog was lying quietly on the grass and looked back at her with big brown eyes. “Um, Lindsay? Let’s be sure that no one ties Martha to the bumper at any time during the trip, okay?”

A blue bag sailed over the top of the Jeep.

Fifteen minutes and a few flying bungee cord bruises later, the couple was finally on their way to pick up Jill. Martha sat on Cindy’s lap with her head poked out the window, her pink tongue lolling out happily as her ears flapped in the wind. She didn’t know how she’d obtained this place of honor, but she wasn’t about to act unhappy about it. Besides, when they picked up her other person, she’d probably have to move into the back of the Jeep. Her ears perked up instantly when she recognized the blonde standing on the curb ahead and she barked her greeting.

“Hey, Martha,” Jill cooed as the Jeep rolled to a stop beside her. She reached out and gently patted the smiling Border Collie on the head. “Ready to get out of the city where you can run and play?”

“Good Lord, Jill. Did you and Cindy leave anything behind?” Lindsay asked as she walked around the Jeep and spotted the neat stack of Tumi luggage on the edge of the sidewalk. “You can’t take all of this stuff. Martha needs to ride in the back. There’s no room.”

Jill glanced over at an obviously happy Martha and grinned; she had the perfect solution. “She can ride on Cindy’s lap.”

“Oh no, she can’t,” Lindsay said, shaking her head vehemently. She pointed at the entrance to Jill’s building. “You’re going to take some of these bags back upstairs.”

Jill eyed her luggage and listed a mental inventory of its contents in her head. Everything she’d packed was essential. Putting her hands on her hips, she readied for a war of wills. “No... I’m not.”

Lindsay stepped closer to her friend. “Yes, you are.” She edged even closer and put on her most intimidating detective face. It wasn’t as effective on Jill, however, especially with Lindsay’s gun packed inside her duffle bag, and the fact that Lindsay was wearing a t-shirt professing that ‘Detectives Do It Undercover’ certainly didn’t help her bullying tactics either.

“I’m sure Martha won’t mind riding in the front seat,” Jill assured, glancing over at the smiling dog. “See, look at her; she thinks it’s a great idea.” Jill pointed toward the happy-looking pooch, hoping that Lindsay would have a change of heart once she saw Martha’s sweet face.

“She won’t be happy in that position for more than an hour. She needs room to stretch out,” Lindsay returned knowingly. She’d actually allowed Martha to ride in the front seat once when she’d started on one of her long drives to Texas and the dog was soon begging to climb into the back. “You willing to listen to her whine most of the drive because that’s what’s she going to do.”

Jill looked at Martha and couldn’t imagine putting her through anything that would cause her any upset. The club’s mascot didn’t deserve to have to suffer after what she’d gone through when Pete had poisoned her and left her to die.

“Okay, just give me a few minutes to sort my things,” Jill finally conceded as she headed for her bags to try to consolidate as best she could. “Hey, maybe Claire can...” she started but was cut off by Lindsay who’d already figured out what her friend was about to propose.

“No, Claire gets just as much room as the rest of us, more even. She’s got the food and cooking gear.”

Sighing dramatically, Jill removed her gigantic makeup case from her carryon bag and slipped it under her arm. It would just have to ride at her feet. There was no way she was returning to civilization on Monday without makeup.

Claire was impatiently waiting on the curb when Lindsay’s Jeep finally turned the corner and came into sight. She’d already called Cindy twice to find out what was holding the

club up and hadn't been surprised that their delay had revolved around Jill and her luggage. She'd specifically instructed the lawyer to pack only what was necessary but figured she'd leave Lindsay to deal with any problems. It had taken the inspector much longer to deal with Jill than Claire had expected.

"About time you got here," Claire grumbled as she reached down for her single, compact suitcase. The small piece of luggage was flanked on both sides by two perfectly packaged bags of groceries on its left and a taller bag of cooking utensils – also neatly packed – on its right. Claire wasn't taking the chance that the cabin wouldn't have pots and pans to cook in.

"Yeah, well, Barbie here wanted to bring her entire wardrobe," Lindsay complained as she stepped from the car to help her friend load her things. "I think she had Skipper packed in one of her bags."

Claire laughed as she hoisted her suitcase into the back of Lindsay's Jeep. "Ah, inflatable Skipper. I'd forgotten about that model," she teased, making certain that her voice carried over the luggage and into the backseat.

"Hey!" Jill protested weakly, her mood having lightened considerably despite having to leave most of her wardrobe in her apartment. Once they'd pulled away from the curb and started for Claire's, giddiness had bubbled up inside her and she'd found herself excited about the prospect of spending four uninterrupted days with her friends. "No Skipper for me," she said, pausing purposely. "It's Twist 'n Turn Barbie all the way, baby!"

A smile blossomed on Lindsay's face as she edged the last of the bags around the area she'd cordoned off for Martha. The dog looked up at her and returned her smile. Patting the canine on the head, Lindsay closed the rear door and moved around to the driver's side.

Claire followed her friend and climbed into the seat next to Jill. Fiddling with her seat belt, she looked at Jill with a gleam in her eye.

"Poor Ken's always been more of an accessory, hasn't he? Kind of an afterthought."

Martha barked and the car erupted with laughter as Lindsay wheeled away from the curb.

"Um, Lindsay?" Cindy said pitifully as she eyed her Double Big Gulp. Her lover had warned her against buying the super-sized drink, but Cindy had insisted that she'd 'nurse' the ginormous container of Dr. Pepper until they'd stopped for an early lunch. This marked the third time in the past hour that she'd had to ask Lindsay to exit the highway for an unscheduled potty break.

Lindsay sighed unhappily and rolled an eye toward the guilty culprit: an empty, 64 ounce white Styrofoam cup with bright red lettering. She'd only stopped at the 7-11 on the outskirts of San Francisco because she'd felt guilty that she and Cindy hadn't had time to eat breakfast and had thought that a small snack would tie them over until lunch. She'd forgotten about Cindy's definition of 'small' when it came to drinks and junk food.

"Did you have to drink the whole thing?" Lindsay asked grumpily as she flipped on her turn signal and eased into the right lane, readying for an exit in approximately 2.5 miles and, according to a very informative sign they'd just passed, a McDonald's. She'd make sure to accompany Cindy inside the restaurant to ensure that her lover wouldn't return with another drink.

Claire piped up from the backseat before Cindy could formulate a reply. "I kind of have to go, too." She didn't really, but she'd already listened to Lindsay ask the very same question twice before and figured Cindy's answer wasn't going to change. It seemed that whenever Cindy was cooped up in a car, she got bored and, when she got bored, she ate and drank and then drank and ate. Frankly, Claire was surprised the young reporter wasn't suffering from a stomach ache.

"Me, too," Jill chimed in but, unlike Claire, she'd meant it. The coffee she'd purchased at the first place they'd made a pit stop was making itself known and in a very big way. She'd kept her mouth shut, however, not particularly caring to listen to Lindsay's views on what her friend referred to as TBS – tiny bladder syndrome.

Lindsay glanced in the rearview mirror and tried to make eye-contact with her friends, but short of twisting in her seat or craning her neck at an almost impossible angle, the faces of the two women stayed just out of sight. She couldn't gage from the tones of their voices if they were being sincere or just coming to Cindy's aid, although it really didn't matter. Even though she bitched and complained about the pit stops, she'd never let Cindy suffer needlessly.

"So, where do you think we should stop to have lunch?" Lindsay asked, surprising everyone with her subject change. Claire leaned forward in her seat to answer; she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"I think Bakersfield may be our best bet. After we leave the Interstate, the pickings will be slim."

"Describe slim," Jill said with a decided interest in her tone. "Are you saying there won't be any restaurants close to where we're staying?"

Re-crossing her legs, Cindy clamped them together tightly and glanced over her shoulder. "Did you somehow miss the part about camping?"

"Actually, that was the only part I heard," Jill replied, realizing now that she had no idea where they were going. It hadn't mattered at the time, but perhaps it was something she

should have asked. “I just figured we’d be staying in one of those resorts where the cabins are spread out far and wide around the grounds of a large commercialized area.” She shrugged. “You know, having solitude at the cabin but, when we wanted to get a bite to eat or maybe mingle with other people, the hotels and restaurants would be nearby.”

Lindsay shot a look in the mirror and almost missed her exit. She slowed the Jeep and angled toward the feeder road and the large yellow M at the base of the ramp before she added her two cents. “You saw the photo, Jill. Did you *see* any hotels or restaurants in the background?”

“Oh, thank God! Mickey D’s,” Cindy exclaimed loudly, bringing the conversation to an abrupt halt when she’d spotted the restaurant. She squirmed in her seat and moved her hand to the door, readying to shoot out of the Jeep the second Lindsay pulled to a stop.

Claire chuckled lightly and pretended to be equally excited. “Finally,” she said, adding a touch of relief in her voice to complete her ruse. “Jill, I’ll fill you in on everything after we’ve had our break.” She watched in amusement as light dawned in her friend’s blue eyes and Jill fumbled for the door handle.

The Jeep’s tires had barely touched the curb when two doors shot open and a couple of blurs raced to the restaurant doors. Claire laughed out loud as she eased out of the car in a more sedate manner. Shouldering her purse, she closed the door and followed her friends.

Lindsay sat quietly behind the wheel and contemplated the weekend ahead of her. “Be ready for anything in the next few days, Martha.”

The dog raised her ears but stayed silent as she continued to rest her chin on her front paws. She wouldn’t expect anything else.

“When I was six, I wanted to be a stewardess. I thought it would be great fun to work in the sky,” Cindy replied in answer to Claire’s question to the club as to what they’d each wanted to be when they ‘grew up.’

Lindsay frowned. “I thought you wanted to be a cop like your dad.”

“That was later,” Cindy declared dismissively. “When I was little, I wanted to fly the friendly skies. I like the term stewardess, too. Why’d they have to change it to flight attendant anyway?”

“Yeah, I think the word fits perfectly and there’s always the male version of steward. Maybe it was just too old English or something,” Claire said with a shrug. “Honestly though, I can’t say that it’s something I’d ever wanted to do, but I really do admire those

people for what they have to put up with. Nothing quite like being stuck miles above the ground in an airtight tin can with nowhere to go to escape any problems that might arise.”

Jill held her tongue and slid her feet further underneath Cindy’s seat to stretch her legs. She’d never given a single thought to being a flight attendant, although she’d freely admit to thoughts of ‘doing’ one in the air - and numerous times at that. She slammed her eyes closed when a vision of loveliness formed in her mind, one of Denise clad in a starched light blue shirt tucked neatly into a very short, form-fitting navy skirt and leaning over to offer a drink. Having actually glimpsed what lay underneath her boss’s shirt, her imagination didn’t have to wander very far from reality and it soared freely without restraint. Stiff cotton morphed into soft silk and soft silk into smooth, creamy skin and Jill was well on her way to ‘Mile High, USA.’

“Jill?” Claire said in concern, reaching over and patting her friend on the hand. Jill looked flushed, her eyes appeared a bit on the glassy side, and she’d been unusually quiet in the last several miles, seeming to be content just to listen to Cindy prattle on and on about the various changes in politically correct vocabulary terms through the years, some for the good and others not so much. “Honey, you feeling okay?”

“Huh?” Jill reluctantly pulled herself free from a mass of tangled limbs and hands and mouths that blazed determined paths across hot, slick skin. Her eyes fluttered open just before she’d been able to touchdown at her final destination.

Claire feathered her fingers beneath Jill’s damp bangs. “You feel feverish. Do you hurt anywhere?” One thing they certainly didn’t need was for all of them to come down with the flu. Claire just hoped it wasn’t H1N1.

“What?” Jill muttered as she slowly eased back into the present. She gazed unseeingly outside the car window as a road sign declaring Bakersfield to be seventy miles ahead swam into view. “I’m fine; just tired, I think.” Her stomach growled loudly and she gave Claire a sheepish look. “And hungry, too.”

“You sure?” The doctor in Claire had to be certain that Jill wasn’t trying to hide her discomfort and was being totally honest with her. Hardheadedness ran deep in their club.

Jill reached up and eased Claire’s hand from her forehead. She wrapped her hand around her friend’s and smiled. “I’m sure. Soon as I get a good meal, I’ll be fine.”

“Food does sound good,” Cindy agreed as she eyed a few billboards that promoted several upcoming gas stations and fast food restaurants. They’d only stopped once since McDonald’s to gas up and Lindsay hadn’t allowed her out of the car.

“Bakersfield is only an hour away. If you eat something now, you won’t be hungry later,” Lindsay cautioned, having noted the path her lover’s focus had taken. She knew full well, however, that very little actually spoiled Cindy’s appetite. “It’ll be worth the wait,” she promised, hoping to distract her lover from the billboard ads.

Jill bit her lip. She wondered if Lindsay had any idea how motherly she sounded with all of them. Pointing it out to Lindsay might not be the best idea, however. Apparently that was why Claire wanted Lindsay to drive. It gave the medical examiner a break from that role. The notion almost made Jill chuckle.

The DDA glanced around the Jeep, taking in her friends. She was tired, hungry, uncomfortable and the slightest bit horny, but she wouldn't have traded where she was for anything.

Cindy frowned unhappily at Lindsay's suggestion. "What will we do until then?" They'd already tried the alphabet game shortly after their McDonald's stop but had quit when Cindy had gotten frustrated with Jill's words. The DDA had taken great joy in adding a sexual slant to the game, even using slang and made-up words when she couldn't come up with what Cindy had termed as 'legal and acceptable' words for the age-old car game. It was Jill's use of joygasm that had brought the game to a screeching halt. Cindy hadn't accepted her friend's explanation that it had been used by the Riddler in *Batman Forever* and, therefore, should be allowed. Jill had replied that Cindy should have been a lawyer.

"Hey, how about a riddle?" Jill suggested hurriedly before Cindy could come up with another idea. Unwittingly, she borrowed a tactic from the very individual that had caught Cindy's ire earlier. "I've got a good one."

"Oh, I like riddles." Cindy grinned widely and twisted around in her seat to better hear her friend. "What is it?"

Jill leaned back and stared out of the window, trying to remember the exact wording. "Okay, three men go into a hotel. The man behind the desk tells them their room will cost \$30, so each man pays \$10 and then they head to their room. A while later, the man behind the desk realizes the room is only \$25 and he sends the bellboy to the three guys' room with a \$5 refund. On the way, the bellboy couldn't figure out how to split \$5 evenly between the three men, so he decides to give each man a \$1 and keep the other \$2 for himself. This meant that the three men each paid \$9 for the room, which is a total of \$27 and, with the \$2 that the bellboy kept, the tally moved to \$29. So... where is the other dollar?"

A deafening silence fell over the car as the others contemplated the riddle. Cindy faced forward again, her eyes narrowing as her mind turned to finding a solution. Claire eased her elbow to the padded armrest of her door and leaned her cheek against her fist, already in deep thought. Lindsay continued to watch the white line of the highway but her focus was on the missing dollar.

Smiling, Jill closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the seat, grateful that she'd be able to get in a good nap while the others pondered the mystery. She knew she should feel guilty, but she just couldn't play another one of Cindy's games today. Her

redheaded friend was cute as all hell, but she had too much energy. How Lindsay kept up with the reporter was a mystery, but Jill envied them both all the same as the repetitive roar of the road lulled her to sleep.

“I still don’t get where the dollar went,” Cindy complained as she poured a generous amount of Ranch dressing over her salad. She’d spent the entire drive to Bakersfield trying to solve the riddle and hadn’t been happy with Jill’s explanation of the solution. A true riddle always had a justifiable answer and incorporated every single component of the original riddle into its conclusion.

Lindsay reached across the table for a pack of crackers and a package of butter. “There is no missing dollar, Cindy. The men spent \$27, of which \$25 went to the room and \$2 to the sticky-fingered bellboy. You can’t add the \$2 the bellboy stole to the \$27 the men spent as the \$2 actually came directly from the \$27 the men spent, with the other \$25 going toward the room.”

Cindy’s head threatened to spin off her shoulders. “But there *is* a missing dollar. \$30 divided by 3 is \$10. Each man was refunded \$1 which means they each paid \$9 instead. 9 times 3 is 27. The bellboy has \$2. That’s \$29.”

Claire popped a mushroom into her mouth and kept silent by carefully chewing the morsel into nothingness. She’d only complicated matters when she’d tried to explain her reasoning that \$25 divided by 3 was approximately \$8.33 and that the men should’ve been refunded \$1.67 with one receiving \$1.66. By keeping the change, the bellboy ended up with the men’s pocket change of \$2. So, all the money had been accounted for or so Claire had thought, but Cindy was like Martha with a bone.

“Cindy, think of it more as a trick puzzle,” Jill explained as she took a sip of her wine. She was sorely tempted to gulp down the glass and order an entire bottle. “I just thought it would pass the time more quickly.” And Jill really needed the peace and quiet, too.

“Then you should’ve said it was a puzzle, not a riddle,” Cindy replied as she forcefully stabbed a crouton. Everybody knew that puzzles often relied on trickery and manipulation of known data.

“Well, it’s all moot anyway,” Claire said with a slight grin. “There’s no way three men would’ve stayed in the same room in the first place.”

“That is *so* true,” Jill agreed, shaking her head in memory of various overnight conferences she’d attended. “Women are always expected to room together, but men usually room alone. It’s as if they’re afraid they’re gonna get cooties or something.” Of course, there were those times when she shared a room with one of her male colleagues and much more than cooties had been exchanged.

“Weird how they can stand right next to each other to pee but try to put them in the same room, even with two beds, and they go ballistic,” Lindsay said with a confirming nod. “I remember this one time when I had to work and Tom had to go to one of his family reunions without me. He and his cousin’s husband were assigned the same hotel room. My ex-mother-in-law had thought it was a logical idea since neither of their wives could attend. Tom slept in his car.”

A smile crept onto Cindy’s face. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope, and it gets better,” Lindsay replied as a deep chuckle bubbled up and forced its way past her lips. “The reunion was in Minnesota... in the winter. It snowed during the night and they had to dig Tom out of his car the next morning.”

The waitress arrived to a round of laughter from her customers and she smiled in relief as she began to serve their plates of food. With the mood the foursome had been in when they’d first come in, she was certain that her tip would be a lousy one, but now it appeared that things had taken a turn in her favor, especially since the hot-looking blonde had winked at her.

“You have no shame,” Claire whispered softly to Jill as she eyed her grilled salmon, gently laid to rest on its bed of rice pilaf. Her mouth watered just thinking about tasting the delicious-looking meal.

Jill alternated her gaze between the cute brunette waitress and her bowl of shrimp étouffée - both looked absolutely scrumptious. It was just too bad that King’s Canyon National Park was miles and miles from the restaurant. At least she could take some solace in the fact that she’d be spending the next few days with her friends at a veritable paradise on Earth.

The DDA glanced up and watched as Cindy held a forkful of salad up for Lindsay to consume. The taller woman rolled her eyes, but did as commanded. Jill smiled a little sadly and took a bite of her own meal. Maybe by the time the weekend was over she would know which woman in her life she wanted to spend more time with. The question was whether either of them could give her the kind of love Cindy and Lindsay so obviously had for each other.

ACT II

“This isn’t the cabin from the photo,” Jill stated assuredly as she stared out of her car window at a small wooden house that stood underneath several overgrown trees, their limbs standing out at odd angles and looking as if they were all having a bad hair day. A tiny but clean-looking pond sat off to one side, about 50 yards from the house, and was nowhere near the size of the lake Jill had expected to see. “You must’ve taken a wrong turn somewhere, Linz.”

Lindsay stared down at the hand-drawn map she'd been given by Claire when they'd turned off the Interstate and onto a deserted farm road that had dumped onto a narrow gravel road that had then led to an even narrower dirt path that had eventually dead-ended at their current location. She visually retraced every curve along the way and was satisfied that she'd not made a wrong turn anywhere.

"No, this should be the place," she said as she ducked her head and looked over Cindy's shoulder and through the passenger-side window. "But you're right, Jill. This doesn't look anything like the picture we saw in Claire's office."

Leaning an elbow on the seat, Claire rested a chin on Jill's shoulder. "Okay, it's not exactly the same, but it doesn't look so bad."

"Yeah, Claire's right; so it's a little smaller and it's made of boards instead of logs. Where's your sense of adventure?" Cindy asked as she reached for the door handle and pushed her way outside. "Besides, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. I'm sure the inside will be perfect for the four of us. C'mon, let's go check it out."

Grinning widely, Claire jumped from the car and hurried around to join Cindy. Together, the pair linked arms and started for the house, leaving their more skeptical friends behind.

The forest felt pleasantly cool and damp, the scents of pine and earth mingling and making the air a delight to breathe through the open driver's side window. Lindsay took it in as she watched Cindy and Claire murmuring excitedly to each other. Peace stole over her and she closed her eyes, welcoming the almost unfamiliar sensation.

"Is she always so perky?" Jill asked as she watched Cindy move ahead of Claire and practically skip up the front steps. Sliding from the car with a pitiful moan, Jill stretched her arms high overhead to work out the kinks as she turned a discerning eye on the surrounding property.

"You don't know the half of it," Lindsay groaned as she climbed out of the car and moved toward the back to let Martha out. If the inside of the house didn't have two bedrooms, she was heading back to San Francisco first thing in the morning.

"Lindsay!" Jill's shriek had Lindsay reaching for the small of her back where her gun usually resided and Martha jumping out of the Jeep and racing to come to the blonde's defense, a sharp bark announcing that she was on her way. The Border Collie nearly took Jill's legs out from under her. "Whoa, where's the fire, Martha?"

Martha moved in front of Jill and scoured the area for any sign of trouble, a low growl signaling that she was prepared to take on the danger that threatened one of her people; however, nothing seemed amiss.

"What in the hell?" Lindsay asked, having arrived at her friend's side moments after Martha. She, too, scanned the immediate vicinity looking for whatever had spooked Jill.

Movement at the edge of the cabin caught her focus just as Martha zeroed in on it. The dog shot forward and went in pursuit of the trespasser, barking with each and every step. Lindsay started to follow but pulled up short when she spied the culprit.

“A raccoon? You’re scared of a little ol’ raccoon?” Lindsay sighed tiredly, the burst of adrenaline at hearing Jill’s yell zapping what little energy she had left after a very long and trying drive.

“What?” Jill asked in confusion as she tracked Martha’s progress and finally spotted the masked critter as it slipped into a narrow opening underneath the house. She listened to Martha voice her frustration at being too big to follow. “I wasn’t talking about the raccoon,” she explained. “I was talking about that.” Jill pointed past where Martha was still barking to a rickety-looking structure located a short distance from the corner of the cabin.

Lindsay crinkled her brow into a frown, her other features quickly following suit. “Is that what I think it is?”

“If you think it’s an outhouse, then you win the prize for the day,” replied Jill, her focus still on the rundown shack. “I am *not* using an outhouse.”

“Well, I’m not driving back tonight, so unless you can hold it until tomorrow, you’re going to have to make a choice,” Lindsay said with a jerk of her finger toward a thick grove of trees on the other side of the house. “I think I’ll take my chances in the wilderness.”

Jill looked back and forth from the outhouse to the woods as images of snakes, spiders, and other creepy-crawly creatures flipped through her mind like a Rolodex. Holding it was sounding better and better.

“Hey, you two!” Cindy called out from the porch. “What’s taking so long?”

Lindsay glanced over at Jill. “We were just enjoying the scenery,” she replied, stretching the truth to its limits as she started toward the front steps of the cabin. “So, how’s the inside look?”

“Clean,” Cindy reported quickly, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. “Ready to unload the Jeep?” she asked in an enthusiastic tone that sounded as phony as a politician’s promise. Lindsay wasn’t fooled.

“What’s wrong with the cabin? No indoor plumbing?” she guessed, having already come to that conclusion the moment she eyed the outhouse. They’d just have to leave in the morning and spend the rest of their vacation back in the city.

“Oh, there’s indoor plumbing alright,” Cindy said, vividly remembering the tiny room where it would be virtually impossible for more than one person to fit inside. She’d had

to turn sideways just to get to the toilet. “There’s an itty-bitty problem with the bedrooms.”

“Bedrooms?” Lindsay questioned, not really seeing a problem as there was actually more than one. “What? There’s only one bed in each?” She didn’t see a problem with that either.

Cindy scratched her nose nervously. “Kind of.”

“A twin bed?” Jill asked for clarification. It wasn’t what she preferred, but she’d willing trade a few nights sharing a narrow bed with Claire in exchange for indoor plumbing.

“Yep, two in each room actually, one stacked on top of the other,” Cindy nodded at Jill, grateful to have had a little help in explaining the problem to her lover.

Lindsay didn’t bother to suppress a groan. “Bunk beds?” That wasn’t exactly what she had in mind when she visualized being on top. The look on Cindy’s face left no doubt in Lindsay’s mind that her lover felt the same way.

“So, two beds in each room and indoor plumbing,” Jill listed the house’s inventory as reported by Cindy. “If there’s a kitchen, we’re in business.”

“Claire’s in love with the kitchen. We may never get her out of there,” Cindy reported, smiling in memory of her friend’s expression when Claire first saw the largest of the rooms. It was as if they’d walked into the 1940s. “There’s one of those antique gas stoves with four burners and a griddle in-between. It’s got an oven on one side and a broiler on the other.”

A grin split Jill’s face. “So we’re not going to starve either. You were right, Cindy. This isn’t going to be so bad after all.”

“This isn’t going to be so bad after all,” Lindsay mimicked her blonde friend after Jill had followed Cindy back inside. She looked down at the dog as Martha came up and plopped down beside her on the fresh soil. “It’s just a few days,” Lindsay said. “How bad could it be?”

Martha barked and wagged her tail.

“Who asked you, anyway?” Lindsay grouched before steeling herself and heading inside.

“Has anyone seen my cell phone?” Jill yelled from the bedroom she and Claire would be sharing. The group had finally managed to unload the Jeep and all their bags were now in their appropriate places. She was almost finished unpacking her things into a small

chest of drawers when she realized what she was missing. “I could’ve sworn I put it in my... damn it... Lindsay!”

“What?” Lindsay asked innocently as she dared to take a step inside the room. She’d just been passing by when she heard ‘damn it’ and then her name – two words that, when used together, usually didn’t bode well for her, especially if they happened to be spoken by Cindy. Poking her head inside the doorway, she wondered what it was that she’d supposedly done now.

Jill whipped around, placed her hands on her hips and readied to lay into her friend. “What did you do with my Python Cortina boarding tote?”

Lindsay frowned and tilted her head in confusion. “Your what?”

“My tote. The one that looks like a big purse,” Jill explained in frustration, watching as her friend’s gaze moved to the large Dooney purse that sat on the pillow of her bunk bed. “The silver and black print that looks like a python,” Jill elaborated further, hoping that the bag had somehow ended up in Lindsay and Cindy’s room.

Lindsay’s expression brightened in understanding. “Oh, the snake bag. I put it in the pile with the rest of the bags that needed to be returned to your apartment.”

“But I had it with the bags that you were to pack to bring with us. Why would you move it?” Jill asked, trying to remain calm. She didn’t remember seeing the bag amongst the ones she’d taken back upstairs to her apartment, but she’d been in such a hurry she’d not paid much attention.

“I figured you’d already decided on the purse you wanted to bring since you tossed it in the backseat,” Lindsay said with a shrug, not seeing the reasoning for bringing two purses along. One purse already seemed a bit much to Lindsay for anyone to take on a camping trip. Who was Jill trying to impress anyway? The wildlife? Lindsay suspected some of the creatures might actually take exception to the accessory.

“It *isn’t* a purse, Lindsay. It had my cell phone, my iPod, some books, my journal, my hair dryer and my hair products,” Jill replied testily, her upset escalating with each mentioned item. The tree limbs outside would have nothing on her after a couple of days without her sculpting foam.

“Look, I’m sorry, Jill, but I’m not the one who brought your things upstairs,” Lindsay pointed out just as crossly, her patience starting to wear thin. If Jill had packed more sensibly in the first place, they wouldn’t be having this conversation and the snake bag would be sitting beside Jill’s other purse.

Jill eased a hand to her hair and began to rake her fingers through blonde tresses, but froze her motion before she could sweep completely through. Very gently, she extricated

her fingers and smoothed her hair back down. Lindsay was right; it would be Jill's own fault if she ended up looking like Madeline Kahn's character in *Young Frankenstein*.

"Hey, you two ready to take a little hike?" Cindy stepped beside Lindsay and wound an arm around her lover's waist, giving a light squeeze to try to calm the tension that had begun to radiate from her partner. She'd overheard Jill and Lindsay's minor altercation and thought a little distraction might be just what the two needed. She'd also made a mental note about how easily voices carried from one part of the cabin to another.

Lindsay exhaled tiredly and looked down at the redhead attached to her side like a limpet clinging to a rock. If she had her way, that's exactly how she'd spend the rest of her weekend.

"I'm game," she said, directing a smile and a wink at her lover in thanks for diffusing the tense situation and brightening the gloomy mood that had hovered like a ground fog threatening to engulf the two friends. "How about you, Jill? Ready for some fresh air?"

"I think some fresh air would be wonderful," Jill agreed, returning Lindsay's smile. "Just let me change my shoes; I'll meet you on the front porch."

Jill watched with a bit of envy as her two friends turned and moved away, neither woman willing to let go of the other. She thought of Maggie, of her arctic blue eyes and charm but, before an image of the two of them together could solidify, her thoughts abruptly shifted to Denise, the woman who was all cold steel and fiery determination. Apparently she didn't fall for the warm and friendly type of woman, Jill realized, but she did know how to pick interesting ones.

"Someday, Jill, someday," she whispered as she slipped off her mules and reached for her tennis shoes. If Lindsay had gotten lucky enough to find someone special like Cindy, then Jill had to believe that there was someone out there waiting just for her, too. Whether that person was Maggie or Denise was yet to be seen.

"Wow, what a view," Claire remarked from behind her camera lens as she zoomed in to capture the setting sun just as it tipped a mountain on the other side of a vast canyon that separated the spectacular scene from the ledge where she stood with Jill. Their cabin was truly the perfect getaway; located miles and miles from the actual park, they had the best of both worlds: amazingly gorgeous scenery without having to share it up close and personally with strangers. It certainly made Claire appreciate the beauty all that much more knowing she'd be able to share her photos with Ed when she returned home.

Jill sighed in contentment at the beauty in front of her. She wished she could bottle up the feeling and recall it whenever she needed it, like every time she walked to a crime scene where some senseless act of violence could have been avoided. Kelly Yung's sweet face came to her mind and Jill had to force herself to focus on the tall, majestic

trees across the canyon. Slowly, very slowly, she was seeing only the colorful autumn leaves of the Sequoias.

“You okay?” Claire asked softly, having noticed Jill’s melancholy look when she’d turned to ask if her friend was ready to head back. “Want to talk?” she offered as she eased a hand to the middle of Jill’s back and gently rubbed up and down the other woman’s spine. She knew her friend had been conflicted about her feelings for Maggie Snow and Denise Kwan and, even though Claire knew there’d be major problems should Jill hook up with either woman, she really wanted to be there if Jill needed someone to listen.

Jill stared down the trail that led back to the cabin and watched as Lindsay and Cindy walked, hand in hand, away from the two of them. She knew what Claire was asking, but she wasn’t ready to discuss her love life, or lack of, with her friend. She hadn’t figured out herself how she felt or what she wanted to do but, when she did, Claire would be the first person she’d tell.

“Nah, I’m just feeling a little down. I’m sure after a good night’s sleep in this fresh mountain air, I’ll be good as new,” she said, glancing over her shoulder and offering Claire a smile. “So,” she began and turned around to face her friend. “You want the top bunk or the bottom?”

Claire looked into teasing blue eyes and broke out in laughter. “Your skinny ass is climbing up that little ladder.” Looping her arm through Jill’s, she started forward and steered them down the path. “I wonder which one Cindy will choose?”

Intermittent chuckles kept them company as Martha brought up the rear. Her humans were acting more than a little strange tonight, but the one called Claire had promised her a juicy bone so she could overlook any weirdness for a while. She barked when a voice shouted out from below.

“Hurry up, slowpokes! I’m hungry,” Cindy called back playfully to her friends. She and Lindsay had stopped at the bottom of the path to see what was keeping Claire and Jill, and Lindsay had insisted on waiting for them. She’d used the excuse that she had to make sure nothing happened to their cook but Cindy knew better. After everything they’d been through, Lindsay wasn’t about to let anything happen to any of them on her watch. Cindy didn’t blame her. There was something about having all her friends around her right now that was soothing over some rough patches on her soul. If this little getaway was doing wonders for her, she could only imagine the effect it was having on Lindsay.

“Us, too!” Jill yelled back as she picked up her stride and forced Claire to match her step for step. It was definitely much easier to walk down the inclined path than it had been to walk up, but Jill could feel her calves burn just the same and it felt great. She’d be famished by the time they made it back to the cabin. “Um, Claire? What *are* we having for dinner?”

“Roast, potatoes, and carrots. I put them in one of those roasting bags before we left,” Claire replied, sparing a quick glance at her watch. “And they should be ready right about now.”

Pulling her arm free from Claire’s loose grasp, Jill increased her pace and blew right past Lindsay and Cindy. She loved those tender baby carrots Claire prepared with garlic and thyme. “Last one to the cabin has to wash the dishes!” she shouted over her shoulder just as she hit her maximum sprinting speed.

Lindsay, Claire, and Martha took off like a shot after the retreating blonde, while a stunned Cindy could only stare at their backs. It took her a few seconds before she realized what was in store for the loser. “That’s cheating! Wait for me!” She hurried down the path but made it to the cabin well behind her long-legged friends.

“That was so not fair,” Cindy huffed in-between deep gasps for breath. She bent over at the waist and struggled to push more air into her lungs.

“You snooze, you lose,” Lindsay teased her lover as she eased beside Cindy and rubbed her back. “Next time, I’ll give you a little more warning.”

Still a bit breathless herself, Jill walked over and joined the pair, while Claire just tsked heavily and headed for the kitchen with Martha on her heels. She’d have to remember to insist later that since she was doing all the cooking, she should be exempt from cleaning duty. She was sure the others would see it her way, especially if she threatened to go on strike.

“Sorry, Cindy, but when it comes to chores, there’s no such thing as fair play,” Jill explained her version of all’s fair in fun and games, especially if the grand prize was to avoid work. She tousled her friend’s red hair earning a scowl from the reporter that made her chuckle.

Cindy dug her fingers into her sides and stood slowly. “I’ll remember that next time.” She exhaled a long, deep breath and moved to lean against the front porch railing. “Okay, that’s weird,” she said as she searched the top of the wooden rail. “I could’ve sworn I left my iPod right here when we left for our hike.” The media player had fallen out of her pocket when the four of them had started away from the cabin, and she’d left the player on the railing when she’d discovered a nice size hole in her jacket pocket.

“You did,” Lindsay confirmed, jogging down the steps to check the ground below. A glint of metal caught her eye and she squinted toward the base of the house just as the raccoon they’d seen on their arrival raced away. “Shit! The raccoon has it!” She hurried toward the bandit but was too late. The raccoon slipped under two long boards and disappeared beneath the house.

“Did you get it?” Cindy asked as she started down the front stairs. She studied Lindsay’s hands for the missing iPod but found only long, slender fingers and empty palms. “Do you know how long it took me to load all that music?” she whined pitifully. Not only would she have to clean the kitchen but now she’d have to do it without her music.

“A very long time,” Lindsay answered knowingly, having been ignored on more than a few occasions when Cindy had been absorbed in downloading songs she just had to have. Casting one last look at the spot where the raccoon had disappeared, she walked back toward the porch and met her lover at the base of the steps. “Sorry, Cindy, he was just too quick.”

“I really loved that iPod,” Cindy whispered sadly as she allowed Lindsay to take her by the hand and lead her back to the porch. “I can’t believe I’ll never see it again.”

Jill edged closer to the pair to extend her condolences. “I’m sorry, Cindy. I’d offer to let you borrow mine, but...” she said, leaving her sentence hanging in the thin air between them as she glared at Lindsay.

"It's an iPod, not a dearly departed uncle," Lindsay grouched. She looked at Jill. "And you can shove yours up your..."

“Food’s on the table!”

"Saved by the bell," Jill declared, pivoting on one foot and hurrying away from Lindsay's ire. "Coming!"

Placing her hand in the small of Cindy’s back, Lindsay shook her head as she directed her lover toward the door. “Let’s have some dinner and then we can see if we can find the little varmint’s hiding spot. Maybe he’ll be willing to trade for some food.”

“You really think so?” Cindy asked hopefully, her wishful tone sounding eerily like the Scarecrow questioning Dorothy as to whether she thought the wizard could find him a brain.

“It’s worth a try, isn’t it?” Jill called over her shoulder, unwittingly responding with the next line in the script as she moved ahead of the couple to open the door.

Lindsay deviated sharply from the well-known dialogue. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll shoot his ass.”

With one foot just inside the door, Cindy whipped around to face her lover. “You are *not* shooting Rocky!”

“Rocky?” Lindsay voice rose with her question. She wouldn’t dare look at Jill.

“Yes, Rocky. Rocky Raccoon,” Cindy clarified, solidifying the hunch Lindsay and Jill already had as to what Cindy had been referring: the Beatles inane song.

Jill stood by silently and refused to explain to her much younger friend that not only had Rocky not been a raccoon but that he had indeed been shot, although it hadn't been made clear in the song whether he'd been hit in the ass or not. Her blue eyes met Lindsay's brown ones over the top of the reporter's head. She didn't bother to disguise her amusement and Lindsay merely glared in response.

Cindy turned toward the kitchen and huffed away, drawing Lindsay's attention off a smirking Jill and back onto her lover. Only five minutes earlier, Cindy had been devastated that her iPod had been stolen and now she was protecting the very critter who'd stolen it. It was such a... *Cindy* thing to do that Lindsay felt a twinge of bemusement, even if she suspected she'd just landed in the dog house.

“You were screwed the moment she named that raccoon,” Jill said softly, barely able to keep the mirth out of her voice. She hooked her arm through Lindsay's and tugged the other woman forward. “C'mon, the food's going to get cold.”

Lindsay sighed and followed alongside her friend. She'd be lucky if she got to sleep in the same room as Cindy tonight, much less a separate bunk bed.

Martha raced past her mistress and leapt from the ground to the front porch in a single bound. Their run had been wonderful: the air had been cool and crisp, the trail packed solid and free of debris, and Lindsay had waited patiently while Martha chased the odd rabbit or two. The dog settled in front of the door and lolled out her tongue just as Lindsay made her way up the steps.

“Have fun, girl?” she asked Martha as she lifted her long leg and hooked her heel over the railing. Leaning forward, she stretched out sore sinewy muscles. “Ugh,” she complained aloud. “I've got to get back into a better routine.” Switching legs, she readied to stretch out her soreness when she spotted her running pants lying on the ground below the railing.

“What the...” she began, cutting off her words as she decided to investigate. She skipped down the front steps and headed toward the pants she'd ditched earlier, having figured that her jacket and shorts would be sufficient to keep her warm enough on her morning jog. Scooping them from the ground, she held them up in front of her just as something slipped out of one of the pockets and fell to the ground, a hot pink something: Cindy's iPod.

Taking the media player in her hand, Lindsay's eyes grew huge and she quickly scrambled to dig in each pocket, turning them inside out and coming up empty. Rocky had not only taken her cell, he'd grabbed her keys as well.

“Why didn’t you wake me? I could’ve used the exercise, too,” Cindy said as she shuffled toward the edge of the porch and yawned widely. Dressed in a worn, oversized San Francisco police shirt, a pair of gray sweats that had seen better days and fuzzy pink slippers, she cradled a mug of coffee and sipped from it, savoring every drop of Claire’s freshly-made brew.

Lindsay recognized the moment Cindy spotted her iPod as her lover’s eyes opened wide from their previous slits and a smile spread on her face until she was practically beaming. Abandoning her precious elixir on the porch railing, Cindy hurried down the steps as quickly as her oversized slippers would allow.

“He brought it back!” she said excitedly. “The food idea worked. You’re a genius, Linz.” She gave her lover a quick peck on the lips and gently extricated her cherished iPod from Lindsay’s hand. Staring down at the media player, her smile grew.

“Apparently Rocky had something else in mind in the way of negotiation,” Lindsay grumbled unhappily. Before her run, she’d checked the edge of the porch where they’d left food for the animal and had found that they’d been had. The raccoon had eaten the food, but he hadn’t held up his end of the bargain. He hadn’t left anything in its place.

Cindy brushed the iPod against her pants leg to knock off the bits of dirt that clung to it. “What? He gave it back and didn’t eat the food?”

“Oh, he ate all the food,” Lindsay reported petulantly, sounding every bit like a spoiled child who hadn’t gotten her way. “He gobbled it down and left without leaving so much as a thank-you note.”

“Who cares about a thank-you note,” Cindy said gleefully. “He left something better. See? He’s not such a bad little raccoon.” She cradled the iPod gently in her hands.

Lindsay thrust her pants toward her lover and held them up high to show the empty pockets that she’d yanked out, the white lining a stark contrast against the shiny black material of her pants.

“The little shit took my phone and the car keys, too!” She shook her pants vigorously during her diatribe, startling Cindy and causing her to take a step back. When the words finally filtered into the reporter’s brain, she quickly glanced over to where Lindsay had parked the Jeep, as if expecting to see it missing or, at the very least, Rocky sitting behind the steering wheel revving the engine.

“Why would he take your keys?” Cindy asked out loud, realizing her mistake almost immediately. She scrunched up her shoulders and cringed in preparation of Lindsay’s reply, just in case her lover blew a fuse. Her precaution was well warranted.

“Because he’s a little shit!” Lindsay growled, her opinion of the resident raccoon well-represented by her obsession with her new pet name for the animal. She glared at the hole that provided a safe haven for the raccoon. “That’s it,” she said angrily. “I’m getting my gun and blowing him away.” Throwing her pants down hard enough to stir up some dust, Lindsay stomped toward the cabin steps.

“Wait!” Cindy exclaimed, reacting much more quickly than she had the evening before when the others had taken off and left her standing clueless on the mountain trail. She grabbed hold of Lindsay’s arm and allowed herself to be jerked into her lover’s body. She held on tightly. “If you shoot him,” she started, careful not to call the raccoon by name, “we’ll never get your phone and keys back.”

Lindsay stopped trying to pull free of Cindy and paused to contemplate her lover’s words. It would be kind of hard to retrieve her phone and keys if the raccoon was no longer able to return them. “Okay,” she grudgingly agreed. “But if I have to call Jacobi to come get us, I’m shooting the annoying little bastard.”

Cindy nodded in mock agreement. At least Lindsay was thinking of the raccoon in different terms.

“What’s all the ruckus about?” Claire asked, a bit surprised to find the couple in an embrace. From the loud conversation that had sent her and Jill hurrying outside, she’d figured to find her two friends feet away from each other with Lindsay standing with her hands on her hips and Cindy with her arms crossed in anger.

“Cindy got her iPod back,” Lindsay replied as she slid her arms around her lover and hugged her close.

“Really?” Jill said with a smile. “That food trick worked?” She’d been skeptical about whether the raccoon would consider the offering a trade. She’d just figured the animal would think it was food they’d thrown out and was free game for whomever or whatever came across it.

“It didn’t work,” Cindy said simply, not offering any more details. She’d let Lindsay explain what had happened.

“But…” Jill gestured toward the hot pink iPod Cindy held in her hand.

“He took my cell phone and keys,” Lindsay interrupted before Jill could voice her next question. “At least we still have Cindy’s and Claire’s phones in case of an emergency.”

“Not having transportation doesn’t constitute an emergency?” Jill asked with a touch of sarcasm. “What would then?”

Claire cleared her throat but not to stop the likelihood of bickering between her friends, rather to clarify a misconception Lindsay seemed to have. “Um, I have my cell, but the battery is dead.”

“So, just charge it,” Cindy supplied helpfully, although she did wonder why Claire hadn’t already thought of the obvious solution.

“Normally I would, but I accidentally picked up Ed’s charger instead of mine. My cell isn’t compatible,” Claire reported the little ditty she’d discovered last evening when she’d tried to plug the adaptor into a port that was much too small.

“Well, we’ve still got mine,” Cindy said, grateful that they weren’t stranded in the middle of nowhere without transportation and a means of communication. That had all the makings of a bad slasher film. “I used it this morning to check my messages, so there’s definitely a signal.”

“Okay, now that we’ve got that settled, why don’t I whip up some pancakes and we can discuss how to trick Mr. Raccoon into giving back the keys?” Claire suggested, figuring they may as well make the most of things. Besides, they still had a couple of days before they had to worry about leaving.

“Chocolate chip pancakes?”

“Banana pancakes?”

Jill and Cindy voiced their preference at the same time, their pitch almost identical. Laughing, Claire motioned the two toward the cabin door.

“If I’m making more than one kind, I’m going to need some help.”

The medical examiner was almost mowed down as Jill and Cindy raced past her and into the cabin. Chuckling, Claire started for the door but stopped before she stepped inside and turned toward Lindsay.

“You coming?”

Lindsay shook her head. “You go on ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.” She waited until Claire had closed the cabin door before she turned her attention back to the raccoon’s hidey hole.

“Those keys better be on this porch sometime today,” she threatened in a low, gravelly voice. With one last glare, she headed for the cabin and whistled for Martha, holding the door for the canine to pass through.

Underneath the house, a pair of tiny hand-like paws fiddled with their shiny new toys.

Act III

A light, warm breeze swept across the surface of the pond, generating a continuous ripple effect on the water. It went unnoticed by Lindsay who sat slumped in a canvas folding chair, her long legs stretched out in front of her with one ankle crossed over the other. Dark glasses covered the fact that she wasn't watching the cork on the end of Claire's fishing line as she'd promised. It was a little hard to do with her eyes fully closed. The scents and sounds of their surroundings were making it damn hard to stay awake. If she'd had her favorite reporter to cuddle with consciousness would have been a lost cause completely.

Claire wasn't watching either; she had her focus well past the red and white bobbing sphere and on the two women who stood on the other side of the pond near an old, gnarled oak tree. Cindy had both hands around a thick rope that was suspended from a limb that hung out over the water, and she and Jill appeared to be deep in conversation. Claire was fairly certain they were deciding who should be the first to test the old-style swing. Snatches of the conversation drifted to her from across the water, and even though she couldn't make out the words, the warmth in their familiar tones was obvious.

"Those two are like a couple of kids," Claire remarked fondly, tempted to toss her pole and join them. If she weren't fishing for their dinner, she would have. "Can you just imagine the trouble they would've gotten into had they been friends when they were growing up?" she asked as she watched Cindy climb onto the knotted end of the rope while Jill held it steady. The mother in her wanted to yell at the two to be careful, the rest of her just enjoyed the moment. Claire felt a surge of joy; Kiss-Me-Not and the Hallelujah killers had deprived them all of a lot of things, but thankfully, it seemed, not of everything that mattered.

"That *is* a very scary thought," Lindsay answered, her reply seconded by a light 'ruff' from Martha who sat near her side. Reaching out blindly, she patted the dog on the head, enjoying the feel of sun-warmed fur slipping through her fingers. Reluctantly, Lindsay opened her eyes as she turned her attention to the other side of the pond. A half grin appeared on her lips when she discovered the pair. "Jill would've been like a mother hen."

"Yeah," Claire agreed. "Maybe if Cindy had been around, things would've been different for Jill, although William Carter would've still been in the picture. I don't think even Cindy could've helped Jill through that nightmare."

Lindsay tensed up instantly. Just the mere mention of Jill's stepfather brought Pete Raynor's sick, smiling face to mind. She could just see his smug expression when he told Denise that he'd killed Carter before playing another card from his seemingly endless deck to coerce Lindsay into paying him a visit. He'd made a critical mistake; however, he'd underestimated Jill.

“Whoa!”

Claire’s excited shout snapped Lindsay’s attention to her friend and Pete Raynor once again disappeared into the shadows of her mind. Claire pulled back on her pole and began to reel with urgency. “Get the net, Lindsay!”

Lindsay scrambled up and grabbed the net that lay near Claire’s feet. Martha joined in the fun as she moved around to Claire’s other side, her focus on the tiny ball that rushed toward her. She barked and edged closer to the water, her yelps drawing interest from the other side of the pond.

“Hey,” Cindy yelled to her personal swing-pusher. “Claire caught a fish! A really big one by the looks of it.” She didn’t dare let go of the rope to point toward Claire and Lindsay. It was a little too late in the season to take an unwanted dip in the water.

Jill ducked out of the way of Cindy’s swinging body and looked over at her friends. Claire was shouting at Lindsay to ready the net but apparently Lindsay didn’t seem too keen on getting her shoes wet. Seconds later, Lindsay pushed off her hiking shoes, quickly rolled up her jeans and splashed into the pond just as the line went slack and Claire screamed in frustration.

“Uh oh,” Jill whispered as she noted the look Claire was giving Lindsay. She could just imagine what the medical examiner had to say about losing her fish.

“Damn it, Lindsay, you were too slow!” Claire grumbled and reeled in her fishless, baitless hook. She scooped up another worm and continued to mutter under her breath as she wound it around her hook.

“Me?” Lindsay asked in surprise. She looked over at Martha who stared at her in disappointment and seemed to be of the same opinion that it was all Lindsay’s fault that the fish had gotten away. “What did I do?”

“Not net the fish,” Claire stated the obvious. “Next time, I’ll let Martha hold the net.”

“C’mon, Claire, I’d have had to wade out another 10 feet to catch that fish,” Lindsay defended herself as she leaned over to roll her jeans back down. She wasn’t actually sure how far she’d have had to go to cover the distance but it had looked plenty far to her. She did know, however, that her feet felt like twin blocks of ice. That water was damn cold.

“Hmmp,” Claire grunted unhappily and gave her fishing line a healthy tug before casting back in the general vicinity where she’d landed the whopper fish. She pretended to ignore Lindsay but kept a concerned eye on her friend. She’d noticed the slight shiver that had coursed through Lindsay when her friend had pushed her pants legs back down and was secretly pleased when Lindsay had settled into her chair to put on her shoes.

A high-pitched laugh crossed the short distance from one shore of the pond to the other and Lindsay and Claire were drawn to the two women who seemed to be having a world of fun with just a tree and an old rope to keep them occupied. Lindsay smiled at watching her friends' antics and hearing their childlike laughter. Claire had been right: sometimes Jill and Cindy really were like a couple of kids who gleaned an almost innocent enjoyment out of the simplest things in life.

It was Jill's turn on the swing, and she laughed out loud as Cindy pushed her higher and higher. Holding on tightly to the rope, she leaned back and closed her eyes, her blonde locks appearing to glow as the sun shined down brightly on the crown of her head.

"Woohoo!" Jill yelled as she soared to a height where Cindy could no longer reach to push her. She hadn't felt this light and this free in years. Jill looked back at Cindy, seeing the sun catch in her red hair and a smile that had won over the hardest of hearts. She waved at her friend, savoring the sound of Cindy's light laughter that floated upward at her antics.

****CRRACK****

****SPLASH****

Lindsay nearly fell out of her chair laughing when Jill hit the water and Claire almost lost her fishing pole in the pond as she struggled to reel in her amusement. Even Martha's bark came out as a dog-like chuckle as she slowly pushed to her paws and stood next to Lindsay's chair.

The trio waited for Jill to sputter to the surface so that they could tease their friend, but their smiles fell from their faces as they watched Cindy kick off her shoes and dive into the pond. Claire threw down her pole and raced toward the other side, while Lindsay and Martha hit the water, heading directly for where they'd last seen Jill.

The sun beat down and raked across the surface of the water, searching for blonde hair in which to highlight. There was none to be found.

"Jill? Jill, honey, can you hear me?" Claire asked in concern as she eased the tips of her index and middle fingers to Jill's wrist. The skin was ice cold and damp, but a strong, steady pulse beat back against her fingertips. Claire nearly shuddered in relief.

"Uhhggg..." Jill groaned and coughed. She screwed her eyes closed more tightly, feeling the bright sunlight behind her eyelids and trying to avoid it for as long as possible. "Did someone get the license number on that bus?" She moaned again for good measure just in case she'd forgotten to before.

Lindsay smiled in relief. "She sounds fine to me." Lindsay wasn't so sure she could say the same about herself. After swimming across the pond, diving down to help Cindy pull Jill to the surface, and tugging her friend to the shore where Claire was waiting, she should be exhausted, but adrenaline was still rushing through her bloodstream. She didn't look forward to when it would all crash down on her.

A blue eye rolled open, slammed shut, and then tried again. Its counterpart followed behind at a much more sluggish pace until they were both halfway parted. Looking to her right, Jill was mesmerized by red hair that appeared as if it had been set on fire by the sun's bright rays. Cindy's face swam into view as the reporter shifted until the sun was a mere backdrop.

"You... are... beautiful!" Jill exclaimed, a rather goofy look settling on her face. She continued to gaze up at Cindy in adoration.

"Okay," Cindy drawled with a bashful, and slightly baffled, smile. "She seems fine," she said, lifting her gaze from Jill to focus on Claire.

Claire wasn't at all convinced. She needed much more than just a couple of hasty diagnoses made by well-intentioned, non-medically trained friends. She brushed a finger across purplish skin near Jill's temple and detected a slight bump.

"Jill, did you hit your head?"

Jill reluctantly moved her gaze from Cindy's cute little smile to Claire's troubled expression. She'd seen that exact look before and she struggled to remember the circumstance. A vision of the other woman leaning over a dead body and frowning into an open chest cavity almost caused her to toss her cookies, but she swallowed the bile that rose and focused on the reason for the rather stumped look. She imagined it probably had something to do with the apparent victim's cause of death.

A thin eyebrow rose slightly. "Am I dead?" She reached out and grabbed hold of Cindy's hand for reassurance but it felt as chilled as her own. Her eyes widened as she glanced around the tight circle that surrounded her. "Are we all dead?"

Lindsay and Cindy let out an amused chuckle, while Claire stayed completely focused on Jill's face. One of Jill's pupils had definitely reacted much slower than the other when the DDA had stared wide-eyed at her friends. Claire changed her questioning strategy.

"Cindy, did you see Jill hit her head on anything?"

"Sort of," Cindy replied, suppressing another giggle when she grasped the seriousness of the question that was being directed at her. "When the tree limb fell, it brushed against her. At first, I thought..." She suddenly realized why Claire was so focused on head injuries. "Oh my God, that's bad, isn't it?" She gripped Jill's hand tightly and looked down into deep blue eyes. "I wasn't laughing at you just now, Jill, honest," she started,

hesitating at telling an obviously blatant lie. “Well, maybe I was, but I didn’t mean anything by it. Really.”

Jill just smiled another goofy grin. “I know you didn’t, sweetie,” she said, her jaw beginning to quiver and her teeth starting to chatter. A full-body shiver followed and Claire realized she had another problem.

“We need to get you out of those wet clothes before you catch pneumonia,” Claire said with authority. She quickly ran her hands along the back of Jill’s neck and partway down her spine. “Do you feel any pain or tingling in your limbs?”

“Nnnoooo,” Jill answered, her reply drawn out by her nearly uncontrollable shaking. She kept her focus on Cindy. She did have tingles, but they definitely weren’t in her arms and legs.

Standing quickly, Claire looked over at Lindsay. “Help me get her to her feet and we’ll worry about any other problems when we get back to the cabin.”

Lindsay nodded in understanding and grimaced as she pushed to her feet. Her own clothing felt ice cold against her already chilled skin and her shoes made a squishing sound when she moved behind Jill. Unlike the fishing net fiasco, she hadn’t taken the time to remove her footwear in her haste to get to her friend.

“Think we should call Jacobi to send us some medical assistance from Bakersfield or somewhere else nearby?” Lindsay eased her arms underneath Jill’s and slowly lifted. Her friend was overly compliant and hadn’t taken her eyes off Cindy since she’d answered Claire’s last question. Lindsay frowned, turning her gaze on Jill’s profile to watch her friend carefully. She was starting to get a bad feeling, and too many years as a cop had taught Lindsay not to ignore that twist in her gut she was feeling now.

Cindy visibly cringed at her lover’s suggestion to call for help and she slowly reached back to her rear jeans pocket, struggling to remove its contents from tight, wet denim. With two fingers, she finally managed to free the object and brought it around to where she could see it.

There was no sign of life from her cell phone and her fears were confirmed when she opened its cover to find more darkness.

“Houston, we have a problem,” she said as she pushed a non-responsive button and then hit the phone against the flat of her palm as if to shock the device back into working order. A push of another button and still nothing.

“Try again,” Lindsay told Cindy as she slid an arm around Jill’s waist to steady her friend. Her adrenaline levels were rapidly tapering off, especially with the news that they

had more than likely lost their only means of communication with the outside world. Jill's cold, shivering body wasn't doing much to help warm her own freezing skin, either.

Cindy pressed every button on the display... twice. "Maybe it'll work after it dries out." Her doubtful tone did little to reassure herself or Lindsay. "I bet Jill brought a hairdryer..."

"Forget the phone," Claire ordered as she moved around to the other side of Jill and eased her arm along the top of Lindsay's to settle on Jill's hip. "We really need to get Jill back to the cabin." She felt a tremor race along her arm, but this time it had come from Lindsay. "And you two need to get out of your clothes, too."

Jill giggled. "Hey, I know," she somehow managed to say loudly and clearly, despite the shivering that was rendering her legs virtually useless. "We can all get naked together!"

Lindsay and Claire shot forward and guided a snickering Jill along with them, while a red-faced Cindy followed closely behind. None of them had realized that Jill hadn't referred to any of them by name.

Claire gently closed the bedroom door and motioned for Lindsay and Cindy to follow her into the kitchen. Her two friends had managed to take a shower in the very small bathtub and a shared one at that, but only because they'd both been shaking so badly when they'd finally arrived back at the cabin that Claire had shooed them out of the room with orders to climb into the shower and then into some warm, dry clothes. It would've been virtually impossible for them to have engaged in any 'water aerobics' even if they'd been so inclined.

"Well?" Lindsay asked impatiently when Claire veered to the coffeemaker instead of the table where she and Cindy had headed. She pulled out a chair for her lover before plopping into the one next to Cindy. Martha had been towed off as well and was now settled on the floor next to Lindsay.

Scooping some coffee grounds into the machine's filter, Claire swiveled the container back into place as she readied to draw some water. "Physically, Jill seems fine," she reported, turning on the faucet and filling the glass container.

"And mentally?" Cindy questioned nervously. Something about Claire's demeanor set off bells and whistles in her head. She shifted in her chair.

"She's a little confused," Claire answered cryptically as she turned off the tap and poured the drawn water into the lid of the coffeemaker. She flipped the switch to the on position.

Lindsay tilted her head curiously and stared at Claire's back. The medical examiner was definitely stalling.

"Exactly how confused are we talking here?" Lindsay asked, not able to keep her detective tone out of her question. She folded her arms across her chest and waited for a reply.

Turning, Claire leaned her back against the counter and mimicked Lindsay's cross-armed position. "She knows we're all friends, she knows what we do for a living," Claire began as Martha sat up on her back haunches. Claire smiled. "And she knows Martha, too." The dog wagged her tail and seemed to relax at the good news.

"But?" Lindsay questioned knowingly. A bombshell had been loaded and was about to be dropped.

"She doesn't seem to remember that she's dating Maggie," Claire announced to the couple. A little good news never hurt and might even soften the blow for what she'd have to report next.

Cindy couldn't stop a grin from creasing her face. "Is there any way you can make that stick?" She'd love to see the expression on Maggie's face when the detective found out that Jill had no memories of their time together.

"What about other stuff?" Lindsay didn't need to be specific; Claire knew exactly as to what her friend was referring.

"I didn't ask her about anything else. I didn't want to upset her should she not remember Pete or David Arnold, and I certainly didn't want her to try to dredge up those particular memories if she didn't."

"Okay, I get that," Lindsay agreed with Claire's strategy. "Do you think we should try to get her to a hospital?"

"Normally, I'd say yes, just to make sure there isn't an internal injury of some kind," Claire replied, glancing over to check the progress of the coffee. The container was half-way filled. "But since we don't have a way out of here at the moment, I think we should stay put. We certainly don't need to send out for help and then chance one of us getting lost or hurt."

Lindsay ran a hand through her hair in frustration. "If that damn raccoon hadn't stolen my keys..." she grumbled, stopping her rant mid-sentence, although there wasn't any need to continue. Her point had been made.

"Well, he did and now we need to figure out how to get them back," Cindy said, her mind already turning over the possibilities. They just needed to find something that had more of an appeal to Rocky than the Jeep keys.

Claire reached into the cabinet and removed three mugs. “You two focus on Mr. Raccoon and I’ll tend to Jill.”

“Can’t we do something?” Cindy pushed to her feet and moved over to help Claire serve the coffee. “You can’t stay with her 24/7.”

“She needs to be awakened every hour. I’ll take the first several shifts as that’s usually when a problem will occur.”

Cindy nodded in understanding. “We can help with that and, if we think there’s something wrong, we’ll come get you.”

Lindsay stood suddenly and started for the door, Martha right on her heels. Claire called out to stop her before she could even turn the knob.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“To see if there’s a way inside the little shit’s hideaway,” Lindsay growled, her hatred of the critter shining through in her words.

“Drink your coffee first; he’s not going anywhere,” Claire ordered and pointed toward a dark blue mug. “You need to drink something hot. You’re not any good to us if you get sick.”

Grumbling under her breath, Lindsay crossed the room and took the steaming mug from Claire. The heat from the cup felt wonderful against her palm and she wrapped her other hand around its middle to take advantage of the ceramic hand warmer.

“Hey, Claire?” Cindy asked as she stirred some sweetener into her mug. “Why’d you mention Maggie right away?” Her eidetic memory had swung back to the beginning of their conversation and had immediately stopped on Claire’s initial report on Jill.

“What do ya mean?” Caught off guard, Claire hid her face behind the rim of her cup and sipped on her coffee. She was too slow for Lindsay.

“Cindy’s right,” Lindsay said, placing her mug back on the counter and facing Claire. “With everything you could’ve started with, you chose to focus on Jill’s relationship with Maggie. I don’t think it was because you knew how happy it would make us, either.”

Cindy replayed Claire’s words over and over again in her mind. There’d been a touch of regret in her friend’s tone, as if Claire wasn’t looking forward to telling them something. She’d said Jill was confused and then had said Jill knew who they were and then...

“Oh Lord, don’t tell me she thinks she’s dating Denise,” Cindy blurted, her mouth finally catching up with her thoughts.

“Nope,” Claire replied honestly. “It’s not Denise.”

The hairs on Lindsay’s arms rose up and this time it wasn’t because she was chilled to the bone. “Not Denise?” Her next question didn’t need to be voiced. Claire understood completely and figured now was as good a time as any to inform her friends of what they faced next.

“Jill thinks she and Cindy are dating.”

A stream of coffee flew from Cindy’s mouth and landed directly in the center of Lindsay’s nice, clean shirt.

“Where are you, you little shit?”

Lindsay leaned forward and angled her head to peer inside a small hole. Her knees still ached from their earlier abuse and, now, the mistreated joints screamed their displeasure of the current ‘all fours’ position. Lindsay just ignored the pain and focused on her mission.

Reaching for her back pocket, she removed a small flashlight, flicked it on, and aimed it inside the raccoon’s living quarters. Martha inched closer to her mistress and looked through an even smaller hole as the two searched the underside of the house for any sign of the varmint.

“See him, Martha?” Lindsay whispered her question as she directed the light across the darkness, the beam dancing over stone piers, dull metal pipes, and wooden boards that lined the outside of the house as well as the ones that provided flooring to the cabin. The crawlspace was too narrow for Martha and Lindsay had to wonder who could’ve possibly installed the plumbing. “Think there are some fairy people living nearby, girl?”

Martha whined softly in response.

“There!” Lindsay said excitedly as she shone her light in the middle of the darkened area. The Jeep keys were lying in the dirt next to the center pier, but her phone didn’t appear to be nearby. And neither did the raccoon. Lindsay stared at her rainbow beaded key chain that, even from a distance, looked mangled and chewed on. “I think I need a new keychain,” she grumbled, having grown fond of the colorfully beaded chain Jill had given to her as a joke. It made Tom flinch every time she fiddled with it in his presence.

“Having any luck?” Claire called down from the porch and scared the crap out of Lindsay, who’d believed she and Martha were alone. She jerked her head up and hit it against the underside of the cabin that jutted out a couple of inches from her crouched position.

“Shit!” Lindsay cursed and reached up to rub the sore spot. She was certain she’d be sporting a nice-sized knot later. “Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

Claire chuckled. “Sorry. Just be glad it was me and not Mr. Raccoon. He might have taken offense to you blocking the doorway to his home and bitten you in the ass.”

“Ha ha,” Lindsay returned sarcastically. She lifted to her knees and pushed to her feet. “I spotted my keys.”

Claire straightened and turned serious. “Can you reach them?” She’d feel much better if she could put Jill through a battery of tests just to make sure the only problem was her friend’s faulty memory.

“No, the little bastard made sure of that,” Lindsay reported in frustration. They couldn’t possibly be so lucky. “I think we’re going to have to go with Cindy’s plan and try to find something else to entice him and then hope that he’ll trade like he did before.”

“Hmm, he seems to be drawn to shiny objects,” Claire suggested as she mentally inventoried the different things she’d packed. She didn’t think he’d trade the items for her cell phone as it wasn’t as new and fancy as Lindsay’s and was nowhere near the hot pink of Cindy’s iPod. She secretly held the notion that the raccoon had only turned over the fluorescent pink media player because he didn’t like Cindy’s taste in music.

“Maybe he’d be attracted to my gun,” Lindsay plotted, an evil grin beginning to take shape. “He brings back my cell and keys, picks up the gun, looks into the barrel, and... BAM! He blows himself away.”

Claire shook her head. “You really don’t like the little guy, do you?”

“He’s a little...”

“Shit. Yeah, I know,” Claire finished the raccoon’s moniker and forged on to try to distract Lindsay from visions of animal suicide. “Let’s go see if we can find something that he won’t be able to resist.”

Still holding out hope for her gun, Lindsay put a foot up on the porch and used the rail to pull herself up. She scissored over the top and Martha leapt up behind her.

“Where’s Cindy?” Lindsay asked as she followed Claire to the door.

“She’s waking Jill.”

Lindsay tripped over a loose board and almost fell on her face.

Cindy stood near the bunk bed and stared down at a soundly sleeping Jill. Her friend looked so peaceful that she really hated to wake her, but Claire had stressed that it was a necessity. Reaching out a hand to shake Jill on the shoulder, Cindy veered at the last second to brush blonde bangs off a cooled forehead. Except for the bruise near Jill's temple, she'd have never known that her friend had been injured.

"Jill?" she said softly, leaning forward and stroking lightly across fair skin. "Jill, you need to wake up and talk to me for a few minutes." Claire had also explained to Cindy that she needed to make sure Jill was responsive.

Before the thought had left her mind, a strong hand suddenly snaked up and around her neck and pulled her onto soft pink lips. There was no longer any doubt in Cindy's mind as to the level of Jill's responsiveness.

"Mmmph, whoa, wait," Cindy pleaded helplessly against Jill's lips until she finally managed to pull free of the other woman's grasp. Breathless, she looked down into a teasing smile and eyes as blue as the ocean.

"Hey," Jill said sweetly. "I've been wondering where you were. Claire said that you needed to shower and change." She shifted onto to her side and rested her head on a bended elbow. "Are you okay?"

"Um," Cindy started, easing back a step and just out of Jill's reach. "I'm fine." Her voice raised a pitch and she worked to clear her throat. "But you need to take it easy."

"I have been taking it easy," Jill complained, her bottom lip pushing out into a pout. "All I've done is sleep the day away."

Cindy stared at a moist pink lip that poked out further than its mate. Normally, she'd tease Jill for such a childlike expression, but this particular situation was far from normal.

"You need your rest."

Jill tilted her head and smiled smugly. "What I need is for you to come over here and kiss me again."

"You kissed me!"

"Hmm, you're right, I did," Jill admitted with pride. "And if you won't come to me, I'll just have to come to you." Rotating her hips, Jill placed her feet on the floor and moved to stand, but that was as far as she got as the world began to spin off its axis. She closed her eyes and tilted forward. Only Cindy's quick reflexes kept her from landing headfirst on the hardwood floor.

Gently cradling Jill in her arms, Cindy called for help.

“Claire!!!”

ACT IV

“It’s just for tonight, Linz,” Cindy tried to explain for the third time in what seemed like as many minutes, but Lindsay wasn’t in the mood to listen. She was tired and cranky and didn’t want to listen to reason, especially if that reason involved Cindy spending the night with Jill.

“This is absolutely ridiculous. Can’t Claire do something?” Lindsay paced back and forth across the length of the small bedroom, a life-size image of Jill wrapped up tightly in Cindy’s arms stuck in her head. When she and Claire had heard Cindy’s shout earlier that afternoon and had raced into the room, she’d known immediately that Jill was unconscious and she’d known Cindy was only holding her friend to keep her safe, but she was also very aware that Jill wouldn’t have seen it that way had she been awake, at least not this Jill: Jill of the Head Injury.

“Lindsay,” Cindy stepped into her lover’s path and wrapped her arms around a narrow waist. Turning her head, she pressed it firmly against Lindsay’s chest and tightened her hold. She wished, not for the first time, that her day weren’t ending like this, but Jill needed her right now far more than Lindsay did. “We’ve got to do this. We don’t have a choice.”

Closing her eyes, Lindsay buried her nose into her lover’s neck and breathed Cindy’s familiar scent into her lungs. Her head understood everything Cindy had said, but her heart held a tiny bit of gripping fear and a larger, irrational sense of jealousy. She knew she was being stubborn and pigheaded and it needed to stop. She needed to place her trust in Cindy, although that didn’t mean she couldn’t peek in on them from time to time.

Lindsay nodded once, her nose lightly nudging against soft skin, and she gave Cindy a little squeeze before taking a step out of their embrace. “Okay, you go on and I’ll see you in the morning,” she offered with a wink and a smile. Receiving a gentle kiss as reward for her surrender, she then watched as her lover walked out the door. Her smile quickly faded when Cindy disappeared from view and she continued to stare at the empty opening until Claire entered moments later.

“You okay?” Claire asked as she stepped inside the room dressed in lightweight sweat pants and a long t-shirt - her sleeping apparel, Lindsay assumed.

“Let’s see: my best friend thinks my girlfriend is her girlfriend and so now, instead of clarifying that huge bit of confusion, they’re going to sleep together. I’m just peachy, thanks for asking,” Lindsay snapped tiredly, the day’s activities finally starting to catch up to her. “And don’t even get me started on that little bastard raccoon.”

“They won’t be in the same bed,” Claire assured as she crossed the room and settled on the lower bunk. She’d be damned if she was sleeping so close to the ceiling; it would feel too much like being in a morgue drawer. “I told Jill that her bed was too small for both of them and that we couldn’t chance her falling and re-injuring herself.”

“And she bought that?” Lindsay asked in disbelief tinged with a thread of hope. Jill thrived on any type of potential confrontation that could be spun into a positive, argumentative discussion. It was what made her such a good attorney. “Why couldn’t you have come up with a reason why she and Cindy had to sleep in separate rooms, too?”

Claire struck her ‘you’re kidding, right?’ pose and replied, “I’m good, but even I couldn’t have talked Jill into sending her girlfriend away.”

“Hey!” Lindsay objected vehemently. “Cindy is *not* Jill’s girlfriend.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Claire said, gentling her voice to try to calm her friend. She hadn’t meant to tease Lindsay – well, maybe just a little - but this whole situation was more than a little bit weird. Why Jill had latched on to Cindy was anyone’s guess; Claire had figured that, if she’d been confused about her relationship with one of them, it would’ve been with Lindsay.

“We have to be patient, Linz, although maybe not for too much longer. Jill has already started to put the pieces of her puzzle back into the right slots. It’s kind of like a slideshow for her right now. She’s seeing different images and just needs to get them ordered and in the right perspective.”

Lindsay’s sour mood turned hopeful. “You really think so?” she asked as she walked over to where Claire had made herself comfortable. “You really think she’s starting to remember things?” She felt petty for worrying about her own feelings instead of Jill’s injured state, but Jill was making it hard. If she weren’t so damned *hands on* with people, Lindsay wouldn’t have thought twice about the situation.

“I know she is,” Claire said, bobbing her head up and down in affirmation. “When I was getting her settled back under the covers, she suddenly grimaced and I thought she was in pain. She said she wasn’t, so I figured she had to be remembering something unpleasant. I called her on it.”

“The church?” Lindsay asked, hoping that wasn’t the case. If Jill lost any of her memories, Lindsay wished the whole ordeal with the Hallelujah Man would be near the top of the heap. Those tortured hours Jill had spent in the church still haunted Lindsay’s dreams so she could only imagine what reality had been like.

“No, it was Denise. Jill recalled Denise’s reaction to Kelly Yung’s death. She didn’t say much, but she was visibly shaken by how the image made her feel,” Claire recounted, choosing not to mention that Jill had calmed the minute Cindy walked into the room. “I think things will get less and less fuzzy for her. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Okay, time it is then,” Lindsay said, pushing off her shoes and placing her sock-covered foot on the first rung of the ladder that led to the top bunk. “And speaking of time, we need to come up with a definitive plan to get the Jeep’s keys back.” Skipping the second step, she lunged upward to the next one and then allowed her momentum to carry her up and over the edge of the ladder and onto the upper mattress. “Oomph,” she sputtered on landing as the bed shook slightly in protest.

“Careful up there, we don’t need you knocking yourself out, too,” Claire warned as she reflexively reached for the bed post to steady herself. “You’re right, though. I don’t want us to be stranded here and have to be rescued because some raccoon outsmarted us. Ed would never let me live that down.”

“Tom or Jacobi, either,” Lindsay agreed. She didn’t want to think about the fun her boss and partner would have at their expense. She groaned loudly at another thought.

“Oh God: Hollywood. We’ve *got* to get those keys back!”

A full moon appeared larger than life in the clear night sky, its light beaming brightly and illuminating the ground below. In a corner bedroom of the quiet cabin, moonlight peered through a sizable gap between the room’s curtains and stole its way across a wide planked floor, its luminous path ending on the far side of the room and on a green and brown plaid bedspread.

Under the covers, Jill slept fitfully, tossing and turning to images that raced through her dreams like stock cars jockeying for position. At first, the images had been jerky and slow as if they were being played on an old reel-to-reel where the film hadn’t been properly fed through the projector. One slide seemed to stretch into the other, distorting the subjects much like a fun-house mirror until, finally, the images became clearer and more connected as they seamlessly flowed from one to another.

The club sitting around a table at Joe’s laughing and enjoying each other’s company morphed into Claire’s den where she, Claire, and Cindy sang and danced to *Dancing Queen* while Lindsay watched with a smile. From there, slide after slide of the foursome flickered across her mind and brought a smile to a sleeping Jill’s face, one that melted away to a confused frown when Denise Kwon, the by-the-book, stoic Acting District Attorney, stepped through a thick mist, grabbed Jill roughly, and kissed her senseless and, just as she could taste the sweet wine on Denise’s tongue, the kiss changed to one where Jill was the aggressor, kissing the other woman for all she was worth until they both became breathless. Then they parted and Denise just looked at her in shock and denial and walked away as a dense fog rolled in and surrounded Jill once again.

Creeping forward to where she hoped she’d find her friends again, Jill felt the ground beneath her shift from a soft, comforting carpet to hard, unforgiving concrete. Her heels

beat out a staccato sound as she moved further into the thick maze, the air around her turning cold and sending a shiver down her spine. Up ahead, she could see the halo of a light and she forged toward it, not seeing the dead end of a cement wall until it was too late. A deep chuckle drew her attention to her right, where a man sat on a concrete bench behind a set of heavy black bars, his features hidden by the shadows.

“What do you want?” Jill’s voice wavered noticeably despite her attempt to come across as strong and confident. The figure seemed to sense her fear as he leaned forward and pushed to his feet. Jill gasped softly at seeing William Carter walking toward her, his familiar smug expression set firmly in place. She reflexively stepped back as if not trusting the bars to keep them apart.

“Hello, Jillian,” the gruff voice belonged to Carter, but Jill’s step-father’s tall, muscular body had morphed into a six foot, much leaner frame. Pete Raynor now stood before Jill and sent her dream spiraling into a nightmare she’d rather not relive.

She could hear her stomach cry out for food and water, feel her body shiver from buckets of ice cold water that had been thrown across her skin time and time again, and feel the metal pipe pummeling against her bruised and tortured torso. She prayed for it to end, prayed for someone to rescue her, and prayed that the son-of-a-bitch would just die. Her focus moved to the source of her prayers and her gaze fixed on a statue of Jesus that was suspended above her. His eyes looked sad. He couldn’t save her from this horrible ordeal: she was going to die at the hands of a madman.

Fighting against silk bonds that kept her captive on a cold marble altar, Jill jerked at the sound of gunfire and she whimpered as the assaulting weight that had been pressing firmly against her was suddenly gone. She felt a comforting presence beside her and she looked up into caring brown eyes filled with concern, fear, compassion, and...

“Jill, it’s okay; it’s just a dream. You’re okay. Wake up, Jill,” Cindy said gently as she sat down on the edge of the bunk bed and lightly stroked blonde hair damp from Jill’s struggles to free herself from her dream. Cindy had been awakened by soft whimpers and had practically leapt off the top bunk to get to her friend.

Blue eyes appeared from behind tightly closed lids and Jill stared up into the same comforting eyes of her dreams and, for a moment, she was still trapped inside the sanctuary and the nightmare Arnold had provided. She reached out and grabbed hold of Cindy.

“Don’t leave me!” Jill pled, gripping onto Cindy, her hands like vises around the younger woman’s waist. She burrowed her head against Cindy’s middle; Cindy just held on and continued to reassure her friend that whatever Jill had seen wasn’t actually happening to her, although she suspected that what Jill had lived in her dreams was much more than just a nightmare.

“I won’t leave you. I won’t ever leave you,” Cindy promised and tightened her hold. Lying down beside Jill, she rocked back and forth and repeated her words, waiting for the storm to calm.

In the doorway, Martha watched carefully. She’d heard a whimper and had immediately looked up at her mistress, but Lindsay was sleeping soundly, and judging from the soft snores coming from the lower bunk, Martha figured no one in the room had heard the soft cry except her. Moving toward the door, she’d glanced back once more at the two sleeping women before she’d left to investigate. Now, she was torn as to what to do.

Should she go wake her mistress or perhaps the person called Claire, who’d given her a very juicy bone for no reason at all - ‘just because,’ Claire had said when she leaned down and waited for Martha to take the offering - or should she bark and wake the others and then race to the door, pretending she’d spotted the raccoon that had made everyone so mad? Martha watched as the blonde began to relax in the redhead’s arms and she eased into a lying position, halfway in and halfway out of the doorway.

She rested her head on her outstretched legs and waited. At the next sign of trouble, she’d bark loud enough to wake the entire cabin.

The first thing Jill became aware of was that she wasn’t alone; the second was that the person who spooned her from behind and held her so gently and so lovingly wasn’t Maggie and it definitely wasn’t Denise – ‘thank God,’ she whispered softly. Dreaming of sleeping with her boss was one thing, having it become a reality and then having to deal with the aftermath was something entirely different. Turning her mind inward, she took a quick inventory in hopes of solving her current mystery.

Her head ached but wasn’t nearly painful enough for her to be suffering from a hangover. The bed seemed too hard and way too small to be her own and she figured it must be the other woman’s, the other woman who cradled her protectively and smelled really nice and really familiar, kind of like... Cindy!

Jill froze and had to concentrate to breathe. Would she? Had she? She lifted her lashes just high enough to peek between them and stared out into the room, the lump near the doorway slowly clearing and taking the shape of a dog... Martha!

Holy hell, she had! And in Cindy’s apartment, too! *Wait a second*, she thought as she allowed her eyelids to fully part to take in the rest of the room: a floor made of wide wooden boards, beige walls with pictures of wildlife grouped together here and there, dark green curtains parted midway and revealing sunlight peering through colorful leaves of several trees just outside the window. This wasn’t Cindy’s apartment; this was the cabin and, specifically, the room she shared with Claire. So why was Cindy in their room? Had she and Lindsay had a fight? And if so, why would Cindy have climbed into bed with her?

Jill paused for a moment to ponder her last thought. If Cindy and Claire had indeed swapped rooms, Cindy would've naturally taken the bed Claire had slept in, which just happened to be the bed Jill and Cindy were currently sharing. So if the natural progression had taken place, it had to have been Jill who'd climbed into bed with Cindy, not the other way around as she'd presumed.

“Shit,” Jill whispered softly as she began to plot as to how she could extricate herself from Cindy's hold without waking her friend or, worse, before Lindsay could find them in their compromising position. Easing Cindy's hand from her hip, she paused again, a memory shooting through her mind so quickly she almost missed it: she and Cindy taking turns pushing each other on an old rope swing, soaring so high it felt as if she were about to take flight into the clear blue sky. A loud crack and a mad scramble to take purchase on something, anything. A searing pain against her temple and then... nothing.

Jill reached up and gingerly rubbed the tender skin, wincing slightly when she pushed a little too hard against the deep purple bruise. She fought against the annoying pain and forced hidden images to surface. She remembered it all – from first waking up freezing and confused on the pond's shore to waking up this morning in Cindy's comforting embrace. She'd been living in a fantasy world and the others had played along. Despite being a little unsettled and more than a little embarrassed, Jill had to smile at her friends' efforts.

A soft 'ruff' pulled her from her thoughts and she looked over to find Martha wagging her tail and looking up and over her shoulder at her mistress. Lindsay shifted her weight from foot to foot and tried to appear nonchalant at finding her lover wrapped around her best friend. Jill's smile widened. The charade had to have been hell on Lindsay.

Pushing her weight down against the mattress, she very slowly and very gently eased out of Cindy's grasp and slid her feet to the floor. She gave Cindy a grateful glance before crossing the room and heading for the door. Martha stood quickly, her tail wagging with renewed purpose as Jill neared. The blonde looked to have an extra spring to her step this morning.

“I love you, Linz,” Jill said as she stepped beside Lindsay and looked into her friend's dark eyes. It was obvious that Lindsay was fighting the green monster that threatened to break free. Leaning forward, Jill placed a soft kiss on Lindsay's lips. “She's all yours,” was all she said as she slipped through the door and headed down the short hallway toward the bathroom.

Lindsay stood frozen and watched Jill walk away as realization slowly dawned. A bright smile creased her face and chased away her dark clouds. Their Jill was back.

By the time Lindsay and Cindy made it to the kitchen for breakfast, Claire and Jill had already filled the table with plates of eggs, bacon, and pancakes. The wonderful aroma

that had spread through the cabin had almost sent Cindy to the table wearing only a pair of black French cut underwear and a black bra, but Lindsay had caught her lover by the arm and had insisted that she finish dressing. Cindy just laughed and winked a 'gotcha message' as she scooped up a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

"Something smells awfully good," Cindy praised the two cooks - Claire actually, as Jill had only helped with clean-up and occasionally poured pancake batter onto the griddle when Claire was busy with something else. Cindy eyed the stack of pancakes and her mouth began to water.

"Yeah, I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I got a whiff of bacon," Lindsay confessed and snagged a piece of what had stirred her hunger pangs. She snapped a crispy slice in half between two white teeth and showed her appreciation with a soft 'yum.'

Claire smiled. "I think it's more because none of us had dinner last night, but I'll take compliments any way I can get 'em." She slipped on an oven mitten and removed a pan of biscuits from inside the old-style oven. The color and texture were perfect and she wished she could figure out a way to strap the oven to the top of Lindsay's Jeep. Of course, there was still the small matter of retrieving the vehicle's keys so that they could actually leave the next morning.

"Sorry for being such a pain yesterday," Jill apologized, feeling guilty that everyone had had to tiptoe around her and had gone so far as to miss a meal. It was bad enough that she'd forced Cindy to play the part of her girlfriend. She guessed all her earlier musings about what a great relationship Lindsay and Cindy had, coupled with her own misgivings about whether she and Maggie could come anywhere close to what her friends shared, had attributed to her confusion. And then there was Denise who had her questioning everything.

Claire eased an arm around Jill's shoulder. "We're just glad you're okay, although I do want you to promise to get checked out when we get home."

"Okay, I promise but first, let's make up for last night and dig in."

Cindy didn't need an invitation as she plopped down in the nearest chair and started to pile pancakes on her plate. Ignoring her friends' chuckles, she slathered butter in-between the individual pancakes and reached for the maple syrup.

"By the way," Cindy said as she poured concentric circles of syrup over her large stack of pancakes. "I think I know what will entice Rocky to give up the Jeep keys."

All eyes, including Martha's, turned to Cindy.

Bounding down the front porch steps, Cindy hurried to join her friends at the foot of the trail they'd explored their first day at the cabin while a reluctant Martha followed along behind the reporter. She'd much rather have stayed near the cabin to confront the raccoon about stealing her people's things, but Cindy had explained that the critter wouldn't come out of his hiding place if he felt threatened in any way and both times when Rocky had taken something it had been when Martha had been away from the house. Martha had stared at the hidey hole and growled before she turned and trotted away.

"Okay, we're all set," Cindy reported and stepped into the semi-circle the group had unwittingly formed. "We'll just have to wait and see if it works."

"It had better," Claire grumbled as she turned and started up the trail. "That's my best spoon."

"And the shiniest, too," Jill added with a grin. "I think you and Cindy are right about Rocky liking shiny things."

"Let's just hope he likes peanut butter, too," Lindsay muttered, not 100% behind her lover's plan, although she'd never admit that out loud.

"He will," Cindy assured, slipping her hand into Lindsay's and squeezing lightly. She knew Lindsay wasn't gun-ho about attempting something that wasn't guaranteed to produce results, but they were dangerously close to becoming desperate and Cindy feared Lindsay would come up with something that didn't have the raccoon's best interests at heart.

"How did you come up with the idea of using peanut butter?" Jill asked, keeping her eye on the trail. She wasn't about to slip or misstep today as she'd promised Claire she'd be extra careful. The ME had wanted her to stay inside and not venture from the house, but Jill had insisted that she felt fine and now she just had to prove it.

"I saw a guy on YouTube feed peanut butter to a raccoon with a plastic spoon. The little fella was so cute the way he inched up the stairs," Cindy replied, a light chuckle escaping her lips at the memory. "He'd swipe some peanut butter from the spoon and then lick it off his paw."

"Had he stolen the guy's keys?" Lindsay growled under her breath but made sure to speak loudly enough for the others to hear.

Jill laughed but smartly tried to cover by pretending to cough. Not such a bright move when walking several yards behind a doctor. Claire stopped and pivoted around.

"You didn't catch a cold, did you?" Claire had actually been surprised the freezing pond water hadn't been responsible for at least one of her friends catching a cold. The hot

shower had probably prevented Cindy and Lindsay from succumbing to the elements, but Jill had only had the benefit of blankets – lots and lots of blankets.

“No, I just had a tickle in my throat,” Jill said, gesturing to the weedy-looking shrubs along the path. “Maybe I’m allergic to something.”

“Too bad you’re not allergic to Hollywood,” Lindsay quickly countered, easily transferring her hatred of the raccoon back on Maggie Snow. “I’d prescribe a lifetime of avoidance just to be certain that you wouldn’t contract the horrid symptoms that would go along with exposing yourself to her.”

Claire piped up before Jill could respond. “Hey, there’s a fork up ahead. Do you want to head for the valley we saw the other day or explore the second path?” She’d seen blue eyes dancing with mirth and figured Jill was about to make some comment detailing exactly how much she’d ‘exposed’ to Maggie Snow. Yep, Jill was definitely returning to normal.

“I say we explore,” Cindy replied, wanting to give Rocky plenty of time to decide whether the peanut butter-covered spoon was good enough to trade for Lindsay’s stuff. Cindy really hoped he’d choose the keys because, even though they could use Lindsay’s phone to call for help, they’d prefer not to have to be rescued by the guys.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Jill cast her vote. It felt great just to be amongst friends and not have a care in the world. Well, except maybe how they were going to get home.

Lindsay just shrugged. “I’m with Cindy.” There; she’d finally gotten to speak the words she’d been itching to say to Jill when her friend had believed differently. Better late than never, she thought.

Martha looked back and forth between her mistress and the other women of their club. She and Lindsay had been on the other path just the day before. There hadn’t been any valleys but there sure had been lots of rabbits. Her tail wagged in excitement.

“The path less traveled it is,” Claire said with a grin as she headed for the fork. Why should they suddenly change their MO after all this time? The fun was in the adventure. Nothing else mattered as long as they were together.

“So,” Cindy began in a casual tone and hurried to catch up with Claire. “Did you guys go on any camping trips like this when Nikki was in the club?” She’d been dying to find out more about Nikki Beaumont and the early years.

Jill and Lindsay broke into laughter and Cindy turned to Claire for an explanation. The medical examiner chuckled in memory of a younger Nikki and she had to wonder if Nora had ever tried to take their former club member into the wilderness.

“You’d not find Nikki within a hundred miles of anywhere that didn’t have a spa,” Claire said, although Jill had actually been much worse back then. A broken nail had been a major crisis for either woman.

“Oh! Remember the time Nikki went to that new hair salon and that stylist talked her into getting a perm?” Jill sniggered. “She looked like a poodle that’d been plugged into an electrical socket.”

Claire smiled at the memory but more so because Jill’s memory was definitely on the mend. “Then she was called in to work crowd control at a murder scene involving a beauty pageant judge. She didn’t have time to try to rinse it out; she had to report right away.”

A deep chuckle exploded from Lindsay’s lips. “I remember that. It took her days to tame her hair into something that was manageable and even longer to get over the whole pageant incident.”

Cindy just followed along quietly and listened as her friends strolled down memory lane. Replacing Nikki Beaumont no longer seemed like such a bad thing.

“Oh my God, it worked!” Cindy exclaimed as she looked down where she’d left the peanut butter-coated spoon. Their afternoon had been filled with stories – some old and some recent – but all involving fun and good times. Nothing about the Hallelujah Man, Pete Raynor, William Carter, Maggie Snow or even Denise Kwon had been so much as mentioned. When they’d made the turn that led to the cabin, Cindy had sprinted ahead of the rest, not able to wait any longer to discover if her planned had worked.

Hearing her lover’s excited voice, Lindsay hurried around the corner and stared at her phone and keys in disbelief. Her thrill at seeing the items was short-lived. “Eww,” she uttered and scrunched up her nose in a frown. “There’s peanut butter all over them.”

“Yeah, but it worked,” Cindy grinned and moved to retrieve the sticky items. She scooped up both and held them out for Lindsay. “Want to see if they work?”

Lindsay took a step back, as if she feared the items might explode, just as Jill and Claire rounded the corner.

“It worked?” Jill asked in amazement as she focused on the phone and keys Cindy held in her hand. A frown settled on her face and matched Lindsay’s right down to the narrowing of blue eyes to brown ones. “Is that peanut butter?” She hoped it was and not something much worse. Her mind stopped short of coming up with a potential list of substances.

“You two have evidently never had to deal with a four year old who’d sneak a jar of peanut butter from the cabinet and then go play with all of his little football men,” Claire said, pushing past Jill and Lindsay and holding her hand out to Cindy. “Here, give me those. I’ve had plenty of practice.”

Cindy handed Claire the phone but held on to the keys. “I’ll help.” She winked at Lindsay as she followed a retreating Claire toward the door. “Who knows? Someday, I could have a four year old with the same tastes.”

All breath left Lindsay’s body and Jill eased beside her friend. “She’s just kidding,” she said, although her tone was far from believable. It didn’t help that Jill could easily imagine a redheaded little boy scooping peanut butter from a jar with a tiny finger, half-heartedly licking the sticky substance off, and then racing his running back across his makeshift football field of magazines, peanut butter sticking to plastic and paper as the player vaulted across the goal line.

Lindsay drew in a much needed breath and just nodded. “Yeah, she’s just kidding.”

“C’mon, let go see if they were able to salvage your stuff,” Jill said as she looped her arm through Lindsay’s and started for the door. A change in scenery was definitely in order, not to mention a change in subject. Besides, she could always tease Lindsay later.

By the time the two women had caught up with their friends, Claire was scraping off the last bits of peanut butter from Lindsay’s phone while Cindy polished the Jeep keys with a dish towel. The rainbow key ring lay on top of the rest of the trash in the garbage can. Cindy looked up just as Jill and Lindsay stepped into the kitchen.

“Sorry, Linz, but your key ring was too damaged. Rocky really liked those rainbow beads,” Cindy said as she held the keys up to the light. They shone brightly against it, the peanut butter having added luster to the metal.

The musical sound of a cell phone being switched on filled the room and Claire smiled. “We have communication.” She swiped at a spot she’d missed on the underside of the cell before holding it out for Lindsay. “I don’t see any missed calls, either. That’s good.”

Lindsay took the phone and quickly checked for messages. There weren’t any. “So no emergencies or none that the guys thought they needed to report.” She figured it was more than likely the latter of the two but she wasn’t going to worry about that now. They had a way home.

“Okay, now that Cindy has solved our problems, what do you say we start on dinner? Spaghetti anyone?” Claire asked as she walked toward the refrigerator. She hoped the others would agree with her suggestion: It was their only choice.

“Sounds good to me,” Jill said, her reply receiving smiles and twin nods from Lindsay and Cindy. “What do you need us to do?”

“Cindy, there’s a loaf of bread in the far cabinet. Would you mind making the garlic bread? And Lindsay, would you cut up some onions? They’re in that bag on the counter.” Claire’s voice was muffled by the refrigerator door, but Cindy and Lindsay heard her perfectly.

“We’re on it,” Cindy replied, already heading toward where she’d stored the loaf when they’d first arrived. She heard Lindsay rummaging in the bag of onions and smiled. It seemed like forever since they’d cooked a meal together.

Jill waited for her orders but none came. “What about me? I can do something.”

“You can go lie down until dinner is ready,” Claire replied in a tone that brooked no argument. It did, however, induce a world-class pout.

Jill poked out her bottom lip and folded her arms across her chest in quiet defiance. Claire had to clamp down on her jaws to keep from smiling. “Okay, you can set the table and *then* you can go lie down until dinner is ready.”

The stare-down was brief as Jill really was tired and wasn’t up to facing off against a woman who had perfected the art. Conceding quietly, Jill moved to the cabinet and removed the plates and glasses. She made her way around the table a few times before everything was in its proper place.

“No talking about anything good until I can join in,” she warned as she left the room to a chorus of chuckles. With a heavy sigh, Jill trudged down the hallway and into her room, making a beeline for her bed. She barely took the time to push off her shoes before she climbed in and melted into the mattress.

Sleep eluded her as she tossed and turned, finally giving up and flipping on her back as she stared at the top bunk. Tomorrow, they’d return to the city, to their routines, to their lives and, for Jill, to things that were just as confusing to her as when she’d left. She was no closer to figuring out what she wanted, no closer to getting in touch with her true feelings and no closer to knowing what she was going to do.

Maggie was fun and had provided a nice distraction when Jill really needed one. And she liked her, too. Problem was the others didn’t and Jill knew why and understood perfectly, almost too perfectly. Most of the time, she felt guilty for dating Maggie, as though she had crossed enemy lines, but there were those times when the rest of the world faded away and it was just her and Maggie: naked, skin on skin, hot, sensual kisses, hands mapping familiar territory as they each fought to gain control of the other.

Jill turned her focus to their relationship. Was that all they shared? Just a physical attraction? Or was there more? Could there be more? And what about Denise? When had her thoughts begun to center on her boss?

Slamming her eyes shut, Jill slowly re-opened them in hopes that she could ward off any memories of the two kisses she and Denise had shared. There was no doubt in Jill's mind that she felt physically attracted to Denise Kwon, but should she make an attempt to get past the fortress Denise had erected around herself? Dare she throw caution to the wind and risk herself and her job on something that wasn't a sure thing? Was it even worth it?

“Ruff!”

Martha's bark almost sent Jill to the floor as she'd jumped and then rolled toward the source. The dog stood in the doorway, splitting his attention between Jill and the hallway.

“What is it, girl?” Jill asked softly and lifted into a sitting position, crouching low as she eased her feet to the floor. “Timmy in the well?” she joked faintly. “Scratch that. If Lassie were in our world, it would be Cindy in the well.”

Before Martha could reply, Cindy's voice filtered into the room... loudly.

“Jill! Dinner's ready!”

Had the reporter heard her? Half hoping Cindy had, Jill shook her head and leaned over to put on her shoes. Claire had probably told Cindy to call Jill to dinner and the younger woman had, just with much more volume than Claire had intended. She could just see the older woman scolding Cindy.

“Ruff,” Martha barked more softly and wagged her tail when Jill finally pushed to her feet.

“I'm coming, girl; I'm coming,” Jill replied as she crossed the room and followed the dog down the hallway.

“I would so not fall down a well,” Cindy huffed as she sat down with Lindsay and Claire at the table. Both women looked up in confusion before shifting their gazes to Jill as she took a seat.

Jill shrugged and reached for a piece of garlic bread. “She's your girlfriend,” she reminded Lindsay.

“Nice of you to remember that,” Lindsay retorted before taking a sip of her beer.

Jill just smiled and decided to set all her problems aside for the night. Maggie and Denise could wait a few more hours; she'd figure things out with them soon enough if the two women in her life didn't figure things out for her before then.

In this cabin, at this table, there was only her family. Jill took them all in with gratitude. They'd had a hellish two years, but they'd come through the other side stronger, wiser and closer for it. She lifted her glass of water. "A toast."

They all looked at her like she was crazy but lifted their beverages regardless.

"To us," Jill said.

Claire nodded. "To us," she echoed a half second before Cindy and Lindsay did the same.

Their glasses came together with a satisfying clink.

THE END