

# BLOODHOUND3

pour me another one.



by

B.L. Wilson

## **Bloodhound3**

pour me another one.

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Edited by BZ Hercules  
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## *Author's Note*

*Bloodhound3, pour me another one* was written and takes place in a time when technology was somewhat more simple. You will find references to flip phones and people not being as easy to reach as they are now. Social media was nonexistent, at least not like it is in the present day, and most of my characters did not feel incomplete without a cell phone. Updating the technology might change the plot elements, so I have left the “old-fashioned” ways untouched and request that you enjoy this bit of “nostalgia” as it is written.

Thank you.

B.L. Wilson

## *Dedication*

I wanted to write about how difficult it is to overcome an addiction. What is it like to love doing something so much that you can't stop? No matter how much it damages you and the ones you love, you can't stop doing it. How do you know when you're addicted? You know you're addicted when you can't stop...hoarding, drinking, drugging, smoking, overeating, shopping, lying, gaming, watching porn, sexing, gambling, bullying, raping, killing, or whatever your vice is.

The cure sounds simple, doesn't it? Just stop and you won't be addicted anymore, right?

For all you folks who can't stop, there is hope for you. First, you have to admit you have a problem before you can seek help for it. I'm dedicating this book to you.

[www.gamblersanonymous.org](http://www.gamblersanonymous.org)

[www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

[www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org)

[www.shopaholicsanonymous.org](http://www.shopaholicsanonymous.org)

[www.hoardersanonymous.org](http://www.hoardersanonymous.org)

[www.ocdhotline.com/Help](http://www.ocdhotline.com/Help)

[www.clutterhoardingcleanup.com](http://www.clutterhoardingcleanup.com)

[www.smokershelpline](http://www.smokershelpline)

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[www.smokershelpline](http://www.smokershelpline)

[www.stompoutbullying.org](http://www.stompoutbullying.org)

[www.narconon.org](http://www.narconon.org)

[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

[www.pride-institute.com](http://www.pride-institute.com)

<https://saa-recovery.org/>

[www.nycenterforsexaddictiontreatment.com](http://www.nycenterforsexaddictiontreatment.com)

[www.video-game-addiction.org/](http://www.video-game-addiction.org/)

[www.virtual-addiction.com](http://www.virtual-addiction.com)

<https://rainn.org/.../substance-abuse>

*When you fish for love, bait with your heart  
and not your brain.*

~Mark Twain~

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## **Chapter 1...Five years ago**

**T**he guitar player in the live band made his instrument growl low and softly menacing, like a pit bull protecting its master. The rumbling bass grew louder until it became a roar and the guitar exploded with sound, vibrating the surrounding air. In appreciation, dancers jumped and jiggled with energy as they kept time with the pounding bluesy rhythm.

A waiter walked around the small, satin-smooth stage filled with gyrating dancers and over to a mid-aisle table of four women. He grinned confidently as he carried a tray with a single bottle of expensive brandy surrounded by four empty fishbowl-shaped snifter glasses. He cupped a brown hand to his mouth and raised his voice, shouting over the throbbing music.

“Which one of you lovely ladies is Professor Gomez?”

An attractive woman with snapping black eyes and shoulder-length dark brown hair framing a tanned oval face stopped giggling with her blond coworker and raised a hand, shouting back, “Ah, that would be me.”

The waiter nodded as he set the tray down in front of the woman who was smiling up at him. His gaze included the four women crowded around the tiny round table. “Here you go, Professor—and you too, Ladies.”

Gigi Gomez turned the bottle around so she could read the label and then frowned at the waiter. “Waiter, this looks expensive. We didn’t order this.”

“Yes, Professor, it’s three C-notes a bottle.”

Gigi shook her head and pushed at the bottle. “Take the bottle back, Waiter. I can’t afford it.”

The waiter grinned and pointed to a dark corner. “I can’t do that. The gentleman at the table in the far corner paid me forty bucks to bring it over to you and your friends. He said he took one of your psych classes. It helped him get a raise, so he’s just repaying the favor.”

“I can’t accept this.” Gigi turned around to squint through the darkness. With people milling around, leaving to dance, going to the bathroom, or smoking at the bar, she couldn’t make out the man’s face. She felt an elbow nudging her in the side and turned around to acknowledge her friend Sylena, the chubby, warm-brown-skinned Black woman sitting to her left.

Meanwhile, the waiter waited to see what she would decide to do.

“Lighten up, Girlfriend. What’s the harm in accepting a gift? It’s not like he’s a current student trying to ply you with food and drink for a better grade.”

“Aw, come on, Gigi. The guy just wants to thank you. Be nice and accept his gift,” said the blond woman who sat to Gigi’s right.

“Astrid’s right. Aren’t we supposed to be here celebrating the end of the term and looking for some cute guys tonight?” chimed in Irma, who sat across from Gigi and between Astrid and Sylena.

“Yeah, Gigi, didn’t you say you wanted to hang out? You know, like forget about finals, papers, grades, all that crap, and just hang out.”

Gigi raised a hand to prevent further discussion from her colleagues seated around the table and then cupped a hand around full lips to shout at the waiter over the music. “Okay, okay, enough said. Ladies, I’m keeping it.” She pantomimed opening the bottle and then patted the table in front of her for emphasis. “Open the bottle and leave it here, please. Tell the

gentleman my friends and I said thanks for the brandy.”

The waiter opened the bottle and grinned at the women. He caught Gigi’s eye and winked at her. “I’ll be sure and let him know. If you ladies need anything else, just signal and I’ll come running.”

Sylena shoved Gigi in the side with a chubby elbow, looked up at the waiter, and smiled. “Oh, don’t worry about us. If we need something, we’ll be sure and signal you, Honey.” She watched as the waiter nodded at her and walked away, heading to the bar to pick up another order. She sighed loudly, studying his retreating backside. “He’s cute, isn’t he?”

“God, Sylena. We’re not here to pick up the staff,” Gigi admonished her friend. “We’re here to dance and have fun, right?” Her twinkling eyes took in her three girlfriends as she rose and held out her arms, swaying to a Latin Caribbean beat. “Come on, Ladies. Let’s dance.”

Sylena, Astrid, and Irma rose from the small table, following their friend. The four women sashayed in time to the music as they joined other dancers, both male and female, on the dance floor. When the women weren’t dancing with each other or several of the men who asked them to dance, they went back to the table to finish the beers they’d ordered. They danced some more before they decided to celebrate and toasted the end of the semester with the bottle of expensive brandy Gigi’s mystery student had given her.

Four hours later and just before closing time, Gigi and her colleagues stood on the sidewalk in front of Cookie’s Bar & Grill, located on 148<sup>th</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue, also known as Fredrick Douglass Boulevard. The street was quiet but not empty. The four women, who were little high but not drunk, watched several people strolling in the direction of 145<sup>th</sup> Street, where one of subways station was located.

“God, I hate to go home and face my four walls alone.”

“I had fun tonight.”

“We should do this more often.”

“Yes, we should. Night, Gigi, you get home safe.” Irma smiled at Gigi, then kissed her cheek.

Astrid pulled her collar out and flipped her blond mane over it. She blew Gigi a kiss and then linked arms with Irma. “Our trains are this way.”

Sylena, the chubby Black woman, studied her friend under the Eighth Avenue street lamp. She tilted Gigi’s chin toward the light to examine her pupils. “Girlfriend, are you sure you’re okay to drive?”

Gigi giggled. “Of course I am, Silly Sylena. I had one beer and three sips of that brandy before you, Irma, and Wonder Woman, also known as Astrid, snatched my glass and the bottle, claiming you were protecting me from a drunk driving charge. I should be worried about you three catching the train in your condition. Are you all gonna be okay? I could drive you home.”

Sylena laughed and held a hand up. “Oh please, Girl! Haven’t you heard? There’s safety in numbers.” She turned around to walk back and join her two colleagues, who were a half a block away. “See ya in the office tomorrow, Gigi,” she called over a shoulder.

Gigi Gomez waved until her friends were out of sight. She had several blocks to walk before she reached her car on 151<sup>st</sup> Street and Bradhurst Avenue. She sighed, noting the sputtering streetlight half a block away—flashing a dull off and on glow, while a broken light provided no light at the end of the street. It wasn’t the best place to walk alone this late at night. She squinted at the parked cars on both sides, looking at them closely for occupants. She patted her purse, feeling the bulge from the can of pepper spray. She smiled confidently as she muttered to herself, “The car isn’t coming to you like in the movies. You have to go get it, Gigi.”

“You’re so right, Professor Gomez. Cars only follow their masters in James Bond movies.”

The man's voice startled Gigi. He was so close she could feel his breath against the back of her neck. How did he get so close without making a sound? She reached down to unzip her purse.

"Bet you're looking for a mace can or maybe it's that pepper spray can you always carry in there. When you find it, I bet you a dinner at Cookie's it won't work."

When Gigi tried to turn around, she felt heavy pressure against her neck, keeping it straight. He steered her over to the curb. "No, don't turn around yet. I don't want you to see me until I'm ready."

"Oh my God, what do you want?" Gigi whimpered softly as she felt a gloved hand tighten around the back of her neck. He pressed her face against the window glass of one of the parked cars until the pressure nearly flattened her nose. "I have money in my bag. Please, take it and let me go," she mumbled.

"I can't do that, Professor Gomez. I don't want your money."

"My car keys are in my purse. You can have them. Take my car."

The man laughed but kept the pressure against her neck. Then, in a sudden move, he quickly pulled her against him and wrapped a forearm around her neck. "Why would I want that old clunker? I hate freaking Volvos."

"How do you know what I drive?" she wheezed hoarsely.

"It pays to know whom you're dealing with, Gigi." He flexed his forearm against her throat, making her struggle against him as she gasped for air. "I'm gonna fuck you until you scream for more. But for now, I'll let you sleep." He yanked her chin upward with his forearm, wiggling it completely under her neck. He wrapped his other arm around her belly, pressing hard. He pushed out the air in her belly through her mouth, then prevented her from inhaling. When he felt her wilt against him, he released the pressure against her neck, letting her body sag

against the car. “I don’t want you dead, just pliable.”

He reached in the side pocket of his black cargo pants, pulled out a needle, and gave her an injection, stabbing her with the needle in the thigh. Just as quickly, he checked both sides of the block for nosy pedestrians. It was deserted, but who knew how long it would stay that way. He prepared a great little place for their first night together. It was just two blocks away in a vacant building. He grinned. It wasn’t too far from her parked car either, but could he wait that long?

He looked down at his bulging fly and Gigi’s partly exposed leg. He unzipped with one hand as the other dove under Gigi’s dress, touching bare thigh skin. He moved his hand upward until his fingertips felt the elastic of her bikini briefs. He ran a fingertip underneath the elastic leg of the briefs, following the line of the puckers against a smooth beige thigh and then across a firm hip. He used the same hand to stroke his fly and the tent at the front of his pants grew larger.

“Gigi, my love, you wore these just for me! Can’t wait to show you how much I love them and you. We were meant to be together. I saw you looking at me with love in your eyes. I know you feel the same way, just like in class. I knew you loved me back then too. You were just too shy to admit it. But you sure did tonight when you drank from my gift of love.”



**T**he tall female detective with the rich cinnamon features and dreads several shades darker than her skin climbed out of the squad car. She adjusted the holster under her arm and buttoned her tweed jacket over her waist to hide her gun. Detective Lindsay Washington scratched her head as she looked up and then down the busy street, West 148<sup>th</sup> Street. “Why this street?” she muttered, standing on the sidewalk in the

middle of Harlem's historic Fredrick Douglass Boulevard. She stood still, watching the block fill up with kids reluctantly going off to school while their parents rushed to the subway down the street to jobs they probably hated.

She decided to inspect the crime scene again. They might find somebody who saw something. But the victim wasn't on the front sidewalk when patrol found her, so they might not find a damned thing. Patrol discovered the vic's badly beaten, bruised, and swollen body posed on a filthy mattress in an open space running the length of a bar and grill called Cookie's and the building next to it. They thought she was dead until she licked bloodied lips and moaned.

The area wasn't fenced, so there was nothing but its narrowness to keep people out. Its size and location worked in the crime lab's favor for collecting evidence but at the same time, its isolation hurt the victim. According to Cookie's staff, nobody used the area except to take a leak, smoke a cigarette or something stronger, and maybe toss out the household garbage she'd just stepped in. It was an excellent place to hide a dead body. Time would tell if the place also hid evidence if there was any evidence to recover.

All the items the crime scene techs found—the bloody clothes and the blood trail with drag marks—belonged to the victim. Everything was the female victim's, except for one thing. The bottle of Jack Daniels that the monster poured on her, used to beat her senseless, then rape her, and left stuffed in her rectum. That little piece of evidence was his ... all his. The bastard didn't leave prints, semen, condoms, urine, or blood in the narrow alleyway. He left behind a dirty mattress for which the lab boys were tracking down the manufacturer.

The empty whiskey bottle in the victim's rectum, the nasty mattress, and drugs were his signature too. He pumped the same drugs into the professor's system that linked him to another victim. He'd attacked other victims from behind with the same

forearm chokehold that linked him to four other assaults in the city and now the professor. That all the victims were professional women increased the odds further that the five women had the same assailant.

According to an assailant profile, the man was probably white, although the detective's trainers at Quantico claimed serial rapists of color were starting to catch up with their white counterparts in terms of victimization. Her hunch was that this predator was a white male who felt comfortable in this neighborhood, which was rapidly undergoing gentrification. She noticed a Starbucks on the corner of 145<sup>th</sup> and Fredrick Douglass and a New York Health and Racket Club next to the coffee giant. A Pathmark superstore was across the street and a Duane Reade was up the block. All of that meant if the creep was white and male, he wouldn't stand out as the only white guy in a Black neighborhood...not anymore.

She sighed and glanced down at her predator profile notes again. He'd be in his late twenties to early forties. He was underemployed in a job that provided him with plenty of free time. He had problems in the bedroom, a lack of intimacy with the opposite sex. He wasn't married and probably didn't date. After he choked or drugged his victims into unconsciousness, he sexually assaulted them but didn't kill them. He tried to have intercourse with the women he'd chosen, but he never succeeded. He frightened them into thinking he was going to rape them, but he couldn't complete the act with his penis, so he used whatever was handy.

What worried Detective Washington was the level of violence he used on the professor. He hadn't beaten his other victims. Before the professor, he relied on stealth, strength, and drugs to do the trick of incapacitating them. She wondered if the professor set him off in some way. Did she say something or do something to him? Or if he was simply evolving from nonviolent rape to violent assault and rape, and then finally



murder? She sighed, wondering what the answer was as she strode to the narrow enclosure that served as an alleyway.

When she kicked a can lid on her way into the alley, a large mud-colored rat scrambled from underneath it, squeaking and looking for an opening in the brick wall opposite the bar. Wrinkling its dirty pink nose as it sniffed the air, the annoyed beast found a nearly invisible hole in the wall and quickly disappeared into the early morning. “Christ! I hate the filthy, disease-carrying little shits!” Lindsay muttered, jumping back out of the rat’s path. She decided to send her partner to the other end of the secluded space while she stood at the mouth of it, breathing through her mouth from the stench of stale piss and fermenting garbage.

“What can you see from there?”

She watched her partner, Detective Zach York, shade his eyes with a hand and look around the claustrophobically tight space before calling out, “I can see you and not much else, Lindy.”

Her eyes traveled up Cookie’s partly cement-covered red brick wall to scan the windows above the first floor. The five-story building above the bar had beige plywood and dull gray tin seals on most of the windows. She could see curled up tin peeling away from the plywood in the corner of several windows. The curling tin reminded her of the oval-shaped tin cans of spicy smoked oysters Barbara loved. The cans rolled open with a key. She grinned. Thinking about Barbara always made her smile, but she’d better get her head back into the game.

According to the building’s owner, except for the first-floor commercial tenants, the place had been closed for renovations. She frowned at the white lie the club owner told her over the phone. Patrol said the building had been closed for well over five years with no current construction planned. They said the six-story building next door almost suffered the same fate,

except the tenants, who were mostly seniors with no place to go, filled about twenty percent of the units.

Lindsay pointed a finger upward to the building next door to the bar and grill. “Look up there, Zach. Can you see anything?”

“Yeah, I see a light. Hey, Lindy? Somebody just moved in the corner window on the second floor. If I can see them, they can see me down here. We might have a witness.”

“See anything else?”

“No. How about you? Can you see anything from where you’re standing?”

Lindsay shaded her eyes and squinted upward. Somebody peeked out at her from the top floor front window and then quickly pulled down a shade. “Top floor, front window just looked at me. It looks like we go talk to some neighbors today.”

“You ready for this, Lindsay? I mean, we can wait until we eat or go to the drug store if you want.”

Lindsay shook her head in disagreement. “You know like I do what happens if we leave a witness with too much time on her hands and she suffers hearing loss, gets stupid, or can’t see shit. Let’s do this now, Zach.”

Zach studied his partner as he walked up the narrow alleyway to join her. She looked full of get-up-and-go today. She was buzzed or high. He couldn’t tell which one. “So what did you do last night?”

“Why?”

Zach scratched his chin thoughtfully when he looked at his partner’s extra bright eyes. “I don’t know what’s going on, but you seem full of energy today, Lindy. Why is that?”

Lindsay grinned and slipped the notepad into the slanted front pocket of her tweed jacket. “I got some rest last night.”

“Or maybe you got nookie from the fabulous woman you refuse to introduce me to or talk about.”

“I know how to separate business from pleasure, Zach.

Besides, a lady never tells that stuff.”

Zach poked a lip out and pretended to pout as they walked to the six-story residential building next to the bar. “I tell you about my women all the time, Lindy. Why can’t you do the same?”

“First off, Zach, you need to tell me about your girlfriends. If you didn’t, who’d keep ‘em straight for you? Without me, you’d call number one by number two’s name or three by four’s name, so on and so forth. You wouldn’t remember their birthdays either. And who would be your gift advisor if you didn’t have me in your life? Maybe Lieutenant Russell would do it for you?” Lindsay chuckled. “Well, you get the idea.”

Zach laughed. “You got me there, but I still wanna meet her some time. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure, Zach, we’ll go out on a double date—dinner and a movie. You name the time and place and I’ll be there with her.” She made the offer knowing it would never happen. She pressed the intercom for the apartments on the top floor and waited for a response. No answer. She buzzed again—still no response.

“They know we’re cops and don’t wanna talk to us.”

Lindsay held up a hand, showing off her crossed fingers. “I’m hoping it’s because somebody saw something last night.”

“Yeah, me too.”

She pressed the buzzer for the second floor.

“Who’s that ringing my bell this time of day?”

“It’s NYPD, Ma’am.”

“I didn’t call no cops. Whatcha all want?”

“If you let us in, we could speak in private.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ to hide from no cops. Humph! That’s if you real NYPD. You sounds like a woman I used to know. I never liked that gal. She was so evil with me. She was just plain ole evil when she didn’t have to be.”

Zack chuckled and then elbowed Lindsay in the side as they

waited in the small ceramic-tiled vestibule area that smelled of bleach and pine oil. “Plain old evil woman, yep, that’s you chapter and verse, Lindsay.”

Lindsay hovered over the intercom’s panel. “Ma’am, I promise you that I’m not that lady. My partner and I would like to come inside and speak with you about last night.”

“Did something happen last night?”

“I thought, er, I mean, **we** thought you might have seen something in the yard around four o’clock this morning.”

“Can’t sleep so good with all the medicine my doctor give me, so I up most nights.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ma’am,” Lindsay remarked, hoping her concern might convince the old woman to tell her what she’d seen.

“What you sorry about, Girlie? You didn’t do nothing to me to be sorry ‘bout. If I ain’t taking that medicine, I’d be dead. Then I surely couldn’t tell you what I seen, could I?”

Lindsay grinned at Zach. “Would you mind telling me what you saw last night, Ma’am?”

“I’d rather tell that handsome boy I seen in the backyard with you.”

“Is it okay if I send him up to talk with you?”

“Ain’t that what I just said, Girlie? You sure you ain’t kin to Eula? You surely are working my last nerve like she used to do!”

“If you buzz us in, I’ll send him right up. What floor do you live on, Ma’am?”

“Humph! You just rung my bell so you oughta know which floor I on. Box where bell be at tell you what floor I on. You just keep your butt downstairs and send up that handsome boy, Girlie.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m sending him.” Soon as Lindsay heard the buzzer, she grabbed the door and held it open for Zach. “See you later, Partner.”

“If I’m not back down here in twenty minutes, come get me.”

Lindsay chuckled. “If I don’t, what are you afraid of, Zach?”

Zach stood in the doorway, holding it open with his foot to study Lindsay with a straight face. “She’s right about you. You are annoying just like her ex-friend Eula.”

“Ha, ha, you’re so funny, Zach. See you when I see you.” She watched him climb the stairs to the second floor.

Thirty minutes later, Zach returned from the old lady’s apartment, frowning and scratching his head. He pulled out a notepad from a breast pocket and ran a finger down a page. “Here it is. She saw something, but I’m not sure what it means. She said somebody made a racket, bumping into cans when they dragged something into the alleyway. She thought it was one of those life-size rubber dolls. She said it couldn’t be a real person the way he left the doll sitting there on a pile of rags with its legs open and something stuck in its bottom. She didn’t know it was a human woman until she saw the lights flashing and heard the EMS sirens.”

“Which direction did he drag her?”

“That’s the strange part. She said he dragged the doll from where I was standing in the rear yard down to where you were. Then he dragged it back to my position. Why did he do that, Partner?”

Lindsay tapped her upper lip in thought for a minute. “Maybe he wanted to confuse us. Make us think he dragged her in from Fredrick Douglass and not Saint Nic.”

“Why?”

“How the hell do I know why, Zach?” Lindsay remarked impatiently. She reached into a pocket to pull out her notepad and make note of his new quirk. She flipped a couple of pages backward and started to read. “Did you know this is the first time he tried to stage a crime scene?”

“It’s also the first time he nearly killed one of his victims.”

Lindsay looked up from her notepad with a furrowed brow. “He’s getting more confident with his surroundings. It’s the first time we’ve had a witness in almost nine months who wasn’t a victim. Could the old lady give you a physical description?”

Zach exhaled heavily and consulted his notepad again. “That’s another strange thing. She said what she could see of his face looked pale and shiny. He wore a dark knit cap or some kind of hood. Whatever it was covered his head, his hair, and part of his face. He wore dark gloves for his hands.”

“So he’s a white guy who sweats a lot, right?”

“She wasn’t sure what he was. She said it was pretty dark when she first spotted him carrying the big doll. He kept looking up at her building when he was in the alley. She thought he could be a light-skinned Black or Hispanic male or a dark-skinned white dude. She was sure he was a male, though. After she realized the doll he dragged back and forth was a human woman, she said he was strong too. She said he lifted the body over can lids and garbage bags with a dancer’s grace.”

“How big was he? Did she notice how tall he was?”

“She couldn’t tell if he was tall or not since she was looking down at him. She didn’t have anything to compare his height against.”

“But he was strong enough to lift our victim like a sack of potatoes.”

“According to Miss Sadie, he moved like a dancer.”

Lindsay stopped writing in her notepad to grin at Zach. “Miss Sadie, huh? Getting kinda friendly with a witness, aren’t you?”

“We needed her name for our report anyway.” Zach ran a hand through curly dark hair that reached the collar of his light blue shirt. It was almost time for another haircut. He fluttered long eyelashes over innocent-looking sky blue eyes. “Can I help

it if women like to tell me things?”

Lindsay signaled Zach to follow her out of Miss Sadie’s building. “Come on, God’s Gift to Women. Let’s go talk with Cookie’s staff.”

“What about checking out the top floor for witnesses?”

“We’ll come back later when they aren’t so nervous about talking to cops. The bar owner said we could talk with the waiter assigned to the victim’s table last night. Patrol spoke with him and said we should interview him.”

“Do they see a connection with the assault last night?”

“Patrol didn’t say.” Lindsay patted the badge hanging from the breast pocket of her gray tweed blazer. “That’s why we got the gold and they don’t.”

“Amen to that, Partner.”

“Let’s go shake some shit and see which way it rolls.”

Lindsay led the way into Cookie’s and thought how different bars looked in the light of day. None of the bars she’d been in lately seemed nearly as cozy or friendly when sunlight entered behind the last patron of the night. If she had more of a philosophical nature, she’d think that was why bars had tinted windows, drawn shades, and turned-low lighting. But she was a cop working an assault and rape case connected to other cases. That made her a cynical bitch.

She figured bar owners lowered lights and darkened rooms to keep the atmosphere friendly and their customers focused on the fine art of drinking and enjoying their products. Couldn’t see liquor as well in a dark room, but a customer could sure smell its seductive scent and taste its enticing flavor. It was all a big setup to make a customer buy more.

is your problem She-she. Tell me what's bothering you."

Shelia strummed on the steering wheel, pretending to look out the windshield so she could avoid the questions in his eyes.

Zach reached into the car to still restless fingers. "Aw, come on, She-she. Tell Big Apple what's got your core upset."

Shelia giggled, then swung around to face him. "You are so sweet when you want to be."

"Scoot over and let me drive us home." Zach suddenly knew whatever was bothering Shelia was personal. Something about Lindsay's situation triggered deep shit in Shelia. If he had to guess, he'd figure it was Lindsay's alcoholism or her employment—current or former. He frowned. It could be as Shelia claimed; she didn't approve of his history of sex with coworkers. He grinned when Shelia unlocked the door and moved into the passenger seat. Great! That meant no lumpy living room couch for him.



number on me.” She rubbed her nose and frowned. “Shit, that’s not true. I resigned rather than get clean and sober. I didn’t want to walk a beat again either.” She sighed when Marcella looked at her oddly. “Okay, okay, I’m a drunk. I screwed up good cases because I loved alcohol more than I loved my job or my woman. Is he talking about what I drink?”

She scratched her head, frowning, and answered her question. “No, no. It’s about the case. There were six victims, but I didn’t see the connection between Barbara and the other woman who died or the four others he assaulted but didn’t kill. I still don’t see the connection five years later.”

Marcella studied Lindsay before adding softly, “Maybe there isn’t one.”

Lindsay stared at the note in her hand. “You might be right. The only thing connecting the women is the man who assaulted the first four and killed his last two victims.” She frowned, then set the note on the bed and smoothed it flat with a palm. “Damn it! I shouldn’t have touched this. I shoulda stopped you too. We probably messed with fingerprints the lab could pull from this.” She stood up, shoved her hands in her pockets, and started to pace again. *Humph*, as though they’d have time to wait for lab results. The bastard was killing somebody tonight. “What did he mean about numbers?”

“I think we should tell the detectives about the note, Lindsay. They might have some ideas you haven’t considered.”

Lindsay shook her head. “No, not yet, Ms. Easley. He wanted me on this kidnapping, not Zach or his partner.”

“After what we’ve been through tonight, I think you’ve earned the right to call me Marcella.”

Lindsay ignored to Marcella’s remarks to give a running

commentary. “Numbers, what numbers does he mean, street numbers or phone numbers? Did he mean victims’ phone numbers? Birth dates are numbers too. So are dates of death, bank accounts, passwords, and then there are victims’ ages and addresses. Shit! Everything is a number.” She rubbed her neck. “He could mean victims’ employment dates, termination dates, or the number of children each one had, or how about how many times they’d been married? Jesus Christ, the bastard knew the world was full of numbers—meaningless numbers! How do I know which ones the bastard meant?”

“Maybe this will help.” Zach threw a case folder on the bed. “Look through it, Lindsay. It’ll give you something to work with.” He studied the two women. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the phone number on your caller ID was a pay phone, Ms. Easley. The lab said he called from a pay phone. It hasn’t been in use for years.”

Lindsay pressed palms into weary eyes, then moved her head from side to side to loosen stiff muscles. “Thanks, Zach. Did the lab give you the last known address of the phone?”

Zach shrugged. “No. They said something about the guy using wireless IP addresses that are locators not identifiers, private or public IPv6s, white lists, black lists, and on and on. I don’t know what he meant except that the caller disguised the origin of his address using a computer device. You know how tech geeks are. You can’t understand a thing they say without a translator.”

“Call back and ask.”

“Why?”

Lindsay leaned over to pick up the folder that looked identical to the one she kept in her bottom drawer for five years. It was the same folder he’d stolen from her apartment tonight. She sighed as she studied her ex-partner’s face. “I don’t know why, Zach. My gut says to do it. My mind says I need to know. My heart says I gotta know how to help her.”

Zach raised a hand in surrender. “Okay, okay, stop with the journey of your body. I’ll make the call.”

Marcella scanned the hallway from her perch on the edge of Dixie’s large bed and then frowned at Zach. “Weren’t there two of you? Where’s your partner, Detective York?”

“She crashed about an hour ago on the living room couch. She’ll probably be there for the next couple of hours,” Zach remarked over a shoulder as he walked into the hallway to make the call.

“I should be so lucky,” Marcella muttered, covering a yawn with a heavy hand as she tried to keep drooping eyes open.

Lindsay shut out the voices around her to read about his victims in the Clayton case folder. She paid special attention to anything with numbers. She scanned victims’ addresses first as she tried to make sense of the numbers in relation to the killer’s last statement. “How do we know if the victims still live at the same addresses? How do we know that? When was the last time we checked them?”

She flipped through the file checking for current dates or updated notes. She found a half-used up yellow legal pad in the back of the folder and pulled it out to run a finger down the first two pages. She stopped to point at month-old dates and two of the women’s current addresses, then matched them against old addresses the original assault reports.

Lindsay grinned. “Ah! Here we go. Okay, so we know who still lived in the old neighborhood and who moved on. If they haven’t moved, I need current addresses.” She frowned with a new concern. “Would he know they moved? Shit! Suppose his ‘numbers’ are based on old information? What then? Where do I go from there?” She rubbed at the tension in the back of her neck with a nervous hand as she stared at the pad in her hand with grim eyes. “Christ, this guy is one tedious bastard!”

Zach stood at the doorway, watching Lindsay study the folder. He also noted that Marcella Easley had moved. She

rested her head against the pillows near the headboard with her face turned away from the door. He couldn't tell whether she'd fallen asleep or not. "Once upon a time, you were a persistent bitch yourself, Lindsay. I'd say that makes you and him an even match."

Lindsay sighed. "That might have been true before I started my love affair with Jack. I don't know how that makes me anything but a recovering alky."

Zach shrugged, then entered the room scratching his chin. "I remember how you used to do something that drove me crazy."

Lindsay caught Zach's eye and smiled. "You mean when I'd spread out my case across every available surface, your desk, my desk, and our chairs."

Zach returned her smile, issuing an engaging grin. "Don't forget the surrounding floor, Lindy. You said spreading out helped you see the case better."

"And you used to say, 'Why don't you buy glasses or something?'"

He nodded at Marcella. "She's dead to the world, just like Shelia. Spread the stuff out at the end of the bed. I don't think either one of them will mind."

Lindsay nodded, then grabbed a quilt and walked over to cover Marcella. The note on the bed caught her eye on the way back to the folder. She picked it up and offered it to Zach. "Here. You read while I spread out. He left this shit and a bottle of Jack as a parting gift at my place tonight. He stole my copy of the Clayton file, so he's probably read my notes."

She avoided Zach's puzzled look as she wiped at damp eyes. She couldn't seem to shake Jezzy's image from her mind. The pain of finding her like that was still too fresh and far too applicable to Dixie. She needed to do something to remove the sight burning its way into her brain. She started pulling crime scene photos out of the folder and spreading them across the

*Bloodhound3*

bed face up in six piles. Then she arranged them in crime date order. She took out notes, reports, lab tests ... anything and everything about each victim, placing the papers behind the photos.

She folded her arms across her chest as she stood over the bed, looking down, and closed her eyes, blanking out everything in her mind. She wanted to look at all the evidence with new, fresh eyes. There had to be something among the paperwork and pictures that he knew she'd see. She'd bet there was something in the photos that answered his clever little riddle about numbers and beginnings. She prayed there was something in them that would speak to her and tell her where he had Dixon Freeman.

## **Chapter 22...Every victim is a number**

“Okay, Lindy, what are we looking for? Tell me again, what am I supposed to see?” Zach asked. He pressed into his tired eyes with his palms, then blinked rapidly. He stood next to Lindsay, squinting down at the pictures of each victim with a frown.

Pieces of yellow papers, pages—some torn in half, others left intact—had been ripped from the legal pad and were scattered across the bed below each of the six victims. Yellow pages had numbers filling every thin blue line on them. The numbers represented victims’ information, such as age, birth date, dates of death, cell numbers, land lines, job numbers, fax numbers, license plates, driver’s ID numbers, credit card numbers, number of husbands, children, and pets, the MTA train and bus numbers each victim rode. Anything and everything with numbers had been coded and listed somewhere on the yellow pages.

Lindsay yawned as she continued to stare at the stuff on the bed until her eyes watered. “I don’t know, Zach. I’ll know it when I see it, except that I’m going blind as a freaking bat and bug-eyed as a hound dog off scent. There has to be something in the goddamn numbers that tells us where he’s got her.”

Zach raised a hand, then pointed to Marcella, who they’d convinced to sleep crosswise on the bed. “Hey, shush. Not so loud. We don’t want to wake her.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll be quieter,” Lindsay whispered. “Let’s do

another review. I want you to start reading all the numbers again. Tell me who they belong to and what they are.”

Zach groaned. “No. This time, you do it for me.”

“Why?”

Zach grinned at Lindsay. “Reader has to stand. Listener gets to sit and write, maybe take a nap too.”

Lindsay shrugged and ran a hand through springy dreads, smoothing them down against her scalp. “Okay sure, Zach. You sit and I’ll read.”

An hour into the numbers analysis, Lindsay watched the pen drop from Zach’s hand and hit the floor as he drifted off. She sighed, wondering why she hadn’t crashed as everyone else had. She’d gotten a second wind somewhere. She could go on doing this for the next day or two, if not longer. Another hour into the numbers and she was growing weary and frustrated. Make that very frustrated. Why couldn’t she make the connection? Why couldn’t she see whatever it was that he wanted her to see? She scratched her head, fingers trying to avoid the stitches in the back but finding the spot anyway. “Ouch! That shit hurt!” she muttered.

She squatted down to look at the crime scene photos, detective notes, and the yellow sheets of papers with numbers on them scattered over half the bed. She frowned. “Five years ago, there were six victims. He murdered his last two victims, so that left four living victims. Let’s see, those are numbers, right? Combine them and make an address. Maybe he meant five, six—two and four or how about just the number of victims, not the years in between. Maybe he meant six, two, and four something on a street, avenue, or boulevard.” She eyed Zach’s list of numbers on the legal pad. Nothing matched.

She decided to check addresses one more time. “Okay, the first victim lived at 2401 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. That was no good.” She drew a line through that series of numbers. “Victim two lived at 36 Edgecombe. Nope, that’s a no go. Three lived on 353 West

154<sup>th</sup> Street. Not that one either. Victim Four's address wasn't good either." She drew a line through it too. She was damn tired and operating on fumes, but she wanted to finish this. Dixie's life depended on it. She could sleep tomorrow.

She sighed, studying the list after rubbing bleary, burning eyes. Something clicked and she saw the connection. "Oh, God, it's not six two four! It's six, four, and two. The bastard took the victims' numbers mixed 'em with my favorite drink and put it in the freaking riddle," she murmured and sat down slowly on the end of the bed with the legal pad in her hand. She knew where Dixie was. His last piece of wicked irony kicked in. The bastard had brought Dixie to 642 Jackson Street.



**H**er cheek stung. Pain, sharp and intense, was the first thing that drifted into her head. Suddenly, she was drenched in something cold enough to cause goose bumps on her arms and diamond hard nipples at the end of her breasts. Her blouse was soaked in it. When she opened her eyes, the glint of shiny metal greeted her.

"Ah, that's much better." He held the large hunting knife with the jagged edges an inch away from her nose. "I thought I might have to pierce your cute nose to wake you. I read somewhere how nobody wants to hire people with visible body piercings. You'd never get your dream job in corporate America with a pierced nose, so stay awake, Dix."

He sighed, then slid the knife back into the sheath attached to his belt. "I heard a noise outside. It wasn't rats, so I think somebody is here. The question is whether the noise I think I heard is real or Memorex, rats or people ... people or the homeless ... the homeless or Lindsay and maybe Marcella. It could be the police checking the building for pros and junkies.



They like to visit places like this. My mother sure did.”

Dixie raised a puzzled eyebrow. “Huh?”

“Oh my, didn’t I tell you?” he remarked in a smug tone before he reached into his left breast pocket to pull out an address book, then waved it in front of Dixie. “I used this to call Marcella and tell her I kidnapped you.” He studied Dixie’s lethargic eyes, waiting for her to comprehend his words, and laughed when she didn’t. “Have you figured out where you left this?” He watched Dixie close her eyes as she tried to make sense of this new development.

“My tote bag. I left it at her place. You broke into Lindsay’s apartment?” she remarked in quiet despair, then gazed at him with sad eyes. “Did you hurt her? Is she all right?”

“Jesus Christ, Woman! I just told you somebody’s here. Lindsay has to be alive to come here, don’t you think?”

Confused by his words, Dixie frowned, then wiped at salty tears with the back of her hand. She looked down and discovered he’d removed the duct tape from her hands and arms. He’d taken the chair away too. She was sitting on a damp couch that smelled of mildew. He’d covered it with a clean sheet, but the musty smell permeated the sheet. She could stand and move freely again. She rubbed clammy hands up and down cold, wet sleeves as she tried to make her body warm again. “What did you do to me? I’m freezing and my clothes are wet.”

He walked back to the kitchen area. “I had to do something to wake you quick without marking you, Dixon. If you’re cold, do some jumping jacks or something. That chain can stretch to make a fifteen-foot circle. I’m going downstairs to greet whoever is there.” He flipped the switch to cut off the ceiling lights in the area over her chair, bringing darkness with it except for an eerie illumination casting a blue glow in the kitchen.

Dixie watched him move away from the couch. She had to shift her position to keep an eye on him. She could just make out his profile before she heard a loud click like a trigger

cocking. She instinctively ducked down and away from the sound, then covered her head with defensive hands. She listened intently and kept nervous hands over her head until she heard footsteps walking down the squeaky wooden staircase. When she thought it was safe, she stood and tiptoed as far as the chain would allow her to go toward the kitchen. The chain tightened against her waist when her bare feet were several inches from the door saddle marking the kitchen's threshold. She could see what caused the weird glow. The bastard staked out the place with video cameras—inside and outside.

She could see him on one of six monitors at the front door. He was tugging on the plywood seals on the building's exterior openings, making sure nobody had disturbed them. They held. He walked over to the large picture window panels and performed the same routine with the same result. He walked to the left out of camera range, then popped back on the monitor, making the same examination of the rear door. It was nailed solid too.

He didn't see or couldn't see what Dixie saw on one of the monitors. Somebody was in the alleyway that ran alongside the length of the bar. A shadow was easing around open bags of trash. The figure avoided bold cats drinking water from muddy-looking puddles and large rats with bright eyes scurrying for cover. The figure hid behind the first in a series of small dumpsters yawning open in the alleyway, then signaled for another shadow to move up. It moved on to find a hiding place behind the next dumpster.

Dixie held her breath when the monitor clearly showed the shadow's profile as it turned away from the camera to signal again. She couldn't tell who it was. The figure pressed a handkerchief over its mouth and wore a hat pulled low. Somebody was coming for her. They knew she was here and they were coming for her. She heard the clunky, thunking sound of a metal can when somebody crashes into it, then knocks the

lid off, and the can falls over. She winced at the sound long before she saw the accident happen on the screen. She stuffed a fist in her mouth to keep from crying out when the man drew his gun as he disappeared off camera, then reappeared at the side door, checking the plywood seal.

She thought he'd wait for the intruders at the side door, but he didn't. He disappeared and then drifted into the screen again. The camera found him in a dungeon. *That must be the basement*, Dixie thought, watching him check the trap door at the underground entrance. She could see what looked like slide bolts; two of them across twin metal doors installed in a ceiling over a set of stone steps. He pulled on the padlocks clipped into the bolts. They held solidly.

Then, like magic, he disappeared and reappeared at the rear, then the side door. It wasn't until she heard him climbing the stairs that she let loose a sigh of relief. He didn't know about the shadows in the alleyway. She scrambled over to the chair and sat down. She pretended to shiver as she rubbed the sleeves of her damp sweat suit. "I'm cold. Can't you turn up the heat or build a fire?"

He walked over to the wall in front of her, turning on the overhead light. He sighed. "Nobody's out there, Dixie. I guess you didn't mean as much as I thought you did to either Lindsay or Marcella." He noted Dixie's silence when his eyes traveled to her face. He studied her closely. "What? No denial or a smart-assed remark about how hot you are? I was expecting you to say something flippant about how good you screwed both of them and gave the two of them a memorable time."

"I'm cold and tired. I just want this to be over and done."

"Hold out your hands, Dixie."

Dixie's eyes widened when she saw him pull the hunting knife out of its sheath. "Why should I? What are you gonna do?"

"I thought I might send your women a little somethin'—"

something else. A message to show I'm serious about this. What I sent before fell on deaf ears and blind eyes. It's either that or Lindsay hasn't managed to disentangle herself from police lockup. I wonder how long it takes for a person of interest to buy her release from her former coworkers. Do persons of interest have rights?"

Dixie frowned. "What?"

"It's nothing. Never mind, I'll tell you later. Just hold your right hand out for me. He eyed her look of fear. "Aw, come on Dix. I'm just gonna take some nail clippings. I'm not gonna take a finger." He shrugged. "I thought about it, but I can't risk infection. I'd have to kill you if I couldn't cure you. It's Lindsay I want, not you. You're just the means to the logical end..."

Loud noises, a door violently disassembled, wood splintering kicked several times from its frame before it collapsed. The violence shook the floor, interrupting his speech. He held a hand up for silence. "Quiet, Dix," he whispered, striding over to turn off the overhead lights. He quickly went to the video monitors. "Well, well, would you look at that? I see they made it here in one piece. It's just like the good old days of mayhem and murder."

Dixie heard shuffling.

It sounded close.

Somebody stumbled into something downstairs and cursed.

Footsteps walked around quickly before the first floor became silent.

She strained to hear something—anything.

Who was down there?

Was it Lindsay?

She frowned.

How could that be?

Lindsay thought she was having a good time with Marcella.

The stairs creaked.

Somebody crept slowly up the stairs.

Dixie took a chance, shouting a warning. “He’s got a gun! Don’t come up here. He’s got a gun,” she repeated as she searched the room for her tormentor. Where did he go? Suddenly, she knew it was a trap. He wanted her to call out. He wanted her rescuers to come up here so he could kill again. “It’s a trap. He’s setting...” She saw a flash of lightning before something white-hot hit her in the chest, knocking her backwards. She couldn’t speak. She couldn’t breathe without a thunderbolt of pain hitting her chest. Suddenly, she was floating, feeling nothing as welcome darkness swept over her.

“I told you I didn’t want to kill you, Dixie, but you wouldn’t shut up,” he explained, stooping down to check her limp body while keeping an eye on the staircase.

The gunshot echoed down the staircase, ricocheting into Lindsay’s brain.

Zach grabbed at Lindsay’s arm to stop her from charging up the remaining flight of stairs. “You’re too close to this one. You’re not armed either, Lindsay. Wait here. I’ll go find out what happened,” he ordered, stretching out to grasp her arm again and grabbing empty air.

“Let me go, Zach. If she’s dead, I’ll kill him! What am I saying? He killed her. I know a freaking gunshot when I hear one!” Lindsay avoided the hands trying to clutch her arm and raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time with the gun she’d taken from Marcella.

Meanwhile, Zach grabbed at the banister railing, almost missing it in an effort to keep from falling backwards down the stairs. Once he’d righted himself, Zach crept up the remaining stairs, keeping an ear tuned for the fatal gunshot he knew was about to happen.

Instead of a gun’s report, he heard scuffling and a thud. Something heavy, maybe a body, hit the floor, then more sounds of a struggle. A male voice uttered a curse. Somebody hit a chair and it fell over. He heard deep, labored breathing

before a loud crash and then a cry of pain. When he reached the top, he slipped the gun out of the holster under his arm and bent down until he was eye level with the top post of the wood banister. His heart thundered in his chest. Holding the gun in line with his chin so he could shoot whatever he saw, Zach peeked around the thick, solid banister post and darted back to his original position.

He exhaled slowly when he saw Lindsay's two-armed police stance over a man sitting on the floor, holding his shoulder. He felt for the extra gun he'd stuffed in his waistband, frowning when it was still there. "She didn't get that one from me," he muttered, taking another glance at Lindsay's profile. She looked enraged. It was time to show his face. He climbed up the last two steps, aiming his gun at the man's head as he climbed.

"Put the gun down, Lindsay. You're not a cop anymore. If you shoot him, you go down for murder. A good DA could make a first-degree murder charge stick. Since you're a former cop, you'd do life in solitary."

Lindsay wiped away the tears with her left hand so she could see to take aim with her right. "The sick freak killed Dixie, Zach!" she wailed. "I let him get away after he killed Barbara. I was too drunk to stop him. I'm not drunk now. I can't do this again." She stepped closer to put the gun near his head. From this distance, there was no way she'd miss. It didn't matter what happened. She'd lost everything that mattered to her in the last eight hours.

Zach sighed. He shifted his gun from the redheaded monster on the floor and pointed it at the woman standing over him. "Lindy, I don't want to shoot you, but I will. If I let you do this without trying to stop you, I couldn't look myself in the mirror every morning."

"I can't do that, Zach. You know he'll get out after he does the max. He'll be in his sixties. That's young enough to start

another killing spree. I won't stand by while the bastard kills more women," Lindsay remarked raggedly.

Shaky fingers took the safety off with a click that sounded as loud as a warning thunderclap from the impending storm in her head. She could feel the sweat drenching her body, much like a sudden burst of summer rain. It saturated her bra and panties underneath the street clothes she wore. Like a hot flash, the perspiration spread, soaking through her clothes and wetting her palms until it loosened her grip on the gun. She had to use two hands to keep the gun steady in her damp, trembling hands. "I gotta do this, Zach."

"Yeah, shoot me, you chicken-shit bitch!" Terry Cramer growled, holding his bloody, damaged shoulder. "Finish the job, Lindsay. For once in your miserable drunken life, finish the fucking job you started five years ago and kill me." He read the hesitation in Lindsay's eyes and grinned at it. "Do you wanna guess what I did to Barbara before I slit her throat?" He watched Lindsay's eyes grow cold and hard.

Zach's eyes narrowed as he listened to the monster taunt Lindsay with details they hadn't released to the public. Even Lindsay didn't know about it. She was wasted and on suspension when the lab reports came back. Nobody on the case or in the department wanted to tell her. It appeared nobody ever did. He'd pulled that part out of the report he gave her tonight. He also knew her copy, the one the monster had stolen from Lindsay, didn't contain much of anything about Barbara either. Lindsay made the copy before Barbara became the bastard's sixth victim. "Lindsay, don't listen to him. He's crazy. He doesn't know a fucking thing. Shut up, you ass-wipe!"

Terry's eyes darted from Zach to Lindsay and back again. He grinned with sudden insight. "Ah! I can see from your puzzled expression that you don't know what I did to your lady friend. Do you, Lindy?" he purred softly.

The sound of Zach removing the safety from his gun broke

the silence in the room. He took aim at the man on the floor, who was casually watching the scene unfold with a smirk on his face. “I said SHUT-THE-FUCK-UP, you evil freaking scumbag! Lindsay, ignore him and just gimme the gun.”

Lindsay rubbed a palm wet from sweat against the thigh of her jeans. She frowned, then moved away from Terry and over to Zach. “What’s he talking about, Zach? What’s he mean? What did he do to Barbara?”

“He drugged her. She bled to death when he slit her throat, end of story.”

An image of her own bedroom suddenly popped into Lindsay’s head, and Jezzy’s bloody body along with it. Then her mind raced back to the crime scene photos of the fifth victim. Patrol found the assistant professor posed on a clean mattress in an alleyway. The assailant beat her with a whiskey bottle, then left the empty bottle in her rectum. The professor was a teetotaler. During the investigation, she assumed the bastard needed to have a drink before he raped her. That rage made him pour the remainder of the whiskey on her and then beat her head with the bottle when he couldn’t get an erection. It was an empty bottle of Jack Daniels.

She suddenly realized that even back then he’d been taunting her, leaving clues she didn’t see. She groaned, then held her aching head, remembering what she had to do. She walked the two yards over to the monster on the floor, knelt down next to him, and pointed the gun at the back of his head.

“What did you do to her?” Lindsay asked in a soft, deadly monotone.

The muscles in Terry’s neck tensed until the carotid vein in his neck throbbed. He held his head. “Hey, hey, Lindy, be cool. My gun has a hair trigger. I don’t want you blowing my head off before I answer your question. If you think about it hard enough, you’ll know what I did.” He sighed as he kept his muscles rigid and his head still. “I read your notes on me. Drunk



or sober, you're the best damn investigator I know, even if your technique is a little tired. But you forgot to add the usual psychobabble about my parents." He smiled, knowing from Lindsay's position behind his head that she couldn't see the smile, but Zach could.

"Tell me, fuck face, or I blow your head off right now!"

"Excuse me, Lindsay, but you're the one eating pussy. I believe that makes you more of a fuck face than I'll ..." Terry's sentence hung in the air, incomplete, when Lindsay pressed the gun into the back of his neck hard enough to make him grunt. "Okay, okay, I'll tell you. Let's see, Barbara...Babs Parker. Hmm, she was a tasty piece of ass. Did you know we have something in common, Lindsay?"

"I don't wanna hear any more of your bullshit. Tell me or I blow a hole in your freaking head!"

The pressure from the gun barrel drew blood, adding a stripe of ruby red to the collar of his blue shirt. Terry could feel wetness sliding down the back of his neck. "Ouch, that shit hurts! Could you lighten up on my neck?"

"I don't have a goddamned thing in common with you, you treacherous sick freak!"

"Ha! There's where you're wrong! My mother was a drunk. Like your uncle, she didn't think I'd amount to much either."

"She was pretty damn accurate!"

"Your drunken uncle just beat you. He never screwed you like my mother screwed me."

"My heart bleeds for you, Terry. That's why I'm gonna save the state money by killing your sorry ass." Lindsay found another spot on his neck to press the gun. "Before I do, tell me what you did to her."

Zach sighed as he watched her press the barrel of the gun into Cramer's neck. "Drop your gun, Lindsay. I got him covered. If he makes a move, I'll shoot him."

"Shut up, Zach. I'll do the goddamn honors after I hear what

you and the department forgot to tell me about Barbara's murder!"

The monster on the floor chuckled. "They couldn't tell you, Lindy. You'd been suspended. Isn't that right, Zach? Or was it because the department knew the news might push their ex-detective over the edge. She wouldn't come back as a security guard or any other reincarnation of a cop. She'd remain the worthless drunk her uncle always said she'd be but without the violence."

Lindsay's eyes widened.

"What's wrong, Lindy? Did you forget I've been observing you for years? The last two and half years, I've been working with you. If you call sharing the joys of guarding people who wouldn't give you the time of day in the street or piss on you if you were on fire working. I know I don't call it that."

Terry shook his head, then pretended sadness. "I watched you suck it in and take shit from Ivan the Terrible and that fat motherfucker Green. When you were at your peak, you could run rings around that little bastard. Even as a recovering drunk, you coulda done more to him. Ivan harassed you sexually as a lesbian and made fun of your disability as an alcoholic. And he created a hostile work atmosphere where Green thought it was okay to say shit to you too.

"That's a double no-no. You should sue the company and get the mental midget and his fat-ass minion fired. But you won't because you're too busy being saintly and feeling guilty about all the murders you couldn't prevent."

Terry grinned at her. "Three of them you could have stopped, couldn't you, huh, Lindsay? I'm giving you a gift you'll never forget. It's something your partner and the department kept from you all these years. I fucked Babs in every hole she had. The bitch loved it too. When we finished, I took a bottle of your favorite whiskey. We toasted your health. After that, I took the bottle and jammed it up her ass as far as it would

go. I slit her throat to keep her from screaming out her delight.”

Zach’s eyes widened at Terry’s words. What was he trying to do, make Lindsay shoot him? “Lindsay, he’s lying. Don’t believe that sick freak.”

Lindsay frowned at the back of Terry’s head. She pressed the barrel into his neck, feeling the dark rage inside her bubbling over. “How could you do that shit, Terry? Those women you assaulted, the two you killed, why do it? What did Barbara ever do to you? What did any of them do to you?”

Zach interrupted the conversation when a movement caught his eye. Something moved. Maybe was it rats? It was a vacant building, so rats, roaches, mice, alley cats, and vagrants were all possible guests. If he could distract Lindsay and get her mind on something else, he could disarm her. “How do we know they’re all dead, Lindsay?”

“What?”

“Did you check Dixie’s pulse or did he tell you she was dead?”

Lindsay frowned as a faraway expression crossed her face. “He shot her in the left chest, Zach. She’s dead.”

“So you didn’t check her for a pulse, right?”

“There was no need to check. He killed her, Zach. First he killed Barbara and now Dixie. That’s why I’m killing his ass.” She tightened her grip on the gun against Terry’s neck. “He deserves to die by my hand.”

“No, you’re not. You’re taking me to the hospital,” Dixie rasped and then groaned. She struggled to sit up, using her right hand to push up while her left hand pressed into the wound on her left shoulder from an awkward angle. “Ooo, Lindy, I hurt.”

Zach cleared his throat, then took aim at Terry. “Lindsay, I got this bastard covered. Will you put the goddamned gun down? Go see to your lady friend before she bleeds to death.”

Lindsay cleaned her ear out with a nervous finger, then shook her head. She stared in the direction of Dixie’s voice and

loosened her grip on the gun in her hand. “This can’t be happening. You’re not real. I saw you die. I heard the gunshot!”

It was just enough distraction for Terry. He leaped at Lindsay, knocking the gun away as he tackled her to the ground. The gun clattered to the ground and then skittered to a stop several feet away. Lindsay and Terry were on the floor wrestling until Terry punched Lindsay in the head, stunning her. With his damaged shoulder, Terry had to crab his way over to the gun. His fingertips reached the gun’s grip, then walked up the handle to the trigger.

“Don’t do it, scumbag! You’ll never ...” Zach’s voice faded as he blew a hole in Terry’s back before he could turn to fire the gun in his hand. “...make it.”

Lindsay exhaled when she felt Zach’s hand squeezing her shoulder as she lay on her belly. She heard his voice telling her Terry was dead, but she didn’t believe it. She rolled over and sat up in a daze, rubbing her head.

“Mon Cherie?” Dixie called out in a weak croak.

Lindsay followed the sound of labored breathing, crawling over until she found Dixie slumped against the back of a battered, smelly couch. She remembered the couch from five years ago when Barbara lived here. She reached over to smooth Dixie’s hair away from her tense face with trembling hands. Her eyes widened as she gazed at the blood dripping through Dixie’s hand. She wondered how much blood she’d lost. “I’m gonna help you lie down, Dix. It’ll slow down the bleeding, okay? If you feel a little light-headed, that’s normal.”

Dixie frowned when Lindsay shifted her upper torso. “Ooo God, it hurts to move...I can’t...” Her body relaxed in Lindsay’s arms.

“Dixie?” Lindsay shook Dixie gently, but she didn’t open her eyes. Not even when Lindsay settled Dixie on her own coat to protect her from the dirty floor rug did her eyes open. “It’s gonna be okay, Sweet Sugar Baby. I’m gonna check your

shoulder to see how bad it is,” she remarked with quiet concern, not knowing whether Dixie could hear her attempts at comfort. She adjusted Dixie’s body to see the jagged hole in her sweat suit. When she started to unzip it, she could see the bullet pushed through muscle tissue about four inches above Dixie’s heart. It continued leaking blood until she pulled a hanky out of a pocket and used it to apply pressure against the wound and held it there.

“Zach, call for a bus.”

“I did already. They’re on the way. ETA is three minutes.” Zach leaned down, resting hands on his knees to look at Dixie. “How’s she doing?”

“The wound isn’t bad, but she’s lost so much blood,” Lindsay remarked, continuing to apply pressure.

Zach stood up and groaned, then grabbed his back when it spasmed. “I’m getting too old for this shit. I’m going outside to guide them up here. You okay, Lindy?”

Lindsay looked down at Dixie’s relaxed face and smiled. “Yeah, if she’s still breathing, I’m fine. Zach?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for stopping me back there. I woulda killed the bastard in cold blood.” Lindsay frowned. “I can’t believe I worked next to him for over a year. I didn’t see it in him. I didn’t see it coming. I shoulda known it was him.”

Zach sighed, then rubbed his chin. “No, Partner, you couldn’t. There was no way to tell. He fooled everybody for a long time.”

“He probably fooled himself the most and for the longest time,” Lindsay murmured, exhaling deeply. She gave Zach a sad look. “Damn it! I wish I’d listened better when Terry used to talk. I could have helped him. Maybe given him some advice and the name of a good therapist or something.” She frowned. “Who am I kidding? I was too busy just trying to stay sober to help anybody with their problems.”

“Come on. Lindy. You know some people like living in misery. I doubt he was ready to listen to you or anyone else.” He watched her grow silent. “I’d better get down there. Lindy?”

“Yeah, Zach?”

“Are we good?”

Lindsay studied Zach’s face for a moment before she grinned. “Yeah, Big Apple, we’re good. We’ll always be good. Tell IA to call me about how the bastard got to be lying dead on the floor.”

Zach nodded. “After this is over, don’t be surprised if Russell and the department come knocking at your door asking you to come back.”

Lindsay rolled her eyes upward. “Yeah, sure they will, Zach.”

“Trust me on this one, Lindsay. The department needs success stories like yours. It’s good for the old image.” Zach patted his chest. “Hell, I need you back working with me again.”

“Humph. I don’t think Shelia would like that.”

Lindsay looked down at the blood-soaked hanky she’d pressed against Dixie’s chest and wondered how this was going to end. For nearly five years, she’d imagined returning to work. It was the one thing she’d wanted more than a shot of Jack or a can of beer. Being a cop again entered her dreams and became a secret mantra. She prayed about it to her higher power. “Just gimme another chance. I swear I won’t screw it up,” she’d say. After tonight’s activities--or was it early tomorrow already--Zach said it would happen. Now, she wasn’t sure she wanted the job anymore.



**L**indsay’s precariously balanced chair legs hit the floor. She woke with a start. For a moment, she panicked. “Oh shit,

I'm back in the hospital. Am I hurt?" she muttered, patting her chest, then her arms, belly, and finally, her head. "Nothing hurts here." She cupped hands over her mouth, blew into them, and inhaled deeply. She issued a relieved sigh. "I'm not drunk. Why am I here?" she muttered, scanning the room with a surprised look.

"If you're finished masturbating, Washington, bring me some water. I'm thirsty." Wide, sparkling eyes studied Lindsay as she went through her hospital wakeup routine.

Lindsay frowned. She drew close to the bed, then stared down at Dixon Freeman with a frown. "Damn it, Woman, don't you ever scare me like that again!"

"Oh, just shut up, Washington! Go get me some water."

Lindsay sighed. It was good to hear Dixie's voice, even if it was fussing at her. She poured water from the pitcher on the end table and offered it to Dixon. When she didn't reach out for it, she put it in her lap. "There you go. Want me to feed it to you?"

"No, I do not!" Dixie struggled to sit up to accept the water. Her left shoulder and side hurt too much for her to reach out, so she just left it in her lap. "Oh, that hurts." She clenched her teeth when the pain bit into her shoulder again. "If you're going to issue orders, ex-Detective Washington, you can just leave right now. I'll call Marcella in here to give me a ride home."

Lindsay removed the cup from Dixie's lap and set it on the end table next to her bed. She shoved a hand in her pocket to play with the change before she cleared her throat and drew Dixie's attention. She rubbed the back of her neck with the other hand. "I kinda told Marcella that we... I mean that I... Ah... I... you know what I mean, Dixie."

Dixie frowned at Lindsay's efforts to explain. "No, I don't know. Just spit it out, Washington, then you can leave me in peace."

Lindsay pulled on the right side of the bed rail until she pushed it down. "Mind if I sit down for a minute? I'm tired. I

stayed up all night with you.”

Dixie leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes, pretending a weariness she didn't feel. “I don't care what you do, Washington. It's over. I don't have to care about you anymore.” That was such a lie, but she couldn't keep waiting for a woman who didn't want more from her. She already had a half-assed relationship with Marcella. She didn't need another one with Lindsay Washington. Humph, at least Marcella was willing to buy her nice gifts and spent time with her.

“Dixon Freeman, open those spectacular eyes and look at me when I'm proposing to you!”

Dixie's eyes flew open. She stared at Lindsay in disbelief.

“Yeah, that's right. I'm proposing to you. I told Marcella too. I said it because I wanted to take care of you. I want to make you laugh when you're sad. I want to hold you when you feel scared. I wanna soothe you when you're sick or hurt.” Lindsay rubbed the back of her neck, then stroked her chin in a familiar gesture. “I'm trying to say I want to be in your life all the time. I can't do that if Marcella's there.” She studied Dixie with a questioning look. “That is, unless you prefer Marcella's company to mine.”

Dixie's eyes twinkled. “Well, she does give me nice presents. She wants to put me through law school. She wants me to...” Firm lips covered hers with a kiss that started tenderly but ended with the two women feeling the heat in it. She licked her lips. “Mmm, you taste good, Washington. Can I get...another one?”

Lindsay leaned over to kiss Dixie hard, pushing her tongue into Dixie's mouth and then pressing into her chest.

Dixie groaned loudly.

“Shit! Did I hurt you? Oh God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do anything to hurt you. What can I do to make you feel better, Dix?” Lindsay stopped tasting Dixie's lips and started stroking her cheek.



Dixie nodded against the pillows. She sighed and then pressed the button for the painkiller. “A little when you pressed against my shoulder, but it’s aching anyway. I didn’t know getting shot could hurt so much.” Her eyes closed.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Which one?” Dixie yawned, then murmured in a drowsy voice without opening her eyes.

Lindsay watched the pain medication overwhelm Dixie. She slipped off the bed and leaned over to pull the covers over Dixie, then whispered, “Go back to sleep, Dixie. I’ll be here when you wake.”

Dixie’s eyes fluttered open for a moment. “Hey, Washington, you forgot to tell me you love me.”

Lindsay grinned and shoved a hand in her pocket. “I guess I did. I love you, Dixon Freeman. I don’t understand you and your French words, but I know for sure I love you.”

Dixie exhaled quickly. “It’s Creole, damn it! I speak Creole, Washington. Learn the difference.”

Lindsay chuckled. “Yes, Ma’am. I will if you’re my teacher. They say if you want to learn a new language, find a woman who speaks it. Hook up with her. She’ll teach you all you need to know. So I’m hooking up with you.”

Dixie’s tired eyes closed. “If that’s your idea of a proposal, Washington, you need more help than I thought.”

Lindsay paced at the side of the bed. “Shit! What do you want from me? I just told you I loved you. I want us to live together. Isn’t that enough for you?”

Dixie opened drowsy eyes, then issued a smug grin as she looked at Lindsay. “Humph! I just wanted to hear you say it again. Yes, I want you and your devilish cat.”

Lindsay decided she’d tell Dixie about Jezyz’s death another time. Today, she’d just play along with whatever Dixie wanted. “You’ve managed to spoil my cat rotten in only two days, Dixie. She misses you.”

“Oh, never mind about her, Lindsay. I want to hear it again. Say it.” Dixie snuggled into the pillows.

Lindsay shrugged, then pulled the chair she’d slept in all night closer to the bed. She reached over to stroke the hand in Dixie’s lap. “I love you, Dixon Freeman.” She watched Dixie’s eyes close and her breathing become regular before she made a confession. “I was gonna die. No, I was gonna get stinking drunk. I was gonna crawl into the goddamned bottle and never come out when I thought the sick freak killed you, Dixie. I didn’t think I’d feel this way about anybody ever again.”

She reached over to brush a strand of hair away from Dixie’s eyes as she slept, then kissed her forehead. “I’m glad I can still love. After Barbara died, I hit bottom. I stayed there for years. I didn’t think anybody could love me. Hell, I didn’t think I could love me and then I met you, Dixon Freeman. You got under my skin the way nobody else did. You proved I could love again. I didn’t have to get drunk to do it either. Most of all, I’m glad I met you, Dixon Freeman.”

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