

# Darklighter

by  
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Part Three

I made my hands stop gripping my chair arms before I broke them and made an attempt to look bored and irritated. I wasn't sure how successful I was. I could still feel my gut clenching with anxiety as I tried to shore up my act by leaning forward, carefully picking out a candy from the dish, and leaning back again.

I slowly unwrapped my candy as I said irritably, "Can we just pretend you shouted at me, I apologized, and you said don't do it again, or you'll be suspended? I've had a bad morning–night–life–you fill in the blank.

Hammond made a steeple out of his fingers and replied calmly. "I wasn't going to shout and I don't want to suspend you."

I was relieved. "Well, that's good." I put the wrapper back into the candy dish and popped the candy into my mouth. It was raspberry flavored. Not my favorite.

"I'd like to fire you." Hammond fished the wrapper out of his candy dish and tossed it somewhere behind his desk, presumably into a wastebasket there. "You're lucky you're *that* good, Singer."

"Thank you."

Hammond made a vague motion in the direction of the main precinct room. "There are a lot of veteran officers out there who would love to have your job. They would be a hell of a lot less high maintenance. They wouldn't disappear for days at a time either."

"You know why I take the time off! If you'd rather I came in here drunk off my ass..."

Hammond leaned forward with intensity, his elbows on his desk with his hands flat, as if he felt like standing up and knocking sense into me. "I'd rather you went to the police psychiatrist instead of *taking the edge off* with a drinking binge. Does it even help?

I sucked on my candy for a moment and then said in a low, disgusted voice, "My high school psychiatrist was better qualified than him. Who said I was drinking, anyway?"

Hammond's expression was incredulous.

"You weren't drinking? Were you taking drugs instead? Is that why you're wearing your sunglasses? So I can't see your eyes?"

A charge like that struck like a knife into my heart considering my past. Hammond was well aware of that past. In fact, he was a large part of it. That meant the anger and pain he was inflicting was intentional.

I swallowed what was left of my candy, and whipped off my sunglasses so that Hammond could see my bloodshot, but not dilated eyes. I replied furiously, "How many times do I have to tell you that I'll never do drugs? I don't care how shitty, or crazy my life gets, I won't end up like my father."

Hammond sat back in his chair again, but he was looking concerned. My outburst hadn't convinced him.

"Drinking is the same thing Jack. It just takes longer. The psychiatrist could prescribe you something safe."

I stared at the floor rather than at Hammond's concerned expression. My shoes were dirty and the white cat fur clung to my pants leg.

"That's how it starts out," I argued. "The drugs help you, hook you, and then kill you by slow degrees."

Hammond sounded disgusted and at his wits end.

"Let's not do this again," Hammond said tightly. "You're mischaracterizing your father's death. I worked on his case, remember? You're displaying paranoia. It keeps you from getting the help you need. If I hadn't made that promise to your father..."

He trailed off, obviously taking a painful, guilt ridden trip down memory lane.

I wasn't going to allow him to indulge in self-flagellation. "You're right, let's not do this again. I don't need to hear about how my father *guilt tripped* you with his dying breath into transferring me to your precinct, when I was looking at a dismissal for my dozens of failed psych evaluations and a multitude of disciplinary marks. You shot him in self-defense. He was high on prescription meds and he was going to shoot you. You were doing your job. Nobody says any differently, including me. You don't need to keep me employed if you want to fire me."

Hammond looked stricken. "Jack, I..."

I made a dismissive gesture. "Like I said when I first came in; let's just assume we both danced the dance and I'll get back to work."

Puss came out from beneath the desk and tried to rub against my leg again. I stared at it with wide eyes, expecting it to change into the ghost woman. When it didn't, I dared to push it away from me. My hand sunk into its thick white fur. It was very soft and warm.

The cat gave me an offended look and walked away to investigate a corner of the office.

"Why is there a cat in your office?"

Hammond's expression became indulgent as he looked over at the cat. He shrugged, clearly embarrassed as well.

"I bought her a week ago. For some reason, I can't leave her at home. I feel better when she's here. She helps with my stress. Maybe you should get one?"

I stared at the cat. She seems to be staring back smugly. "I have pets. They love me, aren't demanding, and don't shed all over the place. Speaking of which, I'm sending you my cleaning bill."

Hammond made a dismissive gesture and made some notes on his blotter. When he was done, he looked up at Jack with a serious expression.

“Forget the cat. I managed to get you a new partner. She should be arriving in about an hour. Try not to break this one, Jack. I’m running out of people who owe me favors.”

“Hugh’s was not my fault!” I retorted.

“It’s never your fault, Jack,” Hammond said in disgust, “yet the common denominator here is you. You’re still on the force while your partners have either quit or transferred. You take too many risks and you’re too hard to work with. Fix both those things in one hour.”

I stood and grabbed a handful of candies.

“Maybe you need to hire someone more hardcore who can keep up with me?” I argued angrily as I stuffed the candies into my pocket. “These kids fresh out of the academy you keep sticking me with—”

“Don’t know your reputation,” Hammond pointed out in disgust. “The ones with more experience don’t want to ruin their careers by being associated with you.”

“I thought you were the Chief of Police in this precinct. Don’t you give the orders around here?”

“How would that go exactly, Jack? I order you to work with a maniac, ruin your career, and maybe lose your life. Report to Detective Jack Singer.”

“I see that asking nicely hasn’t had any results either, so what’s your point?”

Hammond rubbed his forehead and frowned. They stared at each other for a long moment.

“What?” Hammond asked abruptly.

“Am I fired or not?”

Hammond swore under his breath.

“I told you I just acquired another partner for you. I wouldn’t do that if I’d just fired you, Singer!”

I smirked. “I just needed confirmation.”

“If your unorthodox investigating technique didn’t solve so many cases, I would fire you.”

My smirk turned into a grin. “A compliment, thanks.”

“It was an observation. Don’t push your luck. When your new partner arrives, I expect you to start with the Metzger case. Some questions were raised about the investigation. Verify that the case was handled with due diligence and close it. Take your new partner along and break her in slow. I suggest you try very hard this time not to let her in on your particular talent.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And don’t let her get killed on the first day.”

“Checking the facts of a case can get someone killed?”

“Ask Mullens—oh, right. You can’t. He has a restraining order against you. I’ve never lost a detective because of an attack by an irritated circus elephant, Singer.”

“The elephant was pertinent to the case.”

“Sure it was. Get out of my office, Jack.”

The cat jumped into Hammond’s lap again. He stared down at it and his angry expression suddenly turned into pleasure. He smiled and smoothed a hand along the cat’s back, making it purr loudly.

The cat was watching me intently. I stared back unnerved.

“Something else?” Hammond asked abruptly.

The cat didn’t transform again. It continued to look like an ordinary cat.

“No, nothing.”

I left Hammond’s office and couldn’t help a shiver.