

Begin Again

Peace from God
the Lord Jesus

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“I never thought there was a killer out there who could scare me more than Kiss-Me-Not,” Lindsay murmured. She sat on the old faded sofa, her shoulders slumped and her brown eyes rimmed with red and deep, dark circles. She looked like she hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in days... maybe weeks.

The psychiatrist tilted his head. “Does he?”

“Scare me?” Lindsay asked. “Yes,” she whispered. *Hell yes*, her thoughts added.

“He’s made it personal.”

“So did Harris. He killed my father.”

“But this is different,” the shrink pointed out gently.

“Yeah.” Lindsay’s voice was a faint imitation of itself. “This one is different.”

Six months earlier...

Lindsay moved through the Saturday morning drizzle, her uniform already so soaked an umbrella made little sense. She passed trees, flowers, and headstones, the wet scent of them invading her senses as she made her way toward the limo, her brown eyes focused on the passing blades of grass under foot. An American flag was folded just so and tucked fiercely under her right arm, shielded from the weather as much as possible.

As she reached the car, the door opened and Jill stepped out with an umbrella in hand. She ushered Lindsay inside and the inspector dipped her head and complied, sliding in next to Cindy and diagonal to Claire. Jill slipped back inside and closed the door. They sat in silence for several moments as the rain drummed on the roof before the limo eased forward and seemed to glide from the cemetery.

Lindsay kept her eyes on the floor, hoping the others wouldn’t try to get her to talk. She just wanted to go home. She just wanted to be alone with a bottle of scotch and memories of her father.

A warm hand slid into Lindsay’s cold one. Cindy said nothing, just offered Lindsay wordless comfort. It took a few moments but Lindsay finally squeezed back.

Cindy felt Lindsay relax marginally beside her and she shifted closer, trying to share some of her body heat with her now shivering friend. Taking a breath, she reached over and eased the flag from Lindsay’s arm before laying it reverently across her own lap. She worried her presumptuousness would anger the inspector but Lindsay only looked at her, a tiny sliver of gratitude visible in her tired and tear-filled eyes.

Heedless of the rain-soaked clothes, Cindy put her head down on Lindsay's shoulder. No one said a word as the limo carried them back to the church and their waiting cars. The hardest part of the day was almost over.

There was nothing left for Claire, Jill and Cindy to do but watch from under the shelter of the church entrance as Lindsay drove away.

"Someone should be with her," Cindy protested.

Claire shook her head. "Honey, I know you want to help, but..."

"She lost her father. I know what that feels like. She may say she wants to be alone but she doesn't."

"Cindy," Jill said, her voice sounding raspy and raw. "She won't appreciate it. When Lindsay says she wants to be alone she means it. I know first hand, kiddo. Give her some time to grieve. When she's ready for us to be there she'll let us know."

Every fiber of Cindy's being was telling her to go to Lindsay. She understood that Jill and Claire knew Lindsay better than anyone, but her instincts were rarely wrong... and they were rarely this strong. "You do what you feel is right."

"Cindy," Claire warned.

"Give me your keys to her place," Cindy told Jill

"I am not going to be an accessory to this act of stupidity," Jill huffed. She crossed her arms and looked at Cindy defiantly.

"Jill," Cindy pleaded. "She's going to go home and drink. You know it and I know it. I don't care if I have to sit out on the street in my car and keep watch. Someone needs to be there for her right now, and I know what she's feeling better than anyone."

Claire gently nudged Jill in the side with her elbow. "Give the girl the keys."

Cindy watched them both with a hopeful expression as the rain picked up in intensity behind them.

"Fine." Jill fished the set of keys out of her purse and slapped them into Cindy's palm. She pretended to be annoyed even though she was secretly relieved. "If she kicks you out of the club for this, don't come crying to me."

"It's not a club," Cindy replied cheekily. She grinned when Jill shook her head but smiled. "If she doesn't want me there she can throw me out." Cindy stepped forward

and gave them both a quick hug. “I’ll call you later and you can tell me you told me so.”

Jill and Claire watched her dart out into the rain. Jill seemed to reconsider and took a step after her but Claire grabbed her wrist. “Let her go,” she said in a resigned voice. “Some things you have to learn on your own.”

Jill paused as she watched Cindy clamber into Maggie, her little red Saab. “What if she’s right?”

Claire smiled. “Then I guess it’s a good thing she’s more stubborn than we are.”

Act 1:

“What’s the best approach here, Thomas?” Two hours later Cindy sat in her car outside Lindsay’s apartment. She’d run home and packed a bag before swinging by Mike’s Pizza and getting Lindsay her favorite deep dish. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, breathing in the scent of rain and mozzarella as she watched Lindsay’s windows for signs of life.

She knew Lindsay was in there hurting and it was driving Cindy nearly out of her mind. It was a ground rule of the club. Make Lindsay laugh when the chips were down. Well the damn chips were all over the floor right now. Pete was half a world away, Lindsay’s father was dead and the case that had ruined Lindsay’s marriage and damn near destroyed her life had come to a violent end.

Cindy knew if she’d been in Lindsay’s shoes she would have come completely unhinged by now. It was too much too fast, even for someone as strong as Lindsay Boxer. A meltdown had to be coming and the reporter was terrified at the thought of Lindsay being alone when it happened. Lindsay would put on a brave front but underneath it Cindy knew the flavor of the pain Lindsay was in. She’d tasted it herself.

She decided against knocking. Lindsay would either ignore her or slam the door in her face. That meant the direct approach was her only option. Hopefully Lindsay wouldn’t shoot her.

Or arrest her for breaking and entering.

Taking a deep breath, Cindy shoved her door open, grabbed her bag and the pizza, and then made a mad dash for Lindsay’s front porch. She fumbled with the unfamiliar locks but finally got them open before stepping inside. Trotting quickly up the steps she came to Lindsay’s apartment door on the second floor and began sorting through keys once more. She found the right one this time on the first try and shouldered the door open, turning to call out and announce her presence. Her teeth snapped together when she found herself face to muzzle with Lindsay’s gun. “Hi.”

Lindsay rolled her eyes and re-holstered her weapon. “If I had been one more drink into that bottle I might have shot you,” she slurred. She noted Cindy’s bag and the pizza but was slow to connect the dots. “You going somewhere?”

“Already there.” Cindy kicked the door closed then thrust the pizza box into Lindsay’s hands. She could smell the scotch on Lindsay’s breath and her nose wrinkled a little in reaction as she brushed past her and headed for the living room. It didn’t escape her attention that Lindsay was now barefoot in worn and torn jeans and a t-shirt. She tried not to let it worry her that her friend was wearing her service weapon under the circumstances.

Lindsay stared fuzzily at the box in her hands before turning her head to watch Cindy’s small frame for a moment. The redhead was soaked and dripping water all over her floor. Dazedly, Lindsay followed her into the living room and watched as Cindy seated herself on the sofa and hefted the bottle of scotch to read the label. “What are you doing?”

Cindy shrugged. “Hanging out.”

“Cindy,” Lindsay was pleased with herself for sounding so patient. “I really want to be alone right now.”

The reporter patted the space next to her. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“You are in no position to bargain,” Lindsay replied with a dry laugh, but she found her steps taking her to Cindy’s side anyway.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Cindy said again, unperturbed as Lindsay settled next to her. “You eat this pizza with me, and I’ll go.” She tapped the top of the box in Lindsay’s hands.

Lindsay glanced down at the warm box. She could smell the cheese, and her stomach was surprisingly open to the notion of having a bite of it. She looked up at Cindy again. “Why don’t you just leave it?”

“I’m hungry.” Cindy stared at her innocently.

Lindsay shook her head. She was too drunk to deal diplomatically with Cindy Thomas on a mission, especially when *she* was the mission. “There is a reason I didn’t want to go be with people, eat food and talk about my dad,” she said crossly.

“I know. I did the same thing you’re doing when my dad died.”

That brought Lindsay up short. She and Cindy had never really shared much of their family history. She suddenly felt guilty about that. “In the hospital...” Her voice faltered at the memory of her friend lying in that bed looking so frighteningly pale. “You were

waiting on your parents...”

“My mom and step dad.”

“Oh,” Lindsay breathed, aching for her instead of herself for a moment. “Sorry.”

Cindy moved aside the bottle and set the pizza box on the coffee table. Lindsay watched her, half irked and half touched. Truthfully she was soaking in Cindy’s presence. She was just so vibrant. So alive. Her energy filled the room and brightened some of the darkness Lindsay felt pressing in on her. The reporter wasn’t demanding that she talk about her dad. She wasn’t encouraging her to cry and let it all out. She wasn’t scolding her for drinking her sorrows away. Cindy was just there. A part of her really needed that.

Cindy handed her a slice of pizza as Lindsay watched her quietly. “You get started,” she said. “I’ll go get plates and napkins.”

Lindsay watched her go, her eyes drawn to the sway of the girl’s hips. She rubbed a hand over her bleary eyes and tried to focus on what she was doing. Finally she took a bite of her pizza. It was the first thing she’d really tasted in days, and she found herself growing more enthusiastic about the idea of sharing it with Cindy.

It could have been so much worse, Lindsay realized, and the thought managed to sober her momentarily. She could have buried her dad today and visited Cindy’s grave. The reporter’s shooting was still fresh on her mind and as the week had progressed she’d seen the occasional flashes of pain dart across the girl’s features. There was something to be thankful for today. Cindy was still there. She was still breathing. Still talking in that incessantly adorable way of hers. Still looking after Lindsay like she had a right to.

Maybe she did.

Lindsay only knew she liked it when Cindy fussed over her, but that was something she would never share with another soul. Especially not with Cindy. Jill and Claire had tried in their years as friends to be there when Lindsay needed them. Then Kiss-Me-Not had happened and things hadn’t been the same since. Her old friends were more cautious with her now. They took her at her word when she said she wanted to be alone. Lindsay didn’t blame them. She’d given them every reason to believe her.

She cursed herself, not for the first time, for that.

The reporter returned with plates and napkins, interrupting Lindsay’s bitter musings. Cindy plopped playfully down on the couch and handed Lindsay a soda before popping her own open. She was relieved when Lindsay did the same and didn’t reach for the bottle of scotch again.

“What... what happened to your dad?” Lindsay asked after a few moments of silence

and chewing.

Cindy had known the conversation would turn to this at some point this evening but her guts still churned in reaction. “He was shot and killed about three months after I graduated college.”

Lindsay didn’t know what to say. This was not something she expected them to have in common.

“You remind me of him a little,” Cindy confessed.

Lindsay looked at her questioningly.

“He was a cop. Lived and breathed the job until...” Cindy set her soda down and took a breath.

“Until it killed him,” Lindsay guessed. She watched as Cindy nodded. She could see the tears brimming in the reporter’s eyes, but they didn’t fall.

“Domestic dispute,” Cindy said quietly as she picked off a piece of pepperoni and popped it into her mouth with little enthusiasm. “He’d been to that house five times in two months, but the woman wouldn’t press charges. Maybe if she had she, her two kids and my dad would still be here.”

Lindsay swallowed around the lump in her throat. Her gaze dropped, and she felt her heart do the same. All those times she’d made fun of Cindy, teasing her about her age, she realized now how off the mark she’d been. Cindy was apparently wiser than her years... wiser than any of them had given her credit for. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Cindy looked at her then and smiled sadly. “He died doing what he loved. He wouldn’t have had it any other way.” She leaned back against the sofa and took a bite of her pizza signaling an end to the conversation.

Lindsay didn’t want to let this window into Cindy’s past close just yet. She scooted closer and propped her feet up on the coffee table. “So I bet you were a precocious brat as a kid,” she teased.

“Hey!” Cindy laughed, charmed that Lindsay was showing interest. She playfully slapped Lindsay’s shoulder.

“Call it a hunch.” Lindsay took another bite of her pizza as she watched Cindy’s smiling features with her first sense of peace in a week.

Something was buzzing.

Cindy cracked open one eye and looked around. Disoriented by familiar furniture that wasn't her own, the reporter took a moment to place her surroundings. She got some unexpected help when a pair of warm brown eyes suddenly popped up in her line of sight.

Ah. Lindsay's living room.

"Hi, Martha," Cindy murmured quietly. She reached out and scratched the dog behind an ear. She slowly became aware that she wasn't actually lying flush on the couch. That meant she had to be lying on...

Cindy bolted upright, spooking the dog who ran for the kitchen. Her sudden movement stirred the sleeping woman whom she'd been inadvertently using as a pillow. They'd fallen asleep practically sitting up. Lindsay's head slowly lifted from the arm rest and one of her feet squeaked on the hardwood floor as she moved. After a moment, Lindsay rolled over and blinked her eyes open, staring at Cindy in obvious confusion.

"Hi," Cindy said with a little wave, hoping her face wasn't as red as her hair.

Lindsay's brow furrowed as she tried to put the pieces together.

The buzzing that had drawn Cindy out of her dreams filled the air again and they both looked toward the coffee table. Lindsay's cell phone vibrated across the surface, coming dangerously close to the edge before Cindy grabbed it and handed it to her friend.

Lindsay cleared her throat. With one last confused glance at the reporter who was now scrambling to her feet she flipped the phone open. "Boxer." She listened with growing dread as the voice on the other line spoke. Cindy watched from her safer position at the end of the couch.

"I'll be there in half an hour." Lindsay closed the phone before looking up at the redhead.

"Problem?" Cindy asked casually.

"Were you here all night?" Lindsay asked her voice still thick with sleep.

"Apparently. We must have conked out on the couch. The phone woke me up." Cindy straightened her clothes self-consciously.

Lindsay frowned. She could vaguely remember Cindy's warm weight on her back but decided she had to be imagining things. Sighing, she rolled over and got to her feet. "I have to go."

"You caught a case?" Cindy asked unhappily. "I thought you took some time off."

“I did. Looks like my time is over.” Lindsay looked at the reporter. “Chris Blake is dead.” She waited for Cindy’s eyes to widen and wasn’t disappointed. “He was found in his kitchen about forty five minutes ago by the maid.”

Cindy rubbed her face with her hands. Chris Blake was one of the city’s most wealthy and well-known restaurateurs. His death was going to make the front page for days. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because as soon as I leave you’re going to call the crime desk, find out about it and wind up meeting me there anyway.” Lindsay didn’t seem bothered by the knowledge, Cindy realized; she seemed to just accept it as fact. She watched as the inspector wandered down the hall toward the bathroom. With a grin, Cindy grabbed her bag and headed toward the kitchen to change.

Chris Blake’s kitchen was the size of Lindsay’s entire apartment, she decided. His refrigerator alone, a large, stainless steel, commercial-grade monster, wouldn’t fit in both her bathrooms combined. The room would have seemed airy and pretty with its white and gold tones on the cabinets and floor, but the stench and sight that greeted her in the middle of it eclipsed the expensive décor.

“Oh that’s just *nasty*,” Jill gasped then turned her head away from Blake’s corpse.

Lindsay’s lips were pursed in distaste. “I would have to agree with you on this one.”

They watched as Claire clucked her tongue as she made a circuit around the body. “That is not something even I see every day,” the medical examiner murmured.

“God, I would hope not,” Jill said from her position in the doorway. She still had her back to the scene and was trying mightily not to puke. Her shallow breaths seemed to have little effect at blocking out the hideous smell that permeated the air. She started fiddling in her purse for the bottle of vapor rub she kept there. “What is all that...”

“Looks like vomit,” Lindsay confessed with a little swallow. Blake was tied to a kitchen chair, his light blue shirt soaked through with the stuff. What was far more disturbing was the half-chewed food that was crammed in his mouth and down his throat.

“I meant in his mouth,” Jill replied smartly.

“Looks like chicken. Dark meat I’d say.” Claire bit her lip as Jill staggered from the room with a strangled sound.

“That was cold,” Lindsay muttered but she was smiling.

“It was the truth.” Claire shrugged but there was a tiny grin on her lips. She shook her head and grew serious again. “This took some patience.”

“You think someone force fed the guy until he died?”

“Looks like it at first blush. I’ll know more when I have a look inside.”

Lindsay’s mouth twisted at the thought. Blake was a big man. A really big man. He was as well-known for owning his six restaurants as he was for eating at them. Lindsay had never met him personally, however, she had heard good things about him. He made considerable donations to various police and children’s charities. Tom had mentioned him once in passing, saying the only thing bigger than Blake’s stomach was his heart.

Given the amount of food in his mouth and the remains of it on his shirt and the floor, Lindsay was struck with the perverse thought that Blake might pop like a bubble as soon as Claire’s scalpel touched his skin. “Jill is right. This is gross.”

Claire shook her head. “The man did a lot of good. He did not deserve to die like this.”

“We’ll make it as right as we can,” Lindsay told her with conviction. She started to leave Claire to her work but stopped when Claire said her name.

“You know I have to ask if you’re alright, right?”

Lindsay smiled at her friend’s concern. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem hung over,” Claire replied with a touch of pride.

“Cindy,” was all Lindsay had to say before she turned and headed toward the back door.

Claire pursed her lips. “Well, well, Thomas. Who knew you had it in you to tame the bull-headed beast.” She looked back at the body and took a tiny swallow of her own. She was not looking at a pretty way to die.

Lindsay found the reporter in question inside the greenhouse. She stepped inside, feeling the warm, humid air stir against her skin as the scent of soil and watered plants reached her. Cindy was rubbing soothing circles on Jill’s back as the attorney leaned over some potted begonias, her hands on her knees.

“Tell me you did not throw up in here.”

“Not yet,” Cindy answered for the blonde who was taking slow, measured breaths. “Was it that bad in there?”

“It was pretty bad,” Lindsay said with a wince. “I’ll certainly be sticking to steak and fish for awhile.”

Jill groaned and extended a particular finger back toward the detective.

Lindsay’s eyebrows elevated but she didn’t comment on Jill’s colorful rebuke. “Did she fill you in?” she asked Cindy.

“Kinda. She was more focused on the ‘not puking’ part.”

“Still am,” Jill tossed over her shoulder.

Lindsay took Cindy’s elbow and led her away from the attorney.

“So he was found with chicken stuffed down his throat?” Cindy had a look on her face like she was dying to say something she really shouldn’t.

“Just spit it out, Thomas.”

“Murder most fowl?” Cindy said in a rush. “Oh, God, I am so going to hell for that.” She quickly crossed herself.

Lindsay wanted to laugh, but she managed to rein in her amusement. It wasn’t appropriate. “Someone appears to have made Blake eat until he died. I didn’t even know that was truly possible to do. Drink yourself to death, yes, but eat until it killed you?”

Cindy grew serious. “He was a really nice guy. Had this really contagious laugh. I met him a few times when I was first starting out at the Register. I’m just having a hard time believing that he’s dead. I really shouldn’t have said that murder most fowl thing…”

“It’s fine,” Lindsay promised. “It’s a coping mechanism to joke at something like this.”

“I know,” Cindy confessed. “It just feels especially disrespectful when you know the deceased.”

“So what can you tell me about Blake?”

Cindy took a breath. “Like I said, he’s a good guy. His only enemies would be other restaurant owners. Blake’s places are popular. They’re packed almost every night.” She gestured at the expansive greenhouse and the towering mansion beyond. “He obviously does well, but he gives a lot of cash to charity.”

“Married? Kids?”

“Two kids from a previous marriage. I think they’d be college age about now, maybe a little older.”

“No wife in the picture, then?”

“Only an ex one,” Jill said as she joined them. She was still as green as some of the leaves around them, but at least she didn’t appear to be hyperventilating anymore.

“Any of them have motive?” Lindsay asked.

Jill shrugged. “I’ll look into his will and financials.” She turned and looked at Cindy. “Although I’m betting you can get them faster.”

Cindy just smiled. “I’ll let you know where to look.”

“Thank you.”

“Alright. We start with the family and any business partners. We look at his staff and any competition he’s crossed swords with lately.”

Jill nodded. “I’ll work the family and partners angle... see if I can come up with any legal reason someone would want this guy dead.”

“It’s not just about someone wanting this guy dead,” Lindsay said. “What was done to Blake took a long time. The killer was patient, taking as long as it took. This goes beyond a disagreement. This is loathing on the most disturbing of levels.”

The three women regarded each other for a moment as the knowledge sank in. Suddenly there was nothing funny about the case at all.

“Inspector?” a uniformed officer called from the entrance.

Cindy eased out of his line of sight as Jill and Lindsay stepped casually in front of her.

“What is it?” Lindsay called back.

“The M.E. found something you should see.”

“What have you got?” Lindsay asked as she and Jill returned to the kitchen.

Claire glanced away from where two techs were wrangling Blake’s body onto a gurney. She shook her head as she moved around them to the counter, picking up some sort of book in a clear plastic bag. “We found this in the fridge.”

Lindsay accepted the evidence bag and smoothed a gloved finger over the words she saw printed in gold leaf on the black cover.

“A Bible?” Jill asked as she leaned over Lindsay’s shoulder for a look. “In the fridge?”

“Mmhhh.” Claire crossed her arms. “It was open with a particular passage circled in red.”

Lindsay and Jill looked at her expectantly.

“Philippians, chapter four, verse five. Let moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.”

“That doesn’t sound like a coincidence,” Jill murmured, her gaze darting uneasily to the body then away again.

“The Bible in the fridge didn’t clue you in first?” Claire drawled.

Jill gave her a cross look then glanced at Lindsay who was staring at the leather-bound volume in her hands with a worried expression. “What?”

“Have you ever just...” Lindsay paused, trying to articulate her thoughts.

“Just what?” Claire prompted, concerned by the look on Lindsay’s face.

Lindsay shrugged, trying to play off the uncomfortable feeling that had washed over her as she held the book in her hands. “Nothing,” she said as she handed the evidence to a passing CSI to bag and tag. How did she tell them she felt like she’d just had a brush with something evil and not sound like an idiot?

Shaken and trying not to show it, Lindsay gave both her friends a slight nod and left the room, hoping like hell it didn’t look like she was running.

“Lindsay? Lindsay!” Cindy hustled after her tall friend as she watched Lindsay moving across the grounds in longer strides than normal. Lindsay looked almost like she was fleeing the scene as she snapped off her latex gloves and headed for her white SUV at the curb.

Cindy abandoned the story and ducked under the police tape, earning a startled glance from the uniformed officers who wondered how she’d gotten past it in the first place. She ignored their shouts as she chased Lindsay down, catching up with her just as the inspector swung herself inside the vehicle. Cindy grabbed the door and kept Lindsay from closing it. “Where’s the fire?” she asked out of breath.

Lindsay scratched self-consciously behind an ear. “Nowhere. I just need to make a few calls.”

Cindy looked skeptical. “Really? I thought you were bailing.” She mentally kicked herself for ditching the story until she realized Lindsay wasn’t making eye contact. “Hey. You okay?”

Lindsay looked at her then. She started to say something to brush the reporter off when her gaze landed on the cross nestled in the hollow of Cindy’s throat. “You were raised Catholic.”

Cindy blinked, startled by the change in conversation. “Yeah,” she answered slowly.

“Philippians, chapter four, verse five.”

The reporter frowned. “Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand?”

Lindsay’s eyebrows elevated in surprise.

“What?” Cindy asked defensively. “I can quote *Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and Shakespeare, too.”

Lindsay pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head.

“Why are you asking me about scripture?” Cindy leaned on the door.

“A Bible was found in Blake’s refrigerator... open to that passage.”

The reporter processed that. “You’re holding that back for now, I’m assuming.”

Lindsay gave her a tame version of the laser vision. Cindy held up her hands.

“Fine. Just checking. So the Bible was in Blake’s fridge opened to a passage that doesn’t exactly describe him very well... Except the whole ‘Lord at hand’ bit.” Cindy tilted her head. Something still seemed off about her friend. “You never answered my question. Are you okay?”

Lindsay licked her lips, reluctant to share but feeling the need to. “There was just something... when I held that Bible...”

“Something that made you feel like someone walked over your grave?”

The inspector looked startled at having the feeling so accurately pegged. Cindy shrugged.

“You look spooked, Linz,” the reporter confessed. “And you rarely look spooked. What happened?”

Lindsay shook her dark head. “I don’t know. I just got... a chill when I held that thing. We’re all making light of this to keep our minds off how nauseating it is, but think about it. Think about how *long* the killer took with Blake. Blake loved food. He loved to eat. The killer took that from him and murdered Blake with his own greatest passion.”

Cindy put her head against the door as she watched Lindsay’s eyes focus on some spot beyond the windshield, but she suspected the inspector’s gaze was actually turned inward, sifting and sorting through what she’d seen and heard inside the house. “It was torture,” she murmured. “I bet if Blake had survived he never would have wanted food again.”

“Like he was being cured of it,” Lindsay agreed softly.

“Talk about the cure being worse than the disease.”

“What are you doing out here?”

Both women turned to see Jacobi sauntering closer. Lindsay’s partner looked less than amused to find her at the crime scene. Cindy opened her mouth to respond then shut it when Jacobi pointed a finger at her.

“You’re working,” he said simply to the reporter before shifting his gaze back to Lindsay. “You, however, are supposed to be doing the opposite.”

Lindsay wilted a little under his displeasure. “I got called in.” She fidgeted.

“And did you tell them that you were unavailable?”

Cindy looked away in case Lindsay decided to lie. Not that she would blame her, but if Lindsay needed her as backup then her friend was screwed.

“It was Tom,” Lindsay replied. “He was at the funeral. He knows my dad died. Go yell at him.”

Jacobi rocked back on his heels. “Really?”

Lindsay gave him an exaggerated shrug. “I’m just doing what my boss told me.”

“And since when do you willingly do that?”

Lindsay looked offended even though she privately knew he was right.

“Go home,” Jacobi instructed. “The SFPD can manage one high profile case without you.”

“But I...” Lindsay looked to Cindy who winced and just shook her head. “You’re going to side with him?” Lindsay asked her voice incredulous.

Cindy shrugged. “It’s just... you buried your dad yesterday. Being around murder, death and partially digested chicken may not be the best thing for you right now.”

Lindsay closed her eyes before rubbing them in irritation. “I can do without the partially digested chicken,” she admitted dryly, “but solving a murder is just what I need right now.”

“Linz...” Jacobi started.

“Look.” Lindsay opened her eyes. “I appreciate your concern. Both of you. But I’m fine. Working is the best thing I can do for myself right now.”

“Taking the time to grieve is the best thing you can do for yourself,” Jacobi growled.

“Warren,” Cindy interjected herself carefully into their argument. “If she wants to work let her work. She’s a big girl. Literally and figuratively.”

“There you go.” Lindsay gestured at Cindy. “One of my best friends just weighed in on the matter. Take her word for it.”

Jacobi hesitated, clearly torn. He sighed wearily. “I’m going to have my eye on you, Linz.”

“You mean you don’t usually?”

He swatted her on the shoulder then walked away muttering. Lindsay shook her head then turned it to look at Cindy. The reporter was staring at her, an expression on her face that made a warm spot bloom in Lindsay’s chest. “What?”

Cindy slowly smiled. “I’m one of your best friends?”

Lindsay blinked when she realized what she’d said to Jacobi. She shrugged, feeling mildly exposed. “Yeah. I thought that kind of went without saying.”

Cindy leaned on the open door again. “That goes both ways, you know.”

That warm spot got a little larger. Lindsay cleared her throat. “All the exclusives I give you, it better.”

Cindy reached out and laid her hand on Lindsay’s arm. “Don’t get mad at Warren for caring. We’re all gonna have our eyes on you the next few days. Accept it. That’s what friends do.”

Lindsay sighed resignedly. "It's been a hell of a few weeks."

"You're telling me." Cindy's hand left Lindsay's arm to rub distractedly at her chest.

"Are you hurting?" Lindsay's voice was suddenly sharp when she realized Cindy was touching the area where she'd been shot. She glanced up and found twinkling brown eyes waiting for her.

"See," Cindy said as her hand dropped, and Lindsay realized she'd just been faked out. "Friends look out for each other."

"What in the hell was that?" Jill asked when Lindsay had departed. Her gaze lingered on the back door that Lindsay had just walked through.

"She did look a little..." Claire cocked her head as she recalled the disturbing expression that had been on Lindsay's face when she left.

"Freaked?" Jill supplied as she glanced back at Claire.

"As good a word as any," Claire agreed. She shook her head as the gurney carrying Blake's body was eased out of the room. "What is she doing here anyway? I thought she actually took some time."

"That's my fault," Tom said as he entered the room.

"You called her in?" Jill's tone was accusing. "Christ, Tom, she buried her dad yesterday."

He looked uncomfortable but unapologetic. "This is a big case. I need my best detective on it. Besides, you know how Linz is. She prefers to work through stuff like this."

"Even though, as her friends, we should really make sure she doesn't?" Claire crossed her arms. "Have you been paying attention to your ex-wife these last few months, Tom?"

His gaze darted between the two women worriedly. He took comfort in the feel of his sidearm and the knowledge that he was surrounded by a half dozen other officers. All armed.

"First Kiss-Me-Not resurfaces," Jill said.

"Then you get remarried," Claire added. "Then Lindsay winds up in protective custody because Kiss-Me-Not starts playing games with her."

"Then Cindy gets shot," Jill continued, ignoring that painful memory of the redhead's

close call.

“Then Lindsay’s dad gets shot helping her take down Billy Harris.” Claire held up her hand to indicate the five things they’d rattled off so far.

“And on the same night that the biggest case of Lindsay’s career ends, Pete leaves and Lindsay’s father starts having complications only to die two days later.”

Tom licked his lips. “So she’s been through a lot...”

“She’s been through hell,” Claire cut him off, her voice steely and edged with anger. “You’re the lieutenant of Lindsay’s squad. What are you thinking dragging her into a case the day after she buries her father? For crying out loud, Tom.”

He put his hands in his pockets and opened his mouth to answer.

“He’s thinking the press will be all over this one. So his bosses will be all over him.” Jill shook her head.

“Like Denise won’t be all over you,” Tom fired back.

“She can crawl up my ass all she wants. If Lindsay needs me, I’ll drop this case like a hot stone.”

Tom sighed. “I need my best on this one. She’s my best.” He held up a hand when they started to protest. “Let’s just work together on this. We get this case wrapped quickly, and I’ll give Linz two weeks. I’ll pay for the damn plane ticket, anywhere she wants to go.”

Slightly mollified but still largely pissed, Claire just shook her head and brushed past him. She heard the click of Jill’s high heels following behind. “I have an autopsy to perform.”

“And I have some place better to be than in a room with you.” Jill was far less diplomatic.

Tom said nothing as they left.

Act II:

Jill was the first to arrive at the morgue after Claire’s summons. Dressed to the nines to meet a date in thirty minutes, she poked her head in the door, taking a cautious sniff of the air. Satisfied that it smelled no more disturbing than normal she stepped inside. It

was late, and the morgue was between shifts so no assistants hurried about. Jill walked through and rapped on the door to Claire's office.

"So what's up?"

Jill nearly screamed at the sudden voice and presence behind her. She whirled and smacked into Claire's door, sending the glass rattling. "Jesus, Cindy."

The reporter grimaced. "Sorry. I thought you heard me."

Claire yanked open the door. "What are you all doing out here?"

"Causing trouble, probably," Lindsay added to the conversation as she swept into the room, a vision of denim and leather and a swagger that was all cop.

Jill shook her head, wondering if Lindsay had any idea the effect she could have on anyone willing to have sex with a female member of the species. "Cindy is just skulking around scaring people to death."

"Am not," the reporter fired back. "You just weren't paying attention."

"Girls." Claire's mom voice came out and she pointed into her office. She chuckled when Jill playfully pinched Cindy's backside as they walked by, the redhead yelping and spinning around to swat Jill with her purse.

"We work with children," Lindsay drawled as she followed them.

"They keep us young," Claire replied.

Once everyone was settled in their respective seats, Claire sat on the edge of her desk. "I have a preliminary cause of death. We're still waiting on the tox screen."

"We don't have to look at the body again, do we?" Jill asked.

"I haven't seen it yet," Cindy added.

"You don't want to," Lindsay and Jill both spoke at the same time.

Cindy didn't appear to agree but she didn't say so.

Claire took a patient breath. "Preliminary cause of death is due to a massive coronary. He was definitely force fed a hell of a lot of food, most of which he vomited back up. The stomach can only take so much."

Jill responded with a tiny swallow. "Can we please not dwell on that? I'm having dinner in twenty minutes."

“Sorry,” Claire answered, sounding anything but. “The food in Blake’s mouth...” Jill’s groan interrupted the medical examiner for only a beat. “The food in Blake’s mouth,” she continued, “was stuffed in there after his death. And there was a lot of it. I’d say someone actually took some sort of pipe or stick to shove it down his throat. He has some tearing on his esophagus that’s consistent with that.”

“Ouch,” Cindy murmured her hand going in reaction to her throat. She swallowed as well. “Do you think he was drugged?”

“I sure as hell hope so.” Claire sighed. “The killer would have been at this a while. I’d put Blake’s time of death around seven last night. It could have taken hours before Blake’s heart gave out from the food or the fear. With two blocked arteries he was headed for a massive heart attack in the near future anyway.”

“Would have been better than going out the way he did,” Lindsay commented. “Anything under his nails? Any fibers?”

“Yes and yes. I sent both to trace.”

Wearily the inspector blew out a breath. “Okay. Let’s call it a night then. We’ll come at this fresh in the morning and hopefully have something to go on from trace.”

Jill wasted no time getting to her feet and heading for the door with a quick “see ya” mouthed to her friends. She stopped next to Lindsay, though, and laid a quick hand on her shoulder. Lindsay glanced up seeing the questions and concern for her mental state in Jill’s sparkling blue eyes. She reached up and tangled her fingers with the attorney’s, giving her friend’s hand a quick squeeze.

When you had been friends as long as they had, words weren’t always necessary.

Jill kissed her on the temple and left.

“So.” Claire slapped her hands together making the two remaining women in the room jump. “What are you two up to tonight?”

Lindsay and Cindy exchanged glances.

“I... really hadn’t given it much thought,” Lindsay confessed, although she knew moping and a few glasses of scotch would probably be involved.

“Um...” Cindy shrugged, wondering why she suddenly felt like a loser.

“Good. You can come with me to see Nate’s play. He’ll be thrilled.”

“Uh...” Lindsay could think of no graceful way out of the predicament she’d just landed

herself in. “S... sure,” she managed. “Don’t we need tickets...?”

“Five bucks at the door. I’ll drive.” Claire breezed past them both with a smirk on her features. She was determined to make sure Lindsay did not spend the evening wallowing.

Cindy finally got a clue about Claire’s motivations and jumped in wholeheartedly with the plan. She gave Lindsay a shy smile. “We so walked into that one.”

“You so aren’t kidding.” Lindsay sighed, touched by what she knew her friends were doing. “I have to walk Martha first,” she shouted after the departed medical examiner.

“Both of you stop laughing.”

Lindsay doubled over in the parking lot, her hand clutching the side of Claire’s government issued vehicle. Cindy staggered into the taller detective, giggling adorably as they both tried to catch their breath.

Claire crossed her arms and tried to look angry.

Lindsay sobered under the glare as she put her arm around Cindy’s shoulders, pulling the reporter next to her. They both affected serious expressions. “We’re sorry.”

“Really sorry,” Cindy managed to say before she hiccupped from laughing too much.

They abruptly lost it again, and Claire’s lips twitched. It was good to see Lindsay laughing so hard she was practically crying. “That little girl is going to be traumatized for life, you know,” Claire pointed out.

“At least it wasn’t Nate who tripped and pin-wheeled into the set,” Cindy said. She slid her arm around Lindsay’s waist and held on, afraid if she let go she’d fall on her ass in the middle of the parking lot.

“Those painted trees went down like dominos...” Lindsay practically wheezed as she giggled helplessly at the memory. “And the look on that dragon’s face...”

“Tommy Reagan,” Claire said. “He’s gonna have a lump the size of an Easter egg on his forehead.”

This time they all laughed.

Lindsay finally sobered and looked at them both with grateful eyes. “Thanks. I needed that.” She felt Cindy’s arm tighten around her waist, and she turned her head, meeting the reporter’s warm brown eyes up close. She felt gratitude wash through her, but it was

chased by something else, something sweeter she couldn't quite identify.

Cindy felt her breath hitch as something changed in Lindsay's gaze. Her friend's smile softened a fraction, and Cindy felt her gut react with a nervous flutter.

Claire looked from Lindsay to the reporter and back again. Her eyebrows elevated but she chose not to say anything. It could just be a moment, she rationalized.

Or maybe it was a beginning.

She smiled. "C'mon. Let me get you girls home."

"Stubborn."

Lindsay took Jacobi's greeting as a compliment. "And good morning to you, too," she rasped as she sauntered into the squad room and tossed her leather jacket over the back of her chair.

Jacobi eyed her, relieved to see the dark circles under his partner's eyes starting to fade. "You got the coroner's report?"

Lindsay tossed him the folder as she swiveled her chair and sank down into it. "Anything pop on the scripture? This doesn't feel like the killer's first time." She blinked when Jacobi stood and leaned across his desk, dumping a pile of folders on hers. "Are you kidding me?" There had to be seventy files in front of her.

"Happy reading," he drawled as he leaned back in his chair and flipped open the coroner's report.

Lindsay shot him a look that went ignored. "You know we have these things called computers now..."

Jacobi dropped the file in his hands so he could see her. "I'm well aware of that, Inspector Wise-Ass. The computer kicked back one hundred and eighty hits." He dipped his head at the files. "I narrowed it down."

Lindsay's eyes widened at the number. "There were that many crimes in the last five years that had some sort of religious bent?"

"People have always used religion as a way to justify their actions against other people. 'God made me do it.' 'I was just doing God's work.'"

"Our killer seems to think he is." Lindsay frowned.

“You think he’s somewhere in that pile?” Jacobi asked. “That he’s done this before?”

“I know it.” Lindsay slipped the top file off the stack and leaned back in her chair. She had the fleeting thought that she wished the girls were there to help.

Three hours later Jill found the inspector with her head on her fist as Lindsay reviewed yet another open file on her desk. There were two stacks, one on each side of her friend’s head about even in height. “How’s it going?”

Lindsay leaned back and stretched, her lower back popping and making the attorney wince in sympathy. She shook her head. “Slowly.”

“Where’s Jacobi?” Jill eyed the empty desk across from Lindsay’s. It, too, was scattered with files. She edged aside Lindsay’s in-tray and settled on the corner of her friend’s desk, hitching up her skirt and crossing her long legs.

“Getting us lunch.” Lindsay raked a hand through her hair. She noted the folder in Jill’s hands. “Please tell me that’s not another crime with religious overtones.”

“Just this one,” Jill smirked. “Cindy came through as always, and I was able to check through Blake’s financials pretty quickly.”

Lindsay gave her head a little shake and opened her eyes wider, trying to perk herself up a little. “And?”

“There is nothing there, Linz. The ex-wife had plenty of cash of her own. Blake’s partners were full partners who stand to lose more than gain from his death.”

“None of the restaurants were in trouble?”

“Not a one. Have you ever eaten at one of Blake’s places?”

The detective shook her head.

“You’re missing out. You and Pete should try one out the next time he’s in town. How is he doing anyway?”

Lindsay frowned. She hadn’t given her lover much thought this last week, let alone called to check in. “He’s busy but good.”

“I still think you should have let him come back for the funeral.”

“He’d just gotten there. Honestly I…”

“Didn’t want to have to deal with one more thing at the time?” Jill guessed.

Lindsay smiled guiltily. Jill knew her cold. “Yeah.”

“I need to talk to Tom for a minute,” Jill said as she glanced up toward his office. “Let me know when you have something.”

“The very minute.” Lindsay sighed as she flipped open another file and started reading. A frown creased her features, and she felt her heart kick against her sternum as her eyes skimmed the contents of the folder. Jill was to the top of the steps when Lindsay yelled for her to come back.

Jill lingered behind Jacobi and Lindsay as they unlocked the door to the dilapidated warehouse. She could still see the residue of the crime scene tape that had once sealed the gray and grungy door six months ago. She glanced around, breathing in the smell of the ocean and docks that surrounded them. Lindsay shouldered the door open, and the two officers stepped inside with flashlights burning as Jill followed reluctantly.

“This place still have power?” Jacobi asked.

Jill tried the light switch which merely flipped impotently. “Not in this room.” She continued behind them until they came to a former storage room. She smelled the blood before she saw it.

It had long since dried, staining the walls and concrete floor the color of rust. Jill swallowed as Lindsay and Jacobi’s flashlight beams played over the walls, showing the spatter patterns that overlapped from multiple beatings. “Jesus,” she whispered.

“Don’t feel sorry for the victim,” Jacobi muttered. “Bastard beat his wife and kids every damn day. Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.”

Lindsay found another light switch and tried it with similar results. She blew out a frustrated breath.

“Linz, are you sure this is the same killer? The victims couldn’t be more different. Blake was loved and adored. This Robert Dellan guy was the exact opposite. No one misses the sonofabitch and it’s clear from the lack of paperwork that no one in the SFPD lost a whole lot of sleep over not closing this one.” Jill heard something squeak in the corner that sounded suspiciously rodent-like. She eased closer to her friend unconsciously.

“Three weeks,” Lindsay said into the relative darkness as she eyed the spot on the floor where Dellan had been tied to a chair and beaten to death. She could see four distinct squares where the chair legs had been in all that blood. “Dellan was kept here for three weeks... beaten a little every day with a pipe, a piece of wood, the killer’s fists...”

whatever this bastard felt like doing to him.”

“It took patience,” Jacobi murmured. “He found an isolated spot. Somewhere where no one would hear the victim scream.”

Jill flipped open the folder she carried and motioned Lindsay over with the flashlight. “Dellan used to own the business here. Apparently his mismanagement of the financials led to the company’s ruin. Lot of people lost their jobs.”

“Not just an isolated spot,” Lindsay said. “A spot that was isolated and had significance.”

“Just like Blake’s kitchen.” Jacobi turned and went to a door on the other side of the room. He opened it and peered into the darkness.

Jill and Lindsay looked at each other in the yellow glow from the flashlight. It bounced off the pages the attorney was holding, lighting both their faces from beneath and making their eyes appear sunken and hollow.

“The killer was willing to take his time,” Jill said quietly. “However long it took. Just like he did with Blake.”

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Jill looked at Lindsay as she rattled off the scripture seemingly from memory.

“Ephesians, chapter four, verses thirty one and thirty two,” Lindsay said.

“I’m impressed.”

Lindsay shook her head. “Don’t be.” She swung the flashlight around to the far wall.

The passage was written on it in Dellan’s blood.

Act III:

Twilight was giving its last gasp as Lindsay slowly made her way up the front steps to her apartment. She had a stack of folders under one arm, the last of the case files she still needed to go through. Sighing, she reluctantly slipped the key in the lock and started to turn it. The last thing she wanted was to go into her lonely apartment but there was no getting around it. Jill had another date, Claire had her family, and Cindy... Well Cindy apparently had a deadline because that was the only time the reporter didn’t

answer her phone.

A throat cleared behind her as Lindsay swung open the door, and she turned finding the reporter in question at the bottom of her steps. “Hey,” she blurted in surprise.

Cindy smiled as she tucked her hands into her denim jacket. “Hi. Bad time?”

“That depends,” Lindsay said after a moment of studying her welcome face.

“On?”

“On your reason for being here.”

The redhead shrugged. “I had this craving for lasagna.”

Lindsay tilted her head and waited for the rest of the excuse but Cindy just kept looking at her. “And?”

“I want homemade lasagna. I can make it. I can make a really mean lasagna. It’s just... the recipe makes too much.”

Lindsay’s eyes dipped to the bags at Cindy’s feet. “Ingredients?” she guessed.

“And that’s why you’re a cop,” Cindy replied with a smirk.

Lindsay pocketed her keys and came trotting back down the steps. Cindy watched her approach with a little grin, sensing this was going to be easier than she thought. Jill had called after she, Jacobi and Lindsay had left the Dellan crime scene. Lindsay seemed especially down according to their blonde friend, and since Cindy had obviously had some luck getting Lindsay out of her funk after the funeral... Cindy had readily agreed, happy to be of use.

“Jill sent you,” Lindsay said as soon as she was in front of her.

“Okay, *that’s* why you’re a cop,” Cindy said. She reached down and grabbed a bag with each hand. “So how about it? You hungry?”

Lindsay eyed the bags then looked at the reporter. “I have a lot of work...”

“You work. I’ll cook.” Cindy moved past her without another word.

Lindsay turned and watched her go then shook her head. “Thanks, Thomas,” she said softly before following her inside.

Lindsay jumped a little when a plate was suddenly set in front of her. It was heaped with lasagna and sporting two slices of garlic toast. It was almost disconcerting to finally see the food after the smell of it had driven her nearly crazy for the last hour. “Whoa.”

Cindy came around the couch and set her own plate on the coffee table, careful not to disturb any of the files already stacked there. She returned to the kitchen and snatched up two wine glasses and a bottle of red she’d brought along.

Lindsay started to object when she saw the glasses then decided one couldn’t hurt. She waited impatiently to try a bite, tapping her fork on her leg as Cindy poured the wine.

“Are you nervous to try it or something?” Cindy asked as she re-corked the bottle then handed Lindsay her glass.

“I’m anxious to eat it,” Lindsay replied and motioned with the fork for Cindy to hurry up. “I’ve been breathing it in for the last hour.”

“Hungry, huh?”

“Cindy...”

The reporter laughed. “Don’t wait on me...” she got out before Lindsay did as told and dove in. She watched as Lindsay sampled her first bite. “Well?” she asked hesitantly.

“Oh my God,” Lindsay said around her first bite. “That should be illegal.” She started chewing again.

Cindy grinned, pleased with herself. “Secret Thomas recipe.”

Lindsay was already forking up another bite. “I can see why.”

“You really like it?”

Lindsay gave her a mock glare as she chewed, and Cindy finally took a bite from her own plate.

“I didn’t know you knew how to cook.” Lindsay tried the wine and found it more than satisfactory.

“My mom thought it would help me land a man.”

Lindsay looked at Cindy over the rim of her wine glass. She was startled to realize she had no idea who Cindy was dating... if she was dating. “Is there...” She hesitated, feeling like a heel for not knowing. “You never really talk about...”

Cindy looked at her blankly for a moment. “Oh! Am I dating someone? No.

Pathetically single thanks. That's why I'm making dinner for you." She blinked. "Wait. That came out wrong."

Lindsay chuckled. "Relax. I know what you meant."

"Actually Jill and I tend to be the ones who talk dating and stuff."

Lindsay looked up again as she swallowed another bite. "How come you escape being set up with every single straight man in San Francisco, but my love life is the topic of every chat not involving a homicide?"

The sip of wine went down as a laugh bubbled up, and Cindy almost choked. She coughed, feeling the alcohol burn her nose. "You're not the topic of every chat. I've gone out with six different people since we met. Believe me, I got the third degree after every one of them."

Six people? Lindsay set her wine glass down, feeling something sour in her stomach. Cindy had dated six people and she hadn't known about any of them. How damn wrapped up had she been in herself not to know such a simple thing about someone she cared so damn much about? Then the detective part of her brain took notice of a key word. *People*.

"People?" Lindsay blurted before she could think better of it.

Cindy's head came up and she looked momentarily caught. "Uh... yeah. As opposed to aliens, robots..." She tried to shrug casually but inwardly her heart started racing. She drained her glass of wine and reached for the bottle to pour another.

Lindsay wasn't sure why she was shocked but she was. This was San Francisco so the concept wasn't a new one to her, but the thought of Cindy Thomas with another woman was just... it was...

Kind of hot actually, Lindsay realized with a start. Yet it also made her feel just the slightest bit...

She shoved the thought aside and focused on the issue at hand. "People say 'people' when they're hiding pronouns." She gave Cindy a reassuring smile. "Are you hiding pronouns, Ms. Thomas?"

Cindy took another large gulp of her wine. "People means... people. You know..."

Lindsay cocked one eyebrow and just looked at her.

"Please don't stare at me. You know it makes me nervous."

The inspector merely tilted her head and waited.

“Fine,” Cindy confessed after less than twenty seconds. “There may have been one... maybe two... women in the pool of ‘people.’” She said the last word with air quotes. “Happy?”

“No.” Lindsay admitted quietly. “I’m really not.”

Cindy went completely still.

Lindsay saw the look on Cindy’s face and rushed to explain. “No. God no. Not about that. I’m... fine... with... that.” She shook her head and took a breath. “It’s just... I meant what I said to Jacobi today. You’re one of my best friends.”

Cindy didn’t say anything. She was too busy trying to get over being scared shitless by Lindsay’s initial comments.

“I just... You have been a really good friend to me since my dad died... before that even. I just... feel like I haven’t really been that good of a friend to you.”

The redhead set her glass down then scooted closer to Lindsay. She decided to risk picking up her hand and intertwining their fingers. It felt natural and Cindy’s body lost its tension at the contact. “Linz, you’ve been going through a lot since we first met.”

Lindsay’s gaze dropped to their linked hands. “That’s no excuse...”

“It is,” Cindy cut her off firmly. “It is, Linz.” Cindy reached over to gently encourage that beautiful face up to meet hers. Her thumb teased the dent in Lindsay’s chin. “What do you want to know?” Cindy asked softly.

“Tell me where you grew up. Tell me about your family,” Lindsay suggested, her voice sounding husky even to her own ears.

“After we eat,” Cindy informed her. “Because my stomach is going to start growling so loudly in a second you’ll cite me for disturbing the peace.” She reluctantly moved away and returned to her side of the couch, feeling much colder than she had a moment ago.

“You haven’t slept with Jill have you?” Lindsay asked abruptly and wondered where the hell her internal edit button was tonight.

The reporter looked dumbstruck. “What... I... no,” she finally forced out.

“Just checking.” Lindsay stabbed another bite of her lasagna and smiled, looking forward to learning more about Cindy Thomas during the night ahead.

“Hey.”

Jill’s head came up as she took a sip from her third cup of coffee. “Hey. Morning.”

Claire wandered the rest of the way inside Jill’s office and closed the door behind her. “How was dinner last night?”

Jill gave her a look. “Well for some odd reason I lost my appetite. I had a salad.”

The medical examiner slumped in a chair and gave Jill an amused wink. “I take it he wasn’t Mr. Right?”

“He’s Mr. Right Now and that’s enough.” Jill took another sip of her coffee. “So what brings you by?”

“Lindsay left me voicemail last night about Dellan.”

Jill sighed. “Yeah.”

“You went to the crime scene. Do you think the cases are linked or do you think...?”

“That Lindsay is looking for another monster to replace Kiss-Me-Not?” Jill guessed where the conversation was headed. “They’re related, Claire. You could almost feel it standing in that room.”

“She doesn’t need this,” Claire murmured softly. “Not another serial killer. Not so soon after Harris.”

“None of us do,” Jill admitted. She raked her hands through her blonde hair then linked her fingers behind her neck. “I’m worried about her, too.”

“However,” Claire drawled, an edge of humor entering her voice. “It seems Cindy is doing a rather admirable job of keeping the fair inspector in better spirits.”

“She’s like a pit bull in a rat terrier’s body,” Jill agreed. She smiled. “She’s a tiny little thing, but when she gets her teeth in something... look out.”

“They’re kind of cute together,” Claire offered casually.

Jill paused before taking another sip of coffee. She canted her head and narrowed her eyes as she puzzled over the words and Claire’s tone. “Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

Claire shrugged innocently.

“You are! You think...” Jill tried to imagine Lindsay and Cindy as more than friends.

She'd thought the image would amuse her, that it would be too jarring to fit.

But it wasn't.

"Huh." Jill took another hit of coffee. "If it's there neither one of them sees it. And there is Pete to consider."

"There is that."

"You're plotting in that head of yours. I can tell."

Claire held up her hands. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right." Jill sighed. "Look. I'll admit they make a certain kind of sense... all dark and light and yin and yang and all that. But Lindsay... I just don't think..."

"She has the guts to follow through? To be involved with another woman?"

"Yeah," Jill said quietly.

"That your personal experience talking?"

Jill's head came up, and she looked at Claire with alarm. "What?"

"You think I didn't know you and Linz has some sort of thing going on once upon a time?" Claire crossed her arms and gave the attorney a look of disappointment.

"Sweetheart, it was hard to miss. Three weeks back in March of 2005..."

"You knew," Jill murmured her features almost slack with shock. "You never said anything!"

"I almost did... when it fell apart and our friendships nearly did the same. Then you both showed up in the lab one morning, and I could see that you had worked through it somehow." Next to Ed being shot and the birth of her first child, Claire had never known fear and worry the way she had for those few days as Jill and Lindsay spun helplessly toward the ruin of their friendship. The relief she'd felt that morning when their mutual world had stabilized had been so sweet it hurt. She'd cried when they left her lab, thankful that their impulsiveness hadn't wrecked them all.

Jill looked down at the papers on her desk as she took a moment to collect herself. "We were younger and stupid and fell head over heels in lust." She looked at Claire again with a sheepish expression. "Lindsay just wasn't ready to admit that what she was feeling for another woman was serious. She thought it was a phase." Jill almost groaned at the notion.

"I so want to ask if she's good in bed," Claire said with a laugh.

Jill's pale skin turned bright red and Claire only laughed harder. "Good Lord. I just made Jill Bernhardt blush. I didn't think anything could embarrass a woman of the world like you anymore."

"I'm so going to get you for that."

There was a knock at the door before Lindsay's head popped in. "Here you are," she said to Claire. "I wanted to go over the autopsy report on Dellan with you." Her eyes went to Jill's face and stayed there. "Are you feeling all right? You looked flushed."

Claire got to her feet as Jill scratched her nose and tried to look busy.

"C'mon, skipper. Let's go have a look." Claire grabbed Lindsay's elbow and led her away protesting.

Jill stopped moving when they were gone and took a deep breath. Remembered pain came to her sweet and strong, squeezing her heart with the ache of it. Lindsay had been the one who had gotten away. It had only been three weeks, but it had been three of the best damn weeks of her life until it had all fallen apart.

But they were just too different. It worked for them as friends but had torn them apart as lovers. The knowledge had been a bitter pill to swallow at the time, but Jill looked back and was grateful they had talked it out. Lindsay was her best friend, and the thought of losing that, more than the intimacy they had shared, had been enough to make Jill handle the breakup with more maturity than she ever had before or since.

Lindsay with Cindy? Jill thought about it and found the idea oddly appealing. Her friends were a good match. There were a hell of a lot of obstacles in their way, however... not the least of which would be Lindsay herself.

Jill's relationship with Cindy had become tighter since the reporter's shooting. She felt more protective of her than she had before, almost as if Cindy had become a sort of adopted little sister. Jill decided then and there that Lindsay would not break the redhead's heart by running from reality.

Not if she had anything to say about it.

Cindy was waiting when they arrived in the morgue. She was munching on a handful of M&Ms filched from Claire's morbid skull candy jar when the medical examiner and inspector strolled into the office. The reporter smiled at seeing them both. "Hey."

"Hey," Lindsay replied first with a grin of her own. "Thanks again for dinner last night."

Claire's eyebrows both jumped but she said nothing as she continued on to her desk and sat down. She leaned back and watched her two friends with undisguised interest.

"No problem. Glad you liked it." Cindy turned her gaze reluctantly away from Lindsay's lazy smile and focused her attention on Claire. "So here's the thing; the crime desk has been doing some snooping. I don't know how, yet, but somehow they've heard about the Bible at Blake's house."

"Damn," Lindsay hissed, her good mood vanishing.

"It wasn't me," Cindy rushed to say.

"We didn't think it was, sweetheart," Claire told her. She watched as her friends seated themselves.

"So what else do they know?" Lindsay almost groaned.

"They don't know about the scripture, but I think it's just a matter of time. Then they'll connect the dots to Dellan just like you did."

"How much time do we have?" Lindsay asked wearily.

"A day. Maybe two." Cindy leaned forward. "I'd like to suggest something."

Claire and Lindsay looked at her expectantly.

"Let me run with the connection now." Cindy held up a hand when she saw Lindsay draw in a breath to argue. "Otherwise another reporter is going to get this story and you're going to have a hell of a lot less control over what gets printed in the Register."

Claire glanced at Lindsay. "She has a point."

Cindy turned her gaze on the inspector. "Besides... once I write the story then my editor will assign some folks in research for me. I can funnel any info they find to you. Another reporter..."

"Wouldn't share shit," Lindsay said. She sighed. "I'm okay with it, but I need to clear it through Tom."

"The sooner the better," Claire suggested.

"Yeah. Great," Lindsay muttered. "Just what I was looking forward to... talking with my ex-husband today."

"He likes Cindy," Claire pointed out. "He'll go with you on this one."

“Tom likes me?” Cindy asked with a smile.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Lindsay told her. “And I’m not sure I’d take that as a compliment, either.”

The reporter looked tickled, but she made no further comment.

“I’ve reviewed Dellan’s autopsy report. He took a *long* time to die.” Claire flipped open the file as she got down to the business at hand. “The killer burned him with cigarettes at least forty times. There were shallow slash marks from a pocket knife. Clumps of hair had been ripped out.”

Cindy’s smile faded as she listened.

“The killer beat him a little every day. You can see the progression in the color of the bruising... where they didn’t overlap that is. His fists seemed to be the method of choice but metal filaments were found in a wound on his cheek suggesting a pipe of some kind.” Claire shook her head. “Three weeks,” she murmured.

“The hours he must have taken to kill Blake sort of pale in comparison,” Cindy commented as she glanced up from the notes she was taking.

“Keep the scripture quiet for now if you can. We need to keep that close to the vest.” Lindsay nibbled on her thumbnail as she looked from Claire to Cindy.

“I’ll try. Hopefully my editor will be so giddy about the fact that San Francisco has a new serial killer on its hands that he won’t notice me leaving that part out.” She looked up at Lindsay. “What was the passage this time?”

“Ephesians, chapter four, verses thirty one and thirty two.”

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you,” Cindy rattled off.

Claire’s eyebrows hiked again.

“Do you have the whole damn book memorized?” Lindsay asked half in awe, half in irritation.

“Nearly,” Cindy replied.

“Well I’m impressed. I should take you to Sunday school with me next week,” Claire murmured.

Cindy shot Claire a grin. “What do you think he’s trying to say by leaving these

scriptures lying around?”

“At the Dellan scene it was painted on the wall.” Lindsay watched as Cindy scribbled that in her notepad. “In blood,” she added, watching with some satisfaction as Cindy’s pen momentarily stopped moving before resuming.

“Creepy,” the reporter commented. “But kind of clichéd at the same time.”

“I think it’s the bastard’s way of saying ‘God made me do it,’” Claire’s voice carried her disgust. “People who pervert religion for their own motives really piss me off,” the medical examiner confessed. “Especially when they use something that beautiful and wonderful as an excuse to kill.”

“Can I quote you on that?” Cindy asked to lighten the mood.

Claire smiled.

“Here is a quote for you,” Lindsay offered as she leaned forward and put her hands on her knees. “We know what he’s doing now. And we’re going to stop him.”

Cindy held Lindsay’s gaze. “Can I ask you something and you promise you won’t get mad at me?”

“Oh boy,” Claire muttered.

Lindsay looked from the medical examiner back to the reporter. “What?”

“Are you sure you’re up to this after Billy Harris?”

Claire pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. Cindy was still new to her friendship with Lindsay. She had yet to learn not to come at Lindsay so directly. The inspector would just close up and dodge the question, making it even harder to get her to talk about what was going on in her head later.

Lindsay took a breath and swallowed the nasty retort she wanted to make. She glanced at Claire and tried not to fidget. “I’m fine.”

Cindy didn’t push. She merely nodded. “Okay.” She got to her feet. “I’ve got to get going. Call me and let me know what Tom says.”

“He’s my next stop,” Lindsay answered without looking at her. “Then I’ve got several interviews lined up.”

“Linz?”

Reluctantly the inspector tipped her head back and looked up at the reporter.

“Just so you know... It’s okay not to be fine with this. I didn’t spend years chasing Harris the way all of you did, but I’m not thrilled that we’re about to start chasing another monster.”

Claire watched Lindsay fidget some more as the inspector looked at her clasped hands. “There will always be monsters, Cindy. And they won’t wait for me to be ready to chase them.”

“That’s why you have us,” Cindy replied sagely as her gaze went to Claire then back to Lindsay. “To help you.”

Lindsay took a breath and felt some of the tension in her shoulders ease. She managed a smile. “Go get started on your story. I’ll call you within the hour.”

Cindy winked at Claire then smiled at Lindsay before leaving them alone.

Claire sat in her chair and marveled at what she’d just witnessed. Lindsay’s brown eyes turned her way and Claire offered her a gentle smile. “Looks like she’s been good for you this week.” She waited for Lindsay to protest.

“Her dad died in the line of duty,” Lindsay said unexpectedly. “Did you know that?”

Claire took an aching breath. The news surprised her, but it also made certain things about the reporter make sense. Like her hero worship of a certain inspector they both knew and loved. “No. I didn’t. She said she knew what you were going through but we didn’t think she meant that.”

Lindsay continued to stare at her hands where they dangled between her parted knees. “I haven’t... I haven’t treated her fairly these last nine months. She’s been there for me every time I needed her. And the one time she needed me I was too damn slow.”

Claire sucked in another surprised breath. After a moment she licked her lips then got up from her chair before coming around the desk and settling in the seat next to Lindsay. “Cindy’s shooting wasn’t your fault, Linz.”

“I should have put it together faster. Moved faster.” Lindsay shook her head. “I keep thinking about it, seeing her lying in that pool of her own blood.” She swallowed and cleared her throat as it tightened painfully. “I didn’t even know she’d dated six people in the time we’ve known each other. ‘People,’” Lindsay reiterated putting the word in air quotes as Cindy had done the night before so Claire would realize just how much she’d been clued into during the recent days.

The medical examiner nearly laughed. “You’ve had a lot on your plate, Linz.” Claire was relieved to see Lindsay finally taking notice of the reporter on a more personal level, though. “She understands.”

“I know she does. That makes it harder somehow,” Lindsay said with a bitter laugh.

“Let her in, Lindsay. I’m telling you as your friend, you need a ray of sunshine like Cindy in your life.”

“Yeah,” Lindsay finally murmured after a quiet moment. “I’m starting to figure that out.”

Claire stood and wrapped her arms around the sitting inspector, planting a kiss on Lindsay’s head. “You’re stubborn, sweetheart, but I knew you’d come around eventually.”

“Thanks,” Lindsay drawled. “I think.”

Tom looked up at the sound of a knock on his door. He motioned Lindsay in as he continued to talk on his phone. “Yeah. We’re working on that. Yes. We think the two cases are connected.” He rolled his eyes at his ex-wife, and Lindsay smiled politely. “I will. Thanks, Chief.” He hung up and looked at Lindsay expectantly. “Tell me you got something good.”

Lindsay stuffed her hands in her back pockets. “Well…”

Tom sank back in his chair. “Please don’t tell me you linked another murder to this guy.”

“No. If that’s what you were worried about then what I have to say will seem tame in comparison.”

“Then lay it on me.”

“The Register found out about the Bible in Blake’s fridge.” Lindsay held up a hand before Tom could comment. “It wasn’t Cindy Thomas. She gave us the heads up.”

“It makes me nervous… you being so chummy with that reporter.” He fiddled with a pen on his desk rather than look at her.

“I trust her, Tom. She helped me break the Kiss-Me-Not case, remember?”

“I remember. I know she’s been an asset on a few other cases as well, but she’s press, Lindsay.”

Lindsay counted to ten to keep from saying something nasty. “I’m well aware of what she does for a living, but when I tell Cindy not to run with something she doesn’t run with it.”

He sighed, having no choice but to take her word for it. “Damn. Alright. I’ll start trying to plug the leak.”

“Actually,” Lindsay bit her bottom lip. “Cindy wants the go-ahead to run with it.”

“Why?” he said slowly.

Lindsay explained Cindy’s rationale for going with the story then watched as Tom scratched his chin and considered it.

“Alright. As far as reporters go she’s about the only one I don’t want to shoot every time I see her. She’s got the go-ahead.”

“I’ll let her know.”

“Lindsay,” Tom called before she could make a clean getaway.

She winced before reluctantly stepped back into his office.

“You okay?”

“Actually I’m getting kind of tired of being asked if I’m okay,” she confessed. “If I didn’t want to work I would have told you where to stick the case, Tom.”

He smiled. “I know that. Too bad your friends don’t see it that way.”

Lindsay’s features eased into a smile as well. “They gave you grief for pulling me in,” she guessed.

“That they did. I thought Jill and Claire were gonna have my manhood on a spit at the Blake crime scene. Your partner had a few choice words for me as well.”

Lindsay tried not to laugh at the mental picture he painted. “Sorry.” She rubbed her bottom lip to hide the smile curving her mouth.

“No you’re not,” he teased warmly. Tom watched her for a moment. “I’m glad you’ve got them all watching your back.”

“Me, too,” she agreed softly.

“So how’s Pete?” he tried to ask casually.

Lindsay knew she should have expected the question but she didn’t. She cleared her throat. “Fine. I’m supposed to call tonight.” She caught herself before she frowned, wondering if she could text her lover and put him off for one more night.

“Give him my best.”

“I’ll do that. Same to Heather.”

A few seconds later she was trotting down the steps, glad to have that uncomfortable and incredibly awkward moment of her day over with.

Claire glanced up from her paperwork when she heard a throat clear from her doorway. She was surprised by her late afternoon visitor but pleased nevertheless. “Hi.”

Jacobi smiled and dipped his head cordially in greeting. “Hope you don’t mind me stopping by.”

“Not at all.” Claire leaned back in her chair and looked up at Lindsay’s partner. “Everything all right?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you.”

“Ah.” Claire pursed her lips then gestured at the chair on the other side of her desk. Jacobi sat and sighed. “She’s gonna get mad if we keep hovering,” Claire told him.

“That’s why I’m down here talking to you and not her.”

Claire snorted. “She’s hanging in there,” she promised him.

Jacobi slowly nodded. “I’m just worried that she’s hanging in there by a thread. She’s good at hiding the deepest part of her pain.”

“I know.” Claire’s voice was quiet. “But she’s dealing. I think work is actually helping.”

“Working another serial killer case. It’s too soon, Claire.”

“No help for it, Warren,” she answered. She folded the file and handed it to him. “Tox results are in.”

He accepted it and skimmed the contents. “Blake was drugged.”

“*After* being force fed. I’ll go over the body again carefully, see if I can’t find the injection site.”

“What is this stuff?”

“It would have sped up the heart. Aggravated the pre-existing condition.”

“The killer encouraged his heart attack?”

“In a nutshell, yes.”

“So if he brought this drug with him... why not use it on the vic from the start? Why draw it out like that?”

“Because the drug was a means to an end. He didn’t use it until he got whatever it was he wanted from Blake,” Claire guessed.

“And what the hell was that, I wonder,” Jacobi muttered. He rubbed his tired eyes. “Feels like it never ends.”

“That’s because it doesn’t. For every monster we take down there are always six more waiting to replace him.”

“Then why do we do this job?” he asked with a wry grin.

“Because it’s what we were meant to do.”

He shook his head then playfully smacked his hand down on her desk. “Keep me in the loop on Linz. She won’t talk to me but she talks to you.”

“I will,” Claire promised, touched that he’d checked in. She watched as he waved and left her alone once more, her thoughts now on her friend instead of her files. She brought her fingers together and placed them against her lips as she thought about the months past and what this new case could hold for all of them.

It left her feeling overwhelmed.

She couldn’t imagine what Lindsay had to be feeling right now.

Lindsay took a deep breath before knocking on the chipped red door in front of her. The house was in a nice neighborhood, but it had seen better days. A gutter was coming loose to her right, the grass was almost knee high, and the flowerbeds were choked with weeds. It had an air of neglect to it that pressed in on her, weighing down her mood.

The door opened and Lindsay came face to face with a mousy woman of about forty. She was around Cindy’s height and build, her pale skin dotted with dull freckles. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and her listless green eyes met Lindsay’s with a hint of fear in their depths.

“Yes?” she asked in a timid voice.

Lindsay’s jaw clenched. “Mrs. Dellan?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Inspector Lindsay Boxer with the San Francisco Police Department. Can I come in and talk to you for a moment?” Lindsay flashed her badge and suddenly wished she and Jacobi hadn’t decided to split the interviews with friends and family. While it was true they would cover more ground this way, facing this shell of a woman alone made Lindsay uncomfortable. She never knew how to deal with weakness, her own or someone else’s.

“Is this about Robert’s murder?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tina Dellan moved away from the door and Lindsay followed her inside. The house was clean but devoid of energy, as if it had been sucked out long ago. She swallowed. “This will only take a few minutes.”

“I understand.” Mrs. Dellan sat on the couch then looked up at Lindsay, waiting patiently for the inspector to say or do whatever she would.

A part of Lindsay wanted to shake the woman. She had two kids, two children that depended on her. Despite the circumstances, her bastard of a husband would never touch her again. Why wasn’t she embracing this chance? Reveling in it? Lindsay couldn’t understand her mindset. She just couldn’t.

With a sigh Lindsay stiffly sat down as well. “We think whoever killed your husband might have murdered someone else,” she began.

Tina looked at her and merely waited, showing no signs of any curiosity.

Lindsay scratched the back of her neck. “Are you a very religious woman, Mrs. Dellan?”

This time there was a spark of something in Tina’s eyes. “How could I be, Inspector? What kind of God lets a woman and her children get beaten every day?”

What kind of mother didn’t try to stop it, Lindsay wanted to ask. Guilt, hard and cold, swept through her at the thought and made her stomach roll. Dellan was a victim here, Lindsay had to remind herself. “Someone obviously decided to stop your husband from hurting you.”

“Perhaps. But I don’t know anyone. Robert never let me leave the house.”

“You never told anyone you were being beaten?”

“No one.”

“But you were admitted to the hospital.” Lindsay checked her notes. “You were admitted seven times last year for serious injuries and came to the ER an additional seventeen times. The doctors never asked?”

“Of course they did. I told them I was clumsy.”

Lindsay rubbed her forehead, wanting nothing more than to get away from the woman. She wanted to feel pity, but all she felt was outrage that Tina Dellan just accepted what life handed her and didn't do a damn thing to help her children. This was no home for two kids to grow up in. She made a note to talk to Jill about getting Children's Services involved.

She also made a note to look into what asinine doctors hadn't worked harder to get this woman to report such obvious abuse.

“Why did you ask me if I was a religious woman?”

Lindsay's dark eyes came up and fixed intently on Dellan's face. “I'm sorry. I can't divulge that information.”

The woman nodded. “I was told he was beaten the entire time he was missing.”

Unease threaded through Lindsay, but she didn't deny the statement. Instead she waited Dellan out, suspecting she would say more. After a few heartbeats she did.

“Do you think he ever begged for the killer to stop? Do you think he ever asked why?” She paused and finally looked directly into Lindsay's eyes. “Do you think he ever regretted doing to me everything the killer did to him?”

Lindsay's whole body went cold. “I don't know,” she rasped, but she strongly suspected the killer wouldn't have let Robert Dellan die without wishing he'd never laid a hand on his wife and children.

Dellan would have been made to repent. It was the only way God would forgive him. The only way the killer would let him rest in peace.

The same chill that had taken her at the Blake crime scene gripped her now. Lindsay tried not to shiver. “Thank you. That's all I needed to ask.”

Act IV:

Cindy felt her glasses slip and she pushed them distractedly back up on her nose. She was writing furiously, trying to make her deadline and claim the story as hers and hers alone. She could see some of the other reporters on the crime desk calling their sources, trying to get the information that would give them a leg up on her.

But they didn't have the club.

She smiled at the passing thought and kept typing. When the phone rang she snatched it up without looking. "Thomas."

"It's me."

Cindy stopped writing, her brain instantly moving away from the story and onto the distressed sound of Lindsay Boxer's voice. "Where are you?"

"I just left Tina Dellan's house."

The reporter hesitated. "She wasn't a distraught widow was she?" Cindy would have been partying on the insurance money if the roles had been reversed.

"Hardly. I'm not sure she feels much of anything." Cindy heard a sigh before Lindsay spoke again. "I've got to get those kids out of there."

Cindy took a breath and let it out slowly. "Did she give you anything?"

"Other than making me twitch? Not really."

"This case is going nowhere," the reporter murmured.

"You're telling me," Lindsay huffed. She sighed again. "She did say something, though, that got me thinking."

"Yeah?"

"She said she wondered if Robert ever begged for the killer to stop. If he ever regretted laying a finger on her when the killer was doing to him what he had always done to them."

"Jeez."

"Yeah."

Cindy considered the idea. "I'll bet he did. Just like Blake probably begged the killer not to feed him another bite."

“Curing them,” Lindsay said, echoing the conversation they’d had at the first crime scene.

“This guy is whacked, Linz.”

Lindsay snorted. “But he isn’t stupid. Maybe trace will still come back with something on the fibers off Blake’s clothes.”

“Was there anything on Dellan’s?”

“He was found six days after he died. The bugs and rats got rid of any physical evidence.”

“Ew.”

“Yeah.” There was a moment of easy silence before Lindsay continued. “Anyway, finish your story. I know you’ve got a deadline. I’ll check in later.”

For some reason Cindy was reluctant to let Lindsay go. “You doing anything tonight?”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone.

“Uh... working the case, I guess.”

“You have to eat, right?” Cindy toyed with the cord on her phone as she watched some of the other reporters in the bullpen scramble to meet their deadlines.

There was another pause.

“You gonna cook for me again?” Lindsay’s voice sounded more normal now, lighter.

“I could do that,” Cindy offered, a smile splitting her features. “What would you like?”

“Surprise me,” Lindsay teased. “I’ll come to you this time.”

Eagerness skittered through Cindy’s veins. “Seven o’clock, my place?”

“I’ll be there.”

“See you then.” They disconnected and Cindy took a deep breath, trying to slow her unexpectedly racing heart. She set the receiver gently back in its cradle and focused her attention on her computer screen. The story needed to be put to bed and fast.

She had plans for dinner.

Lindsay put in another three hours of interviews then called it quits. She'd talked to Blake's widow and his two children, all of whom seemed devastated by the man's death. On the flip side had been Robert Dellan's family and former business associates. They had been surprised that the case was still open. They could have cared less who'd killed Dellan and as far as they were concerned the killer should be given a medal.

She sighed as she stepped into the elevator to head up to Jill's office. Two completely different men killed in two completely different ways. There was no pattern to it. No obvious connection between them. It didn't make any damn sense.

But they were connected. She could feel it. And there was a pattern. She just had to find it.

The elevator doors pinged, and Lindsay stepped out, nearly crashing into the very person she'd come to see. "Oh, hey."

"Hey," Jill said in surprise. She gave Lindsay a look and didn't seem to like what she saw. "What is it?"

"You got a minute?"

"For you? I've got two." Jill ducked her head toward her office and the pair started walking. "What's up? I heard you went to talk to Dellan's wife. How'd that go?"

"That is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about," Lindsay said as they stepped inside Jill's office and the attorney closed the door. "We need to get those kids out of there."

Jill hesitated before sitting down behind her desk. "That bad?"

"Yeah." Lindsay sighed and flopped into a chair of her own. "They were at school when I interviewed the widow. I'd stay there if I were them. Coming home would depress the hell out of me."

Jill picked up a pen and twirled it between her fingers. "A depressing home life isn't enough to get them removed, Linz."

Lindsay was quiet a moment. "That woman had nothing left. Dellan had beaten it all out of her... if she even had anything to begin with."

"Are you worried about her mental state?" Jill asked sounding very much like the attorney she was.

"Uh... yeah," Lindsay stated like that should be obvious.

“I can work with that. I’ll notify Child Protective Services and have them do an interview.”

“Thanks.” Lindsay watched Jill as the DDA jotted down a few notes. She sighed. “Busy day?”

“Eh. Prepping to go to trial on the Dow case.”

“I thought you couldn’t try the case due to a conflict of interest... namely that he damn near made you another victim.”

“He didn’t get that close,” Jill said in a huff. “You showed up flashing brass just in time. My hero.” She batted her eyelashes playfully and was rewarded with a grudging grin from the detective. “And I’m not prepping as an attorney. I’m a witness.”

“That has to be weird.”

“You have no idea.” Jill looked up when the room was silent for too long. Lindsay was giving her a droll look. “Oh right. You testify all the time.”

“And I’ll testify in the Henry Dow case as well. In fact I’ve had three text messages from Denise telling me to set up a time to go over my testimony.”

“At least Denise likes you.”

“Like hell. Denise doesn’t like anybody.” Lindsay sighed again. “You got plans tonight?”

“Going over my testimony some more and preparing a few pre-trial motions. What about you? You look tired.”

“Long day of talking to distraught and disturbing people.” Lindsay glanced at her fingernails. “I’m going to Cindy’s for dinner.”

Jill’s head came up from where she’d shifted her focus back to her notes. “Really?” She smiled knowingly and tried to hide it. “That sounds nice.”

“You knew she dated women.”

Blue eyes widened. Jill was completely unprepared for this direction in the conversation. “Um...”

“I can’t believe you never said anything. That seems like information that would be too juicy for you to sit on.”

Jill was surprised to realize the thought of sharing such gossip had never crossed her

mind. It was a sure sign Cindy had moved into the small circle of people Jill fiercely claimed as family. “Wasn’t my information to share,” she pointed out and had the satisfaction of watching Lindsay squirm a little. “When did you find out?”

“Last night. I can’t believe I didn’t see it.”

“Your interest in Pete waning already?” Jill asked casually as she went back to jotting down notes.

It took Lindsay a moment to pick up on what Jill was suggesting. A blush roared onto the inspector’s cheeks. “What? No. I mean... she’s like, twelve.” Lindsay winced. “And I’m in love with Pete.”

“Okay.”

“I mean... it’s not that Cindy isn’t... attractive... or anything.”

Blue eyes slowly lifted and watched Lindsay basically have a conversation with herself.

“But we... we’re not... there’s nothing...”

“Lindsay?” Jill waited for Lindsay to look at her. “I was joking.”

“I knew that,” the inspector answered too quickly. She shut her mouth and studiously refused to puzzle out her odd behavior. Lindsay tunneled her hands through her hair then jerked abruptly to her feet and started to pace the small confines of Jill’s office. “This case is getting to me, and it’s barely started.”

“We’ll get him, Lindsay,” Jill promised as she watched her friend move about with a worried frown. “We just keep talking to the families, friends, and enemies of the victims. Something will shake loose.”

“He’s not in there, Jill,” Lindsay told her. “They don’t know him. They’ve never seen him.”

“You can’t know that.”

Lindsay pivoted and looked at her. “My gut is telling me he chooses the victims for a reason. Something they do sets him off. But it’s random how he comes across them. Random just like it was for Billy Harris.”

Jill took a breath. “This guy is not the Kiss-Me-Not Killer, Linz.”

“I know that. I’m just saying... Harris picked women who had relationships of some defining sort with older men. On the surface it wasn’t obvious until we had the knowledge about what Harris’ father had done to his sister.”

“You think there is a pattern.”

“There is a pattern,” Lindsay insisted. “I can feel it. I just can’t find it. What made him choose Blake and Dellan? What did they do to incur what this guy thinks is the wrath of God?”

“One thing is for sure... the guy enjoys his calling,” Jill murmured.

“It is. It is a calling. His murders felt like he had purpose. He went about the task of killing them both like he had the patience of a saint.”

“Or the enjoyment of the devil.”

Lindsay stopped pacing and let her hands drop. “I know it isn’t the same as Harris.”

Jill stood and came around her desk, stopping in front of her friend. “But it sure feels familiar right now, huh?”

Reluctantly Lindsay nodded. “He’s going to kill again, and I can’t stop him. The sad part is I almost need him to kill again so he can make a mistake. It’s the only way we’ll catch him.”

“Then what do we do?”

Lindsay spun and with sudden violent force she banged her fist against the wall. “We wait. Damn it! We have to wait until he takes another Chris Blake or a Robert Dellan. Wait until he’s finished with them... and who knows how long that will take.”

Jill felt her stomach sink. It was happening again. Just like with Harris. Another psychopath was slithering into their lives, wrapping them up in his twisted and warped games. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, the knowledge almost suffocating.

Lindsay’s anger deflated the moment she saw her friend trembling. It did something to her guts to see Jill so shaken. She came closer. “I won’t let it happen again,” she vowed. “I won’t let this guy break us down.”

“I’m more worried about you,” Jill said. She opened her eyes. “Please, Lindsay. Don’t walk this road alone again. Let us come with you.”

“You’re always with me,” Lindsay answered, her voice hoarse. “But I won’t... I won’t let him get to me the way Harris did.”

“Are you sure he isn’t getting to you already?”

Lindsay inhaled deeply. “It’s just... I feel like I failed my dad,” Lindsay said suddenly.

“Harris wanted to take him from me and he did. I didn’t catch Kiss-Me-Not... he caught me... he ended things on his terms.”

“No. No he didn’t.” Jill took Lindsay’s hands. “If he had ended it on his terms I would have been at your funeral instead of your father’s.” Jill’s voice broke and her grip tightened on her friend’s hands. “You stopped him, Linz. Billy Harris will never hurt another woman again.”

Lindsay wasn’t sure what she believed, but she was grateful for Jill’s friendship at that moment. “I’m projecting onto this case, aren’t I?”

“Maybe a little.”

“I just want to stop this one. I need to stop this one before he hurts anyone else.”

“Our club rocks,” Jill said managing a fair impression of Cindy. “We’ll catch him.”

“Yeah.” Lindsay squeezed her friend’s hands in return. “I just wish someone else didn’t have to die first.”

He watched in plain sight.

Nothing about him stood out, he made sure of that, and when he returned to his sanctuary he would alter his appearance once more. He liked to think of himself as a chameleon... always changing but remaining the same creature underneath.

One of God’s most magnificent creations.

One of His chosen.

He had been selected to do the Lord’s work, called to it like a minister to the priesthood. He served willingly and without hesitation. He was blessed, blessed to do the Lord’s bidding and rewarded with the pleasure of it, the almost orgasmic feel of snuffing out those that made this world such a deviant and depraved place. They paid for their sins. And he was the collector.

It was God’s will that he make the sinners repent... renounce their sins and beg for God’s forgiveness. Those were the sweetest moments of all. When they prayed to the Almighty God and he sent them on their way, their confessions heard... their souls cleansed by his hand.

And now God needed him again.

He watched Travis Martin. His expensive suit. His Italian shoes. The twenty thousand

dollar wristwatch he sported. So much excess for one man who shared so little with those more deserving.

“Fuck the poor,” he’d heard Martin say as he passed him one day on the street. Martin had laughed as he’d passed a homeless person, he and his friends sneering at the poor old man who sat in near rags cradling a cup full of change as if it were his most prized possession.

God had spoken to him in that moment. Travis Martin needed to repent. He needed to be saved. It was a sign that he’d been there when Martin had uttered those words.

The banker stepped out into the parking lot and headed for his bright red Corvette. He had dinner plans this evening with two women, twins in fact. The two sets of diamond earrings that rested in his blazer pocket insured he would get what he wanted from them tonight. They loved jewelry and their appreciation was always long and energetic. He smiled, not paying any heed to the man walking up behind him.

One zap from the taser and Travis Martin went down.

He would not arrive for his dinner that evening.

“Thy will be done,” his attacker murmured before beginning his work.

FADE TO BLACK

SIEGE

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

Reporter's
Notebook

Episode 2: Siege

It started out as an ordinary day for Heather Hogan. She kissed her husband before she left the house in the morning, prayed that he'd come home safely, and hoped that her kids wouldn't act up today. Usually, she loved the unadulterated energy in a kindergarten class of twenty children, but she was feeling a little under the weather. Friday - thank God the weekend was close.

A soft knock on the door preceded Isela and her father into the room. Heather shook first his hand, and then the little girl's. "My, Isela, you've grown."

Mr. Quiroga smiled shyly; Isela beamed at her. She had dealt exceptionally well with the traumatic ordeal after two men had burst into their home, killed her brother and left her father barely alive. Father and daughter had moved away shortly after the incident, but yesterday, Mr. Quiroga had called and asked if Isela could possibly stay with the class for a few hours while he was in town for a job interview. Heather had said 'yes' immediately, because she'd been looking forward to seeing the girl again.

Isela found herself a place to sit with another girl, and Heather started the class with a song she'd taught them earlier this week. It was good that the girls and boys sang with enthusiasm, so she didn't have to put much of a strain on her aching throat.

The door opened again, interrupting the singing of those sitting near the door, while it trailed off in a wave across the classroom as the other children began to notice the intrusion. For a split second Heather thought that Mr. Quiroga had forgotten something and come back.

What she saw instead made her heart lurch with sudden fear.

The black-clad man with the ski mask and rifle was as out of place as he could be in this setting, but she knew with sickening clarity that this was no bad dream.

The seconds ticked by, the moment frozen in time as she stared at him in horror, while he stared back coldly. Then one of the boys started to cry, and a girl joined in. That jolted Heather into motion before the man spoke:

"Make them shut up, or I will."

She gathered the crying children to her, an arm around each. To the others she said in the firm tone she only ever used when the class went crazy on her, "Don't you be afraid. Just do what this gentleman says, and it will be all right. Everything will be all right."

Twenty pairs of wide, disbelieving eyes stared back at her. And then there was Isela. She had tucked herself into a tight ball, rocking herself, trembling with the effort to keep quiet.

Heather found that at this moment, she reflected her own feelings perfectly.

It wasn't going to be an ordinary day after all.

Act One

Lindsay Boxer leaned back into her desk chair, hands linked behind her head as she gazed smugly at the computer screen. "A nice quiet morning with paperwork. It's going to be a good day."

"You're evil," Warren Jacobi observed, having read her thoughts exactly.

She shrugged. "It wasn't my fault that the defendant tripped and broke his arm, so the hearing was delayed."

Tripped on the same stairs she had run down not so long ago, as Cindy had lain at the bottom, bleeding. Lindsay shuddered at the thought, her good mood gone in an instant. Too much had happened in the meantime, too much she couldn't afford to dwell upon. If she was getting this tiny break, Lindsay supposed she'd earned it.

Not for long, anyway, as there was another predator on the loose.

Career Day had come at a bad time, but then again, for anyone in Homicide, there'd never be a good one.

Jacobi picked up on her shift in mood. "I don't know about that. You'd do anything to avoid the gates of hell, right?" he teased, trying to lighten the mood.

Somehow, his choice of words irritated her, but Lindsay went with the joke anyway. "Gates of hell, huh? I thought you liked children."

"Jill's words, not mine," he revealed.

Lindsay smiled, remembering Jill's reaction when Claire had tried to talk her into joining her for Career Day in Nate's 5th grade class. Of course, any protests had become pointless when Denise had ordered her, another inter-departmental event she wasn't supposed to miss. Though the way Tom's wedding had turned out, Jill's wariness was certainly understandable.

Even though she was using the court appointment as her excuse, Lindsay had gotten a free pass out of Career Day due in large part to the fact that Tom had carelessly neglected to inform her the last time he'd invited Heather and her kindergarten class to the station. Lindsay would hear all about it anyway, and truth be told, she was looking forward to an evening with the girls where Jill would confirm her caution for the k-word, Claire would shake her head at her fondly, and maybe they'd even have some carefree moments before the subject went back to the serial killer, and Lindsay's state of mind.

And then there was Cindy. She found herself smiling at the thought of her. So far Lindsay thought she'd done pretty well with the shields she'd built around herself, letting few people see glimpses of what was behind the façade. Cindy had easily circumvented those barriers, in much the same way as she always managed to make it to the other side of the yellow tape at crime scenes. And surprisingly, Lindsay found she didn't mind.

But it wasn't like the criminal element in this city cared much about her personal issues - with the murders of Chris Blake and Robert Dellan still unsolved, there really wasn't much time for confusion... or even for the grief for her father she kept tucked away in a more remote corner of her mind. It was a little disconcerting, but somehow, that was a relief, too. As she kept telling everybody, work was the best healer.

Lindsay was quickly pulled back into the moment, though, when the door of Tom's office slammed and Tom hastened down the stairs. She was about to crack a joke when she saw the slightly dazed look on his face that was so unlike him, it had her worried instantly.

"Over at Mission Day School," he said as though he could hardly believe himself. "There have been shots fired. Unknown number of shooters, or casualties."

The realization came like a gut punch. That was the school where Heather Hogan worked as a kindergarten teacher. It was also the same building where Jill and Claire were supposed to be entertaining a bunch of 5th graders on Career Day.

Unlike other moments of crisis, where the weight of her gun usually offered a sense of reassurance, in this instance it did nothing to ease her fear for her friends.

Lindsay shared a worried look with Jacobi. Then, with more confidence than she felt, she said, "Let's find out who these bastards are and what we're dealing with."

So much for a quiet morning - or getting any closer to finding the religiously motivated serial killer they had on their hands. Not today.

"Now that's a surprise!" Claire remarked as they greeted Cindy in the hallway. "Don't tell me you were sent to cover Career Day."

"Though it could very well classify as a crime that I was sent here," Jill added. "So who do you know who's going to kindergarten? Anything we should know about?" she asked with a wink.

Cindy laughed. "No kids yet, and none for me in the immediate future. Besides, you already know all my secrets," she said, blushing a little, since for her, it seemed too obvious what - or who - she was referring to. "I did a piece on Child Protective Services a while ago, and was just meeting with a woman and her little girl I was interviewing at that time. So you're going to show the kids the ropes today? How to abide the law? Cut a dead body open correctly?"

"When you put it like that, I begin to understand why Nate is sick at home today," Claire said dryly. "It's not going to be that bad though. We're just going to tell them that Mommy does more than wash their laundry and make them dinner."

"Mommy?" Jill shuddered dramatically. "Speak for yourself."

"They will love you," Cindy said with conviction. "I've got to run. See you tonight?"

"Yes. Remember that drinks are on Lindsay for bailing on us."

They laughed at Claire's words, and Jill muttered, "I'll be *sure* to remind her."

The bell rang and Cindy left, as Jill and Claire went back to their class.

"We don't know yet who they are or what they want," the captain of the SWAT team told them. "They went in around 12:15 and shot everyone in their way. At least two teachers and one of the kids were killed, that's what we heard from a few who made it out. The negotiator is on the way."

Lindsay shared a long look with Tom. The gunmen had chosen the most vulnerable as their shield,

hiding in the kindergarten area. Heather was still inside. As Career Day was being held in the library in the same building, so were Jill and Claire. That knowledge cut like a laser through every issue that had taken up her time lately, professionally and personally.

Between the two of them, no words were necessary. *We're not going to lose another loved one.*

Passing by her, Tom squeezed her arm gently. "That might be too late. We have to establish communication with these jerks now. And work out a plan on how to get in, because they're not going to release those hostages. They are too valuable to them."

Lindsay shared his assessment, but now that they were going to do something, she breathed just a little bit easier. Strapping her Kevlar tighter, she followed him into the van where their operation was being set up.

Jill watched with amusement as Claire tried to steer the subject away from the dead bodies and get the kids to focus on her education as a medical doctor. Despite Jill's earlier protests, this community-serving job had actually been fun. These kids were clever and interested. That's why this was important, to help kids like the Dellans' realize they had choices, and that a violent father-turned-murder victim and a helpless mother wouldn't be all that ever defined their lives.

She'd even looked at some of the girls and almost giggled when she imagined a future 'murder club'. Some of the kids clearly showed potential.

Any sense of humor was lost in a heartbeat though when a noise resounded in the building, sounds that could only be interpreted in one way:

Gunshots.

Claire stopped her narrative, but she stayed reassuringly calm. "All right, we're going to check out what happened, but you will all stay here. Ms. Gavin," she addressed the teacher, "make sure everybody stays away from the windows."

The young teacher nodded, fear written in her eyes.

Jill jumped up to follow Claire who cautiously opened the door and peeked outside. The hallway was empty. Jill wished she possessed her friend's seemingly unshakeable calm. "What the hell is going on here?"

"I don't know, but it can't be good. I'm calling Lindsay."

Before she could even punch in the numbers, another gunshot rang out, closer this time.

"You stay here," Claire said. "Somebody might need my help."

"No way. I'm not going to let you go out there alone."

"Jill, this is not the moment to be stubborn. Lindsay will kill me if something happens to you."

"And it's the same vice versa, so I'm coming with you."

Claire gave in abruptly, obviously realizing that Jill was determined. "We'll just take a look, then we'll get back inside, barricade the door, and wait until the police arrive."

"Good idea," Jill said, and it sounded only a bit ironic. She was too scared for anything else.

Down the next hallway there lay an injured man, bleeding from a wound in his chest. Claire hurried to his side. Just for an instant she looked up at Jill and they wordlessly understood that they were both thinking the same thing. Each of them still had their own nightmares about the day Cindy got shot. Thank God, Jill thought, she wasn't here anymore to get caught in this particular mess.

The footsteps of heavy boots echoed loudly.

Claire knelt beside the man who had fallen unconscious, putting pressure on the wound. "Go back in there," she snapped at Jill. "They aren't going to break the door down."

"No."

"Damn it, can't you for once--"

Claire broke off the moment the sounds stopped, and Jill spun around, finding herself face to face with the barrel of a rifle trained on her by a masked man.

"You two come with me," he barked.

"I'm a doctor," Claire hastened to explain. "This man needs help." Which was rather obvious, Jill thought, and wouldn't make much of an impression.

The gunman snorted. "Help yourself, bitch. You come with me, or I'll blow her brains out."

For an instant both Claire and Jill were lost in a world of despair, on their own. Then Claire got up from the floor, her eyes bright. The teacher had regained consciousness. He looked scared, his eyes imploring the only person who had promised help, but who was being made to choose her friend over him.

Jill didn't breathe until the muzzle of the gun left her neck, then jumped when it was fired at the injured man once more.

More men had come inside, all dressed in black with masks, ushering Heather's colleagues and some older kids inside. She didn't feel much assured by her co-workers' presence. Martin had a bleeding nose, Angela a bruise on the side of her face. They both looked shell-shocked, and Heather was worried that each of them could lose it soon. These men, whatever it was they wanted, seemed to be itching for a reason to pull the trigger; she was determined to make sure that neither she nor any of the kids would give them one.

Ever since she had realized that her classroom was going to be the headquarters of this nightmare, a strange kind of calm had settled over her. For the kids and herself to survive, all she could do was try her best. She cast a worried look at Isela who hadn't once looked up since she'd caught a glimpse of the weapons, cringing every time one of the men spoke up.

It had been Career Day for the 5th grade class today, which explained the presence of D.D.A. Jill

Bernhardt and Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Claire Washburn. The same women who, Heather remembered, barely stifling a hysterical giggle in time, had almost blown her wedding. Friends of Tom's ex-wife.

It was probably the way her mind had dissociated itself from the situation, but she had faith in Tom to get her out of this.

Him, and Lindsay Boxer.

Lindsay was aware of everybody's eyes on her as she dialed the number of Claire's cell phone. That's what made her good at her job; in this moment, she was able to push aside the thought of her friends in the midst of this hostage situation, of what might have happened to them or Tom's wife, for whom she'd found a grudging respect. No thoughts of dead children crossed her mind as the phone began to ring. Once. Twice.

She was calm. Just like she'd been when Cindy had knocked on the front door of McCarthy's house.

Three, four, five times.

Tom was tapping his fingers nervously.

Six times.

Then, somebody hit the call answer button. Waited. Most likely not Claire.

"This is Inspector Lindsay Boxer. Why don't we talk?"

The laughter sent chills down Claire's spine. He'd made her fish the cell phone from her purse and then taken it. She'd quickly pegged the man as the one in charge, since he didn't have to confer with anyone else before he answered. Other than that, the black fabric over their faces, with holes left for eyes and mouths, made them all the same, faceless monsters sprung from a nightmare.

"Yes, we should," he said. "Just so you understand your situation correctly, *Inspector*."

There was something reassuring about the notion that it was probably Lindsay on the phone.

"If you don't want to lose any more lives, you had better listen closely. I want this area cleared of all SWAT members and other police. No surprises, no interruptions."

She couldn't hear the answer to that, but it had to have been something he'd expected. "You're in no position to bargain. You won't see any of these hostages until you have met my demands."

Claire listened as he gave further instructions regarding money and their getaway, and as terrified as she was, she wondered who they were. So far, they hadn't given away anything. The kindergarten hadn't been randomly chosen, though, and so it was likely that they'd watched the school - this was not some spontaneous action. These men probably wanted press. With a sinking heart she realized that would mean more, not fewer, deaths.

She thought of her family and the possibility that she wouldn't be seeing them again, and as she choked back tears, she thanked whoever was responsible for the fact that Nate was safe at home. A movement to her side distracted her, as Jill took her own cell phone out of her purse and slipped it into one of her boots. Claire moved a little so she blocked her from view, and they shared a grim smile.

The odds might not be good, but they were going to do their best to survive.

He had hung up on her.

Lindsay felt herself flush with nausea for an instant. The leader of this group had been quite specific as to what he wanted - \$1 million and to get away with it - but they still didn't know anything about their motives. She had screwed it up. No one said so, but she felt it.

"That's why they usually leave these things to us, Inspector."

If it was possible, hearing that voice made Lindsay feel even worse. The hostage negotiator, Nelson Wilcook, and his team had arrived. They'd had a run-in before, and if she'd never had to meet him again, it would have been too soon. No such luck.

"Usually hostage takers don't have the patience to wait while you're stuck in traffic." Tom gave her a warning glance. It was unnecessary. Lindsay saw it most sensible to relent, at least for the moment anyway. There were too many lives at stake.

"They seem to have randomly chosen hostages, most of them children, but also a few teachers and a couple of speakers for Career Day." *Jill. Claire.*

She cleared her throat and continued, "Heat sensors tell us they're back in the kindergarten area."

"Not good," Wilcook murmured, pushing his gold-rimmed glasses higher up on his nose. "We need to get them back on the phone. As long as they're talking, it's less likely that they're killing people."

Only the seriousness of the situation kept Lindsay from rolling her eyes at him.

"They killed her. They killed her right in front of me! She was my best friend!"

Cindy held on to the sobbing woman with a heavy heart, wondering how this day could have gone to hell so abruptly. On her way out of the school, she had passed two men who didn't seem to fit into the environment, but she'd assumed they'd been some hired workers. Somehow, she'd had this *feeling*, but she'd pushed it aside quickly in favor of anticipating an evening with the girls at the end of the workday.

Not that it was very likely now.

At least there had been one lucky coincidence for her friend Sarah and her daughter whom Cindy had met today. Little Chelsea had been sick, so Sarah had picked her up even before Cindy had met Jill and Claire.

She had tried to call Lindsay as soon as she had realized what was going on, but couldn't reach her. Chances were she was already in the thick of things. Of course.

Cindy had come here to the tent that had been put up a safe distance from the crime scene. The tent was equipped with a crisis intervention staff to tend to scared and traumatized children, parents and staff. Most of them had been in the neighboring buildings that were able to be evacuated quickly. No such luck for the kindergarten staff and the children, and many of those who had been attending Career Day.

No one had questioned her presence so far, and she had probably already gathered more information than if she had been closer to the scene. She had checked in, and needless to say it was making her boss happy, but what was bothering her was that she hadn't yet found out about Claire and Jill. Cindy didn't want to think about what that could mean.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated, feeling selfish for wishing that, at the end of this day, she wouldn't have to share the woman's grief.

Betty Lowan was a teacher whose friend had been shot right in front of her. In the following commotion, she had been able to make it out. "I told her it was too dangerous," she whispered, and Cindy started at the words, a shiver tracing down her spine.

"Tell me more," she said.

"I just hope he doesn't mess this up."

Secretly Lindsay thought the same, but she didn't voice her opinion to Tom, who was obviously under enough stress already. They stood together in a corner of the van, viewing the layout of the school, but she could sense that he was having a hard time standing still. It unnerved her, as much as she could understand his unease.

"He's arrogant, but at least on that level he can relate to the guy," she made a lame attempt to reassure him.

So far the intruders hadn't given an inch. Fortunately, they also hadn't shot anybody else, but the pressure on both sides was increasing. They had no way out, and everybody knew it.

There seemed to be no alternative to finding a way in and ending this without any more people getting hurt, because there was no progress in identifying the intruders. Lindsay took a look at Wilcook who seemed outwardly cool, though obviously the man on the other end of the line wasn't giving them anything to work with. Then she glanced back to Tom. Lindsay could tell he was nervous. Hell, she was too, but there was something about his posture that had her worried.

"I'll go find the principal," she said. "We'll look at those plans with her. There's got to be a way to surprise them."

"I don't like it. The moment we go in, they're going to start shooting the hostages." His voice was strained with the effort to keep his voice quiet.

And if we wait too long, they're going to do it anyway. But she didn't say that out loud. Lindsay wished she could call Claire again, but that wasn't an option. They needed a good plan, and soon,

before these men realized that they weren't going to get what they wanted.

Making her way to the area where the principal was talking to her staff and trying to calm everyone in the crisis intervention tent, Lindsay took a moment to pray that her friends weren't hurt. Then again, no one deserved anything like this happening to them. They would bring this to an end.

Hearing a familiar noise, she looked up to see a news helicopter circling the area.

Lindsay shook her head. She began to wonder why Cindy wasn't anywhere to be seen, but felt guiltily relieved about it. After all, she already had her big story with the connection between Dellan's and Blake's murders. At the moment, that felt like a distant, alternate universe.

Cindy had gone behind the tent with the distraught woman. The more she heard of Betty Lowan's story, the more she felt like she had to talk to Lindsay, and soon.

Lowan told Cindy how she had tried to find records of a girl's earlier school visit, but had come up empty. She'd done more digging, talked to the principal and her friend who had been killed today, and found out they had a secret. They had been hiding the girl's true identity.

"Why would they do that?" Cindy's mind was spinning. This hostage situation had seemed so random, from what she'd heard from teachers and a few older kids who had gotten out. A senseless, violent act. But it was beginning to look like it was anything but.

"I'm not sure - they said her parents would only stay for a couple of months, and no one was to find out about them. I don't know, I think they were in the US illegally." She started crying again.

"What was the girl's name?" Somebody had found out about them, and if this was related, Cindy assumed there was more to it than immigration issues.

Betty Lowan looked up at her, a sudden distrust in her eyes. "Why are you asking me all these questions?"

"Look, I'm working with the police--"

The disbelief got a little more pronounced. "Kind of. I'm a crime reporter for the Register, and I have a contact in Homicide. She's probably out there as we speak, and they will want to know about this. Please, I'm telling the truth."

She must have sounded sufficiently trustworthy, because Betty Lowan gave in. "Her name's Isela Quiroga. At least she attended here under that name; I never knew her true identity."

The air in the van seemed to get more stifling by the minute.

Lindsay had brought a reluctant principal back from the crisis intervention area. The principal had wanted to stay with her staff, offer support and solace, but they needed her. She'd been at the school for nearly 20 years and knew it inside out. They needed Marla Graham to show them a way in.

The rooms that housed the kindergarten area and the library had huge windows facing the

playground. There were guards by the door. There was no possible way to approach that wouldn't alert the men who had taken over the school building. Not from the ground, at least.

"Damn it!"

Lindsay flinched at Tom's sudden outburst. Pacing within the confines of the van, she was equally sympathetic and annoyed - he wasn't the only one who had someone to fear for. She wouldn't even start thinking about the parents or colleagues of the hostages. As far as Wilcook was concerned, there wasn't much they could do about it anytime soon.

"Yeah, I'm not happy about it, either," she said dryly. "Who the hell are these creeps? Why kindergarten?" Though partially, she had already answered the question: With little children, the pressure was highest. But there was a deeper meaning to it, she just hadn't figured out what that was yet.

Wilcook, now off the phone, turned to her. "Looking for something specific - or maybe someone? If they were in it just for the audacity of it, a whole lot more people would have been killed already. So far, they've been remarkably patient. That means they haven't found what they were looking for yet."

Whatever that was, Lindsay hoped they hadn't realized that the teacher of the class was the lieutenant's wife. As much as she feared for Jill and Claire, that connection was... worrisome.

There were detectives currently covering that angle, looking into past arrests, but she had the feeling that Tom denied it could be an option. He was probably right, though. If they'd been after Heather, there was no use in holding a whole school hostage, right?

In the oppressive silence, the ringing of her cell phone startled all of them.

Impatiently, she answered it, then froze at the sounds in the background. Children crying.

The caller ID showed Jill's number.

"Quiet!" she said sharply, making everyone turn in her direction. The quality of sound was as to be expected, but still clear enough to hear a male voice speak. Lindsay recognized him; it was the one she'd spoken to earlier. The leader.

"You let her go now."

"No!"

The other voice belonged to Heather, her protest turning into a scream.

In the midst of the commotion, Jill spoke over the crackling line in a hushed whisper, "Lindsay? There are at least a dozen of them in here, heavily armed, and they're looking for a girl, Francisca Jimenez. And, Linz, they're getting nervous."

The last words sent a cold shiver down Lindsay's spine. Before she could answer, there was a gunshot and the sound of shattering glass.

Act Two

Cindy was frustrated as hell. The officer guarding the barricades was unfamiliar, and her mentioning of her *relationship* with Inspector Boxer didn't impress him a bit.

None of the teachers or students she'd spoken to had known anything about Jill or Claire. Everyone the intruders had left alive had probably been ushered into the kindergarten room right away. She had a bad feeling about this, and longed to speak to Lindsay, but this guy wouldn't see the necessity.

When she and Lowan had returned to the tent, the principal was no longer there.

She had to find a way to get the news about little Isela to Lindsay. In any way that she could.

This officer here would be walking a beat for the rest of his career, but she couldn't care less. He'd had his chance.

Jill was fairly proud of herself for having used the general commotion to relate the information to Lindsay. Hopefully it would bring them closer to identifying the perpetrators. She hadn't managed to put the cell phone back into her boot though, so she had to hide it in a toy box. Just in time, before one of the black-clad men looked her way. She could feel herself shaking.

Claire reached out to take her hand into hers, and she squeezed it gratefully.

The men had split up to watch the hostages, uttering threats at the teachers who frantically tried to calm the younger children. Some of the older ones who fully understood that they might not get out of this alive had a distant look of shock on their faces.

In the midst of this, Heather Hogan was clutching a little girl to her, refusing to give her to the leader. Apparently he thought that this was Francisca Jimenez, the child they were after and wanted to separate from the group, no matter how often every one of the teachers had claimed that there was no child of this name here.

When she'd first refused, he had fired a random shot into the group, hitting a young girl in the shoulder. One female teacher had cradled the bleeding child in her arms. When Claire had tried to get to her, she'd been pushed back roughly.

Now, a terrified silence was settling over the group of hostages.

"If you want, you can come with little Francisca."

Heather held the sobbing girl tighter, surveyed the children and her colleagues, and then nodded.

"Don't do this!" The words were out of her mouth before Jill could even think about it. "You still have a chance to cut a deal, but the moment you walk out of that door with that teacher and child, it's off."

The leader turned around and walked over to her, unhurriedly. "What's it to you?"

Jill didn't know where she was drawing her courage from. Maybe it was just sheer desperation. "Because I'm the person who could make you that deal."

He came closer. She flinched when he reached out, but he didn't touch her; he just yanked the visitor's badge from her blouse. "I'll be sure to remember that," he said, making sure it sounded more like a threat than a source of relief. "Now shut up." Then he turned to one of his men and pointed at Heather.

"Get them out of here."

Jill exchanged a look with Claire. Years of friendship ensured that one's fear was obvious to the other even without words. They both hated the idea of Heather and the child alone with one of those monsters, no matter whether the girl was really the one they were after or not.

"Look," Claire tried, "she's right. You can still get out of this, but--"

The hard slap to her face, with the back of a hand, stunned her into silence.

"Thank you," Heather whispered to Jill and Claire, her eyes bright, but tears kept at bay. "Please tell Tom that I love him."

"You're going to tell him yourself," Claire said confidently, even as she wiped blood from her face. All of them knew she was making promises that would be hard to keep, but it was the thought that counted.

At the moment, it was all they had.

Tom banged his fist against the wall of the van hard enough to bruise his knuckles. "We can't wait any longer!"

"We have to. Come on." Under the watchful gazes of the staff, he followed her outside without any protest, much to Lindsay's relief.

"You've got to keep yourself together!" she urged. "We go in now, there's no telling how many people will get killed."

He stared at her blankly. "There's no telling anyway. Aren't you thinking about your friends at all?"

It was a low blow, maybe not intentionally, but it still struck. *They're all I'm thinking about.* "Of course I am. But until we have everyone in position, ready to go in there, the outcome will only be worse."

"I know that!" Tom ran a shaky hand over his face.

Taking a closer look, Lindsay was more than worried by what she saw. He shouldn't be here. He was usually good at being in control of a situation like this, making the right decisions, but with the person you loved in mortal danger, anybody's judgment would be clouded.

Then again, Lindsay was quite sure she wouldn't let anyone keep her away from the scene either. It was hard on all of them, but they couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

"There must be a way to take them from both sides without them noticing. And we'll find it."

"In the meantime, they're killing our children. What are you going to do about it?" She spun around to see a tall man in his early thirties, with dark hair. He was almost handsome, if it wasn't for the obvious arrogance he had about himself. Talking to Tom, he had completely ignored her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Tom asked irritably, mirroring her thoughts.

The man threw him a meaningful look. Tom sighed. "I'll handle it, Inspector," he said, dismissing her.

The other man snorted, and even if Lindsay would have loved to give him a piece of her mind, that would have to wait. She had recognized him and wondered how he had made it past the police barricades. Their problems had just gotten bigger.

"I'll have a word with the principal," she said and walked off, leaving the two men alone.

Principal Graham showed them the students' files on the laptop that had been set up for her. There was no one by the name of Francisca Jimenez, and she couldn't imagine why anybody would be after one of the children.

Except in one case. Katerina Peral, from Heather's kindergarten class, was the daughter of Carlo Peral, the man who was currently conferring outside with Tom. He had been one of Tom's contacts back when he had been working on the gang task-force.

It would have been too easy, though. Lindsay's guts told her that this wasn't gang-related. It had a different feel to it.

She switched to the floor plan, staring once again at the lines that made up the layout of the school. Those giant windows were a problem, so were the guards at the door. If they could take them out without alerting the ones inside...

If only they knew about the Jimenez girl. As it was, they had nothing to stand on for negotiation; even Wilcook had to admit it.

As for now, the roof was probably their best bet. That, and-- "What is this?" she asked, pointing to a black bar next to a wall of the kindergarten play room.

"Oh, that won't help you," Graham said. "It's an old elevator shaft from at least two renovations ago. No one has used it or been down there in years. It's probably not safe."

"But there's still access?"

The principal nodded reluctantly. "You might even be able to get in from the cellar of the neighboring building. There's still a door to that floor, bolted. However, there's no way to tell if you'd even make it up there."

One team from the roof... one from the elevator shaft... A plan was taking shape.

The incoming call was from Jacobi, and she cast a thoughtful glance at the still nervous principal, wondering if she needed to lean a little harder on her before anyone was going into that building.

"Boxer."

"You won't believe this," he said without preamble. "Francisca Jimenez died four years ago in a car accident, together with her parents. They're after a phantom."

"Anything on why they would want her?"

"I talked to Jill's boss, and she's on it. Speaking of bosses... how is ours doing?"

Lindsay sighed, half listening to the argument getting louder outside, and it was probably all the answer that her partner needed. "We all need this to end soon," she said. "We might have found a way inside, through an old elevator shaft."

"Be careful." Jacobi sounded impressed but wary. "Any news about Jill and Claire...?"

"We don't know yet," Lindsay said, almost surprised that no trace of the pain had found its way into her voice.

"I'll call you back as soon as I know more."

They didn't give each other reassurances, knowing they could very well be false hopes. Ending the call, Lindsay turned all of her attention to the principal now. "Please, think," she said. "Is there any other child who could have attracted the attention of these criminals? They're organized. They didn't choose the school randomly, but because they wanted a certain child. If we know who it is, it would probably help us to solve this without any more bloodshed."

Marla Graham nervously knotted her fingers together. She tried to hold Lindsay's gaze, but couldn't, looking down at her shaking hands instead.

Lindsay sat down across from her, laying her own hand over Graham's. "If you've got something to tell, please, do it now. One child has already been killed, and at least two of your teachers. Don't let the bodycount rise."

She had the uncanny memory of herself trying to make Kate Hammond confess to murder. She sure knew how to get them where it *hurt*.

Principal Graham was no exception as she looked up with tears in her eyes. "We only wanted to protect her!"

Cindy didn't have to think of a distraction after all; somebody else did it for her.

Once she was convinced the man who had just approached the officer would keep him and another colleague occupied, she slipped past the barrier and carefully inched closer. Briefly, the thought of what Lindsay would think of her doing this crossed her mind, but it couldn't be helped. The information Betty Lowan had given her was crucial, and Lindsay could blame Officer Clueless later.

The thought made Cindy smile. She wouldn't want to be in his shoes.

It wasn't like she was actually doing anything dangerous, just going to talk to Lindsay. Hopefully, she had good news on Jill and Claire. Cindy wondered how Lindsay was holding up, doing her job under this much pressure. She'd gotten a glimpse of it when Ramos' people had taken McCarthy's family as hostages, knew how focused Lindsay would be - it was reassuring.

Then again, there had been too much loss lately. Even with the images of the terrified people in the tent still vivid, it was hard to wrap one's mind around what was going on *inside* the building - and that their friends were right in the middle of it.

She couldn't bear to think about it too much. She would have been too terrified to move.

Not so Lindsay. Fear only spurred her further.

With the layout of the school, there was no way for the police to get very close; they would have had to set themselves up beyond a certain distance. Trying to make herself as small as possible beside the hedges, Cindy looked around cautiously for anything that could look like an unmarked police van. She edged further into the territory, still a good distance from the actual school building. *Which is fine with me, really. I'm not out to do something stupid.*

The school was to the right, the huge windows of the kindergarten area glistening in the distance. To the left, she saw the van; it had the sign of a construction firm on it, but the woman and man talking outside of it were familiar.

At the sight of Lindsay, Cindy breathed a sigh of relief. Talk about finally getting somewhere.

She allowed herself an instant to stop and watch, secretly admiring Lindsay's confident posture. She had to admit Lindsay had been right about going back to work - for some, it was the best therapy. And it wasn't like Cindy couldn't understand. After the shooting, she had returned to her own job as soon as possible. Too much time to think could kill you - sometimes literally.

Cindy was about to make her way to the van when a movement to her right made her jump.

The girl was about ten years old, and she had blood on her hands. "Please," she urged, reaching out. Cindy winced when the small fingers painted the skin on her arm crimson red. "My little brother is still there!"

"Come on. I'll take you to the police."

"No!" The girl shook her head, tugging on Cindy's arm insistently. "He fell. I can't carry him. Please!"

They weren't going to go into the building, right? It wasn't like she could tell her no. She just couldn't.

"Okay, quick. Show me where he is."

She had the sinking feeling that while it was the right thing to do, it wouldn't turn out to be the smartest thing.

Despite the circumstances, Inspector Warren Jacobi still knocked before he entered acting D.A.

Denise Kwon's office.

She gave him a quick, wry smile in acknowledgement. "I was going to call you," she said. "It took some calling in of favors, but here's what we have on the Jimenez family. It was hard to find anything on them, because they basically never existed. There was a car accident four years ago, two adults dead, a little girl - also dead according to the records."

"Maybe not an accident after all?"

Denise shrugged. "Likely, but it couldn't be proven. As I said, I owe favors to too many people now. They were in a witness protection program. The word was out that their identity had been found out, and they were going to be relocated. Martin Torres, the father, had been the main witness in the trial against Andrew Vasquez three years ago."

"The crime lord? That Vasquez?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"But wouldn't they know about the accident, in case it actually was one and they didn't help it happen?"

Denise shook her head. "It gets better from there... the girl who died in the car was not the daughter, Francisca. In fact, her name should sound familiar, as you and Boxer worked on the case. Isela Quiroga."

He must have gaped at her, because she laughed dryly. "I reacted the same way. And here's the last connection: The agent who was assigned to them worked undercover. As a kindergarten teacher."

"Anything else?"

Denise just smirked.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "We owe you."

She made a dismissing hand gesture. "I'm glad to help. I'm pretty sure the girl we got to see was really Torres' daughter. For some reason, it was Isela in the car with the Torres'."

"So we need to find the good Mr. Quiroga to clear this up. Thanks again."

Jacobi was already heading for the door when she called him back. "And... Inspector?"

"Yes?"

"You call me the minute you hear anything about--"

"Sure," he said, stifling a smile. Denise was as worried as all of them, but she had a hard time admitting it.

She sighed. "This will be one Career Day none of these kids will ever forget. I wish I hadn't made her go."

"No one could've known this would happen," he said, uncomfortably reminded of Jill's choice of

words.

'Gates of hell' seemed oddly fitting now.

Jill stroked the dark hair of the girl who had just curled up in her lap, trying not to think of what would happen to Heather and the other girl now. She had hope... they weren't just separating them in order to kill. As they all had learned before, these men weren't worried about killing with an audience.

Little Isela had scrambled over into her lap the moment her former teacher was gone from the room, and she hadn't looked up again.

It was a different kind of horror for her, Jill assumed, because she'd probably just started to feel safe after having strangers invade her home and kill her brother.

The warm weight in her lap was both reassuring and disconcerting. It spoke of life, and at the same time, its utter fragility.

Again, she searched Claire's face, finding solace in the nearness of her friend, something that Jill guiltily acknowledged. She wouldn't mind seeing Lindsay soon, either...

As if on cue, Claire said, "They're going to get us out."

"I know."

She watched the men pacing the room, their leader still with them. Was finding the Jimenez girl really all that was on their agenda? And if not, how had they planned to end this? They couldn't kill everyone in the room, could they?

She gave herself the terrifying answer.

Who would stop them?

They both jumped when a desperate wail filled the room. "I need to get out! I can't breathe! Please, somebody help me!"

This time, Claire didn't hesitate. While Jill kept holding on to Isela, praying that her friend wouldn't have to pay for her bravado, Claire crouched beside the teacher and shook her gently. "Miss? Please try to calm down. Take deep breaths. Yes, that's it."

One of the masked gunmen approached her, and she gave him a daring look.

He left her alone. His posturing was simply to remind her, to remind every one of them, of the threat.

"You won't do a thing about it. You're worried about your kid, I can understand that. My wife is in there too!"

Lindsay supposed it was not a good thing that Tom had Peral nearly by his collar. "Lieutenant. You should take a look at this." Both men looked equally unnerved at the interruption.

"There's new information. And we might have just found ourselves a way in."

Peral gave her the same presumptuous look as before. "Took you people long enough."

"Mr. Peral here wants to tell us how police work is done. Would you get someone to accompany him back to his car?"

"My pleasure," Lindsay said, stifling a grin.

Tom shook his head as they both watched him walk away. "He's crazy. Of course he's worried like the rest of us, but he actually offered manpower for the storm. Can you believe that? SFPD assisted by a gang leader. Now that would be a headline for your friend."

He laughed dryly, which Lindsay found slightly offensive, though she couldn't really say why. Maybe because she didn't have the time to remind him that Cindy didn't indulge in sensationalism like some of her colleagues did. And Lindsay didn't like that she had to remind him in the first place.

"Where is she anyway?"

"Outside of the barricaded area like all good reporters, I guess. Tom, Cindy isn't stupid."

He nodded, and it remained unclear if he trusted her judgment in this, or if he just didn't want to waste time with an argument. "Okay. What about that way in you were talking about?"

"No, absolutely not. I can't risk any of you breaking your necks!"

"Can you risk any more dead hostages?" Lindsay asked in a harsh whisper. "This is the only chance we have. We can come in from two sides, from the roof and through that shaft. From the ground, it will never work. They'll notice too quickly."

"Didn't you hear the principal? No one's been down there in forever!"

"Until today. Tom," she said firmly. "This is how we can end it. They're not going to give up. Torres and his wife may be dead, but Quiroga raised the daughter. If they make the connection, they're going to kill her anyway. Hell, they might be more eager to kill once they know we've figured them out."

Lindsay could tell he was torn. She would be too, making a decision that would hopefully save the lives of many people, including a loved one, but that could possibly endanger the women and men for whom he was responsible.

Time slowed down to a standstill before he said, "All right. We do it your way."

The boy looked at her with wide, terrified eyes, his small face tear-streaked. It made Cindy want to

cry, too, but she was aware that what would help them most was to get both of the siblings to safety as soon as possible.

She scooped up the boy. He had banged his knee when he fell, hence the blood on the girl's hands. It was a relief that it was nothing more serious. Not a gunshot wound.

The feeling was short-lived, though.

There were several men coming along the same path that she had taken, blocking her way back. They didn't look like plainclothes at all. And how naïve had she been anyway, thinking they wouldn't watch the territory, make their rounds in a wide circle?

Cindy backed away slowly, the girl's hand in hers, sticky-red.

The only problem was it brought her closer to the school, not further away.

The thought was slightly unreal, as was the hand over her mouth from out of nowhere, before she could scream.

All she could see was a black rectangle far above them. It was at that moment when Lindsay began to question the wisdom of her insistence, but it couldn't be helped now. She tested the lowest foothold, relieved to find it solidly bolted into the wall. She was also grateful she'd never been claustrophobic, because she wouldn't be able to do this now. No fear of heights either. The only way in was through a connecting tunnel in the neighboring building, and this one was two floors down.

Back when there had actually been an elevator in use instead of empty space, save for dust and possibly bugs, the school building had been much smaller.

Unlike the newer elevators, this one would have transported about four people, maximum. Aware of the expectant looks on her, Lindsay straightened and began the climb, wincing a little when dust rose around her. Focusing on climbing, she ignored the cottony feel of it under her fingers.

Graham had been right; no one had been in here for a long time. The upside of this was that the intruders would not expect anyone to come that way.

Behind her, a member of the SWAT team sneezed.

"Bless you," she murmured, trying not to breathe too deeply.

After Jamie Galvan had told her his name, there had been one unreal, terrifying moment in which Cindy had thought that he was going to kill her. He had turned out to be harmless, but the current nightmare she found herself in was anything but.

She had struggled, but ceased when the barrel of a gun was pressed into her side. They'd made a deal. He wouldn't hurt the children if she came with him quietly.

It wasn't much of a consideration.

What had her really scared, however, was that after he'd dragged her along the eerily quiet hallway, he pushed her into a room where none of the men wore any masks, and it made her think that they were far from being harmless like Jamie had been.

There were two of them, one who she quickly pegged for the one in charge, and one of his minions. Her mind already filed away descriptions, distancing herself from the likely fact that she wouldn't be able to tell anybody.

They weren't the only occupants of the room.

There was the little girl who they thought was the one.

Cindy could now easily tell that Betty Lowan had only told her half the truth. There was much more to this than a case of illegal immigration.

And in the middle of the room, tied to a chair, was Heather, pleading with the men to leave the girl alone. "Look, why don't you understand that you've got it wrong? I've been with the school for five years, there is no Francisca Jimenez. Certainly not her. Her name is Maria." Cindy noted that her clothing was slightly disheveled, but not so much as to assume something... worse had happened in here. She couldn't go there, not now.

They didn't listen to her, instead now turning their attention to Cindy who swallowed nervously.

"Found her snooping around," the one who had brought her in explained, giving her a rough shove that almost made her stumble.

He opened her bag and emptied the contents on the floor before leafing through her personal documents, coming up with her press ID.

The one who was so obviously the leader smiled at her when he saw it. Cindy suppressed a shudder. There was not a trace of emotion in his clear blue eyes. He'd kill with the same care that other people would switch off their TV.

"You wanted an exclusive?" he asked, sounding amused. "This is as exclusive as it's going to get, Ms. Crime Reporter. It's your lucky day - or maybe not."

It would have been easy to fall into that bottomless pit of fear that seemed to be opening up around her, but somehow Cindy managed not to. "Does that mean I get to hear why you are terrifying all these people, including me, when the girl you're after isn't even here?"

She closed her eyes for an instant, fearing he was going to shoot her right then and there.

It didn't happen.

Instead, one of the other men who had been standing by the window, said, "I don't like this, it can't be coincidence. We should pack up here."

He was clearly nervous, and Cindy wondered if he was the one to worry about more. Hell, who was she kidding? Neither of these people was in any way reassuring. And they had already killed.

"We will," his boss answered, unfazed. "You'll make another round and make sure that this time,

you don't bring anyone back. And you," he directed at Heather who cringed, "better tell me all you know about your agent colleague. I'd prefer a living hostage, but it's not mandatory."

He winked at Cindy. "Story of your life, huh?"

She honestly didn't know how to answer that.

The noise seemed deafening, making the windows rattle, and for a moment, Claire thought a bomb had gone off. She was still holding on to the woman who had had the breakdown earlier and was now quietly sobbing. Jill rocked little Isela who seemed so far gone she didn't even react to the overwhelming sound.

Had they gone crazy? Or were they trying to bring the whole building down with the hostages trapped inside now that they thought they'd found the child they had been looking for?

Claire found that she couldn't bring herself to fear much – any more than she already did, anyway. She was losing track of time. Part of her mind was aware that she was settling into shock like everyone else here, but it was still disconcerting.

The thought of the teacher in the hallway came unbidden and she lowered her gaze, trying to keep up the pretense of calm, though inside, she longed to scream.

The men were checking the doors and windows and speaking rapidly, which meant the hostages needed to keep it together. Because if the nervous reaction of the men was any indication, it wasn't them who had caused the explosion.

Whatever that meant.

"We can arrest all of these jokers later. In the meantime, the most important thing is that they don't interfere. Keep them out of the way."

Lieutenant Tom Hogan could barely restrain his anger when he'd realized what was happening. They'd wanted a slow, cautious approach, but that was no longer possible, thanks to Peral and his men who had used a grenade to create a diversion and start an operation of their own.

It was an act of arrogance that could probably cost more lives than they'd ever dared to fear, while he had teams halfway inside the building. Their lives were now in a lot more danger, too.

"Now that has to be the most unfortunate outcome," Nelson Wilcook said. "Didn't anybody see this coming?"

Tom wanted to slug him.

Act Three

The door to the hallway was almost in reach, some five feet away, when the explosion seemed to

shake the building. Not quite, but it felt that way in the narrow space. For an instant, her ears were ringing and Lindsay clutched the metal handholds even tighter.

Whatever it was, it meant that they had to hurry up, and also get out of there as soon as possible.

The flashlight illuminated the metal safety door, as well as numerous bugs scurrying away.

Somebody made a disgusted noise.

Changing the flashlight for the lock pick, she went to work. Since this door was so old, the school's current skeleton keys wouldn't be of any help, so this would have to be done the old-fashioned way.

It was tricky work in the near darkness, having to rely on her sense of touch more than her sight, holding on to the handhold with her right hand.

Under pressure to work fast.

Finally, she heard the reassuring click, as well as another sound; the crunch of metal in concrete loosening when the hold under her feet gave way.

Cindy realized several things at once. First, from the reaction of the men in the room, none of them was responsible for the explosion. So it was either the police coming in... or the group she had been trying to evade earlier, confusing them with the hostage takers, which had ultimately made her end up in here.

Lindsay would be mad, but it wasn't really her fault, was it? She couldn't have just left those kids to their own devices.

Come to think of it, if the worst that happened today was Lindsay yelling at her, Cindy wouldn't complain, because it'd mean that they'd both be alive.

If a competing group was trying to get control of the situation, what would that mean for the police?

She caught Heather's frightened gaze as one of the men, cursing, untied her.

"I want the child," the leader said, "and her," he pointed at Heather, "to keep the girl quiet." He turned to Cindy, again giving her a smile that did nothing to reassure her. "You're coming with us, too. You'll get your story."

She didn't want to go anywhere with him, but she had the unnerving feeling that refusing would possibly put her in a worse position.

"We'll meet outside," he told his men, 'outside' obviously not being random, but a very specific place. Of course. They were too organized to not have come with a plan B. "In the meantime, you go and take care of the folks next door."

The almost bored tone in which he'd said this sent a shiver down Cindy's spine. "What do you mean?"

He stepped closer to her, so his face was only inches from hers. "You be glad about your press ID,

little lady, because it's what's keeping you alive for now. What do you think it means?"

"No." She shook her head frantically. "No, you can't do that! There are friends of mine. They have nothing to with why you're here! Hell, you heard her, you even picked the wrong child. Why don't you just leave? I'm sure you've made your getaway plan before you came here. They'll be too terrified to even try and identify you!"

"All of my men have been masked inside. The only ones who could identify anyone are her, maybe the girl - and you. That's why you are all coming with us. For now."

He raised the rifle at her, and reluctantly, Cindy backed a step away.

It was so much worse knowing what the men who were leaving the room were about to do.

They had left two men in the room to guard the hostages. Others who had just come in were sent back outside to identify the source of the commotion.

Jill hardly dared to breathe. She could easily tell that it was the same for every one of the hostages in the room. Whoever was interfering with the intruders' agenda here, if they were their enemies, that should definitely mean something for all of them who were trapped in here.

Stroking Isela's soft hair, Jill scooted closer to Claire. They had to pay attention. They had to get ready.

For what, it wasn't quite clear, but then she saw the blur of movement outside the window, and had only a split second to shove Claire down and cover the child in her arms with her own body before the glass pane exploded.

There was no time, not even for her breathing to settle again. She had slipped for a moment, but found her footing again, and as Lindsay pushed the door open, finally on solid ground, there was not an instant to obsess over what could have happened.

She stepped into an empty hallway, but there were sounds to be heard, indicating they'd have company soon. Tom had informed her of the new development over the comms. It wasn't good, but they had to work with it now.

They were only a corner and two doors away from the room where the hostages were held.

Vasquez's people were nowhere to be seen, and when the shooting started, it quickly became clear why. Peral's men had taken the straight route in.

Katerina Peral screamed at the top of her lungs as she was picked up and carried out of the room, a hail of bullets separating the man who was carrying her from those all clad in black, up to and including their masks. They were firing back.

She was obviously out of her mind with fear, and there was hardly anyone in the room who couldn't

sympathize, because the men who had come to take her away were definitely not the police.

Two of the intruders were down, one of them reloading his weapon, cursing, as the man carrying the child was already out of the room. The one who was covering him got hit in the chest before he could make a retreat as well.

The adversary approached slowly, his expression unreadable under the mask as he raised the weapon, his finger poised over the trigger.

Still on the ground, sheltering little Isela from the view, Jill watched, wanting to keep the obvious from happening. But she just didn't know how.

She nearly fainted with relief when a familiar voice said, "I don't think so."

Lindsay stepped inside the room, her own weapon drawn, and the sight of her in the midst of this chaos was wonderfully reassuring. But only for a moment, before said chaos erupted anew.

Somebody dragged the fallen man out of the room, more police rushed in, and that's when she realized that one of the intruders who lay on the ground, bleeding from a gunshot wound in his side, was reaching for the weapon that he had lost when falling.

She reacted without thinking, taking it and pointing it at him. They all looked alike with their clothing and masks, but it didn't matter. All of them had come inside with the intent to kill, or at least none of them had ruled it out.

Like the man who had held the barrel of the gun to her neck this morning, who had forced her and Claire to leave the teacher, then, in a cruel twist, killed the man anyway.

Her vision began to blur.

"Hey. It's okay. You can give it to me now." There was a trace of worry creeping into the voice now, though the warm, soothing cadence stayed the same. "Jill, can you hear me?"

She took a deep breath, and her vision finally cleared to reveal Lindsay, looking all the part of the victorious warrior with the slightly disheveled ponytail and the smudge of dirt on her face.

It was over. Jill staggered slightly. "Did you come down the chimney?"

"Something like that," Lindsay said enigmatically. "Are you all right? Claire?" There was a hint of urgency in her voice. As much as she obviously worried about them, her responsibility extended to more people than just her and Claire, Jill realized.

Little Isela had no such reservations, though. "Lindsay!" she exclaimed, extending small arms.

There was a brief misty-eyed moment for all of them when Lindsay scooped her up. "Hi, honey. You are one brave girl. Would you mind staying with these ladies here for a little while longer?" Isela nodded against her chest.

Over the girl's head, Lindsay said quietly, "Take care of her, please. I'm going to find Heather."

What she didn't say came across just as clearly.

Hopefully, it isn't already too late.

The strange feeling didn't abate, and Lindsay could tell from experience that was not a good thing. If it stayed while clearing up a crime scene, it usually meant that there were things *left* to clear up. She'd been nearly breathless with relief at seeing her friends unharmed, save for some scratches from when Peral and his men had shattered the window. Now, as she and the rest of the team went through the school room by room, she wished they had found Heather just as unharmed. She didn't want to be the one to have to tell Tom... *stop it!*

They had to be somewhere in the building - Heather, the girl who they thought was Torres' daughter, and the man she'd spoken to on the phone hours ago. There was literally no way out.

This was what was causing the strange feeling. He wasn't among the men who had been arrested or shot, Lindsay was convinced of that. And if he hadn't made it outside the building, there were few alternatives. He could give himself up, although from what she knew about Vasquez's organization, that option was not likely. He could kill his hostages, and himself. There was a probability in this.

Either way, they didn't have much time.

The next door of the hallway was locked. Kicking it open, Lindsay found there was no one alive in there.

The body belonged to a woman in her early thirties, shot to the chest twice. Lindsay suspected she had found the agent who had been responsible for the Torres' girl, since no one had bothered to hide the bodies of the teachers and children they'd found so far, until now. Four adults. Two children.

Six too many dead.

She didn't want to add a single one to the count today.

The two men were arguing angrily about how to get out and still fulfill the contract they had with someone named Vasquez. If he was the one Cindy was thinking of, it made a lot of sense that he had ordered this siege in order to find the girl he was after.

They had stopped at a corner, their argument getting continually louder.

She exchanged a look with Heather who still had the child by her hand, before quietly taking a step backwards, closer to the corner.

Heather scooped up the girl, stealing a glance at the men who debated hiding inside the building versus trying to escape.

The leading man was watching them from the corner of his eyes, of course. They were just huddling closer together, two women who had basically nothing in common but fear and the utter, relentless will to survive.

When, for the blink of an eye, none of the men were looking at them, Cindy took her hand and they ran.

Her world spun for a moment, before it settled again and she couldn't ignore any longer what she was seeing. Lindsay crouched beside the clutter on the floor. Keys, sunglasses, a tube of lipstick.

A notebook.

Her hand shook for the first time today when she picked it up. Lindsay knew who these things belonged to, and seeing them in here without every missing person, let alone perpetrator, accounted for came close to cracking the professional persona that usually helped her make it through a day as bad as this.

They were Cindy's.

It was like waking from a nightmare and realizing it was all true after all. This whole day she had clung to the idea that at least Cindy was safe, only to find that was all it had been - an idea.

She clutched the notebook in her hand, trying to calm herself and get her racing thoughts into some kind of order.

Why? Cindy wasn't supposed to be in here, not even in the vicinity of this place. Lindsay remembered what she'd told Tom earlier, and she still believed that there was no way that Cindy would just accidentally have gotten too close. She was determined, but not stupidly careless. There had to have been a reason why she'd gotten caught up in here...

Lindsay wavered only for a moment, images of the dead teacher she'd just found mingling with memories of the day Cindy got shot. *No.*

She couldn't allow herself the thought. Not ever.

They had only moments before the men realized what was going on, and they didn't have any time for second guessing. There were no words being exchanged between the two of them, no expression of fear.

Soon they heard footsteps getting closer. Too soon, Cindy reflected. Their desperate attempt to make it out of this hell together wouldn't work like this. At this point the child might not even be that important to the men - nothing more than a hostage to help them get off the grounds.

Not that she was eager to sacrifice herself, but she saw how Heather struggled with the weight of the child in her arms while running. If she could find a distraction... Both the girl and Heather were possibly more at risk.

Heather, noticing that she was slowing down, turned to Cindy. "Please, don't give up," she said desperately.

Cindy shook her head. "I'm not. Let's just split up. So they won't get both of us."

For an instant, it looked like Heather was going to protest, then she nodded. As soon as she was out of sight, Cindy chose the opposite direction, coming to a door that lead to a flight of stairs. *Up.* It

made her feel slightly like the heroine in a horror film, *stupid, why up?*, but that was the only direction the stairs went. And if her plan worked, the open door would alert them, while Heather would hopefully run into cops outside of the school building.

Judging from the sounds of the footsteps, her plan was working.

Until the heel of her left shoe caught in a loose bit of the linoleum and she slipped and stumbled. The sudden pain shooting through her right leg wasn't even as bad as the grin of the man who had caught up with her. This wasn't the leader, the one who had promised her the story of her life.

This one, and the grin he gave her as he pulled her up, scared her much more than the others had before.

The sound of leaves being crushed made Lindsay spin around. She had no real indication as to where the perps would go, with the school surrounded, but the backyard with the hedges and the park behind had seemed worth a try.

Someone else obviously had the same idea. Carefully, she drew her weapon and inched around the hedge, close enough to have small branches scratch her skin.

"Freeze!"

Stepping around the hedge, Lindsay found herself face to face with a woman brandishing a shovel, probably from the janitor's shed, in shaking hands. A little girl with a tear-streaked face was hiding behind her.

Quickly, Lindsay holstered her gun and approached cautiously as Heather, still clutching the shovel tightly, seemed quite out of it. "Hey there. It's okay. You made it."

Seconds ticked by, then Heather dropped the shovel and stumbled forward, the girl's hand still in hers, as she wrapped her other arm around Lindsay and held on. When she started to cry, Lindsay returned the embrace reluctantly, for more than one reason. She wanted to find Cindy, make sure she was all right. She wanted it so badly she didn't think she could spare another minute on anyone or anything else.

Over the microphone, she alerted Tom. "Hey. I've got someone for you right here, and I think she'd rather see you than me now."

Heather gave her a watery laugh. "I'm sorry, Lindsay," she said, smiling self-consciously. "I didn't mean to cry on you again." Before Lindsay could answer that, she scooped up the girl. "Maria, meet Inspector Boxer. She's a very brave lady."

Lindsay smiled at her, but inside, the tension tied her stomach in knots. Her knees were weak with relief when Tom finally arrived with another officer who took the girl, while Tom and Heather embraced. His eyes were a little bright when he mouthed 'Thank you' over her shoulder to Lindsay.

"You're welcome," she said, not bothering with an explanation as she headed back towards the building.

In the back of the ambulance, Jill held on to Claire, not even sure anymore which of them needed steadying. Save for some scratches from the broken glass, they'd been lucky, but she just couldn't calm down, her mind still overloaded with the images. She remembered the feel of the gun in her hands... she'd almost shot a man. Of course, he would have shot her first without hesitation, and Jill preferred very much to be alive, but still...

She glanced at Claire, who was clutching a paper cup with hot coffee in her hands, looking lost in thought.

Obviously, she felt very much the same.

"I so hate this day," Jill sighed, her voice only slightly shaky. "The--"

"--drinks are on Lindsay," they said in unison, and her vision blurred just for a moment, as they laughed quietly. Then she had to fight back the tears.

Lindsay was still in there. It wasn't really over yet.

Stupid! Cindy berated herself for acting heroically again with disastrous results, and berated the man for having nothing better to do than planning to assault a woman in an empty stairwell when he had the chance to get away from the police.

The realization hit her like a bucket of ice cold water poured over her.

He had nothing left to lose. She, on the other hand, had a lot.

Her high-heeled shoes would have come in handy now, but she'd lost them earlier when he'd dragged her up and down the stairs. A kick with her stockinged feet would be nowhere near as effective - but when he wrapped a hand around her throat, Cindy realized there weren't many options left.

This wasn't going to happen, not with her and Heather having gotten away in the first place, and the police already in the building.

Not with Lindsay close.

She kicked as hard as she could, her aim a little off, but good enough to make his grip loosen. Then she screamed.

It all happened in a blur once she'd entered the stairwell. Lindsay had feared he would try to take Cindy as a shield, but instead, he shoved her aside roughly and barged forward, the knife in his hand coming out of nowhere.

Lindsay avoided getting stabbed by inches. They circled each other; he feigned a move, she dodged it, waiting, and the next time he moved, she kicked the knife out of his hand.

He recovered quickly, getting in a punch that had her side connecting solidly and painfully with the

wall. But he'd underestimated her, not counting in the anger that had flared within her the moment she had seen him with his hand on Cindy's thigh, pushing up the fabric of her dress, the intent clear.

She translated all that anger into her answering kick, another move, and he was down, clutching his shin. Before she could even think about how to quickly restrain him, a shot rang out, and another, and the man screamed, a red stain growing rapidly on his pant leg.

Lindsay turned to face a jovially smiling Carlo Peral. This time she couldn't help it and she rolled her eyes at him. "Shouldn't you be with your daughter?"

"You saved one of my men, who, actually, helped save my daughter. You have my respect, Inspector."

"Well, thanks. You're still going to be charged for interfering with a police operation."

"You want to arrest me, Inspector?"

"Get out of here, Peral," she said, already turning to Cindy who stood leaning against the wall, alarmingly pale.

All explanations could wait. Lindsay walked over to her, laying a hand on her arm and resting it there. "Are you okay?" Under her fingers, she could feel her trembling. The answer to that question was very obvious, though Lindsay reminded herself that it could have been worse. Much worse.

Instead of an answer, Cindy just melted against her, and Lindsay did what she had wanted to do all along. She pulled her close.

"I'm sorry. I'll get myself together in a minute, okay?"

"It's okay." Over her shoulder, Lindsay still kept an eye on the perpetrator, technically unnecessary, since she'd cuffed him before. He wasn't a danger any longer, but it was a good excuse to ignore the emotion welling up within her. Cindy didn't cry, but she also made no move to loosen her hold, so Lindsay let her, stroking her hand down her back in a calming motion, grateful for this lucky outcome in an otherwise horrible day.

Not everyone had been so lucky.

Lindsay knew how to put up a shield against the daily horrors of her job, but the sight of a child killed in cold blood put a crack in it every time.

With a sigh, she just leaned into the embrace, thinking she probably needed it just as much. Just a moment longer, until her colleagues would find their way in here.

And some time later, I'm going to find out why you were here in the first place.

Half an hour later Cindy was on the phone, standing off to the side. Lindsay couldn't help but watch her, knowing from Claire's indulgent smile that she was probably being too obvious about the need to assure herself that her younger friend was safe. She didn't care.

Only now, having her friends all in one place, the pressure of this day was alleviating slightly, but

finding Cindy's papers in the classroom had been an additional shock at a moment when the situation seemed almost resolved, and it still weighed on her.

Jill had been following her gaze, shaking her head with a fond expression. "She's always in the middle of it. Who could have expected anything like this to happen when visiting a kid she once interviewed in school?"

"That's why she was here?" Lindsay asked, puzzled, and also somewhat relieved that the explanation was this easy.

"She wasn't in the classroom with us, but yes, we met her before class. Lindsay, you didn't think--"

Claire's slightly admonishing tone struck. It wasn't like she really believed that Cindy would take a foolish risk for a story... but she was willing to take a risk, and at times, that was enough to terrify Lindsay. "No. No, I didn't."

"At least we had each other in there," Jill added meaningfully. "Imagine how it must have felt to know there was no way out, and being all alone."

Lindsay didn't want to imagine that. She was feeling very tired all of a sudden, and her side hurt where it had impacted the brick wall.

"At least Peral's troupe left enough of them alive to bring to trial and hopefully tie the murder of the Torres family to Vasquez. Jill, I see some overtime coming your way."

Jill just sighed.

"Poor Isela," Claire said to Lindsay's relief, going with her attempt to redirect the focus back to the case on their hands. "That'll bring up trouble for her and her father once again."

"Jacobi is talking to him. Hopefully this time, we'll get the whole story from him."

"Speaking of which," Cindy had ended her call and rushed back to their little group, "are we still going to meet tonight? It doesn't have to be long."

"I'd like that," Jill answered quickly. "We're back among the living. I wouldn't mind a stiff drink before this day is over - and mark my words, this will be the last Career Day Denise ever sends me to!"

Lindsay felt a smile tug on the corners of her mouth. "She was pretty helpful today. She really regrets having sent you."

"Sure, but for how long?"

Their banter continued until a scream nearby cut through the cacophony of sounds around them. It was followed by sobbing.

In the ambulance a few feet away, someone had lost a loved one. The knowledge silenced them, slamming home once more the fact that they had been aware of all this time, that showed in the looks they shared instead of words.

Today, it could have been any of them.

Act 4

She was surprised to see the lights still on in Tom's office, so Lindsay climbed the stairs and knocked softly.

"Come in," he said tiredly.

Lindsay closed the door behind her and leaned against it. There was a moment of silence, though a lot less awkward than it had been on earlier occasions. After a day like this, knowing everyone they loved was either safe at home or at Papa Joe's already, and having survived it themselves, personal issues became relatively unimportant in comparison.

"Shouldn't you be home?" she asked.

Tom's gaze went to the picture of himself and Heather he had on his desk. "In a minute," he acknowledged. "Heather knows I need to wrap things up here."

Lindsay nodded. "I'm... glad she's okay. Now get your butt out of here. The paperwork won't run away." That granted her the ghost of a smile.

"You know, it's ironic," he said. "You won't like this, but here's the truth - I used to worry about you. A lot. And it wasn't because I thought you couldn't do your job, I knew you did it better than anyone else. You were never afraid. On the contrary, you'd face the danger head-on. Maybe that was something I couldn't deal with."

Lindsay smiled ruefully, somehow touched. She had of course known about Tom's old-fashioned protective streak, but it had never really been spoken aloud.

"We made our choices. You don't expect to be almost killed in a kindergarten class," she said and then winced at her choice of words. This day had taken a lot out of her. The censors were down.

"Damn right, you don't."

"It's not your fault, Tom. No one can foresee these things."

"Does that make you feel any better?"

Lindsay considered this for a moment, the fear of making wrong decisions she could only really acknowledge after she'd known that her friends were safe. She hadn't even learned until the end that Cindy had been inside... to think of the possibilities was devastating. No one could understand Tom's mindset better than she did.

"No," she admitted, and they shared a smile.

Turning off the computer screen, he stood up and grabbed his jacket and keys. "Thank you, Linz. And... say hello to your club."

"How do you-- It's not a club," she protested out of habit, wondering about the office grapevine.

He just chuckled, and Lindsay shook her head.

They said goodnight.

Martha greeted her enthusiastically. Taking a moment to pet her and then preparing to feed her, Lindsay had almost overlooked the blinking of the answering machine. Or maybe she'd wanted to.

If the day had gone as planned, she would have liked to have taken that call, had a hot bath and a glass of wine while listening to her lover's voice a world away. But today's events had drastically altered her schedule, and everyone else's for that matter, so she opted for a quick shower. As always, she hastily grabbed some clothes out of the wardrobe, not sparing the bed a single glance. She would have to do something about it, to deal both literally with the bed as well as with her own avoidance of it - but not today.

Her friends wouldn't stay long, just a drink or two together, to remind themselves that they'd made it out in one piece and could -- what, go back to business as usual? Lindsay remembered the cry of the mother whose son had died in the ambulance, her throat tightening at the memory. Not everybody had been lucky. Two children, four adults - and the death toll could have been much higher.

In the bathroom, she leaned her forehead against cold tiles, taking just a moment to get her bearings.

She couldn't afford to let this get to her this much.

Vasquez might have been ruthless in his plans to kill the family of the man who'd testified against his organization, but tomorrow another even more vile predator was waiting for her.

Revenge was something humanly understandable - it was a world away from someone who considered himself an instrument of God, master over life and death, like the fanatic they were after.

Well, his delusion would come to an end, too. Lindsay straightened, taking a look at her tired face in the mirror. *Sooner or later*, she vowed.

And Tom had been right, she wasn't afraid to face the danger. She might have been spooked by the utter evil of those crime scenes, but not enough to look away. Where others ran, she took a closer look.

And she could do this because she had the support of a small group that consisted not only of her best friends, but also the sharpest minds in their fields.

A slow smile spread over her face at that thought. *Watch out*.

The phone rang again, and she considered not picking up, but then decided that Pete wasn't to blame for what had gone wrong today. So she answered.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, a smile in his voice. "Long day, huh?"

"Aren't they all? I'm - I'm sorry, I need to leave in a few minutes. It's good to hear you though." She just let the words tumble out, one after another, and finally took a deep breath.

"Going to meet your Girl Scout club?" It was probably friendly teasing, laced with a bit of disappointment that she was going to cut the call short, but the timing was way off.

"I thought you'd have an idea of the work we do," Lindsay retorted sharply, and regretted it immediately. She just couldn't have a sense of humor about this now. "Look," she said, pacing while she kept talking, "there was a hostage situation at the school where Tom's wife works. And--" The realization kept crashing down on her. "Jill and Claire were in the building for the kids' Career Day. Cindy was there, too. Those men killed six people, two children among them, and another died later in the ambulance."

"Oh my God, Lindsay, I'm so sorry. Are you - are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she choked out, relieved that he got it. Come to think of it, Pete had always been a lot more understanding about her job than she had given him credit for. He had seen her attic and was able to acknowledge that she had a job to do, rather than call her crazy. Or obsessed.

She could forgive him one misplaced joke, couldn't she?

"I'm sorry, I've got to go."

"I guess you have to. Take care of yourself."

"Always do."

"I love you," he said easily.

"Me, too, I mean... I love you, too." Not so easy at all.

Hanging up, Lindsay frowned, hoping that for an hour or so, she'd get something good out of this day after all.

"I'm not staying long," Claire gave an apologetic smile. "I nearly had to sneak out of the backdoor to come here in the first place." She and Jill were the first ones to arrive.

"They'll understand." Jill smiled warmly. "You've got your family waiting for you. However, the only person who'd maybe not get freaked if I wanted to talk about today would be Denise, and I so prefer your company."

They laughed together, in a kind of looking-over-your-shoulder sort of way, but were basically glad to be there.

"I won't be here long, either," Jill continued. "Since I'm not dead or injured, she'll expect me to come in at eight tomorrow morning."

"If that was meant to be a joke, you're losing your touch." Lindsay had arrived, taking a seat next to her in the booth.

Even with the disapproving words, Jill found her presence rather reassuring. In a way, she always had, but the feeling was definitely more pronounced after today's events. She just smiled at her

friend, and Lindsay's gaze softened.

She was probably about to say more, but then Cindy breezed in, immediately drawing the inspector's attention to her.

Jill thought wryly that if the young reporter hadn't been so clearly oblivious to the effect she had on Lindsay, and if she weren't the amiable person that she was and a good friend, it would have been annoying.

But it was Cindy, so she just sighed and smiled, and held Claire's knowing gaze.

I'm fine.

"At least you get to sleep," Cindy said, nearly humming with the residual adrenaline. "I, however, will probably get to write through the night. My boss only checked to see if I'm still able to do the job. Since the answer is yes, there'll be no reprieve."

"You should take some time off." The moment the words were out of Lindsay's mouth, Jill noted, she looked like she regretted them, and hastily added, "You all should."

"Not very likely, though. I think I remember you saying something about overtime... that was a really crazy thing Peral's people did."

"Indeed," Lindsay said darkly. "A lot more people could have been killed. What the hell was he thinking? Well, I know what he was thinking, but thinking about it just pisses me off even more, so I refuse to go there."

She leaned back into the booth with a sigh, wincing slightly.

Jill smiled at her empathically. "You got pretty banged up, didn't you?"

Lindsay shrugged and winced again.

"That was a pretty cool thing to do, climbing up the ladder in that shaft." Jill shuddered. "I could have never done that."

"I didn't know heights bothered you." Lindsay looked pleased with the compliment, though.

"They don't. But bugs do."

They laughed until Jill noticed that Cindy had gone silent all of a sudden. "Are you okay?" she directed at her. "That must have brought up some bad memories. I know it did for me."

"Well, thanks to Lindsay, I am okay," Cindy said quietly. "I know it wasn't very clever to go in there, but the girl and her brother needed my help. I had to do it. I checked on them though, they both got out okay."

"Wait a minute."

It was Jill's turn to wince, as she hadn't known there was an addition to that story. Like everyone else, she'd just assumed Cindy had gotten caught in the middle on her visit. Not her fault then. Now it seemed like things had been quite a bit more complicated.

Lindsay had been under a lot of pressure today... and yes, she was right to read Cindy the riot act. Tonight, though, with all the emotions still so fresh and raw, it didn't seem like a good moment.

"You were out of the school already?"

There was a dangerous tone to Lindsay's voice that normally signaled to a perp in the interrogation room that if he didn't tell the truth right now, he'd be digging his own grave, figuratively speaking. Jill shuddered. Not a good metaphor, not today.

But she did agree with Lindsay. Rescuing those children would have been the police's job. Cindy's actions had been as brave as they'd been foolish - but of course it wouldn't harm her story that she'd been right inside of the mess. She had crossed a line in every sense of the word.

"Lindsay," Claire said warningly, to no effect.

"I'm sorry, it's been a long day, so maybe I didn't get that right. Could you please explain it to me?"

"All right," Cindy held up her hands in defense, "I was just talking to the people in the crisis intervention tent, and a teacher told me about Isela, so I was going to find you. This officer wouldn't let me through, and then he was distracted when Peral arrived, and -- I swear, Linz, I was just trying to find you!"

Lindsay shook her head. "That's enough." She nearly jumped up from her seat, pulling Cindy up and out of the booth with a hand around her wrist. "Looks like we're going to have that talk now, and it'll be better outside."

"Lindsay, what the hell--"

Claire rarely cursed, but Jill agreed that this situation called for it.

Lindsay held up a hand. "I'm sorry, no, this is between Lois Lane here and me. I've had enough from a gangbanger treating a crime scene like his own little vendetta playground and endangering people's lives. I don't need a friend to do it."

Jill watched Cindy follow her outside reluctantly, wearing a defensive expression.

Part of Jill could sympathize with Cindy and her actions, but there was also another part of her that wanted to shake her. Putting oneself right in the center of a situation with bullets flying was by far the worst strategy to try and overcome the trauma of having been shot.

She looked up at Claire, her own feelings reflected in her friend's gaze.

They were worried for both of them.

"You are going to tell me from the beginning, every little detail. Are you hurt?"

"There is not a scratch on me. Yet." Cindy spoke slowly, for emphasis, and her words hit home.

Lindsay let her hand fall to her side, ashamed to see reddened skin where she'd clutched Cindy's

wrist, dealing with her like a disobedient child. The sentiment vanished quickly though with the thought that she wouldn't have had to come into that room to find Cindy being held there. She wouldn't have had to be terrified for her life - if Cindy had stayed where she was supposed to be.

"Go on. Tell me about that girl and her brother."

Cindy gave her a quick summary of how she'd ended up on the wrong side of the barrier with two children, finding that there was no way out the moment Peral's men were coming in.

"So you had to go rescue the boy too. You didn't think the police could have done it."

"I didn't think there was enough time! Lindsay, they had killed children!"

"I know. I was there!"

Lindsay didn't care about the strange looks the patrons just leaving Papa Joe's were giving them, or the snickers and murmurs about a 'lover's quarrel'. "And unlike you, I had a job to do there. Look, I know you'd do almost anything for a story, but this is too much. How am I supposed to trust you?"

"It wasn't for a story. Well, yes, I'll be writing it, but all I wanted to do was to get the information to you, because I thought it would help *you*!"

"It didn't help me when I realized you were somewhere in the building, and I didn't know whether you were dead or alive. It didn't help me when I--" She broke off just in time when her voice was about to break, and no, Lindsay didn't want to let it go that far. "You just don't get it, do you? Tell the others goodnight, I'll see them at work tomorrow."

"Lindsay," Cindy called after her, her voice uncharacteristically small. It took all the self-restraint Lindsay had left not to turn around and... well, damn it, possibly hug her again.

She quickened her stride, away from the argument, away from her own fears.

Cindy wiped her face hastily before she went back inside to get her purse she had left behind. Not like she could hide her shell-shocked condition from Jill and Claire, but she was at least safe in the knowledge that they wouldn't push.

"Don't mind her," Claire said warmly. "You know Lindsay. She'll come around eventually."

"I don't know," she choked out. "Whatever. I've got a long night ahead of me, I should go." Did she really know Lindsay Boxer? She had thought so, but at the moment Cindy was doubting that she did.

Jill offered no reassurance regarding Lindsay, though, and Cindy soon found out why.

"I know you won't like to hear this," she said, "but don't you think Lindsay has a point? I for one would have preferred to be on the outside."

Cindy needed a moment to absorb this, realizing that Jill was not going to side with her, and wondering what it would mean for the bond she'd thought they had formed ever since Jill had stayed at her hospital bed, waiting for her parents to arrive. Lindsay, of course, had had other plans

that night... she couldn't afford to dwell on those thoughts now. She had her own job to do.

Still, the accusation that had been in the room all along, that she'd done it for the story rather than trying her best to keep the children, Heather and herself from getting killed, stung.

"Me too, believe me."

"Really? You could have fooled me."

Whatever Jill's deal was in this, Cindy didn't feel like figuring it out right now. It was probably saner to go home and get started on her story. At least it would keep her from obsessing too much about today's events and the meltdown she felt like having.

"Goodnight," she said quickly and all but fled from the diner.

The first thing Claire did once back at home was to check on her sons and to thank God for the stomach flu that had kept Nate safe and at home today. Derek was still up, sitting behind his computer with some game. For once, she didn't have the heart to chide him for his late activities when there was school the next day.

Her throat tightened at the thought that, after today, some mothers would have to bury their children.

"So Dad has gone to bed already?"

The only answer she got was a nod and a sigh. She couldn't have hoped that the boys hadn't caught on to the tension between her and Ed. But tonight, it didn't really matter. When someone held a gun to your head and you were still coming home to your family, all else faded in comparison.

She'd thought Ed was asleep, but when she snuggled up against his back, curling an arm around his waist, he turned and pulled her close.

It was the first time today that she let herself relax, and Claire felt her eyes grow bright. She leaned into the embrace gratefully, relieved that Ed had been understanding about that one hour she needed to spend at Papa Joe's.

Not that their meeting had ended with a reason to be relieved, but she would worry about that another day. Same with the new serial killer who had chosen San Francisco for his turf.

Tonight, the two of them together was all that mattered. It had been too long since they'd had a moment like this.

Cindy stilled her hands for a moment, taking a deep breath when she realized she'd hit the keys almost hard enough to make her fingers hurt. Not good.

From the moment she had driven home to now, more than halfway through her story titled *'Vendetta against the Weakest'*, the scene had been playing through her mind over and over again. She kept seeing the girl with her brother's blood on her hands, kept asking herself if there had been

a moment when she could have acted any differently. Cindy couldn't come up with any.

What angered her most was that even though she knew Lindsay had overreacted, part of her was accepting the blame, already searching for a way to make things right.

It wasn't her call this time, though.

It didn't help either that the events of the day had left her wired and restless, and even as she finished with her task much sooner than she had estimated, Cindy knew she wouldn't get any sleep tonight.

Maybe this would be a good time to remember one of the "people" she'd dated lately. A quick glance to her watch told her that she would catch Ellen at her most awake. She was a web designer who worked from home and preferred to work nights.

Maybe that would, at least for a while, keep the nagging worry away that Lindsay was seeking permanent changes to their relationship, whatever it was these days.

Lindsay was obviously not keen on visitors tonight, but she seemed relieved that it was Jill on her doorstep. That was a beginning. She probably wouldn't want to deal with Claire right now, and Cindy -- most likely, she wouldn't have let Cindy in at all. Jill could sympathize with what she knew, but she suspected there was probably even more to it.

"It's late," Lindsay greeted her. "I was hoping to get some sleep before the alarm goes off."

Jill smiled ruefully. "Don't remind me." She followed Lindsay into the living room where they both took a seat on each side of the couch. Martha was wagging her tail happily; she welcomed the late night visit.

"And by the way, you promised to pay for the drinks."

"You came after me because I owe you ten bucks?"

"No," Jill said patiently. "I came after you because you might want to talk about what's been going on tonight."

Lindsay stared at her through bleary eyes. "Not really," she said tiredly.

"Look, I can understand you're mad at her. I am too. I'm not sure I would have been able to tell the girl no, but then again, I wouldn't have gone back in."

"She was close enough to see our van. That close to being safe. And in that classroom - her things were strewn all over the floor. It was like..." Her words trailed off, but Jill had no trouble understanding what Lindsay was referring to.

"That moment over and over again. I'm sorry, that doesn't sound right. It's not like knowing you and Claire were in there was freaking me out any less."

"You don't have to explain."

Lindsay looked a little doubtful at that, and Jill wondered if she really had any idea how obvious she could be at times. Of course, Lindsay didn't like to be called out on that, but as a friend, you sometimes had to take a risk.

"Because there is a difference, right?" Jill continued. "It's Cindy. We all know she's an adult, and she can handle herself, but still there's something about her... you just want to protect her. Besides the fact she got shot not so long ago. It makes all the difference in the world."

Lindsay's haunted gaze at that was all the answer she needed. There was more to it, Jill knew, but she also felt they had reached their limit of confessions and soul-searching for today. She got up to stand behind Lindsay, placing her hands on her friend's shoulders.

"Today was just a whole lot of bad luck mixed with Cindy's usual lack of a healthy kind of fear." Almost of their own accord, her hands started a slow soothing massage. And if the contact brought up a memory or two, it didn't matter today. "I agree we shouldn't just let it slide."

"It's like everybody knows how to do my job better than I do. Peral--"

Jill laughed dryly. "I thought they were going to blow up the school. So much for a rescue attempt."

"Then Cindy decides to be a hostage evacuation squad all on her own. It should have never gotten out of control like it did."

"Not your fault." They were probably thinking of the same thing now, that same event that was making her eyes grow bright, when they'd heard that scream coming from the ambulance of someone from whom this day had taken more than it had from each of them.

"I'm not so sure of that, but thanks for the vote of confidence. Please, don't stop what you're doing, by the way."

Jill smiled to herself. "I must admit to ulterior motives," she said. "I was hoping to earn myself a spot on your couch for tonight."

"Sure," Lindsay answered too quickly, stiffening under her touch.

"Sorry, it's probably not a good time. I should go."

She felt a little panicky at the thought that her request could have been misunderstood, as she'd meant no double-entendre. Jill admitted ruefully that part of her motivation to go after Lindsay was the prospect of not being alone tonight. She wanted to feel just a little safer than she had all day; to know that Lindsay and Martha were next door would certainly do the trick.

"No way," Lindsay finally said after a considerable pause. "It's yours. Just factor in that Martha might want to visit you."

"I'm fine with that."

"Okay then. Let's try and get about --" Lindsay checked her watch and sighed. "Four hours of sleep. What else is new?"

Lindsay leaned heavily against the door of her bedroom, feeling a drop of cold sweat snake down her spine. Martha, having no such reservations, jumped onto the bed and happily found herself a place right in the center of it.

Martha was the only living being who had touched said bed in weeks.

The whole room had been cleaned thoroughly after the CSU had finished and Corinne Stevens' body had been removed. Tom had promised to send someone to take care of it, and with too many other things on her mind, Lindsay had just let him.

It had smelled clean and fresh inside, new light blue sheets covering the bed. Nothing reminiscent of the fact there had been a woman who'd been stabbed to death left in it, her face grey, her lips sewn shut.

Nothing but her own vivid memory. The moment Lindsay had seen Corinne, she knew she wouldn't ever sleep in that bed again; possibly not even in the same room, but the jury was still out on that.

It wasn't like she wasn't used to the company of ghosts and death. They still lived upstairs in the attic, where she'd never gotten around to cleaning up after Kiss-Me-Not's death, something that was overdue. If she asked them, the girls would not hesitate to help her out with it, her own little exorcism.

Except for Cindy maybe, in whose face she had slammed the proverbial door tonight.

The memory made her chest tight with regret, the hollow fear of an uncertain future, even though she couldn't see how she could have handled things differently.

Thoughts were swirling in her head like leaves in the wind. She was probably just plain exhausted, but that didn't make them any lighter as they pressed in on her. At least Jill was with her on the subject of Cindy, though it didn't really solve any of her issues.

Truth be told, that conversation with Tom had her thinking too, about how he used to be worried about her, but somehow not so much anymore. His attempt at trying to tell her how today had been so much worse, because you didn't expect a kindergarten teacher to face mortal danger on her day job. Heather was supposed to be all about smiles and children's laughter...

... so where did that leave her? And could you really spend the majority of your life around evil without being touched by it?

It wasn't like she wanted Tom back. That was a chapter from the past that carried with it the sting of failure, but that was all. They worked well together. After all, she had Pete now, a man who, if not very available at the moment, cared and understood the demands of her job.

And it was almost a miracle that he wanted to be there, with the dark that was always so present in her life, embracing her, maybe even having become a part of her over the years.

It was coming back to haunt her in the form of a man who chose his victims on a seemingly random basis, exerting a punishment that, up to now, only made sense in his twisted mind. There was only one way to get to him: get inside his mind, open hers to him. It had worked with Kiss-Me-Not. It would work again.

And she had learned that it came with a price. Given what she had paid to stop Kiss-Me-Not in the

end, it was probably a good thing that Cindy was mad at her and Pete was in a foreign country on another continent.

At a safe distance from the darkness.

It was just so damn lonely to be alone in that space.

Martha regarded her worriedly as Lindsay sank to the floor, her back against the wooden door behind her, fighting back tears she told herself only came from pure exhaustion. As tired as she was, though, she couldn't bring herself to lay down up there, to share the bed with the ghost of a woman who could still be alive if only they'd made the connection earlier. And she didn't want Jill to know it.

Everyone had been mad at her for keeping Kiss-Me-Not's earlier threat a secret, but the truth was she would have done it all over again, if given the choice. She would have done anything to keep her friends out of today's mess - and away from this new psychopath with his bizarre rituals.

Lindsay couldn't. Because she needed their help; it was the ever-present dilemma that wouldn't go away.

With Kiss-Me-Not, she had gone to her father for help.

Lindsay took a deep breath, trying to chase away the images of Corinne Stevens that threatened to overlay reality as always when she spent more than a few minutes in this room.

Martha slept, snoring quietly.

With a sigh, Lindsay pushed herself up from the floor, grabbed a comforter out of the closet and then snuck back into the living room where Jill had fallen asleep in the meanwhile.

She sat back in the armchair and closed her eyes, hoping she wouldn't dream tonight. Except for the night she had shared on the couch with Cindy, ironically, her subconscious never failed to come up with fragmented images of those closest to her lying in Corinne's place.

Ironic, because this threat was gone for good. Come tomorrow, they would face another which was similarly dangerous, if not more so.

Tonight, the nightmares might bring her back to the stairwell of Mission Day School and what could have been. If she was really honest, Lindsay knew that moment, worse than anything that had already happened until then, was what had upset her most. Which made it seem rather unfair that she had unleashed all her fury on Cindy when she could have just tried to set her straight in a rational, sensible way.

All of a sudden Lindsay was very grateful that Jill was here, just a few feet away from her. It kept the chilling loneliness that had taken hold of her since she'd fled the diner at bay.

If only for the moment.

FADE TO BLACK

Torn Asunder



Episode 3: Torn Asunder

The note crumpled in her hand as she curled her fingers into a fist. She didn't need to read it again. The contents... every word... was burned into her brain, playing on an endless loop.

I can't do this anymore.

Tears slipped out and left hot trails down her cheeks as she closed her eyes. How had it come to this? How had it gone wrong so fast after all these years of being so right?

It was an impossible choice she was being asked to make. Wasn't it?

There was a scuffling sound from the doorway, but she didn't open her eyes. The tears came harder when she smelled familiar perfume as her visitor came closer. A warm hand touched her back, and she felt Cindy sink into a crouch next to her. The reporter's voice was hushed when she spoke.

“Claire? What's wrong?”

“I'm being an idiot, aren't I?”

Wide, sad brown eyes looked back at her.

“It's just...” Lindsay searched for the words to explain her anger. “It's... she just...”

Martha laid her head down on her front paws and looked up forlornly at her pacing master. She just wanted her morning dog treat.

Lindsay took out her phone and flipped it open. “I should just call her. I should just call Cindy and...” She flipped the phone closed with a snap. “No. No... I'm not calling her. I'm not gonna cave this time. She always looks at me with those puppy dog eyes... you know the ones.” She glanced at the dog. “Exactly. Just like that,” she said pointing at Martha.

Martha sighed.

“She could have died,” Lindsay said with sudden volume, making Martha's ears twitch. “She risked her life, again. Why does she keep doing that when it makes me crazy? Sometimes I think she does it on purpose to make me crazy. She's a reporter... a story is not worth risking your life over.” Lindsay flopped down in one of the kitchen chairs before slapping her phone on the table. “Damn it.”

Her fingers drummed on the tablecloth. She ached to hear Cindy's voice. Craved the sight of the girl's sunny smile. Lindsay wanted to look into those warm, teasing brown eyes that got her to open up and say things she normally wouldn't.

There was something about Cindy Thomas that settled Lindsay in a way nothing or no one ever had. It was what made staying away from her so damn hard... what made her so mad that it could have been lost.

You're gonna miss me when I stop coming around, Cindy had said to her once.

Damn it all to hell if the girl hadn't been right.

Lindsay raked her hands through her hair, wishing she knew what in the hell to do.

The phone rang and she jumped, startling Martha who raised her head and barked once in response. Lindsay checked the caller ID.

Cindy Thomas.

Her heart leapt behind her ribs. The angry part of her wanted to let the call go to voicemail, wanted to ignore it all together...

She flipped the phone open. "Boxer," she answered, wincing when she heard how eager she sounded to talk to the reporter, even if it was to yell some more.

There was a pause on the other end, and Lindsay closed her eyes, feeling her heart ache just a little. She wanted to take everything she'd said to Cindy back, wanted to apologize for being an overprotective ass, but Cindy owed them an apology. Not the other way around.

"Lindsay..." Cindy hesitated again, and Lindsay strongly suspected the reporter had expected to get her voicemail. "Um... can you get down to Claire's office ASAP?" Her voice was quiet, strained.

"Something turn up on the Blake or Dellan murders?" Lindsay asked.

"Just... come quick. Claire... Claire needs us for something."

Lindsay felt her stomach sink. "What's wrong?"

"Please," Cindy said softly. "Just come. I can leave when you get here if you want." Lindsay heard Cindy swallow. "Claire needs you."

That was all Cindy had to say. "Give me twenty. I'm on my way." Lindsay started to say more but Cindy hung up, leaving Lindsay with the drone of a dial tone. She felt irrationally hurt which was stupid, she decided, because she was the one who was

supposed to be mad.

Lindsay got to her feet and grabbed her keys off the counter, her thoughts on Cindy and what Claire could possibly need. She jogged to the door, quickly letting herself out.

Martha watched her go before her ears flicked and she sighed again. Suddenly the door reopened and Lindsay came trotting hurriedly back inside. She reached into a cookie jar on the counter then tossed the patient dog a biscuit.

Martha crunched happily as Lindsay left once more.

“So what is this about?” Jill looked less than thrilled with Cindy’s summons. They’d barely spoken since the incident at the school six days ago. She was still mad at the chance Cindy had carelessly taken with her life, but she’d still come running when the reporter had called. As much as she wanted to keep her distance, it was proving hard. She missed Cindy. Missed her damn perkiness. It was annoying.

But Cindy didn’t look perky this morning. She looked exhausted and worried. When Cindy looked worried and wasn’t talking... that’s when Jill knew whatever shit was going on was serious.

“It’s Claire.” Cindy’s voice was subdued. “I came by to talk to her this morning. I found her crying in her office.”

Jill’s blue gaze shot to Claire’s closed door. She and Cindy were standing inside the morgue, relatively alone save for the two sheet covered-bodies she was trying to ignore nearby. “Crying?”

“Yeah.” Cindy shook her head. “She was clutching a note in her hand.”

“What did it say?”

“It’s not like I pried it out of her fist, Jill,” Cindy snapped, her own emotions getting the better of her for a moment. Only Claire had been there for her the last few days as Jill and Lindsay had given her the cold shoulder.

Jill blinked, startled by the flash of heat from the redhead. The last time she’d seen it directed at her, Cindy had wound up bleeding on the courthouse steps with a bullet in her before Jill had gotten a chance to apologize. The memory made her heart hurt and she had to look away. She really needed to sit down and hash things out with the reporter, but she wasn’t ready to forgive and forget just yet. Without another word, she walked to the door, feeling Cindy fall in step behind her. Jill knocked and entered without waiting to be asked. Claire was sitting at her desk, staring off into space. She was no longer crying, but Jill could see the evidence that she had been. The sight shook her.

Claire wasn't supposed to cry. She was their anchor. The well-adjusted one of their overly-emotional and relationship-challenged group. Seeing Claire so upset caused the coffee in Jill's stomach to sour.

"Honey?" Jill said as she came closer. "Are you okay?"

Claire took a breath and looked at them both. She held out the note, and Cindy took the crumpled ball of paper. "Read it," Claire said, her voice hoarse with tears. "Save me from saying it."

Jill went shoulder to shoulder with the reporter, each forgetting their irritation with each other for the moment to focus on Claire. Cindy smoothed the note out as best she could then tilted it toward the light so they could see it better.

Claire,

I can't do this anymore. I can't watch you risk your life chasing after killers. We have two children. What am I supposed to say to them when their mother doesn't come home because she died looking into things she has no business looking into?

I'm not going to let another serial killer into our lives. I won't. You bring home enough death every day with your job. Why do you have to seek out more?

We need this fresh start if we're going to survive, Claire. Please, take the job in San Diego. One way or another... I'm going. I hope it's with you instead of without you.

Ed

Cindy read far faster than Jill. She was on her second pass of the note by the time the attorney read Ed's familiar signature. They turned and looked at the medical examiner, both speechless.

"Now you know," Claire said wearily.

"An ultimatum?" Jill asked. "From Ed?"

Claire nodded. "I was offered a nice position in San Diego. More money, less hours..."

"But you're not going to take it," Jill blurted. "Ow!" She yelped when Cindy elbowed her harder than necessary in the side. "What?" Jill demanded. "She's my best friend. I don't want her to leave!"

"Claire..." Cindy moved away from the attorney and sat on the edge of Claire's desk. "Why didn't you tell us?"

“I didn’t think there was anything to tell,” Claire sighed. “I wasn’t going to take the job. I’m happy here. My friends are here.” She looked at Cindy’s hand where it rested on the wood of her desk. She reached out and took that hand in her own, feeling Cindy squeeze back. “Ed seemed all right with that...”

“Until a new serial killer showed up,” Jill guessed, her voice suddenly subdued.

“And the shooting at the school,” Cindy murmured. It seemed like there was no end to the fallout over that. More collateral damage, her thoughts suggested. The aftermath had already crippled her relationships with Jill and Lindsay.

“We were already having problems before that,” Claire admitted. “You knew,” she reminded Jill.

“I just thought...” Jill shook her head. “I mean... you’re the Washburns. You’ve always been the Washburns. You and Ed are like the only people I know who make marriage work.”

“Apparently not anymore,” Claire muttered. Cindy’s grip tightened on hers. “Nothing has been the same since the shooting... he’s not the man I married. I’m not talking physically,” Claire hastened to explain.

“We know,” Cindy said quickly. “So this... Hallelujah Man showed up and piled another straw on the camel’s back, huh?”

“The who what?” Jill asked.

Cindy looked from Jill’s blue eyes to Claire’s dark ones. Both of them were looking at her like she’d lost a marble or two. “You didn’t see the Chronicle? They named the serial killer. Because of the Bibles, the scripture...”

“It’s a Love and Money song,” Jill pointed out with outrage. “I *like* that song.”

Cindy tapped her chest with her fingers. “Not my paper. Not my problem. I’m just saying... it’s gonna catch on.”

Claire shook her head. A tiny part of her almost wanted to smile at the pair of them. They were like squabbling siblings. The thought segued into images of her own children and her amusement vanished as her heart constricted. “What if he sues for custody?” Claire abruptly asked.

Cindy and Jill immediately returned their focus to Claire. “Okay... let’s slow down here. No reason to get litigious, yet,” Jill said. “You and Ed just need some time... talk things out. There have to be some options here.”

Claire picked up the note where Cindy had laid it on the desk. “I’m out of time,” she said

in an elevated voice. “I either choose the two of you and Lindsay, or I choose my family. There are no other options.”

They were all quiet a long moment. Jill made eye contact with Cindy who wordlessly eased away and made room for the attorney to crouch in front of Claire. Jill licked her lips. “What do you want to do?” she asked with an edge of fear in her voice. She prayed she could put Claire’s needs over her own, but the thought of her friend not being there every day was making her stomach twist in knots.

“The answer should be a given,” Claire said softly. “I should want to do whatever it takes to keep my family together.”

Jill frowned, the lawyer in her reading between the lines. “You *should*...” she said slowly. “Does that mean... you don’t?”

The double doors in the morgue swung open as Lindsay Boxer moved into the room, her considerable presence filling the suddenly too small space. Jill watched as Lindsay’s eyes immediately locked gazes with the reporter she hadn’t seen for a week. For the first time, she could actually see the real potential between them, feeling the undercurrent of sexual energy that flowed between the two effortlessly. Not that either one of her friends seemed clued into the fact, however.

Cindy tore her gaze away from the welcome sight of Lindsay and glanced back at Jill and Claire before sighing. “I’ll...” she motioned at Lindsay with a wave of her hand, resigned to being the one to fill the newcomer in.

Jill nodded just as Claire covered her eyes and tried mightily not to cry again. Lindsay saw the tears and went still before surging toward her upset friend.

“Claire?” Lindsay got as far as the doorway when Cindy grabbed her arm, spinning her away and yanking her toward the hallway and some privacy. “Hey!” Lindsay barked but she went willingly when she saw Jill’s encouraging look.

“We’ll figure this out,” Jill promised Claire as she rubbed her back with soothing circles. She was as scared for the club as she was for her friend’s marriage. Already they were fragmented from the friction with Cindy. What would they do if they lost the one friend who knew how to hold them all together? “We’ll figure this out,” Jill said again, praying that it was the truth.

Lindsay nearly stumbled out into the hallway as Cindy gave her a rougher than necessary push. The reporter might be short, but she apparently had some muscle on her smaller frame Lindsay wasn’t aware of. “What’s wrong?” she demanded before the doors had even closed behind them. “What happened?”

“Claire is upset.”

“No. Really, Lois Lane? The tears didn’t clue me in on that,” Lindsay spat then mentally cursed herself when Cindy flinched and put a few more steps between them. She hated that sudden distance, wanted to eliminate it, but her stubbornness kept her where she was.

“Do you think you could put aside being mad at me for one morning for Claire’s sake?” Cindy looked up at her beseechingly. She watched as some unidentifiable emotion chased its way across Lindsay’s face. She hated this, hated them fighting after the weeks before when they had been growing so much closer. Cindy blew out an aching breath and dropped her gaze to the floor. “I’ll fill you in and leave,” she offered, her throat tight. “Okay?”

Lindsay jammed her hands into her back pockets to keep from touching Cindy. She wanted to draw the reporter into a hug, but instead she felt like she was kicking her when she was down. “I’m sorry,” Lindsay said in a calmer voice. “I just... I don’t like seeing Claire cry. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Cindy cleared her throat, taking Lindsay’s apology as the small victory it was. “She got a letter this morning. From Ed.”

Lindsay could only think of one kind of letter from Ed that would make Claire cry. Her heart went into freefall. “Oh God. What...?”

“He gave her an ultimatum.”

“*Ed?*” Lindsay said in disbelief. She shook her head, trying not to think about Tom, trying not to remember the sudden swell of painful memories that threatened to bring her to tears. No. No, Claire was not going to go through that. Not Claire and Ed...

“Either Claire takes a job in San Diego or...” Cindy trailed off and looked at the floor again.

Lindsay rubbed her forehead before pinching the bridge of her nose, hard. “This is not happening,” she murmured. “Not to them.”

Cindy said nothing. The same thought had been going through her own mind, but it was more about her and Lindsay than her friends. She felt guilty for that. It seemed like so much was falling apart around her, and she didn’t know where to start trying to fix any of it.

“I have to...” Lindsay shook her head and moved past Cindy, returning to the morgue and Claire’s side.

Cindy continued to stand there in the empty hallway. Tears welled up and spilled over and she wiped at them angrily. With one last longing look at the doors, she left the

remaining members of the club behind. This was no time for the friction between her, Lindsay and Jill. The last thing Claire needed was to deal with the tension among them.

She slammed open the door leading to the muted sunlight beyond. She'd come back and be there for Claire later.

Alone.

Lindsay hesitantly stepped into Claire's office. Her friend was sobbing quietly and she felt her own tears well up in reaction. It made the whole world feel wrong to see Claire cry like that. Jill was holding her, the blonde's features stricken as her blue gaze lifted and met Lindsay's.

Wordlessly, Jill handed Lindsay the note and the inspector read it with a sigh. The truth, written clearly in Ed's handwriting, was no easier to accept even with visual proof. "Claire," Lindsay's voice held the ache she was feeling for her friend. "I'm sorry."

Jill rubbed the other woman's back. "It's going to be okay, sweetie." She watched as Lindsay came closer. They shared a look over Claire's bowed head before Lindsay sank to her knees and eased her long arms around Claire's frame.

"He'll come to his senses, Claire. He's just..." Lindsay swallowed. She knew what Claire was feeling. What it was like to have a killer come between you and your marriage. It seemed like stepping away from something so violent, so cruel, should be so easy, but it wasn't. If anything, for a person with any sense of justice, it made stepping away nearly impossible. This was what they did. Stopping monsters like Billy Harris and the man they were chasing now... it was what they were meant to do.

Ed should know that. He'd been a cop. He'd given his legs for the job. Where did he get off demanding this of Claire? Unless it was an excuse... and that thought didn't make Lindsay feel any better.

"Maybe he is coming to his senses," Claire finally said as her sobs wound down. "He's right. I bring death home."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jill answered with a touch of heat. She leaned back and ducked her head, encouraging Claire to look at her. "I've seen you at home. I lived with you. You're a wonderful mother, a wonderful wife... Ed is being the prick of the century."

"Jill..." Lindsay's voice was tight and held a note of warning.

"He is!" Jill shot back without remorse. "Linz, let's stop tip-toeing around this. We all know he's still messed up over the shooting, but this is his way to get attention, to feel like he has some power... to yank her away from the things she loves. I want to be

sympathetic to him, but damn it, this is Claire! I'm not going to sit back and pretend I'm okay with this." Jill turned her watery blue gaze on the woman in question. "He knows you'll go! He knows you'll leave us..." Jill's voice broke and she blinked several times as she fought tears.

Claire was silently watching her. "How can he know that, honey?" she finally asked, her voice hoarse. She was touched by Jill's display of anger on her behalf. She took her friend's hand in hers, drawing strength from it when Jill returned her grip without hesitation. "How can he know that when I'm not even sure?"

Lindsay shifted so she could look into Claire's eyes. "Wait. Just wait... Claire..."

"I don't have anything left to give, Lindsay," Claire confessed, her tone defeated. "I've tried and tried and tried... and the only things that keep me sane are my girls and my boys. I love him, I love him so much I can barely breathe... but right now... right now I can't be with him. What am I supposed to do?"

Lindsay was wide-eyed in response to Claire's revelation. Claire had never looked at her like that before, had never asked for this kind of help from any of them. Her stomach twisted when she realized she didn't know what to say, what to do. Lindsay could only be there for her. *Make me laugh when the chips were down*, she remembered saying to Cindy. It wasn't just her rule. It applied to all of them. "You're asking me for marital advice?" Lindsay managed to joke. "Seriously?"

Claire blinked in surprise then a tremulous smile touched her lips. She reached out and placed her hand gently on the side of Lindsay's face in silent thanks.

Jill's phone rang and the attorney cursed. She unclipped it from her belt and checked the caller ID. "Shit."

"What?" Claire asked as she turned away from Lindsay.

"Denise. I'm late for our prep."

"The Dow trial?" Lindsay guessed.

Jill nodded. "She can wait. I'm ready for this case."

Claire took Jill's hands. "Honey, she's your boss, and we worked too hard to put that man where he belongs."

"I'm not leaving," Jill was adamant.

"Yes you are." For the moment, Claire was back to being the one member of their group that could always see reason. "You're a witness on the stand tomorrow, Jill."

“So?”

Claire gave her a look that made Jill feel like a misbehaving teenager. “I don’t want to leave you...” Jill began.

“I’ll stay,” Lindsay chimed in. “You need to go. Denise will have a cow with a bonnet on it if you don’t.”

Jill hesitated, clearly torn.

“Go,” Claire instructed. “We’ll talk more later.”

Jill shook her head and sighed. Finally she leaned over and kissed Claire on the cheek. “We’re not done.”

“Not by a long shot,” Claire agreed. “I’ll see you tonight at Papa Joe’s?”

Jill’s features softened. “Yeah. Hell, I’ll even buy.” She winked then gave Lindsay a meaningful look before leaving her two friends alone.

“You want me to talk to Ed?” Lindsay asked when it was finally quiet again.

Claire shook her head. “No. I don’t think that would be a good idea.” Her voice was hushed.

Lindsay closed her eyes. “We’re a part of the problem, aren’t we?” She asked knowingly. “The club?”

“It’s not a club,” Claire murmured with weary amusement. She managed a smile when Lindsay snorted. “It’s everything right now, Linz,” Claire said after a moment.

“But we’re not helping. The demands we put on your time...”

“It’s not about that.” Claire pursed her lips then looked at her hands. “He... resents you, Jill, and Cindy. He thinks I put all of you first.”

“You put your kids first,” Lindsay’s answer was swift and hard.

“Second then,” Claire agreed. She looked up into Lindsay’s concerned brown eyes. “I’ve always dropped everything and come running when any of you needed me. When Ed still had use of his legs... he didn’t care, but now... Now it feels like he thinks he can’t help anyone... so I shouldn’t be able to either.”

There was bitterness on both sides, Lindsay realized with a sick heart. How had she not seen what was happening between them? And she called herself a detective... “Why didn’t you say something?”

“When would have been a good time, Lindsay? When Tom was getting married? When you were being hunted by Kiss-Me-Not? After Cindy was shot?”

“Yes,” Lindsay said firmly, trying not to think of any of the unpleasant memories Claire’s words stirred. “During any of those times. Claire, I love you. We all do. You’re always there for any of us. You need to let us be there for you for a change.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” Claire confessed. “It’s much easier to dispense sage advice than to receive it.” She smiled sadly.

“Lucky for you,” Lindsay said as she dropped her head on Claire’s shoulder. “I have several years’ worth of your sage advice stored up in here.” Lindsay tapped her temple. “I can share your own wisdom with you. God knows you wouldn’t want any of mine.”

Claire laughed, just a little. She took a breath and lifted her head as she came to a sudden realization. “Where is Cindy?”

Lindsay’s eyes cut to the doorway. She thought the reporter had followed her in, had just held back to let her and Jill handle the situation. Seeing that the room beyond was empty made her feel like she’d been punched in the gut. Cindy had offered to go and Lindsay hadn’t told her to do otherwise. Apparently Cindy had taken her silence as an agreement. Lindsay swore softly under her breath. “She’ll... be back later,” she promised. It didn’t feel like a lie since Lindsay was fairly sure Cindy would check in on Claire... when she thought Lindsay might be gone.

“Ran her off, huh?” Claire asked without judgment.

Lindsay lowered her head. “Not on purpose,” she confessed, thinking she should have known better than to lie to Claire.

“Lindsay...”

“Look. You have other things to worry about than me and Cindy,” Lindsay told her.

“But maybe that’s something I can fix.” Claire’s voice was soft.

“We’ll be fine,” Lindsay promised. “We just need to get in a room and duke it out.”

“Promise me you’ll do it soon,” Claire pleaded.

“No fair,” Lindsay teased half-heartedly. “You’re using my sympathy for your situation against me.”

“At least something good could come out of this then,” Claire answered honestly. “And don’t pretend like this separation isn’t killing you.”

It was, Lindsay inwardly admitted. It was keeping her up, occupying her thoughts... making her have asinine conversation with her *dog*... "I'm not the one at fault here," Lindsay reminded her. "It was stupid. What she did was dangerous and it damn near got her..." Lindsay swallowed when she remembered coming into that stairwell, seeing that bastard with his hand inching up Cindy's thigh. A shudder racked her body.

"Honey..." Claire took a breath. "If you're going to be that mad at Cindy then you should be just as mad at me and Jill."

Lindsay hated logic when applied to her emotions. It gave her a headache. "It's not the same," she answered feeling lame.

"No... I don't think it is," Claire agreed slowly. "But I don't think you've figured out why, yet." She watched as Lindsay looked at her with confusion. "You think about that, Lindsay. Why it feels different to you when Cindy risks her life." Claire wearily patted her friend on the shoulder as the first of the morning employees began to arrive.

Lindsay sat perfectly still, trying to puzzle out what Claire meant. Her friend got to her feet and moved past her, greeting her staff as if nothing was wrong, as if her life hadn't come apart at the seams this morning. Why was it different with Cindy? Lindsay suddenly wanted to understand, but a fearful voice inside her head seemed to think she was better off not knowing.

"You're late."

Jill moved past Denise who was standing ramrod straight in the DDA's doorway. "I had a personal matter," she explained through clenched teeth. She dropped her briefcase into her chair then looked at Denise expectantly. "Do you want to do this here or in your office?"

"We have a free courtroom for an hour," Denise answered. "We'll do it there."

"I don't need to..."

"You've never been a witness before, Jill," Denise cut her off. "I'm damn sure going to make you know what it feels like to be one before Nicole Honeycutt does."

"Is this really necessary?"

Denise crossed her arms. "We're talking about a man who left another to rot in prison and nearly die for his crimes. A man who would have accosted you and probably much worse if Inspector Boxer hadn't arrived when she did."

Jill really didn't need or want the reminder. "I recall. I was there."

"The Galvans deserve justice for all he put them through. And Tracy Welling deserves justice that is long overdue." Denise's voice quavered the tiniest fraction at the mention of the former DDA.

Jill heard it. She swallowed when she realized she had forgotten that this case had to be pretty damn personal to Denise. She and Welling had been friends. Hell, Denise was sitting in Welling's old office. Reminders of the case... of her lost friend... were literally everywhere. If it had been Cindy, Claire or Lindsay that Dow had raped and murdered...

Their gazes held for a tense moment.

"You're the boss," Jill finally relented with a sigh.

"If only you would remember that more often," Denise sniped before pivoting on her heel and marching off down the hall.

Jill resisted the urge to display a finger at the retreating figure. Instead she followed wordlessly, her steps taking her toward the courtrooms several floors below while her thoughts stayed firmly behind in Claire's office.

"Tom."

Lieutenant Tom Hogan jerked at the light, feminine voice that called to him as he stepped off the elevator. He glanced over in surprise to find Cindy Thomas sitting on a bench in the hallway. The young reporter looked tired and wasn't as fast to jump to her feet as he would have expected. He'd always thought she was pretty, her fiery red hair and warm brown eyes appealing. "Ms. Thomas," he greeted her civilly.

Cindy gave him a pained smile. "I'm about to do something that is going to get me in mondo trouble."

Tom crossed his arms and regarded her with bemusement. "From what I know of you, that won't exactly be something new. Should I call down and get the holding cell ready?"

Cindy winced. "Not that kind of trouble, thankfully."

"All right," Tom said. "Lay it on me."

Cindy took a deep breath and prayed she wasn't about to make a huge mistake. She wasn't especially fond of Tom, but she still thought at the end of the day that he was a good man. It was just hard to get past the knowledge that he'd walked away from

Lindsay when she'd needed him most. That was something Cindy would never forgive him for, even if she and Lindsay never spoke again. "It's just... none of them will ask... especially not Lindsay." Cindy hesitated. "So... I just..." She closed her eyes and screwed up her features, her hands flapping helplessly as she tried to make herself say the words.

Tom lifted an eyebrow at her antics. It blew his mind that his ex-wife was so close to such a spastic person. Maybe Lindsay found Cindy to be as entertaining as he did. "What?" He prompted impatiently.

"It's about Claire and Ed," Cindy got out.

Now she had his attention. "What about them?" he asked more seriously.

"Promise me you won't say anything to Lindsay about me telling you this. I'm in enough hot water with her already."

That was news to him, but Tom merely shrugged. "Fine. What's going on with Claire and Ed?" He listened as she filled him in, understanding why she had come to him with the news and appreciating the position she was potentially putting herself in. "You're sure about this? Ed adores Claire."

Cindy sighed. "I'm sure. I saw the note myself." She glanced at the floor then looked back up at him. "I know you and Ed worked together. Maybe..."

"He'd talk to me?" Tom guessed.

"It's Claire and Ed," Cindy explained.

"Good marriages go bad sometimes," Tom told her, his voice quiet.

Cindy swallowed, feeling unexpected jealousy surge inside her at his words. She frowned, confused, but unwilling to give the emotion the attention it deserved. "Will you help or not?"

Tom regarded her. "Why are you in trouble with Lindsay?"

The change in topic made Cindy pause. "The stuff at the school. She's mad at me for taking chances with my life."

"You were trying to save a child," he said slowly. He'd read the reports and been impressed with what she'd tried to do, even though the cop in him knew she shouldn't have done it. "She knows that."

"Apparently not." Cindy stuffed her hands in her back pockets. "She and Jill are barely speaking to me right now."

Tom frowned. That didn't sound like his wife... his ex-wife... at all. "Really," he murmured, his brain taking this news in and beginning to formulate reasons for Lindsay's actions. His gaze cut to the redhead again and he looked at her speculatively.

"What?" Cindy asked, suddenly feeling like she was under a microscope.

Tom looked at her a moment longer. "Nothing," he finally said slowly. "I'll talk to Ed. See what I can find out."

Cindy fished into her purse then gave him her card. "Would you call me after you do?"

"You're butting in, Thomas," he warned her.

"Hell yes I am," Cindy agreed. "Claire is always there for me. I'll be damned if I don't do everything I can to be there for her."

Tom fingered the corner of the card, reading the neat print before lifting his head and meeting Cindy's determined gaze. He nodded once.

So did Cindy. "I'll leave you to your day then, Lieutenant," she said formally as a cluster of uniformed officers walked by them. Cindy spun on her heel and headed for the elevators, aware of Tom's gaze on her back. She felt like she'd just dug herself an even deeper hole with Lindsay, but there was no help for it.

"Please let this work," Cindy said under her breath as the doors opened and she scrambled inside, not caring if the elevator was going up or down just so long as it took her away from Tom's curious eyes.

Denise crossed her arms and looked at Jill expectantly. Jill sighed and moved past the benches, stepping through the small swinging gate before heading up to the witness box. Empty, the courtroom felt cavernous, every step echoing as Jill made her way to the stand. She sat down in the chair, wishing she were somewhere else, anywhere else than in this room at this moment.

"Take it in, Counselor," Denise ordered.

Jill leaned back and looked out over the courtroom, expecting it to leave her with no impression whatsoever, just wood, marble and the ghosts of cases past. Her mind conjured the images of the jury to her left, the judge on her right, a crowd of people and reporters hanging on her every word to the front. Her heart rate accelerated and she broke into a slight sweat. Her sudden discomfort must have shown in her features.

Denise was smirking.

“So now what?” Jill asked to cover her unease.

“Have you given any thought as to what the defense will ask you?”

“I’m an officer of the court. If they’re smart they won’t ask me anything.”

“Arrogance will sink a witness every time, Jill. You know that.”

Jill sighed, conceding that Denise had a point. “We’re ready on direct.”

“We are,” Denise agreed. “And I have no doubt you could usually handle yourself on cross.”

“Usually?” Jill crossed her arms.

“You were in a school shooting last week, Jill. Not to mention you’re working on another serial killer case after what happened with Inspector Boxer and the Kiss-Me-Not killer. Your focus is off. Your cage has been rattled. I bet you’ve barely thought about this case beyond the time spent in my office prepping for it.”

Jill was uncomfortable with how accurately Denise had her pegged. She could rarely get a bead on her boss. Denise’s personality was constantly shifting and Jill never knew which of the woman’s personas would be on hand on any given day. She didn’t realize Denise was watching her so closely or was so aware of her mental state. “Okay,” she relented. “You’re right.”

Denise cocked her head and the tiniest hint of a smile crooked her lips. “Too bad that wasn’t on the record,” she drawled. She didn’t let the light moment last. “So tell me, Ms. Bernhardt. How many men have you slept with in the last month?”

Jill blinked and felt all the air go out of her lungs. “What?”

“Don’t react like that in court,” Denise told her. She came closer to the jury box, leaning her elbow on the rail. “Two? Five? Ten?”

The lawyer in Jill started turning the angles, trying to see where Denise was going with her line of questioning. She didn’t like any of the destinations. “I don’t see what that has to do with…”

“You have a reputation,” Denise cut her off, much as Nicole Honeycutt, the defense attorney, would most certainly do, Jill admitted.

“I’m single. I date. Neither of which is an invitation to be attacked by Mr. Dow.”

Denise dipped her head once, liking that answer. “You like sex, Ms. Bernhardt. Look at

the way you're dressed. You telegraph it very clearly."

Any good lawyer would object to that, especially since it wasn't a question, but it would serve its purpose. It would put the thought in the jury's heads, draw their attention to her and away from Dow. Jill glanced down at her light blue shirt. She noted more buttons were open than necessary and the gauzy material was admittedly translucent in the right light. *Shit*. She took a breath. "You really think she's going to come at me with this?"

Denise raised an elegant eyebrow.

Jill raked her hands through her hair. "We're going to need more than an hour for this," she sighed before slumping back in the witness chair.

A light tapping on the glass pane of her door drew Claire's attention away from her thoughts and onto her visitor. Cindy stood in the doorway, a hesitant smile on her face, her hands tucked into the pockets of her jeans. "Hey," Claire said quietly.

Cindy stepped inside. "Sorry I bailed on you this morning. How are you doing?"

"No one can blame you for not wanting to wade in hostile waters," Claire replied with a half-hearted wink. She managed a tired smile as Cindy slumped into a chair on the opposite side of Claire's desk. "You're going to have to talk this out with them sometime soon."

"Yeah. I know." Cindy sighed and leaned forward, clasping her hands between her knees. "But I'm not here to talk about me. How are you doing?"

"Still processing," Claire confessed. She frowned as she took a good look at the reporter. Cindy did not look well. Claire hadn't see her this pale since the courthouse shooting.

"Have you talked to him?"

"He won't answer my calls."

Cindy's jaw clenched. "Is it wrong that I really want to go give your husband a piece of my mind?"

Claire's smile broadened a fraction. "Is it wrong that I want to let you?"

The reporter sighed. "I'm sorry about all this Claire. I feel like we let you down. We've been so wrapped up in our own lives we weren't paying close enough attention to yours."

"I think I've been in denial," Claire admitted. "I just thought... if I keep going on the way I have been that things would even out."

“No evening out, huh?” Cindy asked with a sad smile.

“Afraid not, skipper,” Claire said quietly. “As for being wrapped up in your own life... how are you feeling?”

Cindy’s head came up from where she was studying a chipped nail. “Feeling?”

The medical examiner’s gaze lowered to a spot in the middle of Cindy’s chest and she watched with some amusement as Cindy’s hand went over it reflexively.

“I’m... I’m fine,” Cindy said with a shrug, but her normal gusto for lying badly was noticeably absent. “Great.”

“How’s the scarring?” Claire asked gently.

Cindy swallowed and got to her feet before aimlessly moving around the small space. “You’re not getting out of talking about you,” she informed Claire. “I know what you’re up to.”

“I’m up to worrying about you,” Claire told her.

Cindy looked decidedly uncomfortable. “The scarring is no big deal. Battle wound and all, you know?” she tried to joke. “The doctors were pretty careful.” She swallowed again. “Can we please not talk about this?”

“You aren’t sleeping, are you?” Claire pressed on. Claire realized with a jolt that Cindy always blew off any talk of her shooting. Maybe the girl had been traumatized more than she let on. Cindy had probably been holding it together when she’d had her support group, but with Jill and Lindsay, especially Lindsay, out of the picture the last week and the incident at the school so fresh in her mind... Claire suddenly felt heartsick for a completely different reason.

“How did we get on the topic of me here?” Cindy asked with a forced smile. “I’m here to help you.”

“You can’t help me if you’re at the end of your emotional and physical rope.” Claire got to her feet and came closer to the redhead. She put her hands on her shoulders as Cindy’s gaze dropped to the floor, refusing to meet her eyes. “Give me something else to worry about besides my own mess here,” Claire urged. “Talk to me.”

Cindy looked at her then, and Claire could see the exhaustion plainly in her brown eyes. They were bloodshot and dark circles marred Cindy’s usually flawless face. For a moment she ached more for her friend than she did herself, Claire realized. “Talk to me,” she said again.

Cindy took a shaky breath. "I'm still hurting," she admitted reluctantly.

"That's to be expected. You having nightmares?"

Cindy swallowed hard then nodded. She didn't bother to tell Claire they weren't of the shooting. They were of Billy Harris killing Lindsay's father then turning the gun on her friend, filling her full of holes and making her bleed and beg for death. He'd smile. In every dream he would just smile as he held Lindsay down and began to sew her lips shut. Cindy shuddered. This new case... this Hallelujah Man as the Chronicle wanted to call him... it was stirring that hornet's nest of fears up all over again.

"I feel like... I feel like I'm on borrowed time... always... when it comes to the club," Cindy said after a moment.

Claire felt a pang deep in her chest. "Why do you say that?"

Cindy shook her head, all traces of the usually vibrant reporter stripped away, leaving Claire with the most naked and open window to the young woman underneath that Claire had ever seen. "I feel like I'm always screwing up... that Jill and Lindsay are just looking for an excuse..."

"And how does getting shot figure into that equation?"

"It's slowing me down," Cindy confessed. "I want so much to help... to make a difference, but I'm so tired. I'm falling behind. I'm not pulling my weight."

"Cindy..."

"I don't want to be left behind," the reporter's voice shook. "I don't..."

Claire pulled the young woman into a hug. She felt Cindy shudder. "You don't want Lindsay to hate you," she guessed. She felt Cindy nod. "Honey, Lindsay could never hate you. She's this mad because she cares so much about you."

Cindy leaned back, pleased at the thought but not sure she believed it. "How come it's okay for her to risk her life every day but when one of us risks ours..."

"It's harder to watch your friends risk their lives instead of risking you own." Claire tipped Cindy's chin up so they were eye to eye. "She's scared, Cindy. You almost died on us a few months ago. What happened in the school... it brought that back for all of us. You and Lindsay especially." Claire put her hands back on Cindy's shoulders.

"You really think Lindsay is this mad because... of my shooting?"

"I think she was terrified she was going to find you dead inside that school building. She almost lost you once, she's scared that it will happen again with the types of risks you

take with your job.”

Cindy took a breath, her brain sifting and sorting through the notions Claire had left her with. For the time being she set them aside and focused her attention solely on Claire. “All right. We talked about me. Now let’s talk about you.”

“Damn. Didn’t distract you all the way, huh?” Cindy pursed her lips and shook her head in mock seriousness, making Claire laugh just a little. She sighed. “I’m meeting Jill and Linz at Papa Joe’s. You coming?”

“I don’t think I’d be welcome there,” Cindy confessed reluctantly.

“I want you there,” Claire told her. She took a breath. “I need you there.”

Cindy’s head came up and she looked at Claire in surprise. “But Lindsay and Jill…”

“Can get over themselves,” Claire finished for her. Claire returned to her desk where she picked up her purse. “Can we just set it all aside? Just for this one night?”

“We can do whatever you need us to do,” Cindy said with determination.

“Good. Because what I need us to do is get drunk.”

Cindy’s eyes widened as Claire walked past her and out the door.

Act II:

“You’re kidding.”

Jill shook her head as she took another sip of her martini. “Wish I was,” she muttered.

Lindsay just gaped at her. “Denise thinks Honeycutt will come at you with that?”

“Apparently. Either that or Denise has a very odd way of looking into my sex life.” Jill polished off the rest of her drink then flagged the waiter for another. They had arrived at Papa Joe’s fifteen minutes early and had decided to get a head start on the drinks after the day’s events.

“Sonofabitch,” Lindsay rasped, her Texas twang more pronounced than usual.

“That about sums up this day,” a voice floated over them.

They both looked up to see Cindy standing there with Claire.

Lindsay felt her heart kick against her ribs, and she almost choked on the sip of beer

she'd just taken. Her body acted without conscious thought as she scooted over to make room for the reporter. Lindsay saw the look of surprise flicker across Cindy's features before the reporter carefully eased in next to her.

Claire smiled knowingly as she slid into the booth next to Jill.

The waiter arrived instantly and took their drink and food orders before leaving them alone once more.

"Well," Claire said to break the sudden tense silence. "Bitch of a day, huh?"

Her friends all smiled and some of the tension eased.

"When are you all scheduled to testify?" Cindy asked them, sticking to the oddly safer topics of murder and justice and soaking up the chance to be near them all without any yelling.

"Day after tomorrow," Lindsay answered readily. Cindy looked at her and their gazes met and held for a moment before Cindy's slid away.

"Same here," Claire said.

"Tomorrow after lunch," Jill admitted with a sigh.

"So I'm up before you all, huh?" Cindy asked them.

"Makes sense," Jill informed her, setting aside her anger with the reporter for one night. It felt good to have the four of them together around a table again. "You got the case reopened. Denise will show how that happened, how desperate a son was to clear his father."

"Desperate enough to kidnap a reporter," Lindsay added with a slight smirk.

Cindy didn't dare return the teasing, too afraid it would upset the fragile balance they all seemed to be keeping. "So... Denise prepped me. Anything I should know from you veterans? I'm not used to being on the other side of the story like this." She rubbed at the still-healing wound on her chest, feeling it ache a little after the long day she'd had. She noticed all three of her friends' attention zeroed in on the motion and she immediately put her hand back on the table. Claire looked at her knowingly.

"Take the time to think about your answers," Jill told her. "On cross, I mean. Honeycutt is smart. She'll try to trip you up."

"I just don't understand why we're going to trial. Dow signed a confession that night. That stopped the execution." Cindy put her elbows on the table.

“He recanted. Said he was forced to sign it under police duress,” Jill explained.

“Surely they can’t expect that to stick,” Cindy protested.

“Plenty of people want to paint the police as the bad guys,” Lindsay added. “They’ll jump all over it if Honeycutt can give them any reason to buy it.”

“That sucks.” Cindy looked like she’d swallowed something nasty. The waiter chose that moment to set her beer in front of her and a cheery looking margarita in front of Claire. The drink was so incongruous with Claire’s current mood that Cindy almost found the sight funny.

“You have no idea,” Jill murmured as she thought about what lay ahead for her on the stand tomorrow. She picked up her third martini, plucking out the toothpick and olive before taking a healthy swallow.

“Might want to slow down there, ace,” Lindsay pointed out with a smirk. “Don’t want the jury thinking you’re loose *and* a drunk.”

“What?” Claire and Cindy both chimed in.

Lindsay explained what Denise was expecting the defense to try with Jill tomorrow. Both women looked at Jill in mute shock when Lindsay was done.

“Honey,” Claire started.

“Brings new meaning to the phrase ‘I made my bed now I have to lie in it.’” Jill sighed and put her head on her fist. “I can’t believe I didn’t even think about Honeycutt asking me this line of questioning. What kind of lawyer am I?”

“One who almost had to shoot a man last week,” Claire reminded her.

Cindy swallowed, wanting the conversation to drift anywhere but to the circumstances around the school shooting. She stiffened in reaction and felt Lindsay do the same. The reporter took a healthy swig of her beer. “Are you ready for her if she comes at you with that?”

Jill shrugged. “As ready as anybody can be. Can’t say that being painted as a slut on the witness stand is going to help my career.”

“You never know,” Lindsay drawled. “With some of the men and women you work for you might actually move up in the world.”

They all shared hesitant smiles.

Claire sighed. “Okay. Enough small talk,” she said seriously. “No, I haven’t talked to

Ed, he's not returning my phone calls. No, I don't know what I'm going to do about the job in San Diego. And no, I have no idea what I'm going to do when I get home tonight."

Cindy glanced at Lindsay only to find the taller woman already watching her. The sight of those eyes on her hit her system like a jolt from a live wire. They nodded once, a silent truce established for the evening. Lindsay scooted closer and Cindy almost wanted to cry when she felt her friend's thigh brush up against her own. It had only been six days, but she'd missed this, missed being a part of the group. She missed the connection and closeness among them. She missed Jill's smirks and Lindsay's slow smiles.

"What do you want to do?" Jill asked, feeling guilty that she was happy to have Claire's problems to worry about instead of her own.

Claire took a sip of her margarita. "I told Cindy before we came over here that I want to get drunk."

Lindsay and Jill looked at each other in alarm.

"Fortunately for all of you I have way too much sense for that." Claire set the drink down just as the waiter arrived with their food.

"Facing Ed wasted is probably not a good idea," Lindsay agreed with a tiny smile. "In fact," she said more seriously. "Shouldn't you be home right now instead of sitting here with the three of us?"

Claire knew she should be home, and it was probably very telling that she didn't want to be.

"What is Ed going to do for work if he goes to San Diego?" Cindy asked as she sipped her beer. Lindsay's perfume drifted over her and she found the scent distracting. She snuck another quick glance at the taller woman and was surprised to see Lindsay's own gaze skitter away.

"He has a consulting position lined up." Claire picked aimlessly at her salad. "It would be good for him, but he can get something like that here."

"Has he tried?" Jill asked.

"I wish." Claire sighed. "I don't know what to do. I don't even want to go home. If it weren't for the kids..."

"You can stay with me," Jill offered before the others beat her to it. "I certainly owe you one." She smiled as she used her teeth to pluck the olive off her toothpick.

"Thank you, but I need to be the more mature one and face the music here. I might show

up on your door later tonight, though.”

“I’ll leave the light on for you,” Jill teased gently. She nudged Claire with her elbow. “It’s going to be okay,” she promised Claire. “We’re going to help you through this.”

Claire set her fork down and covered her eyes with one hand as a fresh wave of tears threatened. She felt three hands on her arm a moment later and knew without looking that Lindsay, Cindy and Jill were all touching her, doing the only thing they could for her. In that moment, her decision crystallized into hardened resolve. She couldn’t give up the three people who would go to hell and back for her for a man who could barely be bothered to cook her dinner.

Claire revealed none of this to her friends, though. She owed it to Ed, to what they’d once been, to talk to him first.

Cindy watched Jill and Claire drive away like they were in the last lifeboat and she was still on the deck of the Titanic. She slowly turned her head to see Lindsay watching her from where the taller woman leaned against the window outside Papa Joe’s. Six days ago the two of them had fought right here in front of God and everybody. Cindy knew she didn’t have the energy to deal with another round right now. “Well…” she said uncomfortably. “Good night, Lindsay.”

Cindy walked to the end of the block, her keys in hand as she approached Maggie, her little red car. Tears were blurring her vision and her chest felt tight with the effort not to cry. The evening spent with the club had been bittersweet. Now that it was over, though, she was back to her very depressing reality. She heard footfalls coming toward her at a jog and she turned just as Lindsay pulled up and paused in front of her. “Hey,” Cindy said then winced at how stupid that sounded.

Lindsay smiled. “Hey,” she drawled back. “I… um… I wanted to apologize. For this morning, I mean,” she clarified. She wasn’t ready to forgive Cindy for what happened in the school. Not yet. But Cindy had looked so quiet and down during dinner that Lindsay couldn’t let her walk away. Not like this. “I didn’t mean for you to leave this morning.”

Cindy took a breath, feeling a small measure of relief. Her shoulders lost some of their tension. “It’s okay,” she answered. “You two have known Claire a lot longer than I have. I probably would have just been in the way.” She turned to open her car but Lindsay caught her wrist. Cindy’s breath hitched and she felt tingles shoot up her arm at the touch as Lindsay eased her back around.

“You were right,” Lindsay confessed in a near whisper.

“About what?” Cindy asked slowly, sensing Lindsay wasn’t talking about what happened with Claire.

“I do miss you when you stop coming around,” Lindsay admitted hesitantly.

Tears obscured Cindy’s vision and she had to look down at the keys in her hands, noticing that Lindsay’s fingers were still wrapped firmly around her wrist.

Lindsay swallowed. “I’m still mad. And I’m not done yelling at you, not by a long shot.” She felt her own tears burn as she swallowed again. “But... you’re still a part of us... you’re still...” Lindsay took a breath. “You’re still important to me.” She felt her heart constrict when Cindy looked up at her in surprise, tears running down her cheeks. “I just... we need to be there for Claire right now.”

“I know,” Cindy agreed.

“We’ll fight when this is over.”

They both smiled tremulously at each other. Slowly Cindy nodded. “Sounds good to me. Well... not good. You can yell pretty loud...”

Lindsay’s smile got wider. “And I’m going to. Make no mistake about it. There will be lots and lots of yelling.”

Why did that thought make Cindy want to grin like an idiot, the reporter wondered. “Okay,” Cindy said quietly, feeling lighter than she had in a week. She had never looked forward to an argument before, but she knew once they had it then maybe she could come back in from the cold.

Lindsay reached out with both hands and used her thumbs to wipe the tears from Cindy’s eyes. The reporter looked so tired and defeated it was nearly driving Lindsay out of her mind with the desire to just draw her into a hug. Cindy chuckled at her antics and Lindsay felt herself smile again. God, she had missed that little laugh. “Okay,” Lindsay agreed when she finally backed off a step. “Night then.”

Cindy watched Lindsay pivot on the heel of her boots and start walking away. She cursed her brain and her body a second later when both decided to happily chase after the taller woman. “Lindsay!”

The inspector turned just as Cindy launched herself into her arms and drew her into a crushing hug. Lindsay’s eyes slipped closed as she wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and pulled her in close. The scent of Cindy’s perfume and shampoo reached her nose and Lindsay inhaled deeply, going so far as to lay her cheek down on Cindy’s soft hair. It felt so good to hold her it nearly made her weep in relief.

Cindy buried her face in the crook of Lindsay’s neck, her hands fisted in Lindsay’s leather jacket. When she felt Lindsay’s arms come around her back her whole body nearly sagged in relief. Maybe they would be okay. Just maybe.

The house was quiet when Claire let herself in about two hours later. Homework lay forgotten on the dining room table and she took a quick look at it to make sure it was finished before following the sounds of some sort of space war being waged by her two sons by way of their Xbox 360. She lounged in the doorway to their room, smiling as she watched them play.

It wasn't fair, she decided, her smile fading. It wasn't fair what was about to happen to them. Their lives were about to be shaken to their foundations and Claire spared a moment to curse Ed for doing this to them, to curse herself for not finding a way to stop this before things had come to this point. She never once thought her husband a coward until that moment. The cop, the good, solid family man she'd fallen in love with all those years ago... Claire wondered where he had gone.

She'd been so relieved when Ed survived his surgery. Even the news that he was paralyzed was met with a measure of relief. It didn't matter. Better to have his life than his legs, she'd thought. He had survived. That was all that was important to her. But now... now Claire wondered if Ed did survive. It sure as hell seemed like her husband, the man she remembered and loved, had gone into that hospital but had never come out of it.

With a sigh, Claire finally shoved off the doorframe and headed for the bedroom. She paused in the doorway when she noticed her suitcase was out. Ed was in the process of packing his. His arrogance added another layer of ice to her cold, hard anger. He looked up when he felt her presence.

"Hi," he said slowly.

Claire crossed her arms. "What are you doing?" Her voice was low, even, a clear warning sign he should have picked up on and either didn't or chose not to.

"What's it look like?" he asked casually.

"Running?" Claire suggested.

Ed looked away as he stuffed a fistful of socks inside his luggage. "I'm not running. We're starting over. We're getting a fresh start."

Claire swallowed and took a deep breath. Her next words would change her life, the lives of her sons. Everything she knew was on the cusp of change and it would begin the instant she opened her mouth. She wanted to snap at him for assuming that she would just cave to his wishes. She wanted to cry because she couldn't give him what he wanted. "You can go if you want to. I'm staying and so are the boys."

The words fell into the silence that suddenly stretched out between them. Finally, Ed swiveled his wheelchair to look at her. "Claire..."

"No. You gave me an ultimatum. Now you have your answer. The boys stay with me, Ed. You want to run away from everything you go ahead, but you're doing it alone."

"We can fix this. All we need is a fresh start," he said as he wheeled closer.

Claire took a step back. She shook her head. "Moving to another city, giving up the friends I love and a job I enjoy... that won't fix anything. The kids are happy here and you would yank them away from everything they've ever known just because you don't want to face your issues?"

Ed jerked his chair around and moved back to the bed. He began stuffing more items into his suitcase. "This isn't all about me," he snarled in a low voice.

"No, Ed, it's not. Stop making it that way."

He looked up at her. "I need this. I need a change."

"I believe you," Claire said softly, her voice trembling as she felt her twelve year marriage crumbling around her. "But you haven't even tried here. Don't tell me this is about a serial killer, or what happened at the school... this isn't about me and my work. You always, always supported me, Lindsay, Jill and now Cindy as well. What changed Ed? Do you even know?"

His anger went from simmering to white-hot instantly. "Can't you do one damn thing for me?" He bellowed.

"One damn thing?" Claire's voice sunk to its lowest register. "You mean helping you with your physical therapy? Or cooking you your meals even after I've been at work all day and sometimes all night earning the money that keeps a roof over our heads and food in your stomach? Or how about the fact I'm always, always, always trying to lift your spirits while all you want to do is drag mine down into the hell you enjoy wallowing in so much?"

Her bitterness surprised him. Claire could see it in his eyes. "You would just walk away?" He asked softly. "From everything?"

"You may not have the use of your legs anymore, Ed, but you walked away from us a long time ago. You think you can't do this anymore? What about me? What about the boys? I want my husband back. They want their father back. If you want to keep blaming the world for everything, go ahead. I'm done."

"I thought you loved me," he said, his voice hard.

“I do love you,” Claire whispered as the tears she’d been fighting began to fall. “I just can’t be with you anymore. Not like this.” She couldn’t face him. Her whole body shaking, she turned and walked away.

Act III

Cindy took a deep breath. She could feel the morning sunlight on the back of her head where it poured in from the window of the courtroom behind her on the witness stand. The first part of her ordeal was over. Denise had questioned her for nearly twenty minutes, and Cindy had supplied her with the rehearsed answers, taking the jury through the progression of events that had led to Henry Dow’s arrest. Now came the hard part. Cross-examination. Cindy eyed the defense attorney warily as the woman took her time to pour a glass of water and take a long sip before finally looking at Cindy as if she’d just noticed her.

“So Jamie Galvan kidnapped you?” Nicole Honeycutt finally asked as she sat behind the defense table. Her red hair was darker than Cindy’s and pulled back in a severe bun that made her prominent cheekbones stand out alarmingly. She was frighteningly thin, Cindy thought as she watched the attorney stand. Cindy decided the woman needed a nap and a sandwich.

“No.” Cindy kept her answers simple. If she didn’t she knew she’d start babbling. Denise had gotten irritated with her during their prep time together, even going so far as to tell her to shut the hell up more than once.

“He was waiting for you in the back of your car, Ms. Thomas. He claimed to have a gun. You don’t consider that kidnapping?” Honeycutt looked dubious and gave the jury an amused look.

“If I had I would have pressed charges,” Cindy answered easily. “Instead I worked tirelessly to help a man who was desperately trying to save his father. A man your client would have let die for his crimes.”

“Objection,” Honeycutt snapped.

“You asked and the witness answered, Counselor,” Judge Merriman drawled. He sounded like he could be Lindsay’s grandfather with his deep Texas twang.

Honeycutt’s gaze no longer looked amused when it zeroed back in on Cindy. She went after the young reporter with both barrels, hammering on Cindy’s credentials, her sources, every single move the reporter had made during the events that led up to Dow’s arrest. Cindy refused to flinch even though she felt like Denise was leaving her to twist in the wind. She had no idea if she was saying the right thing or just making everything worse. In the end she could only answer with the truth and hope it was enough.

Finally, Honeycutt was finished with her. “Nothing further for the witness, Your Honor.”

“You may step down, Ms. Thomas,” the judge told her.

Cindy stood on shaky legs, feeling nauseous as the adrenaline surging through her system began to ease. “Thank you, Your Honor,” Cindy said with a smile as she stepped out of the witness box and offered a second hesitant grin for the people in the jury box. They all smiled back at her.

Denise was standing next to the prosecution table as Cindy walked by. “Christ, Thomas,” Denise hissed and Cindy shot her a concerned look. “If I had known you could think on your feet like that I would have had you testify first.”

Cindy blinked.

“Way to go, Lois Lane,” Denise murmured Jill’s favorite nickname for the reporter as she stacked her papers and called her next witness.

Cindy glanced away when she felt eyes on her. Nicole Honeycutt looked like she was contemplating a little homicide of her own. Cindy smirked and stood a little taller as she left the courtroom heading for the breakfast her nervous stomach wouldn’t let her eat that morning.

Her phone rang as soon as she stepped out onto the front steps of the courthouse. She flipped it open. “Witness extraordinaire speaking,” she said for the hell of it, not really caring who was on the other end of the line.

“Glad to hear it,” Tom Hogan’s voice replied.

“Tom.” Cindy ducked out of the way of some rushing attorneys, their arms full of legal briefs. “Hi. Sorry. I just finished testifying in the Dow case.”

“I figured. Apparently it went well.”

“Nicole Honeycutt looked like she wanted to run me over with her Mercedes. Then back up and do it again for the hell of it.”

Tom chuckled. “You did good then.” He was quiet a moment. “I talked to Ed this morning.”

Cindy took a breath. “And?”

Lindsay’s ex-husband sighed. “It’s not good. He’s got his head so far up his ass...”

Cindy closed her eyes. “How did we all miss this?”

“I don’t know,” Tom murmured. “But I’m not sure there is anything we’re going to be able to do to stop it.” He hesitated. “Claire took the kids and left last night.”

Cindy felt her whole body go cold in the mid-morning sun. “What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“I... was in court. I...” She glanced down at her phone to see if she’d missed any messages. “No one called me...” The cold melted in a sudden blast of fiery temper. Cindy swore under her breath. “Damn them.”

“What?” Tom asked.

“I’m sorry, Tom. Let me call you back.” Cindy hung up without giving him a chance to reply. She pivoted and ran back inside.

Jill paced the confines of her office. She tugged on the collar of her shirt feeling like it was cutting off her circulation. She’d dressed the part this morning in a black business suit with a white silk blouse that revealed absolutely nothing. On most people the outfit would look stylish and professional. Jill thought it made her look like a nun.

She wasn’t scheduled to testify for another three hours, but her nerves were keyed up and raw. Jill tried to keep her mind off her upcoming testimony... off the angles Honeycutt would undoubtedly work to her client’s advantage. What the hell did the defense attorney care? It was Jill’s career she would ruin, not her own.

She tunneled her hands through her short blonde hair and wished for something, anything to take her mind off the mess she found herself in.

Her prayer was answered as the door to her office slammed open. Jill jumped and yelped in surprise, spinning around to find a very pissed off redheaded reporter standing in her doorway.

“You have got to be shitting me,” Cindy announced by way of greeting.

Jill blinked at her friend’s entrance as well as her language. “And hello to you, too.”

Cindy flung the door closed and Jill winced as the glass rattled. “I know you’re pissed at me. Fine. You can be a stark raving bitch to me if you want to from here until the end of time, but damn it, Jill, I still called you. I still told you when there was something wrong with Claire. I didn’t keep you out of the loop out of spite.”

Jill narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Claire!” Cindy shouted as the days of frustration and hurt boiled up and spilled over. “You couldn’t just send me a text message? It didn’t even have to be a phone call.”

“Cindy,” Jill said calmly. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Claire taking the kids and leaving Ed last night. You’re telling me you had no idea.” Cindy scoffed then rolled her eyes. “Please. You want me out of your life because I tried to help a child. Fine. I’m gone, but you damn well better not try to shove me out of Claire’s.” She spun and moved toward the door.

Jill shook off her shock and sprang forward, grabbing Cindy by the arm and spinning her around. They both crashed into the door, rattling the glass again. Jill spared a moment to wonder what her co-workers were thinking about her and all the noise coming from her office right now.

“Calm down,” Jill ordered. “I don’t want you out of my life, Cindy. I’m pissed at you because you damn near made that happen on a permanent basis.” Jill ran a hand through her hair, brushing a lock of it out of her eyes. “Now what the hell are you talking about? I don’t know anything about Claire leaving Ed last night.”

Cindy went still. “You don’t?” She looked skeptical.

Jill cocked her head and looked at her. She still had Cindy bodily pressed against the door, her own hand on the doorknob to keep the reporter from fleeing.

“Um...” Cindy seemed to wilt, the fire going out of her with a sigh. “Sorry?” Her voice was sheepish.

Jill shook her head and rolled her eyes as she stepped away from her.

“Well what was I supposed to think?” Cindy asked plaintively. “I find out Claire left Ed and took the boys and you and Lindsay didn’t tell me.”

“We didn’t tell you because we didn’t know.” Jill sat on the edge of her desk. “Claire didn’t tell any of us.”

“You talked to Lindsay?”

“No, but I’m damn sure she would have called with information like that. And she would have called us both,” Jill added for good measure.

Feeling like an ass and properly chastised for it, Cindy slumped wearily against the door. “I’m sorry. It’s just...”

Jill could see why Cindy would make the leap in logic so she could hardly blame her for it. A sudden thought struck her. “Wait a second. Who told you Claire left Ed?”

Cindy went rigid then shrugged, the motion jerky. “A source.”

“A source?” Jill said with disbelief. She crossed her arms and merely looked at Cindy. It took less than twenty seconds before the reporter started to squirm.

“I’m a reporter. I have sources.” Cindy fidgeted under Jill’s intense blue gaze. “C’mon. Don’t look at me like that. You know I’ll cave.” She risked another peek at Jill who tilted her head the other way and narrowed her eyes. “Aww, that is low... you’ve been practicing Lindsay’s look.”

Jill slowly smiled. She missed this, missed playing with Cindy like this something fierce. “Spill it, Thomas. You yelled at me.”

“You’ve been... that’s not...” Cindy took a breath and then sighed in resignation. “Tom.”

Jill blinked. “Tom? Lindsay’s Tom?”

“He’s not Lindsay’s Tom anymore,” Cindy answered immediately. She tamped down another odd flare of jealousy at the thought. At some point she was going to have to deal with what they meant but that wasn’t going to be today.

Jill smirked at the rapid response but didn’t share her motivation for the expression. “And how did Tom know this? Better yet, why did Tom tell you and not his ex-wife?”

Cindy shrugged again and bit her lower lip before looking away.

“Oh you didn’t.” Jill rubbed her forehead. “Please tell me you didn’t drag Tom into this.”

“Define... *drag*.”

Jill covered her face with her hands and groaned.

“Tom knows Ed... they worked together,” Cindy started to explain.

“Tom knows Lindsay... biblically. This is not a good idea.” Jill peeked out at the reporter between her fingers. She shook her head. “Lindsay is going to kill you for dragging her ex-husband into this.”

“Tom and Ed are friends. He would have gotten dragged into it eventually. Divorce has a way of sucking everyone in.”

Jill shot up off the desk. “No. Don’t say that. Ed and Claire are not getting divorced. We aren’t going to let them.”

Cindy sighed. “That was sort of my point in bringing Tom in. I’m doing whatever it takes here.” She nibbled on her thumbnail before flapping her hand helplessly. “I’m not sure there is anything we can do here, Jill. I thought maybe a guy could help Ed out. They could talk man to man, you know?”

“And how did that go?” Jill asked dryly.

“Actually Tom said something about Ed having his head up his ass...”

Jill blinked and looked at her in surprise. “Seriously?”

Cindy put her hands in her pockets. “Tom is working with us on this.” She watched Jill shake her head. “It’s not like we can’t use all the help we can get. Even if it is Tom. It’s not like I *wanted* to ask for his help.”

“Have you tried to call Claire?” She walked around her desk and flopped into her chair before reaching for the phone.

“Um... I was too busy seeing red to make out the numbers to dial...”

Jill gave the reporter a sardonic look before picking up the receiver and punching in Claire’s number by memory. After four rings it went to voicemail. Jill frowned as she hung up.

“Not answering?” Cindy asked with concern.

There was a knock at the door. Before Jill could say anything it opened and Lindsay’s head poked inside. The inspector paused when she saw Cindy before her gaze darted to Jill. “Have you seen Claire? Her staff said she called in sick.”

Cindy and Jill exchanged glances.

“Right.” Cindy nodded once. “I’ll see what else I can find out.” She backed up until she almost plowed into a motionless Lindsay before turning to face the inspector. “Jill has something to tell you.” Before Lindsay could say anything more, Cindy ducked under Lindsay’s arm and made a run for it.

Lindsay pivoted and watched as Cindy hustled away without looking back. She slowly turned and looked at Jill who had her lips pursed and was doing her best to look innocent. “So.”

“So,” Jill answered matter-of-factly.

“You two are talking again.”

“Looks that way,” Jill agreed. “We’re still mad at each other, though. Are you worried we’ll kiss and make up before the two of you will?”

“Pfft.” Lindsay waved her off and hoped like hell it was a convincing performance. “So what do you have to tell me?”

Jill’s lips wanted to quirk into a grin at Lindsay’s behavior but they didn’t. She waited for her friend to seat herself on the other side of the desk before hitting her with the worrisome news about their friend. “Claire took the boys and left Ed last night. We don’t know where she is.”

“Who told you that?” Lindsay demanded.

“The little redheaded girl that just left. If you hurry you can probably call security and have them hold her in the lobby.”

Lindsay tilted her head and gave Jill a tame version of the laser vision. “This isn’t funny.”

“Do you see me laughing?” Jill protested. “One of my best friends has disappeared into the ether with her kids and meanwhile I’m set to testify in court in less than three hours. By the time happy hour rolls around my reputation will probably be in tatters and Claire will be in Mexico or something.”

“That’s a little... dramatic,” Lindsay muttered. “Denise must have some faith in you to handle Honeycutt. She wouldn’t put you on the stand otherwise. Just play it cool, don’t let her rile you.”

“You’re giving me advice on the court system?” Jill asked in a dry tone.

“No,” Lindsay answered smugly. “I’m giving you advice on what it’s like to be a witness, something *I* know way better than *you*.”

Jill narrowed her eyes and glared. “Forget me. Where the hell did Claire go?”

Lindsay slumped back in the chair, her leather jacket creaking as she did so. “Where would she go? She didn’t come to any of us.” She frowned. “You don’t think...” Lindsay shook her head. “Nah.”

Jill tipped her head to the side and looked at Lindsay curiously. “Think what?”

Lindsay shook her head again, looking oddly guilty. “Stupid thought. Forget it.”

“Think what?” Jill insisted.

Lindsay studied her fingernails in apparent fascination. “You don’t think Claire would...”

you know...”

“*Cheat?*” Jill suddenly realized what Lindsay was considering. “Be serious!”

Lindsay rubbed her hands over her face. “Okay. Forget I mentioned it. It’s just... she didn’t come to any of us...”

“So who in the hell did she go to?” Jill sighed. This day was shaping up to suck big time.

“You should call them. They’ll be worried.”

“I know.” Claire sighed and looked at her cell phone sitting on the surface of the kitchen table. Her sons’ voices floated in to the room from an open window. They were laughing, a sound that normally brightened her spirits. Today it only dragged her deeper down into the depression she found herself in. Derek and Nate still had no idea that their parents’ relationship was splintering and coming apart at the seams. For now they were blissfully unaware, playing kickball in the small open space of Warren Jacobi’s back yard.

Jacobi sat down opposite Claire. Rather than his typical suit, he was in jeans and a baggy red polo. He nudged the phone with the tip of his finger in her direction. “At least call my partner. She’ll kill me if she finds out I’m harboring you.”

Claire smiled weakly. She put her fingers on the phone, drummed them idly. “I’m not ready to face them, yet.”

“Why?” Jacobi asked softly.

Claire swallowed, taking a minute to get past the sudden tightening of her throat. “They... sometimes... sometimes I think they believe I’m perfect, that I don’t make mistakes, that I always know the right answer.”

“No one always knows the right answer except the man upstairs,” Jacobi replied gently.

“Why you so sure it’s a man?” Claire teased as a way to ease some of her own tension.

He smiled. “Point taken.”

Claire continued to let her fingers drum on the phone. “I... I’ve never failed in their eyes,” she confessed.

“You’re not failing now, Claire.”

Her gaze went to the window and her sons beyond it. “Feels like it,” she whispered.

Jacobi laid his hand over hers, stopping the incessant beat she was tapping out. Her brown eyes leapt to his and he saw tears beginning to fill them. “You are one of the strongest women I have ever known.”

She swallowed again but didn’t answer.

“Claire, Lindsay and I see a lot on the streets everyday. Do you know how many women there are who don’t have a fraction of the guts it takes to walk away from bad relationships? Look at Tina Dellan... her husband beat her and her kids and she stayed.”

“Ed isn’t abusing me...” Claire instantly replied.

“Not physically,” Jacobi agreed, not commenting on Claire’s rush to defend her husband. “But lately he’s taking his frustration out on you. I know you’ve tried your damndest with him since the shooting, Claire. We all have. We’ve all tried to be there for him. He doesn’t want our help. Until he does, there is nothing we can do.” He patted her hand before removing his.

“I just... Lindsay, Cindy, and Jill always look to me for guidance...”

“And you think they’re going to think less of you for this? That they’ll stop holding you up to a higher standard?”

Claire sighed. “When you put it like that I sound like I have an ego the size of San Francisco Bay.”

Jacobi chuckled. “It’s important for you to be there for them, Claire. Goodness knows they need you to be sometimes.”

Claire pushed the phone around on the table.

“And Claire?”

She looked up at him reluctantly.

“Sometimes they need to feel like they can be there for you, too.”

Claire closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Now who is being the coward?” she murmured. When she opened her eyes she saw Jacobi looking at her with complete understanding. She patted his arm. “Thanks for the safe haven today.”

“It ain’t gonna stay safe if Linz finds out you were here and I didn’t tell her.”

Claire chuckled at that. “You didn’t have to take the day off, Warren.”

“Course I did. Lindsay would have kicked my butt if I’d turned you away.”

“So you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t, huh?”

“Something like that.” He picked up the phone, put it in Claire’s hand, and then curled her fingers around it. “At least call Lindsay. Then you can go from there.”

He got up from the table and wandered out into his backyard. The boys shouted with excitement when they saw him and moments later Claire could hear him wrestling around with them both.

She flipped open the phone and dialed.

The bailiff came toward her and Jill felt a bead of sweat trickle down the center of her back. He held out the Bible and for a moment Jill’s mind flashed on scripture painted in blood at the Dellan crime scene. She shivered as her hand came down palm first on the surface of the well-worn book.

“Raise your right hand,” he instructed. “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?”

“I do.” Jill was pleased her voice didn’t quiver.

“Be seated.” The bailiff didn’t spare her another glance as he took the Bible away and returned to his post.

Jill slowly sank into the witness chair, feeling the role reversal keenly as she looked out over the gallery. She took a deep breath when she saw Cindy sitting near the front row. Their gazes locked for a moment and the reporter offered her a hesitant smile. Fighting or not, Jill was damn glad to see Cindy’s friendly face out there. Her gaze reluctantly tracked to Denise as her boss came around the prosecutor’s table and approached the bench.

“Deputy District Attorney Bernhardt,” Denise began. “Let me get right to the point so we don’t waste the jury’s time. What were you doing in the defendant’s apartment on the night he was apprehended?”

For the next twenty minutes, Denise walked the jury through what happened at Henry Dow’s apartment. Jill was surprised by how strongly she remembered her fear in that moment as she looked across the defense table at Dow’s smug face. She knew what he would have done to her if Lindsay hadn’t arrived when she did. The thought was chilling.

Denise stepped between Jill and Dow, blocking her view of him. Jill's attention refocused on her boss. She was thrown by the understanding in Denise's gaze and for a moment she couldn't think. "I'm sorry. What was the question?"

"Why were you trying to get out of the apartment?"

Jill swallowed. The words had come so easily in prep, but faced with the man who would have... She took a breath. "As I said, he was drinking, and I realized that he was the real killer."

"Objection," Honeycutt chimed in.

"I realized that he could be the killer," Jill quickly corrected. "And the way he was... he was getting very close, crowding me... I... I didn't want to end up like Tracy Welling."

"End up like Tracy Welling how?" Denise asked.

"Raped and murdered," Jill answered after a hushed moment.

"No further questions for this witness," Denise informed the judge. She held Jill's gaze for a moment then nodded before returning to her seat at the prosecution's desk.

Jill took another deep breath, her gaze seeking out Cindy once more. The reporter smiled encouragingly then winked. Jill cocked her head. Why did she suddenly have the feeling that Cindy was up to something?

"Ms. Bernhardt," Nicole Honeycutt began, stressing Jill's single title. "That sounds like it was a very harrowing evening."

"It was," Jill answered plainly. "I was fortunate that the police arrived when they did."

"Of course," Honeycutt said with complete insincerity. "It's just... isn't it possible my client simply found you attractive? That you perhaps led him on?"

Here we go, Jill thought sourly. "He's not my type."

The jury chuckled.

"Do you have a type, Ms. Bernhardt?"

"Objection? Relevance?" Denise asked for form, knowing that she would be overruled.

"A little leeway, Your Honor?" Honeycutt asked.

The judge looked at Jill, his lips forming into a tight line. "Very little, Ms. Honeycutt," he answered.

“Ms. Bernhardt... you are single, correct?” Honeycutt sauntered closer, a predatory look in her eyes. She came up next to the witness stand and merely waited.

“Yes.” Jill tried to sound relaxed. Inside she was worried about her reputation... her career. Thoughts of Claire and the boys also plagued her but she ruthlessly shoved them aside. She couldn’t think about any of those things now.

“How many men have you dated in the last month, Ms. Bernhardt?”

“Objection!” Denise said with a little more volume. “Your Honor...”

He held up his hand. “Tread very carefully here, Counselor,” he told Honeycutt.

“Of course, Your Honor.” Honeycutt looked back at Jill. “How many men?”

Jill kept her eyes on Honeycutt’s, not allowing herself to flinch. “Twelve.”

“Twelve?” Honeycutt clearly savored the ripple of conversation that spread out over the courtroom from Jill’s reply. “You get around.”

“Objection!” This time Denise got to her feet.

Honeycutt opened her mouth to respond then snapped it closed abruptly when she heard a voice from the gallery.

“She’s a fine one to talk.”

Everyone in the court looked at the redheaded reporter in the front row. Cindy blinked back at them all blankly. “I’m sorry. Did I say that out loud?” Her gaze went to Jill’s puzzled features before sliding off to Honeycutt’s angry glare. “Please... keep going.”

“Ms. Thomas,” the judge drawled. “Please keep your comments to yourself.”

“Yes, sir,” Cindy replied innocently.

“I wouldn’t want to have to hold you in contempt of court,” he continued.

“No, Your Honor.” Cindy looked at Jill again.

Jill’s eyes widened marginally but she tried to keep her sudden suspicions about what Cindy might be planning off her features. Inside, however, she wanted to warn Cindy off, to not do something so stupid... and she wanted to give her the biggest damn hug around for being a friend Jill really didn’t feel like she deserved at the moment. Jill looked at Honeycutt when the attorney returned her focus to her. “Twelve,” Jill said again with more conviction. “Do you want details?”

“Not necessary,” Honeycutt replied before shooting a quick look over her shoulder at Cindy who was nervously tapping her feet on the floor. “How many the month before that?”

“How far back are we going to go?” Jill asked. “It would be embarrassing to lose count.”

The jury laughed again.

Honeycutt didn't seem to mind. “You like sex, Ms. Bernhardt. It's not a secret, is it?”

Jill looked at Denise who just pursed her lips. “Is that a crime?” Jill asked simply.

“If it is then the defense attorney should be doing time.”

All heads swiveled again to look at Cindy while Jill just covered her eyes on the stand. The reporter glanced up from where she was doodling in her notebook as the judge started banging his gavel. “What?” She looked about innocently.

“Your Honor,” Honeycutt said over the sudden loud murmur of voices. Her face was flushed and her eyes glittering. “I request Ms. Thomas be removed from the courtroom.”

“What?” Cindy said again. “I'm just saying... at least the Deputy District Attorney doesn't pay for it like you do. I mean... the receipts I came across...” She held her hands up, indicating a very tall stack of paper.

The courtroom erupted into laughter and angry shouts as Honeycutt came toward the gate separating her from the gallery. Cindy hopped to her feet just as the bailiff and another guard came at her. She looked at Jill who still had her eyes covered and the reporter couldn't help but smirk. Especially when the bailiff had to restrain Honeycutt from getting to her.

“What?” Cindy asked for a third time. “It's the truth. You can read about it in the Register tomorrow. Police are shutting down the high-end escort service you use, probably as we speak.” The reporter thought Honeycutt's eyes were going to bulge out of her head. “Care to comment, Ms. Honeycutt?”

“That's it, Ms. Thomas. You're in contempt of court,” Judge Merriman shouted. “You're hereby fined \$1,000 and you can stay in a holding cell until someone bails you out.” Cindy let them cuff her without argument. As she was led from the courtroom Jill finally raised her head and looked at her. Her blue eyes were full of laughter but her face clearly telegraphed how unhappy she was with Cindy's antics. The reporter shrugged just before she was led out the door.

“Order!” The judge hammered his gavel again. “Order!”

“Good luck with that,” Jill murmured under her breath.

There were three people in the courtroom that didn't find the events of the last few minutes funny. The defense attorney, the defendant, and one person who was watching the proceedings and thinking someone needed his help to be saved.

Act IV

There was a slight nip to the ocean air that caused Lindsay to pull her leather jacket in tighter around her body. Rain clouds were moving in overhead as she made her way from her parked SUV down to the picnic bench on the beach below. Claire was sitting there alone, looking out at the wind and water making their way through San Francisco Bay.

Lindsay took a moment just to watch her, her heart aching for her friend. Claire was the portrait of loneliness, and Lindsay knew from experience that nothing she said or did to help her was going to change that deep down. Some things you had to weather alone. This was one of them.

But knowing that there was someone there waiting, always, it made the difference. “Hey,” she called out as she plowed through the sand in boots definitely not made for walking in the shifting terrain.

Claire looked up and smiled at her windblown friend. “Hey. Sorry to drag you out on a windy day.”

“What else do I have to do?” Lindsay joked as she straddled the bench next to Claire.

“Catch a killer, maybe?”

Lindsay shrugged. “Lots of killers out there. Only one you.” She smiled.

“That was incredibly sappy,” Claire replied with a tired grin.

“Give me points for trying.” Lindsay sighed and grew more serious. “Where have you been?”

“Promise not to get mad at him?”

“You went to my partner?” Lindsay guessed as she clutched her chest as if wounded. “Ow!” She felt a flicker of satisfaction when Claire laughed at her antics.

“I needed someone objective to talk to.”

“I can be objective,” Lindsay scoffed.

“Right, skipper. You’re doing such a wonderful job of that with Cindy.” Claire smiled again as Lindsay scowled. “You two talked, yet?”

“Sorta.” Lindsay looked out at the choppy waves, breathing in the scent of sand and water. “We agreed that we still care and that we’re gonna yell some more later.”

Claire chuckled wearily. “You two are something else.”

Lindsay rather liked that thought. “So what’s up with you leaving, Claire? You don’t walk away from anything.”

Claire sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. “Am I walking away? Or am I saving myself?”

Lindsay gave that some serious thought. “It’s just... I don’t want you to have my regrets...”

“You and Tom you mean?”

Lindsay nodded. Her finger began to trace designs in the wood on the bench. “Even though you and Ed are nothing like me and Tom. Even at your weakest you’re stronger than we ever were.”

Claire’s breath caught. “Lindsay... that’s not true.”

“Yes it is, Claire.” Lindsay held her friend’s gaze. “Do you still love him?” The tears that sprang to Claire’s eyes were answer enough. “Then don’t walk away from this, from him. I know what’s happening right now... I know you feel like you can’t reach him...”

“I can’t. I’ve tried and tried.” Claire took a shuddering breath and watched Lindsay react to the sound. It was hurting her friend to see her like this. Claire reached out and found Lindsay’s hand, trying to console them both. “And I won’t let him take me from my friends. I need you. All of you.”

Lindsay smiled through her tears. “We need you, too, but you already knew that.” Her grin widened as Claire laughed. “Me, Cindy, and Jill can’t find our way out of an emotional paper bag without you.” Her fingers tilted Claire’s chin up, encouraging her to look at her. “We don’t want you to go, Claire, and we’ll fight tooth and nail to keep you here. But don’t turn Ed loose. Not just yet.”

“Why are you championing him?” Claire wanted to know.

Lindsay swallowed. “Because... at one point... I was Ed.”

Claire went still. “Lindsay...”

“I was... broken... by the Kiss-Me-Not case. I pushed Tom away. I was hurting... obsessed... distant. I was wrapped up in my own little world. And when I finally came up for air I’d damn near lost everything.” Lindsay wiped at her eyes. “I know where he is in his head right now, Claire. He needs you even if he doesn’t realize it. I don’t want this to ruin you both... not when I know you can rise above it. Not when I know how deeply you’ll both regret it if you let go.”

Claire didn’t know what to say. She leaned forward and felt Lindsay’s arms come around her. “I’m just so tired of fighting, Linz,” she sobbed into her friend’s shoulder. “I don’t want to lose him but I’m terrified I already have.”

Lindsay tightened her grip on her friend. “He’s still in there, Claire. Ed is still in there. Just... please. Believe in what you have.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Claire confessed as the wind whipped her hair about her face. “Not anymore.” She looked up at Lindsay beseechingly. “I don’t know if I have any strength left.”

“You’ve got mine,” Lindsay told her. “And Jill’s and Cindy’s... we’re not going to let you fall, Claire. We want to help if you’ll let us.”

“You really think there is still a chance?” Claire felt the first tendril of hope in months swirl inside her.

“I do. I still see the way he looks at you when you’re not watching. He still loves you.”

Lindsay swore softly as her cell phone rang. She unclipped it from her belt and checked the ID. “Sorry,” she told Claire. “I have to take this.” She flipped the phone open. “Are your ears ringing?”

“What?” Tom asked her.

“Nothing. I was just talking about you.” Lindsay enjoyed the shocked silence on the other end of the line a little too much. “What’s up?”

“Where are you?”

“The beach.”

If Tom was upset that she was on the beach while she was on duty he didn’t reveal it in his voice. “I need you to do me a favor.”

“Yeah?” Lindsay glanced at the curiously listening Claire.

“Come get your reporter friend out of my holding cell.”

Tom hung up his cell phone then crossed his arms and looked pointedly at the redhead behind bars.

“That was cold and completely unnecessary,” Cindy grumbled as she rested her wrists between the bars.

“What were you thinking in court today?”

Cindy shrugged. “I was thinking I was making sure the jury was focused on the facts and not Jill’s sex life.”

“That was up to Denise to handle. Not you.”

“And she was doing such a bang up job,” Cindy countered. “I knew I was going to wind up here when I walked in that courtroom this morning, Tom. Nothing you say will make me regret that.”

“And what about Lindsay?” He asked. “You think she’ll make you regret that?”

Cindy looked at the floor. “Probably,” she admitted, her stomach flopping at the thought.

“You’d do anything for them, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Yeah. She would.”

Cindy’s head came up and she took a breath when she saw Jill standing there next to Tom. “Hey,” she said timidly.

Jill winked at Tom. “I got this one.”

“She’s all yours,” he said gratefully. He glanced back at Cindy one more time then shook his head.

“He thinks I’m nuts,” Cindy commented needlessly when Tom was gone.

“He would be right,” Jill countered. She stepped closer and wrapped her hands around the bars. “What were you thinking in there?” Her voice was stern but held a note of wonder to it.

Cindy shrugged. “I was just supposed to sit there and watch as she ruined your name to get that sleazeball off? No way.”

“Cindy, this is serious. There was almost a mistrial.”

Cindy sighed. “It’s not like I was lying, you know. She does pay for it.”

Jill closed her eyes and turned her head so Cindy wouldn’t see the beginnings of a smile gracing her features. “You are such an idiot,” she said when she finally had her amusement under control. “I thought Honeycutt was going to come over the rail at you.”

Cindy smiled hesitantly. “I think she would have if that bailiff hadn’t grabbed her around the waist.” She paused, remembering. “That was a very undignified squawk she made, too.”

A snort of laughter escaped the attorney and Cindy looked up at her, her smile broadening. “I know it was stupid and irresponsible and that judge is never gonna let me near another one of his trials... I just... I had to do something...”

“To get back in my good graces?” Jill guessed.

“No,” Cindy said more seriously. “That didn’t matter. I...” Cindy took a breath. “I love you. You’re like a sister to me. There was no way I was going to sit there and let that woman ruin you when I could stop it.”

Jill looked at her through the bars, tears filling her blue eyes. “Do you understand that goes both ways?” She let her hands slide down to rest on Cindy’s. “Do you understand why I got mad at you for risking your life last week? We almost lost you a few months ago. I watched you laying there... bleeding on the steps... and I...” Jill swallowed. She couldn’t look at Cindy’s suddenly serious features. “What happened at the school brought that all back.”

“I got shot doing my job,” Cindy said softly. “I could have been someone walking by on the street just as easily.”

Jill looked at the reporter, noting the dark circles under her eyes that she hadn’t wanted to see until now. She suddenly wondered what effect the school shooting had to have on Cindy’s psyche and made a mental note to start paying closer attention to her. “I know that. But you willingly put yourself in the situation to have it happen again.”

“I was trying to save a child. This guy came out of nowhere and grabbed me from behind. I wasn’t after the story, Jill.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jill admitted.

Cindy felt her heart freefall. “It doesn’t?”

“No.” Jill took a breath and looked up at her. “I can’t stay mad at you regardless.”

Cindy blinked. “You’re...”

“Forgiving you. Yeah.” She squeezed the hands under hers. “And I’m sorry for being so distant. The whole thing just brought up some very unpleasant memories.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Cindy said quietly, feeling relief so profound her legs shook. “I didn’t mean to get myself in trouble... again.”

“You’re a magnet for it, I swear,” Jill muttered. They smiled hesitantly at one another.

“So what happened in court?” Cindy asked after a quiet moment.

“Well, Honeycutt didn’t want to start over. She thinks her best bet is still with this jury.”

“And?”

“And she dropped the line of questioning for me. I essentially got dismissed right after they hauled you off in cuffs.”

Cindy’s grin took on a satisfied smirk.

“No. Don’t smile. You were a bad reporter,” Jill tried to chastise her but her humor crept into her voice.

“So we heard,” Claire’s voice drifted to them.

Jill turned around to find Claire and Lindsay standing there. She sighed in relief. “There you are. Where in the hell have you been?” She crossed to Claire and threw her arms around the older woman, hugging her hard.

Claire closed her eyes and hugged her back.

“She went to Jacobi. Over us,” Lindsay grumbled with playful disgust. Her dark eyes zeroed in on Cindy, drinking in the sight of her. The reporter gave her a hesitant wave and a dip of the head. She looked tired but oddly proud of herself given her current predicament.

“I needed to think,” Claire explained as she turned Jill loose. “Decide what I’m going to do.”

“And Jacobi helped you with that?” Jill asked skeptically.

“No. Lindsay did,” Claire said.

All eyes focused on the inspector who blinked and looked at Claire in surprise. “I did?”

“Mmhm.” Claire threaded her arm through Lindsay’s. “You did.” She turned and focused her gaze on Cindy before shaking her head. “Girl...”

Cindy had the grace to look abashed. “Aw, c’mon. Like Honeycutt didn’t have it coming.”

“That’s not the point, young lady.” Claire admonished. “You made a mockery of the legal system today.”

“But...” Cindy looked away from Lindsay who was still watching her without saying a word. She turned her gaze on Jill. “But...”

“What she said,” Jill replied with a nod of her head at Claire.

“You made a mockery of the justice system and got yourself thrown out of court and tossed in here,” Claire continued.

Cindy narrowed her eyes with suspicion, a tiny smile starting to form. “And you’re pissed because you weren’t there to see it.”

“Damn right,” Claire agreed. She walked up to the bars and reached in to cup Cindy’s face with her palms. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“Which part? Get thrown out of court or do it when you’re not there to see it?”

Claire chuckled, savoring this moment of what passed for normalcy in her life. “I would have loved to see the look on Honeycutt’s face...”

“It was pretty spectacular,” Jill had to admit. “Even Denise was impressed.”

Cindy smiled as her gaze slid back to Lindsay. The inspector was still watching her silently, no visual cues on her face as to how she felt about the situation.

Jill and Claire noticed the two women staring at one another intently. They exchanged knowing looks and smiles.

“Um... let me go start the process to get you out of here,” Jill said to Cindy.

“I’ll go with you,” Claire added. They walked away but not so far that they couldn’t watch what happened from a respectful distance.

“They really don’t have a clue,” Jill muttered as she watched Lindsay finally saunter closer to the bars.

“Not a damn one,” Claire agreed.

Lindsay paused just out of reach of the bars. “You’re going to have to start forwarding your mail here at this rate.”

Cindy felt some of the tension ease from her body. At least Lindsay wasn’t yelling – yet. “The thought crossed my mind.” She wrapped her fingers around the bars. “I’m sorry. I didn’t ask Tom to call you.”

Lindsay studied her in the fluorescent lighting and didn’t like what she saw. Cindy looked exhausted, her normally vibrant eyes tired and rimmed with red. “You okay?”

The question was unexpected and Cindy wasn’t sure how to answer. She swallowed and settled on the truth. “I overdid it today. I could really use a painkiller right about now.” She looked up into Lindsay’s intense eyes as the inspector leaned against the bars and looked down at her. “I’ll live.”

Lindsay took a breath. “That’s all I want, you know.”

Cindy looked at her with confusion.

“For you to live. To be happy. To be safe.” Lindsay studied the floor. “That man would have killed you had I not gotten there in time.”

“I know,” Cindy said quietly. “He would have made me wish I was dead before that,” she confessed. She watched Lindsay swallow hard. “I honestly wasn’t trying to get myself into that mess, Lindsay.”

“I know.” Lindsay had to swallow again. “It’s just... I’m finally...” She took a breath to steady herself, fully aware that Jill and Claire were watching them. “I finally stopped having the nightmare where you’re bleeding on the steps of the courthouse. Now you’ve given me a new one.”

Cindy’s grip tightened on the bars. “Linz...”

Without conscious thought, Lindsay’s left hand came up and reached through the bars, brushing a stray lock of Cindy’s hair away from her features. Lindsay’s knuckles gently grazed the soft skin of Cindy’s cheek before the taller woman realized what she had done and withdrew her hand in confusion.

Jill grabbed Claire’s arm. “Did you see...”

“Hard to miss, sweetie,” Claire replied. “One relationship ends and another begins,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” Jill agreed. “Unless you mean you and Ed, in which case you can just shut up. I’m thinking the muffin man is on his way out.”

Claire put her head down on Jill's shoulder, grateful for her warm and steady presence as they watched their mutual friends finally resolve their differences several feet away.

"I don't want to fight with you anymore," Cindy finally managed to find her voice in the wake of Lindsay's touch. Her body had reacted unmistakably to the caress and she found herself shaking. "I miss you."

Lindsay's hands curled around the bars next to Cindy's. "Promise me. You have to promise me... no more risking your life."

"I..." Cindy shook her head. "I don't want to make promises that I can't keep. Don't ask me that, Linz. I don't ask it of you."

Lindsay sucked down a cold breath. "It's my job..."

"I know. But it doesn't scare me any less to watch you risk your life for it."

They looked at each other.

"I can't believe you did that in court today," Lindsay murmured and a small smile finally shaped her lips.

Cindy shrugged. "Yeah well, that's what she gets for messing with a friend of mine." She hesitated a moment. "Do you mean it? What you said that night at Papa Joe's?"

Lindsay wondered which conversation Cindy was referring to. She shook her head in confusion.

"That you miss me not coming around anymore?" Cindy clarified.

Lindsay snorted. "Don't let it go to your head," she warned her. She was rewarded with Cindy's full smile and she felt her heart stutter in reaction. "Um..." Lindsay stepped back from the bars. "Let me..."

"Get me out of here?" Cindy finished for her. "That would be nice."

Lindsay paused before stepping back up to the bars. "I think I'm still going to have to yell at you at some point. I feel like I should be yelling."

Cindy smiled. "Okay. You can yell at me all you want."

Lindsay grinned helplessly. "Don't go anywhere," she joked.

"Haha," the redhead answered.

"Did you kiss and make up?" Jill asked Lindsay innocently when her friend walked over

to them.

Lindsay glanced back at Cindy and the thought of kissing the girl crossed her mind, unbidden. A sudden flush of heat washed through her body and she looked away, her heart hammering. She snorted and moved past them both. "Let me... I'll just..." She gave up talking since she didn't seem to be capable of it anyway.

Jill and Claire looked at each other and smiled.

It was late when Claire let herself inside the house. There was a light burning in the kitchen so navigating around the furniture was easy. The air cycled off and the house descended into an unnatural quiet as Claire made her way toward the bedroom. The boys were staying with Jacobi tonight, and she spared a moment to be grateful for his friendship in this mess. He knew and cared for them both and this had to be hard on him as well.

She entered the bedroom and felt her heart sink. It was dark and empty. She closed her eyes and leaned against the doorframe.

A tiny squeak made her turn. There, at the end of the hall, was Ed. His chair squeaked softly once more as he rolled another inch closer. Claire's breath caught in her throat when she saw the tears on his face, tears he had yet to cry since losing the use of his legs. He looked at her wordlessly then held out his hand.

Claire didn't remember closing the distance between them, didn't realize she was curling around him in his lap until she smelled his familiar aftershave and the hint of his cologne. His arms came around her and her own tears mingled with his on the stubble of his cheek.

"Help me," he whispered.

Claire simply held him tighter.

FADE TO BLACK



Sins of the father,
Sins of the daughter

Sins of the Father, Sins of the Daughter
by Riley LaShea

TEASER

When engaging in wayward activity, likely to result in some form of serious trouble, it's best to do it with very little fear and as few witnesses as possible. Understanding this better than the general population, Cindy found herself, yet again, one of the few people who had bowed out of the celebratory luncheon thrown by the paper's top execs in honor of their recent EPpy.

The clicks and subdued grumbles coming from the office of her boss served as an unfortunate reminder that there was at least one person at the paper who might be more diligent than she was. But that was hardly grounds for surrender. Cindy was quite accomplished at getting away with subversive behavior under the noses of people whose jobs it was to catch her at it and reprimand her accordingly. She also knew the man in question well enough to trust he was much more interested in ensuring the paper was put to bed with a warm glass of milk and pleasant bedtime story than anything she might have stayed behind to do in the absence of her co-workers.

"Okay. Here they are," her always willing partner-in-crime whispered over his shoulder.

Cindy grasped, with barely controlled anticipation, for the mouse in his hand, pouting as it glided out of her reach just before she made contact.

"You know I'm not supposed to do this right?" Danny reminded her. The delivery was deceptively stern, but his blue eyes regarded her with unmistakable amusement.

"Yeah Danny," she nodded quickly. "I'm well-versed in the rules. You have to know them pretty well to break them as regularly as I do."

"Then why do you always ask me to do it?"

"Why'd you stay behind when you could be dining on prime rib and lobster to celebrate your contribution to The San Francisco Register's award-winning website?" she lobbed back.

He didn't respond to the question. Just smiled at her with a small shake of his head.

"Because you want to," she answered for him. "It sucks to snap all kinds of good shots at a crime scene, have two pulled for the story, while the rest go off into digital file cabinet limbo, never to be seen or heard from again." Cindy managed to finagle the mouse from his hand. "You've got to show yourself off to someone. And I'm a willing audience."

"Yeah? You think that's why I want to, huh?" he asked.

“I know it is,” she replied, scrolling and clicking through images at a breakneck pace, ever aware of the possibility that the boss might decide to take a mind-clearing stroll through the office.

Danny grunted casually, backing away to lean against the edge of the desk behind her. “You know you’re going to owe me a drink for this, right?”

“Sure,” Cindy agreed without argument.

Several crime scenes. At least two dozen photographs of each. Black and white snapshots that were eye-openers to say the least.

“Do you like darts?”

“Huh,” Cindy returned distractedly, her eyes holding on a blonde in the picture, experiencing a strange sense of déjà vu, though she knew she’d never seen the woman before in real life.

“Darts? Do you like to play?”

“Um...” Cindy scrolled back up, reopening a picture she’d already looked at, instantly realizing why the woman from the photograph four rows down seemed so familiar. “Maybe,” she uttered, eyes moving back and forth between the images.

Leaving the pictures open, Cindy returned to the thumbnails, opening and closing until she found the woman again. In another photograph. At another crime scene. Jumping between the shots several times, she determined she was actually seeing what she thought she was seeing.

“I’ve got a great technique. I’d love to show you.”

“That sounds good,” Cindy responded distractedly.

On a mission, she moved through the entire folder, sitting back in disbelief once she’d uncovered comparable images from every crime scene. She wrote down the slide numbers, and turned to find Danny behind her, with a grin that seemed somehow out of place in their current surroundings.

“Could you print these for me?” she asked.

Caught off guard by the request, Danny’s smile faded as he took the list, glancing in the direction of the boss’ office. Cindy could practically see a scale in his head weighing the consequences.

“Yeah, sure,” he finally conceded.

Closing all evidence of their transgressions on her computer, Cindy followed Danny to his. At the sound of the photo printer humming to life on his desk, Danny’s eyes darted around the room, and he plucked each photo off the printer as quickly as it finished.

“Thanks,” Cindy said as Danny turned and handed the lot to her. “I owe you a drink.”

“I think you owe me a whole dinner now,” he said with an uneasy laugh.

“Deal,” Cindy agreed, taking the prints from his hand with a smile before heading to her desk.

Even the most expensive meal in San Francisco would be well worth it. How often did a few photographs blow a huge, ongoing case wide open?

ACT I

Lindsay smoothed her fingers across her eyelids, trying in vain to rub away the massive throbbing behind them.

No new bodies in three weeks should have been a blessing. But considering Dellan was held for three weeks, beaten a little everyday and left to suffer the injuries, it wasn't exactly cause for celebration. It was possible that Hallelujah Man – because apparently every serial killer in her career had to have a pet name – hadn't struck again, or it was possible that he already had someone and was slowly torturing them. Even if Dellan may have deserved everything he had gotten, and that really wasn't her place to say, there was no way of knowing if the next victim would be more Dellan or more Blake. And maybe it shouldn't make a difference. Either way, it was her job to find the killer.

He wasn't going to stop. Not on his own. For that to happen, there would have to be guilt, and it was difficult to feel guilty and justified at the same time. Those words he left behind, the Bible verses so carefully selected and tailored to each crime, those were his justification. Remorse was too much to hope for.

So, apparently, was a decent piece of evidence.

Grateful as she was that the fibers found with Blake and Martin provided the physical evidence needed to force Tom to pull his head out of his ass and admit that they were dealing with another serial killer, they did very little to help solve the crimes. In fact, they seemed so much more hindrance than help that she almost wished they hadn't found them at all. Then Tom could go back to living in his little fantasy world where there were acceptable hiatuses between serial killers, and she could pretend that she'd been wrong all along, and the Biblical associations with the three deaths were just a disturbing coincidence.

The silk fibers possessed no distinguishing properties at all besides the color, which, worse than being common, was virtually non-existent.

Tyrian purple. First harvested by the ancient Phoenicians from mucous secretions of sea snails, exploited for the aesthetic pleasure of royalty and the incredibly wealthy, with a value several times that of gold. Useless information stuck in Lindsay's head due solely to the fact that Cindy was so fascinated by the historical significance, and remarkable exclusivity, of the dye.

Lindsay would love to have shared in her excitement, but when the stakes were this high, it was kind of difficult to appreciate the puzzle. She would rather someone just tell her the solution.

Though still sporadically produced, Tyrian purple was hardly used in modern times. Certainly not in anything average or everyday. No silk shirts, scarves, sheets. Nothing common or readily available. So what incredibly expensive item those threads came from, and what in the hell it was doing in San Francisco, was anybody's guess.

"Linz, you still with us?" Jill asked quietly.

Lindsay looked up, meeting a worried gaze. Turning toward Claire in an effort to avoid the look, she wasn't all that surprised to find that Claire's expression wasn't any different.

"Yeah," she answered. "So, Jacobi and I have a few new leads."

"That's good," Claire said at once.

"We're going to check them out," Lindsay told them, nodding distractedly, pausing to chew her lower lip for a half a second. "So, I might not be able to make dinner."

"No," Claire's firm response verified Lindsay's fear that she wouldn't get out of the morgue without a debate.

"Claire, I have to work."

"You've been working. For weeks. We all have." Seeing Lindsay preparing to interrupt, Claire raised a finger to her. "We planned this. Everyone agreed. We are doing dinner. It will not kill you to take a few hours."

"Yeah, well, it might kill someone else," Lindsay mumbled, wrapping her arms around herself, trying to fight the sudden chill creeping over her.

"Do you really believe that you are going to solve this case tonight?" Claire asked.

Lindsay sighed. Of course they weren't going to solve the case tonight, especially with the laughably bad intel they had. But at least she would feel like she was doing something. She couldn't just sit around and wait for another clue, knowing that it would come attached to a fourth dead body.

"You really should take a night off, Linz," Jill took Claire's side. "You never know when a plague might come along and wipe out your entire office, and you'll be forced into the kind of schedule you're keeping. It could be oozing down the elevator shaft as we speak."

"How many people are out now?" Claire asked.

“How many people are out?” Jill countered, voice and eyebrow rising in unison. “There are only four of us left, two clerks, me, and, as my fabulous luck would have it, Denise.”

“That virus is supposed to be seriously unpleasant,” Claire made a face. “You’re lucky you escaped it.”

“Since I’m the only person with a law degree left in an office with Denise, I think I’d prefer vomiting up my organs.”

Lindsay snorted quietly. “You’d want to throw up every time you threw up.”

Jill tossed Lindsay a playful glare, so normal it seemed abnormal in their current reality.

“Well, I feel fine.”

“You’d better,” Claire uttered, leaving zero room for argument. “Because we ARE having dinner. No excuses. It’s going down.”

“Are we scheduled for a rumble I don’t know about?” Cindy came through the door, her gaze meeting Lindsay’s at a distance. A single soft smile and the pounding in Lindsay’s head eased to a dull thud, the insistent chill gradually dissipating. Something else she couldn’t quite deal with at the moment, she chalked it up to coincidence.

“There will only be a rumble if I get stood up tonight,” Claire answered her.

Lindsay reluctantly pulled her eyes from Cindy to meet Claire’s unyielding expression.

“Understood. We’re going to dinner,” she conceded, stopping short of grabbing the lab report beside her and making it her white flag. “Which means I should probably get back to work.”

“Actually,” Cindy cut in as Lindsay pushed up from the counter. “I have something for you.”

“A lead?” Lindsay asked hopefully

“Yeah. It’s…”

“Thank God,” Lindsay interrupted, drifting in Cindy’s direction. “What is it?”

“It’s not about HM, Linz,” Cindy quickly informed her, though, as she watched Lindsay’s face fall, she desperately wished that she had something that could help Lindsay find the religious freak and bring him in. “It’s about the arsons in Potrero Hill.”

Tugging the photos free of her bag, Cindy nodded toward Claire’s office, heading in that direction, realizing after a few steps that she wasn’t being followed.

“That’s not my case. No one has died in them,” Lindsay stated.

Somewhat slighted, and somewhat irritated, Cindy turned back and tried to remember who it was she was dealing with.

“Well it is my story, so could I get five minutes?” she gently requested. “Please?”

Shame hitting her like a battering ram to the esophagus, Lindsay took a steadying breath and looked Cindy in the eye. “Yes. Of course you can,” she murmured. “I’m sorry.”

Jill and Claire watched as they disappeared into Claire’s office, then, through mutual, unspoken agreement, Claire stripped off her gloves and they went in pursuit.

Cindy spread the 8x10s over Claire’s desk with care, ensuring the important parts were visible.

“What am I looking at?” Lindsay said softly, positioning herself behind Cindy, and gazing over her shoulder.

“These are photos from all nine fires,” Cindy’s voice came out an abnormal rasp, and she paused to clear her throat, “that are attributed to the Potrero arsonist.”

Lindsay nodded her understanding, though Cindy couldn’t see it. Distracted by a scent she couldn’t identify, it took her a moment to process the common object in the photos.

“Who is this woman?” Lindsay questioned, hand brushing Cindy’s hip as she leaned in to point.

Flanking the desk across from them, but seemingly unseen, Jill and Claire exchanged a look.

“I don’t know,” Cindy responded, trying to keep her voice steady. “But I do know she’s not a cop, a firefighter or any other city employee, and she’s been at every crime scene.”

“Where did you get these?” Lindsay husked close enough to Cindy’s ear that goose bumps broke out down her neck.

“Staff photographer,” Cindy answered, sliding out from in front of Lindsay. She escaped the imposing presence and turned to rest on the edge of Claire’s desk.

“And no one noticed before now?” Lindsay asked.

“When a story is going to press, there is a limited amount of time,” Cindy explained, looking up at her, slightly light-headed. “The editor chooses the photos for the article and the rest are filed in Never Never Land. But they reassigned the story to me, and I figured out a while ago that the editors rarely remember what they chose. If you make friends with the photographers, you can usually make a substitution and no one is any the wiser.”

“So you went back through all the old photos,” Lindsay deduced.

“Of course,” Cindy responded.

Jill and Claire chuckled, and Cindy spun around to grin at them. Turning back to Lindsay, she was more than surprised to see the light smile on her face too.

“Couldn’t you get fired for that?” Lindsay wondered aloud.

“Better fired for quality than commended for tripe,” Cindy shrugged.

“That’s my girl,” Lindsay shook her head, returning her attention to the evidence. Only the ensuing silence made her realize how it might have sounded to everyone else in the room. Incredibly grateful when her phone buzzed on her hip, Lindsay reached for it, grimacing slightly when she glanced down at the text.

“Jacobi’s been waiting for me for twenty minutes.”

“Sorry,” Cindy cringed. “I know it’s not your case, but I thought maybe you could, you know, pass it along. Maybe they can stop the fires.”

“Sure,” Lindsay agreed, gathering up the copies. “I can keep these?”

“Yeah. But when you finish with them, just…” Cindy made a ripping motion. “Get rid of them. They don’t exist.”

“The usual then,” Lindsay smiled. The urge to stay warring with the overwhelming need to make something – anything – happen with the Dellan, Blake and Martin cases, she slowly started away. “I’ll see you tonight,” she promised, getting as far as the doorway before her conscience got the better of her and she eased back around. “Thanks for the tip.”

“That’s what I do,” Cindy shrugged.

Lindsay actually laughed lightly as she took her leave. Watching the place where she’d been long after she was gone, Cindy finally turned to Jill and Claire, both of whom were staring so intently at her it was as if they’d been taking lessons in laser vision from Lindsay.

“What?” she asked, fidgeting under their probing stares.

“Nothing,” Jill shook her head. “Awesome work, Nancy Drew. I should probably get back to work too. Denise is expecting the work of ten Jills.”

She was already halfway out the door. She could have pretended she didn’t hear the question and left Claire to fend it herself, but the vulnerability in Cindy’s voice drew Jill to a halt.

“Is this how it started before?”

As Jill turned back, Claire’s desperate eyes swung her way, and Cindy looked back and forth between them as if they were trying to hide something from her.

“Come on you guys,” she pleaded. “Is it?”

Feeling a responsibility to make Cindy less worried, Jill stepped back into the room.

“This isn’t Kiss-Me-Not, Cindy. Things will be different this time.”

“Will they?” Cindy questioned. “I have barely seen Lindsay in like two weeks. I’ve hardly seen any of you. We haven’t been hanging out. We’ve had hardly any club meetings.”

“It’s not a club,” Claire said, cracking a grin when Jill’s voice harmonized perfectly.

“It just…” Cindy uttered weakly. “It feels like she’s pulling away.”

“She’s not pulling away from you.” The words were out of Jill’s mouth before she had a chance to censor them, though part of her was glad it was out in the open.

“She isn’t?” Cindy begged reassurance, her fear at the thought as blatant as she wore all of her emotions.

“No,” Jill said simply. From what she’d witnessed, when Cindy was in the room, Lindsay’s rule of thumb was less about creating distance and more about eliminating it. But it really wasn’t her place to share that.

Claire shook her head in silent agreement. The unanimous assurance seemed to work as Cindy tentatively nodded.

Feeling as if she’d just won a big case, with all the relief and exhaustion that went with it, Jill tilted her head toward the door. “Gotta go,” she declared. “Don’t forget dinner. Apparently there are no excuses.”

Blue and purple are not the same color. That had never bothered Lindsay before, but she’d never before had to waste half an hour of her life trying to explain the fact to Tom. When he wanted to know why she and Jacobi had left to look at choir robes and didn’t bring one back to test against the fibers, Lindsay actually thought the answer really was that simple. The robes were blue, and blue and purple are not the same color. Apparently, Tom thought it needed thirty minutes of repetitive explanation.

What had he expected? Did he really think that they would find a robe dyed with a substance several times the worth of gold in a high school in Oakland? They would be getting along better if they could both just admit that, right now, her job was more about collecting a paycheck than solving actual crimes. She would chase unlikely leads, she would even stoop to listening to the tip line, but she couldn’t make impossible connections just to appease him.

As much as she wanted to find Hallelujah Man and get him off the streets, the conversation with Tom was so exasperating, she was actually glad she had somewhere to go outside of work. It was only when she stopped at her desk to grab her jacket and keys that she remembered the photos. Figuring it would take only a minute to drop them with the lead officer, Lindsay snatched them up, and headed down the hall.

The department was busy, but not busy enough to justify waiting five minutes with no acknowledgment. Annoyed, she approached the nearest desk.

“Hey. Is your Lieutenant in?”

Barely looking up at her, the guy didn’t bother to return her greeting.

“Nope,” he said shortly, looking back down.

“Well, could you tell me who’s investigating the Potrero arsons?” she requested.

The guy looked up at her again, hesitating, and glanced away for a moment before focusing back on her, humorlessly.

“Clifford and Bryan,” he answered.

Lindsay would have thanked him if it felt anything like she was being assisted. Instead, she got the distinct feeling she was being brushed off. Turning to scan the room for Clifford and Bryan’s nameplates, she saw two men already coming forward to meet with her. Clifford and Bryan, she assumed, though she didn’t know who was who.

“I’ve got something for you,” she informed them, holding the photos out in offering.

“Yeah? What?” either Clifford or Bryan, whichever one it was, asked, leaving the photographs dangling in Lindsay’s hand.

“They’re pictures from your crime scenes,” she responded.

“We have pictures from the crime scenes,” Clifford or Bryan returned, crossing his arms across his broad chest.

“You don’t have these ones,” Lindsay explained.

“And what’s so special about those?”

Trying not to roll her eyes, and wondering if the other guy ever spoke, Lindsay brandished the photos again to no avail. “Look at them,” she said.

Neither Clifford nor Bryan took them, and a growing sense of discomfort twinged at the back of her mind.

“What are you doing here?” the arm-crossed spokesman for the duo asked her.

“Passing along evidence about your case,” she stated plainly. “I would hope you would do the same for me.”

“Not all of us have a need to one-up everyone else on the force.”

It shouldn't have, but the clipped reply surprised her. There was some departmental rivalry, but what exactly she'd done to piss off the entire property crimes division, she wasn't sure.

“I have information pertinent to your case. I would think you'd be grateful for it.”

“Where'd it come from?”

Lindsay felt challenged, and she combated the desire to just turn around and leave.

“A source,” she answered him smoothly.

“Seems like you have a lot of sources none of the rest of us have access to.” It seemed an accusation. “The Potrero... that's Bucci territory isn't it? Aren't they friends of your family? Dominic Bucci and your old man, they were tight weren't they?”

Heart constricting at the unexpected mention of her father, Lindsay set her jaw tight against remembered sorrow.

“Guess they wouldn't want to see their livelihood going up in flames. Did they promise you a few thousand if you could keep them in business?”

If it hadn't been such a long day, she might have stayed and taken the abuse, but she was far too tired and overwhelmed to deal with their crap.

“You know what,” Lindsay said, not caring if it was giving up. “Use it, don't use it. It really doesn't matter to me. But since you have brought in a dozen men in a row for questioning, I'm guessing you don't have the slightest idea what you're looking for.”

“We're good,” the spokesman declared, refusing the offered items with resounding finality.

“They'll be at my desk if you need them,” Lindsay forfeited, walking off.

“I try to keep my distance from dirty cops' kids.”

It was an arrow in her back, but she pretended it didn't sting as she walked out of the room to the sound of laughter. Halfway down the hall, she was pummeled by the fact that the anger wasn't strong enough to keep the pain at bay. She hadn't thought about that part of her father's past in recent months. After his death, any indiscretions in his life really didn't seem all that important.

Refusing them the satisfaction of reducing her to tears, she stalked down the hall to her desk, throwing the photos in a drawer. Whether or not they solved their case really wasn't her problem.

Logically, Jill knew that Denise was going to be pissed. Realistically, she also knew that it would be easier to deal with her anger after the fact than get permission beforehand. That in mind, Jill peered out her office door before stepping into the hallway and rushing to the restroom.

Preoccupied with making sure Denise was nowhere in the vicinity, it wasn't until the door closed that she heard the telltale signs of someone vomiting. Just what she wanted to witness before going to eat.

"How are you doing?" the woman on her knees paused in throwing up long enough to ask the woman holding her hair back.

"I think I'm getting it too," the standing woman responded.

Jill looked to the door, debating whether to run to the bathroom upstairs.

"How is it only Denise and Jill have avoided this?" the woman on the floor's voice echoed in the toilet.

"Denise isn't human." The assessment might have made Jill chuckle if the follow-up didn't completely dampen her humor. "And from what I've heard about Bernhardt, she's probably taking a cocktail of antibiotics for STDs that could keep anything away."

Part of her still wanted to slip back out, silently, and act as if she hadn't heard. Then there was the part that was above these people in rank and wanted to see them squirm.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to believe everything you hear," she called out to them.

"Ms. Bernhardt," the standing woman glanced back, though it must have upset the other clerk more, who promptly threw up again.

"Formalities now? Really?" Jill inquired. "If you're sick, you should go home."

Too proud to flee, she went into a stall, trying to ignore the sound, smell, and bad will from a few stalls down. Emerging a minute later, the two women were waiting for her by the sinks, one barely standing. They watched her wash her hands, looking anxious to say something to fix it, and even more anxious to keep their mouths shut.

"I'll tell Denise you're leaving," Jill told them, grabbing a paper towel and not waiting for a reply. Whatever they had to say, she was ninety percent certain that she didn't want to hear it.

Despite her act that she couldn't wait to get to Denise's office and report, she'd actually intended the conversation to take place when she returned from meeting Lindsay, Cindy, and Claire for dinner. As her misfortune would have it, though, Denise was standing in the hall, just outside her office, as Jill turned the corner. Feeling suddenly caged, Jill slowed automatically, trying not to glance around for the nearest escape route.

"I think we've just lost what was left of the team. There's some definite illness happening in the ladies' room," she conveyed.

"Better them than you," Denise hurriedly stated, indifferent to the update. "I need you to prep witnesses tomorrow."

"For what?"

"The Dobbs Trial."

"That's not my case."

"But the trial starts Wednesday, and who knows when Allen will be up to coming back to work. Life goes on. People continue to break the law, forcing us to prosecute, despite the state of the D.A.'s office," Denise declared with little emotion. "Unless, of course, you're too busy with whatever else it is you're working on."

Jill had known this was coming. She was actually surprised it had taken this long to get there.

"You said that it was fine for me to integrate Hallelujah Man into my caseload. We know now that it's a serial killer and that does still make it a priority," she reminded Denise, not fully thinking it through before adding, "You didn't change that, right?"

Denise leveled her with a stare and Jill almost wished she could take the words back.

"It is a priority," Denise acknowledged, "if there is a case to prosecute. You don't even have a suspect. The Dobbs case is solid, if our witnesses don't drop the ball. You have plenty of time before you need to think about your serial killer."

"Depends if you mean time before we go to trial or time before he murders someone else."

"Stopping him from murdering someone isn't your job, Jill," Denise stated, launching into attorney mode. "You are so intent on helping your friends catch these guys. What does it get you? It seems like every time Inspector Boxer asks for your help, you're almost killed, which would be a lot of paperwork for me. Maybe you should consider what kind of friends ask you to risk your job and your life on a weekly basis."

"They don't have to ask," Jill responded immediately. "And, you know, since they don't get smashed and expose my private life in public, I guess I should really be grateful."

She'd gone too far. The look on Denise's face was testament to that fact. In the quiet and uncomfortable aftermath, she should have said something deferential, humbly apologized for her unexpected outburst. It may have been her only hope of still having a job.

Before she could make a completely insincere apology, her phone rang. Guessing who it would be, considering it was well after normal working hours, Jill ignored it in a concerted effort to save her ass, staring at Denise and waiting for whatever the queen of torture might inflict on her.

"Aren't you going to get that?" Denise asked coldly. "Could be about a serial killer. I know how much you hate those."

Well aware that Denise wouldn't quit until she picked up her phone, Jill set her shoulders and stepped into her office, grabbing it on the fourth ring. The display clearly showed Claire's name, but Jill tried for discretion.

"Bernhardt," she answered.

"Formal, but okay," Claire teased. "I tried to call your cell. Where were you?"

"Restroom," Jill answered simply.

"So are you on your way now?"

Feeling Denise's presence inside her office, Jill fought the urge to look over her shoulder.

"I have some things I really need to take care of here," she tried.

"No excuses," Claire reminded her.

"Give me the phone," Cindy's distant voice commanded, there was a scuffle, and Cindy took over. "Jill, we have essential business. We do. Now come drink."

"Listen, I'm going to call you back, okay?"

Hearing the beginnings of a protest, Jill hung up quickly, knowing her friend well enough to hit the DND button before her phone could ring again. Bracing herself as she would for a volatile storm, she turned to face Denise.

"Somewhere you need to be," Denise questioned, far too congenially to be authentic.

"No," Jill shook her head.

Denise stared at her, the goal, Jill was certain, to make her feel as uneasy as possible. She hated that it worked.

"You should go," Denise finally uttered. "It could be important."

The wise thing would have been to say that it wasn't. But pretending that her job was more important to her than her friends was something she wasn't going to feign on Denise's behalf for even a second.

Knowing it might be a very poor move, and feeling kind of like a pawn facing down Denise's all-powerful queen, Jill walked behind her desk and grabbed what she needed. "I'll see you later," she said, slightly troubled when Denise didn't say anything in response, but just nodded slowly as she walked past her out the door.

"I am so fired," Jill moaned, head dropping to her forearm on the tabletop.

"Denise isn't going to fire you," Lindsay tried to assure her.

"Can she fire you?" Cindy asked, far too chipperly in Jill's opinion. "She's just, like, a temp, right?"

Lindsay and Claire laughed at the entirely off-the-mark depiction, but Jill was far less humored.

"Acting D.A. isn't just like a temp," she informed Cindy. "Yes, she can most definitely fire me."

"I can't believe you said all that to her," Lindsay drawled. "Awesome."

"First of all, Linz, you're well beyond tipsy," Jill asserted. "I know this, because you never use the word awesome."

"I do!" Cindy interjected.

"Second," Jill ignored her. "I very likely just cost myself my job, and if I get fired, I will never get another job with the city. Which means I'll have no choice but to become a defense attorney. Which means you'll have to revoke my club membership."

"Is it a club or not?" Cindy turned to Lindsay in clear confusion. "You all say it's not and then you call it that. It's mean and confusing. Especially when I've been drinking."

Laughing, Lindsay leaned toward Cindy, her forehead meeting Cindy's in a gentle bump.

"It's not a club," Claire's voice drew Jill's gaze from the affectionate display. "And that's not true Jill. I don't think they even check references of the janitorial staff."

"Claire!" Jill shrieked.

Cindy and Lindsay looked up dumbfounded, before both bursting into laughter.

"I'm so sorry," Claire said, putting her hand in front of her mouth as if she couldn't believe she'd just spoken that aloud. "That's not my role."

“No, it’s not. You’re supposed to be supportive and motherly, and…” Jill finally broke into laughter. “I can’t believe you said that.”

After a silent moment of companionable drinking, Cindy looked over at Lindsay.

“Did you give those pictures to the detectives working on the arsons?”

“Yeah,” Lindsay said, sobering at the mention.

“And?” Cindy prodded when Lindsay didn’t bother filling in any blanks.

“They didn’t want my help,” Lindsay pushed her drink away, sitting back in the booth. It was a tell that she would never admit to having, but that her friends knew meant she was upset.

“What did they say?” Cindy asked quietly.

“Nothing,” Lindsay returned.

“Lindsay, did they say something to you?” Claire joined the interrogation.

One look at Jill confirmed that if they didn’t get an answer, she’d voice the next inquiry. Grabbing her glass, Lindsay refused to let it get to her again.

“They said I was like my dad… a dirty cop,” she divulged, looking up to meet three pairs of equally pitying eyes and immediately looked away again. “Eventually, they’ll use it, when there’ve been a few more fires, and they still haven’t made an arrest.”

“Linz, I’m sorry,” Cindy whispered.

“It’s not your fault,” Lindsay returned, eyes holding with Cindy’s guilty ones for a moment before sliding away. “Now what in the hell is with this Tyrian purple? They don’t even use it anymore. What is this guy? A king? A time traveler?”

“Can’t we have one night off from this? Please,” Claire pleaded, waving down the waitress as she passed. “Get her another drink.”

“I’m just saying,” Lindsay continued, despite the protest. “It doesn’t make any sense. It’s completely illogical.”

“What about this is logical Linz?” Jill asked. “What about any serial killer is ever logical?”

Lindsay closed her eyes against the question, but it was still there, as effective as if she had mentioned Kiss-Me-Not by name. For a moment, she felt lost beneath the overwhelming responsibility of finding a man who’d left no helpful clues, who would certainly kill again before they had him in custody. Then, she felt Cindy’s hand, warm through the denim of her jeans,

lightly squeeze her thigh, and the feeling somewhat abated. Opening her eyes, Lindsay focused on the glass in her hands, thankful when Cindy's hand stayed where it was, grounding her.

"There was a reason Billy Harris did the things he did," she murmured.

"It didn't make it logical," Jill argued. "It gave it a basis, but what he did with that basis was only logical to him."

"Linz," Cindy softly got her attention, breath catching when Lindsay looked over at her, silently pleading for some kind of answer. "He probably thinks he is being logical. If he believes he's doing what God wants him to do, that's a pretty basic principle of Christian logic."

"I guess it doesn't matter how flawed his logic is," Claire quietly added.

Sadly, both of those things were right. This man thought that he was doing the work God asked of him, but he was wrong. At least no God that she knew would ask for such a sign of faith.

"I just wish..." Lindsay struggled with the admission. "I wish I had some idea."

After a swift, internal debate, Cindy glanced around the table. She wasn't planning to share this, not yet, but Lindsay looked like she needed something, no matter how useless it might be.

"Actually, I did have one thing," she stated.

"You do?" Lindsay asked.

"It's a tiny little nothing," Cindy responded, not wanting Lindsay to get her hopes up. "I wasn't even sure if I was going to tell you. I mean, I don't know if it really even matters."

"Cindy," Lindsay interrupted gently. "What is it?"

"It's possible that there's a pattern to the murders right?" Cindy queried, looking at Lindsay for agreement, and swallowing nervously at just how intently those eyes were already studying her.

"You think there's a pattern?"

"Yeah, maybe. It's..." Cindy hesitated. "Hold on. Let me show you."

Digging in her bag, she found the visual aids she'd created in case she ever decided to tell the rest of the club this, one of her many unsubstantiated theories.

After a moment of watching Cindy search excitedly, and Lindsay wait impatiently with the hope of getting some kind of insight into this psychopath's mind, Claire and Jill shook their heads at each other. There was no denying Lindsay and Cindy really were cut from the same mold.

"Did you know that each of the seven deadly sins has a color associated with it?" Cindy asked, holding a small stack of index cards against her chest, without revealing them.

“No,” Lindsay shook her head.

“Well, they do,” Cindy responded. “Each sin is correlated with a color of the rainbow. Seven sins. Seven colors.” She looked down at the index cards, pulling the first one off the top of the pile. “Wrath, Dellan, the first murder,” she said, laying the card on the table.

Wrath was written in all caps across the card. Beneath, there were details of the murder, including name, location, and the select Bible verse in its entirety. The card was colored red.

“Gluttony, Blake, the second murder,” Cindy said, laying down the card filled with the details of Blake’s murder, which was orange. “And greed. Martin, the most recent murder.” She dropped Martin’s yellow index card beneath Blake’s and looked up expectantly.

It took a moment for the colors to sink in. When they did, Claire looked across the table at Cindy. “They’re in order,” she stated.

“They’re in order so far,” Cindy agreed.

“So, green,” Lindsay deduced, recalling the pneumonic device for the color spectrum. “Envy?”

Cindy laid down the next index card, green with ‘envy’ written in block letters across it. “Green is envy,” she nodded. “I don’t know how that can possibly help. Knowing a pattern isn’t going to make it any easier to catch this guy. It’s just the way my mind works. It’s where I find comfort. But maybe it’s not anything -”

Lindsay’s extraordinarily warm hand gently clutching her forearm ceased the rambling at once.

“It’s more than we had five minutes ago,” Lindsay asserted.

Cindy met her gaze, unflinchingly, until unexpected buzzing drew both of their attention to Jill. Suddenly tense, Jill reached into her bag, pulling out her cell phone with much the same enthusiasm she would hold a severed hand. She didn’t have to tell them. The panicked expression was revelation enough.

“Bernhardt,” she answered, her voice hoarse.

Cindy, Lindsay, and Claire all looked at each other, then all eyes turned to Jill.

“I understand,” Jill said quietly. “Of course. I’ll see you then.”

“Denise wants you back there?” Lindsay asked as Jill hung up.

“No,” Jill informed them. “She’s actually going home for the night. She wants to see me in her office tomorrow morning.” She dropped her phone back down beside her, and her head into her hands. “I am so fired.”

Fearing there wasn't much else she could do for her, because if Denise decided to go on the warpath, there would be no stopping it, Claire reached over to rub soothing circles on Jill's back.

"You're not fired. Relax," Lindsay said, with very little conviction. "It'll be fine."

Wearily, Jill glanced up at Lindsay. "Because Denise is known for being such a forgiving person?"

Waiting for any further words of encouragement, Jill instead got three equally morose expressions. For the amount of optimism about her odds in a room with Denise, she may as well have been already fired.

ACT II

"Happy Halloween," Tom announced to open their morning meeting, "which means we can expect a marked increase in vandalism, theft, and assaults."

"Can you ruin Christmas too?" a voice whispered from somewhere at the back of the room.

Lindsay glanced over at Jacobi, who gave her an amused smirk in return.

"Everybody who doesn't have an active, priority case is in uniform and on the streets tonight. Everybody who does have an active case, you're staying in, but you are on call," Tom instructed, before holding up a file. "We do have one new case. It is a definite priority. The Potrero arsons have been reassigned to homicide."

Lindsay looked up sharply. "Why?" she asked weakly, well aware there was only one possible reason.

"The fire last night was in a tenement on Humboldt. About forty minutes ago, a woman's body was found in one of the rooms," Tom stated the facts of the case with a practiced dispassion. "Probably one of the homeless who couldn't get out."

His account was loudly interrupted by Lindsay kicking the nearest desk, sending it scraping a few inches across the floor. Looking up, Lindsay discovered every eye in the room looking at her as if she was crazy.

"Lindsay?" Tom inquired carefully. "Something wrong?"

Lindsay shook her head, jaw clenching angrily. Tom watched her for a moment, waiting for her to be more forthcoming, though he knew it was too much to ask for, before returning to the task at hand.

"Fong, Cortez..." he started.

“Jacobi and I will take it,” Lindsay interrupted again.

Staring across the room at her, Tom weighed whether or not to just hand Lindsay the file and let her get whatever was going on with her out of her system without him.

“Okay, that’s it,” he said finally. “Everyone’s dismissed. Lindsay, Jacobi, upstairs in my office.”

Jacobi lifted his eyebrow to her in silent question, and Lindsay returned what she hoped was a reassuring look as they followed Tom up the stairs and into his office. Highly anticipating a long-winded tirade about how not to talk to him in front of the rest of the squad, Lindsay was rather surprised when Tom just studied her.

“What’s wrong Linz?”

She could tell the truth. If she disclosed what happened, there would be some serious hell to pay, none of it hers. Clifford and Bryan would get their asses handed to them for refusing evidence that might have solved their case before someone died. They might even lose their jobs. There was some sort of poetic justice in that.

“Nothin’,” Lindsay shook her head, aware that the room knew she was lying.

“Don’t you think you have your hands full right now?” Tom questioned carefully.

“I have a big lead on this case,” Lindsay informed him.

Tom’s eyes narrowed as he leaned forward on the edge of his desk. “What kind of lead?”

“You’re just going to have to trust me, Tom,” Lindsay responded, defensively. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You had a lead on this case and you didn’t give it to the investigating officers?” Tom demanded.

Lindsay looked away. She wasn’t going to go out of her way to get anyone into trouble, but, considering the interaction they’d had, she wasn’t going to lie to protect them either. Regardless, her refusal to answer was more than enough for Tom to reach the correct conclusion.

“They wouldn’t take the lead from you?” he heatedly asked, the anger less on her behalf than on behalf of the woman who died as a result of the petty decision.

“Tom, can we just move forward, please?” Lindsay argued. “Work with what we have. Nothing you do now will change what’s already happened.”

There was plenty he wasn’t being told. Tom knew that. Part of his duty was chastising subordinates for piss poor decisions, but if Lindsay wasn’t going to tell him the whole story,

there wasn't much he could do. Trying to talk it out of her would be a waste of all of their time. If there was one thing Lindsay didn't do, it was crack under interrogation.

"Have you discussed this with your partner?" he tried instead. "Jacobi may be less inclined to be overloaded with both a serial killer and a serial arsonist."

"He's going to have to trust me too," Lindsay replied, looking over at Jacobi beseechingly.

"If she thinks we need another case to keep from getting bored, who am I to question?" Jacobi offered.

Lindsay smiled at how unfailingly Jacobi always had her back, but Tom still looked less than inclined to say yes to either of them.

"Just assign us the case, Tom," Lindsay insisted. "Trust me."

"Fine," Tom conceded, sighing heavily. "It's yours. If you need any help..."

Lindsay grabbed the presented case file from Tom's hand.

"We've got it," she assured him. "Thanks."

Having a deep understanding of the nausea that had gone around the office, but knowing that hers was due solely to her shot nerves, Jill marched up to the door of Denise's office as if she was in a funeral procession. And maybe she was. Death to her career.

Despite an irrational hope that Denise wouldn't show up for her own scheduled appointment, Jill found her sitting in her office, already at work. Choking down the dread, she tried to look normal, giving up on the charade when she realized it was futile. Walking into a meeting with a fifty-fifty chance of coming out jobless wasn't normal. Pretending that it wouldn't alter that fact.

Denise looked up at her before she had a chance to knock. Or run away screaming.

"Jill, come in," she said, brusquely waving her forward.

Though there was no one around to witness the agonizing exchange that was about to take place, it was out of habit that Jill shut the door behind her in preparation for the impending rant. She sat down across from Denise's desk, forcing herself to sit up straight and look Denise in the eye.

"How was your night?" Denise asked her.

Impossible to tell if she was being sincere or cutting, considering it was Denise, Jill thought it safe to assume she didn't really care either way.

“Fine,” she answered in the simplest possible manner, knowing the more she said the more likely she was to shoot herself in the foot.

“Patterson, Lawrence, and Allen have all called to say they’ll be in today, so you can go,” Denise informed her with little dithering and even less emotion.

Thoroughly numb, Jill was at a loss. Anticipating it, and yet not anticipating it, she tried to think of something to say that didn’t end in the words “heartless bitch” or turn into groveling for her job.

“So will my final check be direct deposited or paper?” she asked in a daze.

Denise looked stunned, as if she’d just been slapped in the face. Jill wondered for a second if some of her not too subconscious anger had come to fruition, and she had, in fact, slapped her without realizing it.

“I’m not firing you,” Denise uttered.

“You’re not?” Jill asked in confusion

“Why would I fire someone who covered for the entire staff with me, Jill?” Denise posed, not trying in the least to hide the irritation. “Use your brain.”

“But you said I needed to go,” Jill recapped.

“You do,” Denise reiterated. “You’ve worked overtime ten days in a row, and almost sixty hours in the past three. Take a couple of days off.”

If she didn’t think Denise would take it as being mocked, Jill would have done what felt appropriate, tilted her head to the side and tried to clear her ears. Since she couldn’t, she just kept staring at Denise as if she were sprouting horns, or, more improbably, a halo.

“You know, just because I don’t keep any,” Denise stated quietly, “doesn’t mean I’m going to fire you for having friends.”

Not really sure how to respond to that without creating danger to her well-being, Jill decided her safest course of action was to simply not acknowledge it had been said.

“You should take some time off too,” she recommended instead.

“Then who will make all of these idiots do their jobs right?” Denise bounced right back, every bit as merciless as ever. “Could you give everyone’s work back to them before you take off?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Jill agreed, trying to determine if the majority of the conversation she’d just had was real or if it had taken place only in her head. Not that it mattered. Denise would deny any part that made her seem vulnerable if the subject ever came up again.

Without being told so, Jill knew that she was dismissed. Not bothering with the formality of saying goodbye, Denise simply returned to her work. Relatively confused, but grateful for the outcome nonetheless, Jill slowly got up and walked to the door, bothered by the lingering notion that there was something important left unsaid between them. Feeling a little like she was throwing her arms up in surrender before a trigger-happy firing squad, she turned back anyway.

“I’m sorry about what I said,” she asserted. Oddly enough, it seemed to be true.

Denise looked up at Jill in her doorway, surprised that she wasn’t gone yet, and even more surprised that she actually believed the apology. Unable to hold Jill’s gaze, she dropped her eyes back to the paperwork in front of her.

“Yeah, well, so am I,” she stated so quietly it was almost a whisper.

“I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Yep, I’ll see ya,” Denise responded, anxious to get Jill out of her office as quickly as possible.

Jill did her the service of going, trying to shake free of her mental confusion as she walked down the hall. She still wasn’t entirely sure what had just taken place. All she knew was that what she’d expected hadn’t happened, and what had happened, she never, in a million years, would have expected.

Lindsay and Jacobi spent the majority of their morning talking to reluctant witnesses. After badgering what felt like nearly all of the residents of Potrero Hill, they’d found half a dozen people who claimed to have seen the blonde from Cindy’s photographs walking up and down 25th Street throughout the day. That was their only lead. It might have felt a bit better if the majority of their witnesses weren’t the type of people for whom it was hard to take at their word, and if they hadn’t wasted so much time. At this point, the blonde could easily be back in her apartment, celebrating a hard day’s pacing with a frozen dinner and a wine cooler.

In the passenger seat, Jacobi thumbed through the 8x10s, trying to memorize the features of the obviously genius woman who let herself be photographed at several different crime scenes, her face clearly visible in the majority of them.

“So, what did they say to you?” he asked without looking up, the pictures sliding through his hands in a cadenced pattern.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lindsay answered.

“It does matter if it was something shitty and insulting,” Jacobi ceased in his movements to look up at her. Under the guise of keeping her eyes on the road, Lindsay avoided the concentrated gaze.

“It’s really not a big deal, Jacobi,” she murmured.

“It is to me,” Jacobi returned.

Unable to play off the declaration as if it meant nothing to her, Lindsay finally gave in and looked his way. Jacobi was a portrait in patience, just waiting for her to come clean in her own time. It was his way, and it was rare that it didn’t work on her.

“They wanted to know where I got my information,” she started slowly, “and since I couldn’t exactly tell them about Cindy they assumed my contacts were criminal... like my dad.”

The fact that Jacobi didn’t immediately say anything was not, unfortunately, a sign that he was really thinking things through before he went all raging fury on her.

“Who did?” he asked with a deliberate calm that usually indicated he was on that threshold of being too enraged to speak.

“That is really not important,” Lindsay said, hoping to pull him back from the ledge.

Jacobi wasn’t having it.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m just going to look through the case file and see who was originally on it.”

Knowing he would do exactly that, Lindsay shook her head, and wished she’d never said anything.

“Clifford or Bryan,” she disclosed. “I don’t know which was which. Only one of them did any talking, and, after a while, I stopped worrying about who was who, since they seemed to share only one brain between them.”

Though she refused to look, Lindsay could feel Jacobi’s eyes on her, trying to read her thoughts. And he would with perfect precision. He always did.

“They get to you?” he asked quietly.

“Well, it’s not like I can exactly dispute what they said,” Lindsay returned just as softly. “As far as I know, they’re right about him.”

“But they’re wrong about you.”

“That doesn’t make any difference. We’re judged by the company we keep,” Lindsay uttered, before glancing at Jacobi with a smile. “That’s why I make a habit of hanging out with you.”

Jacobi finally smiled, with a slight shake of his head, and palmed her shoulder long enough to be reassuring without being cloying before returning to the photos.

Slowing down as they crossed Potrero Street, Lindsay looked for somewhere to park. She was at once distracted by a scruffy man, with a wildly unkempt beard, leaning against the fence surrounding a vacant patch of land. Though she couldn't quite place him, the man struck her as uncannily familiar. As she watched, a guy who looked as if he was probably born straight onto the streets approached and the man who looked familiar pulled something from his pocket and handed it to him.

"You've got to be kidding me," Jacobi murmured next to her. "It can't possibly be this easy".

Lindsay turned in Jacobi's direction to see what she'd missed, and Jacobi pointed out the window at a blonde just up the street.

"That woman look familiar to you?"

One look from Cindy's embezzled photograph to the woman standing on the sidewalk was all it took to confirm. Pulling to the side of the road, Lindsay double-parked, and she and Jacobi climbed out of her SUV. Hands resting on their service weapons just in case, they approached the blonde cautiously, though the woman's extraordinarily focused inspection of the rundown theater in front of her made their stealthy approach completely unnecessary.

"Whatcha lookin' at," Lindsay asked her, in an admittedly sarcastic manner.

The woman turned to look at her, presumably amazed to see someone standing right next to her. Lindsay displayed her badge and the blonde's eyes went so wide, Lindsay half-expected a confession to come tumbling out of her irises.

"Let's take a ride into the station and have a conversation," Jacobi proposed, closing his cuffs around the woman's wrists before she seemed to comprehend what was happening.

Jacobi hauled the easily-arrestable blonde toward the car, and Lindsay turned to follow, her eyes drawn to the other side of the street as the man by the fence stirred. Jimmying a cane from where he had wedged it in the fence close by, he brought it down as a crutch beside him and started limping away. Though she still had no idea who he was, all at once Lindsay remembered where she'd seen him before.

"You ready?" Jacobi asked.

Lindsay turned to find him standing inside the open passenger door, the blonde already safely belted in the backseat of the car. Glancing across the street, she watched the man limp off down the sidewalk.

"Can you do me a favor?" she requested, walking over to Jacobi and pulling her keys from her pocket.

"Depends what you're asking," Jacobi responded.

Lindsay grabbed his hand and pressed her keys into his palm.

“Take her back to the station?” she asked. “There’s something I need to take care of.”

Jacobi really wanted to tell her to get her ass back in the car. She could tell he did. But something on her face must have made him change his mind before any words reached his lips.

“How are you going to get back?”

“I’m a big girl with a big gun,” Lindsay reminded him, looking across the street again to make sure the man with the cane hadn’t yet disappeared. “I’ll be fine.”

Sighing, Jacobi closed the door and walked around to the driver’s side, looking at Lindsay over the hood.

“Don’t get yourself into trouble,” he ordered.

“Don’t plan on it,” Lindsay assured him.

With a shake of his head, as if he knew that he shouldn’t, Jacobi got into the driver’s seat and pulled away from the curb. As soon as he turned the corner, Lindsay jogged across the street in pursuit of the man with the cane. His disability working to her advantage, within a block Lindsay had caught up.

“Hey,” she called to him when she was within hearing distance.

He looked over his shoulder, and she would swear he started to limp faster.

“Hey,” Lindsay yelled again, running ahead to obstruct his path. “What are you, deaf?” she asked. “Or just scared of cops?”

“Shit!” he said, pulling to a halt, his greasy black bangs falling into his eyes. “What do you want?”

“I just want to talk to you,” Lindsay promised, though it didn’t seem to bring him any comfort.

“Yeah, what about?” he asked, looking around with a series of rapid head movements, a practiced technique undoubtedly fostered by rampant paranoia.

“I’ve seen you before,” Lindsay informed him.

He was shaking his head in denial before she even finished the sentence. “You’ve got me confused with someone else.”

“No,” Lindsay corrected. “I’ve seen you before. More than once. With my dad.”

Wrought with the ties of daily drug use, he couldn't hold still, looking around continuously and shifting back and forth as much as his bum leg would allow, his cane tapping in an arrhythmic beat against the concrete.

"I don't know you, lady," he said, shaking his head, "and I don't know your dad."

"His name was Martin Boxer."

Recognition flashed through the man's eyes, giving him away even before he glanced anxiously around again. "Never heard of him," he lied.

"We can have this conversation at the precinct if you'd rather," Lindsay threatened.

The guy looked trapped. He was. After a moment's hesitation, in which if he could have physically escaped he would have made the attempt, the man exhaled in frustration and cast Lindsay a nervous scowl.

"I knew your dad, okay," he admitted hesitantly.

"How did you know him?" Lindsay demanded.

"We sort of worked together," the man responded, glancing away.

It was exactly what Lindsay didn't want to hear. In a way, she might have been better off letting the guy flee. There were some things it was better not to know.

"Bucci family?" she inquired.

The man's already remarkable paranoia increased tenfold. His eyes darted around again, and he looked practically terrified by what-if scenarios.

"Listen, what do you want to know?" he hissed. "Being seen with you doesn't exactly keep me alive. You know what I'm sayin'?"

Lindsay looked around. They were drawing attention from a couple of different directions, though there was no reason for them to necessarily make her for a cop. So maybe the guy wasn't entirely paranoid. Though there were no immediate threats that she could see, there was information that she needed to extract from this guy before anyone decided to kill him.

"Come with me," she said, taking him by the arm and tugging him down the street as fast as he could manage.

Lindsay turned them onto the first side street and when they passed the first small coffee shop, she swung open the door and pulled him inside. Other than the lone employee, who barely took the time to raise her head as they entered, the place was deserted. But the guy still looked as if he would rather be anywhere else on earth.

“Who are you?” Lindsay asked as she turned to face him.

“Nobody,” the guy tried, then seemed to realize from her expression that he’d be wise to keep talking. “I just worked for your father from time to time, you know, on an irregular basis.”

“What did you do for him exactly?” Lindsay questioned.

The man glanced over at the counter, but the worker was still very content to ignore them.

“If we have to talk about this, could we at least sit down?” the man asked.

Lindsay’s gaze fell to the cane, and, suffering a momentary bout of humanity, she motioned him to the nearest table. The pained grunt he made as he slid into the chair was genuine, and Lindsay almost felt bad for dragging him down the street.

“And can I get a coffee?”

The sympathy diminished. Aggravated, but wanting to keep him talking, Lindsay went to the counter, keeping a watch on him as she waited for the listless worker to actually do her job. She traded two dollars for the small cup, not terribly surprised when the worker forgot her change, and thumped the cup down in front of her high maintenance ward.

“Bitter,” he shuddered, taking a drink.

“Now tell me how you helped my father,” Lindsay demanded, sitting across from him.

He looked up at Lindsay and realized at once he’d pressed his luck as far as it would go.

“I was able to get in places he couldn’t,” he stated simply.

“Okay,” Lindsay nodded, molding her next words with ultimate care to make sure they provided sufficient intimidation. “You’re going to be a lot more cooperative or we’re going to move back out to the street and I’m going to pin my badge to my jacket.”

Lindsay saw the undisguised fear as a welcome sign that she would stop being jerked around.

“Fine,” the guy muttered irately and looked up at her, his guard dropping for a moment. “So, Marty... you said was. What happened?”

“He died a few months ago,” Lindsay granted him, unsure if he actually deserved to know.

The man nodded slowly, taking another drink with a shudder, and was all of a sudden considerably more human.

“Where I grew up, there were only two ways to be safe,” he began, playing with the paper cup. “You joined a gang or you became a cop. The people I knew were in gangs. I didn’t want that life.”

He glanced up, looking surprisingly sincere, and Lindsay nodded for him to continue.

“When I was thirteen, I was hit by a stray bullet,” he shook his head. “There was no way I could pass the physical to be a cop. So I started hanging around crime scenes, trying to help where I could. Nobody wanted my help.” He gave a small laugh. “Then, one day, I knew the guys who robbed a liquor store in my neighborhood, and killed the clerk. I told your dad. He didn’t want my help either at first. But I just kept coming around. I kept finding him what he needed.”

“You made yourself indispensable,” Lindsay said softly. It seemed an oddly familiar story.

The man shrugged. “He came around, let me help out. And, in return, he let me carry and promised he’d step up if I ever had to use it. Just having a piece that you can use if you have to makes all the difference some places.”

“So you weren’t a go-between between him and Dominic Bucci?” Lindsay asked the question she really wanted to know, terrified of what the answer might be.

The guy laughed uncomfortably, his eyes sliding to the disinterested employee.

“Lady, I’m no mobster.”

What she expected to hear, she wasn’t sure, but she didn’t feel like she’d gotten what she wanted. Fairly certain there was a lot he wasn’t telling her, Lindsay stood up anyway.

“I have to go,” she said. “I need your name. Tell me the truth. You do not want to lie to me.”

“Banks.”

“You got a first name?” Lindsay prodded.

“Leo.”

There wasn’t a lot of trust lost between them, but required elsewhere, Lindsay decided for the time being she would have to take him at his word.

One of the greatest perks of Cindy’s job was that research looked like research whether she was trying to find a unique angle in the Potrero arson locales, so that she didn’t have to keep updating the same “Buildings torched on the Hill. No known Pattern. One dead.” article, or if she was searching for anyone in the bay area who had been envious to the point of making recent headlines.

Phone vibrating in her bag, Cindy got a hold of it, smiling at the caller ID before she flipped it open.

“Hey,” she answered.

“Hey,” Lindsay returned, sounding tired. She’d been sounding that way a lot lately. “I thought you’d want to know, we found the blonde.”

“Already?” Cindy asked in amazement. “I knew it would probably be handed over to Homicide, but I didn’t think you’d get it.”

“Well, I had some inside information,” Lindsay said softly, and, despite everything, Cindy could hear a small smile in her voice. “I can’t believe I haven’t heard from you by now. It’s still your article right?”

“Yeah,” Cindy confirmed, glancing at the dueling windows on her computer screen with a sigh. “But I haven’t exactly been primo crime reporter today.”

“Why? Is something wrong?” Lindsay asked, smile fading into not-so-subtle worry.

Which made Cindy smile. Even if she didn’t want to give Lindsay further cause for concern. Sometimes it was hard to tell how much Lindsay cared. And sometimes it was impossible not to.

“No. I’m just busy,” Cindy semi-lied, anticipating Lindsay’s question about what she was busy doing, and trying to cut it off at the pass. “What’s that noise?”

“I’m on the train.”

“Is the SFPD going green?”

Lindsay laughed softly, and Cindy felt as if she’d scored a small victory. Making Lindsay laugh wasn’t all that easy these days.

“Jacobi took my car,” Lindsay responded.

There was something in her tone, something tenuous and guarded, which she undoubtedly would have preferred for Cindy to just ignore. But turning a blind eye, or ear, to Lindsay’s suffering wasn’t exactly in her nature.

“What’s going on Linz?” she gently queried, half expecting Lindsay not to answer, or to play whatever it was off.

Cindy could hear the sound of the train mixed with the faint rustle of Lindsay’s leather jacket, and envisioned Lindsay shifting around in her seat.

“I just…” Lindsay faltered. “I talked to this guy. I remembered seeing him with my dad.”

Cindy stared at her screen without seeing it, wholly attentive to the voice on the other end of the line. “Okay,” she whispered.

“He said that he helped my dad on his cases. You know, kind of like you do?” Lindsay lingered on the thought, taking a deep breath before she continued. “I thought he might work for the Bucci family.”

Cindy really wished that they were having this conversation in person, where she could do something to eliminate the unnatural fragility in Lindsay’s voice. But there was also some awe in the fact that Lindsay wasn’t trying to conceal it from her.

“You thought it would prove your dad was guilty of what they said he did?” Cindy deduced.

“I just want to know the truth,” Lindsay confessed so quietly that the screeching of the train as it slowed into a station nearly drowned her out.

“So did he?”

“He said that he didn’t.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“I don’t know what to believe. I just got a feeling he wasn’t telling me everything,” Lindsay sighed. “All that stuff yesterday, it brought everything back up, you know?”

Though Lindsay couldn’t see it, Cindy nodded, sorry once again that she’d asked Lindsay to play courier. She should have sent the photos anonymously, and if she had it to do over... Sadly, there were no do-overs. There was, however, atonement.

“The guy you talked to,” Cindy asked, “what’s his name?”

“He said it’s Leo Banks,” Lindsay responded. “Who knows if that’s true?”

Authentic or not, Cindy scribbled the name down on a scrap piece of paper on her desk, and drew a line under it, pen hovering in anticipation of more.

“Can you describe him?”

ACT III

Jacobi looked up as Lindsay walked in, watching her carefully composed approach. Her unruffled demeanor was artificial, but if she was faking calm, it meant she didn’t want to talk about it.

“Everything alright?” he asked simply, proved right in his theory that Lindsay wasn’t in a sharing mood when she forced a smile, and threw back, “Yeah. I’m good.”

Knowing that was all he was getting, Jacobi nodded and stood up. “Then you owe me big time,” he announced. “Barbie started crying the second I got into the car and was still crying when I left her in the interview room.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. Why do women do anything?” Jacobi shook his head, smirking when Lindsay gave him a predicted glower. “I didn’t ask.”

“Well, let’s go ask,” Lindsay proposed, grabbing the photos and file from the edge of Jacobi’s desk and leading him toward the interrogation room.

As she reached the door, Jacobi tapped her lightly on the shoulder, and Lindsay paused before cracking the door.

“I wasn’t making the obvious joke,” he informed her. “I did get her name out of her.”

Curious, Lindsay popped open the case file and snapped it closed again, looking up at Jacobi blankly, and let them into the room.

The weeping blonde looked up with a startled squeal as they entered. Lindsay glanced over at Jacobi, wordlessly asking what was wrong with her. He threw a hand in the air and shook his head as if he wasn’t going to begin to try to decipher this woman’s emotional breakdown.

Indebted, after letting Jacobi endure miles alone in a car with the shrillest crying she’d ever encountered, Lindsay decided it was her duty to pull actual words out of the blonde.

Stepping forward to the table, she threw the photos down, pleased when they fanned out in a rather dramatic fashion in front of the woman. It almost looked like she’d planned it that way.

“So... Barbie... do you want to explain what you were doing at all of the Potrero fires?”

Wincing, and trying not to plug her ears, when the woman wailed in apparent agony at the question, Lindsay thought for a second she might be hallucinating the words.

“I knew I was gonna get caught.”

Glancing in Jacobi’s direction to make sure that he’d heard them too, Lindsay took his stunned appearance as verification.

“So, you admit you set the fires?” Lindsay questioned disbelievingly.

“You know I did,” Barbie howled.

Perplexed, Lindsay dropped down into a chair. “Uh, why?” she asked.

“All those buildings were ugly,” Barbie answered as if it was the most logical explanation in the world (but what about anything was ever logical?). “I thought if I got rid of them, they’d put up something nice.”

“You killed someone,” Jacobi sternly reminded her.

“It was an accident!” Barbie burst into forceful tears again.

Five minutes later, she’d written and signed her confession, and, just like that, a month of arsons that terrorized the Potrero was brought to a close.

“The bad news is, she’s going to prison,” Jacobi said, watching the woman sobbing her way to central booking, pawned off on a passing officer who was already headed that way. “The good news is, she gets my vote for interogatee of the year. I say we send her a fruit basket once she gets a permanent cell.”

With a genuine laugh, Lindsay tapped Jacobi’s shoulder with the file.

“I’m going to take what we have to Jill,” she said, “and let Cindy know we’ve arrested Barbie.”

Jacobi nodded his go-ahead. “You’re good, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Lindsay assured him. “I’m good.”

After getting Cindy’s voice mail, and leaving the fine points of Barbie’s arrest, including all the little details that no other reporter would be privy to about her weepy confession to give Cindy’s version of the story a little extra zing, Lindsay made it to Jill’s door. Getting no answer to her knock, she tried the handle, and found the door locked.

Not letting it unsettle her, she turned to find a frazzled associate of Jill’s rushing down the hallway.

“Patterson,” Lindsay called out to him.

“Inspector Boxer,” he greeted without slowing up.

“Do you know where Jill is?” Lindsay asked, falling into stride beside him.

He shook his head. “Haven’t seen her all day. Sorry.”

Stopping, Lindsay let Patterson continue down the hall without her. Shooting a glare in the direction of Denise’s office, she whirled away and headed for the elevator.

“Claire,” Lindsay called out as she entered the morgue.

“Lindsay,” Claire spiritedly exclaimed back, scraping at the cheek of their charred victim with a swab.

Sidetracking for a moment, Lindsay acknowledged the nameless victim lying between them.

“Do you know who she is?”

“No ID, more than likely no one looking for her,” Claire exhaled. “It will be a while.”

“The fire-starter was trying to beautify the city,” Lindsay enlightened her.

“You should bring her down here,” Claire said sharply. “Let her have a look.”

“Yeah,” Lindsay agreed completely. “Have you heard from Jill? I tried to call. She didn’t answer.”

“She’s at the gym,” Claire answered, eyes running vigilantly down the dead woman’s blackened face.

“Denise fired her?!?” Lindsay incorrectly surmised.

“No,” Claire said slowly, looking up. “She gave her the day off.”

Experiencing a sensation much like the earth decided to stop and rotate backwards for the hundredth time that day, Lindsay shook her head to clear it and eyed Claire.

“Denise punished Jill’s insubordination with a vacation day?”

“Apparently,” Claire stated. “And now Jill has decided we all need to go to a Halloween party with her tonight. She said she was going to call you.”

“Actually I did have a message I forgot to check,” Lindsay acknowledged. “But I’ve spent all day working on this case. I should probably get back on the more pressing one, see if I can make a dent.”

“You’d rather stay on this case that’s going nowhere tonight than have an evening out with your friends?” Claire posed.

Lindsay felt as if she was being questioned by a sage.

“Way to be optimistic, Claire,” Lindsay playfully chided, smiling over at her. “You’re going?”

“I’m going to try.”

“Ed?” Lindsay reasoned.

“Now’s not a good time to push,” Claire acknowledged. “I should probably just stay in and watch a movie with my husband.”

Hoping things would be more stable for them soon, Lindsay nodded her understanding.

“But you should go,” Claire advised, trying to look innocent as she added, “Cindy’s going.”

“She is?” Lindsay asked, biting her lip when she realized she might have seemed too eager.

“Does that surprise you?”

“No,” Lindsay tried for nonchalance. “I guess not.” Picking at the seam on her jeans, she tried not to ask the question nagging at her. Losing the battle, she glanced around the room to avoid looking at Claire. “So, Cindy’s going with Jill?”

Infinitely proud of her restraint, Claire managed not to smirk victoriously.

“We’re all invited, Linz,” she reminded her. “You should go. It’ll be fun.”

“Maybe I will,” Lindsay said with casual interest, knowing very well where she would end up tonight.

“Clifford or Bryan?” Jacobi called out, wondering how exactly property crimes was so busy when almost all of homicide was on the street.

Since the entire department seemed to be taking the night off, he was expecting it when the two men got up from their desks, glanced at each other and moved in his direction.

“No, it’s okay. Really. I can tell you from here,” Jacobi shouted across the bullpen to them, halting their progress. “I just wanted to let you know, Inspector Boxer and I already made an arrest on your arson case. After a month, I’m sure you’re glad to know it’s finally closed.”

Clifford and Bryan looked at each other furiously and looked back at Jacobi, which, oddly enough, did little to dampen his good mood.

“Barbie’s already confessed even,” Jacobi informed them against their will. “It took less than twelve hours. How many hours did you put in?”

Jacobi scanned the crowd he’d brought to their feet. Extraordinarily outmanned, but too incensed to care, he shrugged at Clifford and Bryan. “So, I figure there are two possibilities here. One, Lindsay really *is* that exceptional. Or two,” he paused long enough for them to gnash their teeth and sound their inner growls, “the both of you are total screw-ups. I’ll let you decide.”

Stopping short of saluting them before walking out, reasoning it might go just a little too far, Jacobi knew he hadn't helped interdepartmental relations, and that Lindsay's girl power ideals would openly cringe. But he also knew Tom would say to screw interdepartmental relations, and that Linz would be secretly satisfied.

She was going to owe Danny an incredible amount of favors after this, Cindy thought, looking through the folders he'd opened on her computer with his own highly-trackable password.

"So I was thinking?" he asked from behind her. "How about tonight?"

Cindy frowned as she pulled up a photograph, saving it with the several others into the folder she'd created on her desktop.

"Tonight?" she asked.

"Darts," Danny expounded. "Drinks. That dinner you owe me."

Cindy paused in what she was doing, feeling, somewhere along the way, she'd neglected to comprehend an exchange that had taken place, which really wasn't all that surprising. Pretty sure that she wasn't just being invited to dinner with a coworker, Cindy turned around to meet Danny's confident expression.

"Danny," she started, hoping she wasn't about to embarrass both of them. "I'm with someone."

His shocked disappointment told her she hadn't misconstrued anything. At least not in the course of their current conversation.

"Really?" he asked. "I thought you were single."

"I'm not," Cindy replied.

What was making her lie to him, she wasn't entirely sure. He was a nice enough guy. He wasn't unattractive. And, while she may have been on more than one date with the same person recently, she wouldn't say she and Ellen were a couple. Yet, she'd just claimed she was part of one... with an evidently imaginary other half.

"Oh, okay," Danny smiled modestly. "My mistake. Sorry." He dithered uncomfortably for a few seconds, then motioned toward her computer. "Could you just sign me out when you're done?"

"Sure," Cindy agreed.

Anxious to escape, Danny shot off toward his desk, and Cindy felt utterly guilty for paying so little attention that she'd created a decidedly awkward situation.

Spinning back toward her computer, and staring at the incontrovertible facts before her, she determined she had sufficient evidence. And she knew that she would have to tell Lindsay. That's why she'd done her investigating after all, so Lindsay could know the truth. But there was no denying it would have been an easier task if the truth were more pleasant.

Logging out of the system and closing the folder of doom, Cindy returned to her article. A few relatively easy-flowing paragraphs about Barbie and her virulent crying fits later, her phone vibrated across her desk and she caught it on its way to the floor.

"Cindy Thomas," she answered distractedly.

"I know you don't always answer your phone like that," an unexpected voice returned.

One hand still hovering over her keyboard, Cindy tried to orient herself.

"Ellen... hi."

"Hi," Ellen responded. "What are you up to?"

"My eyeballs in work," Cindy answered.

That wasn't exactly true either. She only had to finish her article, and she was ninety percent there. Apparently, her filter of truth was having a major malfunction.

"I guess you don't have time for a drink then," Ellen replied, disappointed.

Cindy really did have to meet Jill. That wasn't a lie. If she really wanted to, though, she could squeeze in one drink on the way. If she really wanted to, she could even invite Ellen to the party. Jill wouldn't mind.

"I really can't tonight. I'm sorry," she heard herself saying, despite all of that.

"That's too bad," Ellen replied. "I haven't seen you in a while. It's been over a week since I've even talked to you."

Was that true? Cindy wondered, trying to think back. She guessed it was.

"Sorry, I've been really busy."

"It's okay," Ellen was too forgiving. "I know you have things to do. But you're going to call me, right?"

Whether or not she should battled in Cindy's mind, though she wasn't sure why not calling was even a consideration. What reason did she have not to?

"Yeah, of course," she promised. "I'll call you soon."

“Okay,” Ellen breathed. “Bye.”

“Bye,” Cindy uttered, hanging up.

What in the hell was wrong with her? Turning down two potential dates in the course of a few hours. And for what exactly? Another serial killer, occasional nights out with her core group of friends, and the rest spent alone eating frozen dinners and working through her personal time? If she finished up quickly enough, she might even be able to squeeze in appetizers with that drink.

With a sigh, she grabbed her phone and scrolled through her contacts, selecting Ellen’s number, her thumb pausing over send for a long moment. Maybe Ellen wasn’t her perfect soul mate. Maybe she was asking for too much. And maybe perfect soul mates only existed in new age self-help books.

With sudden resolve, Cindy pressed the button and waited for Ellen to pick up.

“Cindy.”

Cindy looked up sharply, her phone falling from her ear to her desk. Chasing it around with her hands, and finally getting a hold of it, she was almost positive she heard a muffled hello as she snapped it closed.

“Linz,” she said. “You scared the hell out of me.”

Face flushed and chest heaving, Cindy looked up at her. Despite her intense curiosity as to why Cindy had an eye patch resting on her forehead above her eye and a black bandana on her head, Lindsay withheld all questions.

“Sorry,” Lindsay stated honestly. “I did come from the front though. I thought you’d see me.”

“I’m just a little distracted,” Cindy muttered.

Fists burrowing into her pockets, Lindsay smiled down at her adorably flustered friend. Cindy’s cell shuddered in her hand, and Lindsay picked up on the muted buzz, glancing toward it.

“Do you need to get that?” she asked.

“No, it’s nothing,” Cindy responded, silencing the phone. “So, what are you doing here?”

“We’re going to a party with Jill,” Lindsay surprised her by saying. “I thought you might want a ride.”

“Oh,” Cindy replied, rather stunned by the explanation. “You’re coming?”

“If that’s alright,” Lindsay answered, oddly coy.

“Yeah,” Cindy exclaimed, getting to her feet at once.

Struck dumb when confronted full-on with the rest of Cindy's inspired ensemble, Lindsay wondered if Cindy had been wearing that all day at work. It wasn't that she was showing anything sacred, but the flimsy gauze-like shirt was both extremely low-cut and practically see-through, the black ruffled skirt was entirely too short, and the black corset left nothing to the imagination, pushing everything up and out for inspection by all.

Gaze trailing down to the knee high black boots that completed her pirate guise, Lindsay realized just how long she'd been inspecting and pulled her eyes back up, trying with exceeding difficulty to keep her eyes on Cindy's face.

"What are you wearing?" she teased, needing to pretend that Cindy's choice of clothing was amusing.

"It's called a costume," Cindy informed her. "Where's yours?"

"You're kidding, right?" Lindsay countered.

"Linz, it's a costume party," Cindy declared. "You're really not going to dress up?"

Her lower lip protruded into a small pout, and Lindsay really wished she'd stopped on the way to buy a costume.

"I didn't know I'd end up going to a costume party tonight," she stated honestly.

Still unsatisfied, Cindy glanced toward her computer, her eyes catching on her incomplete article, which reminded her of the other work she'd finished up not long before Lindsay's arrival.

"What's wrong?" Lindsay questioned.

Knowing her expression gave her away, Cindy decided she really needed to work on her blank slate look.

"I can tell you tomorrow," she replied.

"Or you can tell me now," Lindsay insisted, albeit gently.

Even if she tried to argue, she would never win, so Cindy gave in and opened the folder on her desktop, bringing up the first photo. "Is this Leo?" she asked.

Clearly surprised by the inquiry, Lindsay walked around Cindy's desk. Mentally deducting a few years from the man she'd talked to earlier in the day, she compared him to the image on Cindy's computer. "Yeah, that's him."

Cindy looked back at her, visibly apprehensive. "And he told you he wasn't involved with the Bucci family right?"

“That’s what he said, yeah.”

Wondering if she was doing the right thing, especially in the midst of everything else that was going on in their lives, Cindy clicked through the remaining photos, all of them showing Leo with Dominic Bucci at events across the city. At list’s end, she glanced up at Lindsay again, watching a very ugly rage rise beneath the very attractive surface.

“Now, we don’t know exactly what this means,” Cindy tried for damage control.

“It means the little shit lied to me, and I’m gonna go kick his ass,” Lindsay summarized.

“Okay,” Cindy conceded, catching Lindsay’s arm and effectively thwarting her departure attempt. “If that’s what you think you should do, I’m fine with it. But can I come with you?”

Still holding on, Cindy looked up imploringly, and Lindsay couldn’t say no.

“Come on,” she said, tilting her head toward the door, but found herself still held captive.

“I need to finish my article first,” Cindy admitted timidly.

With a duped sigh, Lindsay settled against the edge of Cindy’s desk.

“Type fast, Thomas,” she ordered, crossing her arms and trying her best to intimidate.

Cindy dropped down into her chair, finished her article with astonishing speed, emailed it to her editor, shut down her computer, and got up just in time to silence her phone again.

“You’re popular tonight,” Lindsay declared as she drew to full height, making Cindy feel as daunted as usual.

“It’s the pirate thing,” Cindy quipped, turning her phone off completely and dropping it in her bag. “Let’s go.”

ACT IV

Leo leaned against the brick wall of a dilapidated building, cane propped beside him. Evidently not as paranoid as Lindsay had diagnosed him to be, he didn’t even seem to notice that the SUV pulling slowly up the road toward him was the same one that had parked here earlier and from which two cops had emerged.

“Hey Leo!” Lindsay shouted out the window.

Pretending not to hear or see her, though she was directly in his line of vision and yelled plenty loud enough, Leo seized his cane and started off. Lindsay came to a stop, watching his attempt at

flight. Why he thought he could escape her when he couldn't before was beyond her, but it was a noble effort.

"Get in the car," she called out to him, in a relatively pleasant manner.

"Can't do that," Leo shook his head, barely glancing her way.

Lindsay threw open her door and climbed out, catching up to him in several easy strides, and, to a chorus of obscenity-laden protests, dragged him back to the SUV. She stopped to grab his cane and toss it into the backseat before cuffing him.

"Ah, come on," Leo said in disbelief.

"Didn't you know they've got a new apple fritter at Café la Ritz?" Lindsay asked with misleading indulgence. "I'm buying."

She chucked him in the back with his cane and hopped into the driver's seat.

Cursing, Leo struggled upright, glancing to the passenger's seat and getting an eyeful of sexy pirate. Feeling substantially better about his situation, he grinned up at Cindy.

"Hey."

"Hey," Cindy returned, turning back to the front.

Stretching forward, Leo happily ogled Cindy's generously exposed cleavage, until the rearview mirror moved, and he was met with a look that clearly threatened his manhood. Sliding back against the seat, he decided to cut his losses and try not to get thrown in the clink.

"Coffee. Chocolate croissant. Start talking," Lindsay ordered, dropping the items before Leo on the table and waiting for Cindy to take a seat before sitting down beside her.

"What about the apple thing?" Leo inquired.

"Eat. Talk," Lindsay refused to negotiate.

"About what?" Leo responded dumbly.

"Why did you lie to me about working with the Buccis?"

The name was like a red hot prod, Leo gave such a start, looking around as if a dozen strapping Italians were going to crawl out of the woodwork and whack him on the spot.

"I didn't lie to you," Leo lied again.

“I have pictures that say you did,” Lindsay informed him. “Either they’re lying or you are, and I know what my money’s on.”

“Listen, it’s not like you’re thinkin’,” Leo claimed.

“Really?” Lindsay countered, unmoved. “What am I thinkin’?”

Leo looked so honestly terrified that Cindy almost felt bad for him when he looked over at her for help. She wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of this grilling by Lindsay. She’d endured enough of her own to know just how unfun they were.

“My father went down for helping the Bucci family,” Lindsay reminded him in a slow, measured voice when Leo didn’t respond. “You worked for them. You already told me you worked for my father. So I guess it doesn’t take a lot of thinking. Were you his go-between or not?”

“Not!” Leo retorted. “I already told you that.”

“Yeah, well, now tell me the truth,” Lindsay shot back.

Cindy watched Lindsay carefully for any sign that she was going to do something that she would regret. Or that she wouldn’t regret, but would cost her her job. It was a struggle not to touch her, try to rub away some of the palpable tension, but she knew that the last thing Lindsay wanted right now was to show any sign of weakness.

“The Bucci family was taking down the city. You remember that. They were untouchable,” Leo started, obviously realizing he’d reached the end of his options. “The cops had no idea what to do about them. It was bad.”

Lindsay nodded slowly, and Leo took a deep breath. Cindy was glad to see she wasn’t the only one Lindsay made nervous.

“I was working with your old man at the time,” Leo continued. “I knew that I could get inside. I mean, look at me. I’m a long-lost cousin if ever one existed. Marty didn’t want me to, but I convinced him. It worked,” Leo shrugged. “They bought it. After a few months, I was seeing everything. I was able to give your dad a heap of evidence.”

Lindsay’s jaw tightened imperceptibly, and Cindy let her knee fall against Lindsay’s, watching her face soften slightly as she glanced sidelong in her direction.

“They were days from taking them down,” Leo explained. “And I got made, talking to your dad in some white damn suburb where nobody from this neighborhood had reason to be.” Still panicky at the memory, Leo glanced out the window. “Marty told me to tell the Buccis I got nabbed by the police, but kept my mouth shut. He said he’d take care of the rest. The next thing I know, the evidence goes missing, your dad is off the force, and it’s in the newspapers that he’s on the take.”

Aware that what he was saying was the full truth this time, Lindsay stared across the table at Leo, trying to articulate her thoughts. “So he destroyed the evidence to save your life?” she finally breathed.

Leo nodded. “If he’d brought the Buccis down then, they would have known it was me. And you’d be talking to me through a... you know one of those people who talk to dead people. “

“Schizophrenics?” Lindsay filled in.

Cindy struggled not to laugh. “I think he means a medium, Linz.”

“Yeah like that,” Leo said.

“So my father was never involved with the Buccis?” Lindsay had to make sure.

“Only as far as I was involved. And only to try to stop them. Whatever Marty did, whatever they think he did, he didn’t do it for no Buccis. He did it to save my life,” Leo shook his head. “I don’t know why.”

“I do,” Lindsay enlightened him. “If he let something happen to you while you were trying to help him when he could’ve stopped it, it would have been like putting a gun to your head himself.”

Breath catching, Cindy stared at Lindsay, feeling as if she was getting a secret glimpse of the internal workings of Lindsay Boxer.

“I wanted to do it,” Leo reminded her.

“That doesn’t change anything,” Lindsay whispered. “He could have said no. He didn’t. You were his responsibility.”

“It was a good time,” Leo smiled, then looked up nervously. “Not, you know, a good time like a good time, but a good time in my life.”

Lindsay and Leo looked across the table at each other, two strangers with extraordinarily different lives, sharing an intensely profound connection.

“So what have you done since?”

The husked question drew Cindy’s attention to Lindsay’s face and she watched the clouds roll in.

“What?” Leo seemed to know the moment was over and he was screwed again.

“My father did the right thing. He lost his job, his world,” Lindsay faltered, pain rushing in, “he lost a lot... for you. Tell me you’re worth it.”

“Is she for real?” Leo shot at Cindy.

Lindsay was out of her seat and around the table before anyone else saw it coming. She yanked Leo up, shoving him face down on the table, and reached into his pocket to pull out a small baggie that she threw down right in front of his face.

“Is this what you’ve been doing since?” she questioned harshly. “Thought you didn’t want that life.”

“Those aren’t mine,” Leo stupidly responded.

“No. Not anymore,” Lindsay agreed, pulling him around, her fingers grasping tightly to his shirt.

“Come on. Easy,” Leo pleaded.

“Linz,” Cindy breathed, hand reaching out and pausing in the air between them.

“I’m going to let you walk too,” Lindsay vowed. “One time. My father thought you were worth saving. Now you’re going to prove him right. You were doing something decent. Do something decent. I’ll be watching. If I see you doing anything illegal again, I’m going to reopen the case and I know just where to find you and make you a witness. The Buccis aren’t as powerful as they used to be, but I trust they’ll still protect themselves.”

Released without warning, Leo fell back into the table. Lindsay grabbed the pilfered baggie and pocketed it. “Eat that,” she clapped Leo on the arm. “It’s the house specialty.”

Entirely unsure of what had just happened, Cindy hesitated when Lindsay’s hand reached out to her, before taking it. When she did, Lindsay pulled her away from the table and back out into the night.

Serial killers. Humanity from normally inhumane people. Some things came out of nowhere. Then there were the things Jill could count on. Like Derek, the bartender, making her drink exactly right, like the drink in her hand, and some bold guy trying within fifteen minutes of her walking through the door, like the one on the stool beside her.

“You here alone, Bumblebee?”

Other than the bumblebee part, which wasn’t all that inspired considering she was in fact dressed as one, it was a typical opener, lacking panache, but it could have been worse.

“I’m meeting some friends,” Jill returned. “They’re running late. They do this. It’s a thing.”

“So can we dance then?”

“Wow,” Jill replied, making out the guy’s costume, a priest’s cassock complete with silver stole and rosary, in the dim light of the club. “Does God permit that kind of thing?”

“I think He would excommunicate me for not taking this divine opportunity,” the guy answered.

Quite possibly the worst line she’d ever heard, Jill couldn’t find it in her to care or come up with a snarky rejoinder. After her week, he could be as uncreative as he wanted to be.

“Come on, Father. Let’s dance,” she consented, grabbing the priest’s hand and pulling him onto the dance floor.

The music and the drink were a relaxing combination. If she had someone familiar there to share them with, it would have been even better, but Claire hadn’t made any promises, and Lindsay and Cindy, well, God only knew where they were together. Maybe she should ask her priest friend, and see if he could get an ETA.

The lights were a pulsing rainbow of colors. Jill closed her eyes and let herself get lost in the feel of the beat and the hard foreign body in front of her. Because it felt good. And too many things had felt bad lately.

She was pulled into a kiss, hands instinctively grasping the fabric hanging down on either side of the guy’s chest. She still didn’t know his name, she realized. Not that it mattered that much. There was a fifty-fifty chance she’d forget it by morning. Just ask her co-workers. They seemed to know all about her promiscuous sex life.

Pulling away, she watched light play off his face. If he looked as strapping as he felt, he really should have gone for Adonis, instead of hiding all of that sculpted muscle beneath an unflattering robe. Though, she had to admit, the priest thing was kind of hot. Dropping her eyes to her hands where they still held the stole, Jill watched it change colors in the intermittent lights. Red. Blue. Green. Orange. Yellow. Purple.

Jill jolted, feelings steady arms close around her.

“You okay?” the guy asked, as if he cared any further than her being well enough to make it to his bed.

The silky fabric soft in her hands, Jill watched the color scheme replay. Red. Blue. Green. Orange. Yellow. Purple.

Purple silk.

“Oh my God,” she breathed.

“We haven’t even gotten to the good part yet,” the guy returned.

Feeling slightly dizzy, Jill pulled his arms from around her and backed away slowly.

“I have to go. I’m sorry,” she said quickly, rushing off to the sound of his frustrated appeal.

Heading toward the exit and her cell, locked safely in her glove compartment, Jill stopped abruptly at the sound of her name.

Not hiding her shock very well when she turned to find Ed and Claire together, her smile was partly genuine and partly put on.

“Claire... Ed, hey,” she greeted them.

“Hey,” Ed said back.

Claire’s smile, however, dulled instantly.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Jill waved her off. She didn’t want to do this. Not now. Not with Ed out of the house and them together and everything right with their world, even for just this one moment. Dressed up as a king and queen, ingeniously incorporating Ed’s chair as a throne, they looked incredible together. “I’m so glad you came out with Claire.”

“Me too,” Ed grinned.

“Jill?” Claire questioned, determinedly.

Jill knew she couldn’t hide anything from Claire, but she tried frantically to come up with a believable lie. One look at Claire, though, and she knew even her most believable lie wouldn’t be believed.

“It’s nothing that can’t wait,” she finally said.

“What is it?” Claire refused to give in.

Casting a glance at Ed, and feeling like a thorn in their precarious relationship, Jill gave into the inevitable. Meeting Claire’s concerned gaze, she lifted one shoulder in an apologetic shrug.

“I think I know what the fibers might be from.”

A block from the café, halfway to the car, Cindy finally found some semblance of balance. Feeling Lindsay’s fingers still wrapped solidly around her own, she glanced down at their hands before raising her eyes to Lindsay’s surprisingly serene profile.

“Is that why you always get so mad at me when I do things you think are stupid?” she gently asked. “You feel responsible for me?”

It was hardly the only reason, but it didn’t make it any less true.

“If anything happens to you because you are trying to help me, I won’t be able to live with that,” Lindsay admitted.

“Linz, even if you didn’t want my help, I would still do what I do,” Cindy replied. “You know that, right? I want to do it. Sometimes, it has nothing to do with you. Sometimes, it’s just about justice.”

“And when you ask your friend for confidential information on a serial killer who nearly destroyed my life or put your job at risk to show me pictures so that I can find out the truth about my dad?” Lindsay inquired.

“Okay. Maybe sometimes it’s for you,” Cindy confessed shamelessly.

They moved in silence past buildings tagged with gang graffiti and other paraphernalia of hard street life, Cindy replaying in her mind what they’d just learned, having no idea how Lindsay must feel.

“Your Dad was innocent,” Cindy stated softly.

“Yeah,” Lindsay rasped, pride coating her voice. “He’s kind of a hero, even if no one knows.”

“You know,” Cindy murmured, squeezing Lindsay’s hand.

Lindsay looked over at her, with an indecipherable expression that made Cindy’s heart rate pick up immeasurably.

“I’m sorry about the comparison,” Lindsay uttered. “You’re nothing like that guy. I mean, we need you, but I have no doubts that, if you didn’t have us, you’d be fine on your own.”

That was so indescribably wrong, Cindy didn’t know where to begin denying, so she simply shifted her hand around in Lindsay’s, interlocking her fingers with Lindsay’s longer ones, and leaned her head against a strong shoulder.

“Well, I totally will not be resorting to drugs, if that’s what you’re trying to say. No matter what,” Cindy solemnly vowed. “Prostitution... that’s my game.”

Lindsay laughed unguardedly. “Is that right?” she asked.

“Totally,” Cindy confirmed. “Three hundred dollars, I rock your world for an hour.”

“That’s steep,” Lindsay returned. Cindy could feel her moving around, but she was too content where she was to raise her head and investigate. A few seconds later, her attention was drawn to Lindsay thumbing apart three twenty dollar bills. “Damn, I’ve only got sixty on me. What can I get for that?”

Lifting her head carefully off of Lindsay’s shoulder and trying not to blush, Cindy glanced up.

“Don’t worry,” she said casually. “I do discounts for hotness. You could totally have me for sixty.”

Suddenly releasing Cindy’s hand, Lindsay dug in her back pocket, coming out with another bill.

“I found another ten,” she announced merrily, adding it to rest. “Do I get something extra for that?”

Wondering how many additional pockets Lindsay might find cash in, how soon she could be up to that original three-hundred dollars, and fighting the warm crimson that was now undeniably creeping along her neck, Cindy wandered toward the curb and away from her oddly exuberant friend. It felt like divine providence when her eye was instantly drawn to a small copper circle lying on the sidewalk, and with child-like excitement she started after it.

“Are you sure you want to pick something up off this street?” Lindsay questioned.

Still bent in picking up mode, Cindy glanced over her shoulder.

“I found a penny,” she revealed.

“A penny? Seriously?”

“It’s heads up,” Cindy explained. “I figure we need all the luck we can get right now.”

No sooner did Cindy speak those fate-tempting words than several things happened in rapid succession. Cindy scooped up the penny, a taxi from out of nowhere squealed around the corner, hit a puddle on the side of the road, and splashed Cindy full on.

A few feet behind her, Lindsay could only watch events unfold, frozen in place, until Cindy turned toward her, dripping all over, penny raised between her fingers, and she couldn’t stop the laughter from bubbling up out of her.

Cindy gave her a disbelieving look.

“I’m sorry,” Lindsay said, trying to get her laughter under control to no avail. “It’s just so funny. The irony.”

“And the fact that I’m dripping water head to toe,” Cindy added for her.

“That too,” Lindsay agreed, clearing the distance between them.

Cindy pulled the flimsy gauze that was serving as stand-in for a real shirt up to wipe her face, the short fabric pulling free of the corset, instantly drawing Lindsay’s eyes to exposed skin and Cindy’s neutral-colored bra. The cool night feeling suddenly balmy, Lindsay glanced around to make sure no one else was bearing witness, relieved to find that they were still alone, before returning her eyes to the sight. Once directed there, though, her gaze went straight for the scar,

the faintly warped skin on Cindy's chest, a stark reminder of how close they'd come to finding out if they could make it without Cindy.

Head popping back up out of the gauze obstruction, Cindy noticed the focused attention. Lindsay wasn't exactly being shy in her observance. Like always, it felt melodramatic and morbid and like pity, and made Cindy entirely uncomfortable. Carefully, she tucked the shirt back in, covering her scar and all of its reminders.

Lindsay felt that familiar twinge, a seizing desire that, with everything that was happening, she'd valiantly tried to toss aside and not acknowledge. She'd disregarded it expertly for some time, and it would be wise to uphold that precedent. But she couldn't. Not tonight. Tonight, she was too greedy. And Cindy was far too beautiful.

"Penny for your thoughts," Cindy brandished the dull coin, trying, Lindsay suspected, to regress as smoothly as possible, pull them away from the edge so that they didn't have to go there. Not right now.

But despite her noble efforts, Cindy was hopeful, looking up at her expectantly, waiting for what was there between them to become something tangible that they could bodily feel. Lindsay didn't have to do much soul-searching to recognize how much she wanted that too. She'd waited too long to repair her relationship with her dad. She didn't want to make the same mistake when it came to moving forward with Cindy.

One hand covering Cindy's penny-wielding fist, Lindsay's other raised to a damp cheek, fingers sliding along a firm jaw line and meeting wet tendrils of red hair. With little hesitancy her thumb cleared away muddy water from a full lower lip. Cindy inhaled sharply, the discharge rushing cool air against Lindsay's skin.

Then Cindy's lips were under hers, opening instantly and eagerly, equally giving and accepting, and Lindsay couldn't remember all of her reasons for resisting the temptation.

World spinning around her, Cindy clutched at the back of Lindsay's jacket, searching for traction, and gasped against the unrelenting mouth assailing her own as she felt Lindsay's body press flush against her. Lindsay's tongue seized the opportunity, rushing in to tangle with Cindy's in an intimate duel that persisted with neither side giving an inch until they absolutely had to.

Breaking apart minutes later, Lindsay felt Cindy panting softly against her lips and shivering forcefully against her. Feeling a little shaky herself, but fearing that Cindy's might be from wearing wet clothes in the chilly night air, Lindsay shucked her jacket, pulled it around Cindy's shoulders and ran her hands up and down Cindy's arms in an effort to warm her.

Cindy opened her eyes and looked up at her, and Lindsay saw something astonishing in them. It almost seemed like the closing scenes of a movie, seconds before “The End” faded in on the screen. But, somehow Lindsay knew that it was more of an ill-timed, complicated start.

Trying not to curse aloud when her phone stridently interrupted, Lindsay blindly reached for it, eyes locked with Cindy’s. Finally pulling the hardware free of her hip, she glanced down.

“Jill,” she murmured.

“She’s probably wondering when we’re going to get there,” Cindy responded softly.

“Yeah,” Lindsay breathed, fighting the urge to ignore the call, and flipped open her phone. “Hey, we’re on our way.”

“Let’s meet somewhere we can talk instead,” Jill returned.

“Why?”

Cindy watched the concern pass over Lindsay’s face and it was instinct to move closer to her. Lindsay reached out for her in response, hand landing lightly on Cindy’s hip.

“Alright. We’ll be there soon,” Lindsay said into the phone, closing it one-handed, and smiling a little as she took in Cindy’s costume. “I hate telling you this, but you’re a little overdressed. Jill wants us to meet her and Claire back at my place.”

“Why?” Cindy asked.

Eyes running over Cindy’s soaked bandana and down her face, Lindsay really wished the night could end differently, but the reality of their lives ensured there would be many nights that would end too abruptly. And never for any good reason.

“She’s got something on Hallelujah Man.”

...E THAT YOUR SOUL
...IS IN DANGER?
...SODOM BURNED AND ALL
...WENT WITH HER.



Apostate Blues

Women's Murder Club Virtual Season (2)

Episode # 6 - "Apostate Blues"

Written by liz_estrada

****Teaser****

Standards for what constitutes a 'large individual' have changed over the course of human evolution; the first Australopithecus to scamper across the Tanzanian plain was likely no more than four and a half feet tall. Now, some seven million years later, when people have become almost inured to the sight of a seven foot, 300 LB man dunking a basketball, it takes a spectacular specimen of biggitude to transform sophisticated urban citizens into paralytic gawkers.

San Francisco Homicide Inspectors Lindsay Boxer and Warren Jacobi waited breathless in the back yard of a dilapidated Seeger Street row house. Their jaws remained agape, eyes unblinking and wide as their murder suspect – a mid-fifties white male dressed in a blood-soaked tweed suit – put a fist on the dirt and stood up, unfurling his body to its full, hellishly intimidating height. Clutched in a lefty death grip, the man held what appeared to be a gore-caked chef's knife.

Not four hours before, officers following an anonymous tip discovered five dead bodies in a drug-strewn dump up the block. Three men, two women, all dispatched by deep, precise wounds to the heart and throat, some liberally dusted with a mixture of crystal meth and cocaine.

Boxer and Jacobi were interviewing various blind, deaf and dumb area residents in the vain search for a witness when a terrified neighbor waylaid them to this yard, to this impressively built, knife-wielding fellow who fit the description of 'likely suspect' so perfectly, he may as well have wrapped himself up as an early Christmas present.

"Have mercy," Jacobi muttered, before loudly ordering the man to drop the knife and raise his hands.

The suspect appeared confused. His brows twitched and forehead wrinkled. Traces of rusty white powder flaked away from his nose and mouth.

To Lindsay, the flakes resembled a grotesque Van Dyke beard of blood and cocaine. A man that size would be difficult to subdue under any circumstances, but if he was nuked on stimulants? Reloading might be necessary. Her finger remained at index on her Beretta's trigger guard, and she repeated Jacobi's orders.

"Police! Drop it! Hands up!"

Only after she gestured emphatically with her gun did the suspect seem to understand his life hung in the balance. Weary blue eyes registered comprehension, and he nodded. His

kielbasa-sized fingers uncurled painfully slow, like they'd been clenched for hours. The knife dropped point-first and stood wavering in the soil. He lifted his arms in surrender.

Barked orders and body language cues sent the suspect to his knees, and Lindsay covered him while Jacobi snapped on cuffs with the suspect's full cooperation.

"You're under arrest," Jacobi began, and tugged with great effort to get the man back on his feet. "You have the right to remain silent -"

"Nu culpa," the man whispered, followed by a string of heavily accented words that sounded like a prayer.

Jacobi cast a questioning glance toward Lindsay, who responded with a helpless shrug. "Greek to me. I'm a lapsed Baptist."

Reading the Miranda rights to suspects was protocol, regardless of their ability to understand, so Jacobi frisked him thoroughly and completed the legalese litany while Lindsay bagged the knife.

"No wallet, no phone or keys," Jacobi reported. "No cash. No identification."

"International man of mystery," Lindsay quipped. She took a quick look around the neighborhood, and was gladdened to find their little side-street jaunt hadn't drawn the baying media's attention. "Let's scoot before the hounds catch our scent."

"Didn't see the littlest bloodhound over there," Jacobi noted.

"Yeah. Can't believe she's missing this one." Lindsay had also clocked the peculiar absence of Cindy Thomas, the San Francisco Register's ace crime reporter, and she tried to hide her disappointment. "Good thing, though," she added. "We might make a clean getaway."

Across town at the Register offices, the reporter in question packed up her desk and struggled desperately with the desire to cry. Or throw something heavy through the conference room window, just to scare the poop out of the chicken-legged editorial staff.

"It's not like we're letting you go, or even suspending you," the managing editor told her. His shirt bore wide sweat rings under the arms, and he smelled like a man besieged by the panicked whims of others. "Just take it easy at home for a little while, do some softer stories until this business gets straightened out, huh?"

"This is ridiculous," Cindy repeated. She'd said that at least five times, partly because it was true, and partly because the repetition kept her from screeching neon blue profanity.

She picked up her purse, a banker's box full of research material, and a small canvas tote bag – a bag which contained the very reason for her banishment from the paper – and elbowed her way around the cubicle partition.

“We're just being cautious, trying to avoid a workplace incident,” the sweaty eddie explained again. “It's temporary.”

“It's ridiculous!” Cindy bellowed.

She made it down to the parking garage before she lost it. In the safe privacy of her car, which didn't really feel all that private or safe anymore, Cindy cracked a little. She almost laughed and almost cried and almost allowed for the possibility that it wasn't ridiculous, that her editors and colleagues were right.

Maybe the Hallelujah Man had a crush on her.

****Act One****

Getting the Hummer-height suspect into their low-ceilinged unmarked unit proved tricky for Boxer and Jacobi; they bumped his head twice before he settled in the back seat. All the while, he remained oddly docile for someone who might be high, especially calm for someone who recently slashed five people to death.

On the drive back to the Hall, he kept his eyes low and continued to mumble foreign, sacred-sounding words. Lindsay caught the occasional 'deo' or 'judico' from Latin, but the rest was a wall of sound her brain could not penetrate.

After only a few blocks, her curiosity and annoyance boiled over. She half turned to face him. “Hey. Hey, what's your name? Where you from?”

At first, he didn't seem to hear her at all, and continued his prayers.

“My name is Boxer. His name is Jacobi,” Lindsay enunciated, pointing helpfully to herself and her partner. “Your name?”

After a few moments, the prisoner quieted and looked up. His bloodshot eyes held a natural confidence and intelligence, and Lindsay was surprised to find his pupils were not dilated. He quirked his mouth flat, as if sealing his lips, and shook his head.

“Okay, Mr. No-name. Are you enjoying your crime spree in America? Carving up half the junkies in San Francisco?” she said, while pointing out the windows at their beautiful city scrolling past.

A flash of something near happiness loped across his face. “Ahh, America. San Farnciska. Yes.”

Lindsay whispered sideways to Jacobi, "I think he's Canadian."

Jacobi's stomach clenched with a stifled laugh. On days like this, days when they missed sunrise while cooped in a rank toilet of a house, spent breakfast staring at the horrified dead tarred with thick strands of their own syrup... well, a joke could make the difference between letting the black seep in, or keeping your professional remove. On days like this, humor was crucial.

"Nu Canada. Romania, yes. Sibiu," the prisoner cheerfully announced.

Lindsay drew back and blinked rapidly. She was surprised by how normal he sounded at that moment, his apparent relief at the prospect of communication. "Do you speak any English? At all?"

He frowned. "Putin englezeste. Little?"

Frustration scuttled through Lindsay's brain. She scanned her memory and realized she knew painfully little about eastern Europe. "How 'bout Russian? You guys speak German?"

The suspect made a dismissive face and spit toward his feet. He said something that even Lindsay could recognize as profanity. "Romanian," he repeated. Turning aside, he resumed his prayers.

She turned around and muttered to Jacobi. "This is gonna be fun. I thought even schizoid killers spoke more than one language nowadays."

Jacobi lifted a brow and humphed at his partner. "Well, you don't. And before you even say anything, Texan is not a formally recognized dialect."

"Aw, shut-up. You're no Rosetta Stone, old man."

"I speak-a the Italiano," Jacobi corrected.

Lindsay sneered at this patently false claim. "Barely enough to seduce a cocktail waitress. That doesn't count."

He hissed through his teeth. "I'll chalk that one up to envy and let it slide. Not my fault your man's across the Pacific."

Lindsay's shoulder tensed in a faint flinch. For the first time that already too-long, too-gruesome day, she gave a thought to the man of mention. Pete Raynor was probably tucked away in his Cambodian offices, working late into the evening to get another building permit cleared through the Phnom Penh bureaucracy. At some undetermined point during their separation, Lindsay had come to realize the phrase 'out of sight, out of mind' was more than an empty cliché; lately, it rang like truth.

Quite unbidden, her thoughts jumped onto a parallel line and Cindy Thomas was suddenly front and center in her brain, looming near with cream-pale skin, warm eyes and thick auburn hair. Sense memory is a powerful thing and, in that instant, Lindsay could almost smell her breath, taste her mouth. She stared blindly into space and let her tongue glide across her bottom lip, as if some trace of a week-old kiss still lingered on her skin. Some sweet hint of lip gloss, or the earthy splash of rainwater...

Jacobi popped his fingers near her face. "Boxer."

She snapped back to reality and gave him a bleary, blinky grin. "Yeah?"

He leaned in through the driver's side window and jingled the car keys. "If you're done chewing on your lips and daydreaming, maybe you could help me take Bigfoot upstairs?" he asked, and jerked his head toward their placid, praying prisoner.

Lindsay looked around and saw they were in the Hall's parking garage. She'd missed half the drive back, lost in recollection of one guilt-stained, extracurricular smooch with a female reporter ten years her junior, a kiss stolen while squished between too many stressful cases, and while her own alleged boyfriend was eight-thousand miles away.

"I'm in trouble," she said, and slammed the car door.

Clumps of uniformed officers parted like a dark blue sea as Inspectors Boxer and Jacobi sailed into the squad room - the enormous, ghastly prisoner ambling before them made for a very effective prow. No one drifted within six feet of the man, and Deputy District Attorney Jill Bernhardt couldn't blame them. Giant, blood-spattered homicidal maniacs gave pause to most sensible people.

Jill sat at Lindsay's desk with a cell phone pressed to her ear while, on the other end of the line, the Deputy Mayor's hostile barking (decrying both Bernhardt and her little SFPD playmates as ultra-morons who flattened the Mayor's approval numbers by allowing serial and spree killers to run rampant throughout the city) turned to irrelevant background noise.

She picked up a folder and waved until she garnered Lindsay's attention, then exaggeratedly mouthed, "Is that him?"

In response, Lindsay raised the evidence bag containing the gory knife and gave her friendly neighborhood prosecutor a cross-eyed smile, which Jill translated thusly: "Der. Of course it's him, genius."

"We got him," Jill announced into her phone, provoking a stunned silence from which she drew immense personal satisfaction. "Yes, mere hours after the crime scene

discovery, a suspect is in custody and police have recovered the possible murder weapon. If you like, you may now retract all previous statements regarding my competency and that of the intrepid public servants investigating these murders.”

The line went dead. Jill flipped shut her phone and sighed. “Guess that's a no-go on the apology. Shocker.”

Not that she was genuinely disappointed; no, for Jill, the current standard for disappointment was learning exactly how many thousands of designs of priest's stoles were available, how many different countries were involved in their manufacture, and how difficult communication with Chinese and Polish textile producers could be – they cooperated only slightly more than the paranoid bureaucrats of the Catholic Church. Ergo, Jill's Halloween party insight regarding the origins of certain crime scene trace evidence had thus far proved difficult to develop.

Like so many other potential Hallelujah Man leads, it curved back and formed a circle, trapping investigators inside while the killer rolled free. Still, even clotheshorse Jill was impressed by the wide array of fashion choices for members of the clergy; the vestment-and-stole combinations alone were almost limitless.

Across the room, Lindsay was briefing Lieutenant David Carbahal – a sub for the vacationing Tom Hogan. He didn't talk much, nodded a lot, napped at his desk and took three hour lunches. He made everyone miss Tom's hunting dog energy.

Once Carbahal departed, presumably to make a few calls and go back to sleep, Lindsay darted around front of the prisoner to open the interrogation room door. As Jacobi led him inside, the suspect suddenly turned and addressed Lindsay.

“Boscher? Boscher.”

Evidently, he listened well enough to catch a semblance of her name. His eyes remained steady, and his voice retained that strangely reasonable, lucid quality which again caught Lindsay's ear. Still, his movement was jarring, so her cautious left hand perched on the butt of her pistol.

“Scuzati-ma,” he said, shaking his head to allay her distress. “Boscher. Nevinovat - nu culpa, ah?”

“Yeah-huh. Obviously all just a big misunderstanding,” Lindsay said. She helped Jacobi secure the suspect foot and hand, then they left him under guard and moved into the observation room, where Jill waited for a briefing.

“Am I mistaken, or did that coke-faced behemoth in the O-positive suit just tell you he didn't do it?” Jill asked.

“That's about all he can say – he doesn't, or won't, speak English,” Lindsay told her.

“Says he's Romanian. And, despite the hydrochloride facial, I honestly don't think he's high.”

“Sure doesn't act like it. Calm as anything,” agreed Jacobi. “We'll have him tested once he's booked, after forensics gets up here to collect evidence. Ten'll get you five that dust around his nose matches our crime scene blizzard.”

“I like those odds,” Jill said. “Please tell me that knife was on his person at the time of arrest.”

Lindsay gave her a grin. “In his very hand, counselor.”

Jill pumped her fist and hissed out a thrilled “Yes!”

Her overt joy was understandable because the city's law enforcement apparatus – the D.A.'s office in particular - was under pressure from City Hall to win back public confidence. Lately, there were too many weak plea bargains, and too few straight-up trial convictions with hard sentencing. After layering that atop a general lack of progress on the Hallelujah Man murders, Jill felt she was overdue for a high-profile slam dunk, and she looked ready to kiss Lindsay flush on the mouth for giving her a clear path to the basket. Perhaps Jacobi, too, though with considerably less vigor.

“I freakin' love you guys,” she burred, bouncing on her tippy toes.

“All we did was put him in the car,” Lindsay deflected. “You should thank the tipsy old neighbor lady who found a 'loony whacker' passed out in her azaleas.”

“If we can put this one to bed clean, I'll swing by with roses and Dom,” Jill proclaimed, raising two fingers to seal the promise. “Meanwhile, I'll try to corral an interpreter for Vlad the Inhaler.”

Lindsay wrinkled her nose over the rotten (possibly inaccurate) pun and watched Jill nearly skip out the door. She couldn't help smiling; seeing Jill in such a buoyant mood was a rare treat these days. Additionally, the sight of those lean hips jiving in a narrow skirt reflexively lit the reptilian areas of the Boxer brain. Though her staring barely spanned a three count, it was enough to warrant notice from her grouchy, perpetually observant partner.

“Good grief,” Jacobi complained.

“Good grief, what?” Lindsay couldn't believe it; this legendarily houndish man, now sour-faced and cross-armed, was daring to judge her for a little glance? “Oh, leave me alone.”

“Clearly, you've been left alone too long already. Do us all a favor - check yourself before you do something incredibly self-destructive and stupid. Again,” he added, plainly

referring to her ancient indiscretion with an engaged ex-husband.

“It's time to write that one off, okay? I'm not doing anything...” Lindsay's voice softened and trailed away. Her sharpshooting eyes had traded Jacobi for a distant target – specifically, a smallish, red-headed bullseye wandering near the squad room entrance.

Lindsay Boxer focused on Cindy Thomas, because that's what she did now, because once the thought of her cropped up, there was simply no other option. At unpredictable intervals and often at the worst possible times, her world would shake until all non-essential contents scattered like chaff, until it all winnowed down to one increasingly necessary person. This violent, tectonic process invariably left Lindsay feeling dizzy, muddled, and starving.

“Stupid,” she finished and summarized.

She watched Cindy shift a canvas tote from one shoulder to the other and approach the paired desks Lindsay shared with Jacobi. Watched Cindy's expression change from confusion to dismay at Lindsay's apparent absence. Watched as a handsome young uniformed officer approached Cindy.

Graham, Kyle. A shiny, crew-cut newbie from Nowhere, Florida with good teeth and broad shoulders. He touched Cindy on the arm. Gestured for her to take the empty chair beside the desks. Brought her water and knelt before her, smiling.

Cindy smiled back at him.

Lindsay's brows instantly crashed together. Her chin dipped low, and her nostrils flared. One boot scuffed against the floor, a tentative pawing before blast-off.

“Toro, toro,” Jacobi whispered, as his bullheaded partner charged off to blindside the unsuspecting young toreador. “Woman never listens.”

Cindy Thomas felt highly uncomfortable walking into the Hall of Justice, and that in itself made this a very unusual day. Her visits were normally work-related and therefore solidly in her comfort zone. Those visits had little to do with her personal life, except on that rare occasion when she made a work-related excuse to spend time with a certain inspector.

In the past, she'd been guilty of dropping in with inane questions about a story or case, questions which could have easily been answered with a phone call, simply to be close to Lindsay Boxer, to perch on the edge of her desk and lean in close, whispering questions and soaking in breathy, drawled answers as if they were discussing national secrets instead of subliminally flirting.

That was before. Before the simmering, scantily acknowledged attraction between them took the form of one exceptionally sweet, tragically brief kiss – a kiss they hadn't spoken of since. Lindsay had dodged her calls this past week and avoided being alone with her, sending the clear message that maybe they'd jumped the gun a bit.

Emotions were running high that night; maybe Lindsay had kissed her while gripped by gratitude or relief over learning that the late Martin Boxer wasn't really a dirty cop. Maybe it didn't mean what Cindy thought, or hoped, at all. Maybe Lindsay took some time to think and came to her senses.

Lindsay had a boyfriend, a successful, handsome, age-appropriate partner with one significant drawback: Pete Raynor was physically absent. Meanwhile, perpetually present Cindy had given Lindsay an irrefutable confession of romantic intent by trying to suck the lips right off her face.

Though it hadn't been like that, not really. Cindy's overactive memory sometimes gave it a garish tint, but she knew it was a bona fide sunrise event – it shimmered, welcome and right, just on the horizon. They would talk about it sometime soon, Cindy knew, just not this morning.

This morning, she walked into the Hall with a literal sack full of problems which, sadly, had naught to do with kissing her favorite cop.

Cindy wound up her courage and crossed the homicide bullpen, headed straight to the familiar paired desks, but neither Boxer nor Jacobi was anywhere in sight. Her resolve faltered for a moment.

“Miss Thomas?” a man's voice called from behind. “Can I help you with something?”

She turned around and found herself nearly nose to chest with a solidly built uniformed officer. “Ooh. Hey, there.” She took a step back. “No, I'm good. I'm just... waiting.”

“For Inspector Boxer,” the officer said, with a sly, knowing smile.

Cindy wondered if she was so terribly obvious, if everyone knew the moment she set foot in the squad room that she was coming to see Lindsay. “Yeah, actually. Is she around?”

The young officer nodded and crossed his beefy arms. “Man, you reporters are fast. She just brought the suspect in a few minutes ago.”

“Just brought in the suspect,” Cindy repeated, trying not to sound bitter. The multiple homicide from Seeger Street wasn't her story, but she was heartened to know that SFPD had the killer in custody so quickly. She thought it better to keep secret her real reason for visiting, and so played along. “We're not as fast as you guys sometimes, but we try to keep up.”

The officer – Graham, by his shiny name tag – waved a hand toward the empty chair by Boxer's desk. “Guess it's okay if you take a seat. Can I get you anything while you wait? Coffee, maybe?”

Pleased and surprised by this courtesy, Cindy asked for and received a cup of water. Coffee was out of the question; her nerves didn't need any extra stimulation. She carefully settled her purse and canvas tote out of sight, under Lindsay's desk.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” Officer Graham asked. He knelt before her chair and kept his voice confidentially soft. “You seem kind of... I dunno. Out of sorts?”

She gave the kid a smile and told a smooth, simple lie. “I nearly got smeared by a taxi this morning. Shook me up a little.”

“Wow. You gotta watch out for those cabbies – they'll run you down, then get out and demand a tip,” Graham joked.

It wasn't terribly funny, but Cindy appreciated the effort and kindness, so she faked up a chuckle. She stopped laughing when Lindsay Boxer clomped up beside Graham, looking like she wanted to kick somebody square in the face.

“Officer? You got somewhere else to be?” the inspector rumbled.

Graham looked up and swallowed hard. “Uh... yeah.” He stood and gave Cindy an embarrassed grin. “See you around. And keep an eye out for those taxi drivers, okay?”

Cindy clicked off a half-salute. Lindsay stared napalm at Graham's back until he departed the room. “What's that about taxis?” she asked.

“Nothing. Didn't happen,” Cindy said. “Do you have a minute for me?”

“Jeez, Thomas. The suspect hasn't even said anything yet. He might be faking, but I don't think he speaks English. And he literally spit when I asked him about German or Russian.”

Cindy pulled a silly, grossed-out face. “He spat at you?”

“Not really. It was more like a 'hell, no' kind of spit.” Lindsay paused as if mulling something over. “Say, you don't happen to speak Romanian, know any Romanians, da-da da-da?”

“Romanian? No, can't say I do.”

“Shoot. Figured it was worth asking,” Lindsay said, shrugging. “Can't rule much out with you.”

“Sorry. Actually, I'm not here about the drug murders - someone else is on the story. Although I'm pleased as punch that you nabbed the psychopath.”

“That's another thing – I don't think he's crazy, or even high. I don't know what his deal is.” Lindsay cast her eyes toward the interrogation room. The forensics team had arrived to collect evidence, presumably the knife, samples from the suspect's grimly powdered face, and every stitch of his blood-spattered clothing. She gestured toward Jacobi, asking if he wanted her to come back over, and he shook her off. Evidently, the erstwhile slasher was still on his best behavior.

“No diminished capacity plea, then. Jill must be thrilled,” Cindy noted. “Hey, back to me for a second? I need to talk to you about something else. Something personal.”

Lindsay, assuming personal meant romantic, visibly stiffened. Thinking about kissing Cindy was one thing, but discussion of said kiss remained a dismaying proposition. “Look... I don't even know what to say about that yet. I know I should have called you, but once we met Jill and got started on the fibers and everything, I just - ”

“Not that, either,” Cindy interrupted, though she was clearly pleased to learn their impromptu sidewalk make-out session remained near the front of Lindsay's mind. “Make no mistake, we will discuss that at some point, even if I have to tackle you and strap you down. There may be truth serum involved – I haven't decided yet.”

The suggestive threat caused Lindsay's eyes to widen. She emitted a nervous laugh and leaned against her desk. “Consider me warned. So what's up? You look kinda whipped.”

Cindy grumbled agreement while she retrieved her tote, then laid three plastic zip bags onto the desktop. In each was a 3 x 5 index card and a bundle of pale yellow wildflowers – the ubiquitous California Poppy. One tiny bouquet was pressed flat, as though it had been tucked inside a weighty book for preservation. Lindsay fluttered her lashes in puzzlement.

“About a week ago, I found this note and a little bundle of flowers on Maggie's windshield,” Cindy began. She held up the baggie with the flattened flowers, and displayed the note so Lindsay could read the blocky, printed inscription.

“You are an exceptional person. In case no one has told you lately... you're beautiful,” Lindsay recited. She paused and squinted, trying to hide her unease. “Okay. That's bizarre.”

Cindy frowned and let her shoulders slump. “Gee. Thanks a lot.”

“Oh – not bizarre that someone would think you were beautiful.” Lindsay's face contorted wildly as she backpedaled toward contrition. “It's true, you know. Both parts. I meant the method of conveyance is weird.”

“Mmh. I thought so, too,” Cindy agreed. “And thank you for the half-assed compliment.”

Lindsay flashed a relieved smile. “My specialty. Moving on?”

“Moving on. This one was dropped off at the Register yesterday morning, with another little bouquet.” Cindy held up the second bag, containing a note which read:

“We don't always know what's good for us. Sometimes we need to be protected from the things we want.”

“Oh, boy. Whatever happened to 'Hey, cutie, let's grab a coffee'?” Lindsay wondered.

Cindy swallowed a zinger about how she'd wondered the same thing lately, though not exclusively about the stalker – now was not the time. “I questioned our building's desk attendant, but he said the note and flowers were waiting at the front door when he opened up,” she added, as her expression turned sulky and angry. “Word got around fast, and someone pushed the panic button. Office gossip says the Hallelujah Man is reading my articles and wrote me a love note-slash-death threat.”

“That's crap,” Lindsay muttered. “It's dangerous to spread that kinda talk. They should know better. Plus, the idea of that pious sicko sending a note just to say you're special and pretty and whatever - it's ridiculous.”

“That's what I said! Or shouted, really.”

“You should have shouted!” Lindsay boisterously agreed. “I would have hollered my guts out.”

Cindy sniffed up a faint laugh, heartened by her friend's vicarious outrage. After the paper raised a white flag so quickly, it felt good to have someone to take up her colors and give a rebel yell in support. “Yeah, well... the managing editor said he couldn't risk a 'workplace incident,' and didn't want to take any chances. They've asked me to do scut work from home until this gets sorted out. That's why I'm not on your super-nasty Romanian slasher case,” she woefully explained.

“Jesus. I'm sorry.”

“Please don't apologize. They're the ones with feathers on their legs.”

“Pardon?”

“Chickens,” Cindy clarified. “Bok, bok.”

“Oh. Right.” Unsure what else to say, Lindsay sighed in sympathy. She motioned for Cindy to continue her show and tell presentation.

“Right. Okay. The third, which I found this morning, was taped to the door of my apartment building,” Cindy said, with a light tremor in her voice. She steadied her hand and raised the third note.

Lindsay scowled as she read the words aloud. “Blindly following our passions will bring misery and ruin. Be strong and walk the righteous path.”

Cindy laid the plastic bag aside. She wasn't scared so much as anxious; the notes weren't overtly malicious, but the notion of being watched by someone bold enough to physically invade her life, someone opinionated and righteous enough to judge her professional (or personal) choices – it was distinctly unsettling. When Cindy looked up, she found Lindsay's expression had washed down to a stern, rocky shoal.

“From vehicle to work to home within a week. Seems you've got yourself a rapidly escalating stalker,” said the peeved inspector. “Why'd you wait so long to tell me about this?”

“Aside from the fact that you've been ducking me?” Cindy fired back, causing Lindsay to lower her eyes. “Alrighty. Got that out of my system. I shall let it drop.”

“I'd 'preciate it,” Lindsay muttered.

“Thing is, that first note and the flowers came right after... after that incident we're not talking about just yet. Truthfully, I thought it maybe it was from you.”

“Me?” Lindsay straightened up, looked genuinely slighted. “You think I'm some cheapskate weirdo who leaves unsigned notes and flowers yanked off a highway median?”

“Hey, I've never been courted by you! You might write poetry and send wine and roses for all I know! I don't know what to expect, if I should even expect anything,” Cindy whispered at a hot ramble, all while blushing a fetching shade of irked. “The first note was kind of sweetly innocuous, and the timing... I mean, it came right after we - ”

“Yeah, okay,” Lindsay interrupted, hoping to spare herself another distracting trip down memory lane. “I savvy your logic about the first one. Those other two are raising my hackles.”

“Are we talking Hallelujah Man hackles, or just generic, overprotective cop hackles?” Cindy squinted out a weak smile. “Please say it's the second one.”

Lindsay sensed how hard Cindy was trying to hide her fright. She battled down an urge to slide off her desk and hug the girl – just wrap her up and hold on until the world slowed down. The fear that she couldn't offer support to her friend without the intrusion of sexual tension or awkwardness made Lindsay feel like a coward and a damned fool. She magicked up a comforting smile instead.

“Second one. There's a religious tone, for sure, but no malice. They seem corrective, sort of like...”

“Vaguely non-secular pedantry?” Cindy supplied.

Lindsay chortled over the reporter's concise, ripping assessment. “Mmm-hmm. This might be someone who reads your articles pretty regular. Maybe they saw you at a crime scene and thought, 'Hey, she's just a cute, fluffy runt.’”

“Whoa, now -”

“A vulnerable, innocent kid seduced into danger by the glamorous world of criminal justice.”

Cindy's mouth fell open in a quiet gasp. “That is so grossly offensive, I don't even know where to -”

“Easy, now. I know you're a piranha. I've seen those teeth at work,” Lindsay said, showing her palms in a placating gesture. “I'm just saying certain ignorant people might mistake you for a defenseless little kitty in need of rescue. Happens to the best of us.”

“Oh.” Cindy took a moment to smooth down her ruffled pride. “Piranha?”

Lindsay jutted out her bottom teeth and clicked bright choppers in goony, underslung affirmation. It worked – Cindy smiled, even laughed a little.

“Anyhow, they've grown so invested in your safety that he – or she – is reaching out, in their own yucky way,” Lindsay continued. “First thing we do is file a report so there's something on record - I'll do that as soon as I get a minute. Second thing, you take this stuff down to Claire and let her do all the usual checks. Third thing, you start being extra careful.”

“I've already skipped ahead to number three,” Cindy told her.

“Good. Don't go outside without a finger on that pepper spray trigger, you hear me?”

“Yup. Loud and clear.”

Across the room, Jacobi emerged from the interrogation room with the forensics techs. He waved his partner over. Lindsay nodded, rolled a hitch from her tense shoulder and leaned a smidge closer to Cindy. “For the record, I have sent flowers, but never in all my days have I written poetry.”

Cindy mustered a grin. “That's a shame. Some of the best American poets are cowboys.”

Lindsay snorted and rolled her eyes. Despite a cellular ache to stay with Cindy and play watchdog, both knew that wasn't really an option. She stood and readied herself for the shift back into case-closing mode. "This deal here will probably wrap up fast. Soon as I can, I promise we'll take care of this."

"Thank you."

"Stay alert, but don't get too worried." Though she wanted to stay, wanted to offer something more solid than a promise, Lindsay gave Cindy's arm a brief squeeze and backed away. "It's gonna be all right. We'll find this crank and put the fear in him, okay?"

With a confidence she didn't fully own, Cindy nodded and gathered her things. She watched Lindsay join Jacobi and examine a slip of paper. They spoke excitedly and departed the bullpen at a trot, presumably following a hot lead. Cindy was inconsolably jealous.

Moments later, two officers led a stunningly large prisoner out of the interrogation room. On his massive body, the prison scrubs looked like doll clothes; the cuffs barely reached his armpits, and the trouser hems rode high on his calves. Cindy imagined that with a strong sneeze, he could rip the stitching at several stress points, like Bruce Banner during a green mood.

"Holy sheep," Cindy murmured. The impolitic reporter in her yearned to rush over and fire a few incendiary questions (in German and Russian, just in case he was faking). In this case, good sense did overrule her passion. Her stalker would be so proud.

On her way out, she called the Register's managing editor directly and tipped him that SFPD had a suspect in custody – nothing more. Her abrupt announcement sent the clear message that she felt snubbed by not getting the assignment. She was too preoccupied to properly flaunt the consequences of his cowardly misstep.

Once trapped in the crowded elevator, Cindy Thomas struggled with an unusual sensation of claustrophobia. Every brushed arm or bumped shoulder reminded her that privacy and personal space were illusions; when someone wants to insinuate themselves into your life, there really isn't much you can do to stop them.

She drew her arms in and tucked against the back rail, tight-shelled as a walnut. Despite the fact that she was surrounded by police officers sworn to protect and defend, she didn't feel safe.

****Act Two****

Medical Examiner Claire Washburn was literally up to her elbows in a body when Cindy Thomas entered the morgue. The crime reporter had built up a healthy resistance to gore

over her relatively short career, but the sight of a vivisected body still managed to chill her blood. Four gurneys bearing sheet-draped bodies were lined up for post-mortem exams. Staffers buzzed around, collecting and classifying as quickly and efficiently as they could in the cramped space. Cindy hovered near the door and cleared her throat.

Claire looked up at her half-expected guest and shook her head. “Honey, I just got started. There's not much I can tell you.” Her hands roved around the corpse's chest cavity, and the sickening squishes made Cindy cringe.

“I so wish I was here for official business, but I'm not on the slasher story,” she explained, hoisting the canvas tote filled with quasi-evidence. “Lindsay said I should bring this stuff to you.”

“She did, huh?” Claire huffed. Her hand emerged from the corpse with a neatly punctured heart in tow. She weighed the heart and recited the results to her assistant. “Is the inspector aware that I am currently, for lack of better words, totally slammed?”

Abashed by her friend's unusual brusqueness, Cindy grimaced and nodded. “Sorry. You know what? It's not a big deal, just personal stuff. It can wait.” She slumped in defeat and turned to leave.

“Cindy.”

The young woman turned back and found Claire looking at her intently.

“You're already here. Speak it.”

Aware that Claire had bigger fish to fry, Cindy cut right to the point. “I kind of... have a stalker? Weird notes. Flowers.” Suddenly feeling silly, she snickered and bowed her head. “Like I said, it's not a big deal.”

Claire's hands went still. Her face, partially obscured by her mask and safety shield, measurably softened. “Are you okay?”

“On the ten point freak-out scale, I'm pulling a five,” Cindy admitted.

“Hmm.” Claire whispered something to her assistant. She pulled down her mask and de-gloved, approached Cindy with her hands out. “Give it over. I'll run some tests once I'm out from under this mess.”

Cindy surrendered the tote and smiled her thanks. Claire grasped Cindy's elbow and they retreated to the relative calm of her office.

“How long has this been going on?” Claire asked, in a voice mercifully free from recrimination.

“About a week. I've been pinged three times so far.”

Once the baggies were spread out on her desk, Claire immediately noticed the flattened, preserved bouquet. “I'm guessing that one arrived first. You planned on keeping it, so... did you assume it was from a secret admirer?”

Cindy instantly blushed. “Well... sort of. 'Stalker' wasn't the first thing that leaped to mind.”

“Way I see it, secret admirers aren't much better,” Claire said. “Who'd you think it was from?”

“Doesn't matter. I asked, I was wrong, that's a dead end,” Cindy explained, trying to neatly end that line of questioning.

Claire tucked her chin low and looked suspiciously giddy. “But you had your hopes.” She bumped Cindy with her hip. “Come on. Spill it. You know you want to tell me.”

Cindy took a step back and crossed her arms. “Maybe someday when you aren't totally slammed,” she said, tilting her head toward all those bodies waiting for the doctor's attention.

“The truth takes less time than all these evasions.”

“Oh, no,” Cindy moaned. “Believe me. The truth would take so, so much longer.”

“Now that's just fuel on the fire. You've got a sweet spot for somebody, and I will have that name,” Claire proclaimed, despite being 70/30 sure she already knew the name quite well. “Mark my words, child.”

With a beleaguered droop of her head, Cindy tried again to divert Claire's deft perception to a more productive topic. “I appreciate that you're trying to distract me – thank you – but I'm really more concerned about the person who sent me the flowers than the person who didn't.”

“Uh-huh.” Claire stared at her for a moment more, then looked over the notes and flowers. “Might be late this evening before I can get to it. If you don't want to go home tonight, you know we'd be happy to have you at Casa Washburn.”

The offer was especially generous, considering the difficulties Claire and husband Ed had endured of late, but Cindy gently refused. “I'm still only registering a five. If that changes, I may show up on your doorstep with my pillow and blankie. And my trusty can of pepper spray, since Lindsay forbade me to leave home without it.”

Claire smiled and patted her arm. She looked past Cindy and saw her assistant busily logging autopsy data, and she felt a pang at having to leave her friend in distress. “You

look tired. If you don't have somewhere to be right now – and if you don't mind the constant whine of a Stryker saw - you're welcome to hang out here. Rest a while.”

Nodding gratefully, Cindy slumped onto Claire's battered sofa. “I haven't been sleeping well,” she said, clutching a throw pillow to her chest. “Maybe just for a little bit.”

“As long as you need. I'm gonna order in some sandwiches, so plan on staying for a late lunch,” Claire said, and closed the door behind her.

Strange as it might have seemed, the morgue office had taken on an aura of safety for Cindy; it felt almost like the basement of a friend's house. Cindy closed her eyes and imagined a pool table and a bar, an old television set with a rabbit ear antenna. Her sense of well-being gradually returned. Her heart rate slowed and her breathing leveled out.

She fell asleep to the sound of a Stryker saw, and the memory of Lindsay Boxer's calm voice promising her everything was going to be alright.

Lindsay loved her partner like nobody's business, but there was one thing about the man that made her crazy: when they weren't heading toward an emergency call, Warren Jacobi drove like a granny bound for church. Lindsay fiddled with the radio, changing the station a dozen times. Looked out the window at the city crawling past. Loudly and deliberately cracked her knuckles.

“Can you hold still?” Jacobi suddenly snapped.

“Can you speed up?” she countered. “Bicycles are passing us. I'm startin' to think you're lost.”

“I know exactly where we're going. It's my day to drive, so suck it up.”

She tried to suck it up, she really did, but Lindsay didn't want to be here. She wanted this case over and done so she could figure out what to do about Cindy's stalker – and what to do about Cindy. After a few painfully quiet moments, she started playing the drum solo from “Wipeout” on her thighs.

Jacobi sighed and rubbed his eyes. In a show of détente, he pressed a tad harder on the accelerator. “What's up with you?” he queried. “We've got the suspect, got the murder weapon, got a clue to follow... as far as multiples go, this one's been a cakewalk.”

Lindsay knew he was right about the case. Rarely did a violent perp covered in damning evidence simply fall into SFPD's collective lap. Rarely did they get such quick replies from immigration authorities, who claimed they were busily tracking down names for recent U.S. visitors of Romanian extraction.

And the clue Jacobi mentioned held promise as well; forensics found an address scrawled on a slip of paper in the suspect's shoe. It might lead to their mysterious giant's secret identity, or help explain his motive. If Jill could manage to wrangle an interpreter, they'd prize out a confession and all the pieces would snap cleanly into place.

"It's not about the case," Lindsay confirmed.

"Okay. Problems with a certain reporter, then."

She tried for a dismissive tone. "Shuh... what makes you say that?"

"I'm a genius detective," Jacobi teased. "Come on. The girl hasn't been around for a week or so. Shows up today, flirts with that gym-built uniform - "

"Please! She was not flirting with him."

"Maybe, maybe not. Pointless if she was," Jacobi said with a grin. "Graham is gay."

Lindsay snorted in disbelief. "Nuh-unh. Every time I see him, Graham's talking about girls," she asserted. "The guy's a loud-barking dog."

Jacobi didn't see the point in criticizing Lindsay's faulty gaydar; the irony would be lost on her. "Fine. Sexual orientation notwithstanding, he appeared to be flirting with Cindy, and you were ready to stomp that boy's soft parts."

"I was not!"

"Be easier on everybody if you'd just face facts. Pete's grown. He'd understand."

"Warren, knock it off."

"Okay," he said, though he was plainly not finished. He waited a few ticks and sallied forth again. "It probably wouldn't be as tough as you think."

Lindsay slammed her eyes shut and prayed with all her might for Jacobi to shut his yapper before this developed into a full-fledged argument.

"1288 Parson," he said. "Not all who wander are lost."

The car came to a stop. Lindsay opened her eyes and found her prayers answered; they had arrived at their destination.

"All I'm saying is - " Jacobi began.

Lindsay was already halfway out the door. She slammed it shut on his unwanted advice and charged up the front walk as if fleeing a fire.

Even from the sidewalk, the house simply didn't look right. Weathered green paint hung off the siding in curved scales, peeling loose like snake skin. All first floor windows were obscured by heavy, dark drapes. Despite the chilly fall temperature, several of the second floor windows gaped wide open.

As Lindsay approached, she noted two broken glass panels on the open front door – a sign of forced entry. She looked back toward Jacobi, pointed at the door, and unholstered her gun. In a flicker, he was at her side.

Lindsay took point and knocked on the door. Even that modest touch made the loose, creaky door swing open wider. She craned her head around to see through the gap, but the room was full dark. She called out loudly. “San Francisco Police Department. Anybody home?”

When no answer came, Lindsay asked Jacobi for his penlight and flashed the beam into the darkened foyer. On the floor, showing black in the pool of illumination, was a trail of blood droplets.

“We got blood,” she whispered, affirming both exigent circumstances and a possible second crime scene. They exchanged a practiced look, held fast for a silent three count, and went through the door as a tight tandem unit.

Barely five steps in, they found the first body. A thin black man wearing a wife beater and pajama pants lay sprawled on the filthy front room carpet. Two wounds were evident: one clean punch through the heart and a wide slash across his throat. He would have exsanguinated almost instantly.

“Same wound pattern as the Seeger vics,” Jacobi said. He pulled out his cell. “I'll call it in.”

“There's two more on the couch.” Lindsay aimed the flashlight toward the claret-drenched sofa, where another man and woman lay dead. Their pale bare feet and hands protruded from beneath a fuzzy blanket. “No visible defensive wounds. Might have caught them sleeping, or passed out.”

Jacobi nodded. “Or maybe they knew him.”

A scrabbling sound from the kitchen made them both jump, and Lindsay swung her light and gun toward the noise.

“Police! Raise your hands and come out - ”

“NO! NO! I AM SORRY!” a woman screamed from the kitchen. She darted past the beam of light and ducked out of sight. “GO AWAY! I'M SORRY!”

The scrabbling sounds resumed. An object whizzed out of the darkness and plunked Lindsay hard on the mouth, then fell to the floor with a woody clonk. Lindsay felt her top lip split and a trickle of blood ran over her teeth. Two more projectiles flew out of the kitchen. One caught Jacobi on the shoulder, the other cracked his cell phone against his ear. He yelped and scrambled for cover beside the kitchen door.

“Dammit!” Lindsay shouted, and squeezed the trigger of her Beretta, firing a quick shot into the floor. The booming noise barely died away before she shouted again. “Police! Stop throwing shit and get out here, right now!”

“I DIDN'T KNOW! I AM SORRY!” the woman yelled again, her thickly accented voice ripped and raw. She crawled into the front room and collapsed in a sobbing, fetal heap.

Lindsay covered her while Jacobi finished calling in backup. He snapped on a set of cuffs and hauled the hysterical woman to her feet while Lindsay searched for a switch and flipped on the overhead lights.

Her slick boot sole landed on something round and her balance went momentarily sideways. Lindsay righted herself, looked down and saw a wooden apple and two wooden lemons, like the kind used in tacky 1970's centerpieces. She licked her bloodied lip and privately cursed the flung apple that stung like a softball.

The crazed apple-hurler herself appeared physically unharmed. She wore a long, dark raincoat over a sheer nightgown – a gown crusted with the dried blood of others - and a pair of sneakers. Her gaunt pallor was classic junkie chic.

“Is anyone else in the house?” Jacobi asked her, but she didn't seem to hear him. Louder, and with greater insistence, he repeated the question.

“Shh, shh. Don't wake them,” she whispered, staring blankly into Jacobi's eyes. She shook her head violently side to side, as if trying to fling out a memory. “I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know.”

“What the hell did these people get into?” Lindsay asked, while the traumatized lone survivor, much like the murderer, chanted a mantra of exculpation.

“I didn't know,” she said. “I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know.”

****Act Three****

“Her name is Jana Macek, twenty-nine, immigrated from Romania seven years ago,” Lindsay told Jill as they marched down a whiteout hospital hallway, heading toward the private detention rooms for patients on psych hold.

“She's a senior research assistant for Lavin Pharmaceuticals in Brisbane. One arrest for illegal drug possession last month. Her supervisor says Jana got hooked on meth through

a boyfriend, and she's currently AWOL from rehab, paid through the company's insurance.”

“I'm guessing her job is history now,” Jill said.

“Correct. Boss says she's a really smart girl, but they're cutting her loose.”

“What about the other victims?”

“One was Jana's boyfriend, Lyle Overbey, former chem major at Santa Cruz and convicted meth cooker. No names for the other two yet, but I won't be surprised if they're in the system. Birds of a feather and all that.”

“So Parson Drive was definitely a cook house?”

“Oh, yeah. There's product scattered everywhere - cocaine, oxy, a little weed, and a lot of crystal. The entire second floor was a lab set-up. Looked real professional, though a lot of the equipment was smashed to junk,” Lindsay recounted. “Sorry you couldn't tour the scene. DTSC said it'll take a while to get the hazardous crap cleaned up and processed for evidence.”

“It's okay,” Jill assured her. “I'm not eager to die of toxic shock.”

“CSU worked the first floor pretty hard. Plunkett says these three victims were killed first, about two hours before the Seeger Street murders. Since our guy had the Parson Drive address on him, it looks like he went there first, stab-slash-stab, then visited Seeger. Stab-slash-stab, repeat as necessary.”

“Any idea why Jana Macek wasn't killed with the rest?” asked Jill.

“We got ideas out the wazoo. Mine is that Vlad was really looking for the second house, but didn't know how to get there. He storms the first house and does everyone but the Romanian girl, because he needs her help to find his real targets,” Lindsay theorized. “Jana had on a coat and sneakers with her nightgown. Since the Seeger house is only about three miles away from Parson, and since no one in this drama owns a car, I'm thinking they walked over and she got him through the door.”

“Still, once he's in the house, she becomes a liability,” Jill persisted. “Why not kill her then?”

“With five victims at Seeger, things might have gotten out of hand. Maybe she skipped during the riot.”

Jill anxiously chewed her bottom lip. “Sounds plausible, but there's wiggle room in that schedule. Even at twenty minutes a mile, that leaves Big Vlad time for reflection before going in.”

“Yeah.” Lindsay grimaced and shook her head. They paused to show their identification to the duty nurse and were buzzed through double doors into the secure ward. “I keep thinking, what if he stopped somewhere else along the way? We could find a third scene, a fourth...”

“Shhh!!” Jill flailed her hands at the notion of a Michael Myers-style spree killer carving a gruesome path through their city's trashy underbelly. Between the ancient Zodiac killer, the recent Kiss-Me-Not murders, and the current Hallelujah Man cases, San Francisco already had an unsavory reputation as a Mecca for pattern murders. “Two scenes, eight bodies – that's quite enough.”

“I know, I'm just sayin' there's a dozen dope holes between Seeger and Parson.”

“Honey? Stop. Please. I beg of you,” Jill insisted, not actually begging so much as demanding. “Has Jana said anything useful?”

“Not unless you want to hear a shell-shocked junkie say she's sorry a thousand times.” As they came to a stop outside a numbered, barren hospital cell, Lindsay heard their lone witness jaggedly calling out in perpetual apology. “That started in the ambulance - five hours ago. They say she hasn't shut up yet.”

Jill bristled at the horrible, pathetic cries; the woman sounded terrified. Jill braced a hand against the steel door frame and peered through the narrow observation window. Jana Macek, strapped to a bed, writhed around like a snake doused with kerosene. “My God. Can't they sedate her?”

“They did. Twice. Girl's got the drug tolerance of a musk ox. The shrink just told me questioning her before tomorrow would be pointless,” said Lindsay. “How 'bout you? Find a passable translator yet?”

“The Romanian Consulate General's office is sending an attorney from Los Angeles tomorrow. They're concerned that we might not provide fair and impartial counsel for their mystery citizen – who, by the way, is still without a name,” Jill snitted. “We're trying to light a fire under the feds, but they're suddenly dragging ass on getting us an ID.”

“Which means one of two things: the giant is someone important, or someone who's not supposed to be here. They're playing CYA.”

“The bureaucrat's favorite game - cover your ass,” Jill concurred. She shut her eyes and ran a hand through her hair. “So much for my slam dunk. More like a lay-up and a hard foul.”

“Hey, you'll get your points. Our guy did it, we just don't know why.” Lindsay let out a weary groan and leaned against the wall beside Jill. “He gets caught with the knife in his

hand and leaves a living witness. Still, he keeps saying 'No culpa, no culpa' over and over. I don't understand."

"You will. We will. Tomorrow, all will be revealed," Jill said, wiggling her fingers as if summoning aid from the mystic forces of truth and justice.

"If only," Lindsay said, grinning. Her smile jerked into a wince as the swollen welt on her upper lip cracked a little. "Can't believe I nearly got taken down by a wooden apple."

Jill gave a sympathetic giggle and yanked on the sleeve of Lindsay's leather jacket. "Come on, sissy. Let your favorite lawyer buy you a drink. I'll throw in some extra ice for your war wound."

The exhausted cop reluctantly peeled herself off the wall. "Sounds like a plan."

"It's a fine plan," Jill agreed, tugging the taller woman along toward the elevators. "Sheer elegance in its simplicity."

Actually, the idea of spending a few hours with her best buddy, ratcheting up tequila theories about hit men for Romanian drug cartels, sounded pretty fantastic to Lindsay. They'd probably wind up discussing the serials as well, because the Hallelujah Dick was never far from their thoughts, and because Jill sometimes experienced Newtonian idea storms while drunk and dancing to eighteen minute reggaeton remixes.

Thing was, Lindsay had somewhere else she dearly wanted to be, and she was tired enough to admit as much to Jill.

"Can I get a rain check?" she ventured. "I wanna look in on Cindy."

If Jill was disappointed, she hid it well. Her sly smile indicated Lindsay's refusal wasn't much of a surprise. When she spoke with Cindy earlier, the reporter seemed pretty chill about the whole stalker thing - though she ranted a bit about chickens and piranhas, which Jill wrote up to frustration, work-related and otherwise.

In that conversation, Cindy had referenced Lindsay more than usual, enough to be conspicuous. Jill noticed that Cindy Thomas was steadily creeping up the inspector's priority list, too, though she remained too keen to say as much out loud.

"An even better plan," Jill asserted. "Call if you need backup. We'll shoot some Grey Gooses... or is it Grey Geese? Flip it - we'll kill some vodka."

Lindsay clicked out a silly wink/point combo. "Will do."

Cindy put the finishing touches on a mediocre, routine story about the county expanding

its enhanced 911 services, pasted the text into an email and flushed it from her computer toward the Register's story dump. It would resurface toward the ass end of the A-section, she knew, and her wobbly pride took another kick to the shins.

Still, it was work, and steady print jobs like hers were hard to come by. In the current turkey burger economy (as a certain Ms. Fey had put it), a working writer couldn't afford to make too many waves, unless they relished the idea of covering dry cleaner grand openings for the local penny saver.

She flipped shut her laptop and pushed away from the desk, rubbed the dancing light spots from her eyes.

“Dinner time,” she called out, and her voice rang through the empty apartment. At times like this, she wished she had a dog. Or a person. Whichever. Some sort of anchoring companion might help her feel less adrift in her own home.

Once in the kitchen, Cindy found she had neither the energy nor the self-esteem to cook anything real. Lean Cuisine and Diet Coke would suffice. While prepping the microwave meal, charitably labeled a 'Cafe Classic', she reviewed her scant list of options for company.

Danny would commiserate with her about the Register's weak-kneed reaction to her stalker; Claire would tell her to pack a bag and come over; Jill would take her out to get hammered and laid; Ellen would nag about why she never called her anymore; Lindsay would... would...

And there, Cindy's coherent train of thought derailed into memory. The memory of a thumb tenderly priming her mouth, of a kiss so dead solid sweet, it strummed her veins like nickel-wound strings and set her blood pounding in time with the earth's churning iron heart. There, looping within that memory, Cindy Thomas experienced four minutes of unrepentant nirvana as a soggy Halloween pirate, levitating above the city sidewalk while Lindsay Boxer kissed her.

The microwave mocked her with impertinent beeping, as if it had never been in love.

She ate her food-shaped food, drank her bubbly soda. Belched indelicately toward the television news anchor - a shellac-haired, dead-eyed dolly who criticized San Fran police for not apprehending the Hallelujah Man with the same tidy alacrity as today's junkie slasher.

“Moron,” said Cindy to the blithering blond. “You try catching one of these pricks.”

Try it, she thought. Let the cockroach crawl inside your head and slick up a nest from newspaper clippings and human blood. Let your failed pursuit of him define your career. Let him steal you away from your friends, your lovers, your life. Let him murder your family. Try it, Cindy thought, try sleeping on broken glass for a few years, then maybe

you'll have the right to run your mouth about the people chasing this vile, cunning freak.

“Moron,” she said again, for it bore repeating.

She went to the kitchen to trade her soda for a beer, but heightened paranoia made her glance toward the front door, the small gap at the bottom. Cindy's breath hitched and she froze in place. A shadow slithered under the lit gap. It departed, then returned. This indecisive spill of anti-light rhythmically oozed across her hallway floor several times.

Cindy figured it must be the stalker, out there pacing, debating whether to leave another note/flower combo or just skip straight to the kidnapping and murder.

Not one to dither in the face of danger, and already spoiling for a fight, she snatched up her pepper spray and - for good measure – her French rolling pin, and crept toward the other creeper.

On the count of five, because three wasn't quite long enough, Cindy threw the locks and flung the door wide. She screamed bloody hell and charged into the hall with spray at the ready and her rolling pin raised high, like the club of a savage barbarian who was learning to make her own pie crusts.

Lindsay Boxer nearly pissed herself from shock. She stumbled back against the wall, one hand raised in surrender and one hand covering her eyes, just in case Cindy got trigger happy with the Capsicum. “Jesus H. Christ, Thomas! Don't shoot!”

Cindy's fearsome shout wilted to a meek eep, and she lowered her ersatz armaments. “Sorry! Sorry.”

Sick to death of that word, Lindsay shook off the apology. “My fault. I should have called first.”

“That might have helped. God, Linz, you nearly scared my hair white.”

“Back at ya.” Lindsay managed a thin smile, impressed by Cindy's assertive response to a perceived threat, but concerned that this wasn't the safest approach. “Did you call 911?”

“Err... no. There wasn't time.”

“Well, if this happens again, call for help before launching your attack.” Lindsay squinted at Cindy's oddball secondary weapon. “Is that a rolling pin?”

Cindy brandished the kitchen implement in a martial manner. “Don't laugh at me. I'm in a Naomi Campbell headspace.”

Lindsay quailed at the very notion. She shoved her hands in her back pockets and looked toward the open apartment door. “Feel like talking?”

“No.” Cindy crossed her arms and immediately reconsidered. “Maybe. I don't know! I hate feeling trapped in my own house, I hate missing out on your funky-up case, I hate that big-mouthed, empty-headed bimbo on Fox News, and I really feel like hitting somebody! Is this normal?”

“You've traded spooked for pissed-off,” Lindsay said, with a sage nod. “Excellent – that's progress.”

“I acclimate quickly,” Cindy said, finally relaxing enough to recognize an opportunity. “I find that cold beer aids me in this process. Care to join me?”

“Thought you'd never ask.”

Lindsay's slasher case update was handled fast and neat while popping beers in the kitchen, and Cindy broke the bad news that Claire found only one set of prints on the notes – Cindy's own.

The flowers were generic roadside poppies, bound in everyday, dime-store kite string. A scant trace of powder was pulled from each note - perhaps an indicator that the stalker used latex gloves - but Dr. Washburn postponed chemical analysis of this powder when a stream of late afternoon corpses flooded the morgue.

“That was totally inconsiderate of you, by the way,” Cindy quipped. “Commandeering my personal forensics expert for actual police work.”

“Sorry. Them's the breaks.”

All the while, they were careful to stand several feet apart. In the living room, they didn't sit close. Once they exhausted work-related topics, conversation stalled like a cold engine. Things had definitely changed between them; their previous sense of ease had been magnetized into simultaneous attraction and repulsion via one electric kiss.

“This is weird for me,” Cindy stated. She curled her legs into her chair as Lindsay slumped deeper between couch cushions. “Is it weird for you?”

Lindsay sipped her beer and thought it over. “Yes,” she said.

Cindy waited for elaboration, but none came. “Yes. And...?”

“And... I don't know.” Lindsay shrugged. She stared at her boots and latently realized she was tracking microscopic amounts of meth and blood all over Cindy's floors. Another guilty straw on her choke-a-horse bale. “It's weird.”

The reporter clenched her teeth and wondered if anyone had ever used torture to make Lindsay talk. Though she had no branding irons or pliers handy, she could probably improvise an Inquisition-style scenario with dripped candle wax and a garlic press. “You should know, this taciturn thing? Is doing nothing to quell my violent urges.”

“So hit me. I probably deserve it.” Lindsay grinned and shrugged again. “Just not on the mouth, okay?”

Cindy instantly seized a throw pillow and flung it at the other woman's head. The quick-handed cop batted it aside and laughed. Only then did Cindy notice the slight plumping of her friend's upper lip. “Someone already bopped you on the mouth?”

“The crazed potential witness at the second – or first – crime scene. She threw wooden fruit.”

“Ouch. I'd offer to kiss it better, but you might not call me for another week,” Cindy joked.

Lindsay swallowed her smile. She had avoided talking to Cindy for the same reason she had dodged Pete's calls all week: she hated hurting people. The very thought of it made her stomach ache, made her spine wilt like overcooked pasta. Still, procrastination was rarely a sound method of problem solving, especially when the solutions were so obvious, so inevitable.

“I didn't want to talk to you until things were settled,” she finally admitted. “Things with Pete. And I've put that off because - ”

“You're not sure about this,” Cindy guessed, pointing between them. Though her hand was steady, she couldn't hide the waver in her voice. “You're not sure about me.”

“Cindy, when it comes to stuff like this, I wouldn't know 'sure' if it jumped up and bit me,” Lindsay confessed. She lowered her eyes, thinking the words might come easier without seeing Cindy's face.

“I've spent a long time on my own. Mostly because I wouldn't settle for less than I had with Tom. I believed if I was patient and it was meant to happen, I'd find that again. It took a while, but eventually Pete came along. He's patient. Seems to understand me. Maybe he's the man I've been looking for.”

Somewhere above Cindy's head, an invisible guillotine blade trembled on a wire. She'd spent so much energy wishing that Lindsay would talk, and now she prayed for her to stop. She felt a sick stab of envy for Pete, and bit down before it flourished into something worse. Wide-eyed and paralyzed, she waited for the blade to drop.

Luckily, Lindsay hadn't quite finished her thought.

“Then again, maybe not,” she said. “Fact is, I'm not sure about him. Fact is, I don't think about him much anymore...”

Here, Lindsay took a deep breath and fixed Cindy with a warm, steady gaze.

“... because I think about you all the damn time. Not just about kissing you again, or even taking you to bed – although, God knows, I want you something awful.”

At last, Cindy blinked. Her guillotine sprouted wings and flew back to French history. She lightened inside, her blood fizzed like champagne, and she held her chair arm to prevent a collision with the ceiling.

“There's more to it. I feel like... like we'd be good together. I know there'd be problems. I mean, you drive me absolutely crazy sometimes, you know?”

Cindy snorted softly and nodded.

“Still, I think it might be worth the trouble, if you want to take a run at something.” Lindsay glanced away and absently wrung her hands. “But I don't want to pressure you.”

“Pressure me?” Cindy croaked, stunned as a lottery winner. “Linz, everything you just said - I've been there for about a year.”

Lindsay looked equally stupefied. “No.”

“Yes. Seriously. Welcome. So glad you could make it,” Cindy said, and wondered for the hundredth time how this woman could be so crazy honest and so oblivious in equal measure. “You and me? It's happening. Actually, it's been happening for a while now. I suspect you're the last to know.”

“Aww, man.” Lindsay let her head fall back against the couch. “You could have warned me.”

“Why? So you could run screaming in the opposite direction?” Cindy clucked her tongue at that silly suggestion. “You had to muddle through on your own, without a map. Like Lewis and Clark.”

Lindsay frowned sourly. “At least Pocahontas had their backs.”

“That was Sacajawea,” Cindy blurted, then shook her head to avoid getting sidetracked by trivia. “Now that we're on the same page... are you going to talk to Pete? I mean, like, soon?”

She sounded so eager, so ready to let Lindsay bulldoze her life, that the older woman smiled and waltzed straight through her anxiety. “Yeah. I will.”

“By way of incentive - you're not seeing my birthday suit until you're officially single,” Cindy vowed.

Lindsay raised her brows at the enticing prospect of a barenaked redhead. Though Cindy's rowdy good cheer was doing wonders for her own mood, Lindsay knew there was another potential hindrance. “Same applies for you.”

“Me? I'm good to go,” the reporter insisted, snapping her fingers. “Strip right now, if you like.”

“But... I thought you were seeing somebody.”

Unwilling to squander their momentum, Cindy downplayed those concerns. “Nothing steady. I haven't talked to Ellen or anybody else since you put the smack on me,” she explained. “That kiss essentially ruined my social life.”

Lindsay chuckled and stretched out her legs in a half-conscious, preening display of denim and sinew. “I'd apologize, 'cept I'm not sorry.”

“Nice. I'm digging the arrogance.” Cindy perched on the chair's edge and considered whether she would need specialized tools to extricate Boxer from those skin-tight Sevens. “Would it be completely tasteless to ask you to call Pete right now?”

“Completely. I'm burnt tonight. I swear I'll call tomorrow.”

Lindsay tried in vain to stifle a yawn; after today's trials, jump-starting her lazy speech center had drained the final amps from her battery. Still, even this weariness held a certain satisfaction, like her plain, hardy words laid the keystone for a bridge, and tomorrow promised a new crossing. As she moaned and stretched her arms high, her shirt rode up and flashed a band of sun-gilt stomach.

Cindy's eyes homed in on the bare skin. She licked her bottom lip and said, “Let's send him a text message.”

“No! Jesus.” Begging the universe for a little more strength, Lindsay straightened her top and ground out a long breath. “I should probably go home while we're still pretending to be civilized.”

“Hey, I can restrain myself. Literally. I have some cuffs in the fun drawer.”

The words 'cuffs' and 'fun drawer' gave Lindsay a humid jolt somewhere south of the border. “Oh, brother...” she said, and readied herself to get up and run.

“Wait – I'm kidding. I'll meditate, or think about baseball or something. You don't need to go.” Cindy shifted a bit, quietly unnerved at the thought of being alone again. “Do you need to go?”

The idea of spending a night on this couch held little appeal for Lindsay. The couch was too close to The Bed, where slept The Cindy, who was still off-limits. Despite her own instinct to push people away when she was in crisis, Lindsay understood the need for fellowship during a siege, and she wouldn't embarrass Cindy by making her grovel for solace.

"I'll have to bolt early," she said. "Jacobi would give me hell if I showed up tomorrow in these same clothes."

Cindy stood and breathed a sigh of relief. "Early is good. I'll make breakfast."

Lindsay drained her beer and pulled off her boots. She placed her gun on the coffee table and splayed across the sofa while offering a warning. "I don't usually eat much breakfast. Don't go to any trouble or you'll spoil me."

"Oh, the spoiling will commence forthwith, on a variety of fronts, so I advise you not to fight me," Cindy replied. "Besides, you haven't really had breakfast 'til you've had breakfast with me."

"Oh-ho! Now who's being arrogant?"

"My dad always said it's not bragging if you can back it up," Cindy explained. On her way to the bedroom, she heard a low, sweet whistle, and smiled.

She brought back a pillow and blanket and shut off the lights. She hesitated near the end of the couch, wanting to say something more serious, when Lindsay's rusty voice whispered through the darkness.

"It's gonna be okay," she said. "Seems like a lot right now, but we'll work it out. All of it."

When Lindsay said things that way, with such surety and conviction, Cindy believed as though she'd brought truth down from the mountain on lightning-scribed tablets. She bid her guest a good night, knowing she would sleep well for the first time in a week, and hopeful this would be the last night they'd spend apart for a while.

For Lindsay, sleep remained elusive; while listening to Cindy prepare for bed, she thought about Pete and flushed hot with guilt. She thought about Claire and Jill and how they would react to the changes which seemed certain to occur. She thought about Jana Macek screaming horror, and guiltless men who murdered as if they had special dispensation from God. She thought about catching Cindy's stalker in the hall and stepping on his neck.

Somewhere along the line, her restless imaginings transitioned to better dreams. Though she slept alone that night, it felt like Cindy was already in her arms.

Of all the ways to wake up, rousing to the smell of coffee and cinnamon ranked pretty high in Inspector Boxer's good books. She rolled off the couch and shuffled to the bathroom in her sock feet, cleaned up and met Cindy in the kitchen.

“Cinnamon rolls, fruit, coffee,” the reporter announced, already dressed and astonishingly perky for the early hour. “I kept it simple.”

“Beautiful.” Lindsay helped herself to coffee and watched with hooded eyes while Cindy alternately nibbled on a roll and slices of orange.

“You're staring,” Cindy mumbled. “What's wrong?”

Lindsay wasn't fully awake, and her inhibitions still ran low from a night of pleasant dreams. “Nothing's wrong,” she said. “Just thinking how good you'd taste if I kissed you right now.”

Cindy promptly choked on her orange slice. She coughed and spit the mangled fruit into the sink.

“I shouldn't have said that out loud.” Lindsay blushed and rubbed her eyes. “Sorry.”

Still red and dizzy from coughing, Cindy mildly jiggled her head. “It's okay. Just don't talk like that while I'm chewing. I could meet a tragic, senseless end before we even get started properly.”

It was a joke, Cindy's reprimand, but it still made Lindsay flinch. She sipped her coffee and nodded agreement to the first rule of their incipient relationship: no spicy talk during meals. She nabbed a cinnamon roll and took a bite, and her eyes nearly rolled back in her head – it was that good. Or she was that hungry, that happy. Maybe a blend of all three factors. “Wow,” she whuffed between bites. “Since when can you cook like this?”

“Since enlisting in Alton Brown's culinary army. Once I establish a breakfast beachhead, lunch and dinner will fall trembling at my feet,” Cindy proclaimed. She snapped her heels together and marched from the kitchen.

Lindsay saluted and held quiet, too charmed to ask who Alton Brown was.

Cindy ducked out the front door and retrieved the paper, hoping against hope that her 911 story got decent placement. She popped the rubber band, spread the Register out on the counter, and her breath ran short.

“Lindsay...”

Accustomed to bad news, the inspector immediately assumed something humiliating and scandalous had made its way onto the front page. “What? Did they get a shot of Vlad in his blood suit?”

White-faced and mute, Cindy pointed to the 3x5 index card taped to her paper's masthead, a card with this simple, block print inscription:

“Can you not see that your soul is in danger? Sodom burned, and all the infidels with her.”

Dr. Claire Washburn had barely rolled out of bed when the call came. Thirty minutes later, she arrived at the forensics lab to find Lindsay Boxer and Cindy Thomas waiting in the hallway, huddled tight on a bench. They saw her approach, and Lindsay discreetly unwound her arm from the reporter's shoulders.

“You okay, honey?” Claire inquired, with a sympathetic smile.

“I regret every time I ever wished for fan mail.” Cindy looked up and sighed. “From now on, I'm incognito. I'll wear a blond wig to crime scenes. My new pen name is Kitty Pimms.”

Claire squatted before Cindy and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “You'd make a cute blond, but I like you the way you are. And you don't look like a Kitty to me.”

“Me, neither,” Lindsay interjected. She jutted out her lower jaw, clicked her teeth, and Cindy smiled like that gonzo face was the loveliest thing she'd ever seen.

Though she knew she was missing something, Claire didn't disrupt the moment by asking. Every time she witnessed Lindsay behaving this way toward Cindy, all protective and sweet, she felt a fragile tickle of potential. The sensation was kind of delightful and kind of scary, like a tiny fish swimming around her ankles in murky water.

“Are you sure you don't mind doing this for me?” Cindy asked. “I feel like I'm jumping the line.”

“It's one of the benefits of club membership,” Lindsay asserted. “This, and a complimentary beat-down when we find this guy.”

“Amen.” Claire extended her free hand to Lindsay. “Gimme the note. I'll run it for prints and start the powder analysis.”

“You're the best ever, Claire,” said Cindy.

“Tell that to my husband,” Dr. Washburn said. Through the plastic bag, she read the

note's plainly homophobic inscription and frowned nastily. Then she gave Lindsay a funny, questioning appraisal (same outfit as yesterday? or do all her clothes look that much alike?) and turned for the lab. "Call you when I get something."

With Claire in the lab and another M.E. on duty in the morgue, Cindy decided she'd feel more comfortable hunkering down elsewhere for the workday. The homicide bullpen was too open, and it wasn't entirely kosher for a reporter to embed with the squad, anyhow. One phone call to Jill Bernhardt solved the 'where to put Cindy' problem, and the reporter was happily ensconced in Jill's office by eight, where she immediately logged on to the web for research-slash-distraction.

Jill herself was heading for the hospital to question Jana Macek in the presence of a psychiatrist and a public defender. She tucked the Seeger & Parson murder files into her valise, checked her identification and issued Cindy a warning. "Don't mess with my bookmarks. Don't move any files, don't clean or fix anything."

"And if I do?" Cindy dared, for Jill's computer was in sad disarray and she ached to neaten it up.

The attorney made a dangerous face and waggled her fountain pen like a lead sap. "I will make you sorry," she promised. "There may be pinching."

Cindy grinned, looking so grateful for the teasing that Jill couldn't maintain her distance. She walked over and put a hand on her friend's shoulder, leaned down and kissed her cheek. Just about then, her door burst open, heralding the arrival of Inspector Lindsay Boxer and Jill's boss, acting District Attorney Denise Kwon.

"If that oily midget thinks we're stupid enough to send a foreign prisoner to his embassy, he's got another thing coming," Denise was saying as she donned her coat. "Possession being nine-tenths of the law, if he wants to see our guy, he'll play by my rules."

Lindsay made affirmative noises and shot her friends a helpless glance. She looked morbidly tired, and Jill could tell she was currently being swept along in Denise Kwon's terrible wake.

"What's happening?" Jill asked.

"The Romanian consul's attorney is trying to dictate terms for questioning." Denise snorted and wrapped her throat with a fantastic emerald scarf. "I told him he could meet us at the detention center, or walk west until his hat floats – I don't care which."

Cindy giggled, and Lindsay gave her a slow, warm smile. Jill blinked at them, cleared her throat, and asked Denise how she could help.

“I need that witness statement.” Denise held up her BlackBerry and canted an eyebrow at her most reliable legal eagle. “Send me highlights as soon as you can. If the suspect won't talk, I'll need leverage.”

Denise turned heel and blew out of the office. Lindsay was clearly reluctant to follow; she lingered near the door and balled a fist against the frame. “Sure you're good?” she asked Cindy.

The reporter gave a calm, steady nod. “Go do your thing. I'll be right here... fixing Jill's computer.”

Jill sneered and thumped her friend's skull. She gathered her things and went to stand by Lindsay. “I'll get back as soon as I can. Don't worry, though – there's a hundred hunky cops downstairs who would love nothing more than to rescue a beautiful, helpless girl.”

Lindsay stayed mum, but her jaw flexed like she was chewing rubber.

“I'm not helpless,” Cindy growled.

Before Jill could recant, Denise materialized behind them like a well-dressed, angry specter. “Ladies? We need to hustle,” she barked, and finally seemed to notice Cindy Thomas was present, and didn't appear to be leaving. “Someone tell me why there's a reporter lounging in Bernhardt's office.”

Cindy piped up and answered for herself. “They're hiding me from a creepy, God squad stalker. The paper chucked me out because they think it's the Hallelujah Man.”

Denise's eyes bulged. Her glove squeaked as she gripped her briefcase handle.

“It isn't him,” Lindsay added. “We're ninety-nine percent sure.”

“No one knows she's here,” Jill interjected. “We promise, there won't be any trouble.”

Looking from one pleading face to the next, Denise could tell it was pointless to argue impropriety; for these women, friendship had nullified the meaning of that particular word. She couldn't comprehend that kind of bond, and the resulting green zap of jealousy erupted from her mouth.

“Sometimes your little club seems like a co-dependent cluster of ass pain,” Denise said, and hied away down the hall.

Jill choked back a laugh. She pointed at Lindsay. “Ass pain.”

“You are,” Lindsay cleverly deflected.

They smiled and waved goodbye to Cindy. Just then, it felt like an ordinary morning, and

did right up until Jill locked the door.

The detention center consult room was barely big enough to contain the assembled group, so Lindsay and Jacobi stood behind Denise, with the mammoth prisoner and his ratlike counsel seated opposite. Denise cued the guards to begin recording the interview. The prisoner whispered something to his attorney, and pointed toward the police contingent. He actually smiled and nodded at Lindsay as if they were old friends.

“He tells me to relate every word properly, or he will dismiss me,” the lawyer explained. “His English is perhaps not so bad as I thought.”

Denise smelled a full confession in the offing, and told him to start at the start. For the next several minutes, the strangely mellifluous voice of a spree killer held them all entranced; the translated English echo seemed like subtitles on a gripping foreign film.

“My name is Vladimir Zmed. Two nights ago, I took eight lives. By the grace of God, I feel no guilt over these actions,” he began, ending much of the suspense early.

“In Romania, I was a doctor of medicine and a biochemist. As a loyal Party member and government consultant, I made powerful enemies. I was jailed for twelve years after the revolution – after Ceaușescu was hanged – on false drug charges. My ideology failed me. I was a broken man. This pain became a blessing, for during my imprisonment, I disavowed the Party and welcomed God into my heart.”

His broad mouth curved into a beatific smile. “I broke with my past and surrendered my will to Him – and He gave me peace. After my release, I had no license to practice medicine, and was forbidden to leave the country for ten years. I started a small laboratory outside Sibiu, where I tested people and animals for illegal drugs. It was piss and blood everywhere, every day, but I was happy. I bothered no one. I married a kind, simple woman, and we made a son.”

He stopped for a moment and breathed deep and slow, as if trying to steady himself. Lindsay watched him closely, and she recognized the pain in his eyes. She knew what was coming next.

“The baby was sickly, born with neuroblastoma, and he... he died in my arms. I spent that night wandering the streets. At home, my wife closed the windows and went to sleep with the gas on. I buried them both in one day. It was more than I could bear, so I raged at the Lord and demanded His reasons. One night, He gave me the answer in a dream: I was to cure my son's illness. It took me six years, but I did His will – I killed the cancer.”

“The letters started coming a few months ago, all written in Romanian, all marked

'Official' or 'Urgent' and things like that,” Jana Macek explained.

She sipped some water and rubbed at her wrists, chafed and raw from a night spent battling her restraints. Whatever medication cocktail the doctors served up seemed to be working; she was lucid and spoke in a plain, factual monotone, but she seemed rather disconnected. Dr. Luke Bowen once said it was called a 'flat affect,' a severe reduction in emotional expressiveness, and Jill still thought of it as such.

“Dr. Zmed is totally xenophobic – he hates foreigners. My name was listed on the Lavin Pharma website, so I guess he checked me out and decided to contact me about his miracle cancer vaccine.”

Jill raised her eyebrows. “A cancer vaccine?”

“Yeah. It's not as far off as you'd think,” Jana said. “He was injecting viral loads into tobacco plants - using them as replicators, like some of the Mayo Clinic experiments - and he claimed he'd had a breakthrough. He wanted me to come to Sibiu and help him, but I was... I'd met Lyle by then. All I wanted to do was get high and screw, you know?”

Pink flared across Jill Bernhardt's cheeks. “Mmh. Go on.”

“I stopped corresponding with Zmed. I thought he would drop it and leave me alone. He had told me he couldn't leave the country, so I didn't give him another thought. Until he showed up on my doorstep three days ago. God, was he angry...”

“Greed never changes. It took half of everything I had, but I bribed the right government officials and obtained false German travel papers. I arrived in New York last week and used the other half of my savings to get my samples past those port criminals.”

He paused there and nodded at the attorney's translation, indicating he was pleased with the man's veracity on this touchy point.

“I came here, to Jana, and told her my plants would arrive in a shipping container the following morning. We could take them to her lab and she would see... but she didn't care.”

Zmed flicked his fingers and sneered. “She was rude and skinny and stunk like a whore, and her home was full of vermin. Her lover, the black man, told me to go. I left Jana a hotel card with my room number, and I went away. I told myself I would try again tomorrow when I had the plants.”

“Lyle had some of his friends over, asshole tweakers from Seeger Street – did I tell you

they stole my TiVo?”

Jill was not surprised and did not care. “Bummer.”

“Yeah. Assholes. Anyway, they were freaking out about Zmed. He's a really big guy, you know. Like... really big. Like a redwood that talks, or something.”

“Yes, I've seen him,” Jill assured her. She sensed the girl's mind beginning to wander, and routed the conversation back toward relevant matters. “What happened next?”

“Oh, they wanted to know why he was there, and I told them he was a doctor and had some fabulous new miracle drug for Lavin. They seemed so interested, but I didn't want to talk about it with them. Because they were assholes.”

I just bet they were interested, Jill thought.

“Zmed called again the next day, and I didn't answer. I thought about calling him back and telling him to try another company, but I couldn't find the card from his hotel.” Jana pressed her fingers against her mouth like she was smoking a phantom cigarette. Her hand started to tremble. “I guess Lyle's friends had already taken it.”

“They kept saying Jana's name, and I opened the hotel room door. They hit me with a metal bat. They stole my cases, all the vials and all the plants... it was everything I had, you understand? There are no other successful cultures. I had to get them back. This was not simply my work. This was God's work.”

He laid his hands flat on the table and examined them, as if expecting divine light to emanate from his ordinary, mortal flesh.

“I went to Jana's house and she would not let me in, so I broke the door. Her man tried to push me out. I believe he was altered by drugs. He became very angry – angry like me. He went to his kitchen and returned with a cook's knife. He presented it like an offering, and I knew what God wanted me to do.”

Zmed looked straight at Lindsay. “I took the knife and pushed it through his heart.”

“He killed everyone except me. He made me take him to Lyle's friends,” Jana recalled. “Once he went into the house and started cutting people, I ran back home. By then, I was gone inside, like my mind shut down. He killed them all, too. Didn't he?”

Jill said that he did.

Jana nodded thoughtfully. "Do you know what happened to the plants they took?"

This tardy concern seemed like an afterthought, an insult to everyone involved.

"No," Jill said. "There were no tobacco plants logged at either scene."

"That's a shame. I know Zmed's crazy, but what if he was right?" Jana belatedly wondered. "Wouldn't it be funny if those idiots smoked the cure for cancer?"

Jill wanted to reach across the table and smack her. She had what she needed, and so ended the interview and fled the hospital before she lost her temper.

"Some ran, some threw their drugs at me, some begged... they all died. I never found the plants. They probably threw them away or destroyed them when they saw no narcotics in my belongings," Zmed said.

"Regardless, I tore the house apart searching. I even dug through garbage cans of other houses until sunrise. I was cold and tired. I fell asleep near a heating unit, beneath a hedge. Then Boscher found me, and now I am in jail for what I did."

Jacobi glanced at his partner, who stared at the floor. She didn't like the shape of her name in this man's mouth; it sounded warped, like his faith.

Denise Kwon tapped her nails against the table.

"Okay, then," she said. "I take it Dr. Zmed doesn't want a trial?"

His attorney conveyed the question, and Zmed opened his hands and shrugged.

"God will judge me innocent," he said. "I will await Him in prison."

No one spoke as they left the detention center. Denise broke off and headed for her own car. Even though it was her day to drive, Lindsay handed Jacobi the keys to their unit and took the passenger seat.

She grew up thinking God, church and fellowship should mean love, acceptance and family. For many people, that was no longer true. Moral relativism apparently creates a sub-class of zealots who imagine God as an intolerant, bloodthirsty Caesar, and themselves as his Praetorian Guards. If the end is Heaven, the means is always justified.

Something was broken in these people's hearts and minds, and Lindsay Boxer couldn't fix it. She could only clean up their messes once the damage was done. Like a janitor with a

gun.

Lindsay's phone rang halfway back to the Hall. She answered it quickly, hoping for good news. "Hey, Claire. Please tell me you got something."

"You're not gonna like it," Claire began. "The powder residue is an exact match for the gloves we use here in the lab."

"Son of a -" she began, and bit back the curse. "So the notes were contaminated during testing?"

"Nope. I was extra careful," Claire assured her. "Lindsay, these gloves are special ordered for investigations and forensics. The powder is unique for evidence elimination purposes."

When it dawned on the inspector what her friend was trying to imply, her blood went cool. "You're saying the stalker is a cop."

Cindy squeaked surprise when the shave-and-a-haircut knock sounded at the door. She knew it was probably too soon for Jill or Lindsay to get back, so it was probably someone looking for -

"Miss Thomas?"

Looking for her, evidently. Who knew she was up here, anyway?

"It's Officer Graham."

Oh. Cop. Nice guy with the chair and the water. Recipient of her 'I nearly got hit by a taxi' lie. But what did he want?

"Just checking in to see if you want some coffee or a muffin or something while you're waiting for the inspector to get back."

Nice. Lindsay sent him to check on me, Cindy assumed. She had the mid-morning blahs, and fresh coffee and carbs sounded like heaven.

"Sure thing," she called out. She peeked through the blinds, just to be sure, and opened the door. "Dude. You're an angel."

Over a tray of coffee and pastry, Graham gave her a shy grin. "I try," he said.

**** Act Four ****

“I’m only saying the stalker is using our gloves,” Claire stressed. “I’m not accusing anybody.”

“Goddammit, Claire, I want you to accuse somebody!” Lindsay kicked at the floor mat and ignored Jacobi's resulting scowl. “We need to narrow it down! Fast!”

The urgency in Lindsay's voice made Claire rethink her diplomatic approach. Apparently, when it came to Cindy, all that 'thin blue line' stuff went straight out the window. “A forensics pro would know about the signature powder,” she said. “And a good investigator would probably use drugstore gloves for the extra layer of anonymity.”

“So maybe a newbie, a uniform?”

“Maybe,” Claire hesitantly agreed. “There's also civilian workers. Interns. Friends and family could get the gloves through pilfering...”

“A uniform.” Lindsay already had someone fitted up in her mind. “Claire, can you get up to Jill's office and check on Cindy?”

“Of course. I'll go right now.” Claire's rapid footsteps were audible over the phone; more secret was the sound of her wrapping and pocketing a scalpel – just in case.

“I'll call to let her know you're coming.”

Officer Kyle Graham couldn't stop smiling.

Since childhood, he'd been told that the right woman would come along, and all his queer foolishness would fade away like the smell of brimstone. Since tenth grade, when the elders pulled him naked from Trey Leinert's pickup and hauled him out to the swamps, he'd known there were consequences for breaking with the church.

He went to Exodus camp and did Bible study. He masturbated to pictures of women. He grew strong in his faith. He moved toward the Bay as Daniel entered the lion's den, and he prayed for God to send the woman he'd been promised, so that he might live righteously.

From the first time Kyle saw Cindy Thomas, he knew she was that woman. She was smart and pretty, and flawed in a way that he understood. She was perfect for him, and he knew they could be perfect together. If only he could make her see, as he had seen...

“So you're from Florida. How do you like San Francisco?” Cindy asked. She tried to be polite, since it didn't seem like Graham was in a hurry to get back to work. She stirred her coffee and waited for an answer.

His rigid grin flexed slightly. "It's challenging. That's good, though. I came here to test myself."

"As a cop?" Cindy asked, squinting a bit.

"As a man," he said. "In this city, temptation waits around every corner. Not everyone is strong enough to resist."

Right on the heels of that verbal cue, Cindy's eyes went round as saucers. Her fingers jumped so tight, she nearly crushed her little Styrofoam coffee cup.

Graham made a soothing noise and shook his head. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm here to help you."

She looked at her purse, across the room on Jill's desk, and wished for her pepper spray. In the bag's outer pocket, her cell phone emitted Lindsay's ringtone. Out of sheer longing, Cindy took one step toward it.

Graham stopped her with a look of warning. Resting one hand on his pistol butt, he backed up to the door and locked the handle.

"Miss Thomas?" he began. "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal savior?"

Lindsay's call went to voicemail. Stricken and furious, she clenched the phone in her fist. She left a message for Cindy to call back immediately, if not sooner.

Their flashers and siren cleared off some traffic, and Jacobi drove as fast as possible, but he knew they might not be fast enough. Stalkers are opportunists, and if this one was a cop, he would be thrilled to find Cindy staked to a post in his backyard.

"Call the desk sergeant. Tell him to pin Graham down and send someone to look in on Cindy," Jacobi suggested.

"I don't know for certain it's Graham – that's just a bad feeling. And nobody wants to listen to me, outside of you and Tom," Lindsay said. "You're here, he's not, and everyone else is a suspect."

"You're being paranoid. Don't tar the whole department with that brush."

Lindsay didn't want to argue that point. They were a few short blocks from the Hall, and by the time she explained herself to the desk sergeant, she'd already be in the building. "Please, Warren... please just get me there."

On hearing the desperation in her voice, Jacobi set his jaw and laid on the horn. Today, they would be fast enough.

Cindy didn't know how to answer his question. If she said yes, Graham might shoot her to send her on to Heaven. If she said no, he might whisk her away for a permanent baptism. She chose to stall for time, to follow the sexual/moral through line of his notes.

“When I was a kid, yeah,” she began. “Sometimes, I think it wore off when I grew up. I met someone I really wanted to be with... and things got complicated.”

“Complicated – yes. I understand. I know what it's like to hear one voice from your soul, and another from your body. After all, we are beautiful and wondrously made,” Graham told her. “But the immortal spirit holds a price above all flesh. Perversion is a flowered path to hell.”

Oh, how she wanted to shake some sense into this boy! But she needed time. Eventually, Lindsay or Jill would come back, or Claire would come up. They'd sound the alarm and negotiate Graham out of the room. Cindy needed to wait it out and keep him talking; to that end, she essayed theological debate with a gun-toting, sexual apostate stalker.

“Do you really believe God would condemn us for loving someone? I mean, didn't he make us this way?”

“We are all born innocent,” Graham said. “Then the world teaches us to follow our passions, to lust and fornicate, to steal and lie – and look! Look what's happening in this very city! He has sent a shepherd, to employ the rod and guide us back to the flock.”

Cindy felt a spike of temper pierce her brain. As usual, it damaged her inner censor at the worst possible time. “The Hallelujah Man is not a shepherd,” she said, somewhat fiercely. “He's a class-A sinner, a deluded murderer who understands irony about as well as Alanis Morissette.”

“This isn't simple murder. God condones the killing of men, when the cause is just,” Graham replied. “You and I both know that your precious Inspector Boxer wouldn't hesitate to take a life.”

“Only to protect others or defend herself,” Cindy snapped.

“Yes. Now extend that same rationale to the shepherd. If he kills an arbiter of corruption, is he not defending the souls of all men?”

“He's not doing this to protect people! You can't make bad people into good people by terrifying them!”

“But you can sway the weak toward righteousness,” Graham insisted. “That’s why you and I need to work - ”

“Whatever!” Cindy waved her hand dismissively. “If someone can’t freely choose to be good or evil, then nothing they do has any moral weight! This whole shepherd-and-rod thing is a fallacy. Totally spurious argument.”

Graham gave an agitated snort. “Wow. You really are complicated.”

“Brother, you ain’t kidding.” Cindy casually walked to Jill’s desk and stood near her open purse. “Since I’m an exceptional person, I’m willing to let you convince me.”

“I can, but not here. This won’t be easy... and it’s not all talk.” Kyle Graham recalled night-long prayers from the elders, while he hung lashed to a cypress trunk with blood drying on his thighs. He shook his head so violently, his eyes boggled like dice. “We’ll need privacy. You have to come with me.”

The glass office door suddenly shook with a determined knock. The knob jiggled, and Claire Washburn called Cindy’s name from the other side.

Cindy’s sneaky hand froze halfway into her purse. She felt the steel edge of the pepper spray canister, cold against her fingertips.

Graham drew his gun and aimed it at the door, roughly in the area of Claire’s chest. He looked at Cindy and pressed a silencing finger across his lips.

Cindy closed her eyes. Nodded. And grasped the canister in her fist.

Lindsay burst through the Hall’s front doors, horse-collared a messenger out of the stairwell entrance, and devoured each upward flight in two leaps.

Her heart rate climbed above 210 for the first time in her life.

Claire knocked again. “Cindy? Honey, are you in there?”

The responding silence felt too quiet. Wrong, somehow. Cindy wasn’t the type to wander off carelessly. She would have called someone.

Claire took the extra keyring from her bag and sorted out the one for Jill’s office door. In her other hand, she held a blue surgical towel sporting a hidden inch of razored steel.

She stepped to the side of the door frame and inserted the key.

Something exploded inside the office. A hollow-point bullet snicked through the safety glass door and missed Claire's arm by about ten inches.

The gunshot jolted Cindy into action. She pulled her spray can free, ducked behind Jill's desk, and launched a ten-foot stream of chemical fire toward Kyle Graham's head.

He screamed and clawed at his eyes. When the world went red, his language went blue. He cursed Cindy for a stupid bitch, damned God, and fornicated Jesus with an H. He pointed his gun toward the desk.

Then came the sound of shattering glass. Louvered blinds over the office door blew aside as if propelled by the Santa Ana winds. Graham spun toward the gust of noise and motion.

He couldn't see Lindsay Boxer's face, but felt her hand jerk his wrist upward as he pulled the trigger. His second shot burrowed into the ceiling.

Three pounds of blued steel Beretta crashed against his temple. Graham dropped to a crouch, lost his gun. A boot to the jaw cracked two molars and put him on the floor.

Clamoring stars washed over his world. A breath-stealing knee hammered his back. Handcuffs snapped on tight.

Warren Jacobi rounded the corner about then. For the third time in two days, he hauled up a suspect while his partner covered them. "We got us a routine going," he told her, and smiled blessed relief.

Still kneeling in a pile of safety glass, Lindsay couldn't speak. Her cardiopulmonary system was working so hard, she felt like she'd swallowed an exhaust fan and a drum machine. She holstered her gun and gestured for Jacobi to please get the guy out of her sight.

Graham dug in his heels. His eyes were almost swollen shut, so he spoke toward Lindsay's last known location. "Don't think you've saved her," he said. "When judgment comes, she'll pay the same as you. You're damning her."

"Shut your mouth," Claire Washburn hissed. "I am sick to death of people wiping their asses with the Bible." Though her hands shook with fury and fear, she pushed at Graham's back until he disappeared into a throng of confused cops and curious lawyers.

As Claire returned to the doorway, Cindy rounded the desk and offered Lindsay her hand.

The wrung-out inspector hesitated. Her ebbing adrenaline washed fine muscle control out

with the tide, and she feared standing might lead to falling. She crossed her ankles, breathed deeply, and leaned back against Jill's desk. "I'm good down here," she said. "Are y'all okay?"

Cindy nodded. She was scared half to death, to be honest, but managed a brave, shaky smile. "I'm tip-top. Claire's the one who nearly got plugged."

"That shot didn't come near me," Claire lied. "I know better than to square up on a bad door. But if anyone tells Ed about this, I will eat their soul."

Lindsay looked ready to start apologizing, but Cindy cut her off at the pass. "Boy. This was kind of a close call," she whispered, and plopped down on the floor by her friend, so snug they could feel each other breathing. She dusted a few pieces of plastic-coated glass off Lindsay's jacket. "Do you feel like calling Pete?"

At first, Lindsay stared at her in total non-comprehension. Even Claire seemed baffled by the suggestion; after all, if Cindy really did have designs on the inspector (as Claire suspected), she shouldn't encourage contact with Pete the Impediment.

It took a few beats, and a long look into Cindy's fluent eyes, before Lindsay got it. Her breath sculpted a crumbly laugh. "Maybe when we get done here. Once I'm home."

"Okay." Cindy leaned her head against Lindsay's shoulder. "Let me know how it goes."

Stealthy as a ninja, Claire Washburn had stepped out and almost closed what remained of the door – to preserve the scene, as it were – when Jill Bernhardt bulled through a clump of colleagues.

Jill saw the shattered glass at Claire's feet, the wounded plaster wall opposite, and the story came together in a thunderclap. She only had one comment.

"Christ on a crutch. Does the fun ever stop?"

Lindsay entered her apartment with the shuffling walk of the condemned. The entryway lamp cast warm light over the room, and her faithful dog charged up and gave her hands a sweet, needy nuzzle. Neither the comfort of home nor the affection of a true friend made much difference in her bleak mood.

"Hey, sweet girl," she said, and ruffled Martha's furry neck. The dog bounced in place, dancing for favor, begging politely to be taken out for her evening stroll.

"Gonna have to wait. I've got something to do, and if I put it off again..."

Martha seemed to intuit that no walk was forthcoming, and she let out a single, pitiful

whine. Lindsay knelt down and gave the pooch a hug, more for her own benefit than to placate the disappointed animal. Martha wandered off to her doggie bed and curled up in a sulky circle.

After a scalding shower, Lindsay went to the refrigerator and fetched herself a beer. Leaned her back against the counter and felt something pop near her hip – a reminder that her spine needed strengthening in more than a figurative sense. She cracked the top off the squat bottle of Anchor Steam and took a long, slow pull. Checked the clock on the microwave and double checked the time with her watch.

“Christ. Just do it. Man up.”

Once settled in front of the computer, she adjusted the web cam while the system booted up. Ran through her semi-prepared speech, replete with hackneyed phrases like 'it's not you, it's me,' and 'you're such a great guy,' and 'you can do so much better than me.' Although Lindsay felt these sentiments were absolutely plausible, none of them sounded like the truth.

She picked up her scratch pad and read Pete's careful instructions, followed them to the letter. Within minutes, the connection was made and the die was cast.

Pete Raynor's smiling face beamed at Lindsay from her computer screen, live and in color from his downtown office in Phnom Penh. He waved and spun around in his chair, obviously delighted by the success of his Luddite girlfriend's initiation of a video rendezvous.

“Yeah! I knew you could do it!” he crowed, slapping a palm against his desk. “Now admit it – that wasn't nearly as hard as you thought it would be.”

His words came through loud and clear, but his motions were herky-jerky and strange. And something was off about the colors, too. Lindsay couldn't quite figure it out.

“I can do hard stuff when I have to,” she said. She moved closer to the camera, and Pete's expression showed concern as he peered back at her.

“You okay, Linz? You look beat.”

Evidently, eight thousand miles and the vagaries of web video did nothing to soften her own clouded, cheerless countenance. “Couple of bad cases. One guy killed eight people 'cause they stole a bunch of... nevermind. Doesn't matter. We got 'em, it's closed.”

“Eight? He killed eight people?” Pete asked, shrinking back from shock. “All at once?”

“Three, then five. Two different places.”

He rubbed his stubbled chin and sighed. “Jesus. I wish I could hold you right now. I'm

listening, if you need to talk.”

Lindsay tapped a nail against her beer bottle. “Seriously, it's done. I'd rather not get into it. How're you doing?”

He nodded, though he seemed hesitant to drop the subject so quickly. “Well.. I got the approval for the parking expansion today. After some serious arm twisting and several expensive dinners for the planning commissioner and his family, his friends, his distant cousins visiting from Laos - ”

While Pete talked, while he made charming insinuations about using corruption and greed for the betterment of Cambodia's tourism industry, Lindsay figured out what was wrong with the video, why the colors seemed askew. It wasn't that the transmitted image of the man was blurry or grainy; in fact, the connection was quite good.

Pete Raynor simply didn't appear to her as someone living and real viewed from a distance. He looked sort of yellow and still, like something ancient trapped in amber. Through the eyes of someone who had already moved on, he looked like history.

“I need to end this,” Lindsay said suddenly, in a very clear voice.

Interrupted and brought up short, Pete fumbled for a reply. “Are... are you tired? If you need to get to bed, we can try again tomorrow.”

Frustrated by the misunderstanding, she grunted and rubbed at her tensing forehead. “Not the call. Us. I mean... I need to end... us.”

There was no room for misinterpretation in that statement. Pete's smile flatlined and he took a moment to adjust. “You're breaking up with me. On a video conference.”

Lindsay heard disbelief, a plea for correction in his tone, and she determined that her pabulum, pre-written speech absolving him of all responsibility was not the way to go. “This isn't working. We're putting our lives on hold for something that might fall apart once we really get to know each other.”

“But... I thought we knew each other well enough to take the chance,” he offered.

“No. At first, I thought maybe, yeah, but... no. We both deserve a shot at something real, not just something we made up and hoped could be real down the line.”

He shook his head, balled his fists on the desk. He leaned forward, and his handsome face and pleading eyes filled the video frame. “Lindsay. Don't. It's too soon to give up.”

“I'm not giving up.”

“That's what it sounds like to me.” He closed his eyes and shook his head again. “I don't

want to lose you. I can get someone to take over for me here.”

“No. Don't do that.”

“I could take some time and be back in San Francisco within a couple of weeks,” Pete continued, as if he hadn't heard her. “We can work this out.”

“That wouldn't change anything,” Lindsay sadly admitted. “It's too late for that.”

“Dammit, no!” he spat, anger briefly flashing between his hurt and confusion. “How can you say that? How the hell do you know?”

It was time. She had to say the words, since it was obviously the only way to make him see that this was not a fearful surrender or a lonely whim, but an absolute necessity. Lindsay drew a stuttering breath and stared levelly into the camera lens. “Pete. I need to end this because I'm falling for somebody else.”

He didn't react. Didn't breathe or even blink. If not for the progressing seconds on the call clock, Lindsay would have thought time itself had stopped while Pete processed her confession.

When he finally moved, when he finally regained his voice, he sounded less wounded and more resentful than she had expected. “Your ex, right? You started up with him again.”

Lindsay snorted and made a bitter face. “Tom? Tom is happily married. That's over and done.”

“Okay. So who is he?” Pete waved a hand and casually reclined in his chair. “Wait – I bet he's a cop. Because no one could possibly share your burdens unless they're from your world, right?”

Her temper prickled at Pete's words and the nasty tone of his voice. Lindsay recoiled and huffed an instinctive denial. “No, she's not a friggin' cop.”

His eyes, no longer sad or pleading, widened in surprise. “She? She. Oh... that's just perfect,” he said, with a caustic laugh. “You're dumping me for Jill.”

“Oh, God...”

“I knew there was something with you two,” Pete rattled on, “I mean, the way she watched you was just south of obscene, and you had that same - ”

“It's not Jill!” Lindsay shouted and slammed her beer down on the desk. “And this isn't some stupid guessing game.”

“So tell me! Who?”

“Pete -”

“Look, I haven't cheated on you, although I've had plenty of chances, believe me. I think I deserve to know who my girlfriend is screwing while I'm stuck jerking off in a hotel room.”

Lindsay sighed, already weary of his venom, although she felt she deserved every drop. “I haven't slept with her.”

He paused then, let that sink in, and it seemed to blunt the edge off his anger. “Okay. Back to my earlier question, re-framed a bit – how do you know? How can you be certain you're not just lonely?”

She took the question seriously, because Pete wanted an honest answer. So did she. So did Cindy. She thought of telling him how easily the young woman invaded her thoughts, how she could picture a smile or a laugh and feel transported to somewhere better, how the memory of a simple kiss made her feel wakeful and dreamy at once. A sense of fair play and a desire to be done with explanations forced Lindsay to boil it all down to one simple statement.

“Everything I wanted to feel with you, everything I was trying to make real... I feel all that with her, without even trying. It's just there.”

He turned quiet again, though this time Lindsay could see the track of a tear glisten along the side of his nose. Time doesn't really stand still for anyone, least of all lovers estranged by oceans and the incessant turning of the world.

“I'm not playing some fairy tale game with you. I haven't mocked-up the way I feel,” Pete told her. “I know you a little, Lindsay Boxer. And if you know me at all, you know I don't give up easily.”

Lindsay didn't have enough strength to dissuade him any further, and Pete was done listening.

“Good night,” he said, rather pointedly. Pete smiled into the camera. He kissed two fingers, pressed them against the lens, and ended the call.

Lindsay stared at the empty screen for a while, feeling like she should cry or something. When several minutes passed with no tears shed, she went to the kitchen and poured her beer down the sink.

“C'mon, baby. How about we take an extra long walk?” she said, and clicked her tongue at Martha. The dog launched from her bed and scampered toward the door.

“If my guts hold out, I might not see you 'til tomorrow.”

When the buzzer sounded at Cindy's place, she made herself stand still for a count of five. Flying out to jump her intended in the hall lacked a certain dignity, and she'd fought hard all day to regain her composure. She straightened her clothes, smoothed her hair. Checked her breath. Then she flipped the locks and eased the door open.

And there stood the woman she'd wanted for so long. A woman with history etched into her skin and heart, a body lean from work and denial, and a soul framed by shadows. A sexy, jaded, good-hearted woman, with more loose screws than an epileptic carpenter.

Cindy wondered what she was getting herself into. She wondered if her own heart would still be in one piece a month from now, a year from now, and found she didn't truly care. On this matter, in this moment, she was fearless.

“I called Pete,” Lindsay said. She shifted her weight foot to foot, wiped damp palms on her jeans. “It's done.”

With great effort, Cindy squelched a smile. Only someone with no class would gloat at a time like this.

Lindsay smiled at her then - a fragile, hopeful grin - and Cindy decided class and dignity were overrated. She powered beyond all the junk of their days, past charlatans whose righteous veneers concealed twisted hearts, and Cindy beamed out her stout, genuine faith in the goodness of life.

“Come here,” she said, and opened her arms.

As she wished to do this morning, yesterday, and numerous times before, Lindsay wrapped her up tight and held Cindy for a good, long while.

After a spell, Cindy whispered something against her neck. “How hard can I kiss you?”

Drunk on hormones, Lindsay didn't follow at first. She hadn't thought about her bumped lip since last night. “Hard as you want. Long as you want.”

A heartbeat laugh skipped out through her nose. “So we're really doing this.”

Lindsay kissed Cindy's hair, grazed lips over her temple. “Yes,” she said.

Cindy nodded and loosened her arms. “Then we should probably close the door.”

They had all night, and time to do everything right. Easing into a kiss, balmy and sweet as their first, they held each other by waist and shoulder and danced a lazy shuffle step toward the bedroom.

Fingers skimmed hip and breast, touching lightly over clothes. Mouths made hungry noises as they dug in harder and deeper. If there was pain from Lindsay's meager injury, it burned away in the rocket fuel heat of her blood.

She reached for the hem of Cindy's sweater and tucked a hand beneath, palmed the gentle curve of her stomach. Smooth skin quivered beneath her touch, and Lindsay broke the kiss. "Is that good?" she asked.

"Mmh. Your hands are hot." Cindy rested her mouth at the base of Lindsay's throat and exhaled her own fire. "I like it."

Lindsay swallowed hard; she had her directive. Her right hand joined the left and roughed over Cindy's ribs. Thumbs glanced along the silky undersides of bra cups. Cindy raised her arms to let her sweater fly away.

Her breath stuttered when Lindsay's mouth wandered down to taste her cleavage, and stilled when deft fingers opened her brassiere and stroked her nipples.

She trembled and clutched at Lindsay's shoulders while kisses trailed over her chest, while a tongue laved her scar, and then moved down her stomach. Cindy was glad she hadn't lingered over the wound; being treated like a fragile bisque figurine was not sexy. As Lindsay gripped her bottom and softly gnawed at her side, she felt firm and dirty, beautiful, and wondrously made.

The buttons on her jeans soon gave way. Breath trickled between the spread fly. Fingers breached her panties, and stilled just beneath the waistband in a neat, happy tangle.

Lindsay hummed a satisfied sound and laid a kiss over her belly button. Cindy touched her chin, tilted her up, and smiled.

"You feared a Brazilian," she guessed. Lindsay made an apologetic face and nodded. Cindy haughtily shook her head. "Not for me. Clear-cutting is ecologically unsound."

Lindsay laughed out loud, a glorious sound that almost made Cindy lose track of what they were doing. When her jeans and underpants were peeled down and wadded around her ankles, when Lindsay bent her over the bed and strung wet kisses around her thigh... well, she snapped back into the spirit of things.

They had all night, and time to do everything right. Somehow, Cindy misinterpreted that as 'do everything right now,' and Lindsay felt like she was dying. From the roots of her

hair to the soles of her feet, every nerve throbbed with the pleasant ache of abuse.

Sprawled nude and prone across the bed with her face booked in a pillow, she tried to regroup while Cindy did some light ablutions in the bathroom. By then, it was far over in the night. A cool wind picked up and sent a draft through the poorly caulked bedroom window. Defenseless, Lindsay's bare back sprouted chill bumps, and she hadn't the strength to reach for a blanket.

There was, she'd discovered, a fine line between being plundered like a treasure chest and getting rolled like a dock wino. Shivering, half-dead and euphoric, she clung to that line.

From somewhere behind came footsteps, then a weight on the bed's edge. Lindsay felt the brushing sleeve of a thick cotton robe, then warm hands rubbed along her spine.

“Wow. You're all goosed-out,” Cindy observed.

Lindsay sent a 'yes' noise into the pillow, then turned her head a fraction. “S'cold without you.”

Cindy stilled her hands. She mounted Lindsay's thighs, untied the sash and opened her robe. The cold worked fast, pricked up her hairs and tightened her nipples in a flash, but when she laid her body down against Lindsay's back, they trapped July between their skins.

They moaned and snickered and smiled as one beast. They loved the world and all who walked it.

Graham said this would be a flowered path to hell. Cindy thought if feeling like this was a sin, bring out the posts, the hammer and nails. Spreading both arms out atop Lindsay's, she twinned her crucified pose.

She thought about the nature of sin, and wondered how many of the seven deadlies paved the road to this moment.

Really, is the desire to completely monopolize someone's attention not greed?

Doesn't a sense of exclusive entitlement to their affection spring from pride, or vanity?

If you feel resentment over time wasted, time you could have spent together, is that not anger?

Jealousy and envy had their day, and may again; at the thought of anyone else touching Lindsay, the word 'NO!' pierced knife-like through Cindy's brain.

As for the seventh, the mutual gluttony which had recently occurred in her bed was a moral crime only by the strictest interpretation.

For those who believed themselves Heaven's magistrates, gray areas did not exist. Cindy Thomas knew that, in their eyes, she would score a perfect seven out of seven.

“Some people would say we've been very bad,” Cindy announced. She combed dark hair aside and nuzzled her lover's nape. “Selfish, weak...”

Lindsay sniffled a little. “It's the human condition,” she said. “We want, we need. We all sin.”

“It isn't worth killing over.”

“No. Not much is,” Lindsay agreed.

Rather than issuing some rote promise about justice, she turned her head and found Cindy's mouth, fed on minty sidelong kisses until her appetite revived. She raised up and rolled them over, and when their bodies grooved together, when their eyes met, a sense of rightness and rectitude displaced all fear.

Cindy traced a thumb over Lindsay's smile. “I won't regret this,” she whispered. “No matter what happens.”

Lindsay blanked on a response. Regret was a recurring touchstone in her life, like mile markers to help her remember wrong turns. Regret wasn't all bad. Besides, saying 'no regrets' was tempting fate, and she felt that fate was already a capricious little bitch.

“This is where you admit you're mad for me, too,” Cindy suggested.

Lindsay brushed her nose along Cindy's chin. “Really.”

“Yes, really. Then you kiss me, very tenderly. Then do that thing with your thumbs - ”

Lindsay kissed her then, very tenderly, and they didn't speak for a while.

It was far over in the night. Like all lovers, they tried to escape the coming dawn.

END



HUMILITY BEFORE HONOR

TEASER

The idea for Sloane and Company to add on the bright all-glass atrium between their two dull gray buildings resulted from one of the company's managers going through a motivational course on employee relations. Giving the diligent worker ants a congregating spot, a place where they could socialize during their ten minute breaks and unpaid lunches, would increase employee morale several hundred percent. Or so went the sales pitch.

What the atrium had actually become was more of a last minute limbo, a temporary haven in which workers snared by average pay and good benefits made personal phone calls, grabbed something from the coffee stand in the back, or caught the most up-to-the-minute news on the trio of six-by-nine foot screens before heading upstairs to take up their cog positions in the corporate machine.

Morale had yet to increase.

Balancing an extra large coffee from the cart, Morgan Levering stood in a group of employees waiting to cram into the next elevator up. Most days, Morgan was very much like the rest of them; bored, listless, completely lacking in individuality between the hours of nine and six, but this morning she was starting her workday out in a considerably more aggravated state than most of her colleagues.

"Isn't your boss back today?" Alice asked as she squeezed up beside Morgan, to the grumbles of the rest of the cluster. Alice was one of the few people that Morgan knew by name in the building, and the only one she spoke to on purpose. Though she worked with these people every day, she paid them about as much attention as any other stranger on the street. Sloane was known for being the best short-term, sale-enhancing advertising firm in the city, not for having unsurpassed camaraderie.

"Yeah," Morgan responded, with a frustrated sigh. "Two weeks isn't long enough. The day before she left, she told me that I would be wise to arrive at six every day this week to help her catch up. I've been here three hours already. Guess who never showed."

"God what a bitch," Alice responded, low enough as to not be overheard by any of the office's opportunistic tattle tales.

"I should have known," Morgan shook her head. "It was totally just a power trip. I don't know why I even put up with her crap."

"Because this is the best firm in San Francisco. Hopefully you'll be promoted out of her department sooner than later."

"It can't be soon enough," Morgan responded sullenly. "Do me a favor. If you happen to find her before I do, call me and let me know where she is. I'm going to try to avoid her all day so I don't say something that gives her cause to throw things at me."

“Sure thing,” Alice replied with a small laugh that could only come from someone who didn’t have to actually answer to the bitch.

An elevator arrived before them, the doors parting to release the few people who’d ridden it down to the lobby. As if synchronized to the opening of the doors, there was a sudden surge of power. The people in the elevator rushed out, looking incredibly grateful that it hadn’t happened a moment earlier. The lights flickered rapidly, there was a noisy clatter in the middle of the room and several simultaneous screams from around it.

Morgan spun to look, coffee sloshing with burning quickness down her arm. Trying to shake off the hot beverage and the resultant pain, she forgot about it completely when Alice’s hand grasped her forearm, squeezing with unrelenting force. Morgan followed her gaze up to the naked, battered body dangling from the rafters, frowning when it twirled in her direction and she instantly recognized Felicia.

“Found her,” Alice announced from beside her.

Twenty minutes after Felicia Watkins plummeted without warning from the ceiling of Sloane and Company, Lindsay stepped through the front doors and into the sunlit atrium. She glanced up at the naked, bound and broken body and she knew. She didn’t need scripture. She didn’t need hard evidence to tell her this wasn’t the product of just any murderer. This was the artwork of a sadistic madman, someone who felt spiritually inspired to be as brutal as he wanted to be. And, as far as she knew, there was only one of those trolling her city at the moment.

ACT I

Claire preferred to think of her place as on the ground, not fifty feet up in a metal basket. If she had checked the “levitate in the air while trying to perform a detailed job” box on her career day quiz, she would have been working for Cirque du Soleil, not the medical examiners’ office.

“Shouldn’t we get her down?” a voice asked too close to her shoulder.

Claire turned and stared her young protégé a step backwards, before returning to the task at hand. The new intern at the M.E.’s office, Paul, asked all of his questions in a voice that was half morbid curiosity and half repugnance. Claire had yet to determine if he was going to be an excellent M.E. or a sociopath.

“If we move her, we may lose any physical evidence,” Claire responded, glancing down for the hundredth time at the distant floor below. “We’re probably losing evidence now. We’ll get her down when I’m done.”

“How do you know those will hold?” he asked, looking over the straps of leather dangling Felicia Watkins’ body precariously from the ceiling.

“We’ll get her down when I’m done,” Claire repeated more forcefully and the M.E.-in-training nodded and shut up.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Paul unnecessarily stated. Claire had several long years under her belt, and she’d never seen anything like it. “Her body is completely mutilated, but her face barely has a scratch on it.”

“Except for what’s missing,” Claire swallowed. But other than the gaping hole where she’d once had a right ear, and the bloody streaks stained beneath her left eye, those things didn’t show. “All the other marks on her face are defensive wounds.”

“How can you tell?” Paul asked.

“They’re very shallow,” Claire explained. “If he’d wanted to cut her face, they would be gashes, not just nicks. She probably leaned into the blows trying to protect some other part of her body.”

“What part could he have been going for where she’d rather take it in the face?”

Claire knew a few of the answers to that question, but not all of them. She wasn’t sure that she really wanted to.

“I don’t know,” she murmured, “but I do know he didn’t mean to get her face. He wanted her recognizable.”

“For who?” Paul questioned. “Us?”

“For everyone down there I suspect. All the people she worked with,” Claire responded, eyes drifting up to the pallid face angling down above her. “Okay, I can be done. We’ll let them get her down. I can do the rest on the table.”

With a nod, Paul turned to the controls, and slowly lowered the basket of the mechanical lift.

Pacing the floor by the food stand at the back of the lobby, Jill monitored Claire’s descent, doing everything in her power to avoid looking at the decimated body or the specks of blood that dotted the marble floor beneath it.

“It should be, at most, a couple of hours,” she stated into her cell.

“Are they sure it’s him?” Denise returned, voice breaking up slightly.

“Yeah, it’s him,” Jill whispered.

Jill heard Denise’s heavy sigh across the line, but Denise didn’t continue the thought with words. Jill couldn’t think of much to say either. She was just infinitely grateful that Denise wasn’t feeling the need to comment on her commitment to the Hallelujah Man or to the club. If she kept this reasonable attempt at civil behavior up, Jill might have to buy her something decent come

Boss' Day.

With neither of them speaking, the hush in the room became deafening. Despite the number of cops in the glass-enclosed space, silence reigned supreme, as if everyone knew what they were up against and none of them wanted to discuss it. Despite the recent slayings in their city, San Franciscans were going about their daily business. The fact that there was a serial killer amongst them was one of the most poorly kept secrets ever, but it hadn't changed much. It wasn't exactly the city's first brush with such renown. But now a few hundred civilians had gotten a really good look at exactly how they could end up if the fanatic disciple got his hands on them. It was going to make everyone that much more uneasy, and the pressure on the police department that much more intense.

"Just fill me in when you get here," Denise finally dismissed Jill.

"Will do," Jill said shortly, snapping her phone closed and glancing over at Lindsay, who had been hovering in the shadows off to the side of the room ever since Jill arrived.

Lindsay watched a couple of guys from forensics cut the leather straps binding Felicia Watkins' body in midair, and lower her slowly onto a simple stretcher. They balanced it between them in the small metal basket of the lift and brought the victim down. Intent on her study of the process, and lost somewhere inside her own mind, Lindsay didn't hear Jacobi's not-particularly-stealthy approach.

"According to the CEO," Jacobi started, pausing when Lindsay startled at his voice. "Sorry."

Trying to look unruffled, Lindsay dropped her eyes to the floor and turned to face Jacobi, arms crossed over her chest.

"According to the CEO," she prompted.

"She left for a two-week vacation on the fifth of November," Jacobi informed her. "We called the airline. She never got on that flight. Today was supposed to be her first day back."

"He had her the whole time," Lindsay deduced.

"Looks that way," Jacobi said with a solemn nod.

"We're not going to want to hear what Claire has to tell us." Lindsay stated, looking back at their victim's body, finally at ground level and being zipped into a body bag.

"I can't see how it's going to be pleasant," Jacobi acknowledged.

"To have staged this, he had to have gotten in here," Lindsay said, studying the thick glass, of which all the panes were still perfectly intact, before trailing her eyes to the high tech security system wired around the door. "That couldn't have been easy."

“He had to know someone,” Jacobi assumed. “There are six hundred people working in this building. It could take a while to find out who he made friends with. Even if we do, they won’t know to tell us. Whoever it is couldn’t possibly have known they were making friends with the Devil.”

“No,” Lindsay agreed. “And whoever he used to get access must be pretty clean. Or at least look that way. If they were anything less than pure, he would have killed them. I really don’t see him letting one sinner slip through his fingers just because they’ve given him a way into a building.”

“So we start with the most boring, least-likely-to-sin-in-the-open people,” Jacobi suggested. “Accounting?”

While the attempt at levity was appreciated, it fell flat in the dismal ambiance.

“How is he finding these people?” Lindsay wondered aloud. “What is the link between them?”

“Maybe there is no link between them. Maybe they’re all just...”

“Sinners,” Lindsay filled in.

Jacobi gravely nodded.

The hush and gloom pressed in on them like physical entities, and Lindsay felt suddenly claustrophobic.

“I’ve gotta get some air,” she said, heading for the door without waiting for a response.

The irritable staff of Sloane and Company was imprisoned on premises by yards of bright yellow police tape and a dozen unsympathetic uniformed officers. None of them particularly wanted to be there either, but considering a woman was slaughtered and dropped into their midst on an otherwise perfectly tolerable weekday morning, no one had any choice in the matter.

Pen at the ready in her right hand and a fresh notebook clutched in her left, Cindy weaved through the masses, trying to be inconspicuous. Ducking the tape was surprisingly easy with that many anonymous people already standing on the other side of it. With any luck, she’d be able to work her way to the front of the building, and with the right distraction, slip past the officer guarding the door.

Most of the comments Cindy caught pieces of as she moved through the cranky employees were of the expected variety: complaints about being held hostage by the police department, concerns over when bathrooms would be made available to them, the occasional disturbed utterance indicating that some of these people could really use a sedative. But then there were those that were staggering.

“All the blood was kind of gross, but I was impressed by the outfit,” Morgan was joking to Alice as Cindy happened by them.

More or less aware of what had transpired in front of these people not that long ago, and knowing the unfortunate likelihood that this was more than just some random crime, to Cindy the statement sounded exceedingly vulgar. She should have let it go, it would have been the wise thing to do, but wisdom being one of her weaker attributes, she turned a sharp about-face and backtracked.

“Did you have something you wanted to offer about the victim?” Cindy questioned, pad and pen moving to note-taking position.

“Who are you?” Morgan returned, giving Cindy a rather unappreciative glower.

“Cindy Thomas. San Francisco Register. What’s your name? I’d love to quote you.”

Morgan opened her mouth, and Cindy knew by the snarl of the woman’s thin lips that she was about to get blasted with a snarky retort. Which gave her that much more motivation. If they were going to engage in a war of words, she was well-armed and had no doubts as to who would emerge victorious.

“Thomas,” a familiar voice interjected sharply from behind her.

Unsure whether to wince or to swoon, Cindy turned to find Lindsay standing there looking intensely authoritative and infinitely sexy. One hand rested on her hip, just above her gun, revealing her badge, which had the beneficial effect of frightening the other woman into withholding her comeback.

“What are you doing?” Lindsay’s voice gentled, lulling Cindy into a considerably more Zen state.

“Just doing my job,” Cindy replied.

“She was harassing us, Officer,” Morgan asserted.

Temporary calm dissipating as rapidly as it had come on, Cindy rotated back to her momentary nemesis.

“That was not harassing you,” she heatedly stated. “I can if you want to see the difference.”

The full sentence barely made it out of her mouth before she felt Lindsay’s fingers in the crook of her elbow, dragging her away from the woman. Morgan gave Cindy a triumphant smirk and a little wave, increasing Cindy’s ire tenfold.

“You just waltz onto the crime scene and then try to draw attention to yourself by picking a fight?” Lindsay questioned disbelievingly, hauling Cindy across the landscaped courtyard. As if

she possessed the power of Moses, the sea of employees parted before her.

“I wasn’t trying to pick a fight,” Cindy corrected, her feet moving with unnatural rapidity to try and keep up with Lindsay’s determined gait. “She was being so freaking disrespectful. Who would say that about someone who’d just...”

Pulled around the curved corner of the atrium and into a passageway almost too small for the two of them, Cindy shut up at once as she was pushed back, somewhat roughly, against a dull gray wall. She might have protested the unnecessary manhandling if not for Lindsay’s lips capturing hers a split second later much more softly than her demeanor up until that point would have implied.

Dropping the impediments, Cindy slid her hands up the soft leather to fist in Lindsay’s jacket, giving consent instead, and hung on as Lindsay kissed the fight out of her.

“What was that for?” Cindy asked breathlessly when Lindsay finally pulled away.

“For me,” Lindsay replied.

It would have been sickeningly romantic if not for the firm set of Lindsay’s jaw, the dread darkening her eyes.

“Bad?” Cindy softly questioned.

“Yeah,” Lindsay rasped harshly.

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

Lindsay gave a slight nod, wishing she didn’t have to confirm that particular deduction, and stared wantonly at Cindy’s lips. If there was one thing that could make her forget about everything, even if only for a minute... But before Lindsay could commandeer Cindy’s mouth again, Cindy was stepping forward into her arms, her head dropping down on Lindsay’s shoulder and her arms closing tightly around her waist.

It was nothing that Lindsay wanted and everything that she needed. As weak as it made her feel to require such comfort, she indulged in it nonetheless, because once her arms clasped across Cindy’s shoulders, she simply couldn’t let her go.

Lindsay had no idea how long they’d been standing that way when she heard her name being called, in clear bewilderment, from the front of the building. She slowly opened her eyes, sending a displeased expression toward the passageway’s opening. Cindy retreated from her arms and inspected the inspector. She reached up to turn down the collar of Lindsay’s jacket where she’d accidentally popped it, assuming that Lindsay didn’t want to appear before her colleagues looking her 1980’s best.

“To be continued?” Lindsay softly inquired.

Cindy gave a head bob in the affirmative. “So, should I wait ten seconds before following you out?”

Without verbal response, Lindsay tugged on Cindy’s sleeve, Cindy bent down for her dropped note-taking tools, and they walked out of the narrow passageway together.

Officer Cho had made it to their side of the courtyard, and was instantly relieved when he spotted Lindsay emerging.

“Inspector Boxer. They’re waiting for you,” he said, sending a friendly smile in Cindy’s direction. “Hey Cindy.”

“Hey Cho,” Cindy returned quietly, but Lindsay didn’t miss the way that Cindy instinctively stepped behind her.

Much like Lindsay, Cindy had a tendency to say that she was perfect when in fact she was only adequate, or maybe didn’t even reach that level. Though she had played off Kyle Graham’s menacing attempt at courtship, Lindsay hadn’t been blind to the effects. Cindy had been a little more guarded, abnormally wary in the presence of anyone who showed her any kind of attention outside of club members, and, oddly enough, Jacobi, who’d been behaving in a rather fatherly fashion ever since finding Cindy in Jill’s office much too close to something that could have turned really ugly really fast. There were plenty of strangers with a fifty-fifty chance of being dangerous walking the streets. The last thing that Cindy had needed was a blow to her trust in the people who had always been nice to her.

“They ready?” Lindsay asked to draw Cho’s attention away from Cindy’s rather obvious reaction.

“Yeah,” Cho replied. “We’re all set up.”

Lindsay nodded at him, and Cho led them to the door, holding it open. Fleeting wishing that her job belonged to someone else, Lindsay stepped past him into the atrium. She’d only made it five steps when she heard Cho clear his throat.

“Um, Inspector Boxer?” he hesitantly queried.

Lindsay turned back to him. On another day, she might have gotten a good laugh out of Cho’s uncertainty as to whether or not Cindy was supposed to be trailing them inside, manifested in one long arm blocking the entrance. For her part, Cindy looked ready to limbo beneath his outstretched appendage.

“It’s alright,” Lindsay husked. “Let her in.”

“Sorry,” Cho shrugged to Cindy, moving well out of her way so that she could walk inside.

Cindy didn't offer much of a response, barely meeting his eyes as she walked by and followed Lindsay to Jill, Claire and Jacobi.

"How's it goin'?" Jacobi asked lightly.

"I could take being on a beach right about now," Cindy responded.

"Ain't that the truth," Jacobi replied.

Tom finished giving orders to a flock of uniformed officers and joined the group, less than enthused to have returned from vacation and back into this mess. Clearly surprised to see Cindy not just pushing in a little closer on the sidelines but right smack in the middle of a crime scene, he did them the courtesy of not saying anything about it.

"Ready?" Cho asked Tom, who nodded roughly.

"8:53 a.m.," Cho began, reading from a small notepad, "sixty percent of the company's employees are in the lobby. According to the head of security, that's an average number. At the exact moment the clock ticks over to 8:54, Felicia Watkins body drops from the ceiling. Ten seconds later, this video tape starts rolling on all of the screens around the building."

Cho gave a nod to a man at the security desk, who pressed something on his panel, and white lines rolled down the three oversized screens around the atrium. From the corner of her eye, Lindsay saw Cindy produce a small digital recorder from her bag, tossing her a nervous sidelong glance before pressing record.

A small flash of light, and the screens switched to a live image. Or at least what had been a live image at some point.

Felicia Watkins stared out at them, completely naked but for the blood and bruises covering her body. A leather collar matching the leather leashes that had been used to suspend Felicia from the ceiling was wrapped around her throat, chains from all sides holding her in place like a dog. The same graphic image that might have been a turn-on for some of the people in the room if staged for the purpose of fantasy was, as reality, turning their stomachs.

Felicia's hands were almost black, her fingers unable to grasp the white sheet of paper she held. Instead, the page was just pressed between her two shaking hands down by her abdomen, as if she didn't have the strength to lift it any higher. The ear was already gone, Claire noted, but she still had both eyes at the time that the video was made.

"My name is Felicia Watkins," she started, her trembling wisp of a voice resounding like a bellow in the still room. "I have been imprisoned in this church for two weeks so that I may atone for my sins."

Tears falling from her eyes, Felicia was plainly struggling to read the words through them, the movement of the paper in her unsteady grip no help to matters. When her efforts persisted

without success for well over a minute, the sudden appearance of what looked like a fireplace poker flashed into the side of the screen. The tip plunged into Felicia's side, and the voice that had up until that point been notably feeble produced a startlingly loud scream. All spectators flinched in unison at the sudden display of brutality.

Crying only amplified as a result of the vicious prodding she'd been given, Felicia exerted more of an effort. She bent as far as her binds allowed to retrieve the paper she'd dropped on the floor, her useless limbs making the process more difficult. When she rose back up, the paper once again pressed between her blackened hands, it was through pure will that she forced out the words.

"Stop judging, that you may not be judged," Felicia read from the paper. "For as you judge so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you."

She paused too long and the poker made another appearance, burying itself through two ribs. Felicia's scream was just as real, but more subdued, as if she was expecting it this time. And, as if they too were already anesthetized to the violence, there wasn't a flinch to be found amongst the audience.

"Matthew, chapter seven, verses one and two," Felicia sobbed, looking up from the paper, her eyes focused upward, as if in silent appeal for some kind of intervention. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Felicia dropped her head with the same resignation with which the paper fluttered from her wrecked hands. Resigned to a certain fate. She had to know that, even after following all given instruction, she would never walk out of there alive. If she still retained the ability to walk at all. Felicia's weeping face grew larger on the screen, the focus moving in for a tragic close-up. For a moment, it seemed a dénouement.

Then rapidly shuffling footsteps drew Felicia's gaze up and she tried to back away. But there was nowhere to go. When the backdrop behind Felicia changed suddenly, everyone knew that they were getting their first glimpse of the Hallelujah Man, mere millimeters of torso, clad in all black, around the edges of Felicia's head.

There was movement in the room, cops and other concerned parties pressing in closer as if they could identify the unidentifiable. This perpetrator knew exactly how to be seen and not be seen, his victim a shield to hide behind. For all of his bold decrees about other peoples' transgressions, it was the modus operandi of a coward.

His arms, concealed in black, came around Felicia's head. Felicia's mouth opened at once in a gasping sound that could only be described as a pre-scream, as if she knew that the Hallelujah Man was about to give her good reason to release one that curdled the blood.

One black-gloved hand palmed Felicia's face, the thumb and index finger spreading Felicia's left eye. The other brought the fireplace poker back into the picture. Felicia struggled against the threat. She gave it everything that she had, shaking his hand off once, but simply didn't have the

energy left to resist his intentions. The gloved hand returned to its position, spreading Felicia's eye open even wider.

"No," Felicia begged as the poker moved in a slow, measured path toward her face. "Please God, no. I'll do anything. Please. I'll do anything. I'll do anything."

Lindsay knew how Jill and Claire would react without looking. Jill would concentrate somewhere else, eyes averted and ears as closed as they could be without sticking her fingers in them, trying not to throw up and spatter her own DNA in the middle of the crime scene. Claire wouldn't want to watch, but, for the sake of being informed, she would. But Lindsay was almost positive that Cindy had never had to witness anything even close to this. She looked over to find Cindy staring up at the events unraveling on the screen, looking predictably disturbed in a way that Lindsay had never seen her. Cindy didn't want to see what was about to transpire, but she couldn't quite look away from it either.

"Turn it off," Lindsay ordered.

When the image didn't promptly disappear at the command, Lindsay shot a deadly look to the man at the security desk controls, who was almost as fixated as Cindy.

"Turn it off," she said more forcefully.

The man snapped back to the moment, fumbling at the controls, and turned the image off just before the poker made contact with Felicia's eye. Somewhere in Claire's bag, the initial report already summarized the outcome.

"Did these people watch this whole video?" Tom asked the question of no one in particular.

"No," Jacobi assured him. "Somebody had the good sense to hit the EPO before it got this far. It shut down the whole building."

Lindsay glanced at Tom's blank expression and translated her partner's shorthand.

"Emergency power off button."

Appearing somewhat frozen, Tom belatedly nodded. "Good."

Lindsay's eyes tracked to Jill and Claire, the latter whose hand was resting on Jill's back, ready to catch her should Jill decide to faint or comfort her should Jill decide to get sick, either of which looked highly possible at any moment.

"You alright?"

They both nodded in response, Jill's a little less believable than Claire's, and Lindsay returned her focus to Cindy. She was still staring up at the screen as if the show were still taking place. In reality, it was more than likely burned onto the back of her brain.

“Cindy?” Lindsay questioned softly.

Cindy’s eyes dropped down to hers, blinking slowly several times as if reorienting herself to her surroundings. A haunted soul stared out at Lindsay from a body that normally housed a positive, lively spirit. Lindsay barely refrained from throwing Cindy over her shoulder and hauling her out of the traumatic atmosphere. She couldn’t refrain, however, from raising her hand to Cindy’s cheek, thumb lightly brushing over her jaw line in a soothing gesture. Involved as all others in the room were in their own disquiet, no one even noticed.

“I guess I was wrong about the pattern,” Cindy whispered.

On the outskirts of the yellow tape, inside which Sloane and Company’s employees had grown rather vocal about being let go, an impromptu club meeting was in session. The quadrangle in which they often stood had become a line, stretching down the side of Lindsay’s SUV, where even Jill in her expensive black pantsuit wasn’t above leaning against the edge of the dirty vehicle for support.

Comparing the four of them with the annoyed and lively people on the other side of the police tape perfectly illustrated the difference between people who’d only seen a little of that video and those who had seen too much.

“I can only guess as to the extent of it,” Claire broke the silence in a low voice. “I know for sure all of her fingers were broken. Pieces of her scalp are missing. Part of her tongue.”

“We’ll go over it back at the hall,” Lindsay said quickly, casting her eyes to Cindy.

Feeling that ‘never’ would be her ideal time to finish the conversation, Claire nodded in hasty agreement.

“We’re definitely going to have no problem getting this guy the chair,” Jill offered with a shudder.

“I’d love to help strap him down myself,” Lindsay declared. “The problem is getting him there.”

Still focused on Cindy, who’d been abnormally subdued, Lindsay saw her take a deep breath and push away from the front of the car, the first one to stand on her own two feet since they’d made it outside.

“What can I do?” she asked. That gritty determination was going to be the death of her.

“We’re all going to be pretty busy for a while,” Lindsay responded, eyes traveling over Cindy’s face, trying to see everything that she was trying not to show. “I think you should just head back to the paper for now. We’ll keep you posted.”

“When are you going over the evidence?” Cindy asked.

“I’m not sure,” Lindsay said simply. Feeling caught in a lie, though she wasn’t actually telling one, since she really did have hundreds of witnesses to pick through, she looked away from Cindy’s overly attentive gaze.

“Well, I could still work on something at the office,” Cindy volunteered.

“I don’t know what you could do,” Lindsay replied, shaking her head. Looking into Cindy’s singularly-focused expression, she knew that answer wouldn’t suffice. “I’ll try to come up with something.”

“When are you going to watch the rest of the video?” Cindy questioned softly.

“No one needs to watch the rest of that video,” Lindsay swallowed, eyes dropping to the toe of her boot as she dislodged a piece of asphalt and kicked it away.

Cindy looked down at Jill and Claire, both of whom met her eyes briefly before looking away.

“Alright then,” Cindy said, gaze trailing back to Lindsay. “Anything you want withheld?”

“Since there are hundreds of witnesses, withholding is kind of pointless.” Lindsay admitted. “I would appreciate if you would paraphrase instead of using a direct quote. People don’t need to know quite how much access you’ve been given to crime scenes.”

That almost brought a smile to the group. Almost.

“Okay,” Cindy conceded. “Just call me?”

At Lindsay’s nod, Cindy hesitated as if she didn’t know quite how to walk away from her without more. She looked desperately in need of an extended hug that Lindsay wasn’t sure how to provide without being completely obvious. Finally deciding that she didn’t really care, Lindsay was beaten to standing by Claire, who tugged Cindy into her arms.

“We’ll all talk later,” Claire promised as she released Cindy.

“Thanks Claire,” Cindy returned, glancing at Lindsay before she walked away.

Feeling fairly incompetent at everything important in her life at the moment, Lindsay at last made it to her feet as well, watching Cindy walk off before turning to face Jill and Claire.

“Are you alright? Really?” Lindsay asked, motioning in the direction that Cindy had just gone. “I know that she isn’t. Are you?”

“All in a day’s work,” Claire replied.

“If I’m not, I’ll have to get over it before trial,” Jill answered. “Can you imagine how Denise would react if I ever lost a case because I demonstrated my weak stomach in the courtroom?”

It was almost a hopeful moment. If Jill was facing this videotape in court, it would be because they had someone to prosecute. That seemed sort of far off considering they didn’t even have any suspects.

“What about you?” Claire quietly questioned.

Much more comfortable on the asking end, Lindsay shrugged self-consciously. “Is it terrible to say that I’m getting used to it?”

“It’s a lie,” Jill countered.

Lindsay shivered and crossed her arms. “I’m fine.”

“I should get back to the lab,” Claire stated. “Obviously this will be bumped to the top of the caseload.”

“I know you’re training right now, but -”

“Don’t worry, Lindsay,” Claire promised. “I’m not going to let a newbie get his hands on this victim.”

“Thanks.”

“I should get back too, let Denise know what we’ve got,” Jill declared, pushing off the car and dusting off her slacks, before looking at Lindsay. “What are you going to need?”

“I’m not entirely sure yet. Jacobi and I will be here for a while, trying to decide who’s worth the trouble of dragging back to the station,” Lindsay said, scanning the corralled Sloane and Company employees and lighting on the girl that Cindy’d had her confrontation with in the restless crowd. “Starting with her.”

ACT II

“I have been waiting for three hours,” Morgan announced as Lindsay and Jacobi walked through the door of the interview room. “Why did I get picked to come down here? Because of that little redhead?”

Jacobi whistled low. “I’d watch what you say about the redhead. She’s got a fan base around here.”

“But that does about cover it,” Lindsay admitted. “She told me that you were talking rather cavalierly about the deceased. That’s her word, not mine.”

“That’s what this is about? Seriously?” Morgan scoffed. “Listen, I’m not glad that Felicia’s dead, but I’m not sorry. No one deserves it more.”

Understanding vividly now the kind of gut reaction that goaded Cindy into her spur-of-the-moment row with the woman, Lindsay pulled out a chair, sank into it, and stared across the table at Morgan until the fidgeting began.

“She was tortured for over two weeks. Her fingers are all broken. Part of her scalp is missing, part of her tongue, her ear, her eye. Think about your own sins, Miss Levering. How might someone choose to punish you?”

Lindsay’s question succeeded in making Morgan appear more troubled than inconvenienced for the first time all day.

“I think what my partner is trying to say is that it would really help to know which of those things Felicia had coming to her and which seem excessive,” Jacobi threw in.

“That’s not…” Morgan whispered, turning her head as a tear slipped down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away. “That’s not what I was trying to say.”

“Then feel free to give us a more accurate statement.”

“When I interviewed for my job with Sloane, Felicia asked me if I would do anything to get it. How was I supposed to respond? I needed the job, so I said yes.” Morgan paused, shaking her head in unwelcome remembrance. “Felicia, she sat back all smug and told me that people who were smart enough never had to be willing to do anything.”

Morgan dropped her head into her hand, and Lindsay glanced at Jacobi. With a “that sounds familiar” sigh, Jacobi returned her gaze.

The interview room adjacent to the one they left Morgan Levering in held a witness selected due solely to the fact that the guy, as Jacobi described him, just looked cagey. He seemed to be doing his best to disappear into the crowd back at Sloane and Company’s offices in an effort not to be noticed. And indeed, as they walked into the interview room to talk to him, the man was a study in anxiety.

“So, Nick Webster,” Jacobi addressed him, before popping a file and getting right to business. “According to the company organizational chart, you worked directly under Felicia. You were one of her administrative assistants.”

Nick nodded, looking back and forth between Jacobi and Lindsay agitatedly.

“Did you like her?” Jacobi asked.

“She didn’t want people to like her,” Nick muttered.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Jacobi countered. “Is it a no?”

“What do you want me to say?” Nick asked, waiting for a moment before he realized no response was forthcoming. “No, okay. I didn’t like her. No one liked her.”

“Did she do something in particular to you to make you not like her?”

Nick awkwardly shrugged.

“And I’ll take that as a yes,” Jacobi responded to it. “We know she wasn’t pleasant. But what did she do to you?”

Seeming about as loathe to tell his story as Morgan had been to share hers, Nick finally shifted forward, resting his forearms on the table, and began folding the silver gum wrapper in his hands.

“I was working in the mailroom when I applied for Felicia’s department,” he said. “I submitted my application for a copywriter position. During the interview, Felicia asked me if I would do anything for the position. I told her almost anything. Then I laughed. I thought she was kidding.” The movements of his hands became more brusque and angry. “So then she asked me if I would work as an administrative assistant for two years. She made it pretty obvious that it was either that and maybe get the copywriting job at some point, or not taking the job and having no chance at the one I wanted in the future. She controls people, that’s what she does.”

“Not anymore she doesn’t,” Lindsay reminded him.

“So, you were forced to be at the beck and call of a woman you can’t stand,” Jacobi summarized. “Must have made you pretty angry.”

In less than three seconds, the guy lost his hand. He fumbled the gum wrapper, flushed an interesting shade of red, and wasn’t the least bit straight-faced.

“What did you do?” Lindsay demanded.

“I didn’t kill her,” Nick stated emphatically.

“We don’t think you did,” Jacobi assured him. “But you did do something.”

Guilt oozing over him, Nick unfolded every fold that he’d put into the gum wrapper before looking up with tear-filled eyes.

“She made me look after her house while she was gone. It wasn’t a choice. It was just deciding whether or not I wanted to keep my job,” he said, tears falling in a sudden rush down his cheeks and spattering on the table. “I poisoned her dog.”

Nick began crying in earnest, sobs racking his lanky frame. Not expecting the response at all, Lindsay and Jacobi were held in place by the sincere sounds of the man’s regret.

“I’m sorry,” Nick said, sniffing. “I’m so sorry.”

Interviews done for the moment, Lindsay and Jacobi sat in a state of minor shell-shock. While Lindsay stared holes into her desk, Jacobi sat at his, hands behind his head, looking blankly off at the stairs.

It was hard to not let Nick go with a warning. The amount of guilt the kid was clearly harboring about what he’d done was a decent indicator that they would never have to worry about him getting into any trouble again. But they couldn’t let it go just like that, so they brought him up on a cruelty to animals charge and sent him off to Central Booking.

“How much must this woman have been hated?” Lindsay posed, just loud enough for Jacobi to hear her over the noise in the busy station.

“I think we’re getting a pretty good picture,” Jacobi replied.

“She made the lives of everyone around her a living hell,” Lindsay declared, mind drifting back to Felicia Watkins’ body dangling a hundred feet up in the atrium of Sloane and Company. “And she still doesn’t deserve what happened to her.”

Jacobi nodded in solemn agreement. “It seems our victim has her own M.O. that came back to bite her.”

“Sounds that way,” Lindsay agreed.

But Morgan Levering claimed not to have made any new friends recently. Of course, all it would have taken was Morgan telling the story about Felicia’s distinct interview style in public where the Hallelujah Man could overhear it. He seemed to have a way of discovering people in need of “saving”.

Reaching out to grab the evidence bag on the edge of his desk that had been taunting them ever since they finished up with the interviews, Jacobi dangled it before Lindsay and tilted his head in the direction of the conference room.

“Should we get this over with?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Lindsay responded, pushing up from her desk before she changed her mind.

Looking around at their colleagues as if they were about to do something they shouldn't, Lindsay and Jacobi walked with a death row pace into the conference room. Jacobi closed the door behind them, hesitating for only an instant before locking it.

Lindsay walked the perimeter of the room, pulling all the blinds closed, while Jacobi set up the tape from Sloane and Company. He pressed play and moved back to where Lindsay had taken up a position on the edge of the table.

It was exactly the same as before. It didn't take huge dimensions to make Felicia Watkins' suffering unbearable to witness. In fact, in the intimate setting, it was all the more real. Felicia's fear. Felicia's tears. Felicia's voice. Her broken hands that were useless, but kept trying anyway. This was the portrait of a woman who had been broken down to her utter being.

Lindsay's thoughts jumped between Felicia Watkins, staring out at her from the screen, and Cindy, hopefully back at her desk where she'd been advised to go.

Cindy had seen all of this. She'd wanted to. Of course she did. Cindy always wanted to see everything. It was her damned curious nature that made it impossible for her to differentiate between the things she actually needed to see and the things that she never should. But maybe Cindy hadn't seen nearly as much as she thought that she had. Because, earlier in the day, when they had stood side-by-side staring up at the larger-than-life image of this absolutely brutalized woman, the *look* on Cindy's face had shaken Lindsay to the core. That look was like her innocence had been ripped out of her and trampled on the floor beside the drops of Felicia Watkins' blood.

And it was all Lindsay's fault. She could have made Cindy wait outside. She should have made Cindy wait outside. It was protocol. Cindy had an active imagination. She could have gotten the gist without needing to bear firsthand witness.

This was Lindsay's world. Her life. She chose to chase monsters, and, as a result, she was subjected to their handiwork on a regular basis. But Cindy didn't have to be, and now Lindsay felt wholly responsible for increasing by fathoms the dark recesses to which Cindy's thoughts could delve.

The Hallelujah Man moved in behind Felicia. They struggled. He got the upper hand.

Lindsay heard the deep, measured breaths of Jacobi beside her as her fingers clutched with painful force at the edge of the table.

Just as they'd anticipated, the fireplace poker plunged straight into Felicia Watkins' eye.

Like one half of an old west gunfight, Jacobi drew the remote lightning fast and muted the scream.

Still not quite up to par following her less-than-ideal morning, Jill pushed open the wood and glass door and headed for the desks of Lindsay and Jacobi. She'd really expected to hear from one or the other of them by now. It would have been a nice change if they didn't need anything, but since the Hallelujah Man had decided to reappear, she doubted it seriously.

Finding their desks empty, but Lindsay's jacket still hanging on the back of her chair, Jill turned and ascended the steps to Tom's office. Sitting sideways behind his desk, Tom stared unblinkingly at the bank of monitors displaying the happenings in all parts of the station. He didn't seem to notice her arrival, so Jill knocked lightly on his door.

"Hi," Tom said, turning in her direction

"Hey," Jill returned. "Do you know where Linz is?"

Tom swiveled his chair sideways again, pointing toward a specific monitor.

Stepping further into his office, Jill stopped at the side of Tom's desk and looked. She recognized Lindsay sitting in the conference room with Jacobi right away. It took her a moment longer to realize what they were doing.

"Do you need something from her?" Tom asked.

"No. I just..." Jill turned away from the screen, looking down at Tom. It was astounding that someone could come back from vacation and look that tired already. "I figured she'd know by now what she needed from me."

Tom nodded and dug through some paperwork on his desk, finding a file and flipping it open.

"We're going to need a court order for the files of everyone who worked under the victim, as well as any information the company has kept on the people she may have interviewed. We'll ask nicely, but you know how that goes."

Jill nodded, eyes trailing back to the bank of monitors.

"We also need the search warrant for Felicia's house to include any evidence of her dog being poisoned," Tom continued.

That snapped Jill's focus right back to him.

"It's a long story," he told her.

"It would have to be," Jill shook her head. "I'll get to work on it."

"Thanks, Jill."

Tom gave her a small half-smile, and Jill smiled back. As angry as she had been at him recently for dragging Lindsay back into all of this well before she was ready, there was something about this particular killer that made every conversation feel like an excellent occasion for making amends.

For the first twenty minutes, Claire had allowed Paul to observe the autopsy of Felicia Watkins. With the extent of injuries, it would have added up to an excellent learning experience for him. How to clean up enough blood to see the wounds that caused it. How to find a wound within a wound; Felicia's body had plenty of examples of that particular phenomenon. But, even though Paul had been nothing but respectful, he'd also asked a lot of questions, and when Claire really got into the thick of things, she'd found that she couldn't answer them. Not because she didn't know the answers, but because she didn't want to tell him. He was twenty-two years old, and this case was no way for him to decide whether or not he wanted to pursue a career as a medical examiner.

With the lab to herself, Claire had just spent four hours alone with Felicia Watkins ghost whispering every gory detail to her. Each wound revealed a little more truth about what had been done. Every bruise spoke volumes. And the echoes of how each of those things must have felt ricocheted around the empty morgue.

Claire went into her office, peeling off her lab coat and aimed for the coat rack. When it missed and landed on the floor, she made no move to recover it. Legs feeling feeble and overloaded, Claire walked to her desk, crashing into her chair. She pulled Felicia's chart over in front of her, scanning her initial report, and realized just how many injuries she had to add.

A seriously strong desire to cut and run seized her, to leave the work half done and go home to her kids' smiling faces. Even if they weren't smiling when she got there, she took some parental joy in the fact that it was never too hard to make them laugh. Which meant that she and Ed hadn't screwed them up too much. At least not yet.

But she couldn't just leave it this way. If she didn't finish the paperwork, it would just wait for her. And starting out another day with Felicia Watkins and the torture she'd endured in that church wasn't something she wanted to do. She just needed to write it all down, close the file, and look at it only as often as she had to.

She couldn't just run.

She'd promised Lindsay she would never do that again.

It took over an hour. Not for her to die, but for him to inflict all the wounds that he had left her to die from. He moved around her as if they were fencing, just outside the scope of the camera, thrusting the fireplace poker into Felicia's body again and again.

When Felicia Watkins' head dangled forward from her neck, because she lacked the strength to hold it up, Jacobi unmuted the sound. There were no agonized howls left in the woman. Now the noises she made were nothing more than groans and whimpers, indicating that the all-around pain had reached a level where she could no longer distinguish each plunge of the fireplace poker through her skin and muscle.

It was only after he was done, after every purposeful lesion was made, that the Hallelujah Man unclasped the chains and let Felicia fall forward. She dropped below the camera's sight, there was the scuffle of feet they could hear but not see, and Felicia made one final cry.

When the camera moved again a minute later, it was to refocus on Felicia's prone form, blood now pouring from her mouth, her tongue lying beside her on the floor. Peripherally, Lindsay saw Jacobi look away from the sight, glancing at her before his eyes returned to the screen.

The camera stayed on, so Lindsay and Jacobi continued watching. The sound of footsteps retreated from the room, and Felicia was left alone. She was unchained, liberated, and it was as if they half-expected her to try to get up and walk out of there.

But Felicia had no capacity to move. She was down for the count, her life draining slowly out of her. Looking at the collective picture left on display, only one thought occurred to Lindsay.

"How does he justify it?" she asked Jacobi.

"God," Jacobi said simply.

"No, not that," Lindsay returned. "If he is doing this for God, if he just wants to rid the world of sinners, how does he justify waiting until last to cut out her tongue if he didn't just want to hear her scream?"

Jacobi looked over at her, bottled rage. And just when Lindsay had thought they couldn't hate this man anymore.

A sudden sound turned both of their heads back in the direction of the TV, a slow, rhythmic speech pattern ever so soft, almost non-existent. Jacobi pressed the button on the remote to max out the volume and it grew as loud as a whisper.

"Is that him?" Lindsay inquired. "Is he chanting?"

"Praying?" Jacobi returned.

He rushed forward to pull the tape, and the two of them barreled from the room.

When she'd made it back to the *Register* earlier, Cindy had been immediately accosted in regards

to how long she'd been absent. She wasn't the only one in pursuit of this story. It was the biggie right now. Everyone wanted it. And everyone else who had gone after it had made it back to the office well before she did.

In no mood to argue or explain, Cindy had simply asked for an hour, sat down at her desk, and started writing. Somewhere in the bottom of her bag was the recorder on which Felicia Watkins' final words were precisely recorded. But Cindy didn't need it. She could remember everything that she had seen with perfect clarity.

Much to the dismay of everyone else seeking the top spot on the *Register's* website, the boss had awaited her late entry, and, of course, with all of her inside information, she'd handily beaten out the competition. But the thrill hadn't been there the way that it usually was. It was a rather hollow victory. And ever since she'd turned the article in, she'd been on permanent loop in her head, replaying things she really wished would just take their leave. She'd never given much thought to the downside of her eidetic memory. In the past, it had always been used for good, whether helping her ace a test she'd barely studied for or earning her club membership. But apparently it did have a negative aspect. Not being able to quote Felicia Watkins' by heart wouldn't be a particularly bad thing.

She was working through it, but not on anything newspaper related. She had an angle, but it wouldn't in any way benefit the *Register*.

"Thomas."

Cindy recognized her boss' voice behind her, and minimized the search window before she turned around.

"My office," he motioned for her to follow him.

Wondering if this was how Jill felt when she got that phone call from Denise that seemed to put her job in jeopardy, Cindy lugged herself out of her seat and trailed him to his office.

"Could you get the door?" he asked, moving around his desk to sit down.

Cindy pushed it closed, seeing several sets of eyes turn in her direction before it clicked shut.

"Have a seat."

Not sure if it was an invitation or an order, Cindy complied regardless, dropping into the chair in front of his desk.

"That was some article," her boss stated.

"Thank you," Cindy replied, forcing a somewhat insincere smile to back it up.

"I would like for you to take the lead on the Hallelujah Man cases," her boss informed her,

continuing when Cindy's face turned to one of mild shock. "I know I've been letting you all battle it out. I sort of think the competition is good for you. But I think you really have the inside track on this, and that's what we need."

Cindy heard the words, but their meaning seemed to get lost somewhere in translation. She thought she knew what he was saying, but it seemed just as likely that she'd accidentally ingested some crack on her way back to the office.

"This is a big deal, Cindy," her boss stated in response to her severe underreaction.

"I know," Cindy said quickly. And she did.

"But if you don't want it... if you don't think you can handle it."

"I can handle it," she assured him. "I can absolutely handle it."

"Good," her boss smiled. "Because you've been consistently turning in the best work on this. I'd like to see that continue."

"It will," she promised. "Thank you."

"Thank you," he returned.

Cindy gave him a small smile and got up from the chair. The trip back out to her desk wasn't the walk on air she'd always imagined it would be. This was the biggest story she'd ever been handed the reins to. She was supposed to be smiling with braggart grandiosity, but she was having a hard enough time keeping the small pretend one on her face.

When she passed Danny near her desk, her painted-on smile lifted a fraction of an inch in greeting.

"Amazing article, Cindy," he said.

"Thanks," she returned, sliding back into her chair as he continued on his way.

With a quick glance around, Cindy pulled back up her internet search, clicking on the next available link, knowing very well that this investigation would soon come down to hours on the phone. The information she needed just wasn't out there in cyberspace yet.

Grabbing gratefully at it when her cell phone finally buzzed, Cindy checked the caller ID before flipping it open.

"Hey Claire," she answered.

"Hey," Claire's soft voice returned. "How are you doing?"

“Apparently I’m wowing people with my exceptional insight on this case,” Cindy informed her. “I just became the go-to girl by accident.”

“Well that’s a good thing, right?”

“It’s an excellent thing,” Cindy agreed.

“On another day,” Claire filled in for her.

Cindy took a deep breath, shifting the phone away from her mouth so that she didn’t exhale loudly into Claire’s ear.

“How about you?” she asked. “Did you finish the autopsy?”

“Not long ago,” Claire responded.

Cindy played with the cord of her mouse, wondering if it was just her imagination that Claire was being evasive. While she was used to that with Lindsay, Claire was usually much more forthcoming with her thoughts.

“Anything you want to talk about?” Cindy encouraged.

“No,” Claire breathed. “Nothing. I just wanted to check on you, see if you needed a little friendly comfort.”

“I appreciate it. I definitely do,” Cindy said honestly, light bulb burning with sudden brightness in her brain. “But, Claire, you do know it’s okay to call me if you need that, right?”

For a long moment, Claire said nothing at all, and when she finally did, it was barely a whisper.

“Thanks.”

The excitement of having something incredibly solid to go on, or at least something identifiable, had turned to glassy-eyed mystification in the face of one of the tech girls who felt the need to explain everything that she was doing as she did it.

“It’s like you’re speaking in an invented language to us, Asha,” Jacobi informed her to stop the incessant nerd-chatter. “Just let us know when we need to listen.”

With a disappointed nod, Asha proceeded to work her magic in the system, removing what little sounds were left coming from Felicia, the creaks of the old building, and little by little the soft cadence of a man chanting became paramount.

“Is that Latin?” Lindsay questioned softly, trying to listen at the same time.

“I think so,” Asha nodded. “I can get it translated for you.”

She increased the volume, and Lindsay and Jacobi leaned in for a closer listen, looking at each other when several unexpected sounds became perceptible.

“That sounds like other people,” Jacobi stated, leaning ever closer.

“Shh,” Asha said, holding up a finger to quiet them. She pulled up another program, doing something that would only make sense to Lindsay and Jacobi if they sat through several seminars on computer forensics. “It’s not live,” she said at last. “It’s a recording.”

“How can you tell?”

“Would it make sense if I told you?” Asha fairly asked.

“Probably not,” Jacobi admitted.

Both Lindsay and Jacobi backed away, no longer as intent in their listening. It was a cruel blow after the belief that they had something that could possibly be used to identify the killer.

“This could still be helpful,” Jacobi offered, walking over to Lindsay. “It could be more helpful. We can find out what the recording is, find out where it can be bought, trace the sale.”

Lindsay nodded solemnly. “Think we can do all that before someone else gets killed?”

Sighing, Jacobi glanced at Asha, who was still working diligently at cleaning up the sound on the tape. The repetitive Latin continued to fill the room, and Lindsay and Jacobi just stood there as if they didn’t know what their next move should be.

Grateful for the interruption when Lindsay felt her phone vibrating on her hip, she reached for it, both less and more eager to answer once she saw that it was Cindy.

“Hey,” she answered softly.

“Hey,” Cindy’s calming voice returned. “What’s that sound?”

“Nothin’,” Lindsay quickly responded, motioning her escape to Jacobi before ducking out of the room and pulling the door closed behind her.

“How’s it going there?” Cindy asked.

“Not too bad,” Lindsay responded, heading off down the hallway.

“Good,” Cindy said. “Guess who was just given pole position in coverage of the Hallelujah Man cases?”

Drawn to a momentary stand-still by the unexpected news, Lindsay wished she could smile as she started walking again. “If you say it’s someone other than you, I’ll have to come beat up your boss.”

“Well, you can keep that Texas tomboy aggression at the hall,” Cindy assured her, the tone of her voice implying a genuine grin.

“I’m happy for you,” Lindsay stated, with half honesty and half concern about how much more tenacious this would make Cindy.

“So do you have anything for me?” Cindy predictably asked.

Lindsay paused, but not long enough to let Cindy know that she was determining how much to share with her.

“She wasn’t well-liked,” Lindsay stated. “Other than that, not so much.”

It wasn’t a lie. Not really. The recording may have been something, but they had no idea what it might be yet. And maybe the fact that Felicia had ended up pleading that she would do anything after telling employees that if they were good enough they never had to be willing to was worthy of note. But when Lindsay knew that for sure, she’d tell Cindy. At least that’s how she justified it inside her own head.

“Well, I’ve been trying to find abandoned churches,” Cindy informed her. “I figure, it has to be somewhere far enough away from everything that no one would have heard those screams.”

Just hearing Cindy utter that reminder, the urge to tell her to just stay the hell out of it was intense. But figuring that Cindy working on that would keep her from asking more difficult questions, Lindsay managed to refrain.

“Good thinking,” she forced instead.

“I’ll let you know if I find something,” Cindy promised, and Lindsay felt a pang of guilt knowing that, unlike her, Cindy actually would share any new information. When the voice came back over the line, it had softened into something less shoptalk and more intimate. “So, will I see you tonight?”

Lindsay stopped beside the elevator, one foot behind her on the wall to brace her as she leaned back against it.

She wanted that. In just a short time, she’d gotten rather used to sleeping next to Cindy at night, but as long as there was evidence to go through, she wasn’t leaving this. Not to mention, after what she’d just sat and watched, she felt painted black and really didn’t want any more of her darkness rubbing off on Cindy.

“Probably not tonight, no,” she responded.

“I didn’t figure,” Cindy returned disappointedly. “But I thought it was worth a shot. Do you think you’ll be exceptionally late getting in? Should I check on Martha on my way home?”

“Yes,” Lindsay said. “Please. Take her out?”

“Someone’s got to,” Cindy responded. “And, if anything changes you don’t have to call me. Just come over.”

Lindsay took a deep breath. She could really go for meeting Cindy at her apartment right at this very moment. “Alright.”

The fact that neither of them particularly wanted to say goodbye was obvious in the drawn out silence. Then Lindsay really wished that she had.

“Are you okay, Linz?” Cindy softly questioned.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Lindsay gave the stock answer, hitting the button for the elevator with her fist. “I’ve gotta get back to work. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay,” Cindy responded. “Bye.”

Lindsay flipped the phone closed.

She hated lying to her, but she couldn’t stand the idea of Cindy knowing the truth either. Cindy had a dangerous inclination toward risk-taking when she needed help, so Lindsay just had to make sure that Cindy didn’t know she was in need of anything.

Glancing up at the soft rapping on her door, Claire found Lindsay stepping into her office.

“Hey,” Claire said, a bit more morosely than usual.

“Hey,” Lindsay quietly returned. “What do we got?”

Resigned to the inevitability, Claire pushed back in her chair and grabbed Felicia Watkins’ file.

“Can’t we just go over it in here?” Lindsay asked.

“I’m afraid some of these wounds aren’t exactly easily explainable,” Claire informed her.

Not really wanting to go, especially following that prologue, Lindsay let Claire walk ahead of her. By the time she made it to her side, Claire had Felicia Watkins’ body pulled out.

“Let’s not repeat anything we already know,” Lindsay requested. “Sexual assault?”

“Numerous,” Claire confirmed. “With several different weapons. None of them human. And not just vaginal. I would love to give you an accurate estimate of how many times, but the damage is too extensive.”

Lindsay nodded, expecting it. “What else?”

“The bones in both of her feet are shattered. Her shins. Her kneecaps. The ligaments in her left shoulder are torn in two.” Claire paused. “Let’s just simplify this. Her skull is intact. Her brain is fine. Other than that, every bone, muscle and organ in her body has some kind of damage.”

“Anything painful,” Lindsay summarized. “Anything that would make her beg for mercy. Humble her.”

“And she did beg,” Claire said. “Her vocal chords are completely destroyed. If she had gotten out of this alive, she would never have been able to speak normally again.”

Lindsay cringed as she realized she needed a third go-around with the video of Felicia’s death with the sound on the whole time, in case she’d missed something.

“And there’s this,” Claire said, pulling the sheet down to expose Felicia Watkins’ entire torso. Her body bruised from throat to pelvis, the place on her abdomen that Claire pointed out was barely visible. The gaping wound, deep into the tissue, looked almost corroded.

“What in the hell did that?” Lindsay asked. “Acid?”

“They’re rat bites,” Claire uttered.

Slowly, Lindsay lifted her head, eyes locking with Claire’s. “I’ve seen rat bites, Claire.”

“And she has the kind that you’ve seen all over her, which really isn’t surprising. But these ones were inflicted before most of her other wounds,” Claire explained. “We just couldn’t see them for the blood.”

“It looks more like they sat down for a feast,” Lindsay hissed.

“Cindy could explain this much better than me, I’m sure. Why aren’t she and Jill here?”

“They’re busy,” Lindsay said shortly. “You explain it.”

“There was a medieval torture where they put rats inside a cage with an open bottom on a person’s body. The top of the cage was covered with hot coals. The rats try to burrow away from the heat,” Claire stated, pointing out marks on Felicia’s sides. “These marks are from a cage.”

“Jesus,” Lindsay spat, backing away.

Claire covered Felicia's body, retiring it to its temporary resting place.

"We do know one thing from all of this, Lindsay," she said.

"What do we know?" Lindsay asked helplessly.

"It was fairly evident at the other crime scenes, but with this one, it's irrefutable," Claire declared. "This killer has an incredible grasp of human anatomy. With Felicia, he brought her to the edge of death numerous times, and gave her just enough chance to heal so that she didn't die before he wanted her to. And when he did finally kill her -"

"He gave her exactly the right amount of wounds in all the right places so that she would die slowly and be in the most possible pain as she bled out?" Lindsay guessed.

"Yes," Claire replied, wondering where Lindsay had gotten that information.

"How long did it take her to bleed out?"

"From the state of the wounds and the time of death... seventy-two hours."

"This guy is seriously pissing me off," Lindsay snarled.

"Is that it?" Claire's question drew Lindsay's gaze toward her once again. "You're not scared at all? Because I'm scared, Lindsay. From what little I've heard," Claire emphasized the lack of information she'd been given, "this woman's only sin was being a bitch. This could be Denise lying on this table."

The fact that neither of them were big fans of Denise Kwon had little impact on the analogy. Seeing anyone they knew in a condition like Felicia Watkins was a terrifying prospect.

"I don't want to talk about this," Lindsay uttered.

"It's the truth."

"I don't want to talk about it," Lindsay said again, eyes boring into Claire. "And I don't want you talking about any of this with anyone, including Jill and Cindy."

"They're going to want to know, Lindsay."

"When they need to, we'll tell them," Lindsay declared with finality, heading off.

"You watched the tape, didn't you?" Claire asked.

Lindsay stopped cold in the doorway, tensing as she turned back around.

"It's my job," she said with an unfitting lack of emotion, and left Claire to feel on her own.

ACT III

At some point during the night, Jacobi had decided reading and re-reading all their interview notes and looking through old evidence was like chasing his own tail, and he left for a few hours of sleep in his own bed. When he returned, he took one look at Lindsay and knew that she had done little more than catch a quick shower and feed her dog before heading back into the station. He also had an idea as to what she'd spent those solo hours doing, but that was a conversation they could, and would, have later.

He refused to argue over who was driving, letting Lindsay know that she looked like she'd done six shots of Cuervo and an eight ball.

When they arrived at Sloane and Company, entering through a side door to avoid the still-closed atrium entrance, the CEO who had requested a conference kept them waiting forty minutes before he could meet with them. If they weren't in need of something from him, they would have left him to his ego.

"Felicia worked hard to get to where she'd gotten." He was the first person to talk about the victim with any sort of fondness. "I don't think she got people who don't reach her level, people who lack self-esteem, people who aren't one hundred percent confident all the time. She just thought if people could be more like her, they'd accomplish more."

"You seem to think highly of that," Jacobi uttered. "Our killer just saw it as pride."

The CEO nodded. "She was proud of what she'd done. She should have been."

"To the detriment of others?" Lindsay asked.

"I guess you could say that," the CEO shrugged. "A lot of people probably felt that way."

"So would it be safe to assume that every person Felicia came in contact with in her daily life she treated in a way that would make them a likely suspect?"

"I don't think any of them would kill her."

"I'm only asking how many of them have a motive," Jacobi rephrased.

"Felicia was pretty hard on a lot of people," the CEO said. "She was always nice to me, but then, I signed her paycheck."

"Why would you let this woman keep working at your company?" Lindsay questioned.

"Felicia made them hungry," the CEO said in fond remembrance. "She made them want to keep

moving up the ladder.”

“She made them miserable,” Lindsay said. “They only wanted to move up the ladder to get away from her.”

“Whatever it takes,” the CEO responded.

Lindsay and Jacobi exchanged a look of joint dislike of this asshole. If he had any clue as to how easily he could have been the Hallelujah Man’s victim in Felicia’s place, he didn’t show it.

“We’re going to need to see your employee files, as well as anything you might have on people who interviewed with Felicia and didn’t get hired,” Jacobi informed him.

“We’re going to need to see a warrant,” the CEO smugly replied.

“No problem.”

Grateful for Tom’s initiative, Lindsay produced it from her pocket and held it across his desk.

“What are you doing?” Denise’s voice pierced the peaceful quiet that Jill’s office had been up until her arrival.

“Patterson asked for help with research,” Jill explained.

“I know,” Denise responded. “He’s been beseeching the entire office with his story of woe. You’re the only one who gave in. Why aren’t you working on your serial killer?”

“Seriously?” Jill scoffed. “You’re going to get upset when I do work on the Hallelujah Man case and upset when I don’t?”

She wasn’t sure if Denise was angry or impressed as she stared in at her.

“I’m sorry, Denise,” Jill said with sincerity. “Apparently they don’t need my help with that case right now. But Patterson does.”

With a smirk, Denise let Jill’s outburst go. “I thought he was going to cry.”

For her sake, Jill managed a small smile.

“Well, good with the teamwork I guess,” Denise said and walked off.

Jill thought about calling a member of the club, but somehow knew that Lindsay wasn’t going to tell her anything. And if Lindsay wouldn’t, Claire probably wouldn’t either. Cindy would be the most cooperative, but she sort of suspected that Cindy didn’t know anymore than she did.

Fortunately, Cindy had held back just enough information from her initial article following Felicia Watkins' death to provide her with an attention-grabbing companion piece for today's front page. But she was quickly running out of inside information. And no one was providing her more.

When she'd talked to Lindsay that morning, she'd thought about asking again if Lindsay had any pertinent information for her, but Lindsay had said she'd keep her posted. And even though she knew Lindsay wasn't always forthcoming about cases with her, she really wanted to trust her.

Using research as an excuse to get out of the office, Cindy took off first thing, driving just over the bridge where she could be fairly certain that she wouldn't be seen by colleagues.

Now she was holing up in a small, new age coffee shop, where she had a feeling she would be consuming both lunch and dinner.

Plugging in her charger, and cell phone in hand, she settled in for the long haul. Maybe she didn't have anything in reserve to help her keep the Hallelujah Man story hers alone, but if she could get this information for Lindsay, it wouldn't be an entirely wasted day.

"Twelve boxes full of files are too many damn employees," Jacobi grumbled, cracking open another and tossing the lid aside.

"Well, maybe if Felicia didn't bully people into ambition, they wouldn't have seen such turn over," Lindsay returned.

Fed up with the fruitless search for something to jump out at them from the thousands of files to go through, Jacobi glanced around at their co-workers, who seemed a lot less busy than the two of them.

"We could use more hands in here," he said.

"I don't think we should get a lot of careless people in these files," Lindsay countered. "You know Tom will give us rookies."

"I'll take a pass on the rookies," Jacobi declared with a sharp shake of his head. "I was actually talking about your girl squad."

"They have their own things to do, Jacobi," Lindsay murmured without looking up.

"They don't mind putting their own stuff aside," Jacobi argued. "I've seen them do it."

“Not this time.”

There were a whole host of questions tickling Jacobi’s intrigued brain, starting with why Lindsay thought she should re-watch the videotape of Felicia Watkins’ slaughter without him in the wee hours of the morning and ending with why Lindsay’s personal team hadn’t already found this information, as was their habit. He wasn’t lazy per se, but he had gotten accustomed to the more monotonous parts of his job being handed to him with a big silver bow on top.

Before the interrogation could begin, however, they were interrupted by a lilting voice.

“Got your translations,” Asha practically sang at them.

Jacobi took the sheet of paper when Asha held it out to them, and Lindsay stood at his shoulder reading along.

Prayers, as anticipated; several different ones, repeated several times each.

“The spaces aren’t just spaces,” Asha informed them, brimming exhilaration. “Do you mind if I play it?”

When they nodded their consent, Asha looked like she’d been handed a golden ticket to something other than a serial killer’s mind. She pressed play and let the first couple of prayers fill the room before turning around to face Lindsay and Jacobi.

“I think he’s following a rosary.”

After Jill’s discovery, the link to Catholicism wasn’t terribly surprising, though it did offer some confirmation. Lindsay tried not to reflect too much on the fact that Cindy probably could have made the connection the first time through.

The soft chant continuing in the background, Lindsay scanned the transcript. Mixed in with the familiar “Our Father”s and “Hail Mary”s were several prayers she didn’t recognize.

“These prayers aren’t usually said in a rosary, are they?” She pointed two of them out.

“No,” Jacobi shook his head. “It’s like he’s substituting them in.”

“So what are they?” Lindsay asked.

“It’ll take some research,” Jacobi responded with a shrug, “but we’ll figure it out.”

Or it could take one short phone call. Telling herself it was for the greater good, Lindsay pulled out her cell phone and made the call before she could decide against it.

“Hey,” Cindy answered, sounding glad to hear from her.

“Hey,” Lindsay breathed. “I have a question for you.”

“Okay.”

“Will you see if you recognize this?” Lindsay asked.

“Um... sure,” Cindy responded in some confusion.

Lindsay pulled the transcript from Jacobi’s hand and found the first unknown prayer.

“Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I adore thee profoundly,” she read. “I offer thee the most precious body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ, present in all the tabernacles of the world, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges, and indifference by which He is offended. And through the infinite merit of His most sacred heart, and the immaculate heart of Mary, I beg of thee the conversion of poor sinners.”

Cindy probably only needed a small portion to recognize it if she was going to, but once Lindsay started reading, she couldn’t seem to stop. It was like a track straight into the Hallelujah Man’s psyche. This was what he was thinking. This was what he believed. He really did think that he was some holy entity, some blessed prophet.

“It’s a Fatima prayer.” Cindy answered without delay. Lindsay had known that she would.

“What’s a Fatima prayer?” she asked, glancing at Jacobi, but he was already writing it down.

“In 1917,” Cindy’s gentle voice informed her, “the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to three children in the town of Fatima. It’s one of the few earthly visits by a religious icon that the Catholic Church endorses as truth. I’m pretty sure that one’s the Angel Prayer.”

Mentally noting the information, Lindsay moved down the transcript.

“My God, I believe, I adore, I hope and I love thee. I beg pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope, and do not love thee.”

“That’s another one,” Cindy confirmed. “Linz, these prayers are not regularly prayed. Most modern Catholics don’t even know about them. Where did you get this?”

Trying to decide how much truth she owed Cindy, Lindsay was as honest as she could bring herself to be.

“Evidence at the scene suggests that our killer knows about these prayers,” Lindsay said.

“What kind of evidence?” Cindy asked, waiting Lindsay’s silence out for a reasonably long spell, before adding, “I’m not going to print a story about it. I just want to know.”

“Can we just... could we talk about it later, please?” Lindsay pleaded.

“Okay,” Cindy acquiesced. “How are you? You sound terrible.”

“I’m fine,” Lindsay said, turning away from Jacobi’s overtly curious expression. “How about you? Does this help you at all?”

“If that’s all you’ve got, it’s all you’ve got, Linz.”

Lindsay swallowed the guilt, knowing she was doing this for Cindy’s own good.

“Hopefully we’ll have more soon,” she said. “I’m going to go, okay? I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay,” Cindy said softly, not even hesitating before hanging up.

It was so abrupt, Lindsay wondered for a moment if she was as bad of a liar as Cindy.

Knowing that Lindsay would work herself well into the witching hours and rise before the rooster to work some more, Cindy stopped by her apartment to give some love and a potty break to the neglected Martha for the second night in a row, and then headed to the bar to take Jill up on her drink offer.

Claire was going to meet them, but decided at the last minute it was best to go home. So it ended up just the two of them. They drank margaritas and talked, with very little mention of Felicia Watkins or the Hallelujah Man, made effortless by the fact that neither of them had anything new to say.

At the bottom of her second glass, Cindy discovered an unwelcome thought. Looking up, she crooked her finger at Jill, drawing her across the table. Leaned in so close that she felt Jill’s tequila-and-lime breath hitting her cheek, Cindy kept her voice low as if worried about hidden surveillance.

“I get a feeling Lindsay isn’t telling me everything.”

Jill’s eyes narrowed slightly in reaction. With a sudden movement, she sat back, picked up her glass and clinked it into the side of Cindy’s in a bitter toast.

“Welcome to the club,” she said and tossed back the remainder of its contents.

Sporting a slight hangover from her idiotic attempt at keeping up with Jill, when her cell rang at ten ‘til five, Cindy recited every four-letter word she could recall and a few that she made up on

the spot. Reaching for it in a blind rush to make the noise cease, she knocked the phone from the bedside table, where it proceeded to blare up at her with the generic ring that told her it was no one she knew. Finally finding the phone in the darkness, Cindy flipped it open and fell back onto her bed in careless disarray.

“What?” she muttered, half-asleep.

“Ms. Thomas,” a deep, kind voice returned. “My name is Father Marino. I’m sorry to bother you so early, but I have confession from five to nine and your message said it was urgent.”

Forcing herself upright and feeling a deep sense of mortification, like the priest could somehow sense the rainbow of words with which she’d just colored her surroundings or knew how scantily-clothed she had fallen into bed, Cindy grasped at lucidity.

“Right. Father Marino,” she repeated, trying to puzzle out where in her apartment she might have dropped her notes when she’d come in just a few hours ago.

“You wanted to know about San Vincente’s,” Father Marino filled in the blanks.

“Right,” Cindy said, perking up instantly. “What can you tell me?”

“Boxer,” Lindsay husked, shaking out of her less-than-satisfying sleep on the couch in Claire’s office. Not quite sure how she’d gotten there, she came to the conclusion that staying up for the sake of the case may have crossed over into staying up too long.

“San Vincente’s,” Cindy said without preamble. “It’s near Sebastopol, on the Russian River. It’s been abandoned since 2005 when it was flooded. It’s not just sitting empty, Linz. It’s condemned. No one is supposed to go within fifty feet of it.”

Even to Lindsay’s sleep-deprived brain, that sounded about right.

“Okay, good,” she said, sitting up and looking with some confusion around Claire’s office.

“Jacobi and I will check it out. If there’s something you need to know...”

“I know,” Cindy sounded completely unconvinced. “You’ll call me.”

Lindsay didn’t know what to say. Cindy had a right to be doubtful.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?” she finally said.

It was only when she went upstairs and saw the dark outside the windows and limited personnel that Lindsay bothered to check the time. Deciding a visit to the church wasn’t pressing enough to disturb Jacobi at six a.m. – because if the Hallelujah Man was planning to clean up after himself, he would have already done it – Lindsay rummaged on her desk and Jacobi’s until she found the

four sought-after files and took them into the conference room.

She laid them in order on the table, each file flipped open. Dellan. Blake. Martin. Watkins.

Palms flat against the polished wood, Lindsay leaned over them, eyes scanning each one for the hundredth time.

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice,” she read from Dellan’s file. “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Eyes trailing into Blake’s, Lindsay skimmed to the italicized verse. “Let moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.”

“For the love of money is the root of all evil,” Martin’s file threatened, “which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

The next she didn’t have to read. It was still imbedded into her brain.

“Stop judging, that you may not be judged,” she murmured. “For as you judge so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you.”

Perfect summation. He was trying to scare people into not sinning. Holy terrorism. That’s why the video this time. Everyone needed to know that God was watching and his disciple was at hand to smite them should they get caught in a sin.

When she emerged from the room for coffee, Lindsay was surprised to see the station already back to active, and Jacobi, who looked annoyingly refreshed, sitting at his desk.

“Want to take a ride?” she asked him.

“Want to take a shower?” he countered.

“Give me ten minutes,” Lindsay embarrassedly uttered, digging spare clothes from the bottom drawer of her desk.

Jacobi watched his partner walk off, wishing he had the ability to extract thoughts from her through mind control. Pulled from his ponderings by the fluttering arrival of Asha, he looked up as she perched at the edge of his desk.

“I was playing around with the voice recognition software,” she twittered excitedly, “and you are not going to believe who’s on our recording.”

Asha held out a piece of paper and Jacobi took it.

“Pope John Paul II?!?” he exclaimed, reading over the results.

Intent on his shock, Jacobi didn’t notice Claire walk in, stopping just within hearing range.

“It’s not a perfect match, but I was comparing it to one of his last speeches right before he died,” Asha explained. “It’s close enough to make the assumption that our recording is old and his voice changed as he aged. It could be confirmed.”

“With the Vatican?” Jacobi questioned dubiously.

“Good luck getting their cooperation,” Claire declared, walking the rest of the way to his desk.

“Hey Claire,” Jacobi greeted.

“I’ll see what I can find about it,” Asha promised, walking off.

“Where’d you get a recording?” Claire inquired.

“It was at the end of the video,” Jacobi responded. “Linz didn’t tell you?”

Claire took a deep cleansing breath and released it. “She’s been busy.”

“So we’ve got a recording by Pope John Paul II doing a rosary with the Fatima prayers,” Jacobi walked through the path of their evidence. “Lindsay and I apparently have somewhere we’re supposed to be. And we have Asha doing the digging for us.” He didn’t seem to like his odds, but brightened suddenly as he looked at Claire. “You don’t suppose Cindy would be up for this kind of research, do you?”

“Oh, I think Cindy would love to help,” Claire replied. “I’ll let her know.”

“Good,” Jacobi clapped his hands, much more confident in their chance of success.

“And I brought this for you,” Claire said, handing Jacobi a file. “It’s a copy of Felicia Watkins’ autopsy report. I thought you might want to look at it yourself... just in case Lindsay has decided not to tell you everything.”

As Claire walked off, Jacobi got an overwhelming feeling that all was not well.

Cindy was right. She’d narrowed down a wide search to one very likely location. San Vincente’s was miles from anything. No matter how loud they became, no one would have heard Felicia’s screams.

Lindsay and Jacobi stepped inside the damaged building and through the vestibule. The sanctuary was destroyed, but showed no signs that Felicia Watkins had ever been there.

But, though Felicia had told them it was a church, it had never looked like a church on the tape, so Lindsay and Jacobi ignored the ornate pews and altar for the steps at the back of the sanctuary that led down into the basement.

Pulling their guns as if the crime was still in progress, they descended the steep, dark stairwell and emerged into the pitch black below. Flashlights coming out, they walked a little closer together than usual as they moved through the room, like they expected the bogeyman himself to jump from the shadows.

When the small room opened into a larger room in the back, the chains were visible at a distance. It was only as they grew closer to the place where she'd been chained that they could distinguish every part of Felicia Watkins that hadn't made it to the morgue with her, left exactly where they had fallen.

"I'll call for a forensic team," Jacobi stated, pulling out his cell.

When Lindsay opened her mouth, it sounded like somebody else speaking.

"Tell Tom to be discreet, Jacobi. We don't need everybody knowing what's out here."

She assumed without looking at him that Jacobi had heard, though with the lingering screams of Felicia Watkins, she wasn't sure how.

Something heavy bumped Lindsay's foot. She aimed her flashlight down to see a massive rat scurrying across it. With a panicked kick, she sent it flying.

The gathering of evidence from the scene was a full day's work. Lindsay stood the entire time at the edge of the room, watching the forensic team pick up the pieces of Felicia Watkins.

"They're almost finished," Jacobi said as he walked up. "So, what's your plan for tonight?"

Lindsay gave him a look she hoped implied he was crazy. Did this really look like she didn't have plenty of work to keep her ass at her desk for two weeks?

"Here's what I think you should do," Jacobi completely discounted her stare. "I think you should call your friends, because I'm pretty sure one of them is pissed off at you. Then you should go home to your own apartment and get a real night's sleep that doesn't leave you looking like death warmed over... eaten... regurgitated... and warmed over again."

"You sure do know how to sweet talk a lady," Lindsay uttered.

How Jacobi managed to produce an authentic half-smile in this place, Lindsay had no idea, but she did envy him for it.

“Inspector Jacobi,” someone called from across the room, and Jacobi started off.

“Who’s pissed off at me?” Lindsay called at his back.

“Call them all, and you don’t have to worry about it,” Jacobi yelled back.

“So, I have a thought,” Cindy declared. “Maybe we should be narrowing our focus. If this guy wears a stole, if he knows about the Fatima prayers, he’s devout. He’s not your average, run-of-the-mill Catholic.”

“So you think he’s clergy?” Jill asked, having come to a similar conclusion.

“I think it’s possible,” Cindy said. “Then again, with what I learned about that recording, he could be far up in those ranks.”

Jill and Claire sat forward as if waiting for the big reveal. Their last club meeting over two days ago, they had a lot of catching up to do. But before Cindy could impart her awesome knowledge, the door opened and Lindsay sauntered in, plopping herself down in the booth next to Jill and drawing all eyes to her bedraggled form.

“Hey,” Lindsay said. “What did I miss?”

“Did you find anything at the church?” Cindy asked quickly.

“Unless it’s case talk,” Lindsay said. “I really can’t take any more of that right now.”

Catching the eye of the waitress, Lindsay motioned to Jill’s drink and received a nod of comprehension. The silence in response to her statement indicated it was indeed case talk. And the fact that no one started badgering her into talking about it made Lindsay wonder which of her friends, or her Cindy, was supposed to be pissed off at her.

“Claire’s office was broken into,” Cindy changed the subject.

“What?” Lindsay asked.

“It wasn’t wrecked or anything. When I got in this morning, I could just tell someone had picked the lock,” Claire explained.

Red-faced, Lindsay ducked her head.

“Yeah, that was me, sorry,” she said in one quick breath.

“Why did you break into my office?” Claire asked in shock.

“I don’t know,” Lindsay said. “I was tired and I just needed a place to crash. I guess in my somewhat altered state it seemed like a good idea.”

“You could have left me a note,” Claire contended.

“I know,” Lindsay said. “I should have, but Cindy called me super early and I wasn’t thinking.” She tilted her head in surrender. “I’m sorry I broke into your office.”

“Well, it’s better than someone else doing it.”

“Why didn’t you go home last night?” Cindy asked.

“I just... I was working late and I lost track of time.”

“What about the night before?” Cindy questioned.

Lindsay looked around, wondering where her drink was.

“Jesus, Linz! I know you said you were busy, but I thought you’d at least go home to sleep.”

Lindsay’s exhausted gaze held hers across the table, and Cindy was hit with a sudden instant replay of her last three sentences. Sitting back against the booth, she looked at Jill and Claire. Jill’s eyebrow was arched nearly to her hairline and Claire was wearing the expression she always wore when she was trying to keep a straight face but really wanted to grin.

“So how ‘bout them 9ers?” Cindy asked.

Lindsay used it as an excuse to spend the rest of the evening not discussing the case, and the entire time it felt as if there was a pink elephant in the room just waiting to crush them.

“You really do look exhausted, Lindsay,” Jill declared as they stood in front of Papa Joe’s preparing to part ways two hours later. “Are you sure you should be driving?”

“I’ll follow her home,” Cindy volunteered.

That Lindsay wasn’t about to decline. “I’m parked near you,” she motioned with her head. “Later you guys.”

“Night,” Jill and Claire said, watching Lindsay and Cindy walk off, almost disappointed when they just got in their cars and drove away.

Lindsay pulled into the driveway, climbing down from her SUV, as Cindy pulled in behind her and emerged from her own car.

Lindsay ambled back to her, leaning in so that Cindy was pressed back into the driver's side door. Knowing that there were things going on that weren't being spoken aloud, Cindy lost all ability to remember what they were when the metal pressed into her back and she was held hostage by Lindsay's intense stare.

"Come in," Lindsay husked.

"Linz, you need to sleep," Cindy said.

"I can sleep with you here," Lindsay reasoned.

Cindy's look clearly doubted that theory.

"You don't have to stay all night," Lindsay tried. "Just come in."

Completely incapable of saying no to her, Cindy dropped her keys into her purse and followed Lindsay inside.

Martha greeted them inside the door of Lindsay's apartment. Cindy bent down to give her a scratch, but had barely made contact when she was pulled back up. A soft tug and she was pressed firmly against Lindsay.

"I thought you wanted to sleep," Cindy reminded her.

"I want to do that too," Lindsay murmured, her lips occupying Cindy's an instant later in a decidedly pleasant invasion.

When Lindsay's mouth dipped to Cindy's jaw and down onto her neck, Cindy knew two more inches and she would lose all power of speech.

"Hold on, Linz," she panted. "Just a minute."

"Why?" Lindsay asked, moving to the hollow of Cindy's throat.

There were reasons. Cindy knew that. If only she could remember them.

Lindsay's tongue trailed slowly back up her throat and Cindy kissed her hard. Because she'd missed her like crazy. And she was fucking mad for her. But she also needed to know what was going on. As much as she wanted this, she felt like she was on uncertain terrain. She needed to know where they stood.

“I just want to tell you one thing,” she said, watching Lindsay’s eyes darken as she pulled away. “About the recording of the Fatima prayers.”

The question was practically written in neon on Lindsay’s forehead, but she couldn’t ask it. Asking Cindy how she knew about the recording would make it obvious she’d tried to keep it from her.

“Don’t tell me,” Lindsay whispered instead, her lips reattaching to Cindy’s neck.

Wanting so much to just give into it, because it felt so damn right, Cindy lightly pushed Lindsay away.

“It’s important,” Cindy said even as she followed the path that Lindsay was making to the sofa.

“I’m not worried about it,” Lindsay mumbled.

“You’re not worried about it?” Cindy asked.

“Not right now,” Lindsay declared.

“How can you not be worried about it?”

“Cindy, please just stop talking,” Lindsay pleaded.

Instead of the desired effect though, Cindy pushed Lindsay back. She fell softly onto the sofa, staring up blankly.

“What?” she asked.

“You are not not worried about it,” Cindy stated.

“Uh oh, a double negative. I’m in trouble now,” Lindsay teased.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Lindsay responded, getting up again and moving in Cindy’s direction.

“You went to the church today, didn’t you?” Cindy questioned. “It’s the crime scene?”

“Yeah,” Lindsay nonchalantly replied.

“And you didn’t tell us?”

“There was nothing to tell.”

“You have a crime scene, Lindsay,” Cindy stated. “I think we all would have considered that

critical information.”

“We didn’t even find anything,” Lindsay smoothly lied. “We will eventually. I’m just not worried about it. Not right now.”

Cindy evaded Lindsay’s grasping hands. “It’s not that you’re not worried about it. You just don’t want me to worry about it.”

“So what if I don’t? It’s not your problem.”

“How can you say that to me? Especially now?”

“When I find this guy, you’ll have your story, Cindy. I can’t give you what I don’t have.”

“So that’s my role again now?” Cindy asked in disbelief. “Why are you pushing us away from this case?”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are,” Cindy said, backing further away.

With every inch that Cindy moved away from her, Lindsay felt her body temperature drop a degree until she was shivering so hard her teeth knocked together.

“Can we not do this now?”

“We’re going to have to do it some time,” Cindy argued. “Why do you want to handle this case by yourself?”

“When can I ever do anything by myself?” Lindsay countered.

“But that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“What I want is for you to come back over here.”

“And what? Lay there and keep my mouth shut?”

“Yes!”

The silence that followed was more consuming and more painful than any of the ones they had been in lately, which was saying something.

“If that’s what you want Lindsay, maybe you should have just...” stayed with Pete, that’s what she thought, but it hurt Cindy too much to try to hurt Lindsay with it. She didn’t really want to hurt Lindsay anyway. She just wanted Lindsay to stop hurting her. “Why won’t you let anyone help you?”

“Because I never know when everyone will quit on me,” Lindsay exclaimed.

Regretting the words instantly, not because they weren't true, but because it terrified her to be that open with anyone, Lindsay dropped down to the sofa.

Forgiving the whole argument instantly, Cindy moved back over to the sofa, easing down next to her.

“Linz...” she said softly.

Just that small utterance was nearly Lindsay's undoing. Crossing her arms over her chest as if it could shield her from the vulnerability, she couldn't quite look at Cindy.

“I know that this is hard for all of you. I know that Jill and Claire regret what happened in the past,” Cindy murmured. “But I wasn't here then. When have I ever quit on you?”

She hadn't. And she never would. Lindsay knew this without fail.

“When have you ever been really tested?” she argued just to argue.

Mildly interested when Cindy took her hand, and even more interested when Cindy slid her fingers inside the open buttons on her shirt, Lindsay's stomach churned when hand met scar, her palm pressed against the raised skin, fingertips resting over a rapidly pounding heartbeat.

“You are doing it again, Lindsay,” Cindy declared. “You are letting him get inside of you. He doesn't deserve to be there. I want to be. But you can't pull me closer and push me away at the same time. You need to decide which is more important to you.”

Feeling abandoned when Cindy pushed her hand away, Lindsay watched as she grabbed her purse from where it had fallen on the floor and moved toward the door.

“There is only one documented time that Pope John Paul II prayed the rosary like that,” Cindy informed her. “May 13, 1982 in a church in Fatima. It took place after his public homily. Invitation only. And as far as reports go, no recordings should exist.”

Then she left. Lindsay didn't move until Martha started whining at her feet. She took her out and when they came back in, Martha rushed to lie down on the sofa. Lindsay looked at the rectangular entrance in the ceiling.

She pulled down the ladder that led up to the attic and, one rung at a time, ascended into old wounds. Kiss-Me-Not's crimes were still etched into every available space. Even after he was gone, it seemed, she had a hard time letting go.

She did want to protect Cindy. Her intentions were good. But maybe there was some truth in what Cindy had said. Maybe the person most in need of protection was her, and the person she

most needed protecting from was herself.

ACT IV

“Sorry I’m late,” Lindsay said, staggering past Jacobi to her desk.

“How is it that you finally went home last night and look even more tired today?” Jacobi shook his head.

Lindsay just waved her hand at him as if she didn’t want to get into it.

“Well, the good news is,” Jacobi told her, “our technology junkie is eager to please. She’s been researching this recording for us ever since yesterday. Maybe she’ll even find us an answer sometime next week.”

“You can tell her to stop,” Lindsay declared. “May 13, 1982 is the only time that rosary was prayed by John Paul II. There should be no known recording of it.”

“Girl squad’s littlest member?”

Lindsay nodded and gave him a hard stare. “I’d love to know where she got her orders.”

“Got me,” Jacobi shook his head.

Looking at the overwhelming pile of files left to go through without actually seeing them, Lindsay listened to Jacobi call Asha and give her the disappointing news.

“You’re a bad person,” he announced, dropping the receiver back into its cradle. “You broke that girl’s heart.”

“Well, better hers than the other’s,” Lindsay mumbled.

Not entirely sure if she meant to say that out loud, Jacobi let it go with only a curious look. “So on a positive note, you wanted a link between the victims. How about seventy-five percent?”

“What is it?” Lindsay asked.

“Justin Shawn,” Jacobi said, passing Lindsay a file. “He worked in Felicia Watkins’ department before he got moved up to sales. He had an account in one of Travis Martin’s banks...”

“Justin Shawn, that name sounds familiar,” Lindsay whispered.

“It should,” Jacobi stated. “You’ve seen it on the banned customer list from Nouvelle Fleur.”

“Blake’s restaurant?”

Jacobi nodded.

“That sounds like too much of a coincidence to be one,” Lindsay said.

“You want me to take it?” Jacobi offered.

“No,” Lindsay was adamant. “I’m in.”

While they didn’t want a genuinely nice young man with a beautiful family to be a serial killer, a little piece of both Lindsay and Jacobi would have liked to pin it all on Justin Shawn. But never in all their years of interviewing had any one witness been so absolutely convincing in his innocence. Or disbelieving of his bad luck.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” he told them, gesturing broadly in front of the windows in his office. “When Felicia’s body fell from the ceiling, I thought maybe I *did* have something to do with it, like maybe someone was following me or something.”

“Do you know Robert Dellan?” Jacobi asked.

“Never heard of him,” the guy said, and that too was the truth. He turned away from them and looked out the window. “The night that I got banned from Nouvelle Fleur was the night of my bachelor party. According to my friends, I really was that much of a jackass. The interesting part of the story is how much they let me get away with before I was banned from the premises. And then Felicia,” he shook his head, turning back around to face them, making the eye contact of an innocent man. “It really is just a bizarre coincidence.”

Lindsay hated that she believed him.

“Are you a religious man, Mr. Shawn?” Jacobi asked.

“Not really,” he responded. “But my wife observes the Jewish holy days.”

“Okay, Mr. Shawn,” Jacobi said, getting to his feet. “Thanks for your time.”

“It was worth a shot,” Jacobi said, pulling the car into a space.

“Yeah, and sometimes you just do something to do something,” Lindsay responded.

“No worries about the dead-end, though,” Jacobi spewed out-of-place optimism, which Lindsay was secretly grateful to hear. “We’ve got a lot of employees left to look through.”

Lindsay stared at the blank wall of the parking garage, thoughts running in chaotic disorder over the last few days. “Maybe we can get some help with that,” she finally said.

When she looked over at him, Jacobi smiled and nodded.

“I’ll see if I can’t enlist the girl squad for just a few hours,” Lindsay promised.

“See, I knew you liked that name,” Jacobi teased.

Lindsay wanted to know his thoughts. Because, while they shared a lot of things, more than partners should she sometimes thought, they never talked about this part, the part that wasn’t all blazing guns and bravado. The question was so close to the surface that Jacobi had to see it. It spoke volumes that he didn’t pressure her to talk, that he knew she would when she was ready.

“Does it scare you at all, Jacobi,” she asked quietly, eyes returning to the wall, “that this man is out there, indiscriminately killing people in the most sadistic ways, because he thinks that he has some sort of God-appointed purpose?”

“Yeah,” Jacobi answered without hesitation. “It scares me. It could be any one of us. We’re all at risk.”

“Not all of us,” Lindsay countered.

“You point out the person you actually believe hasn’t committed any of these seven sins, and I’ll point out the best liar,” Jacobi declared. “That’s why we’ve got to find this guy.”

Lindsay looked over at him and his resolve made her feel a lot less shaky than she’d been feeling lately.

“Should we get back to Sloane and Company’s vast numbers of disgruntled employees?” Jacobi suggested.

“Actually,” Lindsay said. “There’s something I’ve got to do.”

Jacobi nodded at the response. “You do what you got to do,” he returned. “And come back when you’re ready.”

Lindsay smiled softly at him. He smiled back and got out of the car. After the door closed behind him, Lindsay took a deep breath, dropping her head back against the headrest.

“What are you looking at?” Lindsay whirled from her pacing to ask.

“I’m just trying to figure out what brought you in here, willingly, to pace. Since obviously you don’t feel like talking.”

Dropping down on the faded sofa, Lindsay folded her hands, dangling them between her knees and looked up at the psychiatrist.

“I need to,” Lindsay struggled with the word, motioning with one hand as if to try to coax it out of herself, before letting her fingers link back together. “Talk.”

“Okay,” the psychiatrist responded.

As if it was that easy. Maybe for people other than her.

She lifted her shoulders and tilted her head to either side, treating the psychiatrist to a series of pops and cracks that would make Rice Krispies proud.

“I’m scared,” she finally admitted in a low voice, somewhat hoping he wouldn’t hear her.

“I know. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? Isn’t that the only time you come here?” he questioned. “Because it’s the one thing that you can’t admit to anyone else.”

Lindsay really hated being read like that. And he should have known that.

“There’s a serial killer stalking the city,” he said quietly. “It’s your responsibility to find him. I think you’d be surprised to find the people who care about you won’t take fear as a weakness. Everyone’s a little uneasy.”

With a curt nod of acknowledgement, Lindsay got up from the sofa and walked over to the window. She would have been a lot more comfortable leaving it like that, a half a truth that made her less exposed. But that wouldn’t fix anything.

“He’s not what I’m afraid of,” she said. “Or not the only thing I’m afraid of. He’s not what I’m most afraid of.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

Lindsay stared at the sky, feeling the bright blue over the city wasn’t entirely fitting right now.

“The obsession,” she confessed softly. “The last time I couldn’t find a killer, I…”

“You lost everything,” he finished for her.

Jaw set tight, she turned to face him. “I cannot lose what I have.”

He nodded in understanding. “There are no guarantees in this life, Lindsay. People unexpectedly lose things they think they can’t stand to all the time.”

“Is this supposed to make me feel better?” she asked.

The psychiatrist chuckled lightly before he looked up. “The thing is, if we’re losing something we don’t want to lose because of something we have done or are doing, we have the potential to stop it.”

Though it was a simple answer that she should have come to herself, Lindsay still found herself nodding along.

When she had to knock twice, Lindsay started to worry that Cindy wasn’t going to answer. When she finally did, dressed in striped PJ pants and a t-shirt several sizes too big, just the sight of her brought the kind of smile to Lindsay’s face that she hadn’t allowed herself in days.

“I thought I could buy you dinner,” she said, “but you look like you’re in for the night.”

Cindy didn’t slam the door in her face, but she didn’t smile either, so Lindsay determined the probability of being left standing outside the door of Cindy’s apartment to actually getting inside was about seventy-thirty.

“I should have told you about the church,” Lindsay acknowledged. And she wasn’t just saying it. She really should have. “I’m sorry. It was your tip. It was very helpful. In fact, you have been nothing but exceptional the past few days, even if I haven’t made it easy.”

Cindy just stared blankly up at her for a moment. Lindsay hoped it was a good thing, but doubted it seriously.

“That’s it? You think you’re going to compliment me and that’s going to fix everything?” Cindy finally asked.

“No,” Lindsay stated honestly. But if she had the slightest idea what would, she would do it, no matter how difficult or degrading.

“You don’t have faith in me,” Cindy said, her voice quavering, her eyes filling with tears that she tried but failed to hold back. “You think I’m going to quit on you.”

“No,” Lindsay shook her head.

“That’s what you said,” Cindy reminded her. “You don’t trust me. You don’t trust anyone. You think we’re all just -”

“I didn’t want you to see it,” Lindsay talked over her to stop the inaccurate reasoning that she’d given Cindy time to convince herself was truth.

She knew that she only had one shot at this. Letting any of those thoughts fester – thoughts that she had instigated but had never been true – they would be over before they really got started.

“I know,” she emphasized, “that I can count on you, Cindy. That’s what worries me. Whatever comes at me, no matter how horrible, you’re not going anywhere.”

Cindy wiped her fingers beneath her eyes, looking considerably less angry than she had when she’d answered the door. At first sight, Lindsay feared even Cindy’s adorable frog slippers might come magically to life and go on the attack. Figuring she must be doing something right, Lindsay took a deep breath and plowed on.

“You will always be right there,” Lindsay said straight-faced, “eight inches below me.”

Encouraged when Cindy fought a smile, Lindsay nearly raised her arms and praised Jesus when she finally spoke.

“Five inches max,” she sniffed.

The fact that her smiles were able to come so easily now, one right after the other, seemed a little odd to Lindsay. But then that’s what Cindy did. She made her smile. She always had. And, if she didn’t fuck things up too royally, Cindy might be willing to do it for a while.

“I love that you’re here,” Lindsay tried to be as open as she could be, despite the fact that every second of it felt like a freefall from a very tall building. Feeling a little more confident, she took that first tentative step past the threshold.

“I need you here.” Her left hand rose hesitantly to Cindy’s face, pausing in the air before gently cupping Cindy’s cheek. When Cindy turned into the touch instead of pulling away, Lindsay wondered, yet again, how she had overlooked this for so long.

“It is huge to me that you,” Lindsay lost her train of thought as Cindy dropped a feather-light kiss on her thumb. “That you... that you are willing to go wherever I go.”

Firming her hold on Cindy’s face, she made Cindy look up at her, relieved to see that any anger left was residual and fading quickly.

“But you don’t have to follow me everywhere, Cindy.”

Breathing out heavily, Cindy’s stare was unrelenting. “If you’re going, I’m going.”

It wasn’t what Lindsay wanted to hear. A nice, “Okay Linz, whatever you say,” would have been appreciated. But Cindy’s response wasn’t unexpected. Feeling that she hadn’t exactly won, but since she wasn’t on her way back to her apartment, she most certainly hadn’t lost, Lindsay decided to be thankful for small victories.

“Can I come in?” she asked hopefully.

Hands stronger than their size grabbed onto her jacket and pulled her the rest of the way into the

apartment. And when Cindy kissed her with a force that left no room for misinterpretation, Lindsay knew she would have at least a few hours of freedom before Cindy insisted that she get some rest.

Finally, they were getting a continuation of their moment outside of Sloane and Company... about three days too late.

Finally, they were getting a continuation of what started days ago in this very apartment. Weeks ago on a street in Potrero Hill. Months ago on the day of Tom's wedding. Just over a year ago in the offices of the *San Francisco Register*.

Lindsay hadn't known until a few seconds ago, when she was admitted back into Cindy's world with a small yank, just how badly she'd been needing it.



Tempting Fate

Episode 8: Tempting Fate

TEASER/INTRO

A streetlight blinked erratically, accompanied by a violent hiss as it struggled mightily to remain lit, only to lose its battle moments later. The resulting darkness, however, was only temporary; the brightness of a full moon shone down on parked cars and buildings nearby and illuminated the area in a soft glow. With dogged determination, the moonlight continued to spread to every nook and cranny, fighting its way through the dense branches of an old oak to cast a single ray into a half-circle window forgotten over time.

Once inside the vacant room, the moonlight slowly crept along the walls, taking its time to inspect the area as if stunned by what it had uncovered. Newspaper clippings hung haphazardly along almost every square inch of the walls, even taking up space on the supporting beam and ceiling above. Article after article mocked the San Francisco police department, criticizing their ineffectiveness of capturing a serial killer gone wild. Gruesome photos of the victims accompanied the media blitz and completed the picture – a shrine erected in the name of the killer.

A pair of muffled voices disturbed the silence of the macabre scene, and the moonlight fled the room when a single bulb, fastened on a plain white porcelain fixture, flicked on, highlighting the room in artificial light.

“I need to show you something,” said Lindsay in a soft voice, struggling to keep the nervousness from creeping into her tone. The reassuring touch of Cindy’s hand against her lower back grounded her, and she continued her journey up the makeshift stairs.

“What? You got bats in your belfry?” teased Cindy, sensing her girlfriend’s edginess. When she’d suggested they put up a few Christmas decorations and asked if Lindsay kept them stored in her attic, the color had drained from the other woman’s face. She’d been just about to propose that perhaps it would be better to wait until the weekend when Lindsay suddenly grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. She’d just followed along blindly.

“Not even close,” whispered Lindsay, taking a deep breath and stepping up onto the attic floor. She hesitated momentarily, but finally moved to the side and allowed Cindy a full view of the room. The young reporter’s foot had barely touched down on the wooden floor when she caught her first glimpse at the attic walls. Biting down on her lower lip to keep a gasp from escaping, she forced herself to walk closer to the newspaper clippings and then moved wordlessly along the wall, her eyes scanning the dozens and dozens of headlines and photos. Lindsay’s obsession with Kiss-Me-Not had been much worse than she could ever have imagined.

“Why haven’t you taken these down?” asked Cindy softly as she stopped in front of a set of photos push-pinned into the wall, the faces of the victims with their mouths sewn shut

displayed prominently before her, bringing back what memories she had of the crimes to the forefront of her over-active imagination. She couldn't keep the shiver from running down her spine.

A low voice near her ear made her jump.

“Dad died,” mumbled Lindsay, pausing briefly to gather herself. She swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and eased her arms around Cindy's middle, relieved when the younger woman leaned back against her without a second's hesitation. “Then the murders started, and I got caught up again.”

Cindy tilted her head to the side and rested her cheek against Lindsay's, the familiarity of her lover's skin against her own giving her the courage to move forward with her suggestion.

“How about now?”

“Now?” Lindsay crinkled her brow in question. The warmth from Cindy's body was both calming and soothing, and she wasn't about to surrender her current position to make eye contact with the reporter.

“To take all this down.” Cindy turned in Lindsay's arms. “Let's take it down together.”

Lindsay looked down at Cindy and smiled.

Click...

A hooded figure froze in place and spared a glance over his shoulder. The normally soft sound of a key, worn with age, sliding into a deadbolt echoed loudly in the small confines of the hallway. Dividing his attention to either side of him, he slowly turned the key until the mechanism eased into place. Pausing momentarily to ensure that his actions hadn't garnered anyone's attention, he opened the door and stepped inside, immediately surveying the layout of the spacious room.

It was perfect - a one-room apartment, unfurnished save for a single 3' x 6' folding table that had been set up against the far wall. He shifted his gaze to the center of the room where light from the morning sun had forced its way through a small opening in the drab-looking curtains. Drawn to a single ray of light, showcasing dust particles normally invisible to the human eye that floated lazily in its path, he couldn't help but smile at the ironic correlation. More times than not, for some reason or another, people chose to ignore what was right in front of their faces, even if their well-being depended on their attention to the smallest of details. Their lack of notice had boded very well for him in the past, and he could only hope it would continue in the future.

Pushing his deep-seated thoughts aside for later reflection, he refocused on the task at hand and returned to the hallway to retrieve a dolly he'd left just outside the door. Placing his foot on its lower metal bar, he pushed it forward while easing back on the handle as he rolled the cart inside and closed the door behind him.

Edging near the table, he returned the dolly to its upright position and carefully removed the top box from the stack, placing it in the center of the table. Then, retrieving a hidden knife from his boot, he slid the sharp blade through the packing tape and lifted up the cardboard edges, taking just a moment to grab hold of the hard plastic sticking up from the Styrofoam that offered protection to the box's contents. With a soft grunt, he lifted the object free of its container and gently set it down next to the empty box, and after removing the plastic tie that bound the electrical cord, he positioned the closed circuit television monitor nearer to the wall outlet. Pleased with its location, he reached for the next box.

A flash of bright red hair went unnoticed by the usually observant inspector who sat hunched over her desk poring over the files of the recent murders attributed to the Hallelujah Man. Her gaze moved across the pages laid out in front of her, the lines of text blurring together until a virtual sea of black swam before her eyes. She blinked to clear her vision and moved her focus to the gruesome photographs of the various crime scenes, hoping to spot something – anything - that would jump out at her and scream the killer's name across the vast space of the room. But the photos remained silent, just as silent as the victims who stared unseeingly back at her, their 'sins' laid out in vivid colors for all to bear witness: gluttony, wrath, greed, and pride. Lindsay swept her hand through her hair in frustration, her mind conjuring up the remaining deadly sins not yet addressed by the killer. Which one would show up next?

Keeping an eye trained on the bowed dark head, Cindy slinked past the maze of desks scattered around the bullpen. Her expression – normally a tell-tale sign of her mood – showed a myriad of emotions, mostly uncertainty. She wasn't sure whether to be proud of her stealth skills or hurt that her lover hadn't noticed her presence. Lindsay always seemed to have a sixth sense for knowing whenever Cindy was anywhere in her vicinity, but today, the reporter slipped by without so much as a blip on the inspector's radar. The lack of awareness only further added to her worry that Lindsay was straying dangerously close to the point of no return as her current obsession threatened to grow by leaps and bounds, despite the progress they'd made together. There was no way she'd allow Lindsay to erect another shrine to another killer.

Cindy was eager to catch the psycho religious zealot too, but she wasn't willing to sacrifice the woman she loved in the process. There had to be a way to keep a balance between their personal and professional lives, and after what she'd seen last night, she knew she'd need help in finding and maintaining that delicate balance. With a determined stride, she rounded the corner and turned toward the elevator on her way to meet Claire and Jill in the morgue. They'd need a united front to keep Lindsay from

straying too close to the edge. So focused on her mission, she narrowly missed running smack dab into a coffee-carrying Jacobi.

“Whoa,” said Jacobi, stepping neatly to the side and just managing to keep his cup and its contents from hitting the white tiles of the linoleum floor. “Where you headed in such a hurry?”

“Oh, hey Warren,” Cindy gestured to the few drops of coffee that had barely escaped its container to land on the inspector’s hand. She looked up at the expressionless man and smiled sweetly. “Sorry about that. I don’t always pay attention to where I’m going.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that,” the older man answered in a gruff tone, keeping his true feelings about the reporter to himself. He really liked the vibrant young woman, especially since she’d not paid any attention to his partner’s current case of perpetual grumpiness either. She’d just flash that cute little smile of hers, and he’d watch in amazement as Lindsay’s bad mood would melt before his very eyes. Yes, Cindy Thomas was the best thing that had ever happened to his partner.

“Well, I’d better get going; Jill and Claire are waiting for me.” Cindy made a show of checking her watch, before pointing toward the nearby elevator and taking a few steps back just as a soft ding signaled the car had arrived. Jacobi watched as the doors to the elevator had yet to open wide enough to allow the young woman to slip through, but her impatience to see her friends had her leading with her shoulder and turning almost perpendicular to the doors as she eased into the car to stab at the button that would take her to the floor that housed the morgue. Minutes later, she burst into Claire’s office and quickly closed the door behind her, placing her full weight against the wooden and glass structure. She didn’t waste any time getting to the heart of the matter.

“Okay, I know I wasn’t around years ago when the Kiss-Me-Not killer first came onto the scene, but I’m very concerned that the Hallelujah Man could be well on his way to surpassing Harris as number one on Lindsay’s hit parade of serial killers.” The thought terrified her, especially after witnessing firsthand how truly obsessed Lindsay had been with Kiss-Me-Not. It’d taken the pair almost two hours to box up all the clippings, photos, and files the night before, and she was going to do everything in her power to make sure the attic walls remained bare. Even the coolness of the window blinds pressing against her shoulders and soaking through her thin cotton blouse did little to ease her tension. It continued to roll off of her in waves.

Perched on the edge of Claire’s desk, Jill turned to face the reporter. She tilted her head slightly and folded her arms across her chest. “Trust me. Lindsay is a long way from replacing Harris from her top spot.” She held up her hand to stop the protest before it could escape Cindy’s lips. “But you’re right; she’s definitely falling into the same pattern.”

Leaning back in her chair, Claire folded her hands across her middle. “So – what are we going to do about it?” Vividly remembering Lindsay’s downward spiral the last time, she

knew they had their work cut out for them and had even entertained the idea of drugging and kidnapping Lindsay and then whisking her off to someplace quiet and relaxing for a few days if need be. In fact, she'd suggest the very idea if one of the other women didn't come up with something less drastic. Although, if truth be told, she believed the answer to curing Lindsay's obsession lay with the young woman directly across from her.

Cindy pushed away from the door and shuffled over to the worn leather couch, snatching up one of the throw pillows and holding it against her stomach as she plopped down rather ungracefully in the center of the sofa. With the soft pillow cushioned in her lap, she leaned forward and placed her face in her hands. Her words were mumbled out from between the small space formed between the edges of her palms.

"She promises that she'll try harder not to become so invested in these cases, but then the next murder pops up, and she's right back in the thick of things, spending almost every waking moment at the station and sometimes not bothering to come home at all. I'm at a complete loss as to what to do. I'd hoped you two would have some ideas." Cindy had seemed to have all the answers before she and Lindsay had become romantically involved, but now, she constantly worried that she'd do something stupid that would drive the other woman away.

"You could always handcuff her to your bed," said Jill teasingly. "That should distract her for awhile." She winked at Claire, mistaking the other woman's wide-eyed look as shock at the suggestion that Cindy hold Lindsay captive as her sex slave, instead of an instinctive reaction of worry of how Cindy might react to Jill's words.

"I think that may be a bit too drastic," Claire chided, wondering if she was the only one who'd noticed that their young friend hadn't seemed too comfortable discussing her sex life lately.

Cindy, on the other hand, was eternally grateful that her face was still buried in her hands. Being bent over at the waist in the classic 'hyperventilation treatment position' was rather fortuitous as well. It was just too bad that she hadn't been able to stifle the high-pitched squeak that had escaped.

"Oh," offered Jill, once again misreading the situation, "so, you *have* thought about it." She gave Claire another wink. "Honey, it's okay. We've all thought about it at one time or another."

"Um, Jill, ixnay on the andcuffshay," warned Claire, knowing full well Jill had actually done much more than just think about Lindsay's handcuffs, but right now her focus was on thick red hair carelessly strewn across denim covered knees. Pushing to her feet, she gave Jill one of her patented laser looks as she walked past on her way to the couch. She continued her line of thought as she placed a supportive hand on Cindy's back. "I think we need to concentrate on more conventional means of distraction." Conveniently, her own rather unconventional idea of drugging Lindsay had been completely forgotten when the handcuff idea had been suggested.

“We’re talking Lindsay here, Claire. Unconventional distraction is the way to go, and bondage may be just the ticket. I don’t think she’d be as upset as you’d think if she found herself handcuffed to her bed.”

Wide-eyed, Claire glared at Jill and gestured forcefully toward the back of Cindy’s head. As if trying to dodge the unseen finger aimed her way, the reporter burrowed further into the pillow, and Claire responded with a gentle pat. “I wasn’t referring to Lindsay’s reaction.”

“Huh? . . . Oh!” Properly chastised, Jill crossed the room and took a seat on the other side of the reporter. She placed her hand next to Claire’s and began to rub soothing circles on Cindy’s back. “What do you suggest then?” Her gaze moved across the back of the bent over woman and focused on Claire, but before the other woman could formulate an answer, the door to the office swung open and a dark head poked inside.

Lindsay frowned momentarily at the sight of Cindy being comforted by her friends, but she shoved her concern to the background to relay her news. She made a mental note to question Cindy about it later.

“There’s been another murder. Apparently envy now has a name - Charles Moore.”

ACT I

Claire frowned as she circled the antique rocking chair, once said to be one of John F. Kennedy’s favorites according to the victim’s housekeeper, who’d somehow managed to offer the tidbit in between crossing herself and muttering prayer after prayer. Figuring Charles Moore hadn’t had any idea that he’d meet his end while sitting in the priceless chair, Claire was certain its value would be greatly depreciated now that it was stained with blood and bits of grey matter, the gruesome scene looking strangely out of place in the tastefully decorated study.

“Something’s not right,” she muttered under her breath, making another pass on the custom-designed Italian marble floor. The bruises on Moore’s face appeared to be as fresh as the single gunshot wound at his temple. He hadn’t been tortured and toyed with like the other victims; instead, it appeared he’d been pistol-whipped a couple of times and then shot – quick and easy – not at all like the previous Hallelujah Man’s victims. However, the wire threaded through the skin of the man’s eyelids had definitely been the work of a madman, despite the fact that it appeared to have been performed postmortem.

“Okay, it’s more than a little creepy how the victim’s eyes being sewn shut so closely resembles the Kiss-Me-Not’s method of sewing his victims lips together, but tell me again why this murder is being linked to the Hallelujah Man?” asked Claire, gently lifting the victim’s head and turning her attention to the exit wound. She spared a glance at Jill

who was standing several feet away, the ever present white handkerchief covering her nose and mouth.

“The responding officers found a Bible with a highlighted verse,” said Jill, her gaze shifting to the various groupings of paintings on the mauve-colored walls. She concentrated her focus on the victim’s collection of art and refused to look at the display of metal artwork in, around, and through Moore’s eyelids. “I don’t get the envy reference though. This guy appears to be loaded – huge house full of priceless antiques and art, a garage full of vintage automobiles, a beautiful fiancée, judging from her photo, and I’d imagine a very healthy bank account. What could he possibly be envious of?”

“He’s not,” Lindsay’s voice floated from over Jill’s shoulder, the inspector’s attention on a clear plastic evidence bag that she held in her hand. She lifted it up for her friends to see and explained her reasoning. “I think we’ve got a true copycat this time. Someone’s got their signals crossed when it comes to how the Bible verses have been used.”

Jill stepped closer and squinted through the thick plastic barrier at the highlighted verse of the encased Bible – specifically, the bright fluorescent yellow that sloppily showcased each line of the verse – as she lowered her handkerchief. “Hmm, this does look amateurish, especially when you compare it to the horrific manner he used to showcase his chosen ‘message’ in the Watkins murder. And whenever he’s left a Bible behind at the scene, he’s always used a red marker to circle the reference to the passage.”

With a latex covered finger, Lindsay pointed to the yellowish-colored passage. “James, chapter 3, verses 14 through 16: But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” She paused dramatically. “This idiot has confused the whole Bible reference idea. He’s killed the person he’s envious of, instead of the other way around.”

“And he didn’t make this guy suffer either,” said Claire, pointing to the bullet hole in Charles Moore’s temple and then the barely visible bruising around his wrists. “The killer just tied him to the chair – loosely at that – hit him across the face a couple of times, and then blew his brains out.” She gestured to some grey matter that clung to the arm of the wooden chair’s surface, causing Jill to slam her eyes closed and turn a lighter shade of pale as she swiveled around to face the opposite wall. She took slow, deep breaths as the handkerchief once again found its way to her mouth and nose.

Not fazed in the least by the gore, Lindsay stepped closer and tilted her head, her line of sight following the path Claire’s finger had just taken. The Hallelujah Man had always made certain his victims received his ‘message’ loud and clear. Whoever killed Charles Moore definitely hadn’t done his homework. She moved to inspect the victim’s wrists, but a noise from the hallway broke her concentration.

“Psst!”

Three heads swiveled as one toward the source of the sound, each woman reacting differently at the sight of the individual who'd caught their attention. Lindsay sighed audibly, Claire lifted one corner of her mouth in a grin while simultaneously shaking her head, and Jill frowned slightly.

"How does she do that?" whispered Jill, easing closer to Claire and gesturing toward the redheaded reporter who kept glancing back over her shoulder, splitting her attention between her 'co-club members' and the area behind her.

"Do what?" asked Claire, watching as Cindy nervously shifted her weight from foot to foot as if expecting someone to take her by the arm and forcibly escort her from the crime scene.

"Get by the officers." Jill was truly amazed how Cindy managed to sweet talk her way past the yellow crime scene tape time after time. But this time, the reporter had made it into the inner sanctum of the actual murder without any assistance from a certain inspector.

Lindsay sighed once again as she finally took her first step toward her girlfriend. "She can be quite persuasive."

"I'll just bet," muttered Claire under her breath as she and a chuckling Jill followed in their friend's footsteps. The trio had barely reached the door when Cindy began to rattle off the findings of her most recent research.

"Charles Moore is a saint. He gives to charities all the time, especially local ones. Last week, he gave a million dollars to a home for battered women." Tilting her head and pushing up on her toes, she attempted to peer past her friends to get a good look at the crime scene as she unknowingly repeated Jill's earlier words. "I just don't get the envy reference though. People who commit the sin of envy resent that another person has something they perceive themselves as lacking. This guy doesn't seem to be lacking anything." Her gaze zeroed in on the victim's face. "Hey, what's that on his eyes?"

Lindsay glanced back toward the body slumped down in the antique rocking chair. "For some reason, the killer sewed the victim's eyes shut. We're not exactly sure why." When she'd first seen the threaded wire, a cold chill had slowly made its way down her spine. Her first thought had been that the Kiss-Me-Not killer had somehow found a way to taunt her from beyond the grave.

Cindy nodded in immediate understanding of the wire's significance. "Like Dante's Purgatory."

The three other women shared a quick glance and then crowded around the reporter.

"What do you mean?" asked Lindsay, her focus back on the victim's eyes.

“In Dante's Purgatory, the envious were punished by having their eyes sewn shut with wire because they were seen to have gained sinful pleasure from seeing others brought low, in reference to Saint Thomas Aquinas' description of envy as 'sorrow for another's good'.” She paused momentarily, the wheels almost visibly turning in her head - it always reminded Claire of Nate's hamster running around and around the wheel of its cage. “Moore wouldn't have anything to be envious of. In fact, he's almost too good to be true. Is that a sin?”

Her rhetorical question still lingering in the air between the four of them, Cindy scanned every inch of the crime scene and continued her train of thought, “Looks like the Hallelujah Man messed up big time... unless...” her eyes widened dramatically at her own implication, “Oh my God, this is a copycat!”

Quickly closing the distance between herself and the reporter, Lindsay clamped a hand over Cindy's mouth and shot a glance around the room at the various personnel working the periphery of the crime scene. “Shh... I don't want anyone to know that we're on to him. This son of a bitch isn't getting away with this.” She was determined to nail the copycat. If she couldn't get a bead on the Hallelujah Man, finding his copycat would have to do for now.

Cindy shared a knowing look with Claire and Jill. There was no longer any need for them to find ways to distract Lindsay from her growing obsession with the Hallelujah Man; the copycat had done the job for them.

“I picked the fiancée up at the airport,” said Jacobi, gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb toward a nearby interrogation room. “She's as jumpy as a cat. At first, I thought she was nervous because she had something to do with the murder, but then I realized it was me she was scared of. She almost jumped out of her skin when I tried to take her by the arm to escort her to the car.”

“What happened to the Jacobi charm? Losing your touch with the ladies?” A teasing grin eased its way onto Lindsay's face.

“Hey, my touch is just fine,” replied Jacobi gruffly. “But seriously, that woman is more than just a little unsettled, and I'm not talking about her reaction to being driven somewhere other than home. I think maybe you should talk to her alone.”

Lindsay spared a quick glance at the closed door of the interview room and then at the stairs leading up to her lieutenant's office. “Okay, sounds like a plan.” She briefly turned her attention back to her partner. “Will you fill Tom in on what we suspect so far?”

“You just want my tired old bones to have to climb up those stairs,” said Jacobi with a soft grunt as he pushed to his feet and started toward the stairway.

Grinning widely, Lindsay waited until he’d climbed the first few steps before she called out to him. “Oh, and be sure to tell Tom that we’re treating this as a *regular* case.” With an added smirk, she headed for the interview room, hoping the fiancée could shed some light on their latest case; however, in her haste to talk to the woman, Lindsay had forgotten what Jacobi had just told her. It all came back to her when the petite woman leapt from her chair and moved against the far wall when Lindsay forcefully barreled into the room.

“Ms. Walters, I’m Inspector Lindsay Boxer. Would it be okay if I asked you a few questions about your fiancé?” Lindsay purposely kept her tone soft and gentle as she slowly eased the rest of the way into the room and motioned to the chair that had just been vacated. She offered what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “Won’t you please have a seat?”

Keeping a steady gaze on Lindsay, the woman worried at her lower lip in a sign of obvious indecision. The new inspector didn’t appear to be as intimidating as the one who’d whisked her away from the airport, but the dark-haired, leather jacket-clad woman exuded a powerful presence in her own right. A ball of energy, confidence, and a touch of cockiness flowed freely from the inspector, but it was apparent that she was making every effort to tamp down on her forceful personality. Sally Walters was certain the woman was used to getting her way. The problem was that she had no idea why she’d been brought into the station in the first place.

“Um, may I ask why I’m here?” asked Sally in a less than steady voice. It was the first time she’d spoken since she’d acknowledged her identity to Inspector Jacobi at the Continental luggage carousel of the San Francisco International Airport. She’d just gone along quietly and hadn’t even asked if she could phone her fiancé.

Lindsay was just able to hide her surprise at the question. She hadn’t realized Ms. Walters hadn’t been informed of her fiancé’s murder, and she briefly wondered what reasons Jacobi had given for her personal escort to the San Francisco Police Department. Surely the woman hadn’t come so freely without asking questions, or maybe Jacobi hadn’t lost his so-called charm with the ladies after all.

“What exactly did Inspector Jacobi tell you?”

“He just said he needed to ask me some questions.”

“And you just went along without protesting?”

“Yes ma’am, he’s a police officer.” Shrugging slightly, Sally slowly crossed the room, retook her seat, and placed her hands in her lap. Lindsay waited for further explanation,

but it soon became apparent that Ms. Walters had nothing else to offer as she bowed her head and moved her focus to her restless hands.

Easing into the chair across the table, the seasoned inspector watched the nervous woman fidget in her seat, every bit as unsettled as Jacobi had described, when the expression of another woman she'd recently interviewed suddenly flashed before her eyes. Bells and whistles screamed in her head, and Lindsay sat up straighter in her chair.

“How would you describe your relationship with Charles Moore?”

A blonde head snapped up and green eyes, filled with fear, locked on to Lindsay's. It was the first time she'd made direct eye contact with the female inspector. “What do you mean?”

Lindsay frowned slightly at the sudden change in the other woman's demeanor. She'd only asked a simple lead-in question, and Sally Walters had already reacted in a way Lindsay had been expecting from her much harder questions, the ones she hadn't asked yet. Holding on to her suspicions, she studied the blonde closely as she moved ahead with her theory.

“Has he ever hit you?”

“What?” It was evident that Sally Walters was completely shocked by the question as her jaw went slack and her eyes widened. “Charles would never hurt me or anyone else for that matter. He's a sweet and gentle man.”

‘Was,’ thought Lindsay, her gaze moving to the hand Sally had unconsciously placed on the surface of the table when she'd defended her fiancé's integrity. A band of channel-set, round, brilliant diamonds enhanced by a large center-cut diamond, encased in a six prong setting, caught her eye. The ring was elegant, but not flashy, and Lindsay suspected Sally had had the final say in the style. She didn't come off as being someone who felt comfortable in the limelight.

“Ms. Walters, when was the last time you spoke to your fiancé?”

“Is Charles in some sort of trouble?” Sally eased her hand back into her lap and clenched both her fists tightly as her entire body tensed as if expecting a blow. To Lindsay, it appeared as though the physical response wasn't foreign to the woman, but she also knew she needed to push forward in the interview. She could no longer postpone the inevitable.

“Your fiancé was murdered last evening; your housekeeper discovered the body this morning.”

In hindsight, Lindsay realized she shouldn't have been quite so blunt; she was just able to rush around the table and catch Sally before she slid from her chair and onto the floor. Lindsay held on tightly and turned her head toward the door.

“Hey! A little help here, please!”

A pair of hands flew across a keyboard as the clickety-clack of keystrokes went unnoticed by the individual responsible for the rhythmic sound. Cindy performed search after search, trying to find some background on Charles Moore that might shed some light on why someone had gone to such great lengths to kill him and then attempt to shift the blame to the Hallelujah Man. She softly muttered her thoughts under her breath.

“There's got to be someone who doesn't like this man.” She clicked on the next link, only to find more accolades, professing the charitable acts of Mr. Charles Moore. Her grandmother had always told her that sometimes there's fire without smoke, but she was beginning to wonder if, this one time, her grandmother was dead wrong.

“Thomas! What've you got on the Moore murder? Has the serial killer struck again?”

Cindy practically jumped out of her skin as she swiveled in her chair to face her editor. She really hated it when someone appeared out of nowhere. “I'm working on the story now. The police have neither confirmed nor denied whether the murder is the work of the Hallelujah Man, but I can promise you that I'm in constant contact with my source at the police department.”

Every word she'd spoken was true, especially the bit about the constant contact. She certainly couldn't have any closer contact than sleeping with her source. She bit down on her lower lip to keep a smile from escaping at the thought.

“Alright, but we need that story ASAP.”

“Yes, sir, I'll have it soon.”

Nodding his head, the editor continued on his way, his focus already on one of her colleagues as he began barking orders and demanding another story. She watched for a moment, grateful that she was no longer his main focus, before turning her gaze back to her monitor. There had to be something noteworthy among the hundreds of photos that her latest search had revealed. Determined, she moved her attention from the foreground to the background of each shot. Two hours later, she pushed from her chair and grabbed her cell from her purse as she started for the exit.

“Hey, it's me.” Cindy spoke into her phone as she stepped out of the building and into the adjacent parking garage.

“Got something?” asked Lindsay, closing the Moore file and concentrating instead on her girlfriend’s voice. She hadn’t been able to make any more headway in the case and hoped Cindy would come through with some kind of pertinent information as she often did.

“Um, maybe; I’m just not sure at the moment. I want to check a few things out first.” Cindy shifted the phone to her other ear and quickly changed the subject before Lindsay could question her further. “So, how’s your day been?”

Lindsay groaned into the receiver. “Not very good.” An image suddenly made its way into her thoughts, and she smiled mischievously. She glanced around the bullpen to make sure none of her colleagues were within earshot. “Except for the beautiful blonde I held in my arms.”

“What?” Cindy stopped dead in her tracks right in the middle of the parking garage. She was extremely lucky no one had come barreling around the corner and made her a new hood ornament. “What blonde?” Clenching her fist, she tried very hard not to imagine the same fist slamming into Jill’s face. She knew Lindsay didn’t harbor those kinds of feelings for Jill any longer, but she just couldn’t stop the little green monster from rearing its ugly head.

“Moore’s fiancé,” said Lindsay. “She fainted when I told her about the murder. I was barely able to catch her before she took a nosedive onto the tile floor.”

“Not funny, Lindsay.” Cindy breathed a sigh of relief and, once again, started toward her parking space. “So, how did the rest of the interview go?”

“It didn’t.” Lindsay fiddled with a paper clip, unbending and straightening the metal as best she could with one hand. “We’re going to continue the interview tomorrow.”

Cindy could clearly hear the frustration in Lindsay’s voice and adeptly changed the subject. “I was calling to ask if you’d like me to pick up Chinese and meet you back at your apartment around 6:00.”

“That sounds great,” said Lindsay in relief, grateful to finally have something to look forward to. Sharing a meal and quiet time with her lover was just what she needed.

“Okay, I’ll see you at six then. Bye.” Flipping her phone closed, Cindy pressed the unlock button on her remote and reached for her car door, hoping she’d have something besides Chinese food to feed Lindsay that evening. As inane as her idea was, perhaps it’d at least open other leads. Backing out of her space, she sped away to meet her source.

At precisely six o’clock, Lindsay pulled her Jeep behind Cindy’s red Saab and smiled. This was one of the few times since she’d made inspector that she’d actually come home

when she'd planned. Stepping from the car, she spotted Cindy sitting on the steps to her building, and lengthening her already impossibly long stride, she started up the sidewalk.

"Hey," said Lindsay, a lopsided grin forming in the corners of her mouth and turning into a full-fledged smile when she caught sight of the warm and welcoming expression Cindy wore. Her policewoman's mind, however, wouldn't allow her to just enjoy the moment. "So what was it that you were checking out this afternoon?"

Cindy swooped up the bags of take-out from the step beside her and pushed to her feet. "First, we celebrate the fact that you actually showed up on time, then we'll discuss things over Chinese." She winked teasingly. "I got crab rangoon."

Leaping up on the porch in a single bound, Lindsay swept past the young woman before Cindy could blink an eye. Holding the door open, she gestured with her free hand. "Well, what are you waiting for? C'mon, the food's going to get cold."

Chuckling, Cindy stepped through the door and headed toward the stairs. She'd read once that the way to a woman's heart was through the doors of a good restaurant, but apparently with Lindsay, all she needed was take-out. That was fine with her though; she preferred to have Lindsay all to herself anyway. Her pleasant thoughts were sidetracked by the faint sound of a dog barking.

"Is that Martha?" Cindy stood alongside Lindsay, just outside the apartment door, and waited for the other woman to unlock the deadbolt.

"Yeah, I think it is," said Lindsay, hurrying with the lock, "but she hardly ever barks. Wonder what's up?" With a turn of the knob, she opened the door and stepped inside. Martha was nowhere to be found.

"Arf! Arf!"

"Martha? Where are you, girl?" Lindsay moved further into the apartment and tilted her head to listen. Another bark led her to her bedroom, but a quick visual sweep of the room still didn't turn up the canine. She turned to find Cindy practically in her hip pocket.

"Where is she?" Cindy stepped beside Lindsay and turned on the light switch. She gazed around the room just as a pitiful whine sounded from beneath the closet door. Crossing the distance, she opened the door and was almost bowled over by a very grateful Martha.

"You locked her in the closet?" asked Cindy, easing down on one knee to receive several swipes of a rough tongue across her cheek. She hugged Martha close and looked up at Lindsay expectantly.

"I did *not* lock her in the closet," said Lindsay adamantly, her gaze moving from what would normally be the perfect scene – Martha's unconditional acceptance of Cindy – and

instead, focused her thoughts on her morning routine. She could've sworn Martha had walked her to the door as she'd done almost every day since she'd come to live with Lindsay.

Martha whined again, her head resting on Cindy's shoulder and her eyes searching out those of her master. Feeling the intense scrutiny, Lindsay pulled herself from her troubling thoughts and walked over to pat her pet on the head. A pink tongue lolled from Martha's mouth, giving every indication that she'd forgiven Lindsay's indiscretion.

"Sorry, girl; I'll be more careful next time," Lindsay rubbed the fur behind Martha's ears, earning herself a satisfied bark.

"I think I've got just the thing to make Martha forget all about her unsettling day," said Cindy, pushing to her feet and grabbing up the bags that she'd dropped when Martha had decided she was in need of a full body hug. "I just happened to stop by *someone's* favorite butcher."

"Arf! Arf!"

"You're spoiling her. She's going to expect a bone every time you come over." Lindsay stood as well, her long reach allowing her to maintain contact with Martha's soft coat of fur.

"Well, today, she deserves a treat, don't you, girl?"

"Arf! Arf!"

Cindy laughed and started for the kitchen, Martha right on her heels, while Lindsay stayed behind, making another visual sweep of the room. She truly couldn't remember closing the closet door that morning. Blowing out a deep sigh of frustration, she flipped off the light and headed for the kitchen. She had some major making up to do.

On the far wall of the darkened bedroom, a red light blinked lazily inside the viewfinder of a camcorder positioned just behind the air-conditioning vent, its built-in motion sensor bringing the recording action of the camera to an abrupt halt.

Act II

"Find anything interesting?"

Lindsay leaned over the body of Charles Moore, paying close attention to the lack of trauma to the man's wrists. Claire had been right; he'd barely been tied to the chair. The bruising was practically non-existent.

“Maybe if you’d quit hovering, I’d find something,” said Claire, tilting her head and leveling a laser-like glare through her safety glasses. Lindsay slowly held up her hands in surrender and took a giant step back.

“I’ll just . . . um, be right over there,” she offered, gesturing toward the glass window that looked into Claire’s office. Lindsay couldn’t help but smirk at the sight of Jill catching her eye and waving a few fingers while she pretended to talk on the phone. Both Lindsay and Claire knew the DDA had only used the excuse of needing to make a few calls because she could no longer stand to look at the victim’s face. She’d literally cringed every time she’d gazed down at the wire tearing through the skin of the grotesquely swollen eyelids as if it were the consistency of hamburger meat.

Now that she had sufficient room to maneuver, Claire began a running commentary of her findings. “The contusion and stellate lacerations surrounding the gunshot wound appear to be caused by a muzzle. There’s also some gunpowder in the wound. I’d say the killer pushed the gun forcefully against the victim’s temple and fired point blank.”

“Anything else?” asked Lindsay, already figuring that the kill shot had been inflicted at very close range. She continued to keep her distance in hopes that Claire would find something out of the ordinary that might give her a lead, especially if her second attempt to interview the fiancée that afternoon didn’t produce anything.

“Not yet. You know, you really need to learn some . . . well, hello there,” said Claire, not taking her eye off her new discovery as she reached blindly for a pair of tweezers. Very slowly and very carefully, she extracted a paper thin filament from inside the entry wound and held it up to the light.

“What is it?” Lindsay moved closer and squinted. Whatever Claire had found was barely discernible to the human eye. Surely something so small and insignificant-looking couldn’t be the case breaker.

“Hmm, looks like some kind of rubbery material.” Claire angled the tweezers toward the light, watching as the odd-colored strand wiggled freely back and forth. “It appears to have an orangish tint.”

“A basketball!” exclaimed Cindy, hurrying into the room to get a glimpse of the newly found evidence. She’d arrived just in time to hear Claire’s last few words and had immediately jumped to what, she thought, was a logical conclusion.

“And you know this because?” asked Claire, just able to keep herself from waving the tweezers at the young reporter for almost scaring the life out of her.

“Ellis Vanderholt.” Cindy grinned widely as she reached into her purse for her glasses. Stepping closer to Claire, she eased them onto her face and studied the orangish material.

“Golden State’s starting point guard? What’s he got to do with all of this?” asked Jill from her position just inside the doorway to Claire’s office, making sure to stay as far away from the body as possible but still close enough to take part in the discussion of the new evidence.

“And you know him how?” Lindsay was momentarily distracted by Jill’s question and suddenly began to wonder if she was the only member of the group who had very limited knowledge of professional sports in the Bay City area or in any area, for that matter.

“Luke’s a huge fan. I had to learn all the players,” Jill answered matter-of-factly and turned her attention back to Cindy. “Why Ellis Vanderholt?”

“Wait a minute,” said Lindsey, crinkling her brow and facing Cindy. “Why didn’t you say something about this Vanderholt guy last night?”

“Martha needed comforting,” explained Cindy, not bothering to mention that Lindsay had needed comforting as well to assuage the guilt she’d felt at accidentally locking Martha in the closet, even if she had kept insisting that she never, ever, closed her closet door.

“Something happened to Martha?” asked Jill, concern evident in her voice as she stepped further into the room. Her sudden interest in the welfare of Lindsay’s dog had her temporarily forgetting about her queasiness.

“Martha spent the whole day in the closet, poor thing,” tsked Cindy, the memory of the dog’s grateful expression at having been found shining through in her words.

“It wasn’t my fault. The door must’ve closed on its own somehow.” Lindsay’s tone was weak at best, giving every indication that she might finally be on the verge of accepting that she was truly the one at fault. After all, Martha could hardly lock herself in the closet.

Sensing her friend’s turmoil, Jill tried for a bit of levity, “Don’t worry, Linz; I’ve had friends who’ve stayed in the closet for years. At least Martha came to her realization in a timely fashion.”

A deep, rich chuckle rose up from deep inside Lindsay’s gut and was soon followed by a chorus of laughter from the other women. Cindy wiped a tear from her eye and took advantage of the perfect turn of phrase by Jill to drop her bombshell.

“Yeah, and some people are still so far in the closet, they can’t even find the door anymore – kind of like Charles Moore and Ellis Vanderholt.”

Any and all laughter, including the intermittent sprinkles of light chuckles, came to a screeching halt and was immediately replaced by a deadly silence. The change in the tone of the room was so sudden it was eerie.

“Charles Moore and Ellis Vanderholt?” asked Jill in complete disbelief. She could still recall the night when Luke couldn’t stop talking about Vanderholt and his amazing abilities, calling him a man’s man. She’d just never considered the possibility that he could be speaking literally. Of course, she’d figured Luke hadn’t either.

“And you didn’t think that was worth at least a mention?” Lindsay couldn’t believe Cindy hadn’t breathed a word about what she’d suspected. This information could blow the case right out of the water, especially if the media sharks got wind of it.

“Well, I did say that I needed to talk to another one of my sources this morning before I could confirm my theory. You seemed willing to wait at the time.”

A very vivid memory of exactly what Cindy had been doing when she’d relayed the tidbit about her source made its way into Lindsay’s head in high-definition, the resolution crystal clear. A light pink tint painted her cheeks, and she swallowed hard.

“Um, oh yeah.” She struggled to regain her composure, “Er, okay, why don’t you fill me in now?”

Claire, who’d been silently listening to the conversation, grinned from ear to ear at the last bit of exchange, before she finally spoke up. “I think this is going to be a loooong explanation, and I’m already starving. Let’s order something for lunch and move this discussion into my office. Just let me bag this.” She slowly lowered the forgotten tweezers. “Jill, hand me one of those evidence bags, would ya?”

Sporting a matching grin, Jill turned toward the table behind her for a plastic bag, not realizing that she’d slowly gravitated to a spot next to Claire during their friends’ conversation. She gently released the seal on the bag and held it open for the coroner to ease the filament into the container. Taking possession of the evidence, Claire properly sealed the edges.

“Okay, I’m in the mood for some pizza...” Claire lazily gripped the sheet and gently began to pull it over the victim’s body, “hmm, I’m thinking sausage.”

Jill - making the grave mistake of glancing down at the corner’s slab just as the stark white polyester-cotton neared the completion of its journey and eased its way over swollen, wire-sewn eyelids - swallowed the bile that was rapidly working its way up her esophagus... again.

“I think I’ll just have water.”

Jacobi stared at the dull white tiled wall and frowned slightly. The deluxe corned beef at the deli just down the street *or* the supreme pasta salad at the quaint Italian restaurant

he'd come across several months ago? So intent on his lunch decision, he never saw the individual who'd entered the room to stand, practically shoulder to shoulder, next to him.

"So, how's the case going?" asked Tom, glancing briefly to his left before settling his focus on the grayish grout that outlined the drab tile of the wall directly in front of him.

"Lindsay's going to talk to the fiancée again this afternoon, and Claire may have found something embedded just inside the entry wound." Jacobi shifted uncomfortably. He hated discussing cases in the men's room. In fact, he hated having discussions of any kind in the confines of the men's room.

"What did she find?" asked Tom, not seeming to have any problems carrying on a conversation while otherwise engaged.

Jacobi shrugged slightly. "Lindsay's not saying yet. She said Claire needed to run some tests first."

Tom nodded in understanding. Claire was the ultimate professional. "So, how's Lindsay holding up these days?"

Jacobi's eyebrows lifted to his hairline, and holding the expression in place, he tilted his head and first glanced down at Tom's hand and then his own. "I am *not* discussing my partner's well-being while we're standing in front of the urinals." He rose up on his toes several times and, following a few quick motions, zipped up his pants. "In fact," he turned on his heel and headed directly for the sink on the opposite wall, making quick work of washing his hands, "I'm not answering that question anywhere, anytime, or anyhow." Opening the door, he took one last look at Tom's back. "You figure it out."

Tom worked his mouth open to respond, but the door had already closed on Jacobi's parting words. Looking down, he wondered when he'd lost the ability to know what Lindsay was thinking.

"Oh God, this is sooo good," said Claire, readying to take another bite of her sausage pizza with extra cheese. She glanced over at Jill who was nibbling on a cracker and sipping her water. "Sure you don't want some?" Grinning, she held up a slice.

"You are evil." Jill made a face and shifted on the couch, easing her leg up under her as she turned her attention to the other end of the sofa. "So, spill – what's this about Ellis Vanderholt and Charles Moore?"

Taking a sip of her Coke, Cindy looked up to find three sets of eyes on her, one pair in particular almost causing her to drop her drink, the gaze so intense. "Um, I searched through every picture I could get my hands on, including gallery openings, charity galas, and holiday parties, featuring Charles Moore. I started paying more attention to the

background and discovered something interesting. The same man kept popping up behind the scenes.”

“Ellis Vanderholt,” Lindsay piped up, her mind already firming up a motive. It made perfect sense to her. Closeted NBA player, scared his lover was going to out him, found the perfect fall guy – the Hallelujah Man. Too bad the star point guard hadn’t made proper use of the Biblical verse or known to make his lover suffer.

“According to my sources, Moore and Vanderholt have been lovers for the past three years. They met at a charity benefit.”

“How have they kept their secret under wraps?” asked Jill, angling more toward Cindy as she rested her arm on the back of the couch. “If your sources know, then chances are other people do, too. In this day and age, a secret like that would be worth a handsome payoff. Loyalty doesn’t stretch as far as it used to.”

“Well,” Cindy shifted in her seat, completely focused on the subject of the two gay men and not giving a thought to the fact that she and Lindsay had a similar secret of their own that they were keeping. “I don’t think anyone would notice anything out of the ordinary at these big events – just a bunch of high profile people coming together for a cause, and they’re super careful with the more private affairs.” She placed her canned drink on a side table to free her hands. “They make sure it’s a truly,” she made air quotation marks, “‘gay’ affair.”

Lindsay almost choked on her pizza at Cindy’s rather descriptive turn of phrase, suddenly realizing that their own ‘affair’ could very well be on the verge of being discovered, but her investigative skills kept her on track.

“And how exactly do they do that?”

“Everyone involved is gay from the drivers to the caterers to the serving staff. Plus, the hired help is paid very well and guaranteed to work all the parties. It’s also been rumored that some of them even hook up with the guests.” Cindy watched Lindsay narrow her eyes and anticipated what the next question might be, adding quickly, “Not that I’ve ever been to one of these parties myself.” She made it a point to maintain eye contact with her girlfriend. “My sources occasionally attend, but they adamantly refuse to talk to the police about any of the relationships, especially Moore and Vanderholt.”

Jill chuckled softly under her breath. “But they’ll talk to the media.”

“I’m not the media to them.” Cindy took offense to the statement and, with a slight huff, folded her arms across her chest and swiveled around to face the DDA.

“And exactly what are you considered to be then?” asked Claire, exchanging a quick glance with Jill and Lindsay, before turning her attention back to the young reporter.

“A friend.” The answer was swift, matter-of-fact, and very sincere. “Besides, the people who attend these parties are just trying to find a little happiness in life that they’d otherwise never be allowed to have. Is that a crime?”

“No, but a crime has been committed, and it’s quite possible that some of these people can shed some light on a probable motive, perhaps even know if Vanderholt had threatened Moore.” Lindsay pushed to her feet and moved to the office door. She peered through the open blinds at the body that lay beneath the draped sheet.

“Linz, you can’t just barge into Ellis Vanderholt’s home and accuse him of murder, especially if there aren’t any tangible ties to his relationship with the victim.” Jill bent her elbow and rested her head against her closed fist. “You’ve got to find someone who can at least tie him to Moore.”

“What about the fiancée?” asked Claire, tossing her napkin into the empty pizza box. “She’s bound to know something. That old saying about the wife or lover being the last to know is bull. They’re usually the first to suspect – just the last to accept.”

“Or maybe Moore confided in someone he works with or perhaps someone he depends upon, someone he’s close to,” said Jill, hesitating slightly before adding, “kind of like us. We pretty much share everything with each other.” She purposely alternated her gaze between Cindy and Lindsay, before looking over at Claire and shrugging not so innocently. This pretending game the four of them had been playing at was getting old, but she knew Lindsay had to be the one to make the decisive move to bring it to an end.

A not-so-comfortable silence ensued until Lindsay had finally had enough. It was time to address the very large pink elephant that was fast becoming a permanent fixture in their group. Jill had opened the door; all she needed to do was step through it.

“Maybe he was afraid to tell his friends,” said Lindsay in a soft voice, keeping her focus on the morgue’s far wall. “Maybe he thought they wouldn’t approve of his choice.”

“If they’re truly friends, they’d be happy that their friend had found someone.” Claire pushed to her feet and walked over to sit between Jill and Cindy. She took hold of Cindy’s hand and squeezed reassuringly. “Happy for both their friends.”

“And are they?” Lindsay released a nervous breath and slowly turned around, leaning her back against the door for support. She looked first to her lover and then to her friends. “Are they happy for their friends?”

Smiling, Jill took a firm hold of Claire’s hand and extended her other toward Lindsay, motioning with her fingers in invitation for her friend to complete the circle.

With a crooked grin, Lindsay pushed off the doorframe.

Booted feet made their way down a narrow hallway and came to a stop beside a brown stained wall at the far end of the corridor. The man paid no mind to the water-damaged finish, instead taking great care to ease his key into the deadbolt, making as little noise as possible to unlock and open the door. With a final glance over his shoulder, he stepped into the apartment and softly pushed the door closed, not taking a single moment to pause inside the doorway as he crossed the room with determination.

A flick of a switch brought a monitor to life, and after a few seconds, the room was awash in the soft glow from the television screen. The man reached across to the recording device and checked the time settings on the DVR. He gripped the remote and stepped back a few feet until he was in the perfect position to view the full screen. Using the time stamp, he activated the earliest listed: the camera specifically assigned to the apartment's den.

The screen's action began with the opening of an apartment door, and he watched as a tall brunette stepped into the room, followed by a shorter redhead. The pair seemed concerned about something as they moved quickly across the den and out of view. A push of another button brought a second camera's view to life and showed the smaller woman walking briskly toward the bedroom closet door. The man stepped closer to the monitor and activated the sound, smiling when the redhead accused the other woman of locking the dog in the closet. He continued to follow their conversation to a third recording of a camera that had been positioned behind the air-conditioning vent in the kitchen.

"Hey, it was an accident. It could've happened to anyone." The redhead continued to remove various containers from the bags she'd set on the kitchen table. "Let's not worry about it. Martha's quite content with her bone, just as you should be with your crab rangoon."

The brunette glanced down at her dog, happily gnawing on her bone. "She does look okay."

"She's fine," assured the younger woman. "Now, sit; the food's getting cold."

The watcher continued to listen to the ensuing conversation that centered on the dog, and bored with the rehashing of the same topic of how she'd come to be closed up in the closet, he halted the play of the DVR's recording and was just about to turn off the machine when he noted another recorded listing from the bedroom camera. Highlighting the choice, he hit play and stepped back once again when the darkened screen came to light. He frowned slightly as he watched the two women enter the room together, hand in hand, and his own hand clenched tightly around the remote when the brunette pulled the redhead close, dipping her head and gently pressing their lips together – the gesture clearly not forced. There was no sign of hesitation or nervousness; it was familiar, comfortable even.

He fingered the remote to stop the action but halted his motion when a tanned hand eased its way to the buttons of the younger woman's shirt, expertly freeing each one as she deepened the kiss. Anger rose deep inside him as he watched the long tapered hand return to where it'd begun its task, and now barrier-free, it easily palmed a silken-covered breast and squeezed lightly. The resulting moan from the redhead pushed him over the edge.

Flinging the remote against the wall, he heard it shatter into pieces, the force causing the recorded action to fast-forward. He stared at the images speeding by him so quickly he couldn't make out the blurry figures and felt relieved that he'd been spared from watching the sinful actions play out. Just as he reached out to manually shut off the monitor, the recording came to sudden halt, freezing the last image onto the screen. He hadn't been spared after all.

Light from a full moon shone brightly through the bedroom window, casting a silvery glow on the two women nestled closely together. A long leg had been carelessly thrown over a shorter one, the rather impromptu position in sharp contrast to the way the brunette cradled the redhead closely to her, protecting the younger woman even in sleep.

Consumed with hate and anger, he flipped the switch and darkened the screen, before turning on his heel and heading for the door. Slamming it hard enough to rattle the wall, he stomped down the hallway, no longer concerned if anyone knew he was there.

"Would you care for something to drink, Inspector?"

Sally Walters walked toward the poolside table, carrying a serving tray containing a tall carafe filled with lemonade, two glasses, a small plate of cookies, and napkins. Lindsay shifted in her seat uncomfortably. She hadn't liked the idea of interviewing the fiancée outside the station in the first place, and now she felt as if she was on a social call rather than official police business.

"Perhaps later, I'd like to ask you some more questions about your fiancé first," said Lindsay, placing her elbows on the arms of the wrought iron chair and resting her clasped hands loosely across her stomach.

The blonde faltered slightly, but nodded her assent as she neared the table and placed the tray in its center. Sitting in the seat directly across from the inspector, she mimicked Lindsay's posture with one minor exception. Her hands were gripped together tightly.

"Has anyone ever threatened your fiancé?"

"No; why would they? Charles has never given anyone any reason to be upset with him."

“How about someone he works with? Has Mr. Moore ever spoken of problems at the office?” Lindsay treaded carefully in her questioning, laying the foundation for the questions she really wanted answers to. Besides, there was always the possibility that there was someone else who might have a motive. If not a lover, who better than a disgruntled employee?

“No, he never said anything about work problems. He’s always been very generous to his employees.”

“What about friends? Any arguments lately?” Lindsay watched the blonde closely for any reaction or obvious hesitation in answering her question. Hesitation seemed to be the order of the day as Sally turned her focus to the crystal blue waters of the swimming pool as if the answers to the inspector’s question lay at its bottom. She bit down on her lip in thought.

“There was something a few months ago, but it was resolved.”

Lindsay leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees. Surely it wasn’t this easy.

“What happened?”

“Charles bought an original painting...” Sally hesitated again, trying to remember every single detail of the argument. “I can’t remember its name, but it was two children playing on the beach. Charles wanted to hang it in the foyer of the local women’s shelter, but John didn’t think the painting would be safe there.”

“John?” Lindsay pulled a small notebook from her pocket and removed the attached pen.

“Yes, John Mullins, one of the gallery owners in the Bay Area. He was very upset when he realized what Charles had intended to do with the painting.”

“Did he threaten your fiancé?” asked Lindsay, jotting down the potential suspect’s name and making a note of the incident.

“No, not really; he came up with another idea instead. He suggested a reproduction be placed in the shelter and that Charles keep the original in his study. Charles didn’t like the idea at first, but then he finally agreed.”

“So, you don’t think Mr. Mullins might have held a grudge over the incident?”

“No, not at all. Besides, John would never hurt Charles. He was the gallery’s best patron.”

“Okay, anything else come to mind?” Lindsay sat back in her chair. She’d remembered seeing the painting. It was the one Jill kept her focus on the most when she’d been trying to avoid looking at the victim’s body.

Sally looked off in the distance and shook her head sadly. She truly had no idea who would want to hurt her fiancé.

Reaching into her back pocket, Lindsay pulled out a business card and handed it to the blonde. "I appreciate your time, Ms. Walters. If you think of anything, please give me a call." With a smile, she pushed to her feet and turned to leave, but stopped suddenly as if something had just occurred to her.

"Was Mr. Moore serious with anyone else before the two of you starting seeing each other?"

For a second, Lindsay was certain she'd have to once again leap to the aid of the other woman. All color had drained from Sally's already pale face, but the blonde managed to stay conscious. She was clearly unsettled though.

"Um, I don't believe so."

At that moment, Lindsay was certain Sally Walters was fully aware of the relationship between her fiancé and Ellis Vanderholt, but if she didn't come forward, Lindsay would have to go elsewhere to make the connection. She tried once more to plant a seed of doubt.

"It was just an idea. You wouldn't believe how many times the ex-lover turns out to be the killer."

Wide green eyes, filled with obvious surprise and fear, snapped up to fasten on Lindsay's just before they rolled back into Sally's head. Lindsay was just able to cover the distance between the two of them to catch the fainting woman in her arms. This time there wasn't anyone around to hear her call for help.

ACT III

"Again?" Jill chuckled out loud. "That certainly brings a whole new meaning to saving the damsel in distress."

"I just hope she doesn't get a big head over having a woman swoon at her feet – twice," said Claire with a soft snicker, joining in on the fun. She could just imagine the look on Lindsay's face when Sally Walters toppled over into her arms for a second time.

Keeping her attention on the different photos she'd downloaded to her laptop the day of Moore's murder, Cindy half-listened to her friend's conversation as she struggled to focus on what had been niggling at the back of her brain ever since she'd heard about the latest fainting incident. Frowning, she moved her gaze from each picture's foreground to its background, and then back again, but she just couldn't quite put her finger on what was bothering her.

“Cindy, you should play the jealous girlfriend and milk this big time; make Lindsay grovel for awhile.” Jill glanced over at Claire for an approving nod and then looked across the table at their distracted friend. “Hey, I’m giving you good advice here, and you’re not even listening.” She tempered her words with a reassuring smile.

“Huh?” Cindy looked up sharply from her screen, her glasses slipping halfway down the bridge of her nose. She pushed them back into place with her index finger and apologized for her lack of attention. “Sorry, I was thinking about something.”

“We know; we could hear those wheels turning from over here,” teased Claire. “Why don’t you take a break from staring at that screen? You’re going to go blind.”

“Yeah Claire’s right, but you know, if you’re really into listening to old wives’ tales, there are much more enjoyable activities you could be engaging in that will supposedly give you the same blinding results.” Jill sat back in the seat and smirked, waiting for Cindy to put two and two together.

The young reporter wasted no time in connecting the proverbial dots as her face instantly turned scarlet red. She’d most definitely learned her math facts.

“Um . . .” Cindy swept her tongue across suddenly too-dry lips, not certain how she should respond to Jill’s rather suggestive impropriety. Shifting her gaze to the diner’s parking lot, she searched for a silver Jeep. She was most definitely in dire need of rescuing.

“Wonder what’s keeping Lindsay?”

“I’m sure Ellis Vanderholt is our guy,” said Lindsay, looking over her shoulder to make certain none of her colleagues had overheard her. Even though she was confident in her assumption, the last thing they needed was the station’s rumor mill getting a hold of something this juicy.

“Did she actually say that her fiancé was dating Ellis Vanderholt?” asked Jacobi, his eyes wide and jaw slack, his expression one of extreme shock.

Lindsay grinned. “You just don’t want him to be gay.”

“You’re damned right I don’t.” Jacobi lowered his voice. “I love the guy.” He glanced around the room nervously. “But I can’t love the guy if he’s gay.”

“Why not?” Lindsay noticeably stiffened; she hadn’t expected that particular answer. Her partner hadn’t seemed at all homophobic when he’d been prodding her to make a move on a certain redheaded female reporter.

Jacobi scrunched up his face. "It's a guy thing."

"So, it's not a gay thing?"

"Nope, only if the gay thing coincides with the guy thing." Jacobi leaned closer and whispered, "If one of the guys just happens to be straight like me, that is." The corners of his mouth turned up into a teasing grin. "And macho, too."

Lindsay chuckled softly, understanding exactly what her partner had meant. "Okay, we need to figure out how to tie these two together so that we can have a sit down with Mr. Vanderholt."

"Well, this is usually where I'd tell you that it's impossible for Ellis to have killed Moore, seeing as how the team has five away games scheduled for this week, but Ellis is recovering from a badly sprained ankle and isn't supposed to resume play until the Miami game. He more than likely didn't travel with the team and stayed back so that he could get daily treatment on his ankle." Jacobi blew out a tired sigh; this was one time he was hoping his partner was wrong. "Why don't you see if you can dig up something else while I do a quick check on Ellis' whereabouts for the past few days?"

Lindsay spared a glance at her watch and checked the time. She was running much later than she'd realized. "Sounds like a plan. I'm supposed to meet with Claire, Jill, and Cindy at Joe's for breakfast. Maybe one of them has something for me." She met Jacobi's gaze. "Meet you back here in an hour?"

"That should do it." Jacobi nodded his head and started toward his desk. He had more than a few phone calls to make.

"See you then." Lindsay grabbed her leather jacket off the back of her chair and started for the door just as Tom stepped onto the bullpen floor. He made his way over to Jacobi, keeping his eye on his ex until she'd exited the building.

"Where's she off to?"

"Checking out something."

"Anything I should know about?"

Jacobi suddenly remembered the autographed poster of Ellis Vanderholt Tom had showed him after the championship game a couple of years ago. His lieutenant had been beaming with pride.

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

“Look! It’s a bird... it’s a plane... no, it’s SuperLindsay! The savior of fainting women everywhere!”

“Very funny, Jill,” grumbled Lindsay, sliding into the booth next to Cindy. She was just able to stop herself from taking advantage of her position opposite Jill to kick the DDA in the shin.

“Don’t mind her, she doesn’t know how to act in front of a superhero,” said Claire, her blank expression morphing into a bright smile. “So, how does it feel to hold a beautiful blonde in your arms – twice in one day?”

Easing her hand onto Cindy’s thigh, Lindsay squeezed lightly. “Pretty damned good, actually.”

Jill’s jaw dropped in surprise at her friend’s candor and Claire burst out in laughter, while Cindy just smiled to herself and patted the hand that had kept her grounded, its warmth providing just the right amount of reassurance.

Offering another soft squeeze, Lindsay removed her hand and brought it up to rest on the table. She looked over at Claire as she folded one hand into her other.

“Have you had time to check out that filament from Moore’s gunshot wound?”

Claire nodded and shifted to a more comfortable position. “It’s definitely consistent with the material used in the manufacturing of basketballs all right, but it certainly didn’t end up on the muzzle just by lying around the vicinity of one. Someone had to have placed the gun right up against the leather and fired.”

“Why would the killer do that?” asked Cindy, frowning at the idea that someone would purposely chose to shoot a basketball. “I’m sure that would make a huge mess, and what would it accomplish?”

“Beats me,” said Claire. “Unless he or she was pissed off at the basketball for some reason.”

“Like maybe one that didn’t make it into the basket when the final buzzer went off?” asked Jill, figuring that would certainly be reason enough to want to off a basketball, especially if it was a pivotal game that decided which team made the playoffs.

“Okay, so we have motive for why someone would want to blast a basketball to smithereens and we also know the gun used to kill Moore killed said basketball. Now, how do we go about putting the same gun in Vanderholt’s hand?” asked Lindsay, clenching her hands together tightly. She knew Tom would never approve of even a friendly chat with the high profile player unless there was a direct link between the two

men, other than the fact that they just happened to attend the same types of social functions. She really hated all the politics involved in her job.

“So I take it the fiancée wasn’t very helpful in that department before she so willingly fell into your arms?” asked Jill sweetly, one side of her mouth crooked in a smile that bordered precariously on a smirk.

Lindsay refused to take the bait. “When I asked if Moore had had any problems with friends lately, she only referred to a problem with a painting he’d purchased. It turned out to be nothing, and I was just about to ask her about the parties he’d attended where Vanderholt had also been a guest, but...” she shrugged, “...you know the rest.”

“You going to try to talk to her again?” asked Cindy, hoping her words weren’t tainted with a jealous tone. Moore’s fiancée had managed to end up in Lindsay’s arms twice in the same day whereas it had taken Cindy seemingly forever to receive as much as a brief hug from the brunette. If all she’d had to do was fake a swoon, Cindy would’ve done it ages ago.

“Tom doesn’t think that’s a good idea right now. She’s still very emotional.” Lindsay brushed her hand through her thick locks. She was beyond frustrated with the way things were, or rather weren’t progressing.

“What happens now?” asked Claire, wishing she could offer definitive evidence that would link Vanderholt to Moore. The filament was all they had to go on, and on its own, it simply wasn’t enough.

Lindsay released a dejected sigh. This copycat case was turning out to be almost as difficult as the serial killer cases. She’d hoped for a quick and easy resolution to boost everyone’s confidence level, but she hadn’t planned on the possibility of such a high profile suspect. She’d also figured if the copycat screwed up the way he’d referenced the Bible verses, then he’d more than likely made other critical mistakes, too.

“For now, I guess we’ll...” The sharp ringing of a cell phone cut off her words, and she reached into her pocket and removed her phone, flipping it open and bringing it to her ear in a single motion.

“Boxer.” She listened carefully and glanced around at her friends with a disappointed expression. “You sure? ...yeah, of course you’re sure... okay, I’ll be back after I’ve had a quick bite to eat.” Lindsay snapped her phone closed and laid it in the center of the table. All eyes focused on the silent cell.

“Well?” asked Jill, noting the ‘so not happy’ expression still etched on Lindsay’s face. She just hoped it hadn’t been news of another dead body. A true Hallelujah case might send them all over the edge.

“Jacobi checked out Vanderholt’s whereabouts.”

“And?” Claire leaned forward in her seat, already fairly certain that whatever Jacobi had reported wasn’t good.

“He’s in Chicago, visiting family. His father had open heart surgery, and he’s been there for the entire week. If he had anything to do with the murder, it’s going to be hell to prove.”

Easing her elbow onto the table, Lindsay closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. They were back to square one.

The afternoon found Lindsay and Jacobi standing in front of Tom’s desk, waiting for their lieutenant to end his phone call. In a united front, each inspector refused to look at the other as they both worked very hard at not rolling their eyes.

“Okay honey, I’ll be there,” said Tom in a low, but sickeningly sweet tone. Reaching across his desk, he snagged a Post-it note and scrawled out the name of a restaurant. “I love you, too.” He pushed a button ending the call, noted a time in the upper-right hand corner of the canary yellow note, and pulled it free from its pad.

“Better stick it on your badge so you don’t lose it,” suggested Jacobi, having been guilty of making reminders, only to later forget where he’d put them.

Lindsay could care less where Tom stuck it. “You wanted to see us?”

“Yeah, where are you on the Moore murder? Still think it’s a copycat?” asked Tom, dutifully following Jacobi’s suggestion and affixing the yellow Post-it to the badge that hung around his neck.

Lindsay’s gaze strayed to the yellow note that covered her ex’s badge. During their marriage, she was the one who usually forgot to show up at an agreed upon place. There wouldn’t have been enough Post-its in the world to draw her focus away from Kiss-Me-Not. She’d have ignored the reminders just as easily as she had Tom.

“Definitely a copycat,” said Lindsay, lifting her eyes from the edges of the gold shield to rest on those of her lieutenant’s.

Tom nodded. “Got any suspects?”

Jacobi glanced at his partner and shrugged. He wasn’t going to be the one to burst another man’s carefully constructed bubble around one of the league’s best players.

“We did, but the suspect had an ironclad alibi.” Lindsay treaded carefully. Just because her theory hadn’t pointed directly to Vanderholt as the killer, like she’d expected, didn’t

mean the star basketball player hadn't hired someone to do the deed or, at the very least, that he couldn't be instrumental in finding whoever did kill Charles Moore. She stepped closer to the desk.

"There is someone I'd like to talk to, but he won't be back into town until tomorrow morning. I think he may be able to shed some light on some things."

"Friend of Moore's?" asked Tom, placing his elbows on the arms of his chair and steepling his hands under his chin.

Jacobi nodded. "You could say that."

Lindsay wished she was standing close enough to her partner to elbow him sharply in the ribs. "Just someone who runs in the same circles."

Jacobi snickered. "You could say that, too."

"I think she just did," said Tom, staring at his two inspectors. The pair looked truly mismatched, but they were the best team he'd ever seen. "Someone care to fill me in?"

Cindy focused on the split screen of her computer, the hustle and bustle of her co-workers completely unnoticed as she reviewed every published story from the Hallelujah Man murders. Nowhere made mention that the Bibles had been highlighted in any way, so how had the copycat known to call attention to his particular verse? Had he just assumed that the passages had to have been marked in some way?

"Um, excuse me, Ms. Thomas. Do you need your trash emptied?"

Startled from thought, Cindy managed to close the windows of the various open stories and swivel around in her chair, only to spy the sandy-haired, blue-eyed day custodian. She imagined he'd used his boyish looks to capture many a girl, but his charm was lost on her.

"Not at the moment, JP; thanks for asking though." Cindy offered up a smile. He really was a nice guy, despite his flirting nature.

"I'll swing by later then." JP grinned widely and moved on to the next desk, taking his bright eyes and wide smile to the next available woman.

Amused, Cindy watched as the man slowly made his way through the office, winking and smiling at every woman he encountered. The guy was definitely a player. With a tired sigh, she returned her focus to her screen, this time pulling up photos from Moore's social events. She was determined to figure out just what had been bothering her.

Leaning back in her chair, she gripped the mouse loosely and ran through the pictures once again. It was the next to last photo that caught her eye, and she eased her hand from the mouse. The expression on Sally Walters face was forced, a smile that never reached her eyes. It couldn't – her eyes were constantly diverted elsewhere, as if she were scanning the crowd. Cindy quickly called up the rest of the images and looked for the same kind of reaction, making a mental note of the date that each photo was taken. She'd finally found what had been eluding her.

Automatically reaching for the phone, Cindy frowned when she got Lindsay's voice mail, but not to be deterred, she called another number, barely waiting for the other woman to answer before she blurted out her theory.

"Jill, I think we might be barking up the wrong tree."

Jill spoke calmly, keeping her eyes trained on the woman who stood cross-armed in front of her desk, glaring at her. "Could you hold for one minute, please? I'm just finishing up with a conference." She kept the phone against her ear, not bothering to put the caller on hold.

"Was there anything else you needed, Denise?" asked Jill sweetly and watched as her boss' expression turned even sourer. She was going to owe Cindy big time for getting her out of this particular meeting.

"Not now, but I want a full update soon," said Denise, turning on her heel and walking purposefully toward the door. She stopped at the threshold and glanced back at her smug-looking DDA. "Very soon."

Jill chuckled quietly as her boss closed the door with controlled force. Life with Denise was actually kind of fun these days. She never knew which Denise was going to show up. Today's fiasco, however, had been entirely her own fault.

"Remind me to buy you a drink."

"Later," said Cindy, her eyes still trained on the photo of one half of the supposedly happy couple. "What if there's another reason why Sally Walters fainted when Lindsay asked her about an ex-lover?"

"Like what?" Jill rifled through the various papers she was supposed to have ready for Denise this morning. Cindy had truly saved her ass.

Sparing a quick glance around the Register's office, Cindy cupped her hand over the receiver and whispered, "What if Ellis Vanderholt isn't the lover or ex-lover in question?"

"You mean another one of Charles Moore's lovers?" asked Jill, the idea not entirely unrealistic. In fact, it was a possibility they should have already considered.

“Well, there’s that,” agreed Cindy. “But what if it’s one of *her* exes?”

“I don’t believe this!” Lindsay slammed her long frame into her chair and stared up at the ceiling. Tom had been adamant that if she spoke to Ellis Vanderholt she was to concentrate solely on the usual types of questions: Did you have any dealings with the deceased? Do you know anyone that may have held a grudge of any kind against him? Under no circumstance was she to bring up either man’s sexuality. Tom’s last words, “and especially as a surprise tactic,” had sent Lindsay storming from his office.

“You can’t really blame him,” said Jacobi, looking down at his upset partner and waiting for her dark eyes to flash at him in anger. He’d only counted to two when a force ten glare was directed his way, and he held up his hand before Lindsay could turn her full wrath on him. “He’s looking out for the department’s well-being. We really don’t have any concrete evidence. What did you expect him to do?”

“Believe in me.” Lindsay sat up in her chair and rolled it slowly toward her desk. “I told him I had it on good authority.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know just how cute your authority is. Otherwise, he’d have never questioned you.”

Jacobi smiled at the deep chuckle that bubbled out from his partner’s lips. It seemed the young reporter could make Lindsay smile even when she wasn’t in the same room.

“So how do we go about interviewing Ellis Vanderholt?”

“Well, he’s going to be pretty busy when he returns in the morning. He’s scheduled to rejoin the team against Miami here tomorrow night, and then there’s Houston and San Antonio Friday and Saturday,” Jacobi paused and added, “in Texas.”

Lindsay frowned. “Why so many games?”

“Wake up, Boxer; the season is in full swing. Teams play three to four times a week, sometimes five – home *and* on the road.”

“Then we better make sure we talk to him before he leaves for Texas,” Lindsay pushed to her full height and immediately spotted a pink ‘While You Were Away’ slip on her desk, the note folded in such a way to showcase the word URGENT written boldly across its top. She’d been so angry when she’d come down to the bullpen after their meeting with Tom, she hadn’t so much as glanced at her desk.

“Hey Jacobi, I’m going to the morgue to see if Claire’s found anything else in the trace results.” Lindsay never looked back at her partner as she strode across the bullpen.

Jacobi wore a ghost of a grin as he shook his head. He'd recognized Cindy's handwriting right away and could detect the scent of the perfume Jill always wore still lingering in the vicinity. Crossing to his desk, he grabbed up a file and pretended to read.

"Not a club, my ass."

"So?" Lindsay stepped into Claire's office and waved her pink slip in the air.

"Lois Lane," Jill motioned toward the young reporter and grinned widely, recalling her earlier reference to Lindsay as a superhero, "may have come up with something."

"What?" Lindsay shifted her gaze to Claire's chair where Cindy sat with her fingers perched over the keys of her laptop that was centered on the desk.

Keeping her focus on her computer screen, Cindy stared at a downloaded photo she'd called up just before Lindsay had arrived. It showed Sally Walters and Charles Moore at a ribbon cutting ceremony – Sally's smile was as plastic as the oversized pair of scissors the couple held in their hands.

"What if someone isn't after Moore because of their relationship to each other, current or old news, but instead, someone is after him because he's engaged to Sally Walters? What if it's someone from her past?"

Lindsay knitted her brow in thought. She'd figured the killer had to be from Moore's past, especially when she'd discovered the secret he'd been keeping, and even though her lead suspect had an alibi, she still hadn't ruled out murder for hire. And, if that didn't pan out either, Lindsay planned to turn her sights to Moore's other lovers - someone Moore had dropped like yesterday's news in favor of Ellis Vanderholt.

She hadn't thought to ask the fiancée if there was anyone who'd want to hurt her in some way. She'd been so focused on individuals from Moore's life that she hadn't considered other possibilities. Had her frustration with not having any real leads in the Hallelujah Man's cases caused her to become so single minded?

"Something's been bothering me," said Cindy. Knowing the meticulous way Lindsay's mind worked, she decided to go ahead and explain why she'd made the leap to Sally. "Early in the relationship, Sally seemed nervous, even jittery in the photos. Then she started to relax. The camera is truly her friend when she's smiling and at ease."

"And?" Lindsay snapped out of her thoughts and glanced over at Cindy.

"And a couple of months ago, she slipped back into her mousy mode, shying away from the camera and always looking into the crowd."

“So, you think we may be looking for someone who not only has a passion for basketball, but Sally Walters as well?” asked Lindsay, her tone questioning but her mind already whirling with other pertinent facts she may have overlooked in her very short interviews with the fiancée.

“Oh, talk about wicked – what if the killer knew about Vanderholt and purposely left the basketball evidence behind to link him to the murder,” said Jill, caught up in the idea of a frame job.

“More like wacko if you ask me,” chimed in Claire. “Why go to such great lengths to try to pin it on the Hallelujah Man if he planned to plant evidence that would implicate Vanderholt all along?”

“Hmm... good point.” Jill certainly didn’t envy Lindsay her job. Nothing was ever as it seemed.

“So, is there any chance of another interview with the fiancée?” asked Cindy with mixed emotions, not too keen on the idea of three being a charm, but what if... “Hey, what if you took Jacobi with you this time?”

“She was extremely jittery around him before, but that’s a good idea. Maybe the extra adrenaline will keep her conscious,” said Lindsay, pulling her cell phone free of her pocket. “Let me run it by Tom.”

Nodding a couple of times in show of her support of the idea, Claire walked out of the room and into the morgue. She returned seconds later, headed straight for Lindsay, and held out a closed fist. Lindsay delayed making her call and stared down at the other woman’s hand.

“What’ve you got?” she asked, gesturing to the offered hand. Surely Claire hadn’t waited this long to tell her she’d found new evidence.

Remaining silent, Claire tilted her head and gave her infamous ‘don’t mess with me’ look. Lindsay glanced at the other two women in the room and shrugged as she held out her open hand, palm side up. Without hesitation, Claire deposited two small vials in the center of her friend’s palm.

“What’s this?” asked Lindsay, frowning as she lifted her hand to study its contents.

Claire folded her arms across her chest and grinned from ear to ear.

“Smelling salts.”

“Why exactly am I here again?” asked Jacobi as he stood next to his partner on the front porch of Charles Moore’s home.

“Because I’m not taking the chance of being alone with Ms. Walters if she faints again.”

Lindsay lifted a hand to knock on the ornate door as she reached into her pocket with her other hand to make certain she still had the vials Claire had given her.

“Oh goodie, I get to scare her to death instead,” replied Jacobi, just able to wipe the sarcastic expression off his face as the door swung open. Sally Walters nodded her head in greeting and then turned and walked back inside.

Lindsay smirked at her partner. “She’s still alive. I guess you’ve lost your touch again.” With a wink, she stepped over the threshold and followed the victim’s fiancée into the study, leaving Jacobi standing outside. With a light chuckle, he moved into the house and closed the door behind him.

“Thank you for agreeing to answer more questions, Ms. Walters. I know how difficult this has been for you,” said Lindsay, moving to take a seat on the sofa across from the blonde, who’d chosen to settle into a cream-colored wing chair. Lindsay motioned for Jacobi to join her, but he chose to stand behind the couch instead, figuring that a little distance may be just what the fiancée needed.

“I must apologize for the other times, Inspector; I’m not usually so frail. This whole ordeal has been very unsettling for me,” said Sally, crossing her right ankle over her left and placing her hands in her lap.

Lindsay offered a reassuring smile. “We’ll try to be brief, but we really need some answers from you so that we can move our investigation forward.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Jacobi kept silent and watched the proceedings. It was apparent that Ms. Walters was aware of his presence, but she hadn’t seemed as nervous around him as the first time. He wasn’t going to take any chances of rattling her at the moment though.

“Inspector Jacobi and I are still working on the possibility that someone Mr. Moore knew or worked with targeted him, but we keep hitting a brick wall. So, we thought we’d broaden our search and look at some viable alternatives.” Lindsay paused and allowed the other woman time to take in her words. Reaching into her pocket, she bypassed the smelling salts and removed her notepad.

“Last time we spoke, we concentrated on individuals from your fiancé’s past and present, but I’d wondered if we could talk about you for just a moment.”

Sally’s eyes grew huge. “You think I had something to do with Charles’ murder?”

“Oh no – no, no, no,” Lindsay assured. “But we’d wondered if there was someone who may be angry or upset with you. Perhaps someone who may have threatened you but, for some reason or other, decided to take it out on your fiancé instead.”

If possible, Sally’s eyes grew larger. “Oh my God, it can’t be true. Charles said he was the one who put the rose in my car.”

Lindsay froze in place, hoping she wouldn’t need to use the smelling salts. Instead, she watched as a look of resignation replaced Sally Walters’ shocked expression. Cautiously, she asked the obvious question. “What?”

“He’s found me.” Sally pushed to her feet and walked over to a large picture window that overlooked the spacious grounds and manicured lawn. Wrapping her arms around herself protectively, she stared out unseeingly.

Lindsay glanced over her shoulder at Jacobi in surprise. She was torn between staying where she was so as to not spook the other woman or crossing the room and tearing into Sally Walters for not disclosing what, from all intents and purposes, appeared to be critical information in her first two interviews. The inspector’s moment of indecision was broken by a soft voice.

“It has to be John. I didn’t say anything the other day because I never thought he’d harm anyone else. He’s only ever centered his attention on me, but when you mentioned that the killer sometimes turns out to be an ex-lover, I panicked.”

Flipping a few pages in her notebook, Lindsay read her notes and frowned. “John? John Mullins, the gallery owner? You said he’d never hurt your fiancé.” She looked across the room at the other woman’s back. “Why would he have reason to hurt you?”

“No...not John Mullins.” Sally wrung her hands and wept softly. “John Parker, my ex-husband.”

Act IV

“So what’ve you got on this Parker guy?” asked Tom, leaning back in his chair and looking every bit as smug as he had when Lindsay and Jacobi had reported that they’d found another suspect. With a fresh cup of coffee in hand and the knowledge that he could now thoroughly enjoy Ellis Vanderholt’s return to the Warriors tonight, he couldn’t be happier.

“No criminal records, although, from what we’ve been able to ascertain, he should have a very thick jacket,” said Lindsay, flipping through the pages of the thin file she held. “He’s lived in the same town where he was born and raised, including the years he was married to Sally Walters. Her parents still live there, too.” She pushed the papers

forcefully back into the manila folder. “But we’re getting stonewalled. Parker’s dad is the local sheriff and his uncle is the county judge.”

“What *have* you been able to find out?” Tom placed his mug on his desk and sat up straight as he eased his chair closer to the desk.

“We know he’s hasn’t been working for the past two years. The local high school finally fired his sorry ass after he broke a kid’s ribs,” said Jacobi, his anger bubbling close to the surface. When he’d talked to the principal and discovered just how many incidents of abuse had been swept under the rug through the years, he’d wished the conversation had taken place face-to-face. He wanted to look the spineless man in the face and ask just how he could’ve allowed Parker to continue his abuse.

Pulling several pages free of the folder, Lindsay handed them over to her lieutenant. “And here’s a summary of the injuries Sally Walters sustained while she was married to Parker. She gave her consent for us to obtain her medical records, but this was all the hospital sent. I’m guessing the files themselves were too big to fax.”

Tom clenched his jaw tightly as he scanned the list of injuries, ranging from cuts and lacerations to contusions and broken bones. His eyes locked on the last item.

“Miscarriage?” He kept his focus on the report and avoided eye contact with his inspectors, one in particular.

“Yeah,” said Jacobi in disgust. “That one bothered me, too. I called and had a chat with the doctor who’d treated her. He refused to go on record, but he confirmed that there’d been extensive bruising on her abdomen, and he suspected that she’d been kicked repeatedly.”

“We need to nail this son of a bitch.” Tom looked up and locked eyes with Lindsay, who never so much as blinked. Her reply was swift and spoken with utmost conviction.

“Oh, we will. You can count on it.”

In a mostly vacant garage, a red Saab looked completely out of place parked between a mineral green BMW X5 and twilight grey Lexus LX 570. Cindy sat perched on the hood of her car and waited, hoping that the BMW owner would be the next person to step out of the elevator as she’d already watched most of the luxury vehicles drive away.

A soft ding signaled that the elevator had once again returned to her floor, and Cindy slid off her car and turned toward the opening doors. She smiled when she spotted the man she’d been waiting for and took a deep breath before she spoke.

“Mr. Vanderholt? Could I have a word, please?”

The tall man wrinkled his brow and glanced toward the garage's exit. "How did you get in here?"

Cindy smiled sweetly and gestured in the same direction the basketball player had been looking. "Um, well, I'm friends with Carl, the security guy. I can promise you I'm not a stalker or anything like that. I'm a reporter from the San Francisco Register."

The star guard couldn't help but grin at the cherubic face of the young woman. If she was a stalker, she sure was a cute one. "So, what do you want to know? If I'm 100%? If I'll be able to go all four quarters? How I'll stack up against Chalmers? If . . ."

His next question was cut off abruptly by the one question Cindy needed answered.

"Did Charles Moore ever mention someone by the name of John Parker?"

Vanderholt looked nervously around the garage and visibly swallowed hard. "Um, I don't know anyone by that name."

"Parker?" asked Cindy, slowly closing the distance. This was one conversation she definitely didn't want to be accidentally overheard. "Moore never said anything about him?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know either man. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really need to get home." Using his longer strides to step around the reporter, he started for his car, but Cindy was, as usual, relentless; although she truly hated having to just blurt out what she'd hoped would grab the basketball player's undivided attention. She'd prefer it had come up in the course of a longer conversation.

"The police believe Parker is the man who murdered Charles Moore."

Vanderholt's steps faltered, and he turned around to face the young woman. "But, I thought it was the Hallelujah Man. One of the papers said something about a new sin – envy, I think it was."

"No, someone tried to make it look like it was part of the serial murders, but it wasn't," said Cindy, not bothering to point out that he certainly knew a lot about the murder of a man he supposedly had no knowledge of. Instead, she took advantage of the situation and closed the gap between them once more. "Sally Walters believes her ex-husband is responsible. And I was wondering why Moore didn't go to the police when he first suspected Parker was in San Francisco. I was hoping you might know the answer."

"I really don't want to talk about this," said Ellis nervously. "I can't afford for... um, things to be splattered all over the headlines, and besides, it won't bring Charles back." The last part was spoken in a whispered, almost broken tone.

“I understand, really I do,” assured Cindy. “And I can promise you this will never, ever, appear in print. I just need to know why Mr. Moore told his wife that he was the one who’d left the rose in her car two months ago when she was visiting the shelter.”

Vanderholt stood silent, towering over the diminutive woman, until he finally released a loud sigh and explained his lover’s reasoning.

“Sally had finally quit looking over her shoulder, expecting to see Parker at every turn. When the rose turned up, Charles spoke up and said he’d left it. He apologized for ‘forgetting’ that Parker had always brought Sally roses after the guy had beaten her to a pulp. He just wanted her to feel safe. He hired a private detective to try to find Parker, but nothing turned up. Then, when Sally didn’t receive any more unexpected gifts, he figured everything was okay.”

“Yeah, I’d probably think the same thing,” admitted Cindy as another question occurred to her, one that Lindsay had told her she’d been wondering about as well but hadn’t had the heart to ask Sally after the other woman had answered everything else she and Jacobi had thrown at her. “Why did Moore ask Sally to marry him?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” said Ellis, shaking his head sadly.

“Try me,” said Cindy, her tone soft and gentle. “Please?”

Once again, Vanderholt marveled at the angelic features of the young reporter, her expression one of total sincerity. She might just be the only person who’d understand.

“I could never live my life openly, at least while I’m still playing basketball. Charles understood that, but he also worried that if someone did see us together, they’d dig and dig until our relationship came to light. He thought that if he was married, then perhaps that would cast doubt on anyone’s accusations. He met Sally at the shelter and they hit it off immediately – not anything sexual, mind you – just two people who enjoyed the same things. They became best friends and soon she moved in. She agreed to the marriage and told Charles that should he ever decide to come out, she’d divorce him quietly. She actually told me once that she looked forward to that day.”

Cindy took a firm hold of his hand and squeezed gently, speaking the words no one else had said to him. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Looking down into watery brown eyes, Ellis swallowed the lump that had been stuck in his throat ever since he’d heard the news of his lover’s death. She did understand.

“Bad news, Linz; there are no court documents anywhere associated with John Parker. Well, except for the divorce decree,” said Jill, easing next to the corkboard that was filled

with photos of the Moore crime scene. She made sure not to focus on any of the pictures of the victim and his wire-sewn eyelids.

“What about the incident at the school? The one where he lost his job for hitting one of his students?” asked Lindsay, whirling around to face the DDA.

“I’ve just gotten a hold of a little more information from the principal,” Jacobi piped up from the doorway. “It seems the student’s parents dropped the charges, but they did agree to have the Parker family pay the hospital costs. I also found out another interesting tidbit.”

Lindsay turned her attention to the huge grin that resided on her partner’s face. “Well?”

“Guess what other job Parker held at the school?”

His grand moment of revelation was ruined when Claire pushed off the desk she’d been leaning against and guessed, “Basketball coach?”

Jacobi chuckled at the coroner’s sarcastic tone and rewarded her for her correct response. “Bingo!”

“So yet another crime he’s gotten away with,” said Jill, staring up at the only picture they had of John Parker – a blown up driver’s license photo. It seemed that Sally Walters had burned all the photos she’d had of her ex-husband. A deed she, Claire, and Lindsay had agreed with and applauded.

“But you said there weren’t any criminal...” Lindsay started, just as the proverbial light came on, “...ah, I get it - killing a basketball.”

“Wonder what it did to him?” asked Claire, moving to stand next to Jill. She glared at the sandy-haired, blue-eyed asshole. “And how in the world did he find his ex in San Francisco?”

“We’re not sure, but Sally thinks her mother may have accidentally slipped and told one of her friends. Small town gossip spreads faster than a California wildfire,” said Lindsay, wondering how long it had taken Parker to find his ex-wife. Her frustration with their unanswered questions was starting to take its toll. “Why we can’t find him? He’s got to be living and working somewhere nearby. Unless Daddy and Uncle Joe Bob have been sending him money.”

“Uncle Joe Bob? Is that his real name?”

The trio of women, plus Jacobi, turned to face the newcomer, their gaze following Cindy as she crossed the room and stared up at the board. “Still haven’t found him?” She scanned the corkboard and took in the various crime photos.

“Where have you been?” asked Lindsay, keeping her tone light. When she’d awoken this morning, Cindy had already left, but her upset had evaporated when she’d smelled the freshly brewed coffee.

“Tying up some loose ends,” said Cindy, glancing around the room and noting the number of people milling around. “I’ll tell you guys about it later.”

Jacobi grumbled under his breath. “Yeah, in the clubroom, no doubt.”

Three voices chimed at the same time – “We’re not a club!” – but the fourth voice remained silent; she was too busy staring at the blown up photo of Parker.

“Who’s this?” asked Cindy, tilting her head to get a better angle.

“That’s John Parker,” said Jill, wishing for a dartboard. Maybe with Parker’s face in the center, she’d actually be able to hit the bullseye for a change. Although, pinning Denise’s face to the board certainly hadn’t helped her aim much.

“Oh my God, I know this guy!” exclaimed Cindy, her focus on bright blue eyes.

Lindsay stepped in next to her lover and tried to keep the worry out of her voice. “You’ve seen him?”

Cindy nodded, but kept her gaze on the photo. She knew that smile all too well. Never in a million years would she have imagined it to turn sinister.

“Practically every day for the past several months; he’s one of the day custodians at the Register.”

“How do you want to handle this?”

Tom stood beside Lindsay and looked down at the floor plan of the building that housed the San Francisco Register. The number of exits was mind boggling, and Lindsay briefly wondered if reporters truly needed that many escape routes. Thinking back on the times she’d been tempted to go toe-to-toe with reporters from the crime beat, she concluded there weren’t nearly enough.

“We can’t just go storming in there. We need some kind of diversion,” said Lindsay, paying close attention to those exits that dumped out into crowded streets. If Parker slipped into a crowd of people, they’d never find him.

“Um, excuse me,” said Cindy, stepping away from the far wall where she’d managed to hide in plain sight when things had begun to heat up. Everyone had been so busy trying to organize a plan that no one had paid any mind to the reporter.

“She can’t be here,” said Tom, gesturing for one of the patrolmen to escort Cindy from the premises. Lindsay looked up from the table and glanced over at the reporter.

“Yes, she can. We need someone who knows this building inside and out,” replied Lindsay, motioning Cindy over toward the table.

“We’ll get a city planner in here,” argued Tom, clearly not happy to have a civilian involved in the situation. It somehow escaped his attention that, while on the city payroll, a city planner was considered a civilian, too, or that Cindy had already been involved in two separate police matters, both having been much more dangerous than just offering insight to possible hidden escape routes the Register might have.

“We don’t have time.” Lindsay gazed at Cindy and then pointed at the blueprints. “Can you narrow down the exits Parker would be most likely to take?”

“If you’re thinking of staging a bomb threat, I know exactly which exit he’ll take,” said Cindy, looking down at the building’s plans and tilting her head left and right to get her bearings. She ran her finger along the back of the building and pointed. “There.”

Tom, who’d been following the path of the reporter’s finger, looked up sharply. “How can you be so sure? Who knows what he’ll do when he’s asked to evacuate?”

Cindy grinned. “I do. The custodians always go out back, sit on the edge of the loading dock, and smoke a cigarette.”

“Always?” asked Tom with a frown.

“We’re a newspaper; we get bomb threats all the time.”

Lindsay smiled. She imagined most of those threats had been a direct result of a certain redhead’s articles. Meeting her lieutenant’s gaze, she said, “We’ll station two people outside the other exits just in case, but I want the majority of our personnel to tighten up the area around the loading dock. This guy is not getting away.”

Rolling up the blueprints, she started for the door, stopping abruptly when she sensed exactly who was on her heels. She turned to face the other woman.

“You...stay here.”

“But,” Cindy started, ready to give reason upon reason as to why she should be allowed to tag along; however, the expression on Lindsay’s face stopped her words. She knew exactly what was going through her lover’s mind, and even though this situation wasn’t anywhere near the same as the recent school hostage one, it could prove to be dangerous nonetheless. She nodded her head. “Okay, but I get an exclusive.”

Lindsay longed to pull Cindy into her arms and kiss her senseless, but this wasn't exactly the time or the place to come out to her department or her ex, especially in such a demonstrative way. Although, she would love to have seen the expression on Tom's face afterward. Instead, she smiled and said, "You've got a deal." With a quick wink, she turned and left the room.

Cindy momentarily considered going back on her word, but the doorway in front of her was suddenly filled with the bodies of her two friends.

"C'mon, Lois Lane. Let's go get some coffee and wait it out in Claire's office," said Jill, extending her hand in invitation.

"Cindy was right; there he is," said Lindsay, her back against the wall and a huge smile on her face. She couldn't wait to slap the cuffs on John Parker.

"Cute and smart, I like that," teased Jacobi, keeping his eye on the edge of the loading dock, and specifically, the man in the center of the group. Parker's cocky smile was about to be wiped off his smug face.

"Me, too," whispered Lindsay, lifting her arm to her mouth and tilting her wrist to speak directly into the microphone attached there. "On three." She glanced around the area once more before she counted, "One, two, three!"

Agents flooded the zone like rats running for higher ground, and John Parker was the first of the six men to react as he swiveled back toward the building and pushed to his feet. He froze at the gun that was inches from his face.

"John Parker, you're under arrest for the murder of Charles Moore." Lindsay reached for her cuffs as Jacobi moved in next to her, his gun trained on the other man's head.

"Wait, you've got the wrong guy," cried Parker, "I'm not the Hallelujah Man!"

"No shit," said Jacobi. "You should probably count your blessings, though; my partner would've probably shot first and asked questions later had you been him."

"But...the Bible," said Parker, wincing at the force Lindsay used to cuff him.

"You got it wrong, dumbass." Lindsay pulled down hard on the cuffs for good measure. "If you'd gotten it right, you'd have been the victim. Moore had nothing to be envious of."

Parker's demeanor changed right before their eyes, and both inspectors saw the man who'd beaten Sally Walters on a regular basis. Gone were the innocent act and the sweet smile, replaced with an expression of sheer hatred.

“Oh, but he did. Sally belongs to me – she always has. He shouldn’t have tempted fate by trying to take her as his own. He cast his own die.”

“Read this asshole his rights,” said Lindsay in disgust as she handed Parker over to a couple of uniformed officers. The arrest hadn’t been nearly as satisfying as she’d expected, but handing over an exclusive to Cindy would more than make up for it.

Focusing on her computer screen, Cindy put the finishing touches on her latest story – Arrest Made in the Murder of Charles Moore – as she inserted a photo of the deceased near the top of the article and sighed. What a waste – all because of a man’s obsession over a woman who no longer wanted him. She wondered if Parker’s father and uncle would feel any guilt for this latest crime, but she figured the two of them were already working on a way to try to ‘fix’ the problem. She felt safe in the knowledge that Jill was the DDA on the case. The blonde would have a field day with the two country lawmen.

“Ms. Thomas?” asked a meek voice, and Cindy swiveled in her chair to find Javier Hernandez standing a few feet away.

“Hey, Javier, what can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to apologize for hiring JP... um, I mean John Parker. I should’ve realized he was no good.”

Cindy pushed to her feet and leaned back against her desk. “It wasn’t your fault, Javier. Parker was very good at deceiving people.” She hesitated, and then added, “He even deceived me. I had no idea what he was capable of. I just thought he was a huge flirt.”

The head of the day custodians smiled slightly at Cindy’s confession. “Yes, he was very good at making people think he was a good person.”

“So, don’t worry about it. He’s safely behind bars now and can’t hurt anyone else,” assured Cindy, offering a kind smile.

“True, true,” he said, nodding his head. “Okay, I better get back to work; I just wanted to let you know how sorry I was.” With another quick nod, he turned and walked away.

Sighing tiredly, Cindy turned back to her computer and scanned her article once more before sending it to her editor, who’d been torn between disgust and excitement when he’d learned that his paper had employed Charles Moore’s killer. Getting an exclusive hadn’t been nearly as rewarding, knowing that the killer had been walking through the Register’s doors on a daily basis for the past few months.

A soft chirping sound drew Cindy's attention to her phone which lay beside her keyboard, and she smiled when she noted the caller.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself," said Lindsay, crawling into her Jeep and buckling up. "I was just on my way home. How far along are you on your story?"

"Just put it to bed and thinking about heading out myself."

"You hungry?" asked Lindsay, hoping her own hunger pangs weren't loud enough for Cindy to overhear. She could eat an entire large pizza if one were sitting in front of her.

Cindy, once again, managed to crawl inside Lindsay's head. "Want me to pick up a pizza and meet you there?"

"Why don't you let me get the pizza? I'm thinking extra large tonight."

"Sounds like a plan. See you in a bit then." Cindy hung up the phone and chuckled. Lindsay's appetite had returned in a big way, and she tried not to think about the other appetite that usually went hand in hand with her eating one. A blush slowly crept up her neck and settled on her face, compliments of the path her last thought had taken.

"Oh God, I'm channeling Jill." With another light chuckle, she snatched up her purse and started for the exit.

Hurriedly stepping into the parking garage, Cindy focused her full concentration on the contents of her purse as she fumbled with her keys. In her haste to have keys in hand before she arrived at her car, she hadn't seen the figure who'd stepped out from behind one of the garage's supporting posts. She walked directly into the solid body and dropped her keys onto the cement floor.

"Oh!" Cindy looked up into a pair of clear blue eyes, her own eyes widening in recognition. He was the last person she'd expected to see.

"Pete! You scared the crap out of me." She placed her hand over her heart to keep it from beating out of her chest and spoke the words that had already begun to spin around in her head. "What are you doing here?"

Ever the gentleman, Pete leaned over to retrieve her keys. "Sorry I scared you. I wasn't thinking." With a crooked smile, he dangled the keys for Cindy to take. She blew out a nervous breath and reached out a shaky hand. He dropped them into her palm and took a step back.

"So... what are you doing here?" asked Cindy again, this time adding a slight smile to her question, despite the situation. This was bad, seriously bad.

Placing his hands deep in his pockets, Pete shrugged shyly and said, “I came by to ask you for your help.”

“Help? You need my help?” asked Cindy, wondering exactly when God had gotten a sense of humor and why He’d chosen to try it out on her.

“Yeah, I just got into the city, and I’ve been trying to figure out how to approach Lindsay.” He smiled coyly. “I want to try to talk her into reconsidering our relationship.”

Cindy lost the grip on her keys once again, and they fell to the ground with a loud clatter. “Um, oops.” She shrugged and moved to retrieve them, but Pete had already snagged them from the ground.

“Maybe you should get one of those bracelet things to attach your keys to. You know, the ones that look like a telephone cord?” He held the keys out a second time, and Cindy gripped them tightly in her palm. She was certain she’d have notch impressions and indentations when she finally released them.

“Yeah, maybe I should.”

An awkward silence ensued until Pete mercifully decided to end it. “So, I was wondering if you knew who Lindsay was seeing. She said something about dating a woman.” He chuckled nervously. “I hadn’t realized she was into girls.”

“Me either,” said Cindy truthfully, but was she ever so grateful that she’d been wrong.

“So any ideas?”

“Um, no, not really. Lindsay doesn’t share everything with the club.”

“Club?” asked Pete, tilting his head in question. “She’s joined a club, too?”

Cindy let out a shaky laugh. “No, it’s just something I refer to on occasion.”

“Ah, okay,” said Pete as he glanced toward the exit ramp. “Listen, I don’t want to keep you. I just thought you could give me a heads-up with Lindsay. I’m kind of flying blind here.”

Cindy actually felt a twinge of sympathy for the man. After all, he’d not done anything wrong; he just wasn’t the one for Lindsay. She was sure of that. Just as sure as she’d known she and Lindsay were meant to be.

“Sorry, I can’t help.”

Pete sighed audibly. “That’s okay. It was worth a shot. I should probably go.”

Nodding his goodbye, he turned to leave, and Cindy quickly pivoted on her heel and started for her car. She had to get to Lindsay and warn her that Pete was back. So focused on her whirling thoughts, she almost didn’t hear her name being called.

“Hey, Cindy!” Pete waited patiently until the younger woman looked his way. Wearing a determined expression, he maintained direct eye contact for what seemed like an eternity, before he finally spoke in a cocksure manner.

“I’m going to get her back.” Grinning slyly, he turned and walked away.

Cindy stood motionless and stared at Pete’s back until he finally disappeared from view. Swallowing hard, she headed for her car, barely able to control her shaky hands long enough to hit the automatic door locks. She crawled into the safety of her vehicle and instinctively locked the doors, her focus centered directly on the garage wall in front of her as she replayed the last few minutes.

Every insecurity she’d ever had crawled out from its hiding place and stared her in the face as her mind conjured up various images of Lindsay when she’d been so enamored with Pete. The shy smiles and shrugs, the crooked grins and soft words that had been directed at him, not her, pushed their way through every memory of her own special moments with Lindsay and left in its wake a single burning question.

Would Lindsay take him back?

FADE TO BLACK

Chelsey

HOLY BIBLE

LEAP OF FAITH



Leap of Faith
By Demeter

The call came over the police scanner just when they were about to head back to the station.

"3200 block of Sacramento Street with California tag 3-6-2-Mary-Whiskey-Bravo on a blue Chevy truck possible 102."

Lindsay groaned at the description given by the officer. "Don't you just love those." A drunk driver. Nothing she really wanted to deal with at the end of a day like this. One murderer caught, the one who had inspired him, far more dangerous and unpredictable, still out there. Didn't she qualify just for a small break? High hopes, weren't they, because they were too damn close to the location of that vehicle.

"10-4, 141," the dispatcher acknowledged .

Just maybe, this was ending as a regular traffic stop. They should be so lucky.

"Headquarters, the vehicle is not stopping." Or not. "We're heading east bound on Sacramento Street."

"Unit close to back," came the dispatcher's voice.

"Unit 312 is enroute," Jacobi responded calmly. They were now on Washington Street, parallel to Sacramento. The next corner would be Leavenworth, the most likely way for the evasive driver to go. With a little luck, they could cut him off there.

Lindsay winced a bit as they sped around the corner. "Just whatever you do, remember this is my car."

"Always, partner."

"And try not to hit that--"

It was Jacobi's turn to wince.

"Trashcan."

"10-4, 312. Headquarters will have Code 5 on channel one," the dispatcher informed other units to stay out of the communication.

"Suspect vehicle now northbound on Leavenworth Street," the officer driving unit 141 updated.

"312, I'm southbound on Leavenworth Street," Jacobi returned.

Only moments later, they could see the vehicle in question, barely under the driver's control who was going way too fast, approaching head-on. Behind them, a police cruiser rounded the corner. 141. Nowhere left to go.

Could be said for either of us, Lindsay thought uneasily. She trusted Jacobi. He was a good driver. It was that person in the car coming towards them who was unpredictable.

"I like this car, Jacobi. I don't want to replace--"

At the very last moment, the other driver yanked the steering wheel to the side, slamming his car straight into the corner of a brick wall. Everything happened in the span of minutes; it was a near miracle no other cars were involved.

"Headquarters, we have a 518, 518 at Clay and Leavenworth, we need fire and medics..."

Jacobi hit the brakes, and they both stepped outside, their service weapons drawn. It didn't look like anyone would be able to run from a scene like this, but stranger things had happened.

The driver's side had been smashed together by the impact with the unforgiving brick wall; the driver lay slumped over in his seat, his face a bloody mess. Jacobi, who had reached inside to feel for a pulse, just shook his head.

In the passenger's seat sat a young woman. Her blonde hair was matted with blood, her eyes closed, but the small, pain-filled moan alerted them to the fact that she was still alive.

"Miss? Can you hear me?"

Lindsay leaned closer, almost gagging from the overpowering smell of blood, realizing the woman was not only injured, she was also heavily pregnant. *Oh no.* She yanked at the door handle, not very surprised when it didn't give right away. She tried harder, only vaguely aware of Jacobi running back to her car to update the dispatcher on the situation.

The smells of gasoline and smoke were a dead giveaway that they probably wouldn't have enough time to wait until the firemen arrived. Lindsay gave the door another, desperate pull, the sting of breaking fingernails barely registering, as the door finally opened.

It was tricky; she didn't know what injuries the woman had, and if she was making it any worse moving her. With the smells growing stronger though, it was clear that waiting would dissipate any chance she had.

Carefully, Lindsay removed the seatbelt, startled when she realized the woman's eyes were open, watching her intently.

"I think I can move," she said, tears running down her face from both pain and fear. She seemed to fully understand the seriousness of her situation. "Just whatever you do, please help my child. Please."

She was able to stand, even walk with support, but taking in her dress that was blood-soaked in the front down to her legs, it was sadly clear to Lindsay that this hope would be crushed soon. It took a lot less than a severe car accident to miscarry.

Just how did that happen?

One moment, she had half-joked about Jacobi nearly hitting the trashcan sitting haphazardly on the edge of the sidewalk, the next her hands were a deep, wet red from the blood of a woman who was begging her to save her child.

"It'll be okay," she said, almost choking on the lie, even as they stumbled for cover behind the sector car, a couple of seconds before the Chevy's tank blew up.

She shielded the woman with her own body best she could, feeling blood soak her own shirt. Drawing back, Lindsay could see the woman's eyes starting to glaze over, but her fingers gripped Lindsay's with surprising strength. "Promise me," she whispered.

"Come on, stay with me here!"

Her grip loosened.

"I promise!"

The woman was already unconscious, though, but now the paramedics took over. Lindsay closed her eyes for a second, then she pushed herself up from the ground just in time to see Jacobi come over.

"They got the guy out before it blew up, so -- Jesus!" he exclaimed.

She looked down at herself and winced. Not a pretty sight to behold. "It's not mine."

"You okay?"

"I said it's not--"

He gave her a 'humor me' look, and Lindsay shrugged, acknowledging he wasn't talking about any physical injuries any longer. "I will be once I am out of these clothes. Really," she added, slightly impatient.

She would be. This wasn't even their case. Tom wouldn't come knocking on her door tonight, and she wouldn't be crazy enough to -- the thought seemed so absurd these days that it made her smile, utterly inappropriate at the moment, but Jacobi had caught on anyway.

"Just make sure she doesn't see you like this," he said.

Lindsay clapped him on the shoulder, then winced again at the feel of the wet, sticky fabric moving against her bare skin. "Thanks for the advice, partner."

He smiled to himself as he listened to the latest codes crackling over the police scanner. One dead, the woman severely injured. They had both sinned alright, even though he couldn't care less if they'd repented or not. They weren't among the chosen ones, but a mere distraction.

It had worked better than he could have imagined.

It was a fine coincidence to have Inspector Lindsay Boxer on the scene, the one who shared a bed with the reporter. Surprising that she wasn't here, but she was bound to be busy with another case, another story of hers. *The Hallelujah Man*.

He was going to get to know them better, both of them, but there was time. He turned off the police scanner and left the room. There was a lot to prepare for Judgment Day.

Act One

There were really no coincidences in life, just good timing and bad timing, Cindy thought as she caught Scott's smug smile at her. At 7:30 in the morning, here in the conference room, she couldn't have cared less about the office grapevine and his too-obvious attempts to steal one of her most important stories from under her. Since she'd been given primary on the Hallelujah Man, he was under pressure, and they both knew it.

Cindy wasn't worried about him, though. Whatever connection he had to the New Faith, a religious group who had gotten headlines when one of their members was killed in a pursuit with the police, she had a better one. Cindy was sure of that.

So far, New Faith was under close observation by Children's Services. Unlike most religious groups, they were eclectic, open to members of all faiths. Less open were their rules and guidelines for the lives of the women and men they took under their wing. While their doctrine and conservative propaganda was certainly enough to attract the interest of someone like the Hallelujah Man, it hadn't been said out loud yet.

It was only a matter of time, though.

New Faith was relatively new, but had attracted nearly a thousand members out in Arizona where they had started, two more groups on the East coast, and if their website was to be believed, two more in Europe.

Cindy had done her homework, even if her mind had been on other things lately. The leader, Michael Beaumont, was ex-army with a degree in biology and chemistry. He'd served in the Middle East for nearly six years, came back with the claim that God had told him to build the New Faith. Not a few believed him.

He had moved to San Francisco three months ago, leaving his longtime friend Gideon Ralph in charge of the Arizona compound.

Now the Register was going to run a story on them. If there was any connection to the Hallelujah Man, small as it might be, it would be Cindy's anyway. But she had one more ace up her sleeve.

"The FBI is now looking into them, but not just because of their potential for another Waco. Scott has something that seems to be related to your story, Thomas."

Cindy barely refrained herself from rolling her eyes. Boss-speak for 'if you haven't got something better, it might not be your story much longer.'

She wasn't much concerned, and she had a bunch of emails in her inbox, starting months ago, to keep her relaxed about this subject. "So?" she just said, and Scott's grin brought the 'cat that got the canary' analogy to mind.

"They ordered a lot of new Bibles from a local store. One from that order ended up in Christian Blake's fridge."

Cindy sat up straighter. That was indeed a surprise. Not the only secret kept from her, was it? She couldn't dwell on that now, though.

"I know an ex-member who was with them at the time," Scott continued. "He's willing to give me an exclusive."

Cindy smiled sweetly back at him. Bad timing for all those fears acting up inside of her; the thoughts that had kept her awake nearly all of last night and made her want to cry even now.

However, good timing for her career.

"I've got something better," she said. "I know a way inside."

The night before...

Lindsay pulled her front door closed behind her, so tired she barely took in her surroundings. Lost in thought, she shook her head at the man they'd caught, a murderer trying to imitate a serial killer's M.O. and failing so badly on all counts.

If only all criminals were that stupid... if only Hallelujah Man was. However, he had yet to make his cardinal mistake, the one that would make them catch him. They had gotten closer, though. No way the creep would count down to seven.

Blake, Dellan, Martin, Watkins. She didn't need a room full of articles and gruesome crime scene photographs to bring these names home with her.

In between, the thought of Beatrice Lazar crept into her mind just as unbidden, her desperate plea to save her child. No matter how much the girls had reassured her that there was nothing more she could have done to help the woman, a tiny sliver of pain remained. The feeling of failure. Because it had already been there, and Lindsay wasn't quite sure if it would ever go away... but she didn't want to think about it tonight.

One step into the living room, she nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw the man sitting on the couch.

He was smiling at her, as if nothing was wrong at all. Also, he'd brought a bouquet of white roses, just like that first time, and put it into a vase on the coffee table.

Too sure of yourself, aren't you? She'd felt sympathy towards him, not so long ago, because Lindsay knew what it was like to be the one who was left behind. Now, she only felt anger.

"Pete! What the hell are you doing here?"

Lindsay had come home with the hope of having a late dinner with Cindy, talk shop a little, then cuddle up next to her and fall into a sleep not interrupted for the next eight hours, blessed oblivion. If there was anything she didn't need tonight, it was the conversation she was sure was going to follow.

She wanted Pete out of the apartment, before Cindy arrived. She wanted him out of her life, but as it seemed, that wasn't as easily accomplished as she'd thought it would be.

His smile widened, as he ignored her obvious irritation. "Can't I come to see the woman I love? We haven't seen each other in months."

Oh, that was rich. "I'd call it breaking and entering," she said dryly.

"It isn't. I've still got the keys for your apartment," he pointed out.

Damn, Lindsay thought. She'd forgotten that. *Careless*. She let herself be pulled into a hug simply because she was too tired to argue, but backed out of it rapidly when his hands started to wander.

"That's right. I'd like them back if you don't mind." Lindsay slumped into the armchair, feeling even more exhausted than she had just a moment ago, if that was possible.

"I thought we were clear on this." She noticed that Martha was very quietly growling, the way she used to do when she didn't agree to a visitor. Then again, Lindsay thought wryly, she had had that same growl for Tom, the night no one had ever talked about. Martha just didn't like men very much, except for Jacobi.

Martha loved Cindy even when she was the reason Martha had to sleep on the couch a lot lately. That thought made Lindsay want to smile, but she caught herself in time.

"I know we talked," Pete said, sounding calm and sensible, even though his words suggested the opposite. "I can't accept it. I want you back, Lindsay, and I'm willing to fight for you."

"That's... amazing. It's just that... I'm sorry. I hadn't planned this, but you know that I'm with someone else now. I guess we just weren't meant to be." All else was literally none of his business.

"I think you're wrong," he said quietly. "You don't really mean it. I believe you're just confused at the moment, with that girl, whoever she is. I'm patient, you know. I can wait until you see it, too."

"Never gonna happen. I think you'd better go." If the words had come out somewhat harshly, Lindsay couldn't bring herself to regret it. There was something about his tone that she didn't like, and that was seriously testing her patience. Sure, breaking up in a video conference hadn't been the most sensitive thing, but there had been no better alternative. At least she'd done it face to face, kind of.

Pete's mistake if he had to come all the way here to second-guess her.

He stood up, still wearing that friendly, cordial expression. Lindsay followed him to the door, and they said goodbye.

It wasn't until an instant later that she realized he still hadn't given her the keys back. With a curse, Lindsay yanked the door open, startling Martha, and hurried down the stairs. "Hey, wait!"

Pete turned on the stairs, returning to meet her on the porch, the smile reaching all the way to his eyes.

"Keys," Lindsay reminded him, utterly blindsided when he pulled her close and kissed her. Anger flared hotly within her at his complete lack of listening to anything she'd said. She pushed him back. Firmly.

He answered her glare with another of those smiles she had once been excited to see. "See you around, Lindsay. And remember - we were made for each other."

Just for a split-second, she had seen something else in his usually kind eyes. Disbelief? Ire? But it was gone just as quickly, replaced by friendly, unshakeable Pete, who handed her the keys without any further argument.

Back in the apartment, she told Martha, "Now, that was weird." The dog barked once in agreement. Shaking her head, Lindsay pulled the front door closed, wondering why Cindy wasn't here yet. She'd just grab a quick shower and then call her.

On a night like this, Lindsay just wanted to make sure that she was alright. That, and after Pete's strange visit, she really longed to see her.

There was no way in hell this day could get any worse.

Up until this moment, Cindy hadn't even been sure what had spooked her most: Pete appearing literally out of nowhere, or the utter conviction, arrogance, he carried about himself. Something about too-good-to-be-true Mr. Scone Boy Pete had seriously freaked her out when she'd run into him in the parking garage with no one else around. He'd been nothing if not the perfect gentleman, apologizing and all, but somehow his idea to enlist her help in winning Lindsay back had shaken her even more.

She'd been driving too fast, giggling at the idea of having to confess to Lindsay that she'd gotten a ticket, then nearly cried. Cindy wanted to be with her badly, to be reassured that Pete's plans were nothing but his own private illusion.

About ten minutes ago, Cindy had parked Maggie a bit of a distance from Lindsay's apartment, for the lack of a better spot. It hadn't saved her from witnessing the scene on the porch. Her heart clenched painfully as she flashed back on it again: Pete had already been there. Lindsay calling something she couldn't understand from that far, calling him *back*, and they had *kissed*.

Cindy had sat and stared in mute shock, literally stunned into immobility.

When her cell phone rang only a couple of minutes later, and the caller ID showed Lindsay's number, the spell broke. She punched the steering wheel hard, seconds ticking by until the pain registered with her - outside and inside.

The tears finally came.

When Cindy finally answered her phone, Lindsay's relief was so profound she nearly snapped at her: "Where are you?" The memory of Officer Graham wanting to lead Cindy back onto the 'right path' was still too vivid. Among others, that, she figured, gave her right and reason to be cautious.

There was a small pause, some static, and then Cindy said, "Just a block away. I'll be there in a few."

"Good. I brought that pizza. It's still warm... I think."

Cindy chuckled. "I'll hurry." The attempt at humor aside, she sounded just as tired as Lindsay felt. Figures. She'd been working nearly the same hours as they'd been, closing in on the murderer of

Charles Moore, not to mention the HM case. "Please do. I've got plans for you," she whispered. Innocent as they were and involving mostly sleep, they were plans all the same. Lindsay loved how a comment like this could sometimes get Cindy all flustered and blushing, or on other occasions, evoke a reply in kind, but it seemed like tonight she was too tired for either, so Lindsay just let it go.

"Drive carefully," she said softly. "I love you."

It wasn't good timing with the Hallelujah Man still out there, but then again, she wouldn't let her life revolve around another serial killer for years to come, wouldn't let him kill another relationship she believed in. Maybe with the copycat amateur behind bars, she could beg a few days off, and they could just go... somewhere. It didn't really matter as long as it was far away from the demands of their jobs, just the two of them, so she could prove to Cindy that she mattered more than anything.

When it came down to it, she mattered more than any case, and that was as big a commitment as Lindsay had ever made before.

Since she had asked Cindy to help her take down the pictures from the attic, they were certainly clear on the subject.

Cindy let herself into the apartment silently, but Martha happily pounding her tail on the floor in anticipation of her favorite visitor had obviously alerted Lindsay to her arrival.

She stood by the door for a moment, the inner movie playing, scene by scene: Her leaving the Register, running into Pete, until just a moment ago when she thought she had calmed down enough not to give herself away. Jealousy, fear and anger finally melting away as she stepped into Lindsay's arms, holding on *tight*.

"Whoa, I'm happy to see you too," Lindsay said with just a hint of teasing. Fresh from the shower, the familiar scent of black currant and vanilla wafted from her still wet hair. Her hands came up to cup Cindy's face, then she kissed her softly, pushing the doubts further away. Just not all of them.

How long has Pete been in San Francisco? And, were you going to tell me about it, or is it just not that important?

The questions stayed in the back of her mind, and Cindy nearly groaned in frustration at her inability to give voice to them. There she'd thought the Hallelujah Man was their biggest problem, the one obstacle that could make them stumble.

Cindy was willing to give Lindsay the benefit of doubt, though. Pete had seriously underestimated her if he really thought she'd give up that easily. Help him? *In your dreams.*

"I hope so. You promised dinner?"

There was just the slightest hesitation on Lindsay's part to let go, and Cindy was determined to see it as a good sign.

They had sat down to eat in the kitchen, ending up throwing half of the pizza away. Lindsay figured

they were both simply too exhausted. Cindy claimed she still had some work to do even though her article on the copycat was done, while Lindsay spared a thought for the man who wasn't a religious nut, but an abusive ex who had cost a life and wrecked others nonetheless. Not unlike the guy who had died in the accident today, if you thought about it. There hadn't really been a good moment to talk about it yet, and maybe it was better not to bring it up at all. Leave it in the past. Just like Pete Raynor.

She frowned as she gazed at the used dishes, the thought of doing them now holding absolutely no appeal. "Let's leave them," she suggested, reaching out briefly for her fingers to brush Cindy's before she got up.

"Sure." Cindy smiled, but she looked pale in the kitchen light, shadows under her eyes.

She sat in the same spot, intently staring at the screen of her laptop when Lindsay returned a few minutes later, waiting in the doorway. "You coming?"

Cindy seemed almost startled, but then she cast Lindsay an apologetic glance. "I'm almost done. Soon, okay?"

Lindsay walked back into the kitchen to stand behind her, bending to drop a kiss on her neck. "Okay. Don't stay up too long."

She'd hoped for some wise-crack like 'Yes, mom', but Cindy just gave her a tired smile.

Secrets. Cindy had some of her own. Not regarding their relationship, granted, and they wouldn't be so secret anymore by tomorrow, but still. She'd almost jumped out of her skin when Lindsay had come back and nearly seen what was on the screen, no article, but the email she'd been typing in answer to the many she'd gotten lately.

Today, or tomorrow, she could just tell that Lindsay wouldn't be happy about it. The meeting she had with her boss tomorrow would bring the final decision, but there weren't that many possible outcomes for this. Cindy clicked on 'Send', trying to keep at bay the fear that she'd just made a big mistake. Was it really a smart decision to leave with Pete hanging around?

She remained restless, waiting for the light to go out in the bedroom, did the dishes next - supposing nothing short of an earthquake would wake Lindsay from her sleep now. There was nothing left to do then, and Cindy aimlessly wandered around the apartment, from the kitchen to the living room, and back again.

Martha was watching her intently.

Cindy stood by the window, gazing out into the night, wondering if he was out there, the Hallelujah Man, watching them, laughing at them. Despising them, because they couldn't see anything in him but a sick psychopath, not God's tool as he believed himself to be.

It was only one of too many subjects weighing on her mind.

She turned her back to the window, starting at the sight of what she could only think of as an insult.

Her first impulse was to rush into the bedroom, shake Lindsay awake and ask her what the hell this

was supposed to be. She didn't. Cindy kept standing in the same spot until her breathing calmed, practicing breathing exercises she'd learned in her Yoga class - *letting go*. The hell she was letting go, but this would have to wait.

A small bouquet of white roses. Cindy didn't assume it had been left behind by any serial killer - or stalker. They usually engaged in a bit more grandeur. This was more the style of someone who thought he'd already arrived where he wanted to be.

Screw you, she thought, the rudeness oddly satisfying. She wouldn't hesitate to say it to his face, the next time they met, which hopefully happened... never.

Why had Lindsay kept the flowers? Of course, she had been nearly asleep on her feet. Carelessness?

The conflicting thoughts didn't leave, not in the time she spent in the bathroom, staring at her still somewhat shell-shocked expression in the mirror, not when she went into the bedroom without turning a light on, slipping under the covers next to Lindsay.

She scooted close, laying an arm around Lindsay's waist, holding her. No way, she wouldn't let go of her, serial killer obsessions and all. Never in her life had she loved anybody like this. The ego of a man who'd known Lindsay for two weeks just didn't count in comparison. Her resolve and the close contact were calming her a little, but Cindy already knew that sleep wouldn't come for a long time.

Present

Jill stared at the mess on her desk with a sense of trepidation. Could it really be only Tuesday morning?

The case of Allan Pierce should have been cut and dry; he'd stolen a car, forced his pregnant ex-girlfriend to accompany him on the ride during which he'd managed to cause considerable damage to property. In the resulting pursuit by the police, he'd eventually wrecked the car. Pierce was killed, Beatrice Lazar had a miscarriage and barely survived the accident. On top of it all, it was found that Pierce had been drinking.

Cut and dry, right? Only that Lazar had retracted her statement that Pierce had abducted her; according to her, it was all one big misunderstanding resulting in the death of her baby and the father.

Adding fuel to the fire was the fact that both Lazar and Pierce were members of a religious commune just outside of San Francisco that was claiming foul play by the system whenever Children's Services knocked on their door.

Jill sighed, reaching for the coffee mug, knowing the contents had long gone cold. She wondered how Lindsay was holding up, as that case was obviously bringing up some sad memories - *again*, though this time she felt assured that her friend would find less dysfunctional ways to deal with them.

Beatrice, however, was now looking into suing the SFPD. Not that she had the money, so there was most likely someone else behind that plan, but the press would be interested in the case anyway.

After a short rap against the glass, the door was opened, and she looked up to see Cindy standing in the doorway. "Speak of the devil," Jill said, smiling, the sight of her friend lifting her spirits.

"Do you have a minute?" Cindy didn't comment on the greeting.

"Honestly? No, but I love you for interrupting this, even more so for the coffee you brought, so come on in."

Cindy's smile was hesitant, and a closer look revealed her pale complexion and bloodshot eyes. She closed the door behind her and took a seat.

"You look worse than I feel this morning. What happened?" Jill asked quietly. There was some more hesitation, but then Cindy shook her head as if confirming to herself that she was not going to talk about whatever was bothering her.

"I'm preparing for an assignment," she said instead, "and I was hoping you could tell me anything I might need to know about New Faith, before I go to join them."

Now Jill sat up straighter. "New Faith? Does Lindsay know about this?"

Cindy shrugged. "The meeting was this morning, and she was still asleep when I left. So I came here first."

Jill took a moment to absorb what she had just said - and what had been left unsaid, but remained between the lines. They had all seen each other only yesterday, after the arrest of one of the world's most stupid murderers who, unfortunately, had not been the Hallelujah Man. Jill hadn't picked up anything unusual from either Lindsay or Cindy, nothing that suggested this tension. Trouble in paradise?

"Okay, what do you need? These people are all over my desk anyway, since Lazar decided the SFPD is to blame for the death of Pierce and her miscarriage."

Cindy gazed at the papers strewn all over Jill's desk, though she seemed uncharacteristically distracted. "Yes. I have three days, and I don't even know where to start. The contents of their websites are rather vague."

"How are you going in?" Jill asked, wondering what Lindsay would have to say about it. Hell, she didn't like it, but at times, they had to remind themselves that none of them really had a say in Cindy's work assignments.

"A source." Cindy shrugged. "She keeps telling me that they're just harmless people, open to anyone willing to leave their sins behind and serve God, but if that were all, the FBI wouldn't be looking into them, would they?"

"Hardly. Why don't we meet tonight and I'll see what I can give you on them?"

"That would be great. You know, I'm wondering if it's really just a coincidence - this group getting on the FBI's radar at the same time the Hallelujah Man shows up. Do they know something that we don't?"

Cindy seemed to expect her to have a theory there, but Jill could only draw a blank. Hadn't Lindsay said the trace regarding the Bible order had gone nowhere? "New Faith has gotten a great deal of

attention lately," she said thoughtfully. "Okay, now talk to me. What is it--"

She didn't get to finish the sentence, as Denise entered her office after knocking briefly. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were busy," she said with a smirk.

Jill barely refrained herself from sighing. Whatever was up with Cindy, she probably wouldn't get to hear it tonight at Papa Joe's with Lindsay around, and knowing Denise, there would be no opportunity to talk about it beforehand either.

"I need to go anyway," Cindy said quickly. "See you later."

Great timing.

Jill gave her boss a smile that did nothing to hide the displeasure at the interruption. "So, what can I do for you?"

Reaching out blindly, Lindsay's hand encountered soft fur, making her snap her eyes open and sit upright in bed. Martha yawned and settled down again.

"Ah, no, haven't we agreed that this wasn't such a good place for you to spend the night anymore?"

There was no reaction from her bedmate. "And if Cindy has to go to work early, that doesn't mean that rules are suspended," Lindsay lectured on, well aware that her words fell on deaf dog ears. She felt too good to care after a good night's sleep, deep and dreamless, but with the lingering sensation of Cindy's embrace. It had proven to be more healing than any talk about yesterday's incident could have been.

A quick check told her that Cindy had filled the coffeemaker before she went. "I love you," Lindsay murmured, inhaling the aroma of freshly ground beans. While the coffee was brewing, she went into the living room barefoot, stopping at the threshold.

At that moment, Lindsay had a hard time figuring out whom she was more mad at - Pete for being that insolent, getting a vase from the cupboard and arranging the flowers in it as though they had still been lovers, or herself, for forgetting to dispose of them. They were beautiful, granted, but she didn't want this reminder of their brief and ill-fated relationship, and she certainly hoped that--

The thought left her literally winded for an instant. Even if Cindy had seen them, she couldn't have known who they were from, could she? It had been a mistake, one that Lindsay didn't want to discuss any longer with anyone, least of all with Cindy, and God forbid, Pete himself.

She fed Martha and made herself breakfast, but her good mood was gone as she recalled yesterday's unexpected visit. Hopefully the last one - if he showed up again like this, she'd go to Jill for a restraining order.

Before she left for work, Lindsay threw the bouquet into the garbage, thinking ruefully that there was a metaphor in it somewhere - something allegedly beautiful turned awry.

She closed the lid of the can resolutely. There wasn't really time to dwell on past mistakes and regret. The copycat was behind bars now, but it was all the more a reminder of the serial killer who was still out there. She had a job to do. The time-out was over.

Cindy was last to arrive at Papa Joe's, and given the conversation they'd had this morning, Jill suspected it had been on purpose, if this was the first time Lindsay was going to hear about her plans. This wasn't going to be easy... and Jill felt torn about it already. So far, the pursuit all over the city ending with Pierce's death was the most spectacular incident associated with New Faith, but there were other rumors that didn't die down.

The suspicion remained when a group like this cut itself off from the outside world. Extremist ideas always began simmering behind closed doors. And there were many children on the compound, too.

Uneasy with these thoughts, Jill directed her attention back to Cindy. She was hurried and breathless, but lacking the usual bounce to her step. Jill noticed that Lindsay was giving her worried sideways glances, but she seemed clueless.

"I guess you've waited for me to make the big revelation," Cindy began after ordering a coffee.

Jill just nodded, trying not to be aware of Claire's and Lindsay's questioning gazes.

"Alright then. I've got a new assignment this morning... and it will require me to go away for two weeks." Cindy looked up at Jill briefly, then went back to studying the tabletop. "The Register is running a story on New Faith. I know someone who can take me inside."

Lindsay was silent, which could never be a good sign, her face unreadable, though this had to be a surprise for her.

"Why them?" asked Claire. "As far as I remember, they have been around here for quite some time, and they're by far not the only conservative group. What is different about them?"

"Well, you tell me. Why not start with the fact that they seem to use the same bookstore as someone else we all know?"

For long moments, there was an awkward silence in the wake of her question.

"It's not like we held something from you, Cindy. Not this time." Lindsay's words sounded honest, but they held a hint of regret, for sins of omission then and now, and for the fact that they'd probably cause her to lose the argument that was going to follow. "We looked into that Bible order, but there was nothing to suggest that there was a connection to the killer."

"You could have told me," Cindy insisted.

She wasn't entirely wrong about it. It had been months ago, the first and only time they had intentionally lied to her about inside information, but she hadn't forgotten. Jill thought that neither of them had. It was a barely healed wound, easily torn open.

"There was no point." The impatience was subtle, but noticeable to everyone who knew Lindsay. From the way Cindy's jaw tightened, she had noticed it, too.

"The truth is," Lindsay continued, "I don't think that the New Faith people are connected to our man in any way, however I do think that they are potentially dangerous, so I'd rather have you do your interview off their compound."

Cindy gave an unhappy laugh at that. "Not a chance. Scott is already breathing down my neck; I need more than just an interview. I need to find out how New Faith works from the inside, and I can. Remember the girl I knew in Heather's kindergarten class? Her mom became a member right after the shooting. She invited me."

Lindsay shook her head. "I don't like it. Do you even know who you're dealing with? Even if HM never set foot on their grounds, Beaumont, the guy who started New Faith, came here a few months ago from Arizona. They call him a *prophet*."

"I've been known to do research, Linz," Cindy said, a flash of heat in her voice. "Beaumont's got a degree in--"

"Biology," Lindsay cut in. "Worked for the army 'til 2003, then got *transformed* by his Faith. Cindy, there's absolutely no way you're going undercover in a group of potential terrorists."

"That is not for you to decide."

Jill winced, sharing a worried glance with Claire.

Lindsay tried to look annoyed, but didn't do a very good job to mask the raw hurt underneath. She had always tried her best to keep Cindy out of dangerous situations, but since they'd made the transition from friends to lovers, the obligation was even stronger. It didn't go unnoticed.

"I have to do this," Cindy continued, softer now. "And I'm going to need your help," she admitted.

Aware of the expectant looks on her, Lindsay murmured, "This is crazy."

Jill thought of the copies she had made while Denise was on her lunch break, and brought as promised. As for now, there was a lot of suspicion of New Faith. If any of this proved to be true, 'crazy' was a rather optimistic expression.

"Please."

That made Jill smile, because if Cindy used that look more often, it was easy to tell why Lindsay could hardly ever tell her 'no'. Resistance - futile. Indeed, you couldn't have missed the shift in Lindsay's composure, the relenting.

"I could talk to the cops who investigated the death of Allan Pierce," she offered finally. "There must be a reason why Lazar suddenly turned around and now wants to sue the department. I bet someone higher up gave her the tip, maybe Beaumont himself."

Jill rolled her eyes. "There's no way she could ever win such a case. It could be a distraction. It sure causes our office a lot of work."

"I can go over Pierce's autopsy report, see if there's anything unusual." Claire's eyes met hers for a moment, questioningly, and Jill shook her head in response. *I don't know what's up with them either.*

"Thanks." Cindy finally smiled, albeit with the hesitation Jill had seen on her all day.

"And I guess I can give you some advice on going... undercover." Lindsay was clearly not okay

with this, but she made an attempt at least.

"Too much information." Claire smirked.

"Hey, I didn't mean..." Lindsay protested.

It had the desired effect though, making everyone laugh for the first time since they'd arrived here. Jill couldn't help but feel the sentiment would be short-lived for all of them. There was a variety of reasons for investigating New Faith, and not a single reason that was not depressing in itself.

The amount of danger - hard to gauge.

She finally produced the manila folder she'd brought with her. "And that's what you get from me."

"Please, don't go."

"What?" Cindy couldn't think of anything more intelligent to say. It could have been the absurdity of the statement, or maybe just the fact that her knees were weak from the frantic way they'd started making out here up against the door of Lindsay's apartment the moment they'd come in.

"Say you can't make it. You have your hands full with HM anyway. For once, let someone else have the story, and let's disappear for a week."

Cindy looked up at Lindsay, searching her face in the near dark. Trying to form any rational thought with Lindsay's hands all over her. She couldn't be serious about this, could she? Not Lindsay, who had given a serial killer's victims room in her own home. Was doing it again, if they were all honest, just not in the extreme graphic way it had happened last time.

"It's only a couple of weeks. Maybe less. You know I can't turn down that assignment, or Scott gets it. What's going on? You wouldn't drop everything in the middle of an investigation just to go on a vacation with me."

"You don't get it." If Lindsay was frustrated with the situation, she wasn't the only one.

"Maybe I don't. Because you'd never turn down a case just because I'd ask you to. Hell, I'd know better than to ask." Cindy flinched at the anger in her voice; worse, she knew where it was coming from, and it had nothing to do with their current argument.

She could tell that her words had hit home, because Lindsay had gone very still, maybe reminiscing on the moments they'd spent up in her attic. She didn't really have a lot of talking room where this subject was concerned.

"I'm sorry. I know you worry, but this is not a crazy risk I'm taking. It's plain work. I don't go, someone else will. How would you feel about the Hallelujah Man case being taken away from you?"

She half expected Lindsay to snort at her reasoning, but her lover's reaction was a different one.

"I have a bad feeling about this. They are... up to something." Subtly, she stepped a bit closer into Cindy's personal space, more seeking comfort than being demanding.

"Yeah, probably. Retrieving the money of their wealthier members."

"Your friend isn't all that wealthy. It can't be that alone."

"They are annoyingly conservative and probably condemning what we're doing. Right now." Sensing that Lindsay was about to give in, Cindy pulled her closer, sliding her hands under her shirt.

"The perfect environment for someone who thinks of himself a tool of God to punish the sinners. If not HM, then maybe another crazed individual."

Lindsay's voice had gone darker with the slight diversion of her attention. Though neither of them was exactly backing down, they both knew that this was a done deal; Cindy would go, and it only intensified the desperate pull between them.

"Then this will be my last opportunity to sin in a while."

She couldn't exactly say if Lindsay did it on purpose, a last attempt to hold her back, but Cindy didn't feel capable or even interested in analyzing it now.

As Lindsay bent to kiss her neck, she let the door support her, letting her head fall back. The infinite tenderness of the hands caressing her, starting to undress, warm fingers dancing over the skin revealed... Cindy was tempted. So very tempted. One entire week alone with Lindsay, a chance to leave the city and their jobs behind, it was indeed a heavenly prospect.

She also knew that as long as the Hallelujah Man was still out there, it wouldn't happen.

They might not have a lot of time, but they had tonight, and Cindy was determined to make the most of it. "We'll have that week," she said, her voice reduced to a breathless whisper. "No work, no cell phones, not even the club. Just us. Soon."

Sarah was thrilled that Cindy had finally decided to follow her invitation, and she gave Cindy instructions needed for her first days with New Faith, from clothes to wear, to introductory classes to take, to the shared work. New Faith owned farmland, and they were nearly self-sufficient. Depending on their qualifications, NF members also taught or worked in administration.

Busy with all kinds of preparation, Cindy had hardly any time to obsess over the reason why she had accepted the assignment without even thinking, but it crept up on her at night. Despite the fact that Lindsay had been extra-attentive and gotten her inside material on New Faith that could have gotten her in a lot of trouble, or maybe because of it. She wondered how much of it was guilt.

And then, remembering that last email in her inbox, she felt guilty herself.

Lindsay had indeed tried her best to help, sought out the cops who'd been at the scene of Allan Pierce's death, although she'd made it clear she still wasn't happy about this endeavor. Half-joking, she had picked up the cuffs from the nightstand, metal glinting in the light of the little lamp as she let them dangle from her fingers.

"I wonder if there isn't any way to make you stay."

Cindy had frowned at her. "You're going kinky on me?" In another situation she might have appreciated it, and she couldn't deny the heat that idea sent coursing through her body, and the pleasant shiver at the imagined cool touch of metal against her wrists, fed by a very real memory.

"Really? You... don't have to do that."

"You don't have to break and enter."

She had pushed, because she'd wanted that story, and she'd wanted in on this extraordinary circle of successful, professional women - friends. As early as that, Lindsay had also made her way nervous for reasons completely unrelated to whatever charges she could possibly whip out, and they'd both known it. Lindsay had obviously enjoyed it.

"Then again, it could be worth a try." Cindy smiled invitingly.

"Another time, maybe," Lindsay said with a sigh, stretching out beside her, and they settled into a loose embrace. Who cared about the guy who lived a continent away anyway? "I'd let you, you know," Cindy whispered, enjoying that the suggestion made Lindsay shiver. Something to file away for later, after this temporary period of high collars, long skirts and pants, no heels, and wearing her hair in a braid.

"One more day, then."

"One more day," Cindy agreed, blushing at the blatant lie.

Lindsay slammed the newspaper on the table with such vigor that Martha cringed and cowered under said table.

"How could you!"

Martha whined softly, and the sound broke through the haze of anger and disappointment that had enveloped her ever since she had found Cindy's note. The past few days... she had almost forgotten what would come after this period of preparation, had completely forgotten about Pete's eerie visit.

There had been a time and date set for when Sarah would come to get Cindy to take her to the New Faith compound, and it was supposed to be in a little more than twenty-four hours. Lindsay had been dreading that moment, she remembered, as she was pacing in the living room, but she'd done her best to help Cindy prepare for the assignment, and also arrange her own work schedule so that they could spend as much time as possible together those last few days.

Now, Cindy was gone, one day early.

She had spent the night, like she had most nights recently, and stole away, leaving behind a note that said something about how she was sorry.

"Why the hell did she do that?"

Martha, who had finally dared to come out from under the table, gave her what seemed a thoughtful look. "Yeah," Lindsay sighed, as she sat down, picking up the note again. "I'm just worried about

her, you know?"

About us.

But that, she didn't even share with Martha.

Act 2

Sitting beside Sarah in her battered Volkswagen, Cindy tried to sort out her mixed emotions. Terrified, excited, regretful, and most of all, longing to be back cuddling up to Lindsay in her bed, but it just wasn't possible.

While Sarah had assured her it was just a thing of convenience to have her come a day early, Cindy was quite certain that this was a first test, where New Faith determined how strong your ties to the outside world were. If you made it past the first two weeks into the introductory year, very little contact was allowed.

She had bought an extra cell phone to give away, as private communication was said to be monitored and permitted only in case of emergency. Cindy was pretty sure that they wouldn't see it as such to keep Lindsay informed.

"I'm so glad you're finally here." Sarah turned to smile at her when she had to stop at a red light. "I was so worried about you."

"Really?" Prior to her unfortunate observations regarding Lindsay and Pete, Cindy didn't think she had much to worry about.

"You seemed so sad, especially when you wrote me that last email," Sarah said softly. "I think our place will be great for you, clear up the confusion. I know it did for me."

"Confusion about?"

Sarah's gaze was on the road again. "Some of the choices you made... I take it that's why you'd been changing your mind and wanted to learn more about New Faith."

Cindy was aware she was treading a fine line; inwardly, she wanted to roll her eyes at her formerly open-minded friend, but Sarah's behavior also worried her. It didn't matter now; she had to stay true to her persona. "Maybe," she admitted. Sarah had moved in with the New Faith people after the shooting at Mission Day School. Chelsea had never seen the men that had killed teachers and classmates of hers, because she'd been sick and picked up by Sarah earlier. Reason enough to be grateful, indeed.

"No one will judge you. If we hadn't made mistakes ourselves, we wouldn't be here. But you'd better not tell anyone that your girlfriend is cop."

If Sarah was aware of how she'd just contradicted herself, Cindy found no indication for it. "Why's that?"

"Because they murdered one of us. And it's not the first time they got away with it."

"Allan Pierce?"

"If I were you, once we're there, I wouldn't mention that name all too often either," Sarah said dryly, almost familiar again.

"Gotcha." Cindy leaned back in her seat, mentally filing away what she'd already learned. This was going to be interesting. She didn't know yet whether to be disappointed or relieved that none of these tidbits Sarah had told her between the lines showed any relation to the Hallelujah Man.

"Sorry, I'm late." The door fell shut behind a breathless Jill, and Claire noticed with some amusement her friend's obvious relief that there was no body on the table.

"Seems like you're not the only one. Any sign of the lovebirds?"

Jill smirked. "Haven't seen either of them this morning. Seems like they are *busy*," she sing-songed the last word.

"Yes, they are." Claire shook her head with a smile. "Getting Cindy ready for her assignment. Speaking of which, I found something in the Pierce autopsy report I'd like to share with you. Just waiting until they get here."

Thoughtful now, Jill continued, "I don't know if Cindy's assignment is a good idea. The whole situation with New Faith is...very murky. On the surface, they seem like the perfect law-abiding citizens, pay their taxes, no problems with Children's Services that we know of. Except they seem to think the police have it in for them wherever they go. They've filed numerous suits against police brutality in Arizona."

"Makes you wonder what's beneath it all," Claire summarized.

"I sure do."

They spun around at the sound of Lindsay's voice. Claire thought that her surprise was probably showing on her face just as clearly as it was on Jill's: Cindy was nowhere to be seen.

"Before you ask, Cindy left around 4 AM. Change of plans," Lindsay informed them curtly, making it clear that she considered that subject finished. "So what have you got, Claire?"

Claire had no intention of letting her off the hook so easily, but the information she had was priority even over her own curiosity. "You all know that Mr. Pierce was supposedly drunk when he drove off with Beatrice?"

"Yes." Jill made a disgusted face. "What was he thinking, getting behind the wheel with his girlfriend in the car when he was drunk?"

"Maybe he wasn't thinking too clearly at all. Alcohol wasn't all that was found in his blood."

"What else?" Lindsay definitely wasn't in the mood for small talk this morning.

"A neuroleptic drug called chlorpromazine hydrochloride, better known as Thorazine. It's used in the treatment of psychosis."

"The report didn't say anything about Pierce being psychotic."

Which certainly wasn't the reason for Lindsay's irritation. Claire was determined to find its cause right after they'd finished this conversation. "He probably wasn't. There's no evidence of longtime use, so here are several possibilities: He was only recently diagnosed. That kind of medication needs weeks to become fully effective, so it wouldn't be surprising if there were still symptoms, like, let's say, paranoia."

"He was also drunk," Jill reminded them. "Isn't it dangerous to mix alcohol with that kind of drug?"

"It sure is, and if those meds had been prescribed to him, his doctor would have most likely warned him. Which gave me an idea, so I asked a psychiatrist friend of mine, and he said it was possible."

Jill looked interested, Lindsay, like she was going to start tapping her fingers on the table anytime, so Claire decided to cut to the chase.

"If you are perfectly healthy and dosed with an antipsychotic drug, the opposite effect can occur. Especially in combination with alcohol."

"Someone wanted Pierce to freak out and get himself killed," Lindsay concluded.

"His death didn't seem to be accidental after all," Claire agreed. "Maybe his girlfriend can shed some light on this."

"Seems like she wants to shed light on anything but," Jill sighed. "What do you say we take this to the lunch table?" Her eyes met Claire's, and they silently agreed that there was more to be talked about over dinner than the news on Pierce.

Lindsay just resumed her silent brooding, which indicated nothing good.

"You're still thinking about Kyle Graham."

"Aren't you?" Lindsay shot back, and Claire had to admit it wasn't too far off; she did have the occasional nightmare about the day Graham, who thought that the Hallelujah Man was somebody to admire, had almost shot her.

"Sure, but this is different. If anything, it will make Cindy more careful."

"Right." Jill nodded. "She'll gather information, write her article, and we'll be back to hunting our current sicko sooner than you think. Linz, it's not like she's doing this on purpose. We're doing our job. Let her do hers."

Lindsay didn't look much consoled. "Since when do you get to be the voice of reason?" she said gruffly.

Claire smiled and squeezed her arm gently. "Since my sage advice obviously isn't enough. Come on, we'll keep you busy these two weeks. Count down the days with you. *Relax.*"

"Yeah. Like there's any reason to relax. Didn't we come here to discuss options on how to nicely ask

Lazar for another talk?"

Claire stole another look at Jill, the two of them silently agreeing that these were going to be two very long weeks.

Cindy was glad she'd had the coffee and bagel in the car with Sarah. She'd sat in the uncomfortable chair for nearly an hour, which was making her back hurt. Having been up for a while, she was tired and hungry, and she could practically feel her blood sugar creeping lower. Another test for sure, New Faith wasn't for wimps, but she wouldn't mind lunch anytime soon.

No such luck before she had her interview. It wouldn't be with Michael Beaumont, the leader himself. Sarah had told her that, at first, he had done all of them himself, but with the current size of the community and his growing responsibilities in turn, he couldn't do it all by himself anymore.

Finally, she was called into the office by a stern looking woman in her late forties. She introduced herself as Delia, no last name, and motioned for Cindy to take a seat in the worn leather chair in front of her desk.

"You have to understand that most of our members have come here via recommendation. There is a two-week orientation period which Sarah has certainly told you; after that, you and we both consider whether or not you stay for the introductory year."

"It seems like a peaceful place," Cindy said vaguely. "I could use some peace."

There was a flicker of scorn in the woman's eyes, and Cindy halfway expected her to say something, like, don't we all. Delia's disapproval had other reasons, though.

"Why did you choose New Faith? As you know, these two weeks are not a vacation. You are supposed to take a look inside yourself, and see how much you're willing to change. You'll also be given a task based on your skills."

"I want to do that, really. Change, I mean." Cindy wondered just how much Sarah had told the community about her and which aspects of her life a NF member would see necessary to change. Like, a relationship with another woman.

Before Delia could answer, the door swung open without any warning knock. The man walking inside didn't seem all that spectacular, the short clipped beard and glasses and the overall appearance of someone who wouldn't stand out in a crowd. The utter self-confidence he radiated, the way his interruption was accepted without any second thought, would have probably given him away - if Cindy hadn't seen his picture before.

"Delia, don't scare Ms. Thomas away, it's just the first morning," he said, smiling good-naturedly at Cindy as he extended his hand. "I am Michael."

"Cindy," she returned, trying not to act as blindsided as she unfortunately was. She hadn't counted on meeting him so soon - but now she was sure that it was, like her early departure, no coincidence. Sarah had to have told him some facts, such as her job, and the reason for her *confusion* - and he was bound to be curious about her.

"Nice to meet you, Cindy. Delia, why don't I finish Cindy's interview, and you go meet Zack? He

was looking for you."

While Delia kept a neutral face as she left the room, Cindy steeled herself, slipping further into the role of a woman who sought perspective and direction, and a change in her too-complicated life, like she had practiced for the past few days.

From what she knew about him, Michael Beaumont wasn't a man easy to fool.

"Hey," Lindsay said after knocking on the door frame. "You got a moment?"

Tom looked up, the frown on his face indicating that his read wasn't a pleasant one. "Linz. Come on in."

"I need to talk to Beatrice Lazar," she said without preamble. It didn't seem necessary with a case that practically had everyone in the department holding their breaths.

His frown deepened. "You said there was no connection between the New Faith people and the Hallelujah Man."

"Not that we know of. Claire just found something--"

"Wait a minute. Why did you have Claire looking into that? I'm thinking you have your hands full with another serial killer case. This pursuit gone bad is for me to worry about. Unfortunately."

"It might be more complex than we thought it was."

"No kidding." Tom gestured for her to sit down, and Lindsay did, albeit hesitantly. He sighed. "I know you pulled her from that car, but that doesn't make it your case. It's not a homicide either."

"This isn't about her losing the baby. And I'm not completely sure about the homicide yet." There was an awkward pause, and she hastily continued, before memories would arise that would be inappropriate to dwell on now. "I'm sure Beatrice knows a lot more than she let on in her first interview. And maybe we abandoned a possible relation to HM too early."

"Says who?" It didn't take Tom long to make the connection though. "I'll be the last one to deny that Cindy Thomas has been an asset to many of your cases, but if I were you, I'd do my best to keep her away from New Faith. Beaumont moving to San Francisco, Lazar, it's no coincidence. Whether that involves our killer or not, they're up to something. Soon."

The fact that he shared her assessment somehow made her feel even worse about Cindy's assignment, and she wondered if it was a good idea to tell him. "I think you're right, and this bogus lawsuit is connected to it. So let me talk to Beatrice."

Tom regarded her curiously with a hint of amusement. "Something else I should know?"

"No, why, I... I mean, no. There isn't." He'd been asking about the *case*, damn it. There was no reason to be sputtering like this.

He considered her request for a moment, then said, "This had better be good, Lindsay. Be diplomatic, don't let her get away with anything, and make her change her mind about the

Goddamned lawsuit."

"Will do," Lindsay said with an improvised salute which brought the predicted headshake from Tom. It wouldn't be easy to get through to the woman, but the sooner they did, the sooner Cindy could return home, and that was one hell of a motivation.

After the interview, Beaumont showed her around. The compound was much bigger than it appeared at first sight, with its school house, offices, living quarters and another building that housed the library, rooms where services were held and for meditation.

There was not much reason or motivation to deal with the world outside.

"I hear you've been working as a crime reporter. You must have seen some disturbing scenes."

Cindy shrugged, knowing that this question was all but casual. Nothing about this, the two of them walking together, talking, was. It was more a continuation of the interview. "Sometimes, but I guess so have you when you were in the army."

"Touché." He smiled. "You know we need to be careful; we want to offer our hospitality, but we also need to know to whom. I turned away from man-made authority. You know that we regard God, and the rules he gave us, as the highest authority - as I'm guessing that a young, educated woman like you would have taken the time to inform herself."

Oh, flattery. "Sarah invited me before to come, so I read your website," she admitted. "It sounded like an environment where one can truly find oneself." Cindy wisely did not mention that most of what she'd found on New Faith in internet forums and such uncannily reminded her of Kyle Graham, and an attitude that was everything but peaceful.

"So you don't want to work as a reporter anymore?"

"At the moment, I just don't know." Lies always came easily to Cindy with strangers she suspected of wrongdoing.

"Did you know that our publications are translated into eight languages, and read in more than twenty countries?"

Cindy hadn't known that, but the implied message sent a shiver down her spine. And New Faith was supposed to be just one of the smaller groups with a very narrow-minded interpretation of the term 'family', among other things. Sarah had once been proud to be a single mom, but now saw it as a result of earlier failures.

"That's... wow. Impressive," she said, and it wasn't faked a bit.

"We still need someone who oversees this department here in San Francisco, as our editor-in-chief here just left. From what Sarah told me about your qualifications... it's something I'd like you to think about in the next two weeks."

That was indeed an interesting offer considering the usual occupations of women in this community were in secretarial positions, teaching young children, or working in the kitchen. It came as no surprise, though, that Beaumont, New Faith's prophet, was a businessman, too.

Two weeks from now, Cindy hoped that she'd be back at home, her story written and published. "I will, thank you."

And before that, she'd go back to the library to take a look at those Bibles, one of which could have been in the Hallelujah Man's hands.

Beatrice Lazar didn't seem to have consulted her lawyer, because she came alone, ten minutes before the scheduled 10 AM. She sat in the interrogation room, nervously wringing her hands.

Lindsay could see none of the cold calculation she had expected of someone who planned to sue the hell out of the city knowing they didn't have a single chance. Lazar was extremely nervous, and failing in her attempt not to show it. Maybe there was a way to appeal to her common sense after all.

Maybe she had waited for this offer.

Leaving her place where she'd leaned against the wall, Lindsay took a seat opposite from the woman. "Ms. Lazar, thank you for coming. We have a few more questions regarding your accident."

Disdain flashed in her green eyes. "Which we all know wasn't an accident."

"Right. Allan Pierce abducted you and damn near killed you trying to escape from the police. His actions caused you to have a miscarriage."

There was no answer, but Lazar's lips tightened in a grim line, her eyes growing bright. Lindsay allowed herself a brief moment of empathy, the flicker of an ever-painful memory on her mind, then she pressed on. "Why don't you tell us what really happened that day?"

"That'll be for the court to decide."

"Do you want to know what I think?"

Beatrice shrugged in a way that was supposed to communicate that she couldn't care less. Again, her body language betrayed the attempt. Her foot tapping on the floor. Her hands, never still.

"I think you're scared. We've been told that you wanted to leave New Faith, probably Allan, and start over with the baby." It seemed like a valid theory given Beatrice's very first statement when she'd still been in the hospital, and hopefully enough to draw her out. "Allan was trouble. He drank. He was psychotic. He wanted to get you back to them, didn't he?"

Silence. Beatrice Lazar had gone deathly pale. "No," she said sharply, jumping to her feet. "No. It's a total fabrication by the police. I came here freely. I think it was a bad idea. Allan didn't do any of those things. New Faith doesn't allow drinking."

Lindsay waited until she'd reached the door, then she said, "But he did, and now someone's supposed to pay. Was it Michael Beaumont who told you to sue the PD?"

Lazar's head whipped around. This moment was on knife's edge; she would either cave or run. For

Cindy's sake, Lindsay couldn't afford the latter. "Who are you protecting?"

In the course of seconds, Lazar seemed to age. Her slow walk back to the table was that of someone who was carrying a heavy load. She sat back down, resting her face in her hands.

"You got it all wrong. Allan wasn't trying to bring me back to New Faith," she said finally. "He was trying to get me out." Tears started welling up in her eyes. She began to sob.

"What the hell is so *new* about you anyway?" Cindy mumbled to herself. Despite Beaumont's suspiciously generous job offer to a complete newcomer, her current occupation was to help Delia mail out brochures to subscribers from just about every corner of the world. Disturbing.

Delia looked up from the letter she was typing. "Excuse me?"

"Just talking to myself." She gave what was hopefully a charming smile, and they both returned to their tasks. Cindy had skimmed over the content of the leaflets and flyers which were, if a bit more detailed, pretty much what you'd expect from every conservative religious group; nothing to determine what was so special about the New Faith. Or, new.

She was bored and annoyed. She'd also woken up with a headache and sore throat this morning, the mundane task no real distraction from either. For the first time, she wondered if her boss, whose instincts were usually right on the money, had been wrong about the story.

She'd been hurt to find out that Lindsay hadn't told her about the Bible order, but if Cindy was honest, that wasn't what it was all about. Bad timing, the moment when she'd found out about it, her frustration fed from a different source.

Cindy wondered what Pete might be up to while she was cooped up in here. Or Scott, for that matter. Neither could be any good.

She bent down to get another stack of flyers from the box on the floor, letting them fall with a pained yelp when her back protested.

Delia jumped up from behind her desk. Cindy tried to breathe through the sudden pain, expecting the other woman to yell at her, but it didn't happen. Instead, Delia made her sit in the other chair, gathering the fallen papers. *'We choose our sins'*.

"Don't you worry," she said softly. "You can find the right path. I know. I've been there."

Cindy thought of Officer Graham and his attempts to 'help' her with exactly that. She shivered. "I hope so."

Nearly two hours later, Lindsay was getting increasingly frustrated. It wasn't like Lazar hadn't been telling her story, about her and Pierce, an ex-New Faith member whom she had met a year ago. Lazar had just moved to San Francisco from the Arizona compound, and Pierce had tried to warn her early on, but she didn't want to listen to him.

She had no idea about the antipsychotic drugs, but she remembered that there had been something

off about him. She didn't want to get into the car with him, because he had been drinking.

There was more, though, Lindsay was sure of it, but she couldn't seem to find the right angle to get there.

A soft knock on the door preceded Jill coming into the room, which had Lindsay surprised and relieved in equal parts. She needed a break, because while Lazar's story sure was a heartbreaker, she had given her nothing that could help them with understanding what the real deal about New Faith was.

Jill introduced herself to Beatrice Lazar, then turned to Lindsay with a smile that showed a hint of triumph, enough to be hopeful. "Say you've got something for me to bring this to an end."

"You bet," Jill whispered back. "Do you mind?"

At this point, any interruption was a God-send, especially with the promise Jill had just made. "Go ahead."

"Ms. Lazar, I understand your ex-husband filed for custody of your son shortly before you moved to San Francisco?"

The guarded expression was back in a heartbeat. "Why are you asking me that?"

Lindsay got an idea when Jill held her gaze for a moment, and then asked, "Your son, Danny. Where is he now?"

"You can't help me. No one can."

The pieces fell into place to form a terrible conclusion. "Danny is still inside, isn't he? That's what Beaumont has over you."

The deep pain in Beatrice's eyes was all the answer Lindsay needed. That woman had lost a lot, her lover, the pregnancy, the promise of a life free of New Faith. It was kind of understandable that she would do anything not to lose the most important person in her life: her son.

"If they're holding him in there against your will, there's a lot we can do for you. It's kidnapping."

"And Nathan will win the custody suit. I lose either way."

"Isn't getting Danny out of there the most important thing for now?" There was a hint of anger to Jill's voice. Lindsay had an idea as to where it was coming from, though there was no room to deal with it now.

"That's right," she backed her up. "You work with us now, there's a chance the situation will be resolved quickly. The longer you wait, the more likely it becomes that your husband will win the case. Think about it, Ms. Lazar."

"There's no way you could win the lawsuit," Jill added. "But you can help your son. *We* can."

There was silence for almost a full minute. "Please help my son," Beatrice whispered finally, and for the first time, Lindsay really understood her words at the scene of the accident. She'd already known she'd lose the baby. Her plea had been for 10-year-old Danny, alone in the hands of her

fellow New Faith members.

Delia gave her the afternoon off. Cindy gratefully accepted this opportunity to spend a little time on her own in her room, making some notes even though a persisting headache made it hard to concentrate. So many people living in relatively close quarters brought a considerable noise level that didn't help with her condition either. It hurt to turn her head, and her throat felt sore. Worst possible moment to get sick. She'd taken some Tylenol and hoped it would keep that oncoming cold at bay.

Sarah came to visit her, bringing Chelsea along. The girl hugged Cindy carefully. "Are you hurt?" she asked with wide eyes.

Cindy sat up, regretting the abrupt motion instantly. "Well, a little," she conceded, smiling through the pain, relieved when the girl finally let her go. "How have you been?"

Chelsea looked at her mother first, then sighed. "Fine," she said. Sarah smiled. "She wasn't too happy to be taken out of school at first, leaving her friends, but it's so much safer here. You saw it yourself. Anything can happen to children in a public school."

And you really think she's safer here? Cindy didn't ask the question out loud though. "I'm sure you did the right thing. So what are you two up to today? I must admit I still haven't quite figured out the schedule."

"Resting is on your schedule now. I'm going to help out in the kitchen later. See you at dinner?"

The idea of sleeping through it sounded so much better, but that wasn't what she was here for. "Of course."

Cindy waved goodbye to Chelsea, gingerly sitting back down after the door closed again. She was reluctant to call Lindsay so soon, especially since nothing special had turned up yet, but she longed to hear her voice. She had yet to find out how mad Lindsay was for sneaking out on her.

First of all, though, she'd pay the library another visit. Besides the vague Bible angle, she had to make herself familiar with the layout of the compound.

"How much do you hate me?" she blurted out by way of a greeting.

The small pause indicated that even if hate wasn't involved, Lindsay had not been pleased with the course of events, as she seemed to be searching for the right words. "I don't hate you," she finally said. "Can you talk?"

Cindy breathed a sigh of relief. "At the moment, yes. And I actually have something to tell you." Trying to shift her weight, she couldn't stifle the painful gasp that escaped her.

"Are you okay?" Lindsay asked worriedly.

"Sure, just a little stiff and sore. I spent all day packing up some bad writing and sending it off into the world. I've been told though I've got a shot at chief editor."

Lindsay's laugh showed her relief clearly. "Sounds like fun." The tone of her voice changed then. "I could think of something nicer, too."

Cindy smiled, though the pain was still bothering her. The rush of warmth that came with Lindsay's words proved to be a nice distraction from it though. "Alright, they work, they pray, they're pretty conservative and paranoid when it comes to authorities. That's all on New Faith so far."

"No hint of anything about to happen?"

Cindy shrugged, wincing. "Hard to say. I didn't see them stockpiling any weapons so far."

"Okay, we wouldn't expect them to do that openly, right? Beaumont's buying your act?"

"I think so." She mentally went through the interactions they'd had, the offer he'd made. Whatever Sarah had told him about her, there was no indication that he was overtly suspicious towards her.

"Good. Listen, I want you to look out for a Danny Lazar. He's about ten years old and Children's Services will come looking for him soon, but until then, I need to know if he's okay."

"Sure. Wait a minute, Lazar? In any way related to--"

"Beatrice's son. Long story."

Lindsay sounded weary at that, and Cindy wished they weren't separated right now. "I know we never talked about it. It must have been hard for you to be at that scene."

She pictured Lindsay shrugging, as she said, "She already knew the baby wouldn't make it."

They were both silent for a while, knowing that the subject would inevitably come up again at some point. Just now was not the time. "So what's your story?"

"The Bibles indeed all look the same, but I had an interesting conversation. There was this guy a couple of months ago, spending his vacation here for the orientation period. Obviously, he talked about sin and punishment a lot. It's a reach - but it seems like he was a bit extreme even for the New Faith people."

"You didn't happen to find out where he disappeared to?"

"Unfortunately not. He said he'd come back early next year."

"So he's still in the area. Any word on his profession?"

"He seemed to be disappointed in the church. A former priest? That would explain the fibers, and it goes with Watkins' crime scene."

"Or just dressing as one, because he sees himself in that role. Of which neither explains why he came to possess the recording of the prayers." Lindsay didn't say what they both seemed to think. It was all a whole lot of nothing, at least where the Hallelujah Man was concerned.

"This is going to be the most pointless story that ever had my name on it." Cindy sighed.

"I don't think you're capable of 'pointless'," Lindsay said warmly. "After all, with the Lazar angle--"

A knock on the door sounded. "Thanks, but I really need to go now. I think I've got a visitor."

"Lindsay Boxer?"

"That's right." Lindsay had been telling herself upon opening the door to a fresh-faced girl from the delivery service that taking out her frustration over the interrupted phone call on her wouldn't be fair. When she saw the item to be delivered, she nearly reconsidered. Even if it still would have been unfair.

"That's good. I was supposed to deliver these only to you. Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Extremely."

There must have been something in her tone that made the girl's face fall as she took a tentative step backwards. "Have a good day," she murmured, and turned to go.

Lindsay looked at the flowers in her hands for a moment, white roses, uncomfortably familiar. She didn't need a card to identify the sender.

"I don't think so."

That evening, Claire arrived at Papa Joe's just in time to see Lindsay pouring what she hoped was only the first shot into her drink with a solemn expression.

"Whoa," she remarked, taking a seat across from her friend. "One of those days, huh?"

"One of too many," Lindsay muttered. "It all started when Pete--"

Or maybe it hadn't been the first one, after all. Lindsay usually didn't jump straight into these subjects. "Whoa. What about Pete?" Claire flinched, realizing she'd interrupted her rather harshly. More than that, she hoped there was no reason to get antsy about him.

"He is - or was - in San Francisco. Can you believe that? He came for a visit, let himself in with the keys he still had and waited for me. With flowers."

"I take it you were not amused." When Claire thought back on Lindsay and Pete, it was mostly with a trace of a guilty conscience. They had pushed so hard, wanting her to be happy so badly - and like Lindsay herself, they'd been blind to what was going on right in front of their eyes. Fortunately, that was an episode from the past - wasn't it? "Lindsay?"

The woman in question gave her a dismissing hand gesture. "I nearly had to throw him out."

Knowing Lindsay, Claire guessed this was only a very abbreviated summary of the actual events. "Did he threaten you?"

"No. Was just pretty annoying. So sure of himself! He has changed, for sure. If I ever knew him.

Not that it matters anymore." She downed the rest of her drink and signaled the waitress for another one.

"When did this happen?"

"The day we arrested Parker."

There was a bit of an impulse to lean forward and slam her head against the tabletop. So that was the missing link, the strange ambience between Lindsay and Cindy that she and Jill had picked up on earlier.

"Cindy was there?"

The mere suggestion was enough to put a slightly panicked look on Lindsay's face. "No. She doesn't know about it, and I want it to stay that way."

"You really think that's a good idea?" Claire asked doubtfully. Much as she wanted to put all the blame on Pete, Lindsay didn't have the best record of conflict management in a relationship. Cindy had a right to know, didn't she?

She ventured further into hazardous waters. "Have you spoken to Cindy yet today?" It was merely rhetoric, of course, but they both knew that her question didn't refer to any information on the case the reporter might have for them.

"Briefly, but let's wait for Jill, she should be here any minute." There was some hesitation, as if Lindsay wasn't quite sure whether to share what was on her mind or not. "I feel like she's withdrawing," she said eventually, the fear behind that suggestion coming across very clearly. "I feel it, and I don't know why, or what to do about it."

"Withdrawing how?" It was hard for Claire not to show her own unease with the subject. She had been so thrilled to find out that Cindy and Lindsay were together, finally. Claire knew best, though, that love wasn't always enough. The notion betrayed the hard work that relationships could actually be.

She couldn't imagine seeing these two fail any more than she could have imagined it with Ed and herself. Still, it had almost happened. Worse, she had seen that uncertainty in Lindsay before, months before she and Tom decided to get divorced. Or more correctly, before Tom had made that decision.

"We talked about the case. For about five minutes. That was all."

"Lindsay. She's under pressure. They're probably watching her." None of that was at all reassuring, but it had to be a valid explanation.

"I was wondering... if it was the reason why she went inside. If *I* was the reason. I feel like it's starting all over again."

"Linz, no." Jill had arrived in time to overhear the last part of their conversation. "Cindy is so much in love with you." That sounded just a tiny bit wistful and enough to make Claire look up, wondering what was up with their friends tonight.

"She's also doing her job right now," Jill continued, "and if she's a bit focused there, you should be

the first to understand."

The insinuation was clear, carrying with it the memory of endless discussions, and always, guilt because they'd let Lindsay down back then - and worry that it could start all over again. They just wouldn't let that happen this time. And Lindsay herself seemed very much aware of what was at stake.

"I know all that, and still, they're up to something. Beaumont doesn't have a sealed FBI file for nothing. I don't like these people."

"The feeling, as we all know, is mutual," Claire said dryly.

"Pierce killed himself and nearly a bunch of other people due to their interference, and they hold children hostage. Not to mention the fact that the FBI has an interest in them for a whole bunch of other reasons. All of that together is just..." She sighed. "I guess I just want her out of there."

Claire laid a hand over hers. "We'll all feel better when we have her back. So now, what did she have for us?"

Lindsay looked at their joined hands for a moment, then she started to relate her conversation with Cindy, "They had a visitor who sounds a lot like our man, but he's long gone. He could have been there and taken the Bible that ended up at Blake's. It's all pretty vague at the moment, but she was going to try and find out more from Beaumont. I also asked her to look out for Danny Lazar."

At that, Claire shared a quick look with Jill, reading in her eyes the same relief that she felt. It was bad enough. It would have been worse if the man they suspected to be the Hallelujah Man had still been there while Cindy was with the New Faith people.

"So we can only wait?" she concluded.

"I guess so," Lindsay conceded grimly.

"Child Protective Services? Do you have, by any chance, too much time on your hands, serial killer and all?"

Jill restrained the impulse to sigh as she looked up to Denise standing in the doorway. "Actually, it might be related to Hallelujah Man. In any case, it's related to New Faith."

Denise made a disgusted face at that, and to Jill's surprise, she said, "They're a bunch of narrow-minded crazy people. Much as I wish you'd actually see the work I give you as priority, any child that doesn't grow up in there is a lucky one."

"It's about Beatrice Lazar's son."

Denise nodded. "Thank God Boxer convinced her nicely to drop the lawsuit. The paperwork would have been endless."

It could have been the imagination of her over-worked, sleep-deprived self, but Denise had actually smiled, so Jill offered a hesitant smile in return.

"Let's see what we can do to help get him out and any children who don't belong there as soon as possible. With these people, you never know."

Wonders never ceased... "Sure, I will."

But she was already talking to Denise's retreating back.

"Sarah told me you were working closely with the police."

Here it goes, Cindy thought. He's changed his mind and thinks I'm too much of a risk to have me hanging around. So far, Beaumont had sought out her presence. It was hard to tell if he did it with all aspirants. If HM had been here, had the two men had long talks during walks across the compound?

"Well, yes, I think she also told you that was part of why I needed a break."

"It's a poisoning environment." It wasn't a question.

Like one where children grow up seeing women being mostly relegated to the kitchen mostly and gays being condemned for their 'sins'? Give me a break, she wanted to say. Delia had given her a stack of brochures to read for herself, and she'd found everything she didn't want in her life. So New Faith claimed to offer a shelter from false authorities, to people of all faiths. Their version of charity didn't extend to everyone though.

"It was hard sometimes," she said, truthfully, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

"You might not be able to fully evade it here."

"People have a hard time accepting what they don't understand. Is this about the pursuit?"

Beaumont took his time to answer, his face blank of any emotion as he answered. "It's part of it. They're denying their responsibility, looking for someone to blame."

"What can we do?"

He gave her a long, considering look, but no, Cindy knew she wasn't going to be initiated into the secrets of New Faith that were worth an FBI investigation on the second day. She was laying the groundwork for him to trust her, though. He wouldn't be the first person she had fooled into believing they were dealing with a cute, harmless girl. "You're dealing with lots of harassment, I guess," she went on, letting her question stand in the room as if rhetorical.

"We manage," he said. "Basically, this is a place people come to in order to avoid harassment. A shelter."

"There are many children here."

"We try to teach them, and give a real family to as many of them as we can."

Which sounded like a good idea at first sight. Why was it that people's own vanities and stereotypes always made those good intentions turn ugly?

"I imagine it's hard for them when parents want to leave and take them away from the safety they found."

"That hardly ever happens." Beaumont smiled. "Most of them come back in time - and they're always welcome here."

"Do you think Beatrice Lazar will come back? After all, she left her son here."

He didn't rise to the bait, though. "If it's God's will, He will bring her back into our midst, regardless of the obstacles that might be in the way. If not, he will find a family here. It wouldn't be the first time."

Her next meeting fortunately took place inside, at the library. Her headache had taken a turn to worse in the bright sunlight, and she was beyond relieved to be able to sit down.

"You're asking a lot of questions. Why are you so interested in the guy?" Cindy took a moment to assess if there was any suspicion to the young man's question. Zack had found her in the library the other day, and while they'd talked, he had mentioned their temporary guest who seemed off even in New Faith terms.

Cindy shrugged, giving him a guileless smile, staying wary behind it. Zack seemed okay, but she couldn't let herself completely forget that he was coming from a similar belief system as Kyle Graham. Still, she had to have her answers, so she'd agreed to meet him again. He was 22, and about to get married next month, which hopefully put him on the safe side.

"Bad habit. Curiosity," she said. "That, and he sounded really weird. New Faith doesn't seem to condone harsh punishment."

"We don't. No one is without fault. Michael said he was going to learn that in time, but honestly, I'd be glad if he didn't come back." Zack looked almost startled at his own words. "You're not going to tell anyone, right?"

"Of course not," she assured him. He seemed to know a lot about what Michael did and didn't approve, so Cindy had decided that making friends with him could be helpful.

"He always said there are too many people who don't observe the Law of God, and that the Law of Men just wasn't enough at times," Zack recalled. "There was something he had to do first... and he'd be back afterwards. What about you? Do you think you're going to stay?"

"I might."

So. Not.

"That would be nice." He smiled shyly, then looked at his watch and did a double take. "Sorry, I'm late. I'll see you."

Cindy waited about two minutes, then she followed him, down the hallway, through the double doors and into another part of the building. He'd made that same hasty exit yesterday... Cindy was pretty sure it was something worth checking out.

"I'll have you know that Beatrice betrayed us. The police department is not going to pay for Allan's death."

Shocked murmurs greeted this announcement. "It is like it's always been," he continued. "They cover up their own failures, like before. And it's worse, they're going to come for the child to rip him from our care."

"There will be others," a woman in her twenties said, holding on to her husband-to-be's hand. Zack's fiancée.

Delia was nearly white with disgust. "We can't let them!"

Everybody in the room seemed to agree with her; if anyone didn't, they didn't voice their opinion.

"And we won't. Each of you know what is at stake here. Our freedom. Our lives. Arizona depends on us. No police will set foot on our grounds."

"Never," a chorus of voices echoed.

"Never," Michael Beaumont confirmed.

Cindy had the schedule established alright after the 5th day. The meetings took place daily, in a wing that Beaumont had not shown her. They were about a dozen New Faith members who held the future of New Faith in their hands. Cindy felt sorry for Sarah who had believed she'd found a safe place for her and her daughter. It wasn't. She also felt sorry for Zack who seemed to believe in a safe future for him and the family he wanted to have with his wife-to-be, but also believed religiously in everything Beaumont told him.

Beaumont's hate for the police remained mysterious, but he sure swore his followers in on it.

Everyone in New Faith believed that it was the PD's fault when Pierce had been killed - except, Cindy had learned, this dozen who *knew* that he'd been dosed on neuroleptics, because they'd been in on it. Because they'd planned it.

The office where they met had a computer terminal, but they always locked the door after themselves. She was pretty sure that if she found a way to the files on that computer, she'd get a lot more on Judgment Day than the rhetoric of these meetings. What would they ever do if the police came for Danny Lazar?

She hadn't found the boy yet. Cindy had decided she wasn't going to call Lindsay again until that had happened.

Her supply of Tylenol was about to run out, and the headaches and back pain hadn't gone away, but increased steadily. She'd been sleeping badly and had skipped lunch the second day in the row, because the smell of food and the noise level in the dining hall had made her feel nauseated.

Cindy was beginning to feel just a little claustrophobic.

The camera showed the woman alone in her apartment, brooding over files. Just like he was used to seeing her. She was restless, getting up, pacing, sitting down again. Tonight, she was going to sleep alone, a thought that filled him with utter relief. He wasn't sure how much longer he would have been able to stand the smiles and the kisses, the touches and soft murmurs.

It wasn't right. It was his right and duty to rectify.

On a day not far from now, he would.

Act Three

"They are taking our children away from us. This can not be accepted."

"What are we gonna do?" Zack asked fearfully.

Cindy moved just an inch so she could see Beaumont getting up to walk over and stand before him. "Are you afraid, Zack?" The younger man clearly was, but he shook his head jerkily. Beaumont turned to each of the little group, Delia, Marcus and the others. "Are you?"

Each of them voiced their denial. Beaumont nodded. "Good. The Lord will give us the strength to fight them back as long as we can. If we can't, He is awaiting us."

He was greeted with agreeing murmurs.

Cindy felt herself shaking, praying that what she'd just heard didn't mean what she thought it did.

"For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

Silence. He looked at all of them intently again, then said, "You know what to do."

There were tears on Delia's face. It was the most emotion Cindy had ever seen from her. She felt dizzy, and the pain was almost killing her, but she couldn't afford to acknowledge it now.

Not so much symbolism when you thought about it. Beaumont and the people who believed in him - he'd basically said it would be better to die than to give in to those whom they saw as the enemy. Better for their *children* to die than live in an environment where they might have choices. Granted, choices weren't the same for everybody outside, but here at New Faith, a few 'chosen' were making them for everyone.

Including life or death.

Cindy shrank back further into the corner as the participants of the meeting left the room and went their separate ways. She waited for a minute, counting off the seconds. Then she took the key she'd stolen from the office and opened the door. If there was anything compromising against Beaumont, it was bound to be on this computer.

Silently, she slid inside the room, leaving the door ajar.

"Cindy hasn't called back with any news on the Lazar kid. She would have if she'd found anything."

Lindsay paced the length of the wall, and back again. It was making Jill slightly dizzy. "I know, but that's no reason to worry, right? You said she was alright in there."

"Last time we talked, yes... I don't think they found her out. I'm just--" She broke off. "It might be silly, but she sounded so stressed and tired..." She shook her head in an attempt to clear it. "Is there something else we are supposed to be talking about?" she asked irritably.

"Actually, yes. Mr. Lazar's attorney has achieved a court order to get Danny out. Cindy doesn't even have to be involved with this. Could you sit down for a minute, please?"

Rolling her eyes, nevertheless, Lindsay did. They had gathered in Tom's empty office for a brief impromptu meeting, as this news was supposed to be going to him right away.

"It's okay," Claire chimed in. "We're counting down the days, too."

"There's probably someone else who's counting down days." Lindsay said darkly. "We still don't know who he is, or who he has chosen next, and all the connection we have is that they might once have harbored him. He might have inspired them to some craziness - that's all a lot of probability. I think--"

The sound of her cell phone interrupted her. "Cindy!"

Jill watched the conflicting emotions flicker over her friend's face, from relief to worry, to alarm. "You sure they haven't noticed anything? Good. Stay low-key, don't draw attention to yourself. As soon as there's a chance for exit, take it. Be careful." There was a small pause, as Lindsay listened, then she swiveled the chair away from the worried scrutiny of her friends, and whispered, "I love you too."

They were good for each other. They were in love. So much so that it was easy to feel happy for them, even with a tinge of bittersweet. Jill aborted the brief trip down memory lane when Lindsay said,

"What are you looking at? Never mind. I think Cindy has found why Beaumont left Arizona. He also brought a formula from which tons of fertilizer has been made, a lot more than they need for their fields. How's that for the dawning of Judgment Day?" She pinched the bridge of her nose tiredly. "Damn, I'd really like to see what's in Beaumont's sealed file now."

"Me, too, but at the moment, that doesn't seem like an option."

Jill jumped at the sound of a voice behind her.

They had company.

Tom stood in the doorway, looking vaguely amused. "Looking for a new job, Linz?" he asked.

Lindsay jumped up from his desk chair, a bit mortified that she'd let herself get caught there, while Jill and Claire hastily said their goodbyes.

"Not at the moment, no. Nathan Lazar's attorney called... They have a court order now to have Danny removed from the New Faith's compound."

"They might not have to wait that long," Tom informed her, looking weary. "The FBI will be going in with a search warrant based on terrorist charges."

"What?"

"Don't be so surprised, that was always the question with them, wasn't it? Look, I know you were following the serial killer angle, but that's overruled for now. There are enough chemicals believed to be on their grounds to kill dozens of people. It is priority."

"Sure, but--" Lindsay bit her lip, but her shock had to be visible on her face. "So soon?"

Tom had already caught on. He got up from behind his desk, regarding her speculatively. "Linz, what aren't you telling me?"

She considered evasion for a moment, but it just wasn't an option, not with Cindy's life at stake. He could yell at her all he wanted to, it didn't matter as long as they got her out of there.

"When are they planning to execute that warrant?"

"Tonight."

"Oh, damn it."

"Excuse me?"

"Listen, it wasn't my idea. In fact, I was very much opposed to it. The Register is going to run a story on New Faith, and they sent Cindy in."

Tom stared at her in disbelief, and Lindsay inwardly winced, bracing herself. "I know, it's--"

"Do you even realize what you've done?!"

This probably wasn't a good moment to remind him that technically, she wasn't the one who had done anything.

"You knew, right? You already knew when you asked to interview Lazar. Did it ever occur to you, Lindsay, that I should be informed about these things when it's a case on our desks?"

"It's even worse, Tom. Cindy found evidence supporting the FBI's suspicion."

Tom ran a hand across his face in a quick, frustrated gesture. "Is this girl for real?"

Lindsay would have smiled at that if the situation hadn't been beyond serious. There was, in fact, nothing to smile about it. "They have weapons, not really an unusual amount, considering the size of their community. With or without licenses, I don't know. Something else they have is tons of

home-made fertilizer and secret papers describing preparations for Judgment Day."

Tom looked as sick as she'd felt when Cindy had first told her, but he was quick to react. "You tell her to get the hell out of there. Then I'll put the two of you in touch with the agent in charge. And Lindsay, I'm letting this go for now, because there are way too many lives at stake, but don't think we're finished here."

She didn't tell him that at the moment, she didn't care much, but simply started to punch Cindy's number into her cell phone, only to learn that Cindy's phone was now turned off.

"Cindy, hey. You're up."

At the sound of Sarah's voice, Cindy nearly jumped out of her skin. "Only for a bit," she conceded, turning around as slowly as possible. Turning her head was out of the question, it just hurt too damn much to move. Add to that the steady nausea that was making her feel slightly seasick in addition to the thunder in her head every time she took a step. She moved stiffly to face her friend. "Do you know where Michael is? I need to talk to him."

Sarah shrugged. "I guess you'll see him at dinner. Is everything okay, Cindy?"

Cindy reined the inappropriate impulse to laugh, just barely. Everything was far from being okay, with the FBI probably already near the New Faith's gate, and Beaumont's plans to defy the 'enemy's' sinister plans. She had all of it on a USB drive she needed to safely get out of here. But there was something else she needed to do first. "Sarah, please, I can't really tell you much, but I want you to pack a few things for you and Chelsea, and leave for a day or two."

Sarah looked flabbergasted. "And just why would I do that?"

"Just trust me. Go today." Cindy knew that Sarah had bought into Beaumont's prophet act, but she couldn't not warn her.

"I guess I can do that."

"Thank you."

Sarah gave her a quizzical look before she headed for her room.

Cindy went to pack her own clothes, agonizingly slowly. They ended up in her back in an untidy heap; she just couldn't bring herself to care. Get out of here, get the evidence she'd found into the right hands and then find something that would give her a break from the pain. Sleep 24 hours straight *after* she'd written the story.

She went down to the hall to find Michael.

Stepping inside, Cindy realized that almost everyone she knew to be living in this building was assembled, including Sarah and Chelsea. Why hadn't she left yet as she'd promised?

No one had told her about the impromptu meeting. Not a good sign, just another indication that it was time for her to leave New Faith. *Today*. The pictures she had of the fertilizer, not just here, but also in Arizona, and the plans she had found were enough to bring Beaumont and his cohorts

behind bars for a long time - longer, if it could be proven that they'd willingly given asylum to another killer.

The moment she entered the room, all conversation seemed to stop, which made her even more suspicious.

Dizzy with the headache, Cindy walked to Beaumont's table, aware of everyone's eyes on her. "I've made a decision," she said without preamble. "My two weeks are almost up - I tried, but I don't think this is the right environment for me. I thank you for your hospitality, Michael... but I'm going home."

He stood up, looking at her intently, then he reached out a hand to touch her forehead. She flinched.

"That's alright, but I don't think you're going anywhere at the moment. You look flushed. I think you have a fever. Why don't we have the doc take a look at you, and you can go once you feel better?"

"That's... nice, but I really want to go home. I'll have someone pick me up."

Other than their exchange of words, the hall was tense with a brooding silence. Cindy wondered what would happen if she tried to run. The impulse was getting stronger.

"I really must insist. I can't let you drive like this. Delia, why don't you bring Cindy to her room, and I'll get the doctor?"

"No, thanks, I--"

Delia had already grabbed her arm in an iron grip. "This is ridiculous. Will you let me go now?"

"You're not getting delirious, are you? Come on, Cindy, I think it's better if you go lay down for a while."

They walked her out of the hall, ignoring her protests like everyone else. Once they had passed the threshold of the room, the conversations started again.

Sarah closed the door of Cindy's room behind Dr. Lowman, a worried expression on her face.

"I don't need treatment," Cindy protested, though not very convincingly, given the fact she could barely move without pain. "Just let me out of here, and I'll get to a hospital."

Lowman laid a cool, dry hand against her forehead. "I'm sorry, Cindy, it looks like you'll have to deal with me for now. Just how long have you been in pain?"

"Sarah!"

The woman in question just shrugged. "There's a problem with one of the kid's fathers; he called the police on us. It's a lockdown - no one's going in or out."

"What?"

Sarah stepped closer to take Cindy's hand and squeeze it gently. "Don't feel guilty. Whatever happens from now, it's the Lord's will. Michael has received the word... we knew it wouldn't be easy."

"No! Sarah! You've got to think of Chelsea. He's planning to kill us all!"

Lowman exchanged a meaningful look with Sarah. "I can give her something for the pain for now. She's clearly delirious. When this is over, she should be in a hospital."

No kidding.

"I'm right here, and I'm not delirious. Do you guys really think he'll just let the FBI come in?"

"There's no FBI, Cindy," Dr. Lowman explained patiently. "Just a problem with Mr. Lazar and Children's Services to be resolved. The lockdown is just a safety measure. Now let me give you something to ease--"

Cindy was spared the effort to muster further protest, as Zack came rushing in. "Michael wants to see you two," he said breathlessly. "There's a problem with--" He broke off at the sight of Cindy, the information obviously not to be shared with her. "Let's go."

The door was locked from the outside.

Number one on the speed dial. Thank God. Cindy wasn't even sure if she would have remembered the full number, eidetic memory and all; she just felt extremely drained. Even her fingers seemed stiff and uncooperative, and when Lindsay picked up mid-second ring, she could have cried with relief.

"Linz, I've got--"

"Whatever it is, it can wait," Lindsay interrupted her curtly. "Listen, you need to leave right now. The FBI is going in tonight. It's a matter of hours. I'm going to meet you outside, so you can take everything you have to the agent."

"But I--"

"That is non-negotiable. There's no saying how they react, you can't stay there any longer!"

"But I can't!"

There was silence for a couple of seconds, then Lindsay said, "Tell me what's going on." The softness of her words didn't betray the worry beneath.

Cindy felt tears well up in her eyes, a result not so much of fear, but her crappy overall condition and all that it entailed. Okay, maybe fear was part of it, too. Judgment Day was too damn close, and they weren't talking about it metaphorically. The San Francisco compound was where it was all supposed to start, a test run for all New Faith communities, should the 'enemy' come too close. "It's too late. They're not going to let anyone out. I didn't tell you, because I thought it was just the flu, but I don't know, I'm really not okay, and it's getting worse. They've locked me up in here."

On top of it all, she felt even worse for getting herself into this situation, as much as she was ever to blame, and for having to abandon all pride for the moment. "I need your help."

"That's okay. Just tell me where you are and I--"

Her relief about Lindsay taking this so well was short-lived, when then the door was opened, and Cindy managed to slip the cell phone under the blanket on her bed at the very last moment, interrupting the call before she did so.

"You let a civilian waltz in there to find out about the inner workings of New Faith?" Agent Cornell asked. They were outside of the fences surrounding New Faith land. No one, Beaumont had claimed, would be questioned, or removed from the compound by the police.

For the first time, the threat was out in the open.

Cornell's anger struck Lindsay, not because he'd criticized her, but because in the past few minutes her worst fears were coming true one by one. Her gut reaction about Beaumont and the New Faith had been right - and she should have never let Cindy go.

"Excuse me. They offer open Bible classes to anyone," she snapped. Cindy had sounded scared over the phone, much more so than Lindsay had ever known her to be. Staying here behind the lines, not knowing what had happened after the call was interrupted, was slowly making her come undone.

"Not to those who enter the two-week orientation period. Whatever your friend has been telling them about her connection with you, it's what could kill her. If it hasn't already," he stated bluntly.

Lindsay was very aware of Tom watching them, so she reined the impulse to yell at the agent. "I talked to her. She's sick and needs to go to a hospital, just as much as we need that evidence she's found, but with the FBI surrounding the place, they won't let anyone out."

"Inspector, there are a lot of children still on the compound. Nearly a hundred people altogether. All of them are my concern, and we're trying our damned best not to let this become another Waco."

"Then what are you doing about it?" she seethed. Tom raising an eyebrow was the subtle indication that her voice had risen again.

"We'll send someone in for an exchange if they release hostages, no sooner."

"But they won't if we don't give them something first. Look, I know you're responsible for all of them, but she is sick in there, and we don't even know what it is."

"You took a huge risk there," Cornell said.

Tell me something I don't know.

Tom just looked thoughtful, and Lindsay wondered what kind of connections he was making. It didn't matter. Cindy's words about the New Faith's paranoia against the police, reinforced in those secret meetings, were still vivid in her mind. At the moment, though, she didn't really care. If Cornell chose one of his people to go inside, Cindy would just be any other hostage to them.

She couldn't let that happen.

"I know. I'm sorry. But I have an idea how we can proceed."

Cornell gave her a skeptical look, but waited for her to continue.

"You're worried about the children, so am I, but they would rather hurt an outsider than their own. Ms. Thomas joined them last, so she's most at risk here. We need to get her out first."

"And you're going to do that how?"

"I'll go in."

"Lindsay, no way!"

"It's the only way. We can't even assess the situation now. We don't know what the hell it is they are doing in there!"

"And you think Beaumont is going to invite you in and let you give status reports?" He'd be inviting her in alright, but Tom didn't need to know the exact reasons.

"I do," she simply said.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourself into." Cornell shook his head.

"Believe me, I do."

"Cindy." Beaumont smiled at her, but even now, she was aware that his eyes stayed cold. "You'll get your wish... you can go."

She didn't trust him, but frankly, her head and back hurt too damn much to question his motives. *Everything* hurt. She felt sick. Cindy longed for a dark, silent room, far away from New Faith.

"Really?" Even the sound of her own voice was enough to send bright slivers of pain through her skull.

"Really. There's going to be an exchange. Your death is worth nothing to us. After all, you were never a true believer, were you?"

The words registered with her brain, but the only sense they made was that it meant her ticket out. Coming in was most likely an agent masking as a doctor. Someone who could handle this situation a lot better.

"I'll send Sarah to help you get dressed," Beaumont informed her. "We don't have much time. You can thank Inspector Boxer, by the way."

"What?" For a moment, fear took over even through her pain, leaving her breathless. *No police will set foot on our grounds.* "No," she protested, "I don't want a police officer to--"

"Don't bother, Cindy," he cut her off, making no attempt to hide his contempt. "You are not one of

us. You tried to make Sarah run. You are not worthy. I'll be back in a few minutes, and I want you ready to go."

When he was gone, Cindy opened the seam of her bra with trembling fingers. The metal of the tiny USB drive felt cold in her fever-warm hand, and she shivered, her eyes swimming with tears she didn't have time to cry. Pushing it beneath the fabric, she just hoped they wouldn't strip-search her before they let her out. If they let her out at all. If they did, it came with one hell of a price.

She wasn't just scared for herself any longer. Had Lindsay listened to a single word she'd said? Why her, of all people? She had to know it was crazy, suicidal...

The worst of it was the realization that Lindsay did indeed know, and she was taking the risk anyway. She might pay for it with her life.

No, Cindy couldn't afford to think like this, because it was tearing her apart. The trouble was, she wasn't really thinking too clearly at this moment, and that scared her. It was probably just a bad case of the flu, caught while being in such close quarters with many other people, but it was also the worst possible timing. A mistake could get her killed.

The ones she had already made, could get Lindsay killed.

She pulled down her shirt again. And prayed.

The arrangement had gone over well with the New Faith leader, and it was arranged surprisingly quickly. Well, maybe not so surprising; they'd be sure to consider a cop more of a bargain than a reporter.

As Lindsay walked towards the gates of the New Faith, she wanted to run, but she forced herself to take measured steps, appear calm and even more importantly, harmless, disregarding her inner turmoil. Her footsteps seemed to echo loudly on the pavement in the strained silence around her. She walked on, very much aware that the closer she got to the compound, the more these God-fearing people would have a clear shot. Any mistake she made, they wouldn't hesitate. Maybe it didn't even take a mistake.

She stopped halfway, waiting for the door to be opened in the distance, then two armed men exited, Cindy between them. She hated that they even touched her, but a few steps further, Lindsay realized that she probably could barely walk on her own. Fear surged up inside of her. What kind of flu could make a person that sick?

One of the men, bearing an assault rifle, motioned her over, and Lindsay obliged, though her eyes never left her lover's shivering form. In the near dark of dusk, she could see that Cindy's eyes had a feverish glaze to them. There was recognition in her gaze, though, and she gave a brief, almost imperceptible nod. The evidence. She had it with her.

Lindsay reached out, Cindy did the same, and their fingertips touched briefly, a moment unreal before the armed men urged both of them on. Before she turned once to see Cindy collapse on the pavement.

"No!"

That moment, a part of her was ready to abandon all reason and ignore the gun to her head and the intent of the man who was holding it. She saw paramedics rushing towards her lover and let the NF men drag her towards the building, vaguely aware of the danger she was now in herself.

It was a calculated risk, Lindsay told herself. Dealing with criminals - that's what the NF folks were after all - was her job.

Not knowing what was wrong with Cindy, was by far more terrifying.

The calculated risk had soon turned out to be something entirely immeasurable. She hadn't seen it coming, all thoughts focused on getting Cindy on the other side of the line, to safety. Once they were inside the building, one of the men punched her quickly and painfully to her side, making her stagger and fall. Next, a booted foot against her back. Then they pulled her up again.

The haze of pain lifted, leaving anger in its wake. How could she have not expected this? They hated what she stood for; Beaumont had brainwashed them well. She wasn't just an acceptable alternative hostage - compared to Cindy, she was a much better choice.

It didn't matter now. All she had to do was to hold on until the FBI stormed the compound. It couldn't be long now.

In the meantime, she was going to meet the 'prophet'. Michael Beaumont had been waiting for them. He didn't address her, only his men as he ordered, "Get her in here."

They made her sit in a chair in what seemed to be an office, wrenching her arms behind her back to tie her wrists together. Then they left the two of them alone, and Beaumont, for the first time, acknowledged her presence.

"Much to hate?" she asked wryly.

"It's not my place. I might not like the institution you represent, but ultimately, it's up to the Lord to deal with your kind."

He was clearly not talking about her being a cop anymore.

"Not like, huh? For someone who's committed quite a few sins, like kidnapping, and is about to commit just about every other sin, like murder? You have remarkably conservative attitudes."

He commented on her words with a hard slap that made her head snap back. Angry and worried in equal parts, she tried to let her body absorb the blow nevertheless, ran her tongue across her teeth a moment later to make sure none of them were loose. She tasted blood.

"It's the truth. You let Cindy Thomas walk out with evidence of it. What were you going to do with all that fertilizer?"

It could be a clever statement to make, or a suicidal one, hard to tell, but she had to say it to his face. Regardless of the danger, Lindsay was immensely proud of how Cindy had found a way to get away with the evidence, even sick as she was. God, hopefully they would learn soon that it was all harmless.

Appealing to God at the moment, though, had an ironic ring to it.

Beaumont leaned in very close, until his face was only inches from Lindsay's. "You," he said, "have no idea. There are a hundred people still on the compound, ready to give their lives. I can make them do that. Do you really think I feel obliged to answer to you?" He laughed.

Lindsay could have sworn there was a tinge of madness to it, only this man wasn't crazy. He was an organized criminal who thought his actions were completely justified - almost like the Hallelujah Man did. Unlike the killer who chose his victims one by one, Beaumont could be responsible for the deaths of a hundred people before nightfall. This couldn't happen.

"Maybe you're mistaken. Maybe not all of them are ready to kill themselves for the sham of a promise you gave them."

Beaumont laughed again, as if her words were some kind of joke between them. The sound grated on her nerves.

"Don't you worry about that. I imagine there will be a few apostates, but those who deny transition, will meet it in the fire. I guess you will, too."

That made her straighten in alarm, despite the painful pull on her arms. Lindsay wished she could find any indication that Beaumont's speech was simply rhetoric, but she already knew it wasn't. He had planned this scenario a long time ago, and he wouldn't leave anything to chance.

She opened her mouth to remind him what consequences this mass murder would have for him, realizing that it probably wouldn't have much of an effect. "I always knew religion wasn't worth dying for," she muttered, then looked up again.

He went over to the window, peering out between the blinds, then he came back to pull himself a chair and take a seat directly in front of her, close enough that his knees almost touched hers. "But it's more complicated than that, Inspector Boxer. I give them what they need... a chance to redeem everything they did wrong in the eyes of God. They pay me for that."

"And you don't need redemption?"

Beaumont regarded her with his clear blue eyes, unhurried, interested, the way you might regard a scientific specimen. Lindsay stared back at him, not flinching, though it was hard not to give in to the impulse. He made her skin crawl.

"Funny question coming from you, Inspector. Come to think of it, maybe I should tell them to start the fire right here."

She fought hard not to let her reaction show, but he must have seen the widening of her eyes.

"That's right, I am not going to be charged with arson, murder or anything of the kind. That will be up to others."

"You can't think that you'll make it out of here."

"I could say the same of you."

Beaumont got up, surveying the room, all the empty shelves and cabinets. He had cleaned up this room. Then he turned to her. "Now would be a good time to say your prayers," he said, making her

wonder if his rhetoric had inspired another murderer, the one who always talked about *sin and the need to repent* - or vice versa.

The smell of smoke was in the air.

The relief of having Cindy back on the safe side of this nightmare, and Jill on the way to the hospital with her, was short-lived. Claire stared at the window exploding on the second floor, transfixed. She hated to be useless, to be unable to do anything but wait.

This was Beaumont's Plan B for those who weren't in on the suicide pact.

She jumped at the feel of a hand on her shoulder, spinning around to see Jacobi behind her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Claire shook her head. "No, I'm not. Aren't you just tired of people using religion, of any kind, to justify their sick ways?"

Jacobi didn't argue. "All those children in there." He shook his head disbelievingly.

Claire gave him a quick sideways look and found that he was probably, just like her, struggling to say what was weighing on both of their minds.

"What the hell was she thinking?" he finally said.

The same thought had crossed her mind, Claire had to admit, she hated for her friends to be involved in this mess. Still, it was very clear to her exactly what had been on Lindsay's mind. "If it had been Ed in there, I would have done the same."

"Cindy Thomas had no business being in there in the first place."

The anger in his voice surprised her, especially since she knew that he had a soft spot for the reporter. "It wasn't her fault that she got sick," Claire reminded him.

"You're right. That wasn't." He walked away from her in angry strides, leaving her alone with her own fears and doubts. Should they have seen the danger much earlier? Intervened?

Stay calm. Think. It wasn't so easy with the purgatory about to happen very literally, but when Lindsay caught sight of the rough edge of the worn desk behind her, she felt what was perhaps a premature relief. It was worth a shot anyway. Most likely, it was her only chance.

The rough wood cut into the skin of her wrists, leaving splinters, but she gritted her teeth and worked on, until she felt the rope finally give. Just a little, but it was enough to give her hope she might make it out of here alive.

The air had gotten thicker, the smell more obtrusive. There were screams mingling with the sounds of panicked footsteps.

Small flames were licking at the doorframe now.

Jill had no problem admitting to herself that she was absolutely terrified. When she sat in the waiting room all by herself, realizing her hands were shaking, there was nothing to distract her from the disturbing images playing through her mind. Some real. Some imagined. Both equally haunting her.

Cindy had only been unconscious for a short time, but she'd really been out of it. It had to have scared the hell out of Lindsay to see her like that. It sure had affected Jill, an uncanny reminder of another too close call they'd all done their best not to think about.

"Are you here for--"

On a day like this, it couldn't be any other way. It had to be Luke standing in the doorway, looking almost as startled as she felt.

"Jill."

It had been a long time since they'd seen each other last, longer even since they had talked, which was making the moment considerably awkward. It didn't really matter right now, though. "Can you at least tell me if she's going to be alright?" She knew he technically wasn't allowed to tell her even that, but hoped he'd make an exception. Not because they'd once been lovers, but because she couldn't stand not knowing.

Luke looked behind him, then closed the door and walked over to her. "Your friend is suffering from meningitis. We did a lumbar puncture to determine whether it's viral or bacterial."

She winced at the mental image of that procedure. "When will you know?" It wasn't like she knew a lot on the subject, but she did know that the bacterial kind was a lot more dangerous.

"In a few hours." He hesitated for an instant, then he sat down beside her, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep, come back later?" he asked gently.

"I can't. Lindsay would want me to stay. *I* want to stay."

"I've heard about the New Faith disaster. She's still out there?"

"I guess so. I haven't heard anything yet."

She was tired, ready to cry, and it would have been the easiest thing to just lean into him and... no. it wasn't possible. You couldn't turn back time, not even on a night like this.

"I'm sorry," Luke offered eventually. It didn't change anything, for either of them, but it was sincere. Jill gave him a watery smile. "Thanks. You'll keep me updated?"

"Of course."

She watched him walk out of the door, and the feeling of loneliness and regret was the same as when Lindsay had told Cindy over the phone that she loved her. Jill couldn't help it, even tied up in fear as she was for both of them.

The hallway was filled with smoke, part of the staircase having caught fire already. Lindsay could barely see anything, but she tried to watch out for anyone who might need her help. The scene was chaotic, and it angered her that Beaumont would have an easy getaway in this mess.

A noise behind her made her spin around, and she noticed just in time the burning beam above, hanging precariously from the ceiling - and the boy cowering on the floor, too scared to move. Sparks flew as another part of the beam broke off. She reached for the boy's hand and pulled him aside, shielding him with her body, as the rest of the beam came crashing down.

He clung to her, shaking hard, the small clutching hands making her painfully aware of the bruises she'd obtained. "Hey," she said, stroking the hair from his face, hoping that the calming gesture would make him ease up on the death grip a little. "Let's find a way out of here, shall we? My name's Lindsay. What's yours?"

He stared at her with wide frightened eyes.

"It's Danny," he whispered.

The firefighters had managed to control the flames fairly quickly. The 'apostates', the ones who had tried to save their own lives and those of their children had mostly sustained burns and smoke inhalation.

The sight that greeted them in the schoolhouse further back was worse though, where Lindsay had gone after leaving Danny in the care of a uniformed officer and a paramedic. There were still children's paintings plastered all over the wall of the room, some chalk drawings on the board.

The tables and chairs had been stacked against the wall to make room for the people who had chosen to follow Beaumont's call. He was, of course, not among them.

Lindsay kneeled down to touch the neck of the forty-ish woman, confirming what she already knew. She was dead, just like the young man in his twenties, and the woman of the same age whose hand he held clasped. Like the woman who was around Cindy's age and -- she turned away, unable to look any longer.

The room swam before her eyes and stabilized again.

"They've got him, Linz."

She spun around to see Tom standing in the doorway, his eyes widening at the sight. "Damn it."

"Yes. That's what Beatrice and her son managed to escape. Barely."

He nodded. "Come on, let's get you to the hospital."

"God, yes, I really need to know about Cindy, I--"

"Hey. Linz. Take a look at yourself. I'm glad we got her out, but you should let yourself get checked out right now."

She obliged, taking in the sight of the bloody circles around her wrists, raising a hand to feel the dried blood on her face. "Ew."

"Indeed. Let's go."

"Wait a minute." Lindsay walked back into the room, towards the woman and her daughter. The girl would have been in the second grade, at the most. Even though her body protested the movement, she crouched down and reached out to gently close the girl's eyes.

Her gaze drifted to the silver necklace she wore: *Chelsea*.

Cindy was going to ask about her friend and the daughter. Lindsay knew she'd have to be the one to tell her.

Act 4

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty."

Jill opened bleary eyes to a sight she had very much hoped for, but she wasn't entirely sure if it was just her imagination.

"Lindsay!"

She jumped to her feet to hug her friend. Lindsay embraced her in return, though Jill had noticed her wince. "I'm sorry," she said, making herself let go even if she longed for the opposite. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Likewise," Lindsay rasped and then coughed. It wasn't until then Jill really noticed that she reeked of smoke.

"God," she whispered. "They burned down the compound?"

"Close enough. Have you... have you heard...?"

"It's meningitis. They've been testing as to which kind... we'll have to wait."

"Can't they tell from the symptoms?"

"No, honey." Claire closed the door gently behind her. "The viral form is much more common, and if it's that, she will most likely recover completely."

Sinking into the chair, Lindsay asked the question Jill had not dared to think:

"What if it isn't?"

Claire had no answer for either of them.

She'd been standing too long in the hot shower, very aware of various aches, and at the same time dizzy and dissociated. Lindsay technically understood that with Cindy's already weakened immune system, a visitor coming straight from a crime scene was the last thing she needed.

She had promised to come back after getting rid of its traces and a couple of hours of sleep as well, even knowing that it was a promise she wouldn't keep, at least where the sleep was concerned. Both Jill and Claire had offered to drive, and she'd brushed them both off. Stepping out of the shower, she swayed slightly on her feet, eliciting what seemed like a worried glance from Martha.

"That's right, girl. Been better."

She went to the bedroom to pick some clothes. The freshly-made bed held no appeal for her as it did to Martha, who happily settled into a spot in the center of it. Lindsay's mind was still in overdrive, with thoughts not only of today, or the fear for Cindy's final diagnosis.

She remembered Glen Whitney and his lover who had built a life together, until it was ripped away from them by death, and then again by the lack of protection of their relationship by the law.

Technically, Luke wasn't supposed to tell her a single thing about Cindy's condition.

Within the span of a few months, her life had changed in more ways than she'd been able to catch up with. Lindsay couldn't deal with it all now. There was only one thing she needed to know at the moment.

"Sleep well, girl," she said to the snoring dog, and left her apartment.

"She'll be fine, sweetie. It'll just take some time." Claire could tell from the still shell-shocked expression on Lindsay's face that she had a hard time believing it, and Claire couldn't blame her.

Cindy was on medication for the pain and fever, but she had been awake for a few moments. It had been clear that she didn't know who it was brushing the hair from her face softly, taking her hand so tenderly.

It was to be expected, or at least not uncommon.

It was clearly a shock for Lindsay, written all over her face. Whoever Cindy had been seeing, it was not her. "You sure?"

Even though Claire was just a little spooked herself, she could at least draw comfort from medical knowledge and statistics. By all means, the illness was one to be taken seriously, but knowing they dealt with the viral form was a great relief. In comparison. "I am," she said firmly, because that was the only thing Lindsay needed to know right now.

"Good luck with that. I've been waiting for her for fifteen minutes."

Lindsay spun around, withdrawing her hand from the handle of Jill's office door to face Denise. "I guess I'll come back another time then," she said, feeling in no way like having small talk with the Acting D.A. at 8 AM. She hadn't missed Denise's eyes widening slightly at the sight of her.

Obviously, dark circles under her eyes made a nice addition to the bruises on her face.

"Let's wait together," Denise suggested.

It was not what Lindsay would have chosen, but she didn't have a good excuse ready, so she just leaned back against the door.

"It's good Thomas got us that information on Arizona," Denise went on. "A lot of lives could be saved."

"Yeah. Just not all of them." Lindsay's thoughts wandered back to the schoolroom of horror, and the bodies lying in a circle. Beaumont's chosen ones. He'd mixed up the concoction they had all drunk himself. That had to have happened before they let Cindy out.

She shivered, refusing to let the possibilities come to mind.

"They were unpredictable. The FBI didn't start to prepare their operation just yesterday; it had nothing to do with Lazar and her kid in the first place."

"Really?" Maybe she was just too tired to make the connection at the moment.

"Beaumont was on the FBI's radar long before that problem arose. They were going in for him anyw--"

"And you knew about that?"

Denise wisely took a step backwards.

All of a sudden, Lindsay felt very much awake. "You knew they were going in that day all along? What the hell were you thinking not telling us?"

"I'm wondering about that myself, but I think we can clear all of this up. Lindsay?"

Jill's slightly strained voice finally alerted Lindsay to the fact that backing her friend's boss into a corner wouldn't exactly be helpful. Although thinking of Cindy, who had been in a lot more danger than they'd all thought, made her want to yell some more.

"Come on." She shrugged off Jill's hand angrily, but obediently turned to follow her.

"Some of us have to play by the rules, a concept I know isn't very familiar with you," Denise added, which could have been for either of them. "Jill, I'll see you in my office in fifteen minutes."

"Of course." Jill offered a quick smile which literally slipped from her face when she turned to face Lindsay.

"I know this is bad, but that's no excuse. I've entertained thoughts of getting into Denise's face. Thinking about it is fine. Doing it like that - not good."

"I know," Lindsay said from behind her hands. "Sorry." It didn't sound very convincing.

"Tell that to her."

Lindsay let her hands fall and frowned. "Really?"

Jill rolled her eyes. It was all the banter they got before the conversation returned to the more serious subject matter at hand. "Linz, I'm not defending her, but I think she would have given us a warning if she'd known about Cindy. You've been to see her this morning?"

"Yes. She was sleeping, I didn't want to wake her."

"You heard what Claire said - and Luke, actually. She will get through this."

Jill could easily guess what weighed on Lindsay's mind, besides Cindy's condition. She'd had the same thoughts herself. "We didn't have enough information. If we'd known what we know now... but last week, you couldn't have done anything to keep her from going - well except using your cuffs."

It was meant to elicit a smile from Lindsay, and that worked, though the faint blush brought Jill to another conclusion. "So you did try that too, huh?"

"You sure you want that image in your head with the meeting you have in, what, five minutes?"

Jill laughed. "I don't mind that image," she said with a wink. Then, more serious, "You should be home. Sleeping. You remember what 'sleep' is?"

"Beaumont's being questioned today. There's no way in hell I'm going to miss that."

It was on the tip of Jill's tongue to say that Lindsay probably shouldn't be anywhere near him right now, but she trusted Lindsay to know where to draw the line with him.

"I'll be there."

"I don't need a lawyer," Beaumont nearly spat at the agent. "The Law of Man means nothing to me."

Cornell shrugged. "I'm surprised. If it doesn't, why did you advise Ms. Lazar to file a lawsuit against the police department? In fact, several of those were filed in Arizona. What's the deal?"

"You know nothing. Here, it was only the beginning."

"Where you wanted to try out that poison you conjured up? What did you promise them to make them drink it?"

"This conversation is utterly pointless." Beaumont gave the agent a grin, as if the next words were a joke they both shared. "It's happening all over the world as we speak. Judgment Day has come."

Agent Cornell took up a more comfortable position in his chair. "See, that's where you're mistaken. The reporter found all files on your hard drive. Except for here, no one died - but there have been a lot of arrests, including your friend Ralph. New Faith didn't last all that long, anyway."

"No!" The declaration of his defeat finally brought a rise out of Beaumont. He jumped to his feet, slamming his fists on the table, his cuffs clinking together. A uniformed officer was stepping towards him, but he'd already sunk back into the chair.

"You're lying," he hissed.

"You betrayed them. A lot of them finally understood that."

The look Beaumont flashed the agent was of pure hate.

"So we meet again." Lindsay deliberately let the chair scrape over the floor. She took her time to sit down. "Didn't think that'd happen, did you?"

"You're not FBI. This is none of your business."

"You murdered twelve people in my jurisdiction. That makes it my business."

She had taken her time thinking about her approach for Beaumont, and she needed it to be cool and detached. She couldn't allow any thought of Cindy now.

"I didn't murder them. They gave their lives willingly."

"I guess you can see that potential in people, then."

"That's right. Cindy Thomas would have never made it to the introductory year."

Thank. God.

"Let's talk about someone who seemed to be more interesting to you. Someone who was very familiar with the concept of sin, and measures against it. Did he have that potential?"

"You've got to understand, Inspector, that I protect the people under my roof. The secrets that they tell me are safe with me. I don't betray them."

"One killer protecting the secrets of another?"

The pieces were finally beginning to fall into place. Beaumont was aware of the lives the New Faith members had outside the compound - if HM had been there, he knew it all. And Beaumont knew damn well who she was talking about.

"Look, unlikely as it seems, you could still get a deal. You saw him, talked to him. You probably know where he is now."

As much as this man annoyed her, he could possibly help bring this case to an earlier end than they all could have hoped. It was pretty much a deal with the devil, but it was their best bet to stop HM at the moment.

There was silence for long minutes, before Beaumont said, "I hadn't moved here yet. I don't remember his name, but I gave him one of our Bibles before he went. I'm guessing he used it for his own, twisted purposes."

Lindsay knew he wasn't going to give her any more on the mysterious New Faith visitor. She felt like she was going to be sick, spending one more minute in the room with him.

"Like you didn't."

She pushed herself off from the chair and left.

There was bound to be a survivor of the New Faith disaster who remembered the man who used the community to prepare murder. Little could he have known about how appropriate the company had been.

One day bled into another, more interrogations, little sleep, hours at the hospital, until it was finally determined that Cindy could return home. She had been a lot more lucid, but still very groggy, so Lindsay kept evading the subject of what had happened on the New Faith compound.

In fact, Cindy had been hardly awake enough to agree to come home with Lindsay temporarily. While the pain and the nausea were receding, Luke had warned her that she'd still be exhausted. No kidding. As Lindsay got her settled into the guest room, Martha's enthusiastic welcome nearly made her topple over.

"Hey. No getting horizontal before I say so." As she wrapped her arms around Cindy's waist, Lindsay was struck by the fact that she had lost quite a bit of weight. She had plans to counter that.

Cindy leaned into her for a moment, giving her a tired smile. "Good luck with that."

It was the first time in a while that Lindsay could really bring herself to believe they were going to be alright. Despite the fact no one seemed to remember the man who Zack had been talking about with Cindy, the conversation she'd had with Tom this morning had been no fun, and there'd been a bouquet of white roses delivered to her desk at the station.

She allowed herself a moment to let it all slide, gently helping Cindy down onto the freshly made bed, as she listened to the muted sounds of Jill and Claire making coffee in the kitchen.

"So. Scott covered the New Faith?"

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." Cindy sighed, pulling the covers up to her neck. "I saw he even sent a card."

"This is probably not how he wanted to get to the story."

"You never know," Cindy muttered, and Lindsay felt overjoyed at this hint of her spirits returning. She should have known that the moment wouldn't last long, because there were too many questions still open. "Did you hear anything from Sarah? I think she was really pissed at me."

Lindsay pulled herself a chair and sat down slowly, moments in which she was fumbling for the right words to explain. In the kitchen, Claire was laughing about something Jill had just said. Cindy was watching her intently. "Linz?"

"You know Beaumont and the few who helped him, tried to burn down the main house. A few people were injured, but it's almost a miracle no one died in the fire."

Cindy reached out a hand, and Lindsay took it, holding it in both of hers. "People died, though, because they did exactly what Beaumont asked of them."

Cindy swallowed hard, probably thinking of NF members she'd met. "You saw them?"

"Yes, I saw them."

"I'm so sorry. You wouldn't have even been there if it wasn't for me."

"You don't know that." Lindsay's thoughts wandered back to that night, halting not on the violence erupting, the encounter with Beaumont, or her fear of what was going on with Cindy. She saw herself back in the schoolroom. The necklace.

"Cindy..."

"Did you hear anything about Sarah? Or Chelsea?"

Lindsay just squeezed her hand tighter, waiting for the horrible truth to sink in, hoping it would do so without the words she found herself unable to form.

"No. I told her to leave!"

"She made a different choice... for her and her daughter."

"No, this doesn't make sense at all," Cindy said angrily. "Chelsea escapes the shooting only to-- are you sure it was her?"

"I saw the necklace."

Lindsay had to blink back tears of her own as she leaned forward and held her lover close, letting her cry. She heard soft footsteps approaching, and Lindsay was grateful for the presence of her friends. They both needed them here, now.

After long moments, Cindy finally drew back, wiping her tear-streaked face. "Oh my God," she said.

"What is it? Do you need something?"

"Zack... what he said about the guy, that he claimed the Law of Man wasn't always enough. What if he meant that literally? What if he is working in law enforcement?"

Lindsay turned to see Claire and Jill's alarmed looks, she herself wanting to deny the possibility that seemed so logical after all, and so much worse than the theories they'd had before. It meant access to files, possibly evidence.

It meant the Hallelujah Man was probably aware of their every step.

It was an evening like many, lately.

In the relative safety of her apartment, with the most important person in her life close to her, Lindsay still felt listless, her thoughts revolving around more than their newest theory of HM's background.

Cindy had done some reading, but had at some point fallen asleep next to her, so Lindsay stayed in the same spot, not wanting to wake her. Most of the symptoms had disappeared over time, just as the doctors had predicted. She still kept going back and wishing she could have somehow kept Cindy from taking that assignment, because she would have never gotten sick in the first place. She'd been run-down and tired before, but it was now clear that the virus had spread within the community, as more survivors of the New Faith disaster had obtained the disease.

Cindy still got tired quickly, and occasionally the headaches returned. It made Lindsay weary, too, to think of how much time had passed once more since they had vowed to take some time off, to be together.

Every dead body in between had made them reconsider, but how many second chances did you really get? Life could turn out to be damn short.

Lindsay held her sleeping lover closer to her, trying to breathe around the lump in her throat. All the doctors' reassurances couldn't keep the fear from rushing in every time she remembered the night at the hospital, when Cindy had been so sick she hadn't recognized her. She'd never told her.

Tracing her fingers over soft red strands, the touch more a comfort to her than to the oblivious recipient of the caress, her thoughts wandered back to Beatrice Lazar, the nature of loss, and the one that they shared.

Lazar would most likely lose custody of her son. She'd lost a lover who had been trying to save her from the clutches of New Faith. And - this.

In comparison, Lindsay knew she was so much better off. She hadn't lost everything, though it had been too damn close - again. She knew what it was like to lose a loved one; the bittersweet memories that remained, a barely healed wound over time - and she knew that this time, she wouldn't ever be able to go through it again.

Responsibility was actually kind of a selfish notion. Because now that she'd let her guard down, let Cindy in in every sense of the word, she couldn't imagine not having her in her life.

Trying to shake these dire thoughts, she reached out to pick up the Bible Cindy had left open on the table. There'd been a lot of scripture reading these past months, and when you thought about the reason for it, it was almost obscene. The Hallelujah Man, Kyle Graham and the poisonous social environment that had made him the way he was, Beaumont and his so-called New Faith, they had all twisted it for their own purposes.

Cindy had put a bright pink Post-it note on the page to mark a passage. Curious, Lindsay read: *"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay..."* And she began to understand that this wasn't any research for their case. *"Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me,"* from the Book of Ruth.

Lindsay had never drawn much comfort from religion; if anything, she got to see the results of its

severe misinterpretation, but reading these words now, there was a moment of understanding and acceptance for those whose beliefs carried them. Those who didn't try to force them on others.

These words, knowing that Cindy had sought them out intentionally, actually were a great comfort. With a smile, she closed the Bible and laid it back on the table, then gently shook her lover awake. "Hey. Time to get you to bed."

"I guess it is." Cindy hid a yawn behind her hand. "I'm sorry for conking out on you." There was a variety of emotions behind the apology. Cindy hated not being able to work full time yet. Among the many things they shared, impatience was one.

Lindsay cupped the side of her face in her hand, then leaned over to kiss her softly. "It's okay. I got some reading done." She had to laugh, because the look of suspicion on Cindy's face was just too cute.

Two weeks later...

"What are you thinking?" Cindy asked curiously. The smug grin on Lindsay's face, as she leaned back against the pillow, hands linked behind her head, told it all.

"Thinking... would require higher brain functions. I guess I'm not capable of that at the moment."

Cindy drank in the sight of her lover, all relaxed and unselfconsciously sexy. All hers. She felt so happy it almost hurt, victorious; she'd finally reached the point to beat the illness back, a moment she had often enough feared would never come. But it had.

"I'd love to think I had something to do with that."

She settled into Lindsay's arms again, resting her head on her chest. Cindy would have been okay with just going to sleep like this, but when Lindsay spoke up again, it sounded too serious to dismiss.

"Cindy, I need to tell you something."

She could swear her heart had just missed a beat. It was now thudding uncomfortably, threatening to beat out of her chest. Slowly, she lifted her head to look at Lindsay.

"Pete is back in San Francisco. He came to see me before you went inside."

"Oh. Really."

Hadn't she just known that subject would come up again? *And did he try again while I was on the inside?*

Lindsay sighed, and it wasn't until she spoke again that Cindy let out the breath she'd been holding. "He's got this weird idea that we'll get back together... I had to set him straight." She laughed a little at her own, unintended pun. "You know what I mean. I won't change my mind. I just hope he got it this time, at least I haven't seen him since."

Finally, those were the words she'd been needing to hear.

With the tension evaporating from her body so suddenly, Cindy was glad she was already lying down. "That's good."

Her thoughts went back to the moments in the parking garage. He most certainly had not gotten it - but that was his problem, not theirs. She decided that she didn't need to share what had happened that day, his crazy idea that she might help him. She'd been upset at the time, but it didn't matter anymore. Much worse, she'd been worrying for so long and waiting for Lindsay to come forward, when she just could have asked. She wouldn't make that mistake again. So much could happen in a heartbeat, and there'd be no more occasions to redeem what was lost.

"Hey. You didn't think I'd want him back?"

"No way," Cindy said too quickly, the blush creeping into her face betraying her words.

Lindsay sighed and turned to her, regarding her thoughtfully. "Okay, you asked for this. Pete - aside from him turning into an arrogant jerk lately - he was the perfect guy."

Cindy clung to the fact that she'd used the past tense there, otherwise her words would have been a blow.

"Or that's what it looked like on the surface. I was mostly in love with the idea of what we possibly could be, and it was a welcome distraction. Because there was someone else I cared for so damn much it scared the hell out of me. And I can't believe you made me say this out loud."

Cindy smiled, while at the same time her vision was slightly blurring. "Say what?"

"I love you."

"I'm not sure I got that right. Could you say it again?"

An instant later, Lindsay was above her, her own smile somewhat predatory as she lowered her body over Cindy's, the sensation of skin to skin a sudden shock of pleasure. "Maybe if I show you? That'd be okay?"

They laughed together, happily distracted from the worries of the world before Cindy whispered, "Very much so," and she pulled Lindsay down for a kiss.

They were just about to turn off the light, when a distinct sound interrupted the silence.

Cindy reached over her to the nightstand and picked up the cell phone. She flipped it open, and after one look at the caller ID, said, "Boxer."

Lindsay shook her head at her, but her dark eyes were full of mischief, and suggestion. Cindy gave her a smile which she hoped to be sexy. Giddy was probably more like it. "Hi, Jill. What's up?"

That Jill didn't call her on the joke should have been the first indication. "Jill?" Listening closely, Cindy realized her friend was crying even before she spoke.

"I'm sorry, it's late, and... is Lindsay there?"

Cindy felt inexplicably ashamed for her goofing around. Lindsay had picked up on the abrupt shift of her mood, watching her intently.

"Sure. I'll put her--"

"No, don't bother. Please, just tell her... tell her that William Carter has been arrested on assault charges. I need to see her at the Hall, my office."

"But don't you want to talk to--" Jill had hung up on her before Cindy could finish the sentence. She shivered, a bad feeling rising within like a premonition.

"Jill says to tell you that a William Carter has been arrested. Assault..." She broke off when she saw Lindsay go pale.

"*Damn* it!" The sentiment was obviously more anger than shock.

Without giving any further explanation, she was out of bed, reaching for her clothes, moving at a speed that had Cindy blinking.

"Who is this guy?" And why was Jill crying so hard she needed to break off the phone call?

Cindy had expected Lindsay to elaborate, but it didn't happen. "Bad news," she said darkly.

There were no coincidences in life, just good and bad timing.

Cindy had the feeling that the reappearance of the mysterious William Carter at this point was seriously bad timing.

FADE TO BLACK



REPEAT OFFENDER

The Episode 10: Repeat Offender

INTRO/TEASER

It was well past seven thirty in the evening when Deputy District Attorney Jill Bernhardt tossed her pen on the desk and pinched the bridge of her nose in a feeble attempt to alleviate the pressure that had been building behind her tired eyes.

“Bernhardt, go home.” Denise Kwon’s voice broke the silence of the relatively deserted fifth floor.

Slightly startled, Jill looked up to find her boss leaning against the bookcase just inside her doorway. “Jesus Denise, you scared the crap out of me. How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to see that you’re exhausted. You’re of no use to me if you can’t keep your eyes open in court. Now go home, I’ll see you on Monday.”

Jill opened her mouth to deny the other woman’s claim, but before she could utter a single word, Denise had turned on her heel and left the office, leaving the DDA to stare at the empty doorway.

“They must be having a snowball fight in Hell right now, but who am I to argue,” she mumbled to herself as she reached under her desk to grab her purse. With a soft sigh, she pushed to her feet and started for the door. She couldn’t wait to crawl under the covers of her bed, but little did she know, her night was only just beginning.

As she rounded the corner that led to the bank of elevators, Jill heard the muffled ringing of her cell phone, and digging it from the bottom of her bag, she glanced at the caller ID, expecting either Lindsay or Cindy. Surprised when she didn’t recognize the number, she answered it anyway, her professional tone automatic.

“Bernhardt.”

“Hello Jill, it’s Nicole Honeycutt. I was wondering if you might have a bit of time to meet me for drinks tonight. I have something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“If this is about one of my cases...” Jill started, not in the mood to discuss anything with the other attorney, especially if it was case-related.

“No, this has nothing to do with a case,” Honeycutt interrupted smoothly, before the other woman could go off on her. She’d been expecting resistance from the DDA, but hoped her carefully constructed plan would at least earn her a face-to-face meeting.

“What? Did you max out your credit cards on male escorts? If you’re looking for a date, try the phonebook,” Jill snipped, inwardly pleased with her ability to formulate a witty, well-aimed remark and especially in her exhausted state.

“Ouch, so I guess it’s safe to assume you’re still mad about the Dow trial.”

“Mad, why would I be mad? You only tried to ruin my career. Just what could you possibly want to talk to me about anyway?” Jill didn’t bother trying to hide her irritation, although if she were perfectly honest with herself, she was all kinds of curious as to why Honeycutt was seeking her out, which was precisely why she hadn’t already hung up on the other woman.

“Well, if you really want to find out I suggest you meet me in . . . let’s say a half hour at the Element Lounge? I reserved a table,” was the curt reply. Nicole smiled to herself; she knew Jill wouldn’t be able to resist not knowing why she’d called.

“What the hell, I could use a drink. That’s on Geary, right?” Jill relented, allowing her curiosity to get the better of her.

“Yes, between Van Ness and Polk. Just tell them you’re with me. See you soon.”

Twenty minutes later, Jill arrived at Element and was quickly escorted to a private booth where Nicole Honeycutt sat in her designer suit sipping on a dirty martini.

“Jill, so nice to see you.” Honeycutt motioned to the booth opposite where she was sitting. “Have a seat, won’t you?”

“Seeing as how the last time we saw each other you were trying to make me sound like some kind of whore, I can’t really say the feeling is mutual, but I never turn down a free drink,” Jill quipped as she eased into the booth and tossed her purse on the seat next to her.

“I guess I deserved that, but in the end it was my reputation that ended up suffering, thanks to that damn reporter.”

Jill couldn’t stop - nor did she care to - the smile that spread across her face at the mention of Cindy’s antics in the courtroom. Nicole had been completely blindsided.

“You know it was nothing personal, right?” Honeycutt assured as she motioned their server over to the table.

“Evening ladies, my name is Kristie. What can I get for you tonight?” the pretty brunette asked as she smiled sweetly at Jill, her eyes straying momentarily to the undone top

button of the DDA's white silk blouse and, specifically, the creamy expanse of skin on display for all to see.

Noting just where the waitress was looking, Jill smiled back, ordered herself a bourbon, and waited for the young woman to leave, before returning her attention back to Honeycutt.

"So, as much as I enjoy a free cocktail, I'm curious as to why exactly you wanted to see me."

"Promise you'll hear me out before answering."

"Okay..."

"I've had my eye on you for a while. A ninety-eight percent conviction rate on cases where you were lead, your dedication to the job..." Honeycutt began, pausing momentarily as the waitress returned with Jill's bourbon.

"Thanks, Kristie," said Jill, offering up a wink to the younger woman as she reached for her glass.

"No problem, you need anything else just let me know...and I do mean anything." She smiled seductively at Jill, her green eyes sparkling even in the dim light of the club.

"I'll be sure to do that," Jill purred, enjoying the flirtatious innuendo. She couldn't help but watch as the younger woman walked away. "Nice ass," she commented quietly, more to herself than her tablemate.

"Wow, so I guess it's safe to assume you don't discriminate between the sexes as far as bedmates go." The redhead grinned around the rim of her martini glass, its wide lip not able to conceal her obvious amusement.

"Look, if you've invited me here to get more information on my sex life you can just..."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean anything by that. Honestly, I was just surprised is all," Nicole interjected before Jill could finish her train of thought. "I'll get right to the point, Jill; I asked you here to offer you a job." She quickly held up her hand to stop any interruptions to her proposal and continued, "Now before you turn me down, think about it. You work your ass off for that unappreciative bitch Kwon for a mere pittance. You're worth more than that. A lawyer as impressive as you is wasted in the DA's office. Think of all the people you can help working for the defense."

"You're joking right? The kinds of clients you represent are far from the type of people I want to help." Jill took a healthy sip of her bourbon. Just the thought of representing the same lowlifes she put away on a daily basis made her skin crawl.

“Doesn’t every person, guilty or innocent, deserve the best representation they can possibly get?” the defense attorney reasoned, knowing full well she’d need more than just a simple plea that everyone deserved justice to convince Jill.

“Yes, but I don’t think I’m the person you’re looking for.”

“I’ll triple what you are currently making, full health benefits, six weeks paid vacation, and as a sign-on bonus, I’ll even throw in a new Mercedes. If it makes you happy, you can even choose the cases you want to work.” With the loaded cards laid out on the table, Nicole sat back and waited, hoping the appealing package she’d presented would be enough to entice the DDA to accept the new position.

“You can’t be serious?” Jill replied, more than a little bit stunned at the generous offer.

“Dead serious, Bernhardt. I don’t want an answer right now though. Take some time and think about it. No hurry, you know where to find me when you decide.” Standing, she tossed a hundred dollar bill on the table and shouldered her purse. “I’ll leave you to your night; as much as I would love to stay and chat, I have a date. Stay and have another one or two on me. Maybe you can get lucky - our waitress hasn’t taken her eyes off you since you sat down.” Honeycutt grinned and then turned toward the bar, heading straight for a well-built hunk in an Armani suit.

Jill was so wrapped in thought she hadn’t noticed the woman standing next to her table until she spoke.

“I’m off in a half hour, will you still be here?” The waitress asked, hopefulness evident in her voice.

Two hours and more than a few drinks later, the two women stumbled into the alley behind the bar. It was dark and private, the only light coming from a single bulb just outside the door. Jill could smell the stench of garbage wafting from the bins a few feet away, but she ignored the atrocious odor, one that usually sent her scrambling away in favor of fresh, clean air, and focused her full attention on why she’d come into the alley in the first place. Pinning the younger woman against the brick wall, she kissed her hard, tasting the whiskey the brunette had been drinking as her tongue explored hungrily.

The soft moan that escaped Kristie’s lips was all that was needed to spur Jill’s already overactive libido into overdrive. With one quick motion, she lifted the waitress’ leg around her waist and thanked whichever god had been responsible for Kristie’s decision to wear a skirt – quick and easy access to wherever she chose to roam, just what she liked. Breaking the kiss and pulling away slightly, Jill looked into beautiful green eyes that mirrored her own need.

“Tell me you want me,” Jill purred as her hand roamed up a muscled thigh, her arousal increasing ten-fold when she realized Kristie wore thigh high stockings, her touch unexpectedly going from smooth silk to even smoother skin.

Pulling Jill even closer, Kristie captured her lips again in an almost bruising embrace. “I want you,” she practically moaned her reply as Jill eased away once again.

Unable to control the overwhelming need that coursed through her body, Jill shifted slightly, allowing enough room for her right hand to slip between their bodies. Once again, she found the younger woman’s kiss-swollen lips, kissing her roughly, as she expertly slipped her hand into silk panties. Quickly finding the warm wetness she was searching for, she snaked her other hand underneath Kristie’s white button-down blouse and zeroed in on a swollen nipple, tugging hard and rolling it between her fingers.

Trailing kisses down the brunette’s neck, Jill suddenly latched on to the creamy white skin and thrust her fingers deep inside welcoming warmth. Fast and furious, she continued her piston-like motion and smiled at how quickly the young woman began to tighten around her fingers. Moving to recapture Kristie’s lips, she increased the speed of her thrusts, sending the beautiful brunette over the edge. Jill reveled in the feeling as the younger woman’s body tensed and bucked against her. Continuing to support Kristie’s weight as she returned from her state of bliss, Jill cursed aloud at the realization that her phone had begun to ring.

“Damn it! I’m sorry, I really have to get that.” She reluctantly released her hold on the other woman and reached for her bag, which she’d haphazardly thrown at their feet when she trapped Kristie against the wall.

“Bernhardt,” she answered, hoping she’d been able conceal her arousal from her caller.

“Hello Ms. Bernhardt, this is Officer Mitchell, we have a man in custody for assault who is claiming to know you. He insisted I call you. His name is William Car...”

“William Carter,” Jill finished his sentence and swallowed hard. “I’ll be there shortly.” With a shaky hand, she snapped her phone closed and turned her attention back to Kristie. The warmth from her earlier arousal had suddenly vanished as if a bucketful of ice water had been poured over her head. She shivered, the thought leaving her feeling chilled to the bone.

“I’m sorry. I have to go. I’ll call you.” Jill smiled apologetically and gripped her purse. Without another word, she quickly headed for her car, leaving a stunned Kristie behind to gather herself and wonder if the blonde had meant what she’d said.

Once she was tucked safely inside her car, tears began to pool in Jill’s blue eyes, and she concentrated with all her might to get her trembling hands to dial Lindsay’s number. Laying her head against the seat, she closed her eyes and listened to the ringing, fully expecting to hear her friend’s usual business-like greeting.

"Boxer," Cindy's familiar voice answered, having already recognized Jill's number on the caller ID, and immediately started in on the conversation. "Hi, Jill. What's up?" Wondering when her friend was going to call her on her attempted joke, she listened carefully for a reply, but none was forthcoming.

"Jill?" asked Cindy, worry creeping in to her tone. She'd realized the other woman was crying even before Jill was finally able to form her words.

"I'm sorry, it's late, and... is Lindsay there?"

"Sure. I'll put her--"

"No, don't bother. Please, just tell her... um, tell her that William Carter has been arrested on assault charges. I need to see her at the Hall, my office."

"But don't you want to talk to--"

Jill hung up before Cindy could finish her sentence. Shivering slightly, Cindy felt a bad feeling rising within her, like a premonition of sorts, and turned toward her lounging lover.

"Jill said to tell you that a William Carter has been arrested. Assault..." She broke off her words when she saw Lindsay go pale.

"Damn it!" The expressed sentiment was obviously more anger than shock. Without giving any further explanation, Lindsay jumped out of bed and reached for her clothes, moving at a speed that had Cindy blinking.

"Who is this guy? And why was Jill crying so hard she needed to break off the phone call?" Cindy waited quietly, expecting Lindsay to elaborate, but it never happened.

"Bad news," Lindsay said in a dark tone, her long strides taking her through the bedroom door before Cindy could formulate any more questions.

ACT I

William Carter had worked a lifetime to get to this day. Twenty years as a NASCAR pit crew chief had allowed him a very comfortable retirement at age fifty-five. After years of constant travel and adventure, settling down into a quiet retirement was in no way going to be satisfying for him. Never one to just sit around, he and his wife had relocated to San Francisco eight months ago in the hopes of opening their own training facility for young drivers and mechanics. With the help of a partnership with his former employer,

NASCAR driver Mark McMurphy, he now stood at the edge of his dream, anxiously awaiting the opening festivities that would take place later that afternoon.

“Looks like it’s going to be a nice day.” Catherine Carter smiled lovingly at her husband, as she joined him at the edge of the racetrack. Her blue eyes sparkled brightly in the morning light, her fair skin flushed pink in the brisk January winds.

“We got lucky. No rain in the forecast.” He wrapped his arms around his wife and kissed her forehead, pulling back slightly to look into her eyes. “Mark’s plane will be landing in about an hour; I should probably head for the airport,” he informed his wife with a genuine air of regret. Even after twenty-three years of marriage, William Carter still found his wife beautiful and always hated to have to say goodbye, even for just a few hours, but to realize his lifetime dream, he knew he had to. A successful first day would be the telling tale and paramount to whether the business would sink or swim. In the end, however, it appeared all his worrying had been unfounded.

The grand opening of Carter-McMurphy Racing Academy had gone off without a hitch; the first semester was already at capacity, and thanks to the day’s festivities, the weekend kid’s camp sign-ups were filling fast with only a few slots left. After a long day of meet-and-greets and tours around the facility, Mark had convinced William that a night on the town was exactly what they needed. Not that it took much convincing after months of stressful planning and construction issues, and a night out with Mark McMurphy was never boring.

The two business partners ended up at a typical sports bar on a Friday night; crowded, with bad lighting, a few pool tables, and ESPN on every TV in the place.

“Well, it seems that our little business venture is going to be a success. Time to celebrate.” Mark slapped William on the back as they grabbed two seats at the bar.

“Too bad you have to fly out tomorrow morning. I was hoping we would be able to get in at least one game of golf. Cathy won’t go out with me if the temperature is less than 60 degrees,” William joked, a smile forming on his face in memory of just how he and his wife usually spent those chilly mornings instead of teeing off.

“You’re a lucky man, Billy, you know that? A beautiful wife who loves you and supports you in whatever you want to do. Hell, she basically worships the ground you walk on. A lot of guys would kill for that.” Mark spoke honestly, the pain of his own recent divorce only just starting to abate.

“Yeah, I know I’m lucky. I’m really sorry about you and Julie. I still can’t believe it.”

“Think about how I felt when I walked in on her and the pool guy. I mean really, the pool guy? Couldn’t she have been a little more original than that?”

“At least you were smart enough to get her to sign a pre-nup.” William tried to lighten his friend’s mood.

“I guess it was a good idea putting that infidelity clause in there. She left with nothing more than she came with. I just thank God we never had kids,” Mark replied as he took another swig of his beer.

“Yeah, I hear ya there; kids can complicate everything.”

“Why didn’t you and Cathy ever…” before Mark could finish his thought, he felt William jab him in the ribs with his elbow.

“Looks like we’re about to get company. Maybe they can help cheer you up.” William pointed out two scantily clad college girls heading directly toward them.

“Excuse me, aren’t you Mark McMurphy, the race car driver?” The well-endowed brunette in the too tight red top and skin tight jeans asked, as she ran her hand up his chest.

“Yeah, that would be me.” He smiled warmly and gestured to the empty bar seats. “You and your friend care to join us?”

“What the hell is going on, Linz? Why did I have to follow you here?” Cindy asked in concern as she got out of Maggie. Locking the door, she raced to catch up with Lindsay, who was already making her way to the parking garage’s elevator.

“Jill might need a ride home,” Lindsay offered in reply as she punched the up button on the panel in front of her.

“Who is this guy?” Cindy stepped in next to her girlfriend and pressed the issue further as they watched as the doors slowly closed.

“As much as I want to tell you everything, I really think that’s a question you need to ask Jill.”

“It’s that serious?” Cindy felt her stomach sink. If Lindsay was insisting that she hear the news from Jill, it had to be something grim and, more than likely, quite complicated. None of the club members ever had it easy when it came to secrets and problems from their past.

“Yeah, it’s that serious,” Lindsay conceded as she took Cindy’s hands into her own and faced her. “Don’t push her though, Cindy. She’ll tell you when she’s ready.”

Lindsay's cryptic response did little to help fight the inexplicable feeling of dread that had her insides tied in tight knots since answering Jill's call. As the doors quietly slid open, Cindy slipped her hands from her lover's and silently followed behind through the deserted hallway to Jill's office.

"Should I wait out here?" Cindy whispered as Lindsay knocked on the door twice before opening it. Tilting her head around the taller woman, she peered inside, her breath hitching at the sight of Jill sitting at her desk, her fingers threaded haphazardly through blonde hair as she rested her head in her hands. She looked broken.

"Maybe you..." Lindsay started to suggest that perhaps it would be better if Cindy waited in the hallway, but the younger woman had already darted around her, heading directly for Jill. However, she pulled up short when a blonde head snapped up and blue eyes fastened on her darker ones.

"What are you doing here? I asked for Lindsay," said Jill sharply, immediately regretting both her tone and her words when Cindy visibly flinched. She was so tired and stressed she didn't know if she was coming or going, but she did know Cindy hadn't done a single thing to deserve her wrath. "Damn it, I'm sorry." She swallowed around the lump that had been steadily growing in her throat since she'd gotten the phone call informing her of William Carter's arrest and softened her expression.

"I'm here. I brought Cindy along to drive you home." Lindsay eased forward and placed her hand on her lover's back, rubbing gentle, reassuring circles. She'd seen the hurt look on Cindy's face when Jill had snapped at her, and even though she knew Jill hadn't meant anything by her words, the overwhelming need to protect and comfort Cindy wouldn't allow her to react any differently.

"Oh no, I'm going with you," insisted Jill, her focus now on Lindsay as she struggled to her feet and reached for her purse. Her adrenalin was quickly wearing off, and her legs threatened to turn to liquid at any moment. She gripped the edge of the desk tightly to keep from toppling over.

It only took Lindsay a moment to assess the situation – Jill looked as if she was about to fall flat on her face. Stretching to her full height, she readied to stand her ground. "You're going home. I'll take care of this. You don't need to get involved."

"I want to make sure that son of a bitch doesn't worm his way out of this!"

If Cindy hadn't been looking directly at Jill, she'd have never believed the amount of vehemence and pure spite that had sprung from the other woman's lips. She had absolutely no idea who William Carter was, but she could already tell that she despised the man. Anyone that elicited that kind of reaction from Jill was definitely no good in her book either.

"Jill . . ."

“Don’t ‘Jill’ me, Linz. I’ve waited my entire life for someone to finally nail that bastard. I want my time to gloat.” Jill suddenly seemed stronger, almost as if a second wind had come her way and pushed her back up to stand firmly on her own two feet. She’d not be denied her chance to witness Carter’s fall from his high and mighty pedestal – one built solely on his lies.

Lindsay glanced briefly at Cindy and then looked over at a very determined Jill. She knew this was a battle she’d never win.

“All right, but I’m going to be with you every step of the way.”

“Me, too,” piped up Cindy without hesitation. She was ready to stand beside her friend despite having no real clue as to what she was offering her support for. Feeling two sets of eyes boring into her, she quickly amended her statement before her friends could demand that she stay behind. “Um . . . just to the station. I’ll wait in the lobby.”

Jill smiled slightly. “I’d expect no less.” Moving her gaze to Lindsay, she added, “From either of you.”

White linoleum, worn with age and excessive use, appeared almost gray under the fluorescent lights that lined the ceiling of the narrow lobby from its entrance to the tall, equally worn, oaken desk that stretched across the far end of the room. On each side, high-backed wooden benches had been securely fastened to the floor and placed strategically between doorways to maximize seating while still allowing for adequate passage into the different offices. Cindy sat on the edge of one such bench and leaned an elbow on its end as she stared across at the large bulletin board on the opposite wall.

The bench itself reminded the young reporter of a church pew, but that was as far as the analogy had gone as photos of America’s most wanted stared back at her instead of the usual sacred statues that graced the interiors of most churches. Rapists and murderers, who’d managed to escape the long arm of the law, were a far cry from Jesus, Mary, Joseph, or any other saintly statue for that matter. A chill ran down Cindy’s spine at the thought of another criminal who was still at large, one who just happened to use religion to serve his own twisted purposes. She instinctively wrapped her arms around her middle and glanced over at the closed door that led to the holding cells, wishing, not for the first time, that she’d been allowed to accompany Lindsay and Jill through the glass doors that seem to hold all the secrets.

She’d kept quiet on the drive over to the nearby precinct, which was actually an easy thing to do seeing as how Lindsay had ushered Jill into her Jeep and instructed her to follow. The two had driven away into the bowels of the twisting and turning garage with Cindy practically glued to Lindsay’s bumper. In her mind, it was the only way she could

keep close to a situation she had no control over, but that didn't stop her mind from churning with all sorts of possibilities.

Had William Carter been someone who'd committed a heinous crime, only to get off on some technicality? Had Jill fought tooth and nail to keep him behind bars, but then ended up having to stand helplessly by as he strolled through the doors of the Hall, a free man? Had he taunted the DDA with his words? Or perhaps done something worse?

Cindy sighed and shifted to a more comfortable position, her overactive imagination back and smoothly shifting gears. Or had Carter been an old lover of Jill's? Some guy who she'd fallen hopelessly in love with, promising her heart and soul until death do them part? Had he ripped her heart out and left her all alone to deal with the aftermath? Was he the reason Jill was so terrified of commitment?

Focusing her attention on the glass doors, she watched and waited. She'd give anything to know how Jill was faring.

"You sure you're up to this? No one would so much as bat an eye if you decided not to face him," said Lindsay, stopping just outside the last set of floor-to-ceiling bars that separated her and Jill from the holding cells. "I can tell him that you're not available," she paused long enough for her voice to drop to its lowest register, "*ever.*"

"Thanks, Linz," whispered Jill, reaching over to squeeze her friend's forearm. "But I'd rather tell him myself." Her pale coloring and shaky voice belied her words, but Lindsay held her tongue and smiled reassuringly as she nodded to the guard to unlock the steel-barred door. Placing her hand in the small of Jill's back, she guided her through the final barrier.

The walk to the end cells was eerily silent, save for the rhythmic clicking sound of Jill's heels against the patterned concrete floor. Lindsay could feel the tension radiating from the DDA as it slowly intensified with each step they took, but she remained silent, instead offering support through her touch.

Jill's ramrod-straight posture stiffened noticeably midway to their destination, but she continued forward, her head held high, determined to see this latest nightmare through to its end, an end that was now upon her as there were simply no more steps to take. With one final deep breath, Jill stopped in front of the last cell and turned to face the bars and the man she'd hoped to never have to lay eyes on again.

The interior of the cell was unlit, the two circular light fixtures, dangling from high above, extinguished due to the lateness of the hour and allowing for occupants of the holding cells to get a chance at some sleep. It took Jill several moments before her eyes were finally able to adjust and see into the darkness as the low lighting from the ceiling between the two rows of cells crept through the bars and projected just far enough to see

inside. She focused on the still figure lying on a narrow concrete bench that was affixed to the wall and studied features that had suddenly become crystal clear.

William Carter lay on his back with his knees bent and feet flat on the makeshift bed, the bench way too short to accommodate his tall stature. He appeared to have maintained his well-built physique, the only obvious change in his appearance the gray that now peppered his once midnight-colored hair. Jill shivered in memory of just how much he'd towered over her, dwarfing her smaller size, and she felt the cold tendrils of fear gripping at her wrists and ankles. She took an involuntary step backward just as dark green eyes shifted their gaze from the ceiling above to focus on her blue ones.

A rough, gravelly voice, ruined by too much smoke and drink, cut through the silence like a knife and had Jill inching further away, the delicate hairs on her arms and neck standing on end. She almost stopped breathing.

“About damn time you got here,” said Carter, swiveling his body around into a sitting position. He rubbed his face vigorously with his hands, before returning his full attention back to the DDA. “This place reeks of piss and is hotter than Hell.”

Jill spoke slowly and chose her words carefully, thankful to have somehow found her voice amid the anxiety that threatened to swallow her whole. She'd later realize she'd drawn her strength from the intense anger Lindsay had silently projected toward Carter – all in her name.

“Sounds like the perfect place for you, if you ask me.”

“Cut the crap, Jillian, and get me out of here. These trumped up charges are bogus,” said Carter calmly and in a non-threatening tone as he slowly pushed to his feet and moved toward the bars. His smooth, easy gait and calm demeanor made him look less intimidating, but Jill knew firsthand not to judge this particular book by its cover.

“According to the police report, a witness saw you strike her friend. And then you had to go and make matters worse by getting physical with the arresting officers. Certainly doesn't sound bogus to me.” Jill had taken a step closer to the bars, closer to Lindsay as well, but at least she'd made a bit of progress in confronting her fear.

“That little tramp? She's lying to cover her own ass, afraid her reputation will be tarnished if her friends and family find out she's nothing more than a whore. Both those girls were all over Mark, ready to screw him right there at the bar. It was me who suggested getting a room in the hotel next door. Hell, I saved their reputations,” said Carter, waving his hands in the air as he extolled on his magnanimous gesture.

His chosen words lit a fire inside of Jill, and she saw red.

“So, what were you doing in the alley?” Her anger brought her to the edge of the cell. “Oh, let me guess – you just happened to be passing by, heard crying, and went to

comfort the poor girl and her friend. Nothing happened though, right? Those girls made everything up, read too much into your act of kindness, and wanted you so badly they fantasized everything.”

Jill was breathing hard, her chest heaving with the surge of emotion. She felt trapped as the room seemed to close in around her, the walls threatening to crush her. She needed out of there; she needed air.

“Find someone else to sing your lies to. As far as I’m concerned, you can burn in Hell.”

Holding back the tears that threatened to escape, Jill forced herself to maintain eye contact with Carter for a long moment, before she turned and walked away. She quietly swallowed sob after sob as she made her way to the exit, ignoring his voice as he called out to her.

“Jillian! Jillian, come back here!” Carter pressed his body flush against the bars, trying to see the DDA, but she’d disappeared from view. Only her rapidly receding footsteps kept him apprised of her location until, finally, silence reigned. He was all alone – except for the tall brunette and the uninterested man in the cell across the way.

“Karma’s a real bitch sometimes,” drawled Lindsay, speaking her first words to the man she hated more than any other, including Kiss-Me-Not and the Hallelujah Man. “I can’t think of anyone who deserves it more than you.”

Carter clenched his jaw and stared at the dark-haired inspector. If she hadn’t shown up, he may have been able to talk Jillian into helping out, but the bitch had stood by like some kind of watchdog, threatening to attack if he stepped over the line. He wisely chose not to waste any words on her. Lindsay, however, wasn’t of the same mind.

“Don’t you *ever*, and I do mean *ever*, call Jill again.” She locked eyes on him, her lips curling into a feral smile. “If you do, I’ll spread the word in whatever prison you land in and let the other inmates know exactly what you are. Let’s see how you feel when the tables are turned.”

With one final look of disdain, Lindsay broke off eye contact and walked away. She’d follow through with her threat whether Carter abided by her warning or not.

The night sky was pitch black, without a single star to offer any kind of hope to those who sought it out. Cindy sighed dejectedly and stepped back toward the building’s entrance, pushing through the doors and retaking her seat on the bench. She’d gone outside seeking a sense of peace and calm, having already tried to keep her mind occupied by counting all the ceiling tiles and the floor ones, too. Not that Lindsay and Jill had been gone that long; it was just that the reporter was out of sorts; her worry for Jill was so great that she’d not been able to focus on anything else.

A flicker of movement behind interior glass doors caught Cindy's attention, and she flew to her feet when she spotted Jill on the other side. Her worry increased tenfold when she got a good look at her friend's lost expression etched on a pale, pasty complexion, and she wished, for about the hundredth time since she'd arrived at the precinct, that William Carter had chosen to break the law in some other city.

Jill burst through the doors and didn't break stride as she headed directly for the restrooms across the hallway. Her stomach roiled violently, and she felt as nauseous as she'd ever been in her life, even when compared to gruesome crime scenes that were notorious for making her green around the gills. She barely made it inside a restroom stall, and falling to her knees, lost every drop of alcohol she'd consumed earlier as well as the bag of chips she'd gotten out of the vending machine – her makeshift dinner when she'd been too busy to go out and get something more substantial.

“Jill?” asked Cindy, pushing the door open and standing half-in and half-out of the room as she kept an eye out for Lindsay. A retching sound drew her focus to the center stall, and she released her hold on the door and hurried inside. Racing through the swinging stall door, she leaned over and placed a gentle hand on the nape of Jill's neck, rubbing the damp, clammy skin soothingly. “You okay?”

If Jill hadn't felt like death warmed over, she'd have rolled her eyes dramatically and offered up the perfect comeback. Instead, she closed her watery eyes and leaned into Cindy's welcomed touch. She just wanted this day to end.

“Hey, you guys in here?” asked Lindsay, sticking her head in the doorway and glancing around the room. She burst forward as if she'd been shot out of a cannon when she'd spotted one of Cindy's better features poking out from the middle stall. “Jesus, what happened?”

“You tell me,” said Cindy, swiveling her head around, still a bit miffed that she hadn't a clue as to what was going on. She did, however, continue her soothing, stroking motion. Now wasn't the time to be petty. “We need to take Jill home, but I don't think she should stay by herself.”

Jill stirred at hearing the exchange. “Just take me home. I'll be fine.” She placed an unsteady hand on the toilet seat to hoist herself up, but Cindy had already slipped an arm underneath her friend's and gently lifted as she stood to her full height. Jill finally managed to get her feet under her and pushed the rest of the way up. She felt like a newborn colt standing for the first time, but at least she was standing. Blowing out a shaky breath, she allowed Cindy to lead her out of the close quarters where Lindsay stood by, waiting to take over.

“You're going to my place, no arguments,” said Lindsay, wrapping a protective arm around her friend, and with Cindy bracketing Jill's other side, the pair started for the door

as a grumbling DDA struggled to keep pace. The last thing she wanted was to infringe upon her friends' time together.

"Just drop me off at Claire's. I can crash on the couch."

"Uh uh, Claire had a date tonight, and I'm not going to be the one to interrupt her if she happened to get lucky," said Cindy, opening the restroom door for the trio to pass through. She started forward but was jerked to a stop. She could've pulled a stunned, weak Jill along with her, but Lindsay had planted both feet on the floor and wasn't budging.

"A date?" asked Lindsay, sliding her hand to Jill's waist just in case the DDA felt faint. "What do you mean a date?"

Cindy looked into dark eyes filled with concern and felt a twinge of guilt for her rather poor attempt at humor. "Ed... her date was with Ed."

"Don't scare us like that," said Lindsay as she started forward once again. Jill just shook her head and followed along. It looked like she was going to Lindsay's apartment after all. Keeping her eye on the tiled floor, she concentrated on her steps.

As they arrived at the exit to the precinct, Cindy reached out to push the door open when a stunning blonde hurried up the front steps and yanked the door back. She held it open wide and waited for the three women to clear the opening, before she stepped through, followed by a gentleman in a three-piece suit, and headed for the desk sergeant. Cindy turned back to thank the sharply dressed woman, but the blonde had already walked away.

"Okay," said Lindsay, veering towards Cindy's car, "I need to check with the arresting officers. I'll meet you two back at my place in about half an hour."

"Sounds like a plan," replied Cindy, easing away from Jill's side to open the passenger door. Jill stepped from Lindsay's grasp and climbed inside, gratefully sinking into the seat. She fumbled with her seat belt as Lindsay shut the door and turned toward Cindy.

"I'll be as quick as I can." She looked through the tempered glass at Jill. "See if you can get her to eat something. Maybe some soup and crackers."

"I can handle Jill, but I need you to promise to fill me in on this Carter character. I'm tired of being in the dark."

"I promise." Lindsay hoped that Jill might fill in some of the blanks on the ride over to her apartment, but if not, she planned to fully disclose everything to Cindy later. Her lover had definitely earned the right to know.

With a firm nod, Cindy jogged around her car and opened her door. She gave Lindsay a quick wink before disappearing inside and fastening her seat belt. Easing from the curb, she drove away from the precinct.

Lindsay waited until Maggie's taillights disappeared from view, before she finally turned and headed back inside the precinct. She furrowed her brow when she caught the tail end of the desk sergeant's words to the two individuals standing in front of his desk.

"...Mr. Carter can be released on ROR. A summons to appear in court to face the charges for assaulting a police officer will be mailed out and will denote the time and date for his appearance. The charges for the assault on Miss Anderson are still pending at this time since the victim hasn't been able to give her statement." The mostly gray haired police officer glanced over at the well-dressed lawyer. "Your attorney will need to contact the DA's office for more information."

"I'll be sure to do that," said Malcolm Abbott, knowing full well what the procedures were, but it was late and he really wasn't in the mood to dress down a desk sergeant. His presence tonight hadn't really been necessary anyway; he'd only come along with Mrs. Carter as a favor to his old friend, Mark McMurphy.

"DA's office, you say? My daughter works for the DA, she's . . ."

Before Catherine Carter could divulge the name of her daughter, a low gravelly voice sounded from behind her, the speaker edging closer and closer with each word.

"You don't have a daughter. You gave her up for a lying, abusive bastard. Well, he's going to get his now. I'm going to personally see to it." Lindsay towered over the shorter woman, and despite the obvious similarities to her daughter, she ignored blue eyes that so closely mirrored Jill's and forged ahead. "Still think he's innocent?"

"Now wait just a minute," said Malcom Abbott, stepping between the intimidating inspector and his client's wife. "You can't threaten her like that. What's your badge number?"

Lindsay clenched her jaw and pushed her leather jacket aside, revealing a shiny, gold shield. She rattled off the number etched along its edge from memory and then eased her jacket back into place. It wouldn't be the first letter of reprimand she'd ever received, and it certainly wouldn't be the last, but one thing was for certain, it would be the most satisfying.

"Tell your husband not to get used to life outside. It'll make it that much harder when he has to go back in."

Turning on her booted heel, Lindsay headed for the door.

ACT II

Sliding her key into the deadbolt, Cindy unlocked the door and eased it open, reaching a hand inside and feeling around for the light switch. A quick flick of her finger and the room was awash in a soft glow, revealing a silently waiting Martha. The border collie sat quietly on her haunches and stared at the newcomers, her tail wagging slightly as she recognized the redheaded woman's scent. Her eyes immediately fell on Cindy's hands, searching for any sign of a white paper bag that usually meant a nice, juicy bone.

"Hey girl, sorry I don't have anything for you tonight," said Cindy apologetically as she moved to the side to allow Jill to enter. Pushing the door closed when the other woman stepped across the threshold, she took the blonde by the elbow and ushered her to the couch. "Why don't you lie down for a bit while I heat up some soup?"

"I'm not really hungry," lied Jill, her stomach practically eating away at itself. She felt weak and dizzy, mostly due to lack of nourishment, but she was scared she'd only lose anything she tried to force down.

Cindy sat next to her friend and took hold of a hand that had lost all its warmth. "You've got to eat something. You're going to get sick." She cradled Jill's hand between her two palms and rubbed gently. "I think you'd feel better if you changed out of those clothes, too. There's a pair of sweats on the second shelf in Lindsay's closet and some socks in the top drawer of her dresser. I'll fix you something light to eat while you change."

Jill opened her mouth to protest but closed it just as quickly. It would feel good to put on something comfortable, and it certainly wouldn't hurt to eat a spoonful or two of soup to pacify Cindy. Then maybe the younger woman would leave her alone, and she could curl up on the couch and try to sleep away the bad memories.

"Okay, but just a small cup." She slowly eased to her feet and started toward the bedroom, calling over her shoulder, "Don't come back with a tureen of the stuff either." Jill knew Cindy all too well; the girl didn't know the meaning of moderation.

"Deal," said Cindy, standing and moving in the other direction. "Meet me in the kitchen after you've changed." With a huge smile, she hurried into the other room, Martha right on her heels.

In the bedroom, Jill hesitated in the doorway before moving further into the room. She ignored the unmade bed, its covers thrown back carelessly and its pillows nestled closely together, and tried not to imagine what she'd interrupted when she'd made her call earlier. She knew one thing for certain though, it had held much more meaning than the half-drunken encounter she'd had in the alleyway with Kristie. It was little consolation that she'd at least remembered the woman's name.

Pushing her troubled thoughts away, she stepped in front of the open closet and zeroed in on the sweats Cindy had referred to, grinning slightly as she lifted the pants free and held them up in front of her – average length and fairly new, definitely not Lindsay’s. She efficiently stripped down to her silky bra and panties and slipped into the comfortable sweats, making a quick stop at the dresser on the way out to grab a pair of socks. Her nose, and specifically the aroma that had wafted her way, led her directly to the kitchen.

“That doesn’t smell like any canned soup I’ve ever had,” said Jill, following the enticing scent to stand next to Cindy. “Is that homemade?” She stared down into the small pot, ninety-nine percent certain that neither Campbells nor Progresso had been responsible for its contents.

“Lindsay doesn’t like canned soup,” offered Cindy, ladling a scoop of the hot soup into a small bowl. She cradled it carefully as she carried it to the table.

Martha watched from the doorway as the blonde human followed her new person. The woman called Jill wore an expression much like Martha always did whenever there was a bone involved.

“Thanks for coming with Catherine to the precinct. I really appreciate it.”

Standing beside a dark blue sedan, William Carter held his wife close as he shook Malcolm Abbot’s hand. He knew his release had been sped up because of the attorney’s presence and was grateful to the man for getting him out sooner than he’d expected.

“I was glad to be of service,” said Abbott, returning the firm handshake. “I’ll contact the DA’s office tomorrow, and we’ll get this all sorted out.”

“I don’t know why that girl lied. She certainly was happy when Mark was buying her and her friend all those drinks.” Carter shook his head. “Guess she figured to take things further and got mad when Mark didn’t go along.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Carter; no one’s going to believe a drunken college student over a world-class race car driver. It’s obvious she’s just out to try to ruin his reputation.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it?” said Catherine with a soft sigh. “People are always out to get the good guys.”

Abbott offered up a smug grin. “That’s why there are lawyers like me who make certain they don’t get away with it. Now, you two go on home and don’t worry. I’ll make this, and the scuffle with the police officer, go away.”

“Thank you, Mr. Abbott; thank you so much.” Catherine smiled her thanks as she watched the attorney walk away.

“So, Mrs. Carter, what do you say we go home?”

Pushing up on her toes, Catherine kissed him sweetly.

“Now I know why Lindsay keeps you around,” teased Jill as she stretched out on the sofa. She’d eaten two bowls of Cindy’s homemade soup, before retiring to the den and the comfortable couch.

“Somebody has to make sure she’s fed.” Cindy smiled and reached down to pat Martha on the head, the dog having forgiven her for not bringing home a treat. Of course, the two dog biscuits had helped soothe most of the pain away.

Jill closed her eyes and sighed tiredly, hoping to finally get some much needed rest, but the image of William Carter, lying in the holding cell, pushed its way forward, and in a single second, destroyed everything Cindy had accomplished in ridding her conscience of his memory. She shivered uncontrollably.

“Are you cold? Do you need a blanket?” asked Cindy, reaching for the neatly folded afghan that lay on the back of her chair. She’d moved to the couch and had already thrown the cover over Jill before the other woman could respond.

“Thanks,” whispered Jill, burrowing under the blanket and purposefully keeping her eyes closed in hopes that her friend would decide to leave her to sleep. But a touch to her hand and the quiet rustling of Cindy situating herself on the floor next to the sofa told the DDA that the young woman wasn’t going away.

“Jill, please tell me what’s going on with you. I want to help, but I can’t if I don’t know what I’m fighting against.” Cindy spoke softly and with emotion. “Trust me. Please?”

Biting down on the edge of her lip, Jill opened her eyes and started when she felt a weight on her legs. She looked down the length of her body to see Martha’s brown eyes staring back at her. The dog kept eye contact as she slowly inched forward, stopping only when her head was resting on Jill’s chest.

“Carter’s been charged with assaulting a young college girl,” said Jill softly, reaching out to run her fingers through Martha’s soft fur. “He said he didn’t touch her, that she’d been drinking and made the whole thing up.”

Cindy sat perfectly still, too scared to move or say anything that might distract her friend. Instead, she offered her support with a gentle squeeze of her hand, the change in touch seeming to spur Jill on.

“I know better though; I know what he did. He’s the one who’s lying. He’s the one who pushed his body hard against hers and whispered how *special* she was as he fondled her and forced himself inside of her.”

A single tear eased its way to the corner of Jill’s eye, holding steady until it finally lost its battle with gravity and spilled over, slowly falling down a pale, smooth cheek. Cindy instinctively reached out and caught the droplet before it could roll off the edge of her friend’s jaw, and gripping Jill’s hand tightly, she silently stood guard against the threat of more. She hadn’t realized she’d need to guard against her own tears as well.

“He’s my stepfather, Cindy.”

Pulling her Jeep behind Cindy’s car, Lindsay switched off the ignition and rested her head against the seat. She hadn’t be able to track down Carter’s arresting officers as they’d been called for backup on a robbery gone bad that had left one policeman injured and a suspect dead, but she figured time was no longer of the essence anyway, seeing as how Carter had made bail. She just had to make certain that the assault charges stuck and that Carter’s attorney couldn’t poke any holes in the victim’s story. Jill would be devastated if the bastard managed to beat the charges leveled against him.

As she reached for the door handle, she paused, her thoughts turning to her encounter with Jill’s mother. It was strange how, had she accidentally run across the woman on the street, she’d probably not have made the connection. But once she’d overheard the woman, known who the woman was, the similarities between her and Jill had been eerily uncanny. Although, considering their blood relationship, Lindsay shouldn’t have been surprised.

It was just that she already had a visual image of Catherine Carter in her mind: tall, thin, with high eyebrows, drooping eyelids that covered coal black eyes, a turned up nose and pointy chin, and symmetrically two-toned hair - black on one side and white on the other. In other words, a true-to-life Cruella de Vil. With the Disney character imprinted firmly in her head, Lindsay crawled from her vehicle and started toward her building; Catherine Carter would always be Cruella to her.

Half-way up the sidewalk, she glanced up at the light that glowed softly from her apartment window and wondered how Jill was faring and if she’d confided in Cindy. Lindsay would follow through with her promise to divulge the details of Jill’s painful past, but she truly believed it needed to come from Jill. Cindy needed to know that every member of the club trusted her enough to reveal even the darkest moments of their past. Lord knows Lindsay was trying; it was a constant uphill battle to force herself to confide in her lover, but she was improving every day, or at least in her mind she had.

Lindsay eased her apartment door open and peeked inside, before stepping into the room. Martha raised her head from Jill’s chest to eye the intruder, but she softly laid it back

down when she recognized her master. Cindy, on the other hand, hadn't noticed her lover's presence, so focused on the blonde head that lay in her lap as she gently eased a lock of hair from the sleeping woman's forehead.

Tip-toeing toward the touching scene, Lindsay whispered softly, "Did you get her to eat something?"

Cindy glanced up and smiled sadly. "Yeah, I fed her some of your soup." She looked back down at Jill. "She told me about William Carter."

Lindsay closed the distance and crouched down next to the couch, placing a hand on Cindy's knee. "She's been through so much, but she made it. Jill's a survivor."

"Yeah, but she shouldn't have had to," said Cindy, lifting her gaze to meet Lindsay's. "Parents are supposed to protect their children."

Lindsay flinched slightly, but kept her focus on the subject at hand. "She looks like she's resting comfortably. Why don't we leave her to sleep?"

Nodding, Cindy very slowly and gently eased out from under Jill, and with Lindsay's help, soothed their friend back to sleep. Hand-in-hand, the two lovers spared one last glance at the sleeping blonde, before retiring to the bedroom.

Martha watched her humans walk away and then turned her focus back on her charge. She'd keep guard through the night.

Just before dawn, when the darker edges of the sky had begun to lighten to a shade of pink, a phone chimed loudly, disturbing the quiet and the two women who slept entwined together. Lindsay groaned and blindly reached out to the nightstand, slapping her hand around the small space until she finally located the annoyance.

"Boxer," she said with as much irritation as she could possibly interject into her voice. She'd barely gotten two hours of sleep and someone had to pay.

Cindy smiled against warm skin and snuggled closer, her eyes popping open wide when she was almost thrown from the bed as Lindsay unexpectedly sat up and dislodged the young woman from her comfortable spot.

"What?" Long, bare legs were thrown over the side of the bed. "When?" Lindsay reached toward the footboard and grabbed a pair of worn sweats, shimming into the pants and tugging the shirt over her head as she alternated the phone from one ear to the other. "I'll call Claire." Without so much as a goodbye, she flipped her phone closed and gripped it tightly as she ran a hand through tangled locks.

“What’s happened now?” asked Cindy, scooting closer to Lindsay and lightly rubbing her lower back. She held her breath, hoping the Hallelujah Man hadn’t struck again.

Lindsay reached back and patted her lover’s hip, before she pushed to her feet. “I need to jump in the shower. Can you make some coffee? We’ll need to wake Jill when I get out.”

Cindy scrambled out of bed and slipped into her clothes, hurrying after Lindsay who’d already left the room. Veering toward the kitchen, she spared a glance at a soundly sleeping Jill, and wondered what else could possibly go wrong. Minutes later, she found out.

“Jill?” said Lindsay softly as she reached out to lightly touch her friend on the shoulder. Martha stood to the side of her master and watched the proceedings closely, not at all happy at being removed from her comfortable position.

“Hmmm…” murmured Jill, her eyes still firmly closed as she hovered between wakefulness and sleep – that place that held no problems, no pain, and no nightmares, only peace and serenity. Had she known what awaited her she’d have chosen to stay there, but the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee pulled her into full consciousness.

“Oh, that smells divine,” said Jill, pushing against the end of the sofa until she was sitting upright. She reached out for the steaming cup Cindy held and cradled it in her hands, inhaling the rich scent before taking her first sip. “God this is good. I just love hazelnut.” She snuck another sip, before teasing, “You’re one lucky woman, Linz. I’d snatch Cindy up for her coffee-making skills alone.”

Smiling at the firsthand knowledge of Cindy’s other skills, Lindsay leaned forward and placed her elbows on her knees as she clasped her hands together loosely. Jill had awakened in a surprisingly good mood, and she hated to be the one to have to burst her bubble. Sometimes, life really sucked.

“Jill, Tom called,” she hesitated momentarily, before pressing on, “The girl didn’t make it.”

“What?” asked Jill, halting the mug halfway to her lips, her brain not quite awake despite the few sips of caffeine. “What do you mean?”

“The girl Carter assaulted,” said Lindsay, careful not to refer to his relationship with Jill. “There were complications. Tom has assigned the case to me and Jacobi. I’m going to meet Claire at the morgue.”

Tossing off the blanket that lay across her legs, Jill moved to stand. “Okay, just let me finish this cup and give me a few minutes to dress. I’ll ride with you.”

“You’re not going with me. Cindy will drive you to your apartment for a shower and change of clothes. I promise to keep you informed.”

Jill glared at Lindsay, noting the steel of resolve taking root in the other woman’s posture. There was no sense in trying to argue with Lindsay. It would only make them both tired and frustrated. Besides, there was something much more important that she needed to do. Something she’d waited a lifetime to do.

“What’s her name?” she asked, sinking back into the sofa’s cushions and taking another sip of coffee, resigned to be left behind with Cindy, but only because she knew it would take time to get everything in order.

“What?” The question completely threw Lindsay. She’d expected a knock-down drag-out, or at the very least, more of an argument from Jill.

“The girl who died? What’s her name?”

Lindsay knitted her brow in confusion. “Why? What does it matter?”

“I need her name for the murder charges I’m going to file against Carter.”

“Um, Jill? Don’t you think . . .” started Cindy, leaving her unfinished question dangling in mid-air, the edges of her words scorched from the look that was being directed her way. She was frankly amazed she was still breathing.

“I’m still a DDA in this city. It’s well within my purview to file any charges I see fit, regardless of the crime or the criminal,” said Jill in a hard tone, daring either of her friends to dispute her claim.

Cindy wisely kept silent, while Lindsay made a mental note to call Denise to fill the acting DA in on the murder. She just had to figure out a way to explain the situation without actually ‘explaining’ the situation. Denise could be a real pain in the ass when she wanted to be, which was usually whenever she was breathing.

“Kayla Anderson. I’ll send you more information as I get it.” Pushing to her feet, Lindsay allowed Jill to believe she’d won this particular round. “And eat something before you go to the office.” She softened her tone. “You still look pale.”

Pleased with the compromise and touched by the caring shown by her friends, Jill offered a lopsided grin and turned toward Cindy. “Okay, Paula Dean, what’s for breakfast?”

“What’ve you got?” asked Lindsay, skipping over pleasantries and jumping right to the autopsy findings, as she walked into the morgue and headed directly for the slab that held the body of Kayla Anderson. She gazed down on the youthful, innocent-looking face and

clenched her jaw in anger. The co-ed had had a chance at a long, successful life until it had been snatched away by a man who should've been thrown into prison and the key tossed away years ago.

“First, hello to you, too, and second, why didn't you call and tell me what was going on?” Claire stood from her bended over position and glared at her friend. “I had to find out what had happened from the police report. It took me a few minutes to put it all together.”

Lindsay visibly flinched and shrugged apologetically, her leather jacket making a light crinkling sound when she raised her shoulders. “Sorry, Claire; everything happened so fast, and then Cindy said something about you getting lucky and I thought that if Ed had been able to . . .”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” interrupted Claire, her cheeks beginning to glow. “You can stop right there.” The coroner smoothly changed the subject to their friend's mental state. “Is Jill alright? How's she holding up?”

“Just as you'd expect. She's all over the place; I don't think it's fully sunk in yet. Cindy is handling her like a pro, even got her to eat something last night and again this morning,” said Lindsay, her focus straying to the victim's blonde hair. She didn't dare ask Claire the color Kayla Anderson's eyes.

“Good for Cindy and good for you, too, for keeping Jill out of the morgue. She doesn't need to see this, at least not for now anyway.” Claire inched the sheet to just below the victim's shoulders and waited for Lindsay to zoom in on the bruises that lined Kayla's neck.

Angling her head to get a better view of the purpling marks, Lindsay jammed her hands into her pockets and balled up her fists tightly to keep from hitting something. “Were those caused by someone's hands?”

“Yeah, big ones, too,” replied Claire, splaying her hands as wide as she could and comparing her span to one that caused the bruises. “Way bigger than mine.”

“So, he strangled her?” Lindsay swallowed the fury that threatened to choke her and asked the question she always dreaded. “Was she raped?”

“Bruising suggests that it was, at the very least, rough sex,” Claire explained, hesitating momentarily before adding, “Oral and vaginal.” She gestured toward an angry-looking head wound. “However, the cause of death itself wasn't strangulation, it was blunt force trauma. The witness' statement says the victim was struck across the face and then she fell. Whatever she hit when she landed caused extreme swelling which, in turn, led to an aneurysm that eventually caused her death.”

“Any way to prove she was forced and that it wasn't consensual?”

Claire nodded and pointed to the victim's shoulder. "Here and here..." she waited for Lindsay to note the small indentation types of bruises and clarified, "Someone pushed her to her knees. And there's more." She lifted the sheet that covered the lower part of the victim's body. "Look at her knees – they're scraped up pretty badly. She didn't get banged up like that kneeling on her own."

"We've got to pin this on Carter. Please tell me you've got DNA."

Claire grinned smugly. "I've got DNA."

Freshly showered and wearing her favorite jeans and sweater, Jill strolled through the mostly empty corridor that led to her office, her head held high and projecting an air of confidence she didn't actually possess. Had it been during the regular work week instead of a Saturday, Jill wasn't certain she'd be able to pull off her false bravado and found herself grateful for small favors.

A slight smile creased her face in memory of the fierceness and tenacity a certain redhead had displayed during the night and into the morning light, determined to do whatever was necessary to offer support in any way she possibly could. Cindy had wanted to accompany the DDA to her office or, at the very least, to the elevators, but Jill had insisted that she was fine and that the reporter had better things to do than baby-sit a grown woman, unless the woman just happened to be a dark, brooding inspector, she'd teased, earning her a light blush and causing Cindy to actually stutter. She neglected to mention to her friend how badly she needed to face this particular part of her nightmare alone. It was important that she be the one to strike the first blow to slay the demon.

Stepping into her office, she walked briskly to her desk, easing around its edge and lowering herself into her chair. The stack of files she'd been working on the evening before stood to the side, a stark reminder of what a difference a night had made. Her thoughts were suddenly flooded with images as they flipped through her mind like a bad slide show: Denise at her office door, a brief phone call morphing into drinks with Nicole Honeycutt, the enjoyable encounter with Kristie cut way too short by the call that started her downward spiral, the . . .

"Jill, you look like hell," said Denise, her arms folded comfortably across her chest as she leaned against the office's bookcase, her voice startling Jill from her thoughts and causing her to jump in her chair. Placing a shaky hand over her rapidly beating heart, she stared at her boss who stood in the exact same spot as her flashbacks had begun mere seconds ago.

Jill squinted to rid the image, but Denise remained solid, no signs of even a shimmer. Had she dreamed the whole thing? Had she fallen asleep at her desk and allowed her

ultimate nightmare to play itself out into something much worse than she'd ever imagined in her conscious state?

The apparition pushed off the bookcase and started forward, speaking aloud as it moved. "Damn, you are out of it."

Blinking rapidly, her eyelids fluttering as frantically as a pair of baby bird's untested wings, Jill focused on the moving object as it neared, noting casual black pants and a soft, cream-colored cashmere sweater. She looked down at herself to see faded jeans and her favorite red woolen sweater. It hadn't been a dream after all.

"So what's all this fuss about filing a simple murder charge? Lindsay called and said I needed to push the paper work through ASAP," said Denise, having come to a halt inches from Jill's desk as she refolded her arms over her chest. She looked less than amused.

"Er," Jill stuttered, struggling to break free of her trance. "It's ... um, nothing I can't handle."

Denise raised an elegant eyebrow and looked at the DDA in disbelief. "If that's so, then how come Lindsay felt the need to call me? She's certainly never bothered to consult with me before. You've always been her go-to gal, so why was she worried enough to call me for help?"

"You'd have to ask her," Jill replied with a shrug, easily continuing her lie, "I have no idea what she's thinking."

"So then, I don't guess it has anything to do with the fact that this Carter guy insisted that you be called, specifically asking for you by name," said Denise accusatorily, not believing for a second that Jill didn't know what was going on in Lindsay's head. The all-girl clique knew everything about each other. "What's your relationship to him? An old lover?"

Jill went perfectly still. Just the insinuation that she and William Carter were lovers made bile rise in her throat, its thickness almost choking her. She swallowed hard and prepared her line of defense.

"He's married to my mother."

"He's your stepfather?" asked Denise, barely able to contain her surprise; however, she didn't allow it to distract her from her doing her job. "Bernhardt, you need to distance yourself from this case – now. If this goes to trial, it'll be thrown out before opening statements can be made," she spat, furious with her DDA for crossing the line.

"Carter is *not* my stepfather," Jill spoke slowly and very deliberately, her face etched with raw pain and her blue eyes smoldering with unbridled anger. "And don't ever refer to him that way again."

There was no doubt in Denise's mind that the threat wasn't an idle one and definitely one that warranted further explanation. She knew perfectly well that Jill would never come right out and tell her though; she'd have to do a little digging on her own if she wanted answers, but for now, she needed to calm the waters.

"Look, I'm sorry if I offended you, but there's no way in hell I'm letting you anywhere near this case. I can't take the chance that you'll have a change of heart and go soft on the guy. With Mark McMurphy involved, it's likely to get high profile status and not one we can afford to lose. Emotions can't get in the way of a win." She relaxed her stance to temper her words and to appear less threatening, but that was the only concession she intended to make.

"You think I'd deliberately tank a case?" asked Jill, her anger finding a new place to rest. "Do you really believe I'd let anything get in the way of a win, or justice for that matter?"

Denise stayed silent, internally assessing the situation. Jill Bernhardt was her best asset; she was smart, dedicated, well-researched, always prepared, and extremely wily when she needed to be. If the Carter case did go to trial, she'd need someone of Jill's caliber sitting in the prosecutor's chair, but her relationship to the defendant trumped every single one of her positive attributes unless...

"If you want in, you're going to have to sit second chair... to me."

"How'd it go last night?" asked Cindy with a toothy grin as she slid onto the bench seat across from Claire. The two were the first of the club to arrive at Papa Joe's for another one of their impromptu meetings, and Cindy was glad for the time alone.

Caught off guard - although she should've known Cindy would ask about her evening with Ed - Claire fought back a blush and answered simply, "Fine," and then she belied her grossly understated reply by shifting uncomfortably in her seat. She attempted to shift the conversation as well. "So, tell me everything about your night and, specifically anything that had to do with Jill."

Lindsay had been vague at best in her recap of the previous night's activities, but with Cindy's eidetic memory and storytelling ability, Claire was counting on the reporter to recount every single minute Lindsay had left out. She'd forgotten about Cindy's tenaciousness when it came to getting answers to her own questions, but not for long.

"In a minute," said Cindy, still wearing her grin, "tell me about your date first. I want to hear all the juicy details." She paused and thought for a moment at just how juicy the details could get, especially from someone with a medical background and years of experiences she didn't possess. "Well, maybe not every single one." She leaned forward in anticipation. "Just the good ones."

“We had a nice dinner and then we went home.” Claire pushed against the back of the booth, folded her arms across her chest, and put on the face she used with Nate to indicate their discussion had officially ended. Although usually, with Nate, there hadn’t actually been a discussion at all, just Claire saying no to whatever inane idea her son had come up with. “Now, tell me about Jill.”

Cindy stared across the booth and noted her friend’s stiff posture and determined expression. Claire could be as stubborn as a mule when she put her mind to it, and from all indications, it appeared that her mind was gearing up for her to dig her heels in. With a sigh, the younger woman gave up, but only for now; she’d catch Claire in a weak moment and ask again later.

“I think she’s doing remarkably well, considering the circumstances. Of course, I wasn’t privy to the circumstances until she’d already faced William Carter and then gotten sick in the precinct’s restroom.” Cindy frowned. “Come to think of it, I didn’t know much then either.”

“Sick?” asked Claire, relaxing her posture and slipping effortlessly into her doctor mode. “Lindsay didn’t say anything about Jill being sick.”

“That’s because she wasn’t sick ‘sick,’” drawled a low gravelly voice as the third member of their group slid into the booth next to Cindy. “It was just a reaction to seeing that asshole after so many years.”

Claire shot an irritated glare across the table at the dark haired inspector as she processed the new information. “If Jill was sick for any reason, you should’ve phoned me. What if she’d contracted that virus that’s been going around the Hall?”

“It wasn’t a virus, and besides, I told you why I didn’t call,” said Lindsay, “I didn’t want to interrupt you and Ed, in case you were having sex or something.”

Cindy smiled; she hadn’t expected the topic to crop up again so soon. Quickly readying herself to dive in head first, she didn’t bother to worry if there was a net to catch her. One didn’t waste golden opportunities, especially with a fellow club member. “So *did* you and Ed have sex?”

“Is that all you two think about?” accused Claire as she glanced from Cindy to Lindsay, mentally taking stock of their respective reactions. A huge grin broke out on her face, and she took a moment to add festive decoration to the table she’d skillfully, albeit accidentally, turned and set. “It is, isn’t it?”

Cindy’s face reddened even more, coming very close to matching the color of her hair, while Lindsay fiddled with the edges of a napkin, wishing she was intimately familiar with Origami so that she could lose herself in the art as her fingers smoothly worked the intricate folds. Her thoughts, meant to distract her, instead morphed together with the

subject of Claire's question, and she hurriedly pushed the napkin toward the center of the table as if it were on fire.

"No," Lindsay blurted out, a little louder than normal, causing her to wonder if perhaps there was a smidgeon of truth in Claire's accusation. If she'd been interrogating herself, she'd have immediately suspected guilt as she'd certainly sounded as if she'd protested much too quickly. A change of topic was definitely in order.

"So, um, lab results back yet?" she asked in her best inspector's voice, despite the slight stumble at the start, and even managed to maintain a steady gaze at a clearly amused Claire. She watched the other woman carefully and noted the exact moment Claire decided to let her and Cindy off the hook. Of course, it may have had something to do with the fact that Claire wasn't exactly bubbling over with excitement to discuss her sex life with Ed either.

"Not the one you're hoping for. I don't have a DNA sample for comparison," reported Claire, a touch of frustration creeping into her tone, "and nothing unusual popped up in any of the other test results. Her blood alcohol level was high though, and with her stomach contents indicating that she'd had very little to eat, I'd say she'd have been quite intoxicated." She sighed audibly and shook her head. "Not good for our case."

"Yeah, just 'cause she was drunk, it's not rape or murder anymore. She was asking for it," said Cindy, disgusted at how easily opinions could be swayed, her own included when she thought back to the Hammond case. Now, she realized the point Jill was trying to make about how a jury processed information when it came to circumstances that could influence a case. It shouldn't matter though. When it boiled right down to it, rape was rape, and murder was murder, plain and simple.

"Good thing there's an eye witness who saw Carter strike the victim. Maybe that'll balance the scale," said Claire, hoping she'd spoken the truth but knowing it would take a stellar testimony to rid the jury of certain preconceived images. She did, however, have every faith in Jill to ask the right questions that would lead the witness to take the blame off the victim and put it back where it belonged – squarely on the shoulders of William Carter.

Having similar thoughts as Claire, Lindsay also had another. "If the victim was intoxicated, chances are the friend was, too. Cross-examination could pose a real problem."

"I'm sure after Jill preps her, she'll do just fine," said Cindy, her recent testimony having gone much more smoothly than she'd first thought it would. The assessment of just how well she'd done had barely registered in her mind when it was verbally confirmed by someone who was a much better judge of testimonies and their impacts on juries.

"Maybe you should give her some pointers," said Jill, aiming a teasing smile at her friend as she settled herself comfortably beside Claire to relay her news. "William Carter will

be officially charged with the murder of Kayla Anderson.” She paused just long enough for the good news to sink in before she turned a stony glare on the woman who sat directly across from her.

“Care to explain to me why in the hell you went over my head and called Denise?”

ACT III

Two hands, entwined together, rested on a denim-clad knee; a fine-boned, delicate one engulfed by its larger counterpart. The physical contrast was as stark as the hands’ actions with the smaller one fidgety and restless, while the bigger one appeared relaxed and content just to be holding the other, offering protection by its sheer size alone.

“Sorry to have to put you through this, Cathy. I should’ve just left when Mark hooked up with those girls,” William said with a sigh. “Of course, I’d be free of this whole mess if Jillian had just done her job and had those bogus charges dropped. I mean, I did push that cop, but I was so upset that they believed that other girl. This whole thing is a huge misunderstanding.”

“I’m sure Mr. Abbott will take care of everything,” Catherine assured him, placing her free hand on top of their joined ones and patting her husband’s gently. “You should’ve known Jillian wouldn’t lift a finger to help. She’s so damn headstrong, and besides, it would’ve meant she’d have had to admit that she lied all those years ago. That girl is nothing but trouble, always has been. Daniel was the only person she’d listen to. She worshipped the ground he walked on.” She squeezed her husband’s hand. “I know that you tried to get closer to her, but she’d never allow anyone to take his place.”

William thought back to when he’d first seen Jillian Bernhardt. He’d noticed the beautiful blue-eyed blonde little girl, sitting in a window booth of an ice cream parlor, her concentration obviously on her two scoops of ice cream. He’d watched as she’d used her tongue to effectively work one side of the cone and then the other, before he’d shifted his gaze to the woman who’d sat across the booth. He knew immediately where the girl had inherited her looks.

“I thought that she might have had a change of heart after all these years,” said William, truly believing in the possibility that his step-daughter had let go of the anger of her youth. She hadn’t been at all happy when her mother had started dating him within months of Daniel Bernhardt’s death, and the news of their impending marriage after a short three month engagement had sent the young girl down a road of destruction, acting out at every turn with him as her main target. It had made it increasingly more difficult for him to force her to accept his presence in her life.

“Well, I’m just glad we don’t need her help; I don’t ever want to be beholden to her for anything. Mr. Abbott will get the charges dropped, and then we can put this all behind

us,” said Catherine, offering another reassuring pat. If worse did come to worse, she’d talk to her daughter on her husband’s behalf, but until then, she planned to avoid contact with Jillian at all costs. Her unpleasant thoughts had barely taken root when a youthful sounding voice chased them away.

“Mr. Abbott can see you now,” said Connie, the attorney’s secretary, with a smile. “If you’ll just follow me please.” Turning on her high heels, she started for the massive oaken door that stood well behind her desk, expecting the Carters to follow her as she went through her usual routine, rapping twice on the door before turning the handle to allow passage inside. With her hand still on the doorknob, she pressed her shoulders against the structure and motioned the clients to enter. “You can have a seat in the chairs in front of Mr. Abbot’s desk. He’ll be with you momentarily; he’s just finishing up signing a few papers.”

“Thanks,” said William, placing his hand on the small of his wife’s back as he ushered her inside. He smiled and winked at the pretty blonde secretary, angling closer and brushing against her when he passed, the touch causing a shiver to run down the young woman’s spine. There was just something in the way he’d looked her over as he’d walked by that had unsettled her.

Malcolm Abbott moved his pen across the last document with a flourish, not bothering to glance up to greet his new arrivals. “That’ll be all, Connie.” His dismissal was just what the secretary had been waiting for as she quickly closed the door and headed for her desk, grateful to be away from the roaming eyes of William Carter. She couldn’t help but wonder if yet another guilty suspect would walk away a free man, courtesy of her boss.

“I’m still waiting on the DA’s office to get back to me,” informed Abbott without any preamble as he laid his pen down next to the signed papers. “I’m sure it’s just because of the weekend.”

“So, you don’t think they’re stalling for some reason?” asked Catherine, not ready to divulge her relationship to a certain DDA and inwardly hoping she wouldn’t have to.

Abbott shook his head confidently. “No, I don’t, although the acting DA isn’t exactly my favorite person.” He chuckled. “In fact, I don’t think she’s anyone’s favorite person.”

“Will you be dealing with her directly?” asked William in a hopeful tone. He really didn’t care who got along with whom as long as Jillian wasn’t involved in any way. “Is she at least fair?”

“Fair?” Abbott frowned. He’d never really thought of Denise Kwon as anything but a heartless bitch, but he supposed she could be considered principled when it came to following the law. “Well, Denise knows when the law’s on her side and when it isn’t.”

“Good enough for me then,” said William, figuring the law would be on his side once Abbott got involved. Mark had said Malcolm Abbott would fight tooth and nail to defend him. Losing was simply not an option to the attorney.

“Okay, so where do we...” started Catherine, the question dying on her lips when the door to the office flew open with a loud bang. She turned her attention to the rude individual and was surprised to see the inspector who’d more or less threatened her the night before. Connie was just seconds behind the two uninvited guests.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Abbott, I told them you were in a meeting and weren’t to be disturbed,” the secretary explained, suddenly wishing she hadn’t been called in to work today. Saturdays were usually so peaceful though, and she’d needed the extra cash, but now it appeared that she may very well lose her job.

“That’s okay, Connie. I’ll handle this,” said Abbott, immediately spotting the shiny badges attached to the officers’ pants, man’s casual and woman’s jeans respectively. “What can I do for you, Inspectors?”

“William Carter,” said Lindsay with a touch of smugness, as she moved further into the room, Jacobi shadowing her but allowing his partner to take the lead. “You’re under the arrest for the murder of Kayla Anderson. You have the right to remain silent...”

“Wait a damned minute!” shouted Carter, pushing to his feet and turning to face the two inspectors, giving every appearance as if he was waiving his rights in lieu of verbally, and perhaps physically, attacking his arresting officers. “You have got to be kidding. I didn’t murder anyone.”

“Tell it to the judge,” said Jacobi, easing around Lindsay and pulling his cuffs free. He’d seen the look in his partner’s eyes when Carter had turned on her, and with a prominent attorney as a witness, he didn’t want to take the chance that Lindsay might take ‘physical’ offense to the way the suspect had reacted. She’d been on edge ever since they’d climbed into the car and was just looking for a reason to explode.

“I assume you have the proper paperwork for this arrest, Inspectors,” said Abbott, calmly pushing to his feet and walking around to the front of his desk. This latest turn of events would just make his job more difficult, but certainly not impossible. “I’d like to see it.”

Keeping a hard glare pinned on William Carter, Lindsay reached into her jacket pocket and pulled the arrest warrant free from its leather confines. Gripping it tightly in her hand, she crossed the room and thrust it into Abbott’s hand. “There ya go. Signed, sealed, and delivered.”

“You’ve got to be...” started Carter again and giving every indication that he was indeed heading toward another charge of resisting arrest. Abbot interrupted with a voice of reason.

“Go peacefully, William. I’ll call Kwon and get this settled.”

“Good luck with that,” said Lindsay, watching as Jacobi handcuffed a slightly more amiable Carter. Denise was the one who’d given them the heads up that Abbott wanted to speak with someone in the DA’s office before his clients showed up at his own. She knew exactly where Carter would be for the arrest to be made.

Catherine Carter finally found her voice. “This is Jillian’s doing, isn’t it? Well, we’re going to sue her and this city for harassment and false arrest.”

“Jillian?” asked Abbott. Hadn’t Mrs. Carter been listening when he’d referred to the acting DA as Denise?

Moving in closer to assist her partner in escorting Carter from the room, Lindsay was more than happy to inform Abbott to just what he’d become involved in. “Oh, didn’t she tell you? Catherine gave her daughter up to Social Services when she was thirteen.” She took hold of Carter’s elbow and started for the door, calling back over her shoulder. “Mrs. Carter is the mother of DDA *Jill* Bernhardt.”

Abbott watched silently as the trio disappeared through the door. The case had just become a lot more complicated.

Hair, so blonde it appeared almost white, blended in perfectly with the pages of a law book, the ends of the silky strands just barely tickling the edges of the thick tome while blue eyes, once alert as they’d scanned through various cases looking for any and all precedents that could be used, had finally grown heavy and closed. Jill had only intended to rest for a few minutes when she’d laid her head down on the pages of the book she’d been reading, the warmth of the page soothing her chilled skin. Instead, she was out like a light in seconds and never heard the soft clicking of heels heading her way a good half hour after she’d slipped into a deep sleep.

Denise slowed her steps as she neared a doorway just down the hall from her office, her mind a myriad of thoughts and emotions. She hadn’t meant to delve so deeply into Jill’s past, but with the sudden appearance of the DDA’s step-father and Jill’s strong reaction to this particular crime, she’d made it a point to look into her colleague’s distant past, rationalizing her actions by telling herself that since Jill was sitting second chair she didn’t want any surprises by the defense involving her second. Truth be told, however, she’d always been curious about Jill’s background.

Stepping into her DDA’s office, Denise opened her mouth to ask if Jill had found anything they could use, but she snapped it shut and stopped dead in her tracks, the papers she held almost slipping from her grasp. In sleep, Jill Bernhardt looked so peaceful, so calm, and so beautiful. Denise shook her head to rid her last thought, neither certain nor comfortable with where it had come from. Perhaps she was still overcome by

anger on the blonde's behalf at the travesty of justice suffered by a young child who'd had no one on her side. To be cast aside and tossed into the system by her own mother had to have been the worst pain and betrayal she'd ever endured. How could a mother just throw away her child?

"Mmmph," groaned Jill, struggling to open her eyes against the light of the desk lamp that shone on her fair skin. She blinked owlshly and tried to focus on the far wall as she inched back into consciousness, slowly lifting her head from its resting place and grimacing at the pain that had settled in her neck. Cursing herself for falling asleep in such an awkward position, she was, however, grateful that she hadn't drooled on the page where she'd slept so soundly. Her peripheral vision picked up something to her left, momentarily distracting her from her critical self-incrimination, and she turned to find her boss standing just inside the doorway and wearing an expression Jill had never seen before. It was gone before she could put a name to it.

"You should go home," said Denise, pleased that her voice had sounded strong and confident. She'd been afraid her turmoil would cause her tone to waver as badly as her insides had when she'd finally realized what Jill had had to endure and at such an early age. "The arraignment won't be until Monday morning. We'll have plenty of time to prepare a case after that. Besides, we've got an eyewitness that actually saw Carter strike the victim. It'll be hard to discount that kind of testimony."

"Claire said the victim had been drinking. Chances are the witness had been too. Abbott is going to jump on that. We need to be prepared," said Jill, trying not to focus on the arraignment and the realization that Carter would more than likely await his trial in the comforts of his own home. "I'd like to talk to the witness."

Denise nodded in understanding; she couldn't wait to talk to the witness either. "I appreciate your concern, but to my knowledge, no one thought to give her a blood-alcohol test. I've arranged for Jane Tompkins to come in Monday morning after the hearing. We'll both sit down with her at that time." She hesitated briefly, choosing her next words carefully. "There's nothing we can do until then, so let's get out of here and worry about the case when the time comes." She opted to include herself in her suggestion so as not to appear overly concerned about Jill's well-being. She should've realized the DDA would choose to focus on only one particular thing she'd said.

Jill smiled at the news about the blood-test. "We need to talk to the bartender, too. Maybe she didn't drink as much as her friend." She was also hoping that perhaps the same bartender hadn't served the drinks or, if it had been the same person, that he or she'd not kept tabs on the witness' consumption. Things were suddenly looking much better.

"I'll get Simmons to go talk to him before we meet with Jane Tompkins. It'll give us a better idea on how to proceed with her," said Denise, planning to call the attorney as soon as she returned to her office and emphatically impress it upon the young man just how important the bartender's information was to their case.

“Simmons? Pimple-faced Simmons?” asked Jill, her face contorting into a grimace much more painful looking than the one she’d just displayed when she’d awakened with a sore neck. The kid was one of the best researchers the office had, but she wasn’t sure about letting him out in the real world, especially with something so important. “Okay, whatever you think, Denise,” she said, a plan already forming as she worked up a fake yawn. “I think I’ll take your advice and go home to rest. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Denise narrowed her eyes and studied her DDA. Jill looked beyond exhausted, but that wasn’t what had caught her attention. It was the gleam that glinted in tired blue eyes. She knew exactly what the other woman was planning.

“Go home and set your alarm for eight,” said Denise, sparing a quick glance at her watch and mentally calculating the time. “That’ll give you several hours to get in a good long nap. I’ll pick you up at nine.”

Jill’s eyes got huge. “Wha...”

“To go talk to the bartender,” interrupted Denise. “I know that’s what you’ve got planned. Well, you’re not going without me.”

Cindy sat cross-legged on the couch, Martha lying snugly against her hip and sleeping soundly. The reporter’s fingers rested on the home keys of her laptop’s keyboard, completely still, as they waited patiently for her brain to fire the proper synapses to put them into motion. They waited and waited and waited...

“Where do I start, Martha?” whispered Cindy, careful not to wake the dozing canine, although if she’d thought the dog could offer her advice, she’d have spoken more loudly and perhaps even shaken Martha into wakefulness. “I’ve always had more information on a story than I’ve been allowed to reveal, but this is just so hard. I want to tell the world how sadistic and evil William Carter truly is.”

As if sensing the young woman’s agitated state, Martha whimpered, and Cindy ran a hand through the dog’s fur, soothing her back to sleep. She continued to stare at the blank screen, her fingers starting a rhythmic up and down beat on the keys, but not pressing hard enough to cause the appropriate letters to appear on the screen. It was as if they believed the motion alone would jump start the reporter into writing her story on the senseless murder of a local co-ed, but they were saved from their restless tapping when the sound of a key turning in the door had Cindy abandoning the keyboard and quietly closing her laptop.

“Hey,” said Lindsay, stepping into the apartment and closing the door behind her. She smiled at the very domestic scene her girlfriend and dog presented. It was one she could

very well get used to coming home to, but it was much too soon to even think about her and Cindy living together. She'd never been a fan of the U-Haul theory and planned to be sure it was what they both wanted before leaping into such a permanent commitment. She'd seen far too many relationships fall apart due to rushed decisions and hastily made plans.

"Hey," replied Cindy softly, placing the laptop on the other side of her and carefully easing away from Martha as she slowly pushed to her feet. She headed directly for Lindsay, not adjusting her stride or pace, even as she drew near; she just kept moving one foot in front of the other and trusted her lover to know what she needed. Lindsay instinctively opened her arms and Cindy melted into the warm body, pressing her ear against the other woman's breast and closing her eyes at the sound of the steadily beating heart. The two women stood silently in their embrace and drew strength from the other. It was the first time they'd been truly alone since Carter's initial arrest.

Lindsay selfishly hung on a bit longer before she gave Cindy a squeeze and then eased away, slipping her hand into the younger woman's and heading for the couch, each woman taking a seat on the opposite side of Martha, who'd awakened and wagged her tail at being bracketed by her two humans.

"Carter's behind bars again," said Lindsay, using her free hand to scratch under Martha's chin. "I should've told Jill that I was calling Denise." Lindsay could still feel the fierce glare Jill had directed at her. It had felt as if a knife had pierced her heart.

"You were just trying to help. Jill would've gone ballistic had she known you planned to go to Denise," Cindy said, trying to offer reassurance. "You did the right thing, Linz. Jill shouldn't be involved at all."

"Yeah, well, it's done now." Lindsay sighed sadly and glanced up at Cindy. "She'll probably never speak to me again."

"Don't you worry; Claire and I have everything worked out." Cindy smiled knowingly, having hatched what she conceived to be a marvelous plan with their other club member.

"Oh God, what now?" groaned Lindsay audibly. "You're not planning to lock the two of us in Claire's office, are you?"

"Nope, although I'll keep that one in mind" said Cindy in a teasing tone. "You're just going to have to wait and see."

A ghost of a smile edged Lindsay's lips. She didn't want to wait, and she knew just what to do. "A secret, huh? I bet I can worm it out of you."

"No, you can't." Cindy grinned. "There's nothing you can do to me that will make me talk."

“Nothing?” asked Lindsay, leaning over the top of Martha until she was mere inches from Cindy’s lips, her breath hot against the other woman’s skin. “You sure?”

Cindy swallowed hard and licked her lips.

“Yep.” Her tone was far from convincing.

Lindsay inched closer and helped her lover moisten her lips as she slowly swiped her tongue from one edge of Cindy’s mouth to the other and then back again, stopping long enough to tease the tip of a pink tongue that had come out to play. “You sure?”

“Huh?” asked Cindy, closing her eyes in anticipation of what she hoped was to come. Martha anticipated as well as she slipped from the couch and headed for the bedroom. She knew she’d have hours before she’d be chased away from the comfortable bed. So intent in hurrying to her next sleeping place, she didn’t pay any notice to the clicking sound inside the air-conditioning vent that had barely been audible to even her ears.

The camera lens zoomed in and out several times, finally focusing on the couple on the other side of the room. The brunette had managed to position the smaller woman flat on her back as she slowly lowered herself until she was lying hip to hip against the younger woman. Easing a hand her underneath her lover’s shirt, she deepened the kiss.

The red light on the camera blinked rapidly, appearing to pick up speed, as it took in the scene that would be ready at a moment’s notice for another’s eyes: damp skin sliding against damp skin, hands mapping familiar territory, and mouths drinking in the sweetness each woman had to offer. The watcher would be less than pleased.

“You sure you don’t mind taking the boys out tomorrow afternoon and evening?” asked Claire, her tongue-in-cheek tone apparently detectable to her ears only. Cindy had made certain Ed wouldn’t blink an eye when it came to taking the boys on an outing to ensure the club had the house all to themselves.

“Are you kidding me? Front row seats to the Warriors game? Taking Derek and Nate to that greasy pizza place they like with those loud video games after the ballgame is a very small price to pay to see Ellis Vanderholt in person,” said Ed, his expression changing from disbelief at Claire’s question to a broad smile in anticipation of the next day’s game. Vanderholt was his favorite NBA player.

Claire returned her husband’s smile. He’d absolutely flip if he knew Vanderholt was the very person responsible for the game’s tickets. When Cindy had called, Ellis had been thrilled to be able to help out, even promising to autograph a basketball and present it to Ed after the game. It took everything she had not to spoil the surprise.

“I kind of figured you wouldn’t mind, but I just had to make sure. It’s really important that ‘us girls’ spend some quality time with Jill. She’s having a tough time right now.”

“Well, you take all the time you need, and if they’re still here when the boys and I get back, we’ll sneak in the back door,” offered Ed. “In fact...” His words died on his lips as a loud knock caught his attention. He frowned as he turned toward the doorway that led from the bedroom. “It’s kind of late for visitors.”

“I’ll get it. You go ahead and get ready for bed,” said Claire, kissing the top of his head as she passed by on her way out the door. Arriving at the door just as another knock sounded, she placed her hand on the deadbolt and peered through the peephole, focusing on her well-lit porch. She froze and then blinked - twice - but the figure’s appearance didn’t change. Forcing her hand to work, she threw back the lock and opened the door. She had no idea she could achieve such a high octave with her voice.

“Denise?”

The normally in-control-acting DA glanced nervously over her shoulder at her liquid platinum, Infiniti M45 parked next to the curb, its passenger concealed by its tempered windows and the darkness of the night. She turned back toward Claire.

“Jill’s drunk,” she stated simply, always one for directness when it came to drinking situations, but this time she managed it completely sober.

“You and Jill went out drinking?” The previously never-before-achieved octave went down in a ball of flames as Claire accentuated her latest feat with the raising of eyebrows above eyes that had grown as large as saucers.

“No!... um, I mean, yes... but it’s not what you think,” stuttered Denise uncharacteristically. “We were working a case.”

“At a bar?”

“The bar just happened to be the workplace of someone we needed to talk to,” explained Denise, glancing over her shoulder once again, her nervousness turning to worry over her graphite leather and African rosewood interior. “Can we just get Jill and bring her inside? She can explain everything to you when she’s sober.”

Claire squinted toward the street and tried to make out the silhouette of her friend, but it was simply too dark. She’d just have to trust Denise that Jill was inside the vehicle.

“Why don’t you give me the short version?”

“Can we at least get Jill out of the car?”

“Not until I know why she’s in there.”

Denise grimaced. She hated being stuck between a rock and a hard place, but she hated the thought of her car's interior suffering because she'd not acted quickly enough. The short version was all Claire would get.

"We went to talk to the bartender, but he wasn't on for another hour. Jill wanted to wait, and I didn't see a problem in getting a drink until he showed. So, I ordered a Cosmopolitan and Jill had a Mojito, and then she had another and another and another. I knew that she's . . . um, had a bad weekend, so I didn't see the harm." Denise shrugged slightly in her defense. She'd hoped the short explanation and her apologetic shrug was enough to entice Claire into taking Jill off her hands.

"What did the bartender have to say?" asked Claire, suddenly focused on the case. She knew he could very well be the key in ascertaining the soberness of their witness.

"We waited two hours, but he never showed," said Denise, sparing yet another glance at her car. "We really need to get Jill inside."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Claire was forced to swallow a chuckle. She knew exactly what Denise was worried about. "C'mon; you can fill me in on why you decided to bring her here while we wrestle her from your car." She started for the curb and hesitated slightly. "You do know Jill gets violently ill when she's been drinking?"

Denise shot past and headed for the passenger side door, a chuckling Claire following behind. She caught up to the other woman just as she'd opened the passenger door. Apparently, Denise had taken Claire at her word, quickly explaining just why she'd shown up on the coroner's doorstep.

"I couldn't take her home, and I certainly couldn't take her to my place," said Denise, not offering a reason as to why the latter wasn't possible. "I called my assistant and had him look up your address and Lindsay's. You were the closest."

"Ah, a win by proximity," replied Claire, watching in amusement as Denise tried to talk Jill from her vehicle. She remembered the first time she'd had to pull her friend out of a car. Jill had come to in a state of confusion and had planted one right on Claire's lips, apparently confusing her friend with the woman she'd been flirting with when the club, pre-Cindy, had gone out one evening after a rough case. She'd never told Jill about it, figuring one of them being embarrassed was enough. Fearing a repeat with Denise as the recipient, she acted quickly, figuring the DA wouldn't be quite as forgiving. "Here, let me."

Denise gratefully stepped aside and allowed Claire access to the passenger seat. The sooner Jill was out of the car, the better. She'd only had the car for two months, and so she watched with great interest as Claire reached in and unbelted the DDA.

“Jill? Sweetie?” said Claire, keeping her distance as she lightly shook her friend’s shoulder. “Let’s go inside.” She was pleased that Denise had made sure Jill had been belted in on the drive over from the bar.

“Mmmphhh,” groaned Jill, screwing her already closed eyes even tighter. She had no desire to move from her comfortable resting place. “Don’t wanna.” She wiggled in the seat and sighed. She was very content in her nice, comfy spot.

“So, you don’t want to go crawl under my nice, soft blanket and lie on my big, ol’ sofa?” asked Claire, knowing just how to entice Jill from the car.

“Hmm…” said Jill dreamily as she successfully pried one eye open to look up at her friend. “With that fluffy pillow?”

Claire chuckled. “Yes, with that fluffy pillow, too.”

Jill closed her eye and shifted on the seat, weighing her options. To Denise, it appeared as if the other woman had no intentions of moving.

“She can’t stay there,” she stated the obvious.

“She won’t,” replied Claire, counting to ten. On exactly ten, Jill opened her eyes and leaned toward the curb, trusting Claire to catch her. The coroner took hold of Jill’s shoulders and easily guided her friend from the car, and with Denise moving to Jill’s other side, the pair led the DDA up the sidewalk and into the house.

Once inside, Denise released her hold on Jill and stood near the door as she watched Claire expertly maneuver the blonde to the couch, and she wondered how many times this particular scene had played out: Jill compliantly lying down as Claire left the room, returning moments later with a garbage can, a damp washcloth and a bottle of water. Claire placed the receptacle on the floor, the washcloth on Jill’s forehead, and the water on a nearby table, before she once again disappeared, returning with a soft-looking blanket and a fluffy pillow. Denise watched as Jill smiled sweetly when the pillow was placed under her head and the blanket thrown lovingly over her body. She suddenly felt very out of place.

“Okay, you sleep now, and we’ll talk tomorrow,” whispered Claire just loud enough for the forgotten onlooker to hear. Pushing a stray hair from Jill’s face, she moved to stand, but a hand shot out and kept her close.

“I can’t get it out of my head,” said Jill softly, swallowing hard and closing her eyes against the tears that threatened to escape.

Claire eased down on one knee. “What, sweetie? What is it?”

“That bastard raping that girl in the alley,” she said, choking back a sob. “And at the same time, I’m screwing some waitress in an alley behind Element. How sick is that?” No longer able to hold it in, she allowed the sobs to wrack her body.

Claire pulled Jill into her arms and held on tightly. Neither woman heard the click of the Stryker plate as the front door softly closed.

Three different sized pots sat on three separate burners, one empty while the other two contained spaghetti sauce and soup, respectively. A freshly-buttered and garlic-seasoned loaf of French bread lay on a cookie sheet on the counter above the oven, waiting for the precise moment to be placed inside. Claire absolutely hated cold bread.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Cindy as she watched the other woman pull a food scale from a lower cabinet and place it on the counter. She frowned as Claire tore off a sheet of waxed paper and set it on top of the scale, before she carefully cut off the end of the package of spaghetti and removed some of its contents. Her eyes widened in horror when she realized what the coroner had planned.

"Eww . . . please tell me you aren't going to weigh that spaghetti like some dead person's organs." Her eyes shifted to the stove and, specifically, the drops of sauce that dotted its surface. They seemed to turn redder and redder as she recalled Claire mentioning that she'd slaved over the stove all morning. "What exactly is in that pot?"

"Some of the best spaghetti sauce you'll ever taste," said Lindsay, arms laden with heavy bags, as she stepped into the kitchen and headed toward the table where Cindy sat. "Trust me, after you've had a taste, you won't give a damn what she put in it." She gently placed her load on the table and started rummaging through the nearest bag. "What in the world did you bring?"

Cindy shrugged innocently. "Just something for us to snack on." She knew she should have gone to retrieve the bags from her car, but Lindsay had been so sweet when she'd offered that Cindy had forgotten exactly how much she'd bought.

"Ho-Hos? Are you trying to tell us something?" Lindsay tossed the miniature chocolate cakes to the side and reached for the next item. "White chocolate covered Oreos? M&Ms? Miniature Snickers? I think I'm sensing a pattern here." Now she knew why Cindy had insisted on meeting her at Claire's instead of sharing a car. She'd thought the younger woman had planned to stop by the Register before their club outing, but it appeared that Cindy had gone to the store instead. Lindsay wondered if there was anything left on the shelves.

Her curiosity piqued, Claire abandoned her quest to accurately measure just the right amount of spaghetti for their meal and moved in next to Lindsay. She peered down in the bag closest to her. "No popcorn?"

"I bought popcorn," said Cindy in her defense. Movies just weren't movies without popcorn. She just wasn't sure what kind of popcorn her friends liked, so she'd improvised.

"Oh my Lord, did you ever," said Claire in astonishment as she began to pull box after box from the bag. "Is Orville Reddenbacher in here, too?"

"Ha-ha," replied Cindy, watching as her friend stacked the boxes higher and higher on the table. It hadn't seemed like she was buying that many different varieties at the time, but she just wanted to make sure she bought something Jill liked. The thought of the other woman had her gazing toward the empty doorway. "Claire, what was it you wanted to tell us about last night?"

Sparing a quick glance at the door, Claire walked over to peek into the den to spy a soundly sleeping Jill. She eased the door closed and moved back into the room. "I'm worried about Jill."

"We all are," said Lindsay, removing the last item from her bag of goodies and plopping down in the chair next to Cindy. "Did something else happen?"

"Other than getting drunk and forcing Denise to have to show up on my doorstep to take her off my hands?"

"What? Jill went out with Denise?" asked Cindy. Even with her over-active imagination, she couldn't visualize the two of them riding in the same car, much less sharing conversation at a bar.

"It was case-related," replied Claire, lowering the temperature on the sauce and making her way over to join in on the round table discussion. "They went to talk to the bartender about the witness' alcohol consumption."

"What did he say?" asked Lindsay, hoping his testimony wouldn't hurt their case. Without their witness, the case was fairly weak. They needed eyewitness testimony that William Carter had indeed struck the victim.

"He wasn't there, so they waited and drank," said Claire, glancing back at the closed door. "Or rather Jill drank."

"Are you worried about her drinking, her drinking partner, or both?" asked Cindy, clearly worried about all three. If Jill had allowed herself to get drunk while in the company of Denise Kwon, she was much closer to falling into the deep end than Cindy had realized. Although, she'd always been a little concerned about Jill's drinking habits, but this situation with Denise inched her worry meter up several notches.

"Actually, it's something she said that caught my attention," explained Claire, her face crinkling in thought as part of Cindy's query sunk in. She'd not actually seen Denise leave last night. Was it possible...?

Lindsay's quick reply of concern distracted Claire from focusing on Denise, just as Jill had the night before. "It has to do with Carter, doesn't it? Damn it, we've got to make sure he doesn't slip through some loophole."

"It'll be hard to contest actual DNA. Jill and Denise were able to secure a warrant for a sample so I'll have something to work with soon," said Claire, adding, "But we'll be back to the witness' word again. DNA will only link him to the victim sexually; it won't be able to confirm that he actually raped her."

"Did Jill say something about the witness?" asked Cindy, her entire focus on whatever it was that Claire had started to tell them and not on the subsequent questions and discussions the something had led to. "What is it? What did Jill say?"

Claire hesitated momentarily and sized up the situation. She was, in effect, about to divulge information Jill had confessed when she'd been extremely vulnerable, an indiscretion of sorts that she may not have divulged had she not been riding an emotional rollercoaster of heartache and pain mixed together in an unhealthy form of Mojitos. She needed to talk to Jill first.

"Remember the Collins case?" Claire acted quickly so as to avoid suspicion from her friends as to why she hadn't answered Cindy directly. Lindsay's attention would be easily diverted to memories of Jill's downward spiral to behavior that bordered precariously on destructive while the reporter in Cindy would grab hold of the proverbial bone like a hungry dog looking for a meal and ask about the past.

"Who's Collins?"

"A child abuse case Jill drew years ago," growled Lindsay, remembering the cute little brunette girl with the big brown eyes. "Jacie Collins' mother defended her boyfriend to the bitter end. He beat the case."

"So, what happened to the child?" asked Cindy, her heart going out to both Jill and the abused little girl. She imagined Jill had taken it very badly and that was probably what Claire had been referring to. With Carter back on the scene, this case could prove to be much worse than any other Jill had ever encountered.

Lindsay stared at the chocolate treats in the middle of the table. Jacie Collins had had a very sweet tooth. "She died. The asshole boyfriend threw her out of a moving truck. The mother took a lesser charge and confessed to everything. Jill took it very hard." Lindsay glanced over at Claire. "We all did."

A deadly silence hung in the air as the three women were lost in their thoughts: Lindsay and Claire recalling the days and weeks that followed the tragedy, in particular Jill's reckless behavior as she'd turned to binge drinking and countless sexual encounters to try to bury her pain, while Cindy wondered what would have happened to Jill all those years ago had she been returned to her mother's care.

None of the club members had noticed the figure leaning in the doorway until she spoke.

"Guess I should be thankful I ended up in the system. Who knows what Carter may have done had I been sent back home."

"Is this legal?"

William Carter glared across a worn-looking table at a redheaded woman dressed in a white lab coat and watched with great interest as she opened a black kit and removed a wooden stick-like apparatus that had a plastic covering on one end. He'd been sitting in the small room, waiting for his lawyer when she'd entered and identified herself as a technician for the San Francisco Police Department's lab.

"Yes, a warrant has been issued for your DNA," she said, flipping the cover off to reveal a swab. She started forward but stopped when the muscled man folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm not giving up anything until my lawyer gets here."

Accustomed to this type of reaction, the woman slipped the cover back over the swab and smiled as she took a seat at the end of the table. It didn't matter to her when she got her sample, just as long as she got it. And she would, the warrant was her insurance. Her smile grew larger when the door opened and revealed a handsome man with a million dollar grin. The lawyer had arrived.

"Mr. Carter, I'm Jason Abbott. My father was delayed so he sent me in his stead." The younger Abbott confidently crossed the room and held out his hand. Carter hesitated only for a moment before reaching out to grab hold. The lawyer didn't flinch when he gripped as tightly as he could. Carter smiled. The man had passed muster.

"So, what's this about a DNA sample? Do I have to comply?"

Abbott nodded and explained, "You'll be held in contempt of court if you don't, but you have no reason to worry. My father is currently involved in a meeting that'll make this all go away."

The lab tech sat back and listened to the back and forth conversation. She'd seen and heard the same thing through the years and often wondered how many times the attorney

had been telling the truth. For now, she'd just collect her sample and be on her way. The rest would fall to the District Attorney's office.

"So, okay to proceed?" she asked, keeping her seat until she was sure she'd be able to procure her sample. Looking across the table, she waited for Carter to agree.

"Alright, but I don't like this one bit," said Carter more to his attorney than to the technician. "This better not come back and cause problems later."

"It won't. Trust me," said Abbott Jr., his pearly white teeth, set against bronze-colored skin, gleaming under the fluorescent lights of the room. "I'll be surprised if this even goes to trial."

Carter stared at the confident young man and then motioned the tech over. "C'mon, let's get this thing over with so I can get out of this place as quickly as possible."

The redhead stood slowly and made her way over to the suspect, flipping back the lid with a light snick-like sound. "Open wide."

ACT IV

"Pass me some Whoppers, would you?" asked Jill, keeping her eyes glued to the screen as she eased her hand from the bag of popcorn and lifted it to her mouth. She wasn't about to miss a single Rosie scene. As far as she was concerned the British actress stole the show whenever she was on-screen.

"You've already eaten them all," informed Cindy, holding up the empty milk carton that once held chocolate-coated malted milk balls. "You're going to be sick." Frankly, Cindy couldn't understand why Jill wasn't already sick. Claire's cure-all soup was definitely going to go to waste.

Leaned comfortably against the edge of the sofa, Lindsay swallowed a chuckle. Cindy had been in a mother-hen mode ever since Jill had stepped into the kitchen and pretty much ended their conversation with her astute presumption, and she'd been right, too. Life with Carter would've killed Jill one way or another.

"Jill has an ironclad stomach when it comes to movie nights," said Claire, crinkling up her nose as she watched the woman in question reach out blindly for a Ho-Ho. Normally, she'd make some crack about 'you are what you eat,' but Jill's words of the night before slammed into her teasing nature and held it at bay. The next time she was alone with Jill, they were definitely having a heart-to-heart, but for now, they needed to put painful memories aside and having a few hours of carefree fun.

"Just be thankful she hasn't joined in on the singing or else we'd be the nauseous ones," Lindsay teased. "Pierce Brosnan's singing could easily pass for one of the three tenors when compared to Jill's."

"Hey!" Jill's protest was backed up with several poorly aimed tosses of popcorn, all missing their target and landing harmlessly on the floor beside the couch. Lindsay figured there'd be enough for an entire bag of popcorn by the time the movie had ended. She smiled. This movie idea of Cindy and Claire's had been just what they'd all needed to calm the rough waters that had surrounded them and threatened to pull them under.

"What? You don't remember Martha's howling last year when you tried to sing along with Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*?" asked Lindsay with a grin. She watched in amusement as Cindy's face broke out into a huge smile and settled more comfortably in her seat for a round of teasing she knew her lover was quite capable of delivering. She wasn't disappointed.

"You have a secret Julie Andrews crush, don't you?" Cindy teased, bumping shoulders with a red-faced Jill. "Or is it a nun fetish?"

"What?" asked Jill, sitting up abruptly and almost displacing the tub of popcorn from her lap. "No!" She resettled the bowl, trying to ignore the vivid memory of a college Halloween party involving a brunette dressed like a nun. "To either of your accusations. I just like musicals."

"Yeah, me, too," agreed Cindy, easing back against the sofa and reaching her hand into the bowl of popcorn. A huge grin crossed her face when she recognized the upcoming scene where Rosie and Tanya would try to coax Donna into joining them in song. She winked across at Claire and then leaned in closer to Jill.

"Friday night and the lights are low," she crooned softly.

"Looking out for a place to go," followed Claire with emphasis on 'go' as she pushed to her feet and struck a pose, waiting for Lindsay to belt out the next lyric. She frowned when all she received was a raised eyebrow from her friend, but Cindy came to the rescue, jumping from her seat and moving to join Claire.

"Where they play the right music, getting in the swing." She bumped hips with Claire and the rendition was on, the pair dancing and singing in perfect harmony with the players on the screen. Lindsay waited patiently, watching Jill's feet moving up and down with the music, and smiled widely when her friend could no longer stand it and practically leapt over the coffee table to join in the fun.

Tomorrow, the William Carters of the world would be back to terrorize their victims and they'd still be no closer to finding the Hallelujah Man, but for now, there was only the *Dancing Queen*.

Claire rounded the corner that led to the courtroom, her brisk steps in perfect sync with the woman who walked beside her. The scene was a familiar one, but her walking mate was definitely not. She looked down at the white folder held securely in the other woman's hand, the edges of the silver clasp fastened flat against the envelope and keeping the important findings tucked safely inside. The DNA had come back as a positive match to William Carter, but she'd had to hand over her report to Denise Kwon instead of Jill. It felt strange; it felt wrong; it felt as if she had betrayed her friend. With a sigh, she continued down the hallway, her eyes narrowing perceptively when she spotted Nicole Honeycutt hurrying after a blonde woman who was currently making a beeline for Jill and Cindy.

“That can't be good,” muttered Claire, picking up her pace and heading for what she knew to be trouble. Denise increased her stride, too, only she had no idea why other than trouble seemed to always follow Honeycutt. This time, though, it appeared Nicole was following trouble and losing ground fast.

“You vindictive little bitch!” the older blonde woman spat out, pulling to a stop directly in front of Jill. “We wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for you.”

“Who are...” Jill started, unconsciously taking a step backward at the sudden attack. She stared into deep blue eyes brimming with intense anger and realization had her taking another step back, feeling somewhat comforted when she'd felt Cindy ease in beside her.

“Hey! Back off!” shouted Claire, arriving on the scene just as the older woman threatened to invade Jill's space once again. The excitement in the usually quiet hallway had garnered the attention of several groups of people, including the court officer who stood outside the courtroom that would soon host Carter's arraignment hearing.

Catherine turned her wrath on Claire. “This doesn't concern you. This is between me and my worthless daughter.”

‘Daughter?’ Honeycutt mouthed more to herself than the others as she turned her full attention to the stand-off, glancing back and forth between Jill and her colleague's client and immediately noting the physical similarities. Abbott should've warned her when he'd asked her to escort Mrs. Carter to the Hall. She absolutely hated to be blindsided, especially when it concerned someone she was trying to woo into their firm.

“Daughter?” echoed Claire, only aloud. “You're kidding, right?” She couldn't believe the gall of the woman, who was obviously Jill's birthmother, to have the audacity to bring up any kinship after tossing Jill aside in favor of a child molesting husband.

Jill watched the exchange between her mother and Claire in stunned silence. She hadn't seen her mother since the woman from Social Services had taken her away at her mother's behest, and in all probability, she wouldn't have recognized the other woman in

any other circumstance, but she vividly recalled the stony expression her mother now wore. She'd never forget those cold blue eyes glaring at through the car window as she'd been driven away from her mother and the only home she'd known.

"Yes, my daughter," said Catherine, projecting that same familiar glare on Jill. "She almost ruined my life all those years ago, and now she's back to try again. Well, I'm not going to let that happen." She took a step forward toward a cowering Jill, the move eliciting two separate responses, both of which surprised the hell out of Jill and Cindy.

First, Denise, looking very much the professional in her crisp cream-colored suit, eased in on the other side of Jill and gave every appearance that she was ready to rumble, and second, Claire grabbed hold of Mamma Carter's elbow and yanked her away from Jill.

"She ruined your life?" asked Claire, her tone oozing with sarcasm and her expression one of complete disbelief. "Lady, you are a piece of work."

Pulling out of Claire's grasp, Catherine turned her pent-up anger on the coroner. "You have no idea the disgrace I suffered; I had to leave the city. I had to sell my home." She pointed accusatorily at Jill. "All because that little tart decided to lie about my husband. She's nothing but a whore!"

SLAP!

"She was a child!" Claire's reply was only seconds behind the blow she'd inflicted on the other woman's cheek, leaving a bright red imprint of her hand on smooth alabaster skin. "You were supposed to protect her!"

"Whoa," said Nicole, her usually quick mental processes slowed considerably by what she'd just witnessed. She did at least have the wherewithal to step between the two women and usher Catherine back a few feet, while Cindy managed to coax Claire to withdraw as well, the coroner still shooting a death glare at the older woman. Jill and Denise could only stare in disbelief.

"Let's calm down, shall we?" Nicole attempted to be the voice of reason, but Catherine wasn't buying what the attorney was selling.

"That woman attacked me. I want to file charges."

"Attacked? Honey, that wasn't attacking. I can show you attacking if you'd like," boasted Claire, bowing up and preparing to back her words if necessary. The bitch was going down.

"Is there a problem here?" A male voice asked as the court officer entered the less-than-quiet discussion. He'd started toward the fracas the moment he'd witnessed the slap. "Are you alright, Ma'am?" He addressed his concern toward Catherine.

“Um, oh no problems at all, Officer,” said Cindy with a nervous smile. “It’s just a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding hell,” piped up Catherine, “I want that woman arrested for assault.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, Mrs. Carter,” said Nicole, knowing the judge wouldn’t be happy to discover that the wife of the man being charged with murder had practically incited a riot outside the courtroom. Besides, if what she could put together from the conversation was true, the older woman deserved the slap.

Catherine glared at Claire and then spared a glance at her daughter, before making her wishes known. “I want her arrested for assaulting me.”

The officer nodded and reached for Claire’s elbow. “Dr. Washburn, you need to come with me, please.”

“Ms. Honeycutt, perhaps you should explain to your client’s spouse the ramifications that could arise from this action,” said Denise, finally snapping out of her trance-like state. She was quickly finding that spending time with her DDA, the coroner, and the reporter, who always seemed to be around, was never boring.

Nicole wanted to explain that neither Catherine Carter nor her husband were her clients but figured the acting DA would consider the reason moot. She tried to reason with the angry blonde. “Mrs. Carter, we need to give the proper appearance to the judge if we want him to rule in our favor. In fact, we need to hurry along.”

Denise frowned, as did Jill, at the odd wording. Rule on what?

“I’d think the judge would want justice for all crimes. I’m not changing my mind.” Catherine turned toward the officer. “What do I need to do to file charges?”

“Um, well,” he started, suddenly feeling intense heat from the stares boring into him. “I can direct you after the arraignment if you’d like.”

“What happens to her until then?” Catherine gestured toward Claire, who’d kept quiet in the aftermath of the alleged ‘assault.’ She hadn’t wanted to make things worse, but she’d definitely slap the woman again if the situation warranted it.

“I’ll take her to a holding cell,” said the helpful officer, much to the other interested parties’ chagrin. He did, at least, offer an apologetic smile to the coroner he saw almost on a daily basis, but he was saved from having to verbally apologize by the sound of a voice from the doors that led into the nearby courtroom.

“Honeycutt! Hurry along, we’re going to begin soon,” called out Abbott, clearly not happy with the delay. He wanted Catherine Carter sitting front row and center when the judge took the bench.

Denise gripped the report she held and turned toward the courtroom, miffed at herself for allowing the drama to take all of her attention. Judge Moore hated to be kept waiting.

Honeycutt and Carter followed closely while Jill hesitated, torn between wanting to help Claire and making sure her step-father didn't make bail. Cindy immediately picked up on the indecision.

"Jill, you go on ahead, and I'll call Lindsay to see about getting Claire out of jail." She smiled broadly, hoping to add a little levity to the situation. "It'll be nice to stand on the outside of the bars for a change."

"Quit gloating," muttered Claire as she paced back and forth in the tiny holding cell. It hadn't truly hit her that she may be in for some trouble until the bars had closed with a sharp clang. All at once, she envisioned having to clean out her desk and start looking for another job. Ed wouldn't be one bit pleased with her actions that had landed her in the clink.

"I can't help it." Cindy was beaming, her entire face actually glowing. "Besides being ever so grateful to be on this side of the cell, I'm so very proud of you."

A pink blush spread its way across Claire's face and burned away any unpleasant thoughts concerning her future. If the same circumstances presented themselves with the equally ensuing same results, she wouldn't hesitate to slap the righteous bitch, only she'd be sure to add a little more force to the blow. She'd actually known that deep down, but Cindy's words had sent the knowledge bubbling up to the surface. "Thanks," she said with a smile. "You're just mad you weren't closer."

"I'm not." A low voice sounded from just over Cindy's shoulder. "I'm not sure my inspector's badge could work its 'get out of jail free' magic again."

"Are you saying I'm stuck here?" asked Claire, stepping closer to the bars and wrapping her hands around the cold metal. She presented a picture perfect 'innocent prisoner' pose. "Ed's going to kill me."

"Good thing one of his best friends just happens to be a lieutenant," said Lindsay, moving toward the cell with a set of keys dangling from one hand. Gripping one of the bars with her free hand, she slid a key in the lock and turned. A loud clicking sound was soon followed by the cell door swinging free as Claire hurriedly slipped through before Lindsay could change her mind.

"Thanks, I really don't like closed in spaces," she offered in appreciation, her thoughts settling back on the truly important issue of the hour. "Now, what happened with the arraignment?"

Lindsay released a heavy sigh. “Think of the worst.”

“You’re kidding? The judge released him of his own recognizance?” asked Cindy, figuring the set bail would more than likely be attainable, especially with Mark McMurphy available to help out, but to just release Carter without bail was unconscionable.

“Worse, much worse.” Lindsay placed her hands on her hips and looked down at the floor; she still couldn’t believe what Denise had told her on the phone. Claire immediately clued in on what had happened.

“He dropped the charges?” She looked as if the wind had been let out of her sails. “On what grounds?”

“The witness recanted her statement.” Lindsay glanced up and met Claire’s gaze. “She said she didn’t get there until Kayla Anderson was already on the ground. She said she couldn’t be certain when Carter had arrived on the scene.”

“He let him go? Scot-free?” Cindy reached back for the chair she’d been sitting in earlier and plopped down. This couldn’t be happening.

“Yes, and as you’d expect, Jill’s taking it very hard. Denise said after the judge made his ruling, Jill walked right out of the courtroom and out of the front doors of the Hall. She has no idea where she went.” Lindsay wondered how long it would take to check every bar in the city. Just as she was about to ask Claire and Cindy their opinion on how to find the missing DDA, a uniformed officer stuck his head around the corner and called to her.

“Inspector Boxer, you have a phone call.” He motioned to a nearby desk. “You can use that phone – line two.”

Lindsay nodded and crossed the distance, picking up the receiver and pushing the second button. “Boxer.” A frown immediately worked its way onto her features. “Where? . . . Okay, I’m on my way.” She hesitated but finally added, “Thanks.” Placing the receiver back onto its cradle, she turned toward her friends. “That was Nicole Honeycutt. Jill’s at Element over on Geary.”

“Nicole?”

“Honeycutt?”

Claire and Cindy asked simultaneously and almost in the same perfect harmony as their *Dancing Queen* number. If the situation hadn’t been so grave, Lindsay would’ve laughed. “Yeah, I didn’t ask any questions. Sometimes it’s better not to know.”

“True,” said Claire, glancing around and wondering where her personal effects were being held. “Why don’t you two go find Jill while I locate my purse? I’ve got something I want to check out, too.”

Lindsay tilted her head in question, but Claire shooed her away, not yet ready to fill the others in on her idea just in case it failed to produce anything. “It’s probably nothing.” She watched her friend crinkle her brow in thought and quickly quashed any questions before they could form. “Really, it’s nothing. Go get Jill, and if she’s still got her faculties, bring her to my office.”

The two old friends stared at each other until Lindsay finally broke off and relented.

“Okay, but if your nothing pans out, I better be the first person you call.”

Claire nodded her promise to share any pertinent findings and then waited until Lindsay and Cindy had left the room, before she went in search of the patrolman who’d locked her up. She was banking on her hunch to turn up something they could use to bolster a case against Carter.

“Thanks for calling, Kristie. I really appreciate it.”

Nicole Honeycutt sat in a corner booth and watched from a distance as Jill downed her second beer. She’d been surprised when the waitress had called her, forgetting that she’d given the young woman her card the evening she’d invited Jill for drinks. She actually couldn’t remember why she’d passed her information along, but that wasn’t important now. What mattered was that Jill not do anything stupid, especially something that could possibly end up getting her disbarred. Nicole really wanted the DDA in her firm.

“Well, I figured something was wrong. She’d definitely been crying and wanted George to keep her supplied with Crown and coke. I talked her into starting with beer.” The waitress had actually been tempted to try to talk Jill into something entirely different to take her mind off her troubles, but she’d figured the other woman needed more help than what a mindless fuck could offer.

“You did the right thing. I’ve called some of Jill’s friends...” Nicole broke her words off when she caught sight of a tall brunette dressed in jeans and leather entering the bar. She smiled. Lindsay Boxer would take care of the problem. Sliding a crisp fifty dollar bill into Kristie’s hand, she eased from the booth. “The cavalry has arrived.”

Kristie looked over toward the bar to see a brunette and a smaller redhead bracketing Jill’s side. When she’d turned back, Nicole was long gone.

“Drinking during hours?” asked Lindsay as she eased onto an empty bar stool. “Or are you meeting someone?”

Jill stared at the label on her bottle, the pain of the judge's ruling numbing her senses enough that she didn't even feel guilty about her clandestine meeting with Nicole a few nights earlier. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"I'm taking a vacation day," said Jill, lifting the bottle to her lips and taking a healthy chug. She mentally cursed the bar's deliveryman for being late this morning. She needed something with more of a kick.

Cindy took a quick inventory of the bottles: two empty and a half-full one in Jill's hand. They'd arrived in time. "Did you bother to tell anyone?"

"Didn't think I needed to."

A hand reached out and stopped the bottle from making its familiar trek. "Well, you did. People worry." Lindsay dropped her hand back to the bar's surface, her tight grip bringing the bottle and Jill's hand to the wooden surface as well. "Jill, we'll find more evidence. This isn't over."

A sardonic laugh flowed from Jill's lips. "It's over, Lindsay. The witness was all we had."

"Maybe someone else was around," said Cindy, wondering if the arresting officers had talked to every possible witness or if they'd just jumped on the first available one.

"It doesn't matter. Carter wins... he always wins." Jill's voice was filled with a sad tone of resignation and defeat.

"Only if you let him." Lindsay waited patiently for her words to sink in, the resulting reaction quick and expected. First came the narrowing of blue eyes, followed shortly thereafter by an angry glare. A pissed off Jill was exactly what Lindsay wanted.

"If I let him???"

"Jill, Lindsay didn't mean anything by her . . ." Cindy bit off the rest of her sentence when Jill swiveled her stool and her dark blue glare her way. "Um, what were you saying?"

Lindsay took advantage of Jill's distraction to push the beer bottle out of her friend's reach as she slipped off the stool. "This isn't the place for this conversation. Let's go see if Claire's found anything."

"Found anything? What was she looking for?" asked Jill, already grabbing for her purse as she eased from her stool. She hadn't been aware that there were findings still unaccounted for and had thought Claire had already exhausted every avenue. She held out a slim hope that it wasn't some ploy by Lindsay just to get her to leave the bar.

“I have no idea,” replied Lindsay as she turned for the exit, expecting the other two women to follow. Jill was only seconds behind her, while Cindy took a moment to fish into her wallet and throw a twenty on the bar, before she quickly rushed after her friends.

Kristie watched the trio hurry toward the exit and hoped all would be well for the gorgeous blonde.

Claire sat completely still in her chair and stared open-mouthed at her computer screen. She'd had no idea what she'd find when she'd decided to run Carter's DNA through the national database, but ten years worth of unsolved rape cases, spread far and wide across the nation, was not what she'd been expecting.

“Oh my God,” she clicked the mouse repeatedly and stared at the different cases that flashed across the screen. During the first five years, there seemed to be only one rape a year with all victims around the age of 12. After that the numbers increased to two or three a year, but the range of the victims' ages shifted from 18 to 22, and each woman who'd been assaulted had been intoxicated at the time of the attack. Pulling out a legal pad, she began to make copious notes, and so intent in her charting of the crimes, she lost track of time and never heard the door to her office open.

“Claire?” Lindsay pushed the door open and waited to be acknowledged, finally shrugging to the two women who followed her and stepping into the room. Making her way to the coroner's desk, she glanced down at the filled in notepad. Claire had made multiple columns on the white, blue-lined page and seemed to be lost in the numbers. “Claire?”

“Huh?” Claire started, almost sending her pencil through the center of her carefully constructed table. Looking past Lindsay, she spied Jill and Cindy standing just inside the door. She really wished Lindsay had come alone. “Sorry, I didn't hear you come in.”

Lindsay zeroed in on the column headings: Date, City, Victim, Age, and Circumstance, and then at the number of entries below. Her eyes snapped up to meet Claire's. “Is that...” She left her question dangling in the small space between them and felt an intense rage swell up from her gut when a sad nod confirmed her suspicions. “Son of a bitch!”

Jill tilted her head and frowned. “What? What is it?”

Stepping closer to her friend, Cindy took hold of the other woman's hand and squeezed. She had no idea what Claire had found, but judging from Lindsay's strong reaction, Jill was about to have the rug pulled out from under her yet again.

Claire pushed to her feet and walked across the room, the legal pad left behind on the desk's surface. She didn't need the specifics anymore; she had them memorized. "Jill, honey, let's sit for a minute."

"What now? It can't be worse than having the charges dropped," said Jill, allowing Claire to lead her to the couch anyway. What she wouldn't give for a magic wand right about now. The Bahamas sounded wonderful – a sunny beach, clear blue waters, a never ending supply of mojitos, and someone to share a blanket.

Cindy refused to relinquish her hold as she followed her friends to the worn leather couch. A moment of awkwardness was quickly remedied as Claire directed Cindy to move to the other side of Jill before the trio ended up in an impromptu game of Twister. Lindsay watched the human puzzle untwist their limbs without any of the women releasing their hands and then reached for the abandoned legal pad. A dark eyebrow hitched up to her hairline when she realized the chart had continued onto a second page.

"I had an idea and went with it," started Claire, glancing over at Lindsay for moral support and finding the other woman completely engrossed in her reading. "Um, I ran Carter's DNA through the national database."

"Oh, that was brilliant," offered Cindy, stopping herself from leaning over Jill and pumping Claire for information on what she'd found. It was painfully obvious from Claire's expression and Lindsay's preoccupation with the coroner's notes that the discovery had been nothing short of mind-boggling.

"Yeah, well, it certainly panned out," said Claire, angling her body until her knees touched Jill's. "Carter is more despicable than we ever imagined."

"I doubt that," replied Jill, knowing her imagination had no bounds when it came to William Carter and what he was capable of doing. She jumped in her seat when a legal pad was thrust in her direction. "Shit, Lindsay; don't scare me like that."

"You think that's scary? Read this." Lindsay held the pad out in front of her, offering it to Jill. The DDA stared down at the penciled-in writing and very slowly reached out to take the pad into her own hands. Cindy inched closer and had already started to read Claire's writing before Jill had time to read the column headings.

"Oh my God," Cindy echoed Claire's earlier sentiments as she quickly worked her way down the page, itching to flip the pad to the second page, but holding back to allow Jill time to process the information.

A hitch in her breathing and a hard swallow were the only sounds Jill made as she read line after line, victim after victim, until she'd reached the end. She finally looked up and made eye contact with Lindsay, surprising all three women with her calm voice and her astute legal findings.

“We can’t try him here. These are all out of our jurisdiction.” She flipped back to the first page. “They aren’t even in this state.” She moved back to the second page and zeroed in on the third name from the bottom. “Except for Darla Evans.”

The victim’s name had barely left Jill’s lips when her cell began to chime out a familiar tune. Not bothering with caller ID, Jill flipped the phone open and said, “Yes, Denise?”

Cindy bit down on her lip hard enough to make it bleed. The situation was much too dire to remark on Jill’s choice of ringtones for the acting DA. *The Bitch was Back*, indeed. She, Lindsay, and Claire waited silently for the call to end.

“I’ll be right there,” said Jill with a slight smile as she closed her phone and slipped it back into her purse. “You’ll never guess who just left Denise’s office.”

The three club members could only look at their friend expectantly, each daring to hope for some good news. This rollercoaster ride they’d been on for the past few days was taking way too many turns for their liking.

“Darla Evans was in court this morning. She’d seen a photo of William Carter in an ad the Register ran for the grand opening of Carter-McMurphy Racing Academy. Then she happened upon Cindy’s article and saw the arraignment was today. When the judge dismissed the charges, she decided to take control of the situation that had practically crippled her all these years. She caught Denise as she was leaving the courtroom.” Jill tried to stay guardedly optimistic. She couldn’t take another blow this close to her last one. Denise certainly sounded upbeat though.

“What’s the plan?” asked Lindsay, looking forward to arresting Carter for a third time, although, technically, she hadn’t been in on the initial arrest. She just hoped it went like the old saying and three would definitely be a charm.

Jill grinned again. “Get Jacobi and meet me in Denise’s office.”

Lindsay started for the door and grabbed the legal pad from Jill’s hand as she held out her other hand in invitation. Jill didn’t hesitate to take hold and allowed her friend to lead her from the room. Maybe this time she’d get the justice she deserved.

A figure crept silently through the front door of a two-story house and carefully eased the back door closed, relieved that he’d managed to sneak away unnoticed. With a visual sweep of the area, he hurried to his blue sedan and tossed his bag into the passenger seat, before crawling inside and closing the door. He ducked his head below the mirror and glanced through the windshield to get one last glimpse of his house as he slid the key into the ignition. After a quick stop at the bank, he’d head straight for Mexico. He’d seen the

blonde woman approach the acting DA after the arraignment and had recognized her immediately. There was no way he was spending one more minute behind bars.

A motion from behind caught his attention, and he tried to turn around, but the person who'd been hiding in the backseat was quicker and easily slid the garrote around his neck and pulled him back against the seat.

“Thought you'd get away with it?” A low voice whispered softly in Carter's ear as he struggled against the wire that had already begun to cut into the skin of his neck. A gurgling sound was the only reply the choking man could manage.

“I thought you liked choking?” The man laughed and tightened the wire, grinning almost manically at the noises coming from Carter. One last hard jerk tore into soft flesh and put an end to the sounds as Carter went completely still.

Moments later, the man crawled from the backseat and opened the driver's side door. With a quick glance at the silent house, he pushed Carter across the console and into the passenger seat as he slipped into the car and turned on the ignition. He eased the car into gear and inched down the driveway. No one would ever hear from William Carter again.

“What do you mean you couldn't find him?” Jill had moved from the comfort of her chair and now paced back and forth in front of her desk. “Where have you looked?”

Lindsay glanced over at Cindy and Claire, who she'd brought along for moral support, and took a deep breath. “Everywhere – his home, the Academy, and his usual haunts. He's nowhere to be found.”

“How can that be?” asked Jill, rubbing her hand gently across her forehead to try to rid the headache that had been building ever since she'd received Lindsay's phone call informing her that William Carter had disappeared from the radar.

“Um, I'm not actually sure,” said Lindsay, shifting her weight nervously. “But, I think it's entirely possible that Carter saw Darla Evans talking to Denise after the arraignment. He probably recognized her and got nervous.”

Jill cursed under her breath and stopped her pacing. Leaning her hip against the edge of her desk, she asked the question that had been brewing in her mind. “What did Mommy Dearest have to say?”

“She said she has no idea where he is. He said something about going to check something at the Academy, and he never returned.”

Jill took in Lindsay's explanation and worried at her lower lip. “Do you,” she started, hesitating briefly, before forging ahead and speaking the words that burned in her throat.

“Do you think she’s telling the truth?” She hadn’t meant for her voice to waver, but it had nonetheless. Was her mother covering for Carter again even with this new information coming to light? Would she ever believe the man was evil?

“Actually, I don’t think she has a clue, Jill. She seemed genuinely surprised.”

Not able to stand idly by any longer, Claire crossed the room and perched next to Jill on the desk, sitting hip to hip with her friend as she eased her arm around a slim shoulder. “You shouldn’t care what she thinks, Jill. Let’s just concentrate on figuring out a way to find Carter.”

“Yeah, there has to be someone who knows where he might have gone,” said Cindy, moving to stand next to Lindsay and slipping her hand into her lover’s. Lindsay gently rubbed her thumb across the back of Cindy’s hand, its motion soothing and comfortable as a ghost of a grin inched its way into the corners of her mouth.

“I think I know someone who can help.” Giving Cindy’s hand a squeeze, Lindsay offered a smile to her friends. “I’ll be right back.” Ducking through the doorway, she disappeared from view.

Cindy could only shrug.

“I don’t understand.”

Catherine Carter fidgeted in a wing chair that was positioned directly across from the acting DA. She’d been asked to come in for questioning and had been escorted directly to the office of Denise Kwon. Crossing one stocking-clad leg over the other, she nervously shifted in her seat.

“It’s very simple. You’re covering up your husband’s whereabouts, so I’m going to have to charge you with obstruction of justice.” Denise sat back comfortably in her chair, enjoying watching the older woman squirm. If she couldn’t have the satisfaction of knowing Carter was behind bars again, scaring the missus would have to do.

“But I truly don’t know where he is!” Catherine shouted, her upset finally bursting forth. She’d been completely gobsmacked when Inspector Boxer had shown up at her door, armed with a warrant for a local rape and pages of crimes that were linked to her husband. How could she have been so blind?

“Put yourself in my place, Mrs. Carter,” said Denise, hesitating for just a moment for the other woman to contemplate her position. “You’ve covered for your husband before, believed his lies, and even went so far as to give your only daughter, your flesh and blood, away to strangers in favor of him. What would you believe?”

Catherine ran an unsteady hand through golden locks and licked her dry lips. She'd thought of nothing else once she'd seen the names and names of victims the inspector had taken great delight in showing to her. The places all sounded familiar to her, as well they should, different cities that hosted various NASCAR events during the years, events she knew full well that William had attended, events he'd attended without her by his side, insisting that she'd grow tired and bored. She'd been played for a fool, and she'd played the part magnificently.

"I don't know him at all," she whispered, lost in her memories and seemingly to have forgotten where she was. "I believed him. I was so lonely when Daniel died, and William showed up out of the blue and swept me off my feet. He was so handsome and fun and loving, just exactly what I needed."

Denise, being Denise, broke through Catherine Carter's memories to remind the woman exactly where she was sitting and why she was there. "Maybe you should've taken some time to consider what your daughter wanted instead of inviting a child molester to live under your roof. Perhaps some time behind bars will help to remedy that oversight somewhat."

Blue eyes snapped up to focus on dark ones. "Haven't you been listening? I don't know where William has gone. What can I say or do to convince you?"

Denise smiled; she'd been waiting for those exact words. "You could drop the assault charges against Dr. Washburn." She pushed an official-looking document across the desk, complete with a black pen resting on top, and watched as blue eyes widened in exactly the same manner as someone else's she knew. They narrowed just as similarly.

"Fine. I probably deserved that slap and more." Catherine leaned forward and snatched up the pen, signing her name next to the line indicated by the yellow sticky arrow. "Anything else?"

"You might want to tell your daughter the same things you just told me," said Denise, reaching for the documents that would clear Claire Washburn. "That's just a suggestion, though."

Catherine eased to her feet and nodded at the acting DA. Breaking eye contact, she turned and headed toward the door, stopping just outside to glance down the hallway where her daughter's office was located. She took a tentative step and then another as she slowly made her way toward a conversation with Jillian. She pulled up short when she spied Inspector Boxer disappearing into the office Catherine had been heading for, but she couldn't stop herself from moving closer to listen in.

"I've called in a favor," said Lindsay, gravitating once again to Cindy's side. "I sent Claire's findings to John Ashe. Let's sic the feds on Carter's ass and see how he likes it."

“Smart, Linz, very smart,” said Claire, pulling Jill closer to her side. “They’ll turn up whatever rock he’s hiding under.”

“I’m just glad he’s finally been exposed for what he truly is. I just hate that so many others had to suffer, especially children,” Jill spoke the last two words softly. A chill ran down her spine in memory of the abuse she’d suffered at Carter’s hands and her heart went out to the other victims who’d had to suffer as well. She leaned against Claire and allowed the other woman’s warmth to ground her until the ringing of her office phone drew her attention.

“Bernhardt.” She listened carefully and then ended the call with little fanfare. “Okay, thanks Denise.”

“They find him?” asked Cindy, wondering if they could be so lucky.

“No, Denise just wanted me to tell Claire that all charges have been dropped.” She smiled at her friend and teased, “Ed doesn’t have to visit you in prison now.”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” quipped Claire sarcastically, not letting on how relieved she was to be free of the charges. “Did Denise say what prompted the change?”

Jill shook her head. “Nope, just that the paperwork has already been taken care of.” She reached for her purse; she needed some air. “C’mon, let me buy you guys a drink.”

“Papa Joe’s?” asked Cindy, figuring their local hangout would be the perfect place for them to regroup after everything that had happened.

“Sure, sounds good to me.” Jill shouldered her bag and started for the door. She’d been about to suggest they go to Element in hopes that Kristie might be working, but Papa Joe’s sounded better. Familiarity was just what they all needed.

In the hallway, Catherine watched from around the corner as the group of women walked away, their arms wrapped around each other in such a way an onlooker had to squint hard to see where one woman’s arms stopped and another’s began. She noted the order with the redhead and Jillian in the middle and the coroner and inspector bracketing the ends. She was certain the order changed from time to time, but felt what she was currently seeing was the norm – the two outer women offering their strength and protection to the ones in the middle. It seemed that after all these years, Jillian had found her family.

Long minutes passed before the older woman stepped from her hiding place, certain that the foursome had now reached the floor that would take them from the building. Catherine took just a moment to peer into the sanctuary of her daughter’s office, another achievement Jillian had accomplished all on her own without the help or approval of her mother. She’d managed to overcome the horrors of her youth to become a successful young woman.

A sharp pang pierced her heart and Catherine had to look away. Maybe one day, she'd return to try to piece together a life she'd broken all those years ago, but for now, she needed time – they both did. With one last look at the etching on the door that bore her daughter's name, Catherine Carter turned and walked away.

FADE TO BLACK

A complex collage with a dark, textured background. On the left, a police officer in a brown uniform and a woman in a dark top are shown. In the center, a woman with short blonde hair looks upwards. On the right, a large, detailed eye is superimposed over a background of a city at night. Handwritten text in red and white is written across the eye. Below the eye is a tilted photograph of a person lying on a surface. The text 'THY WILL BE DONE' is centered across the middle of the collage.

THY WILL BE DONE

Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.
Therefore honor God with your body

THY WILL BE DONE PART 1
by inspectorboxer

It was time to repent.

He knew her routine backwards and forwards. Had watched her for weeks when he'd discovered her need for salvation. She would be in her office now, even at this hour. She always worked late, was often the last to leave. Even with her lifestyle full of men and sex, she worked tirelessly on her cases, reveling in the ones she won, bitter in the ones she lost.

The taser in his hand was warm from his body heat and damp with his sweat. He slipped it from his pocket, caressed the handle with his thumb. It was easy to fool the security cameras and the guard would not be back for another twenty minutes. He had plenty of time to disable her and get her from the building. He would take her to his sacred place for she needed more saving than the others. Her wicked ways of the flesh needed to be driven from her body until she could be sent to the Father clean and pure. It didn't matter that the police had tainted his inner sanctum, his sanctuary. They had moved on from it already, leaving their fingerprint dust and yellow crime scene tape to fade and flutter in the wind. It was now nothing more than photos in a file to the officers who trampled through his most cherished space.

A noise made him pause in step and thought. He slipped effortlessly into the shadows and waited.

A figure emerged from the office ahead, moving jerkily toward the stairwell. The man was buttoning his shirt and, as he watched, the stranger ran his hands through his thick hair, taming it into some semblance of order. There was no curiosity about the man hurrying from the sinner's office. He waited until the door closed and the footsteps receded before moving into the low light again.

He frowned when he didn't hear the customary typing that should be coming from the office. The taser slowly came up in his hand as he cautiously peered inside.

For a moment, he thought the room was empty. Like a flash of fire, rage tore through him at having his plans denied. God wanted this of him, and he'd failed this night. He started to turn away when a glimpse of flesh captured his attention. Turning back, he stepped inside the office and approached the desk.

She was lying on the floor, her skirt hiked up lewdly around her waist, her desk supplies scattered haphazardly around her. Her shirt was torn open, her dark pantyhose ripped. At first, he thought she was merely sleeping, so unexpected it was to find her this way.

But she wasn't sleeping. The forming bruises on her neck attested to that.

The rage swelled again. He'd been denied. He'd failed. There was no way he could deliver God's chosen child back into the fold.

The elevator dinged, signaling a new arrival. He moved quickly, slipping out of the office and into the conference room across the hall. He watched and waited, his finger tightened on the taser's trigger.

What he saw made his heart soar.

She was like an angel, a fallen angel with her short blonde hair swept to the side as she came toward him. She was wearing a black skirt and light blue top with one too many buttons undone to reveal a smooth expanse of alabaster skin. He knew this woman. Knew that God was delivering her to him at precisely this moment.

He'd been wrong. He'd misunderstood the plan.

Nicole Honeycutt was not meant to be delivered clean and pure to the Father.

Jill Bernhardt was.

He turned around and saw a wide dry erase board on the wall and smiled. It was time to confuse his enemies. Time to throw those that would stop him from doing the Lord's work off his path.

He chose a red marker...

And began to write.

The club was gonna kill her.

At least they would if they ever found out.

Jill bit her lip as she accepted the badge from the security guard at the front desk and hurried toward the bank of elevators to her right. She caught one as a few junior associates at Abbott, Arbor and Honeycutt were leaving for the night. Both wore suits that Jill was certain would cost her a paycheck.

The elevator doors closed and she sighed, feeling relief that she didn't have to share the space with anyone. Jill stared at her reflection in the metal doors. Her face looked tired and pale, the recent events with her mother and stepfather having taken a lot out of her and leaving the physical evidence of that written all over her drawn features. As she studied herself, her nose wrinkled in reaction to the smell of cigar smoke, perfume and coffee. It permeated the air in the elevator along with a fourth, older scent.

Jill decided it was money.

She didn't want to think about how much of it she was about to turn down. If she thought too much about the money, it made her have second thoughts, and the last thing Jill wanted was second thoughts. She was going to tell Nicole Honeycutt thanks but no thanks. There wasn't enough money in the world to make her represent men like Billy Harris or the current whack-job they were chasing.

Men like her stepfather.

Jill shoved the thought of him aside, the memory of his hands on her. She'd thought she'd buried every last image of him from her childhood so deep she'd never find them, but his reappearance in her life had stirred those once still waters and dredged every ugly memory up to the surface.

She shifted uneasily. It felt like she was going into the enemy lair, especially after Abbott had represented her stepfather. If Jill had needed any further persuading, Abbott's defense of that bastard would have sealed the deal. She thought of Malcolm Abbott's face, of those bushy eyebrows and dull blue eyes, and hoped with fervor that she wouldn't run into him tonight.

The DDA swiped a hand through her bangs as the elevator ascended. Her hands were shaking, and she didn't know if it was because of the conversation she was about to have, or the thoughts of her stepfather that were raking her nerves raw.

Maybe it was because she was ashamed, ashamed that she'd even entertained Honeycutt's offer. Jill didn't want to think about how the girls would react. Lindsay would be the worst, probably taking it as a personal betrayal. And Claire... Jill shook her head. Claire would give her a verbal reaming for the ages.

The elevator dinged, and Jill stepped out on the tenth floor. The carpet was a deep wine color and so plush it swallowed her heels as she made her way toward the office at the end of the hall. That smell of money was much stronger here, and she wondered if piles of it weren't hidden in safes behind every piece of artwork she passed. She was tempted to peek but didn't want to trip any silent alarms. She glanced at her watch and noted with some satisfaction she was a few minutes early.

Jill knocked on the wall next to the door before rounding the corner, drawing up short when she discovered the office was vacant. "Shit," she muttered under her breath. She looked back the way she'd come, hoping to see Honeycutt headed her way, but the floor was eerily silent. She should have known Nicole would do this... make her wait. The woman loved her power trips and no doubt this was one of them.

Jill looked at her watch again. With a sigh, she flipped out her cell phone and punched in Honeycutt's number. She didn't feel like waiting, and if Honeycutt couldn't do her the courtesy of meeting her on time in person then she would...

Her train of thought ended there when she heard the soft ring of a cell phone from behind the desk. It was then that she truly took in the surface. Papers were scattered everywhere. A cup of pens and pencils had tipped on its side, spilling its contents all across the oak surface. The flat screen monitor hung at an odd angle and was facing away from where the user could see it. Jill's gaze was drawn to the floor, where the ringing seemed to be coming from, and she snapped her own phone shut.

It took Jill a few seconds to realize she was looking at a foot underneath the desk. The DDA blinked. Then blinked again.

"Nicole?" Jill moved forward as if in a fog, coming around the desk and looking down. A tiny, shocked sound emerged from her throat.

Nicole Honeycutt was sprawled on the floor, her eyes looking up into Jill's but seeing right through her... seeing something the attorney hoped she wouldn't see herself for a very long time. There were bruises darkening on the woman's throat, forming in the shape of fingertips. They made Jill think of her father, of the girl he just killed...

Jill nearly stumbled over the body in her haste to snatch up the phone on Honeycutt's desk. She pressed zero and tried to control the sudden shuddering of her body that had her teeth nearly clacking together. Jill kept her eyes focused on the phone, on anything but the cooling form beneath her.

"This is Deputy District Attorney Jill Bernhardt. I need you to call the police and lock this building down ASAP. No one gets in or out." She didn't explain as she hung up the phone before pulling out her own cell again. She hit speed dial on Lindsay Boxer's number.

Act I

"Seriously?" Claire huffed as she came bustling out of the stairwell, her kit in one hand and a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead. "You couldn't have restored power to the elevator?"

Lindsay gave her a half-hearted smirk. She'd already climbed the ten-story hike so she felt little sympathy. "We're working on it. The guard went a little overboard. Now they can't get them to come back on." She took the kit from a grateful Claire and motioned with her free hand toward an office at the end of the hall. They began to walk side by side. "It's Nicole Honeycutt," she informed her friend.

"I heard." Claire shook her head. "Small world."

"It's even smaller than you think," Lindsay said as she waited for Claire to pass her and

enter the office.

“Oh?”

“Jill found her.”

Claire glanced up sharply from where she'd just knelt next to the body. Several questions immediately sprang to mind, none of them having to do a damn bit with the case. She settled on the one that had her the most curious. “What was she doing here?”

Lindsay shrugged, wishing she had that answer herself. She had a few theories, all of them swirling around Malcolm Abbott and the whereabouts of Jill's missing stepfather. “Jacobi is with her.”

“Why aren't you?”

Lindsay set the kit down. “I need to focus on the case instead of a friend, no matter how much I would prefer to do otherwise.” She leaned back and crossed her arms, her leather jacket creaking a little as she did so. “I'll check in with her when Jacobi is done.”

Claire frowned, but she understood. She fought the urge to hurry. She wished she could set her job aside for just a few minutes to check on Jill. The last thing her friend needed was this, especially after everything Jill had just been through with her so-called family.

Claire began a preliminary exam of the body. She noted the bruising around the throat and could only imagine what had gone through Jill's mind at the sight. Lindsay hovered in the doorway behind her. Claire could almost feel Lindsay's impatient energy coming off the inspector in waves. A tiny smirk appeared. “So how is Cindy?” she asked innocently.

Lindsay stopped tapping her foot and looked at her. “You're asking me about Cindy now?” Her voice sounded incredulous as she slid her hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

“Why not now?” Claire asked as she checked Honeycutt's liver temperature to determine time of death.

Lindsay freed one hand and motioned at what Claire was doing. “You're sticking sharp, pointy things in a dead body. Now doesn't seem like a good time to talk about my love life.”

The medical examiner chuckled as she glanced at the results. “Well it's not like we've had much time to socialize lately.”

The inspector couldn't argue with that, but she could change the subject. She leaned against the doorway. “How long has she been dead?”

“Not long at all,” Claire murmured as she shook her head. She didn’t mourn Honeycutt. The woman was the antithesis of everything Claire believed in, but being a bitch was not a motive for murder, and it didn’t earn the woman the right to be brutalized like this.

They continued in silence, Claire performing her examination while Lindsay fidgeted with impatience. It was their routine, and Claire took an odd sort of comfort in it. Finally she got to her feet. “She was obviously strangled, but I won’t know for sure the cause of death until I open her up.”

“Inspector?”

Lindsay looked over her shoulder at Officer Sammy Cho. He was standing in the doorway across the hall. His youthful features looked upset, and the sight made Lindsay’s stomach drop. She felt a familiar fission of fear chase up her spine, and for a long moment, she couldn’t speak or move. “Don’t suppose you found the killer in there,” she finally asked when she rediscovered her voice.

“No. Just his calling card.”

Lindsay shot Claire a look, and the two of them stepped out of Honeycutt’s office and made their way reluctantly across the hall to what appeared to be a conference room. Just past the threshold, they both cursed.

Scrawled with a red marker across a dry erase board was the last thing either of them wanted to see.

Scripture.

Something cold washed over Lindsay as she stared at the words written in the color of blood. She’d felt the same sensation, the sick chill, at the crime scenes of all the Hallelujah Man’s other victims. Those victims’ faces flickered across her mind’s eye now, each of them frozen in their final moments of suffering. Except in the case of Felicia Watkins. Lindsay had the misfortune of knowing what her screams sounded like in stereo.

He’d been here, in this room, while Jill had been across the hall. They had been in the same space. On the same floor. Possibly at the same moment.

“This fucker is really starting to piss me off.”

The unexpected words snapped Lindsay out of her dark musings as she slowly turned her head and looked at Claire, her brown eyes like saucers. Cho seemed equally as stunned.

“What?” Claire sniped. “Like you both weren’t thinking it.”

Lindsay shook her head as if to clear it. “Go get the techs,” she ordered the other officer, her voice sounding suddenly exhausted. “Get ‘em in here. And do me a favor, Cho? Let the Lieutenant know?”

Cho nodded, but he didn’t look pleased with the latter request. Jacobi dipped his head in greeting at the younger man as he passed him on his way out the door.

“You might want to go check on Jill. She’s weirding out in the break room. And be nice to the girl when you find out why she was here. She did just find a body after all.” Jacobi caught sight of the scripture and frowned. “Damn. That’s not what I was hoping to see when I walked in here.”

Lindsay and Claire exchanged glances. “Why was she here?” Lindsay asked.

“I am not going to be the one to tell you that,” Jacobi replied. “You want to know, you’re going to have to go ask.”

Jill finding the body was a complication. Lindsay didn’t need complications. Her life had enough of them already. She glanced hopefully at Claire.

“I’ll go talk to her and find out,” Claire announced, reading the beseeching look in Lindsay’s tired eyes with practiced ease. She snapped off her gloves and gave Lindsay’s arm a squeeze as she passed.

“Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit... Therefore honor God with your body,” Lindsay read the scrawled scripture out loud. “Claire’s right. This guy is pissing me off.” She stepped closer to the words, noting that the marker that made them was conspicuously missing.

“He’s gonna run out of passages if he keeps it up,” Jacobi joked without humor.

Lindsay sighed. According to security, there was no way the killer had come down the stairwell or elevator once Jill had sounded the alarm. The building had locked down instantly.

Her brown gaze drifted to the window. Beyond the glass was an impressive and beautiful view of the Golden Gate Bridge. The sight made Lindsay yearn to be somewhere else, anywhere else. More and more, this case made her just want to run, to grab Cindy and get the hell away from San Francisco. Pursing her lips, she approached the expensive view, wondering if maybe the killer had somehow gone out the window and repelled down the outside wall. She put her gloved fingertips against the glass and started to lean forward only to jerk back when a familiar redhead suddenly appeared on the other side.

“Good Lord that girl gets around,” Jacobi muttered in slight awe when Cindy waved to them from the other side of the glass.

“How in the hell...?” Lindsay gave the window a nudge with her finger, unsurprised when it swung open and a gust of cold air brushed her face.

“Hey,” Cindy said breathlessly. Her cheeks were nearly as red as her hair. “Oh...” Her perkiness vanished when she saw the scripture. “Not another one.”

Lindsay stuck her head out the window and looked down, frowning when she saw scaffolding stretching down beneath her. She smelled the distinct odor of paint as the wind whipped her hair about her features. “You *climbed* up here?” She hoped she kept the horror out of her voice as she leaned back inside.

Cindy smirked.

“Cindy, you’re trespassing on a crime scene!”

“I am not!” Cindy protested. “I’m not *in* the crime scene. I’m outside the building. Where is the crime scene, by the way?” She stuck her head in the conference room and looked around curiously. “And who died?”

Lindsay put a finger on Cindy’s chest and pushed her lover back a step. “You have to go. Now.”

“Aw, c’mon. It took me ten minutes to climb up here.”

“Then it should take you about that long to climb down.”

“Inspectors?” Cho re-entered the room, just missing Cindy who dove for cover on the scaffolding platform.

“Whatcha got?” Jacobi asked as he and Lindsay eased in front of the open window.

“The Medical Examiner wants to see you both in the break room.”

“We’ll be right there.” Jacobi promised.

They waited for Cho to leave before both pivoted and watched Cindy’s head pop up over the window ledge.

“Just tell me who the victim is. I can at least get started on that angle. On this floor it’s got to be somebody good.” Cindy looked up at them both hopefully, the cool night breeze ruffling her hair.

Lindsay crossed her arms. “It was Honeycutt. Happy now?”

“Seriously?” Cindy scrambled back to her feet. “Nicole Honeycutt? The attorney from the Dow trial?”

“Seriously,” Jacobi replied. “And you seriously need to beat tracks out of here before you get caught and hauled in for questioning.”

“Wait a second.” Cindy held up a hand containing a reporter’s notebook and pointed it at the scripture. “Nicole Honeycutt was killed by the Hallelujah Man?” Cindy looked at the scripture again. Let the words and what they implied sink in. She thought of Felicia Watkins. The missing eye... the hot poker that had been driven into her again and again...

Cindy remembered how far she’d gone to save Jill’s reputation during the Dow trial. Her outburst in court, her investigation into Honeycutt when she realized how the defense attorney had planned to discredit Jill... It had all been so worth it, even the contempt of court mark on her record. She’d never thought there would be consequences for anyone else due to her actions.

Fatal consequences.

Had the Hallelujah Man made Honeycutt suffer like Felicia Watkins? The thought made Cindy shiver.

“Maybe,” Lindsay hedged. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed something change in her lover’s demeanor.

“How did she die?” Cindy’s voice was more subdued, and Lindsay almost had to strain to hear it.

“At first blush it looks like she was raped and strangled,” Jacobi told her.

Cindy frowned and her brows furrowed. “That’s it?”

Jacobi looked at her and crossed his arms.

“I mean,” Cindy hastened to explain as she swallowed around the sudden bile that seemed to have lodged in her throat. “Did he... make her...”

“Suffer?” Lindsay guessed.

Cindy nodded.

“It doesn’t look like it,” Lindsay admitted.

“So... what else can you tell me?” Cindy asked as she managed to slide back into reporter-mode, but not without a great deal of unease.

“For crying out loud, Cindy, we just got here,” Lindsay replied in a gruff and tired voice.

“So you think I should go?” Cindy suggested as she set her dark thoughts aside for the moment and focused reluctantly back on her job.

“That would be a good idea. You probably just found the killer’s escape route,” Lindsay informed her.

Cindy bit her lip. “So my fingerprints will be...”

“Uh-huh,” Lindsay drawled.

The reporter winced, trying in vain to gauge if her lover was truly upset. “Right. Going now.”

Lindsay stuck her head out the window and watched as Cindy started to descend. She frowned, not liking the idea of the reporter climbing down the rickety looking structure, especially in the dark. She stifled her protective instincts, knowing Cindy wouldn’t appreciate them. “Cindy,” her voice was softer when she said her lover’s name. For a moment, Lindsay forgot all about serial killers and dead bodies as she watched Cindy’s head tip back and her beautiful features come into view once more. The warm pang that hit Lindsay in the middle of her chest at the sight almost made her breathless.

“Meet us at Jill’s. She found the body,” Lindsay told her in a huskier than normal voice.

Cindy paused. She looked like she was about to change her mind, to climb back up the scaffolding and hurry inside to go find her friend. With a pained expression, she nodded and started reluctantly descending once more.

Lindsay didn’t move away until she saw her lover give her a little wave from the sidewalk. She smiled unconsciously.

“You are so far gone over that girl,” Jacobi pointed out. “It’d be sad if it weren’t so darn precious.”

Lindsay looked completely unapologetic when she leaned back inside and closed the window. “You’re just jealous, old man.” Brushing past him, she went in search of the break room. She ignored the scripture behind her, putting it out of her mind for a few minutes. Right now Jill needed her. Their damn killer was going to have to wait.

Claire and Jill were sitting side by side, but neither was talking when Lindsay entered the break room. Jill was staring at a cup of water in her hands. Claire was leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed, an angry look on her features.

“Um...” Lindsay looked from one woman to the other, feeling like she’d just walked in

on the calm before the storm... or maybe one's aftermath. "Problem?"

"Other than me finding a dead body you mean?" Jill asked dryly.

"Wait until you hear what she was doing here," Claire told Lindsay in a tight voice just as Jacobi appeared behind his partner.

"Tell me you were not sleeping with Nicole Honeycutt," Lindsay said with slight horror at the first thought that popped into her head.

Jill turned her head and glared at her. "Please."

Lindsay blew out a relieved breath as she pulled back a chair and sat down at the table with her two friends. Jacobi opted to lean in the doorway. "So... what were you doing here at this hour? You weren't here to talk to Malcolm Abbott were you? Maybe kick him in the shins?"

"I had an appointment," Jill said as her eyes returned guiltily to the contents of her cup.

"With Honeycutt?" Lindsay asked with some confusion. "Why would you be meeting her?"

"Jacobi didn't tell you?" Jill gave him a faintly accusing look, and he held up his hands.

"I was not going there," he confessed. "I didn't want them shooting the messenger."

"Go on," Claire said in a miffed tone. "Tell her."

Jill rubbed her forehead wearily. "It... we were going to... talk about a job."

"A job," Lindsay repeated slowly. "Wait... a job here? For you?" Her voice elevated in surprise and an edge of anger.

"I was here to turn her down," Jill explained.

"Nicole Honeycutt offered you a job, and you didn't tell us." Claire sniffed, clearly put out with her blonde friend.

"There was nothing to tell," Jill answered, her voice now more subdued. "And hello? I found a dead body! I mean... ick. A little comforting would be appreciated here!"

Claire sniffed again.

Jacobi shook his head at their antics.

So did Lindsay. She wanted to yell, wanted to feel hurt by Jill's actions, but the cop in

her wouldn't let it happen. Not now. Not yet. "Okay. Wait. Just... wait."

Jacobi crossed his arms. "So you were here for a job interview," he said in an effort to get the discussion back on track. He'd already been over this with Jill, but he knew he wasn't going to get anything else done until Lindsay had heard the details for herself.

"No," Jill said firmly. "I already had an interview of sorts. I was here to tell her thanks but no thanks."

"I can't believe you ever considered it!" Claire huffed. "She tried to ruin you. These are the people that represented your stepfather!"

"Claire," Lindsay snapped only to blink when she realized whom she was scolding. She cleared her throat. "What time were you supposed to meet?"

"Eight thirty."

"Were you on time?" Lindsay asked.

Jill nodded. "I was a few minutes early. I wanted to get it over with."

Lindsay gave Claire a look when the medical examiner started to comment. Claire lapsed into silence but didn't look happy about it. "Then what happened?"

"I walked in and she wasn't there. Well, she was there. She was just on the floor, and I didn't see her right away." Jill ran a hand over her eyes. "Was she raped?" She looked at Claire.

"Preliminary exam of the body would indicate that," Claire said in a quieter voice.

"Jesus," Jill whispered.

Lindsay glanced at Claire. "Did you tell her what was in the conference room?"

Claire shook her head. "I thought I should leave that to you."

"Please tell me there wasn't another body in there," Jill pleaded.

"You might think this is worse," Jacobi murmured.

Lindsay laced her fingers and leaned her elbows on the table. There was no easy way for her to break the news. "There was scripture written on a dry erase board..."

Jill's already pale skin went ghostly white. "Scripture," she said slowly. She swallowed as her gaze went to Jacobi's grizzled face then to Claire's tired eyes and finally back to Lindsay's deadly serious features. "You're telling me the Hallelujah Man killed her?"

“It’s looking that way. But we’ve been down this road before. So let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Jacobi warned all of them.

“She was still warm!” Jill said as she jerked to her feet and started pacing. “I might have missed him by minutes! He could have been across the hall writing that while I was in her office!”

Lindsay didn’t want to think about that. It was too damn scary to contemplate. “We think he went out the window in the conference room. There is some scaffolding along the side of the building. Cindy found it,” Lindsay informed them before biting her lip.

Claire’s brow scrunched as she puzzled that out before her face cleared when she realized what Lindsay meant. “Don’t tell me she…”

“She did,” Jacobi replied before Lindsay could answer.

Claire put a hand over her eyes and shook her head.

“So why would HM kill Honeycutt?” Jill demanded, resorting to the abbreviated version of the killer’s name for expediency’s sake. “What was her sin?”

“Lust,” Lindsay pointed out bluntly. Jill spun to look at her, something in her eyes telling Lindsay that Jill did, in fact, know exactly what sin the attorney had committed. It was one her friend was intimately acquainted with herself.

“Jill… did you see anyone leaving… hear anything…”

Jill was already shaking her head. “It was so quiet I could hear myself breathing. There was no one up here but me… and maybe… him.” She wrapped her arms around herself as a sudden chill took her.

Lindsay stood and slipped out of her jacket, draping it around Jill’s shoulders. She pulled the sides together and gave Jill a hesitant smile. “All that matters is that you’re fine. Do you want to wait here until we finish up, or do you want me to have Cho take you home?”

“I’ll wait. I should go see the scripture…”

“Jill,” Lindsay started to protest.

“I’m okay,” Jill promised. “A little freaked, but I can still do my job.”

“This isn’t your job.”

The four of them turned to find Denise Kwon in the doorway. “Nicole Honeycutt’s

murder isn't your case, Bernhardt.”

“But...” Jill started to protest.

“No. You're a witness.” Denise looked at Lindsay. “Could you all give us some time alone? I need to speak with my Deputy District Attorney for a moment.”

Lindsay looked like she was about to tell Denise what she could do with her request when Jill squeezed her arm.

“That's fine.” Jill looked at Lindsay. “Come find me when you're done.”

Lindsay nodded reluctantly, but she gave Denise one more long, hard stare of warning before clearing the room with Jacobi and Claire.

“What do you want to know?” Jill asked, realizing that there were worse things than finding a dead body to worry about... like your boss finding out you'd interviewed for another job.

“Tell me you're joking.”

Jacobi sighed as he led Tom down the hallway. “This isn't the sort of thing I tend to joke about.” They stepped into the conference room, and Tom drew up short.

“Damnit!” Tom spat when he saw the scripture. He watched as Lindsay swiveled around to face him. She was crouched near one of the conference room chairs, staring up at the board, and his anger deflated instantly when he saw the shadows under her eyes, the fatigue in every line of her body. She was running herself into the ground trying to catch this guy, and it killed Tom to see it. It was happening again. Another killer was consuming Lindsay's life, taking pieces of his ex-wife's soul with each new victim.

A part of him wanted to shake her, to make her see reason. The rest of him wanted to hold her close and protect her, even now, even after everything they'd been through.

But Tom knew his days of comforting Lindsay Boxer were behind him. All he could be, especially in this moment, was her boss. He pointed at the dry erase board. “So he's racked up another one.”

“Maybe,” Lindsay conceded. She was studying him closely as if she were reading his thoughts.

“That doesn't look like a maybe to me, Boxer.”

“You didn't see Honeycutt's body,” Lindsay told him. “You remember Felicia Watkins?”

How he was escalating and what he did to her? Honeycutt just had some bruises around her neck. Besides, you're the one who keeps telling me not to jump to conclusions."

Tom rocked back on his heels at the rebuke then nodded. "Fair enough. So you think he went down the scaffolding?"

"It's being dusted for prints now," Jacobi told him.

Lindsay wondered if she should mention the fact that a certain reporter's prints were likely to show up all over the place. She decided it could wait. She could just have the techs exclude those prints, and Tom would never have to know.

"And I heard Jill found the body?"

Lindsay nodded. "She had them lock down the building. We searched top to bottom. Anyone who was still here has been rounded up and questioned. Fortunately that wasn't too many on a Friday at 8:30."

"And Claire?"

"Back at the morgue with Honeycutt," Jacobi said.

Tom scraped his hands through his short hair. "The press is gonna be all over this one."

Lindsay bit her lip, thinking that one member of the press in particular already was. "Like the press hasn't been all over the others?" she asked dryly.

"You think she got her killed?" Tom wondered abruptly.

"Huh?" Lindsay asked in confusion.

"Thomas. That stunt she pulled in court, the article she wrote on Honeycutt..."

Lindsay shot instantly to her feet. "This is not Cindy's fault."

Jacobi moved a step closer, sensing a storm brewing.

"How can you say that?" Tom pointed at the scripture. "The Hallelujah Man kills another victim, and we all know what sin Nicole Honeycutt is guilty of. And how do we know? Oh that's right. Thomas' article."

"The only one responsible here for Nicole Honeycutt's rape and murder is the person who killed her." Lindsay felt a trickle of fear that he was right, but more than anything she felt rage. Rage that another life had been lost, that she'd been too late and too stupid to stop it. Rage that Tom kept getting in her way, slowing her down. Rage that he would dare talk about Cindy like she was some clueless, irresponsible child.

Lindsay knew she'd been guilty of that in the beginning, of underestimating Cindy. She'd treated her like a kid, too young to know much about how the world really worked. Then Lindsay's father had died, and Cindy had been there with a wisdom beyond her years. Everything had changed between them the night of the funeral. Lindsay had never been able to look at Cindy the same way again.

"I know she's your friend, Lindsay, but you're letting that cloud your judgment."

"Nothing is clouding my judgment," Lindsay countered angrily.

"Like hell, Boxer. As your boss, I'm hereby ordering you to stay away from that reporter." Tom crossed his arms and waited for the explosion to follow.

"Oh Lord," Jacobi muttered. He put his hand on Tom's elbow, hoping he could defuse the situation before tempers boiled over and everyone's frustration with the case got the better of them. "Lieutenant, maybe we should step outside and just..."

"You're ordering me?" Lindsay responded with ice in her voice. "Are you kidding? Do you know how many cases Cindy Thomas has helped us crack?"

Tom was very aware, just as he was aware of how much time his ex-wife seemed to spend around the redhead. He didn't like how close they stood together, how Lindsay's face lit up whenever that reporter walked into the bullpen. He knew he was letting jealousy color his actions, but he was too frustrated by this killer and watching Lindsay break herself to catch him to care.

"What's the matter, Linz?" Tom sneered. "Have you forgotten how to work a case without her? Maybe she's the one who should wear the badge..." The rest of Tom's sentence was cut short as he was slapped across the face. He staggered back, smacking into the wall with the force of the blow.

Jacobi closed his eyes and swore.

Tom touched his bottom lip shocked to see it was bleeding. He felt a touch of remorse for egging her on, but what was done was done. "You're off this case. In fact, you're on suspension."

"Good," Lindsay muttered, surprised she meant it. "Maybe I can finally get something done for a change," she snarled as she shoved past him. She managed an apologetic look for Jacobi, then spun around in the doorway to say one last thing. "And by the way, *Lieutenant*, asking me to stay away from Cindy Thomas is like asking Niagara not to fall."

"And why is that?" Tom shot back as he wiped the blood from his lip.

“Considering we share a bed almost every night that could be a little hard.” Lindsay had the satisfaction of watching Tom’s eyes bulge. She didn’t savor the moment, though, as she turned and stalked away, determined not to shake her stinging hand until she was out of his line of sight.

Lindsay slammed the door to her SUV and gripped her steering wheel so hard it squeaked under her hands. Needing an outlet for her frustration, she pounded the wheel several times and only stopped when it started to hurt.

“Damnit. Damnit!!”

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the headrest, trying to get her temper under control. When the passenger side door suddenly opened, Lindsay almost came out of her skin.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jill demanded as she scrambled inside. “You got yourself suspended! And hello? You were supposed to be my ride home.”

Lindsay blinked at her, not sure what to address first. “I was going to call you to come down,” she said defensively. “And you have no right to give me grief,” Lindsay countered. “Miss ‘I was offered a big defense attorney gig and didn’t tell my friends about it.’”

Jill was undeterred by Lindsay’s ire. “Jacobi gave me the heads up and told me to, and I quote, ‘go after the fool girl and slap some sense into her.’” Doing as ordered, Jill reached across the console and smacked Lindsay on the back of the head.

“Hey!”

“How could you get suspended?” Jill asked with disbelief. “I found the body! I’m a part of this case, I’m freaked the hell out, I’m counting on you, and you go get yourself thrown off the force!!!”

Lindsay wilted a little under Jill’s anger. She rarely saw Jill this mad and almost never at her. She didn’t much like it. “Did Jacobi tell you why I got suspended?”

“He said you popped Tom in the mouth. Not that I haven’t been tempted a time or two myself, Linz, but...”

“He told me I had to stay away from Cindy. He thinks Cindy got Honeycutt killed because of what she did in the Dow trial.”

Jill stilled, her anger evaporating. “What she did for me, you mean,” she said quietly. She slumped back in the seat. The thought that the trial could have led to Nicole’s death

never crossed her mind, but now it made perfect, sad sense. “Oh God.” She frowned. “So Tom is saying this is somehow Cindy’s fault?”

Lindsay simply raised an eyebrow.

“What the hell did you just slap him for? You should have punched his lights out.”

“Thank you.” Lindsay shifted in her seat and started the car. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do now, but she knew she wasn’t letting this case go. It owned her now. It owned all of them. Badge or no badge, she was seeing this one through to the bitter end.

Jill felt something cold bump her shoulder, and she looked up to see Claire offering her a long-necked bottle of beer. She smiled and took it gratefully as her friend eased around her and settled in a chair to her left. Lindsay was pacing by the front door of Jill’s apartment, checking her watch every ten seconds.

The DDA let her head drop back against the couch and sighed. It was nearly five o’clock in the morning. Way too late, or too early depending on how you looked at it, to be drinking beer, but damn if she didn’t need one. “What a bitch of a day.” She took a long drag on the bottle as she watched Lindsay pivot and head back for the door.

“You’re going to wear out those boots, sweetheart,” Claire informed the antsy detective.

Lindsay rolled her eyes in Claire’s direction, but she didn’t take the bait.

The knowledge that Lindsay was technically not an inspector at the moment was too difficult to process at this early of an hour, Claire decided. Lindsay oozed cop out of her pores and that still hadn’t changed, even if her friend’s status on the force was currently shaky. The phone call from a miffed Jacobi informing her of Lindsay’s impetuous actions with Tom still seemed like some sort of dream.

Lindsay glanced at her watch again and whipped out her cell phone one more time, making sure she hadn’t missed a call. Claire and Jill watched her then shared a knowing smirk.

“So whipped,” Jill whispered.

“I heard that,” Lindsay fired back.

“So how are you holding up, sweetheart?” Claire asked the blonde. “You look like you could sleep for a week.”

“That good? I feel like I could sleep for a month.” Jill brought the bottle to her lips and

took another sip.

“Honey?” Claire began slowly as Jill’s blue gaze fixed on her. “Why didn’t you tell us about the job?”

Lindsay didn’t add anything to the question, but she turned toward them as she continued to pace.

“I was...” Jill took a breath. She’d hoped under the circumstances that she would be excused from this line of questioning for the rest of the night. “It just seems like there are a lot of changes happening lately.” She glanced at Lindsay from under her blonde bangs and watched her best friend’s gaze drop to the floor. “Honeycutt made the offer, and there was a hell of a lot of money involved.”

“And you wondered if maybe you should make a change of your own,” Claire guessed. “Jill, you would have been on the other side of the club. Those people defended...”

“I know,” Jill cut her off. “Which was why it took me all of ten minutes to decide it wasn’t for me. Then everything happened with my stepfather, and I never really got a chance to talk to any of you about it. Then I felt too guilty to talk to you about it.” She sighed. “We all have our moments of stupidity. This was one of mine.”

Claire smiled and patted Jill’s arm. That earned her a grateful look from the blonde.

“Now can we go back to talking about the serial killer who was probably standing across the hall while I was calling you?” Jill asked Lindsay. “Because I’m sort of still wiggling out about that.”

Lindsay’s gaze went to Claire as her friend leaned forward, a bottle of beer in her hands. The medical examiner was staring at the label, her thoughts clearly on something troubling. Claire had left them at the crime scene and followed Honeycutt’s body to the morgue, knowing the case would be assigned the highest priority.

“What?” Lindsay asked slowly.

Claire’s head came back up, and she found both friends watching her. Her eyes widened marginally. “What what?”

“You have that look,” Jill commented.

“What look?” Claire leaned back in her chair.

“The look like you know something and aren’t telling.” Lindsay cocked her head to the side as she pinned Claire with her most patient expression, the one that said she would keep staring until the subject of her gaze relented and spilled her guts.

Claire sighed. "I just... thought I'd wait and share my findings when we were all here." She tried to look innocent and apparently failed when both Jill and Lindsay crossed their arms and gave her expectant looks. "Okay, fine. I don't think it was him."

Lindsay's arms dropped, and she slapped her thighs with her hands. "You have got to be kidding me!"

Jill brought her cold bottle to her suddenly throbbing forehead.

"Hear me out," Claire began.

"No. *No*," Lindsay said again. "How many copycats are we gonna have?"

Claire pursed her lips as Jill just shook her head.

"He was there," Lindsay announced. "I felt it. Tell me you didn't feel it when you were in that conference room. Tell me," she demanded of them.

"Lindsay..." Claire began.

A knock at the door had the detective spinning and rushing to open it. Cindy was standing there, her red hair slightly mussed from the gentle rainstorm that had started up outside.

"Hey," the reporter said out of breath. "Sorry I'm late. I thought I'd get us some food." She hesitated when she saw Lindsay's tight features. "What?"

"You couldn't have called?" Lindsay demanded.

"Were you worried?" Cindy asked in surprise.

Lindsay straightened. "No."

Jill and Claire snorted.

Lindsay glared at them before snatching the white bag with the prominent Papa Joe's label out of Cindy's hands. "Get in here."

Cindy trotted inside, ushered in with Lindsay's hand on the small of her back. "I sent you a text message," the reporter claimed.

"No you didn't." Lindsay retrieved her phone and looked down at it. There, at the top of the screen, was the little envelope icon that said she had a message. She stuffed the phone back in her pocket without looking at it.

Cindy smirked as she stepped away from her lover and went to Jill. She sat down on the

couch and slid her arms around her friend, giving her a swift, hard hug. “You okay?”

Jill hugged her back, ignoring the light misting of rain on her friend’s jacket. Cindy smelled sweet and familiar, and something about her scent settled Jill’s nerves a fraction. She held up her beer when Cindy leaned back. “A few more of these, and I’ll be great.” She brushed a lock of Cindy’s wet hair out of the girl’s features. “What about you? You were the one scaling tall buildings, young lady.”

Cindy smiled. “The wind made it a little tricky at times. I thought I was going to get blown off for a second there,” she confessed.

Lindsay’s head came up from where she was rooting around in the bag. “Okay. Can you not share that with us please?”

Jill bumped Cindy with her elbow, fully aware that the reporter was pulling Lindsay’s leg even if their inspector friend was too clueless to notice.

Lindsay produced four Styrofoam containers from the sack, each with one of their names scrawled across the top. She handed them out, along with the plastic cutlery, and for a brief span of time they did nothing but eat. Cindy got up to fetch a beer of her own, and Lindsay wondered if she should be impressed with her lover’s restraint or worried. She expected Cindy to be all over Jill with questions, but so far the reporter had been silent on the subject.

“No one says a word about my suspension.” Lindsay pointed a fork at Jill and Claire while warning them in a whisper. “I’ll tell her when we get home.”

They both held up their hands in surrender.

Cindy returned with four bottles, handing out a fresh one to each of her friends before cracking open her own and taking a sip. She settled next to Jill as Lindsay moved closer, perching on the armrest of the couch so they could be side by side.

“So what were you doing there?” Cindy finally asked.

“We don’t want to talk about that,” Claire said. “I just stopped being mad.”

Jill rolled her eyes. “I was going to turn Honeycutt down. She offered me a job.”

Cindy chewed on a French fry. “And here I thought the woman had no taste,” she teased faintly.

Jill smiled.

“Can’t blame her for trying to get you onboard. Your conviction rate when you’re lead chair on a case is like through the roof.”

Jill glanced at her other two friends as if to say, “so there.”

“Of course, I’d have been pissed if you went to the dark side,” Cindy offered casually.

Lindsay tilted her head and smirked right back at the attorney.

“Well there was really never any danger in that,” Jill answered sheepishly around a mouthful of salad.

Cindy nodded as she popped another fry into her mouth. Lindsay frowned, realizing that her lover was being a little too subdued. Calling Cindy out on behavior didn’t seem like a good idea, however, at least not with an audience. Besides, she had something she was keeping from the redhead as well.

“All right,” Claire said as they finally got down to business. “I was just telling the girls that I don’t think the Hallelujah Man did this one.”

Cindy paused with her beer almost to her lips. “How many copycats are we gonna have?”

Lindsay smiled at how much she and Cindy were alike at times, then turned slightly bashful when she noticed Jill’s sparkling blue eyes meet her gaze knowingly.

“Nicole Honeycutt was raped and strangled. Someone used their bare hands.” Claire set her food down and eased back in the chair. “Now does that sound like our guy’s modus operandi?”

“No,” the other three women groaned.

Each of them was briefly silent as they remembered the video of Felicia Watkins’ murder in all its gruesome glory. What the killer had done to her, the sound of her screams. If the Hallelujah Man was behind Honeycutt’s murder, the attorney had gotten off very, very easy.

“So what’s with the scripture?” Lindsay finally demanded. “It feels like him.”

“Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit... Therefore honor God with your body,” Cindy recalled from memory. “Corinthians I think.”

“You think?” Claire drawled.

“I can’t remember everything,” Cindy protested before taking another swig of her beer. She leaned back into Lindsay and was rewarded when one of her lover’s hands came to rest on her shoulder and squeezed before rubbing her back gently.

Jill watched them for a moment, aching a little at what they had and she didn't. She tore her gaze away and stuffed the emotion down. "Was there anything there? Anything at all that could tie this to the Hallelujah Man?"

Claire shrugged. "Fibers were found on the body and in the conference room."

"Tyrian purple fibers?" Lindsay asked.

Another shrug. "First glance at the fibers found under the victim's nails didn't look like it. But there was a tiny swatch of something caught in the windowsill. That looked much more promising."

Lindsay frowned. "So we can put him in the conference room but not the office? What the hell?"

"Let's wait for the test results, Linz," Claire cautioned.

Jill sighed, and all eyes turned on her.

"Whoa," the attorney murmured, startled to suddenly be the focus of everyone's attention. "Just tired guys."

"You sure you're all right?" Cindy asked quietly.

"I've had way better days, but, sadly enough, I've also had worse. I'm fine," Jill vowed as she polished off her beer. "And not that this isn't completely fascinating, but I'm about to fall asleep sitting up. Can we all crash for a while and come at this fresh in a few hours?"

Lindsay seemed reluctant to let it go, but she felt Cindy press more tightly against her, and she kept her protests to herself. "Sure," she said quietly.

"Are you okay here by yourself?" Claire asked as Jill and Lindsay got to their feet. "You can stay with me and the boys, or I can crash on the couch..."

Jill grabbed Claire's hand and squeezed. "I love you," Jill said sincerely. "Now please go away."

Claire smiled as she leaned over and kissed her blonde friend on the forehead. "You call if you need anything."

"I will," Jill promised. She accepted another hug from Cindy and then Lindsay who offered her a reassuring smile as she leaned back. For a moment, their history floated between them, and Jill felt her world stabilize. "Thanks," she whispered in response to everything Lindsay had communicated to her in a simple look.

Lindsay nodded. "I'll call you in a few hours."

"Not too few hours," Jill reminded her.

Lindsay was the last out the door behind Cindy and Claire. She waved before motioning at the locks as she shut the door behind her. Jill rolled her eyes but wearily hauled herself off the sofa and went to the door, sliding the security chain and deadbolt home.

She began to unbutton her shirt, only stopping to turn on the security alarm, before almost staggering with fatigue toward her bedroom.

She didn't notice the man on the roof one building over, watching her every move through a telescope.

Act II

Lindsay sighed as she unclipped her badge and gun and set both on the nightstand. She stared at the brass star, letting her thumb run over the rough surface. She made a mental note to meet Jacobi tomorrow to hand in her gun and shield. It was a testament to how high tempers had been running that she hadn't thrown both at Tom, or that he hadn't asked for either. With a second sigh, she reached for the clutch piece strapped to her left ankle.

Her backup piece now resting next to her issued firearm, Lindsay found herself swaying a little in place, feeling like she could fall asleep standing up. Her gaze slid guiltily to her lover's back. Cindy was sitting on the other side of the bed in the process of kicking off her shoes. She'd already shed her jacket, and her fingers were working on the buttons of her shirt. Lindsay's lips quirked as she moved to stand in front of the redhead. "Need some help?" she drawled.

Cindy tipped her head back, a sleepy smile on her features, but there was something in her eyes that Lindsay couldn't put her finger on. Not yet. She had an inkling, but she decided to wait her lover out and let Cindy tell her what was wrong when she was ready.

"Are you offering your assistance, officer?"

Officer. Guilt panged in the pit of Lindsay's gut, but it didn't reflect on her face. This wasn't the moment to share her shaky employment status with Cindy. Lindsay began to unbutton Cindy's shirt, letting her knuckles graze the soft skin underneath. Her fatigue ebbed, replaced by a sudden wash of want. "Well," she teased, her voice low and soothing. "My job is to protect... and serve." She leaned down as the shirt came free, easing it off Cindy's shoulders as she kissed her lover with simple passion.

Cindy made a sound in the back of her throat as her arms went around Lindsay's neck,

pulling the lanky detective down on top of her. Lindsay rolled them both further onto the bed before fumbling with Cindy's jeans as her lover's hands began undressing her in kind.

Finally naked, they slid together, belly to belly as need and instinct took over. Lindsay felt her mind blank from the night's troubles as Cindy's thigh slipped between her own.

"Love you," Cindy whispered between heated kisses, and Lindsay felt her heart soar with the soft words. She knew something was bothering her lover, just as she knew Cindy wanted Lindsay to help her forget whatever it was if only for a short time.

"Love you, too," Lindsay purred against the redhead's lips before her mouth moved lower.

And lower still.

Sometime later, they lay wrapped up in each other, both on the edge of sleep without the ability to tumble over it. Lindsay fought the return of her fatigue, waiting out the silence for Cindy to confess what was wrong. It took another five minutes before the reporter shifted closer and admitted in a halting voice what was troubling her.

"Do you think I got her killed?" Cindy's voice was so quiet Lindsay had to strain to hear it.

Lindsay closed her eyes. It was bad enough that Tom had come to that conclusion. It broke her heart to hear Cindy voice it. She said nothing, sensing that Cindy wasn't done talking.

"The article I wrote on Honeycutt... I put her promiscuity out there for all to see," the reporter continued.

Lindsay put her chin on Cindy's head and pulled her closer. "What happened to her isn't your fault," Lindsay murmured into sweet smelling hair.

Cindy turned her head and nuzzled her features into the curve of Lindsay's neck, breathing in the scent of her lover's perfume. "How would he have known about her?" she protested. "I told him, Linz. I might as well have offered her up on a silver platter."

Tom certainly seemed to think Cindy had. Lindsay stifled her anger at her ex and used her fingers to tilt Cindy's face up to meet hers. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Feels like I did," the redhead said in a hushed voice. "I just have this horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that I led him to her. That I got her killed."

Lindsay studied her in the muted dawn light. She could tell Cindy had been crying, and she cursed herself for not noticing it sooner. "Sweetheart, the only person responsible for

Nicole Honeycutt's death is the person who killed her. As for her lifestyle... she chose the way she wanted to live with all the risks involved."

"Are you saying she was asking for it?" Cindy's voice elevated and was tinted with outrage.

"Of course not," Lindsay's told her gently.

"Because it could have been Jill," Cindy said in a more subdued tone. "I mean, she wasn't paying for sex or anything, but..."

"I know," Lindsay's own voice was quiet. The thought had crossed her mind more times than she wanted to think about in the last several hours. "But it wasn't. We're not even certain it was HM yet."

"It's him. I can feel it just like you can." Cindy's hand went to the cross she was wearing at her throat, and she played with it nervously. "I want this over, Lindsay."

Lindsay hushed her and drew her close once more. "I do, too."

"I want him stopped. I want him stopped before he consumes you any more than he already has. Before he hurts anyone else."

Lindsay closed her eyes, not bothering to disagree or disassemble. She simply held Cindy tighter. It was the one thing she knew she could do right today. She sighed. "Listen, um... I have something to tell you. Promise you won't get mad?" She could feel Cindy go still for a long moment, then the reporter was propping herself up on one elbow to look down at her.

"What did you do?"

"What makes you assume I did something?" Lindsay replied.

"Because you sound guilty."

"I don't..."

"Linz, I've known you for a year and memorized every inflection of your voice. I know what a guilty Inspector Boxer sounds like."

Lindsay was both simultaneously charmed and chastised. "Technically," she said slowly. "I might not be an inspector at the moment."

Both of Cindy's eyebrows scrunched together in consternation. "Huh?"

Lindsay sighed again. "Tom and I got into it at the crime scene."

Cindy said nothing, just watched Lindsay with concern.

“He said some things, I said some things... then I might have... sorta... slapped him.” Lindsay gave her lover her most innocent face.

Whiskey-brown eyes widened in disbelief. All trace of Cindy’s guilt fled with the revelation, replaced by shock and curiosity. “You hit him?” Her lover shrugged and looked sheepish. “Lindsay, what in the hell?”

Something about that struck her as funny, and Lindsay started chuckling.

“It’s not funny!” Cindy protested. “Linz, you’re telling me you got suspended!”

Whether it was fatigue, shock or just a morbid sense of humor, Lindsay wasn’t sure, but she found herself laughing harder. It only got worse when Cindy grew irked with her, and the redhead’s hands skimmed down Lindsay’s waist to find her most ticklish spots. The taller woman squirmed and giggled.

“Lindsay Boxer, I may be small, but I know your weak spots, and I will exploit them,” Cindy vowed as she dug her fingers in. “You are so telling me what your ex said to you to make you... mmph...” Cindy was abruptly silenced as Lindsay surged upward and found her lips unerringly. The teasing touch slowed and became more sensual as the kiss deepened, and Cindy forgot all about articles, murder and Tom Hogan.

For a little while.

Lindsay yawned so widely her jaw cracked.

“Ouch,” Claire muttered as she handed her tall friend a large coffee.

All four of them were bleary-eyed as they accepted their cups from the Medical Examiner. Jill sunk into one chair, Cindy into the other. Lindsay settled on the armrest next to the redhead.

Claire perched on her desk and stirred her coffee without enthusiasm. “I don’t know about all of you, but I could have used a few more hours sleep.”

Jill merely grunted and sipped from her cup.

“Did you get any rest?” Cindy asked the blonde.

Jill shrugged. “As much as I could under the circumstances. I finally took something to help me. Good thing I don’t have court today.” She took another swallow of her coffee

and looked at Claire. “That is if Denise even lets me out of my office ever again. I thought finding a body was bad enough. I think if Denise thought she could get away with it she’d turn me into one.”

Cindy winced, not as used to the Jill/Denise dynamic and all its shifting nuances like Claire and Lindsay were.

“All right. I’m semi-lucid. Tell me what the results are on the fibers.” Jill held her hand out and made a “gimme” gesture with it.

“Well this will wake you up,” Claire promised. She handed the file to Jill who flipped it open and read the contents as Lindsay and Cindy looked on expectantly.

Jill frowned.

“Care to share with the class, Ms. Bernhardt?” Lindsay teased.

Jill handed the folder to Cindy who slipped her glasses on to read it. Lindsay looked over her shoulder.

“So what does that mean?” Jill asked, not sure her exhausted brain was processing terribly well at the moment.

“It means the fibers found at the window were the same ones found at the Hallelujah Man’s other crime scenes, but the fibers found under Nicole’s nails weren’t a match.” Cindy looked at Claire. “Right?”

“You get a gold star,” Claire said with a smile barely visible over the rim of her coffee cup.

“But he was there. In the conference room?” Lindsay asked for clarification.

“It would seem so, but there is no proof he was ever in Nicole Honeycutt’s office. Granted, the fibers under the victim’s nails could have come from something else he was wearing.” Claire sighed.

Lindsay sat back and exchanged glances with Jill. This case was puzzling the hell out of her. It felt off. Wrong. Like HM had been hiding out in the conference room while someone else was killing Honeycutt. “So... what? He was writing scripture while someone else was raping and killing Nicole? Does he have a partner now?” she wondered aloud.

“A disciple?” Jill suggested without humor.

“The woman does have her enemies,” Cindy murmured. “Wouldn’t surprise me if two people showed up to kill her on the same night.”

Jill tunneled her hands through her hair before massaging the back of her neck. “Okay. So let’s assume HM is the killer for now. Nicole definitely fits the “lust” criteria he would be looking for. The purple fibers are a match to the other crime scenes so we know he was at least there. Like you said,” Jill’s gaze went to Claire, “the other fibers could be from another article of clothing.”

“But think about the murder,” Lindsay argued. “The motive is there but the method doesn’t match. Not even remotely.”

“What if…” Cindy bit her lip and hesitated.

“What if what?” Lindsay prompted.

“It is a law firm.”

“So,” Jill replied with an edge to her voice.

“Is it possible that someone there could have found out the particulars of the case… the elements that are being kept from the media?”

“You saying someone from the police department or the DA’s office shared that information with a defense attorney?” Jill asked incredulously.

“You share that information with a reporter,” Cindy pointed out.

They all looked at each other.

“Well that’s a sobering thought,” Claire murmured before swallowing more coffee. “Someone could know about the fibers and the scripture and planted both?”

“It’s just…” Cindy rubbed the back of her neck absently then jumped a little when Lindsay’s hand, warm from holding the coffee, slipped under her hair and took over. Cindy cleared her throat, and she blushed a little at Claire and Jill’s sudden grins. Lindsay seemed oblivious to their amusement. “It’s just that from what you told me… if it was the Hallelujah Man then Nicole must have repented pretty damn fast.”

Jill looked at Lindsay who was staring at the cup of coffee in her hand. “Do you think it’s him?”

Lindsay took a deep breath and blew it out before looking at Jill. “In my gut… I know he was there.”

“That was your chance to say, ‘No, Jill. It wasn’t him. Don’t worry about it.’” Jill gave her friend an exasperated look.

Lindsay pursed her lips. "On the bright side, at least we don't have to worry about figuring out who he'll go after for lust now," she muttered in disgust.

"Was there anything else forensics found at the scene?" Cindy asked.

Claire smiled. "That's the good news."

"Thank God," Lindsay said. "I need some. Tell me the guy left DNA." Claire's smile widened, and Lindsay almost gaped at her. "He left DNA?"

"Is he in the system?" Jill leaned forward eagerly.

"Doesn't look like it," Claire admitted. "But if we can get a sample to compare it to..."

Lindsay gave Cindy a swift kiss on the head before practically racing out the door. "I'm on it!"

"You're gonna need a warrant!" Jill shouted after her.

"Um... hate to state the obvious here," Cindy added once her lover was gone. "But how is she going to get a warrant when she's on suspension?"

Claire's eyebrows hiked before she took another sip of coffee.

Jill nodded once. "Right. Maybe I should go get started on that."

Cindy and Claire exchanged rueful glances when the attorney left before sharing their coffee in companionable silence.

"Ms. Bernhardt."

Jill hesitated in the hallway as a uniformed man came jogging up to her. She recognized him as one of the bailiffs she so often saw in the courtrooms below. "David, right?"

He smiled at being remembered. "Yes, ma'am. Ms. Kwon is looking for you. She's got everybody beating the bushes to find you."

"I thought Denise was in court."

"She is."

"Shit." Jill glanced at her watch, wondering what she'd forgotten or what surprise her boss was about to spring on her. Denise could be a vindictive bitch, and finding out that Jill would have left the Hall for a high paying job that pitted them against each other...

Jill shook her head and almost shuddered at the thought. “I bet you have no idea why she’s hunting for me.”

“No, ma’am.” He smiled again, and Jill actually thought he was kind of cute. He was tall and broad, just how she liked them, and had interesting silver, grey eyes. She wondered why she’d never really paid any attention to him before, but thought now might be a good time to start.

She set her concerns about Denise aside for a moment, deciding a little distraction after work might be just what she needed... and he wasn’t wearing a wedding band. “So...”

“Jill!”

Jill pursed her lips at Lindsay’s shout and let go of the idea of dinner and drinks with a man in uniform for now. “Sorry,” she said regretfully. “I’ll see you around.”

He chuckled and smiled again. “Probably in court this week.”

“Maybe I’ll get lucky and it will be sooner.”

His eyes danced a little at that, and he dipped his head once and gave Lindsay a friendly wave before leaving Jill alone as Lindsay came trotting up. Jill watched him go, a speculative smile on her lips.

“Your timing sucks,” Jill told Lindsay before she could speak.

Lindsay shut her mouth on what she was about to say then darted a look at the retreating man. “Oops.” She tilted her head as she watched him go. “Nice ass,” she had to admit.

Jill waved her off. “Let me guess. You realized you can’t actually execute a warrant now?”

They started walking shoulder to shoulder.

“I made it as far as my car before I remembered.” Lindsay looked sheepish. “I was sort of hoping you could...”

“I was on my way when the bailiff caught me. Denise is looking for me.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah,” Jill agreed. “You want me to meet Jacobi at the firm with the warrant?”

“You think you can get one by Denise?” Lindsay asked.

“We’re about to find out.”

“Well if you hurry, maybe you can still grab lunch with tall, dark and handsome back there,” Lindsay teased.

“I do like the way you think.”

“There are few things I like more than taking DNA samples,” Jacobi said drolly as he swabbed another person’s inner cheek with a Q-tip before placing it in an evidence container and handing it to Cho for proper labeling.

“Glad to hear that,” Jill played along. She checked her sheet. “You have fifty three more employees to go.”

Jacobi shot the attorney a look then sighed. He glanced down the row of employees in front of him. They were going floor by floor at the law firm, collecting samples to compare against Claire’s findings. He had ten left before he could move up to the third floor.

The third floor of a ten-story building.

“Jesus,” he both prayed and cursed.

Jill smiled just a little. “Well if your partner hadn’t gotten herself suspended...”

“Don’t remind me.” Jacobi suddenly held up one finger as the young man in front of him started to protest. “Ah-ah. I don’t want to hear one word of legal mumbo jumbo come out of your mouth. We have a warrant, and nothing you say will be any different than what the other two floors of lawyers haven’t said already.” The young man opened his mouth wider and let Jacobi take his sample. “Thank you.”

Jill hid her smile by dipping her head and rubbing her nose.

“So how did you get Denise to let you execute a warrant on a case she didn’t want you working?”

“I’m a brilliant attorney. I used my amazing skill with words to sway her to my side.”

Jacobi turned his head and looked at her.

“Not buying it, huh?” Jill shrugged. “I promised her I’d help her with some of her paperwork over the next three weekends.”

“And that was enough to make her cave?”

“You should see how much paperwork we’re talking about.” Jill shuddered theatrically. Actually, Denise had yielded with surprising little resistance. Perhaps her boss had thought things over and realized Jill made the most sense on this case. Whatever the reason, Jill knew a little extra paperwork was worth it to be back in the mix.

“Don’t suppose you want to come help me out with mine,” Jacobi joked as he swabbed another employee’s cheek.

Jill chuckled, pleased to be in Warren Jacobi’s friendly albeit gruff company. “So Lindsay really hit Tom?” She kept her voice low as she watched Cho label another sample and file it accordingly.

“Smacked him right in the kisser,” Jacobi said with a weary sigh as he took another swab from a tiny little redheaded clerk that reminded him of a certain reporter. “She told you what he said and about whom?”

“Yeah,” Jill replied, appreciating the fact that they were in mixed company and couldn’t say the reporter’s name. “I’d have punched him... or kneed him in the nuts.”

Jacobi winced, as did a few of the male employees in earshot. “Good thing he was dealing with her then. And here I thought she was showing no restraint.”

Jill sighed. “Do you agree with what he said?”

Jacobi glanced at her, sympathy clear in his gaze. “Not at all. The only person responsible is the one who did this.”

Jill nodded, believing the same thing herself but feeling marginally better for the confirmation. “She’s not going to believe that, though.”

“I know,” Jacobi said. “I’d have a hard time with it if I were in her shoes.” He handed another sample to Cho and felt a ray of hope that he had only two people left on this floor. “Good thing she has friends like you to keep her from dwelling on it too much,” he pointed out over his shoulder.

Jill paused at the comment before smiling. “Damn right,” she told him and was rewarded with his chuckle. She made a mental note to plan a night out with just her and Cindy. They could drink, share Lindsay stories... Her smile widened as she imagined the fear of God the thought would put in their tall, sexy friend.

She wondered if Cindy had tomorrow night open...

Act III

Words blurred as Cindy stared at her computer screen. Her eyes were scratchy from a lack of sleep, and she wanted to do nothing more than lay her head down on her keyboard at the Register and take a nap.

She sighed and slipped her glasses off. There were only a handful of sentences to look at for three hours of work anyway. Guilt over Honeycutt, worry about Jill and Lindsay, and her deplorable lack of quality snooze time was making it hard to focus on anything let alone her story.

It felt dirty, writing a follow up to the original piece she'd laid to bed in the wee hours of morning while her friends had been at the crime scene and morgue. Last night she'd been running on a mixture of adrenaline and stubbornness, but today both were conspicuously missing. She felt like she was making a living off someone else's misfortune. And since she was pretty damn sure she'd been responsible for Honeycutt's death that made it so very much worse.

With a groan, Cindy let her forehead smack down onto her desk. It hurt, but she was too tired to care.

“That bad, huh?”

Cindy's head snapped back up at the familiar voice she never expected to hear in the bullpen of reporters. She jumped to her feet, banging her knees on the side of her desk and nearly toppling over in her haste to stand. “Tom?”

Lindsay's current boss and ex-husband looked as uncomfortable as she felt. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his trench coat. “Is there somewhere we could... talk?”

Cindy glanced around and watched curious gazes skitter away. She wanted some place private, but she also wanted to remain in full view at the same time. She was sleeping with Tom's ex-wife, and the man had a gun after all. “Uh... yeah. We can...” She motioned with her head at the editor's empty office.

Tom followed her, doing his best to ignore the eyes that tracked their progress. He stepped inside the office before moving aside so Cindy could shut the door.

The reporter clasped her hands behind her back to keep from fidgeting. “So...” She noticed his split lip, and her gaze moved off before he could catch her staring. “What... brings you by?” she asked with false cheeriness.

Tom pursed his lips as he looked at her. Thomas looked exhausted, but that fact did little to hide her beauty. He could easily see how the inner light that radiated from the younger woman could seduce someone. As dark a place as Lindsay went to at times, he wondered if it was that light that had first drawn her to the reporter. “So you and Lindsay...” he began uncertainly before wincing. He hadn't meant to bring up the topic like that if at all.

Cindy blinked and swallowed hard. Lindsay hadn't bothered to mention that Tom was in the know about them. She made a mental note to kick her lover in the shins later.

"I know... it's not really my business," Tom said hesitantly. He scratched the back of his head in discomfort. "I guess... I just..." Tom sighed. "Please don't hurt her," he finally blurted.

Cindy took in a sharp breath. "I would never do that," she answered. *Not like you did*, she mentally added but didn't vocalize. She frowned, puzzled by the direction of the conversation.

"I know I really don't have the right to care anymore..." Tom stared at the floor for a moment. "But I do." He looked at her then. "I do care about her and that will never stop."

Was that a challenge or a statement of fact? Cindy wasn't sure. "I know that," she replied slowly. "But she's not yours anymore," Cindy told him, echoing Heather's words to Lindsay the night of the wedding.

"You think she's yours?" Tom asked, truly curious.

Did she? Cindy asked her soul and came back with the answer instantly. "Completely."

Tom's gaze dropped and his jaw clenched for a moment before it finally relaxed. "She told you what happened last night?"

The change in subject wasn't lost on the reporter, and her stomach clenched in reaction. She couldn't blame Tom for still loving Lindsay, but she hated that he did. He was supposed to be married and happy now. He'd devastated a part of Lindsay to get that way. The thought that he might realize he'd made a mistake... that he might come crawling back to the woman they both loved... it made Cindy's heart hurt. "She told me you argued. That she hit you and you suspended her," she managed to get out without sounding as upset by this visit as she was.

"I said some things to her about you."

Cindy went still. She didn't have to guess what Tom had said. Whatever he'd vocalized, she was equally sure it was the truth. She opened her mouth to tell him so.

"I shouldn't have."

Cindy's teeth came together in an audible click. "Okay. You are so confusing the hell out of me right now," she confessed in exasperation.

Tom chuckled abruptly at that. "Sorry." He sighed. "Look. What happened to

Honeycutt is not your fault.”

“But you told Lindsay it was,” Cindy guessed. Her stomach started to settle as she realized Lindsay’s defense of her had been absolute and apparently violent. Her gaze went back to Tom’s split lip and a tiny, inappropriate grin appeared.

“I knew it would piss her off.”

Cindy’s brow furrowed. “If you knew it would piss her off then why did you...?” Her face suddenly cleared. “Tom!” She yelled and ignored all her co-workers who turned and looked at them, hearing her muffled but still elevated voice through the glass. “You egged her on on purpose?”

He held up his hands. “Hear me out...”

“No! Being a cop means everything to her. You reinstate her right now!”

“So she can what, Thomas?” Tom’s voice was harder now. “You want her to walk this path again? You want her sliding further into the dark mind of a serial killer? You haven’t seen how far gone she’ll get. You’ll lose her in there. I’m trying to keep this from happening again!”

Cindy shook her head. “Tom, I appreciate that you care. I even think you have the right to care, but you don’t have the right to mess with Lindsay’s life and job.”

“Even if I’m trying to save both?”

That drew Cindy up short. It was a point she didn’t want to concede even if she privately agreed with it. The idea of losing Lindsay the way Tom had terrified her. She thought of Lindsay’s attic, of all those victims’ faces plastered all over the walls, their lips sewn shut. She swallowed. “We don’t have that right...” she said weakly.

“We love her,” Tom disagreed. “Doesn’t that give us the right?”

Cindy wasn’t sure what the answer was so she said nothing at all.

“Anyway,” Tom spoke quietly, seeing that he’d rattled her. He hoped he’d gotten her thinking about things, that maybe he’d found an unlikely ally in keeping Lindsay from slipping too far from them. “I wanted to say I’m sorry for what I said last night. It wasn’t fair, and it’s not what I think about you.”

Cindy stared at him for a long moment. “What do you think about me?”

“I think you’re an annoyingly perky, pain-in-the-ass reporter who pokes her nose in places where it doesn’t belong, and as stubborn as a mule.”

Cindy blinked.

“And I think you might just be the damned best thing to ever happen to Lindsay in her life.”

Cindy blinked again.

“So don’t screw it up, Thomas.” Tom gave her a final long, lingering look. “Not like I did.” Without another word he yanked open the door and left her standing in her editor’s office too stunned to move.

Lindsay sat at her kitchen table, Martha at her feet snoring softly. She had the files for the Hallelujah Man cases spread out before her, the files she’d conveniently forgotten to return to Tom while she was on suspension. If he wanted them that badly, he could come and get them, along with her badge and weapon, she’d decided hours ago. So far he’d not even so much as called her. Coward.

She rubbed her forehead, trying in vain to put her concerns about Cindy’s mental state out of her mind so she could focus on the investigation. Lindsay knew all too well what guilt over doing your job felt like. She just wished Cindy had never had to experience it. Her lover’s motives for exposing Honeycutt’s sex life may have had a selfish tint, but that didn’t stop it from being a story worth publishing.

The truth was the truth, though, and the truth was that Cindy’s actions in court could have led to HM killing Nicole Honeycutt. It was a bitter pill to swallow, and Lindsay chased the metaphor down with a very real sip of beer.

She sighed and looked at the photographs from the crime scene again. It was the damndest thing. When she looked at Nicole Honeycutt’s body, at what was done to her, she didn’t feel HM’s presence. When she looked at some of the other case files like Blake’s or Dellan’s, their killer’s touch was all over them. Evil seemed to have been captured on film, soaked into the photograph and would ooze onto Lindsay’s fingertips as she studied the pictures from every angle until her eyes were about to cross.

She thought of Tyrian purple silk... recordings of John Paul II... of brutality and scripture...

Of life and death.

What made him chose his victims? They all crossed his path in some way. She had a strong suspicion it was through the killer’s profession, but she’d given up the idea that they were looking for some sort of figure with a position in any church. They’d looked hard at every priest to every altar boy in the San Francisco area and nothing, nothing had popped back on any of them that would suggest they could be their killer.

He was a wannabe, Lindsay knew, and more than one detective was looking at seminary school rejects, going back as much as twenty years.

Lindsay looked at the photo of Nicole Honeycutt and sighed. HM did not kill her. She knew it in her guts. Knew it as surely as she knew herself. The proof was in the motive and lack of physical evidence tying him to the crime scene. After what he'd done to Watkins, his appetite for brutality would have only increased. There was no sign of that here.

Honeycutt's murder was merciful in comparison to what the Hallelujah Man's other victims had endured.

Lindsay picked up a photo of the scripture in the conference room. She felt the familiar chill she'd first experienced when she'd held the Bible found in Chris Blake's fridge. This was his handiwork. Why was he there? Why did he not kill Honeycutt? Did he have a disciple as Jill suggested? Someone he was training...

Lindsay slapped the photo on the table and leaned back in her chair. Her mind was trying to latch onto something elusive, something that was tickling the base of her brain and scurrying around in the dark recesses of her mind. She just couldn't seem to shine a light on whatever it was.

She closed her eyes then rubbed them wearily. When her cell phone rang, she nearly came out of her skin. "Jesus," she muttered as she snatched up her phone and flipped it open. "Boxer," she snapped.

"And hello to you, too," Claire drawled.

Lindsay sighed before pinching the bridge of her nose. "Sorry. I was lost in thought and the phone scared the hell out of me. What's up?"

"DNA just came in on the employees. Thought you'd want to know."

Lindsay snorted. "Tell me again why I need a badge when I have the club?"

"Sweetie, you are the badge," Claire answered, unwillingly to play along.

"I used to be, anyway," Lindsay muttered. "Anything else kick back at this point?"

"You know you could talk to Tom. Apologize."

Lindsay rolled her eyes at Claire's persistence. "Not gonna happen. He had it coming." She glanced at the bruise that had formed on the fleshy part of her palm and wondered what Tom looked like today.

“Lindsay,” Claire sighed her friend’s name. “Do you really want to have your hands tied right now? Jill’s connection to this case... Cindy’s issues with what happened... This really isn’t a good time for you to be out of the mix.”

Lindsay looked at all the photographs in front of her. Leave it to Claire to be the voice of reason, even when she didn’t want to hear it. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

“Something wrong with your phone today?”

Lindsay rolled her eyes again. “Can I please hold onto my pride for another 24 hours?”

Claire chuckled. “Alright. You asked if anything else had kicked back. Nothing yet. Oh, and Jill somehow managed to talk Denise into letting her back on the case.”

“That’s fortuitous,” Lindsay drawled, thinking with a smirk that she might be able to put Tom off for another whole day if she had Jill to rely on.

“Indeed. You meeting us at Papa Joe’s tonight to compare notes? Say around six?”

“Not like I have anything else to do.”

“Hey.”

Jill’s head popped up behind the stacks of paperwork on her desk. “Hey.” She smiled at the welcome sight of her favorite reporter. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

Cindy tilted her head at the compliment. “If you say so. I think I look like a college sorority girl coming off a three day bender.” The reporter moved into the office, flopping ungracefully in one of Jill’s chairs. “Have you heard from Lindsay?”

“Only about six times today.”

“Only six?” Cindy joked. “I can multiple that by two.”

“Claire might beat us both combined.”

“We so need to get her reinstated or she’s gonna drive us insane.” Cindy closed her eyes, and Jill thought she was going to fall asleep right there in the chair.

The attorney smiled at her younger friend. Cindy had been adorable from the moment she’d met her, but Jill hadn’t been so sure that she’d wanted the spunky redhead in the club. Maybe some part of her knew that Lindsay would be drawn to her, that Lindsay would seek Cindy’s innate goodness like a moth to a flame. Sometimes she still resented Cindy just a little, resented her for taking up so much of her best friend’s time, but then

Cindy would give her that innocent, wide-eyed look, and Jill would feel her irritation and jealousy evaporate into the ether.

“Tough day, Lois Lane?”

“Ugh.” Cindy rocked forward in the chair and let her forehead rap slightly on Jill’s desk.

Jill cocked her head at this behavior. “Okay.”

“Tom came to see me,” Cindy said in a muffled voice, her forehead still resting on the edge of Jill’s desk.

Blue eyes opened wide at the news. “Whoa.”

Cindy lifted her head enough to look at the attorney. “He said he was sorry for what he said to Lindsay.”

“Double whoa,” Jill replied.

Cindy bit her lip. “He said he egged her on.”

Jill leaned back in her chair. Her friend had apparently had quite an eventful afternoon. She was almost jealous when she thought about how she’d spent hers, although she wouldn’t trade making Malcolm Abbott give her a DNA sample for anything. “And you’re wondering if you should tell her.”

“Should I?”

“Only if you want to visit your girlfriend in jail for homicide.”

Cindy groaned again and covered her eyes with her hands.

“Cindy, Lindsay isn’t an idiot. I’m sure she’s at least suspicious that Tom did that on purpose.”

“Then why is she letting him get away with it?” Cindy dropped her hands then noticed all the file folders for the first time. “Good grief. It looks like the file room barfed on your desk.”

“Not a far off description. I’m going to be digging out for the rest of the week.” Jill didn’t bother to tell Cindy most of the paperwork was Denise’s.

Cindy winced in sympathy. “He knows about me and Linz,” she confessed in a softer voice.

“It was only a matter of time,” Jill answered when she’d gotten over her shock at the

news, which she hoped hadn't manifested itself on her face.

"I can't get mad at him for what he said to her last night. It's not as if it isn't true." Cindy looked at her hands. "I've never... I've never been responsible for getting someone killed before."

"Cindy..."

"I mean... I know words can inspire... move people... terrify them... I just never thought my words would kill someone." Cindy swallowed.

"They didn't." Jill's voice was firm. "You reported a story..."

"A story I wouldn't have touched or even known about if I hadn't been looking for leverage for you..."

"Then it's my fault that Nicole is dead," Jill answered pragmatically.

"Oh, c'mon," Cindy protested.

"No. If you're going to apply the logic that your story got Honeycutt killed then I can apply the same logic that says my sex life is what got us all into this mess."

Cindy opened her mouth then closed it. Opened again. "That's not fair."

Jill hiked an eyebrow at her.

"But I..."

"Like being a martyr?" Jill suggested.

"Hey!"

Jill leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Our actions have consequences, Cindy. Would you have done anything differently, knowing what you know now?"

"That's not fair, either," Cindy said in a quieter voice. "If I hadn't done that your reputation..."

"If you hadn't done that, I would not be sitting behind this desk. Dow probably would have gotten off. A man who killed two people that we know about. And let's not forget the other killers we've stopped since then." Jill leaned forward again and put her elbows on the desk. "You did what you thought you had to do, and I am grateful that you did it, but you need to remember in the end the person responsible for killing Nicole Honeycutt is the man who wrapped his fingers around her throat and squeezed the life out of her."

Cindy sighed. “So what you’re saying is I should stop making her death about me.”

Jill wagged her head from side to side. “Not exactly but that will do.”

“Get over myself?” Cindy suggested.

Jill pointed at her. “That’s more the phrase I had in mind.”

The reporter chuckled then popped up from her chair, displaying way more energy than when she came in. She walked behind the desk and gave Jill a hard hug. “Thanks.”

Jill smiled. “What are friends for?”

“I’m lucky to have some good ones,” Cindy admitted as she planted a noisy kiss on the top of the attorney’s head.

“Yes, as a matter of fact you are. So lucky in fact that we’re going out tomorrow night – just me and you.”

Cindy stepped back. “We are?”

“Yep. No Claire and definitely no Lindsay. Just me, you, drinks and maybe some dancing.”

Cindy took a breath and considered her reply. “Um... why?”

“Why not? Besides... I thought it was high time we talked about Lindsay,” Jill said with a smirk. She reached for her coffee and took a sip.

“Like about how you used to sleep together?”

Jill managed to spit her coffee back into her cup instead of all over the reports on her desk. “She told you that?!”

Cindy crossed her arms. “A blind man could see you two have history,” Cindy said with a roll of her eyes. “Only people who’ve slept together stand as close as you two do and touch each other with such familiarity.”

Jill just gaped at her.

“What? It’s part of my job to read people.”

“And it doesn’t bother you? Me and Lindsay having ‘history’?” Jill put air quotes around the last word.

“Should it?” The reporter asked. “I sort of assumed you were okay with me and Linz

when you never made any effort to get between us. If anything you seemed to support it.”

“I did. I do!” Jill shook her head. “I just... I didn’t want it to make you uncomfortable.”

“It doesn’t,” Cindy confessed breezily.

Jill brushed her bangs out of her eyes. “You never cease to amaze me, Thomas.”

Cindy smiled, pleased by that. “So these Lindsay stories you want to swap... can we talk about the juicier ones now?”

Jill slowly smiled, her expression anything but innocent.

The reporter.

The cop.

The medical examiner.

They flittered in and out of Jill Bernhardt’s days and nights. Her office. Her home. One of them always seemed to be there or as close as the phone she wore on her hip. They were like an odd family.

A club.

He frowned as he watched Cindy Thomas emerge from Jill’s office. It was so hard to find his moment, the moment where he would whisk Jill away from her life of sin and begin the process of cleansing her soul. There was little that was routine about her life that he had seen so far. He could only wait and watch, knowing that when the time came God would be sure that he was ready.

Perhaps her girl’s night out with the reporter tomorrow evening. He slipped off the headphones as Jill began to type again. He entered the date and time they’d set for their get together into his calendar.

Maybe their night out would end with Jill Bernhardt in the safe arms of the Lord.

The thought made him smile.

Act IV

Cindy bounded up the front steps to Lindsay's place only to freeze when she saw the bouquet of white roses. Her steps faltered, and she almost tripped on the last stair before catching the rail and righting herself.

"This is getting so old," she grouched. She plucked out the card and read it, feeling the familiar stab of insecurity lance through her when she saw Pete's handwriting. When was the guy going to get a clue?

Better yet, when was Lindsay going to get a restraining order?

Cindy unlocked her lover's door then shouldered it open, stooping to heft the vase into her hands before stepping inside. She kicked the door closed with her booted foot before making her way to the kitchen, setting the roses in the sink. They weren't hers to throw away even though she felt like flushing them down the garbage disposal.

The lock on the front door turned again, and Cindy pivoted in time to see Lindsay arrive with Martha. Her lover smiled when she saw her.

"Hey," Lindsay said brightly. She unclipped Martha's leash and let the dog wander off to her water bowl. "I wasn't expecting to see you so early." She entered the kitchen and wrapped her arms around Cindy's waist, pulling her closer. Her eyes dipped to the sink and her features lost their humor. "Damn it."

"That was just the response I was hoping for," Cindy confessed with a tiny grin as those insecurities scampered back into the dark hole they'd crawled out of. She playfully pinched Lindsay's backside and was delighted when her lover jumped. "Do you think he'd get the picture if we invited him over, and I planted a kiss on you right in front of him?"

"I'm not sure Pete would get the picture if I punched him with it." Lindsay fingered one of the roses, her other arm still wrapped around her lover. "This is starting to weird me out a little."

Cindy eased back and looked up into Lindsay's face. "Seriously?"

Lindsay tilted her features and looked down at the redhead. "Cindy, if I were investigating a case where a suspect was behaving like this... I'd have the guy under surveillance 24/7."

"That's... an unhappy thought."

Lindsay shrugged. "I'll go talk to him one last time."

"And if that doesn't work?"

Lindsay reached up and pushed a stray lock of red hair behind Cindy's ear. "If that

doesn't work, I'll get legal on his ass."

Cindy smiled. "Sic Jill on him."

"That would be cold." Lindsay's eyes sparkled. "And really fun to watch."

They reluctantly released each other and wandered into the living room, flopping down together on the couch. Cindy snuggled up against her taller companion who grinned like an idiot in reaction. They stayed that way for a few quiet, content minutes until Lindsay sighed.

"So can we just talk about the case for like ten minutes?"

Cindy smiled. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with anything... everything. I hate being out of the loop like this. I thought me getting thrown off the force would be a good thing. No Tom to worry about. No rules getting in the way..."

"No access to files... background checks... no ability to talk to witnesses..." Cindy added lightly.

Lindsay almost stomped her foot like a little kid. "I really didn't consider all the angles to this slapping my boss thing," she confessed. "It just seemed like a really good idea at the time."

"Because of what he said about me?" Cindy asked innocently.

Lindsay turned her head where it rested against the back of the couch and looked at the redhead. "Jacobi told you?" She asked incredulously.

Cindy took a breath. "No. Tom did."

Lindsay's brow furrowed. She eased up into a sitting position. "Tom told you? When did that happen?"

"When he came to see me at the paper today." Cindy kept her voice casual.

"He what?" Lindsay's voice had dropped to its lowest register.

"You sound so sexy when you talk like that," Cindy commented, her thoughts briefly wandering a much more sensual path.

Lindsay tilted her head and gave her lover a tame version of the laser vision.

"Sorry. Tom came to see me at work. It was no big deal."

“What did he want?”

Cindy shrugged, wishing now that she'd kept her mouth shut on this topic. “Just to chat. So let me tell you what I dug up on Honeycutt today...”

“Not so fast.” Lindsay put her hand over the reporter's notebook Cindy had just retrieved from her jacket pocket. “You are not getting off that easy, young lady.”

“What are you, my mother?” Cindy tried to tease. The laser vision ratcheted up in intensity and Cindy wilted. “He came to apologize.”

“For what?”

“For what he said about me to you. About me being... you know... responsible for Honeycutt's death,” Cindy finished a little more quietly.

Lindsay looked at her for a silent minute. “Okay,” she said slowly. “He owed you an apology so I really don't have a problem with that.”

“Linz? What would you do if I told you Tom egged you on to get you kicked off the force? That it was his own misguided and utterly clueless way of trying to keep you physically and mentally safe?”

Lindsay's lips quirked. “I knew it the moment after I hit him that I'd walked right into it.”

“You knew he was setting you up?” Cindy asked in shock.

The taller woman shrugged. “I figured. Right now we're both in a holding pattern,” she explained. “Waiting to see who will come crawling to the other to make up first.”

“Is that what you did when you were married?”

“Yeah,” Lindsay's voice was wistful. “It's about who can hold out the longest. I just have to wait for him to show a sign of weakness, then I'll pounce and have an apology and my badge back in no time.”

Cindy rolled her eyes. Lindsay's competitive streak was a mile wide. The only thing wider was her stubborn one. “I think he already did, Lindsay. He just went through me.”

Lindsay considered that. She hated that Tom had done an end-run around her, but she couldn't blame him. He'd probably satisfied a little curiosity about Cindy in the process. He was a total pain in the ass, but he was a good man at heart and an even better detective. Sometimes she forgot about that. “So tell me what you found out about Honeycutt.”

It was Cindy's turn to be reluctant to let the conversation go, but she did. "Well she was still paying for it. My exposé didn't slow her down in the least." She flipped open her notebook, and Lindsay scooted closer. "I've been nosing around some of the other lawyers and junior associates, they all say that she's been edgy lately. More snappish than usual."

"Well that must have been completely terrifying," Lindsay drawled. "The woman was already like a pit viper."

"Tell me about it." Cindy flipped a page in her notepad.

"So she wasn't dating anyone?"

"Not that I could find out, but that doesn't mean there wasn't someone." Cindy thumbed through some more pages. "There was a restraining order she took out on a Derek Metcalf about a year ago. Jacobi found that out."

"Yeah? What's the deal with him?"

"Brother of a murder victim. Honeycutt got the killer off on a technicality."

"Ouch," Lindsay hissed. "I'd be pissed too."

"Considering he's in Iraq, I think he's got a pretty tight alibi. There are some junior associates worth looking into, though. Apparently Honeycutt was running some sort of competition among a few of them that weren't showing much promise."

"What sort of competition?"

"She gave them all one case. The murder of Alyssa Silver. Did you hear about that one?"

"In LA, yeah. She was raped and murdered, her body dismembered and left inside an oil drum. I heard they had the ex easy on that one."

"The police do," Cindy confirmed, "but Honeycutt told the associates that only the person who figured out a way to get the ex-husband cleared would get to keep their job."

Lindsay blinked and sucked in a breath. She felt disgust curl in her stomach. "They would have gone after the case like tigers thrown a slab of red meat. Screw the victim. Just do whatever it takes to let her killer walk."

"Exactly. There are three of them. Two are men. Jason Abbott and Adam Pollard."

"Abbott?" Lindsay zeroed in on the name instantly.

“Yep. Malcolm Abbott’s son.”

Lindsay’s darker angels liked the idea of Malcolm Abbott’s son being a potential killer. It would serve the self-righteous bastard right, and she would get to give a little payback when she hauled Jason Abbott into custody. “Junior associates, huh?” Lindsay considered that. “Does Jacobi know what you found out?”

“And Claire,” Cindy replied. “Figured their DNA samples could move to the top of the list. Although you would think a lawyer would be smart enough not to leave DNA.”

In Lindsay’s experience, a lot of people weren’t terribly smart when it came to murder. So many things happened in the heat of the moment. Tempers boiled over and people reacted, lashing out to stop the source of their anger, sometimes with fatal results.

Lindsay kissed her lover’s forehead. “Maybe you should wear a badge,” Lindsay commented, remembering the words Tom had used to get himself slapped. She played with Cindy’s hair, loving the way the fiery red strands felt between her fingers.

Cindy blinked at her. “Huh?”

Bright and early the next morning, Lindsay took a deep breath and swallowed her pride before stepping into Tom’s office. He was on the phone, and his voice faltered when he saw her, but he waved her in after a hesitant moment.

Lindsay stuffed her hands in the back of her jeans and waited, her eyes on the windows and not on her ex-husband as he wrapped up a call with his current wife. When he hung up she finally turned to face him. “How’s Heather?”

Tom picked up a pen and started fiddling with it. “She’s good.”

They stared at each other a moment.

“How’s Cindy?” Tom finally asked.

Lindsay gave him points for the question. “She’s dealing. She feels guilty about Honeycutt, though.”

Tom leaned back in his chair. “She’s never been this involved in a case before. Seen the things she’s seen firsthand.”

Lindsay was surprised to be having this conversation with her ex-husband, but she didn’t show it. “She was there for Kiss-Me-Not...”

“Not like she’s been involved with the Hallelujah Man,” Tom cut her off gently. “She didn’t have the access to the scenes like she does now. Don’t forget she was right there with us when we saw Felicia Watkins’ murder on all those video screens.”

“Don’t remind me,” Lindsay replied. She pulled her hands out of her pockets and ran her palms down her legs before easing into one of Tom’s chairs. “I shouldn’t have let her past the crime scene tape.”

“Why did you?” Tom asked. “Because you’re sleeping with her or because you thought she was just another member of your investigative team?”

Lindsay fidgeted. It was a damn good question. One she’d been asking herself ever since the moment she’s instructed Cho to let Cindy inside the crime scene. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe a bit of both. I rely on her both personally and professionally for a lot. Maybe too much.”

Tom regarded her for a string of heartbeats before getting to his feet and coming around to lean on the front of his desk. He crossed his arms and looked down at the woman he once loved so much it hurt to look at her.

Time had tempered that, but it hadn’t erased it.

“Linz, I did what I had to do.”

“I know you think you did,” Lindsay somewhat agreed. “But this is not the Kiss-Me-Not Killer, Tom. Things are different this time.”

“How are they different? You’re obsessed all over again. You’re losing sleep and weight. Your temper is getting shorter and shorter...”

“Maybe you’re just getting more annoying,” Lindsay suggested with a brief grin.

Tom paused and flashed her a quick smile before growing serious again. “Linz, I don’t want this case to ruin you the way Harris did. He came between us, our marriage...”

“He came between us because we let him,” Lindsay informed him. “We let him, Tom.”

“And you don’t think this guy is going to get between you and Thomas? You’re falling back into old, destructive habits.”

“What do you think I did last night?” Lindsay asked gently.

“Please tell me you weren’t up in that attic of yours.”

“The attic doesn’t have anything but Christmas decorations up there right now.”

Tom seemed surprised by that. “Ok. I’ll bite. What were you doing?”

“Cindy and I curled up on the couch and watched a movie. We shared a bowl of popcorn and a bottle of wine then went to bed.” Lindsay didn’t bother to tell him what happened after they slipped beneath the covers. That would just be cruel.

“You did that in the middle of a murder investigation?” Tom asked slowly and with obvious disbelief.

“I’m always in the middle of a murder investigation,” Lindsay countered. “Cindy...” Lindsay thought of her lover with her tempting smiles and dancing eyes. “Cindy pulls me out of all that death and helps me live, Tom. It’s not the same. I’m...”

“Not the same with her,” Tom guessed. He felt the expected flare of jealousy, but it was paired with a measure of hope and honest happiness for his ex-wife.

“Yeah,” Lindsay agreed, knowing that her admission had to hurt and wishing there were a way to soften the blow.

Tom pushed off the desk and returned to his seat behind it. He picked up his phone. “I’d give you your badge back but since you never turned it in...”

Lindsay slowly smiled before getting to her feet. She felt a moment of regret for what she’d lost with him, what they’d lost together. She moved to the door as Tom asked for the mayor. She turned and looked at him once more, feeling the door to that part of her past finally click shut. “Thanks,” she mouthed to him.

He seemed to understand she was talking about more than the badge. “It was my pleasure,” he answered. His focus turned to the phone. “Morning, sir, just checking in as you requested.”

Lindsay left him to play politics and started down the stairs, giving a hopeful looking Jacobi a thumbs up. He pumped his fist and gave her a high-five when she reached their desks.

“Okay, old man. Where are we?”

“Claire just called. She says she has some results we’ll want to see.”

“By all means then,” Lindsay replied. “Lead on.”

Cindy and Jill were already waiting for them when Lindsay and Jacobi arrived.

“About time!” Cindy protested. “Claire wouldn’t tell us until you got here!”

“Speaking of you being here...” Jill none too subtly grabbed the corner of Lindsay’s jacket and lifted it. She spied the brass shield on Lindsay’s hip and smiled. “Ah yes,” she drawled. “I thought the world felt safer this morning.”

Lindsay rolled her eyes just as Claire hustled into the room, a file folder in hand. “What do you have?”

“Am I supposed to be telling you?” Claire teased.

“She’s been re-badged,” Cindy announced before making a hurry up gesture at the medical examiner. “Come on. Who did it?”

“Is she always this impatient?” Jill asked as she leaned into Lindsay. “If you catch my drift?”

Lindsay moved away from Jill who seemed to be in a mood this morning and clamped her palm over Cindy’s mouth. “Whenever you’re ready, Claire.”

Jacobi and Claire chuckled as Claire opened the file. “We have your DNA match. Sort of.”

“Sort of?” Lindsay took the file, releasing Cindy in the process. The reporter stood up on tiptoe so she could read the report in Lindsay’s hands.

“A paternal match?” Lindsay looked at Claire. “You’re saying this DNA matches the *father* of the killer?”

“Yep.”

Cindy looked at Jacobi. “It’s Malcolm Abbott’s DNA sample.”

“And Jason Abbott works for his daddy and with Nicole Honeycutt.” Jacobi smiled. “I love it when they’re this easy.”

“Wait.” Jill held up a hand. “Don’t we have Jason’s DNA?”

Claire shook her head. “I looked for it after Cindy told me to. His sample wasn’t in here.”

“He ran,” Lindsay deduced. “He killed Nicole and ran. He forgot his father could tie him to the evidence.”

“What an idiot,” Cindy muttered.

Lindsay winked at her as she closed the file before handing it back to Claire. “Now we

just have to find him and figure out what connection he has to HM.”

“If any,” Jill murmured.

“I’ll head back to the Register. See what I can dig up,” Cindy announced before squeezing Lindsay’s arm as she passed and made a direct line for the door.

“And I’ll get the warrants started,” Jill added as she followed.

Lindsay looked at Jacobi. “And we’ll go talk to the proud father.”

They all left Claire to her solitude. “And I’ll enjoy my cup of coffee,” she said to the empty room.

He accessed an image of Jason Abbott on his computer as he listened to the women hustle out of the morgue to perform their roles in catching a killer.

Blonde, ruggedly handsome, the type of man women swooned over, he decided when the photo revealed itself. He leaned in close, studying the man’s eyes, seeing something in them that made him feel like there was a kinship between them.

He remembered his face now, seeing Abbott as he’d fled Nicole Honeycutt’s office. He’d been ready to kill the man who had stopped him from fulfilling God’s plan. Now he wanted to thank him, thank him for helping him see the truth and his true mission.

Jill Bernhardt.

Her name rolled around in his brain as his lips spoke it reverently. Tonight was the night. Tonight he would follow her and the reporter. Tonight he would begin the process of saving her, cleansing her soul to make her clean and pure for the Father.

And God help anyone who got in his way.

TO BE CONTINUED...



Thy Will Be Done
Part 2

Teaser

He surveyed his sanctuary.

The sinners had trampled all over his most hallowed ground. He knew they'd find it, would violate it with their crime scene tape, their fingerprint dust. They'd peered into every corner, touched every pew. He thought he could almost smell the stench of their sweat where it had soaked through their polyester uniforms.

His eyes lifted as the late afternoon sunlight broke through the grimy stained glass and bathed the old, cracked and dust-covered Christ figure above. The crucifixion hung at an angle, as if it were looming over the parishioners long since gone, searching the rows where no believers were left to be found.

He saw it as a sign. The light breaking through meant his quest to bring another sinner into the glory of the kingdom of Heaven must be nigh. Soon he would bring her here. Soon he would drive the sin from her soul in this very room.

He adjusted the tattered stole around his neck. He always wore it here. His memento. His gift that had been blessed by the hand of God. At night he wore it around his neck, tucked into the collar of his coat as if it were a scarf to help him ward off the chill of the San Francisco air.

No one ever looked at him twice. Not even the police who knew by now about the material and the rare, expensive color it was dyed.

He looked ordinary. Even handsome. He blended and mingled with the sinners because God wanted it so. He wanted him to know and understand sin so he could rid others of it.

Tonight he would begin the journey to bring another soul home.

Tonight, one way or another, Jill Bernhardt would begin her path back to righteousness.

“Hey!”

Cindy Thomas had her head buried in her new BlackBerry when she heard the familiar voice call out. She glanced up, smiling as Jill hurried to catch up. “I was just about to call you.”

Jill narrowed her eyes. “Better not be to cancel on me. I’ve been looking forward to tonight all day.” She nudged Cindy with her shoulder as they walked side by side through one of the many corridors of the Hall.

Cindy smiled. "Wouldn't dream of it," she promised. "I could use a few drinks," she added dryly.

Jill tilted her head. "Oh? Trouble in paradise?"

Cindy shrugged then came swinging around to face Jill when the attorney abruptly stopped and grabbed her elbow. "Hey now!"

"Spill. I have ways of making you talk. Don't make me waste them by plying you with alcohol and taking advantage of you."

Cindy leaned back and looked at Jill with amusement.

"Not that kind of advantage," Jill corrected when she interpreted the reporter's look. "Although you do look hot in your tight jeans and preppy little cardigan." Jill winked and playfully tucked her finger in the "V" of Cindy's sweater and tugged, dragging the reporter forward a step. Cindy swatted her hand and Jill chuckled. "Besides, Linz would crucify me."

Cindy tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "I wouldn't be so sure of that," she muttered.

Jill crossed her arms and looked at the reporter like she was crazy. "Well I am, missy. Lindsay would kick my ass to Texas if I laid a finger on you." She dipped her head, trying to make eye contact with the reporter who was suddenly trying very hard to do the opposite. "Talk to me," Jill said a little more seriously. "What's going on? Is Lindsay withdrawing from you again? Do I need to talk to her?"

"No," Cindy answered quickly. "It's not... it isn't exactly Lindsay. It's just... it's... it's Pete."

"Pete?" Jill's blonde eyebrows elevated and she dropped her arms to let her hands rest on her hips. "What did he do now?"

"He's not exactly giving up."

"Still? He hasn't gotten a clue?"

"I got to Lindsay's last night and there was another bouquet of white roses in front of the door."

Jill frowned. Pete was starting to creep her out a little, and she suddenly regretted ever nudging her friend in the contractor's direction. "Cindy, you know Lindsay is devoted to you..." she began.

"I know," Cindy cut her off in a voice that almost managed to sound casual. "It's just..."

She sighed and flapped her hands in frustration. “Why isn’t Lindsay being more firm with the guy? He just keeps hanging around. And then there was that night in the parking garage...”

Jill’s blue gaze sharpened. “What? What night in the parking garage?”

Cindy looked caught when she realized what she’d revealed. “Never mind,” she replied a little too quickly. Inwardly she cursed her inability to lie.

“No, no. Don’t you ‘never mind’ me,” Jill said, her voice growing more serious. She grabbed a handful of Cindy’s sleeve and tugged the reporter to the side of the hallway out of the throng of people that just let out of a nearby courtroom. “Tell me what happened.”

Cindy looked around as if she were hoping a riot would break out and give her the distraction she needed to avoid the conversation. “The night Pete first showed up back in San Francisco,” she began with a sigh.

“Yeah,” Jill prompted.

“He didn’t go see Lindsay first.”

Jill took a slow breath, her unease with the Pete situation growing. Her blue eyes studied Cindy with worry. “Did he... confront you?”

“Sort of.” Cindy rubbed the back of her neck and fidgeted a little.

The reporter always looked like a school kid waiting for the recess bell to ring when she did that, Jill mused. The thought almost made her smile.

“He caught me in the parking garage at the Register. He was waiting for me.”

“Creepy,” Jill commented.

“Yeah. He weirded me out a little. He said he knew Lindsay was seeing someone and wanted to know who it was. He hoped that I would help him get back in her good graces.”

Jill snorted. “Keep hoping, muffin man,” she muttered and was rewarded with a fraction of a smile from Cindy. “Do you think he meant it, or do you think he was already on to the two of you?”

Cindy shrugged. “I don’t know. The whole thing just left me really wiggled out. Then I got to Lindsay’s that night...” She faltered when she remembered seeing Pete kiss Lindsay, the image forever burned into her brain.

“And...” Jill asked. This had been right before Cindy went skipping town to go play in

the New Faith compound. Something told Jill the two things were related.

“I saw him kiss her,” Cindy admitted.

Jill’s jaw tightened as her teeth clamped together hard. She wanted to smack Lindsay at that moment, but clearly her friend’s heart lay with the little redheaded reporter and not scone boy. Maybe there was more to the story. Maybe Pete had planted one on Lindsay without permission. Jill sure as hell hoped so, but she wished Lindsay had slugged him. “Cindy...”

“Look.” Cindy waved her hands as if the issue were nothing to be concerned with. “This is stupid. We’ve got Jason Abbott to find. I actually dropped by to see if I could catch some of the other attorneys, to try to drum up a lead.”

“It’s not stupid if it’s still bothering you,” Jill said sincerely. “We’ll talk about it tonight, okay?”

Cindy seemed to relax at the offer. “Thanks.”

“Now let’s go get this prick so we can enjoy our evening,” Jill announced.

Cindy smiled and readjusted her purse before heading out into the morning sunlight as Jill turned and headed for a courtroom back the way she’d come.

Neither noticed the man who’d watched their whole exchange from the shadows.

Act 1

“That’s absurd.” Malcolm Abbott scoffed as he leaned back in his chair. “My son would never harm a soul. He doesn’t have the backbone for it. And he certainly wouldn’t harm Nicole.”

“And why is that?” Lindsay asked.

“He was scared shitless of her. All the junior associates were.”

Lindsay exchanged glances with her partner. Neither of them had any affection for Malcolm Abbott after what he’d put Jill through. They’d already talked to the attorney and his law partner, Matthew Arbor, the night of Honeycutt’s murder. Neither man had seemed broken up about the woman’s death, but they’d been plenty worried about the loss of income that would result from her demise. Lindsay had hoped not to repeat the experience of talking to him ever again and yet here they were. “Well DNA says otherwise,” she informed Abbott. “Now we can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Abbott stared at her with disdain. He had washed-out blue eyes, receding gray hair and a mustache thick enough to lose his whole upper lip in. His suit, however, was impeccable and probably cost as much as a small car, Lindsay thought. She wanted to tell him to do something about his disturbingly bushy eyebrows but she refrained. It would be too easy to make this case personal, to get a little revenge for Jill. A part of her was self-aware enough to know she was looking forward to putting Jason away and his crimes had nothing to do with it.

“The easy way is that you tell us where your son is, and we go get him quietly and without incident,” Jacobi explained.

“And the hard way?” Abbott sneered.

“That involves lots of press,” Lindsay answered sweetly.

Abbott crossed his arms and eyed Lindsay with new appreciation. “You play rough. I like that.” He reached for his phone.

Lindsay turned her head to look at Jacobi. “Ok. Eew,” she muttered.

Jacobi’s eyebrows hiked, but he didn’t reply.

“Jason? It’s your father. Where are you? You missed work yesterday and today...” Abbott listened quietly. “I see. Very well. Be sure to be back tomorrow.” He hung up.

“Well?” Lindsay asked.

“He’s at his mother’s home by the pool. Working on his tan, I imagine.”

“Working on his tan?” Lindsay spat five minutes later when they slipped into the car. “What is wrong with these people?”

“I hope I never figure that out,” Jacobi drawled as he flipped on the lights and hit the siren. Abbott’s ex-wife’s home was only three miles away. With any luck, they’d have the little junior shit in central booking before lunch.

“Jason Abbott?”

He was ripped, Lindsay had to admit. He was perhaps twenty-six, maybe pushing as much as twenty-eight. He shielded his eyes as he looked up at her, the movement making his impressive six-pack ripple. Lindsay decided he looked a bit like an Adonis sunning himself there. A very pretty, very stupid Adonis.

“Yeah?”

“Stand up,” Jacobi ordered him.

“Why?”

Lindsay held up her badge. “San Francisco PD. Jason Abbott, you are under arrest for the murder of Nicole Honeycutt.”

He looked at her for a long moment. Suddenly he rolled off his lounge chair and started to run.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Lindsay growled. She took off after him, knowing he wouldn’t cover as much ground with his bare feet on concrete as she would in her boots. It took less than ten long strides before she cut him off, knocking him sideways into the pool. She almost followed, but she managed to catch her balance just in time.

“Damn,” Jacobi said with a chuckle. “I was hoping to see you do that underwater cuffing trick again.” He slipped his gun out of his holster and pointed it at Abbott. “Come on, son. Get out of the pool and don’t do anything stupid... er...” Jacobi added.

Lindsay cuffed the snarling Abbott as he emerged from the shallow end. She wondered what hell they were going to catch from the motor pool for getting the back seat soaked. At the moment, she really didn’t care. “Jason Abbott, you are under arrest for the murder of Nicole Honeycutt,” she repeated. “You have the right to remain silent...”

“I know my rights, bitch.”

Lindsay shook her head and kept going. No way was she letting this one off on a technicality.

No damn way.

Jill shook her head as she studied Jason Abbott through the one-way glass. He was handsome in a preppy, frat-boy sort of way. His sun-bleached blonde hair was a tad too long and swept to the side, hanging down low and bringing out the blue of his eyes. It was those pale baby blues that would tell a woman something wasn’t right if they were smart enough to really look at what shined through them.

“What a shit,” Jill muttered to Lindsay. “Takes after his father in the winning personality department.”

Lindsay glanced at her as she waited for Jacobi. “You can tell that just by looking at him?”

“It’s in his eyes. He thinks this is a game. Wonder if he thinks daddy is going to swoop in and get him off.” Jill’s voice grew harder as she spoke.

“Jill,” Lindsay began slowly. “Don’t let this get personal.” It sounded hollow, Lindsay knew. If she were making it personal, she could only imagine how Jill felt.

Sharp blue eyes fastened on Lindsay’s face. “It is personal, but not in the way you’re thinking. I found the body this kid left behind. I know who his father is, Linz. I know what he put me through, but it was the job. Just like Honeycutt. What she tried to do to me in court... it was the job. I didn’t like it, but I understood it.”

Lindsay relaxed and felt a swell of pride and a tiny bit abashed. Apparently her friend was being more of an adult about this than she was. “It was the job,” she agreed. “But that didn’t stop me from wanting to punch the guy for you.”

Jill gave Lindsay a slow smile. For an instant, Lindsay remembered the effect that particular grin once had on her. Her own eyes sparkled.

Jill felt the familiar odd mixture of regret and warmth chase through her with the look in Lindsay’s eyes. “Well,” she confessed, “I did enjoy getting a DNA sample out of the bastard.”

Lindsay chuckled and nodded. “That’s my girl.”

The attorney shook her head. “I believe that distinction belongs to a certain perky redhead,” Jill teased.

Lindsay took a breath, feeling the need to say something, to address the history between them for once with words and not just looks.

“Don’t,” Jill begged softly when she sensed where Lindsay was going. “Leave it where it belongs, okay?” She smiled to take any sting out of her words.

Lindsay reluctantly nodded. “For whatever it’s worth,” she said in a low voice. “I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

The attorney had to look back at Abbott so Lindsay wouldn’t see her tears. She’d waited years to hear those words, and now she realized she’d never needed to. “We’re good, Linz. We always have been.”

The inspector cleared her throat and the moment between them burst like a soap bubble. “So. You think daddy will ride in to rescue Junior?”

Jill took a shaky breath. “I don’t know. Malcolm is a first class ass, but he loves the law. From all the rumor and gossip I’ve heard come out of that firm, he never did Jason any favors.”

“What kind of an attorney is Jason? Do you know?” Lindsay watched the lawyer in question fidget on the other side of the glass.

“Adequate at best.” Jill shook her head as she felt her emotions beginning to stabilize. “I don’t know. I just don’t see daddy prying his son out of this one.”

“As far as I’m concerned, there is no crowbar big enough for that task.” Lindsay winked at her best friend as Jacobi finally joined them, followed closely by Tom. “Hey,” Lindsay greeted her ex-husband politely.

“Hey.” Tom smiled. “Jill.”

“Tom,” Jill drawled sweetly; her eyes were narrow and shooting daggers.

Tom cleared his throat and pretended to be fascinated by their suspect. “So that’s him?”

“No,” Lindsay said. “I just thought he was so cute I had to arrest him and tuck him away some place until I was done for the day.”

Jacobi chuckled.

Tom fidgeted and tried not to blush as Lindsay moved past him and into the interrogation room.

“So lame,” Jill told him as they went shoulder to shoulder to watch.

Tom just crossed his arms and tried to look like he was in charge.

“FYI,” Jill announced. “Lindsay may have forgiven you for tossing her off the force, but I haven’t.”

“Really,” Tom drawled. “I would never have guessed.” Self-consciously he looked away from Jill and turned his attention to the show that was about to begin on the other side of the glass. There was nothing like watching Lindsay making a killer sweat.

“Hey there, Jason,” Lindsay greeted the suspect as she closed the door. “Dried off, yet?”

Abbott glared at her. He was in prison orange jumpsuit, the only dry clothes on hand since he couldn’t exactly sit there in wet swim trunks.

“Maybe the undies are still a little damp,” Jacobi suggested.

Lindsay slapped a folder down on the table, and Abbott twitched as his gaze swung back to her. “I want to make this short and quick, Jason. I have bigger fish to fry than you. We know you killed Nicole Honeycutt. We have DNA evidence that shows you raped

her.”

“You don’t have my DNA,” Abbott snarled. “So whatever game you’re trying to pull you can go screw yourself.”

“You’re a lawyer, Jason,” Jacobi said. “You should know all about DNA.”

“I know you can’t match what you don’t have,” Jason replied with a smug smile.

“We have your dad’s,” Lindsay pointed out.

Jason’s smile faltered.

“Forgot about that didn’t you, son?” Jacobi asked. “What do you think led us to you?”

“I want a lawyer,” Jason snapped as he closed off, seeming to shrink back in the chair as if he were making himself a smaller target.

“You want your daddy?” Lindsay suggested. “Does daddy need to come and help little Jason out of a nasty bind?”

“Shut up, bitch. I know my rights.”

Lindsay stopped playing. Jill watched her best friend’s eyes darken and the muscles along her shoulders tense and ripple, and she prayed Lindsay wouldn’t hit the guy. She shook her head. “Someone is so about to get it,” Jill commented casually.

“And you know what I know?” Lindsay purred. “I know I have a warrant for your DNA.”

Jacobi held up the Q-tip. “I’m going to like taking this one.”

“I know that I have you for resisting arrest,” Lindsay continued. “I know your dad told us just where to find you.”

Jason seemed to wilt further into his chair.

“Daddy isn’t going to help you this time,” Lindsay told him with satisfaction. “Now you know how this can go, Jason. Either you cooperate and the judge shows you a shred of mercy, or you don’t, and I make sure the DA’s office throws everything they have at you.”

Jason shifted in his chair.

“So what’s it going to be? I can leave this room and get you a lawyer, or you can tell me what happened the night Nicole Honeycutt died, and I’ll be sure to tell the judge you

were a good little boy.”

His blue eyes glinted when he looked up at her, and Lindsay saw what Jill meant. There was a coldness to them that was almost unnerving. Almost, she reiterated mentally. She leaned in close, went practically nose-to-nose with him.

“Glare at me all you want,” Lindsay said in a low voice. “I’ve gone toe-to-toe with much scarier bastards than you.” She held his gaze until he looked away. “Tell me what happened, or he and I are out the door,” Lindsay said as she motioned to Jacobi. “And your luck runs out completely.”

“She was asking for it,” Jason finally snarled.

“Are we to understand you’re waiving your right to counsel?” Jacobi asked in a droll voice.

“Fuck you, old man,” Jason growled. “I don’t need counsel. I’m my own counsel.”

Lindsay gave him a predatory smile. There was nothing she liked better than watching some arrogant bastard hang himself with his own pride. “She was asking for it, huh?”

“Come on. Like you don’t read the papers. You know she was a slut. She wanted it. Liked what I could do for her.”

Lindsay’s back teeth gnashed together but outwardly she seemed unaffected by his words. “Tell me, Jason, have you read the papers since the murder?”

“I didn’t murder her,” he snapped.

“Have you read the papers?” Lindsay insisted.

“No. I didn’t want to see what they were saying about her, okay?” He spat and shifted in his chair again.

“There was scripture found on the wall in the conference room, Jason. The press thinks the Hallelujah Man killed her. And your DNA is gonna match the sample from the victim. What do you think the press and the legal system will make of that?” Lindsay leaned on the table and waited for the bravado to pop like a balloon and she wasn’t disappointed.

Jason’s blue eyes widened as his gaze darted back and forth between the two inspectors. “I... I didn’t write...”

“How many murders are we up to now, Jacobi?” Lindsay asked casually.

“Let’s see,” Jacobi held up his hand and started ticking off names with his fingers.

“There was Blake, Dellan, Martin, Watkins...”

“Death penalty for any one of those murders,” Lindsay said with perverse satisfaction as she watched Jason squirm. “But I’m thinking the legal system will give you a lethal injection for murdering a member of the San Francisco bar.”

“I didn’t murder her!” Jason yelled. “It was a fucking accident, alright?”

“Tell me,” Lindsay demanded moving in close again.

“She liked it rough,” Jason complained. “Giving her what she wanted kept me ahead of the pack. It got me special treatment.”

“Your daddy didn’t get you that?” Jacobi asked.

“Hell no,” Jason whined. “Made me start in the damn mailroom and pay my way through law school. He never gave me nothing.”

“Poor baby,” Lindsay said with disgust almost under her breath.

“She was a total fucking nympho,” Jason told them. “Every damn day she cornered me. In her office. In the bathroom. In the file room.”

“And you were tired of being Nicole’s sex toy?” Jacobi asked. “A strapping guy like yourself?”

“She was killing *me*,” Jason told them. “She wanted it rough Friday night so I made it rough. It’s just... she kept egging me on... telling me I would never be good enough to make partner... that I wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for my dad.”

“So you started squeezing harder and harder,” Lindsay prompted.

“I just wanted her to shut up, okay? I wanted her to stop saying that. I just wanted her to get off so I could go have a life on a Friday night.” He was quiet for a moment. “Then she started clawing at my arms, but she didn’t leave a mark on me. She always made me do her in my best suits.” He laughed and shook his head. “I realized she couldn’t breathe.”

Lindsay and Jacobi just waited.

Jill took a breath behind the glass and glanced at Tom who was watching her in the reflection.

“She was starting to panic. I was scaring her. Little old Jason was suddenly more powerful than her. Little old Jason was suddenly the one in charge.”

“And it felt good,” Lindsay suggested.

“It felt *great*,” Abbott corrected. “And suddenly I realized I could make her shut up forever.”

“Well you certainly did that,” Lindsay told him. “But you threw away your career and your life to do it.”

“We’ll see,” was all he said on the subject. “But those other people... I didn’t kill them. I never even knew them. And I sure as hell didn’t stick around and write fucking scripture on the damn wall.”

Wall, not dry erase board, Jill noted.

“I’ve never read a damn Bible in my life,” Abbott continued without remorse.

“That’s alright,” Jacobi replied. “You’ll have plenty of time to find God where you’re going.”

Jill stepped back from the glass and turned, having heard enough. She could feel Tom watching her, almost sense the words he wanted to say to her, but they caught in his throat as she froze in place, coming face to face with Malcolm Abbott.

“Ms. Bernhardt,” the defense attorney said civilly.

“Mr. Abbott.” Jill swallowed. “Are you here as counsel for your son?”

Malcolm looked past Jill. He watched Lindsay and Jacobi with Jason for several quiet moments. “I don’t have a son,” he finally replied.

Jill sucked in a sharp breath. “You would defend a man like my stepfather, a man who would...” She licked her lips and steeled her nerves. “But you won’t defend your own son?”

Malcolm looked at Jill. “Defending your father was business. This is family.”

Jill glanced back at Jason before looking at his father one last time. “Business,” she said slowly. “You know, for a moment, I thought we almost had something in common.” She shook her head. “My mistake.” She brushed past him.

Tom started after her, shooting Abbott a glare as he passed.

“Ms. Bernhardt,” Abbott called after her. He waited until Tom and Jill turned to look at him. “We can’t choose our family,” he pointed out. “But we can pretend like the less desirable members of it don’t exist. That... that is something we do have in common.”

Jill's blue eyes tracked to Lindsay where the tall, lithe woman was working behind the glass. She smiled. "Actually, Malcolm, you can choose your family. It just took me a while to figure that out." She pivoted on her heel and walked away, feeling lighter than she had in weeks.

Act II

She didn't kill her.

Cindy closed the door to her apartment and leaned against it. She'd just put her article about the arrest of Jason Abbott to bed a little over an hour ago. They were still no closer to catching the Hallelujah Man and were even more perplexed than before about his ties to the Honeycutt murder, but right now all that mattered to Cindy was that her words had not ended the attorney's life.

She took a deep breath and pushed off the door, heading for her bedroom with a lighter step than she'd possessed that morning. Her space felt weird and unfamiliar as she moved through it. Most of her time seemed to be spent at Lindsay's lately and that was a good thing. Maybe Lindsay would even ask her to move in.

Cindy almost laughed at the thought then wondered why she should think that was funny. She entered the bedroom and headed for the shower, peeling off her sweater followed by her shirt. She left a trail of clothes, kicking off her shoes and jeans before turning on the spray. She removed her watch as the water heated before stepping inside the warm stream of water and sighed.

It felt like heaven.

She grabbed her soap and began to scrub the last few days worth of grime off her skin. The club had been going full throttle since Jill had found Honeycutt's body, and she'd not bothered to bathe since yesterday morning. It felt good to get clean, and Cindy took a minute to just stand in the warm water and let it beat down on her tense shoulders.

Something alerted her, perhaps the tiny draft of cold air that hit the backs of her thighs. She turned her head and found Lindsay Boxer peering around the shower curtain with a smirk the size of Texas. "What are you doing?" Cindy asked as she felt a faint blush rise to her skin at Lindsay's frank appreciation. "You could have scared the hell out of..." Cindy trailed off as her ability to form a coherent sentence went right down the drain.

Lindsay pulled back the curtain before slipping inside. She sauntered up to Cindy, easing her arms around her lover's waist before bringing their bodies together in a warm, wet, and soapy slide. "Hi," she purred in a deep, husky voice.

Cindy was embarrassed when all she could manage was a tiny squeak in response. She

got over it quickly, however, when Lindsay dipped her head and kissed her, the warm water spilling over their joined bodies.

The reporter took a shaky breath when they parted. “Hi,” she finally managed in a near whisper. Her hands were wandering, the soap easing her touch across Lindsay’s skin. Her lover made a soft sound of approval so Cindy curled one hand behind Lindsay’s neck and brought their lips together again for another long, leisurely kiss.

The shower ended with Lindsay on her knees, and Cindy hoping that her bathroom walls were soundproof. She heard the water shut off, and a second later the reporter was wrapped in a towel as Lindsay’s smirk made a return appearance.

“You seem very satisfied with yourself, Inspector,” Cindy said into the curve of Lindsay’s neck before nibbling the skin. She heard Lindsay’s breath catch.

“I am,” Lindsay confessed with a lazy smile as she grabbed another towel and stepped away from Cindy to dry herself off.

The reporter frowned at the loss of contact. She followed Lindsay as her lover moved into the bedroom. Cindy took a quick glance at the clock and determined she had about a half hour window. Taking a little running jump, she tackled a startled Lindsay onto the bed before kissing her breathless. “My turn,” Cindy told her before descending on warm, damp flesh, determined to make the most of every minute.

Lindsay was almost pouting. Cindy would have thought it was adorable if she wasn’t in such a hurry. Her lover was propped up in her bed, the sheet pulled up indignantly to her chin. Lindsay was watching her with pursed lips as Cindy slipped on a pair of figure-hugging jeans followed by a tight, light blue sweater.

“You’re being a big baby.”

Lindsay didn’t deny it. “I just thought we could spend the whole evening together. Abbott’s in custody. There isn’t much else we can do about HM tonight... and do you have to dress like that to go out with Jill?”

Cindy looked down at herself. “Why? Do I look bad?”

“I’m afraid Jill might try to jump you,” Lindsay harrumphed.

Cindy grinned as she slipped her feet into some black, knee-high boots. “I won’t be out too late.”

Lindsay actually did pout this time as she leaned over, grasping one of Cindy’s belt loops and tugging her lover onto the bed. “Come on,” she pleaded. “Call her and reschedule.”

Cindy kissed her delicately before pulling away. “No.” She bounded back to her feet as Lindsay sighed and flopped against the pillows. “Besides,” she announced. “You’re one of the main topics of conversation,” she told Lindsay as she picked up her purse and keys.

Lindsay’s head lifted. “I’m what?”

“Not every day you get all the juicy dirt on your lover from her ex-girlfriend,” Cindy teased with a quick wink.

“Wait... what?” Lindsay tried to scramble out of the bed only to get her feet tangled in the sheets. By the time she freed herself, she could hear Cindy’s light laughter as the reporter shut and locked the front door.

“So not cool,” Lindsay muttered as she sank onto the mattress. She reached over and snatched her jacket off a nearby chair in order to retrieve her cell phone. She flipped it open and hit speed dial on Jill’s number.

“Hey, sexy,” Jill greeted. “Where is that cute little...”

“Be very careful what stories you share tonight, Bernhardt,” Lindsay warned her in a no nonsense voice. “I will hurt you if you talk about the incident in the park.”

There was a moment of stunned silence on the other end of the phone followed by a slow, seductive chuckle. “Forgot about the park,” Jill said. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“Jill...” Lindsay swore and collapsed back on the bed when Jill cheekily disconnected.

“I am so screwed,” the inspector told the ceiling.

“Hey there!”

Cindy jumped a little at the voice that was suddenly next to her ear and the warm breath that blew across the side of her throat. She turned her head and met Jill’s dancing blue eyes up close. “Hi!” She yelled back over the steady thump of music.

They were in one of the trendier downtown nightclubs. Cindy had been frankly shocked that she’d been waved inside, but she wasn’t going to think too hard about it. Not that Jill was going to give her a chance. Her friend grabbed her hand and led her to the center of the dance floor, putting them square in the middle of a mass of moving bodies.

Jill danced close so she could be heard over the music. “This is just what I needed after this day!”

Cindy smiled. "I left Lindsay in a panic!"

Jill's smile got huge and Cindy laughed. "She called me!" Jill informed her. "Reminded me of this *great* story I have to tell you!"

Feeling cheeky, Cindy threw her arms around Jill's neck, and the two moved in time to the music. Cindy had to admit when Jill turned those warm blue eyes on her that she found the attorney attractive. Maybe if she hadn't met Lindsay first... She chuckled a little to herself at the thought.

Jill was pleasantly surprised at Cindy's behavior. She knew they were attracting a lot of attention as they moved together so comfortably. She had no doubt that she would have more than one offer of a threesome before the night was over. The thought made her eyes sparkle as she playfully pulled Cindy closer, the redhead laughing at her actions.

How long had it been since she'd had a friend like Cindy? Jill tried to remember. Perhaps she never really had. Cindy never judged her. She was just there, steadfast and unyielding. She accepted Jill for the whole of who she was, and Jill was grateful for that. "Glad you're here, Lois Lane!" Jill shouted.

Cindy's eyes betrayed her amusement. "Glad to be here, Counselor!" She shouted back.

Three hours later they were in a booth as far as they could get from the dance floor. A mostly empty pitcher of beer sat on the table between them, their third of the night. Jill felt pleasantly buzzed, both from the alcohol and Cindy's welcome company. They'd spent the last hour talking about Lindsay, with Jill sharing stories she had never told a soul, not even Claire.

"Oh my God," Cindy said as she wiped her eyes and hiccupped from laughing so hard. "Lindsay has an indecent exposure arrest on her record?"

Jill swallowed the remaining mouthful of beer in her glass. "Nah. It got thrown out. But that uniformed officer sure got a nice view of her ass through the window of the car, though."

They looked at each other before bursting into another fit of giggles.

Jill blew out a breath and tried to sober up a little. "Okay. Let's talk about muffin man."

Cindy groaned. "Let's not. Don't ruin a good night by talking about him."

"Cindy," Jill started more seriously. "He's being... weird."

"You don't have to tell me that." The reporter sighed as she watched the throng of dancers. Her throat hurt from yelling over the music. "Let's go get a cup of coffee somewhere quieter and we'll talk about it. Okay?"

Jill tossed some bills on the table and they got up. "Let's go out the back. We can cut across the alley. Papa Joe's is only four blocks from here."

Cindy nodded.

"I'll meet you out back. Ladies room," Jill explained.

Cindy nodded again then headed for the back door of the club. The cool night air felt wonderful as she stepped outside, and she took a deep lungful of it. She instantly regretted it when all she smelled was trash from a nearby dumpster. She slipped her phone out of her pocket and looked down at the screen. She'd missed five calls from Lindsay.

"Paranoid, much?" She asked her absent lover with a grin.

A scuffling sound made the reporter turn.

Pain exploded on the side of Cindy's head. She dropped to her knees, seeing streaks of brilliant white flashing across the inside of her eyelids. Some part of her brain was screaming warnings, ordering her to get her hands up, to defend herself. She felt another blow, this one connecting hard against her jaw. The streaks in her vision went nova then blackness descended, sucking her down into oblivion. She didn't even feel it when her body struck the pavement.

She didn't hear Jill scream, either.

"Would you sit down, sweetheart? You're making *me* nervous."

Lindsay flapped her hands before slumping into one of Claire's chairs. The medical examiner was working late, catching up on some reports that had fallen by the wayside in their pursuit of the Hallelujah Man.

"They're alone together, Claire," Lindsay whined.

"I'm aware. It's hardly the first time, Linz," Claire commented as she continued to type.

"But they're alone and talking about me!"

Claire chuckled.

"It isn't funny."

Claire pursed her lips and tried not to laugh.

“Okay, it’s a little funny,” Lindsay admitted. She banged her head on the back of the chair. “Cindy is going to have so much ammunition on me...”

“You know,” Claire pointed out. “You are a detective. I’m sure if you dug into Cindy’s past a little...”

Lindsay hesitated at the suggestion, feeling the allure of having her curiosity satisfied. “I couldn’t do that,” she confessed reluctantly.

“Good to hear,” Claire replied with a quick glance at her fidgety friend. “So you think you have Abbott lock, stock and barrel?” she asked as a way to distract Lindsay from her nerves.

“Yeah,” Lindsay sighed. “Still gets us no closer to nabbing the Hallelujah Man, though.”

“So you’re convinced Abbott didn’t write the scripture?”

Lindsay nodded. “That kid is as dumb as a box of rocks.”

“That kid is as old as Cindy,” Claire pointed out with humor.

Lindsay stuck her tongue out at the medical examiner and Claire chuckled.

“I just don’t get it. It feels like him, Claire,” Lindsay said as she returned to the subject.

Claire stopped typing and swiveled in her chair to face the detective. “Okay. So Abbott isn’t working with HM.”

“I don’t think so,” Lindsay said slowly.

“So if we’re to assume that HM wrote the scripture on the wall...”

“Then Cindy was right, and two people had designs on murdering Nicole Honeycutt on the same night.”

Claire leaned back in her chair. “Obviously Abbott got there first.”

“Obviously.” Lindsay frowned. “So HM gets there during, maybe after the murder...”

“Finds the body and then...” Claire continued.

Tendrils of ice snaked through Lindsay’s veins as she slowly sat up. She swallowed hard against the nausea that clutched her stomach in a sudden vice-like grip. “Then he heard the elevator.”

“He hid when Jill arrived,” Claire said. “That is not a thought I like.”

Lindsay was slowly shaking her head as she eased up out of Claire’s chair. Her whole body was shaking. “HM hid, Claire. He hid and watched.”

“Watched....?” Claire’s features cleared and she sucked down a cold breath. “Oh my god, Linz.”

“He wrote the scripture on the board to throw us off. But the words weren’t about Honeycutt...” Lindsay could hear the tears that threatened in her voice.

“Jill must have seemed like a sign from God after finding Honeycutt. Oh my God,” Claire said again. “He wrote the scripture for Jill.”

At first she didn’t know what she was seeing. Jill’s brain was too addled with alcohol to truly process the sight of Cindy on the ground, a man looming over her with a rock in his hands. A man she recognized.

David Arnold.

His name came to her in a flash. The bailiff from the Hall. The man she’d flirted with the day before.

He had the makeshift weapon poised, ready to bash the back of her friend’s head in.

Jill screamed as his intent finally sunk in. He pivoted, throwing the rock away as he came at her. His hand went to his pocket, and Jill didn’t hesitate, running at him head first. She slammed into him, taking them both off their feet. She had her keys in her hand, and she tried to gouge at his eyes, but he was too strong. She succeeded in slashing his cheek, but there was no time for grim satisfaction as his blood was spilled. She kneed him hard once, twice. Arnold groaned then renewed his efforts, finally tossing her off.

His scarf went with her as Jill grabbed at something to hold onto. She glanced down at it in shock, knowing the material, recognizing the color instantly even through the haze of alcohol.

It was a fucking stole.

Then electricity arced through her body as the probes from the Taser struck her chest. There was a moment of pain, more than she had ever known, and then mercifully nothing at all.

When Tom entered the bullpen it was hopping for ten o'clock at night. His eyes instantly took in Lindsay in the center of the chaos, her cell phone pressed to one ear, her work phone to the other. She flipped the cell phone closed, and he watched as she stared at it for a long, worried moment. He had no doubts about whom she was trying to reach. Jacobi had informed him an hour ago about the development with the Hallelujah Man. Cops were swarming the bars and clubs trying to find Jill Bernhardt before a killer got to her first.

Tom's intention had been to come in right away, but a call from a beat cop had forced him to take a detour. He swallowed hard at the heavy news he was about to deliver and slowly made his way toward Lindsay.

His ex-wife made eye contact, but she said nothing to him as she continued to listen to the voice on the other end of the phone.

"Linz," he said gently.

His tone caught her attention, and she shifted her gaze back to him instantly. He saw the fear enter her eyes and wished there was something he could say that would make it go away. Instead he knew he was about to make what she was feeling so much worse.

Lindsay hung up and looked at him. "Tell me."

"A uni..." Tom swallowed again. "A uni found Cindy about half an hour ago."

The room seemed to still as all eyes turned on them.

Tom watched Lindsay try to hold it together. The emotion that stormed in her eyes made him ache for her. "She'd been attacked. She was in an alley," Tom continued as Lindsay swayed in place. "She'd been beaten."

Jacobi grabbed his partner's arm to steady her. "Where is she?" Jacobi demanded when Lindsay seemed incapable of speaking.

Tom sighed. "Interview one. She wouldn't let them transport her to the damn hospital..." He didn't get to finish as Lindsay shoved past him and ran for the interview rooms.

Jacobi closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I thought you were gonna say she was..." He licked his lips. "Jill?"

Tom shook his head. "We found her purse."

"Jesus." Jacobi slumped onto the desk.

Lindsay burst into room, startling a groggy Cindy who jerked where she sat at the table. There was a nasty bruise on her lover's jaw. Blood had oozed down from a gash at Cindy's hairline, leaving garish streaks down the side of her face and ending in a rust-colored blotch on the reporter's blue sweater.

The inspector sunk to her knees. They were too shaky to hold her anyway as she threw her arms around her lover and pulled her in close. "Oh God," she whispered into Cindy's hair.

Cindy weakly clung to her. Her head felt like someone had clubbed her with a brick, which probably wasn't far off from the truth. "Ouch," she managed in a somewhat light voice for Lindsay's sake.

Lindsay eased back and looked at her, wishing for Claire who suddenly seemed to materialize on command. The medical examiner set a bag on the table then forced Lindsay to move out of the way.

"Hey, skipper," Claire said soothingly. "Let me look at you."

"He has her," Cindy said quietly as Claire dabbed at the wound.

"He does," Claire told them both. "They found her purse where they found you."

Cindy closed her eyes as tears streamed down her face.

"Tell me what happened," Lindsay pleaded.

So Cindy did, relating the important details of the night.

"Did you see him?" Lindsay asked.

The tears came harder now as Cindy slowly shook her head. "Just a flash of his face. Nothing that would help. He blindsided me. Oh God, Linz. He has her."

Lindsay swallowed hard. Fear made her feel like she was about to come out of her skin. "We'll get her back."

"What if he's hurting her?" Cindy asked.

Claire hushed them both, but the fact that her hands were shaking wasn't lost on any of them. "Honey, you need to be at the hospital."

"No."

"Cindy," Lindsay started.

“No,” the reporter’s voice was firmer this time. “Not until we have her back.” She looked at Claire. “Drive me to my office?”

“Why?” Claire asked. “Sweetheart...”

“I can do the most good from there.”

Lindsay sank back to her knees at Cindy’s side. “I need to know you’re okay. You want to do the most good? Go with Claire to the hospital.”

Cindy’s gaze met Lindsay’s and held.

“I’ll stay here then. Give me a phone and a desk. I need to do something, Linz. Please,” Cindy practically begged.

Lindsay looked up into Claire’s features.

“I’ll stay with her,” Claire announced.

Lindsay reluctantly nodded. “You stay in here. I’ll get you a phone.”

Everything hurt.

Jill’s eyes slowly blinked open. Her mouth was painfully dry, and as she tried to lick her lips she realized she must have bitten her tongue at some point. She tried to move and realized she was on a hard, worn carpeted floor, but her hands were tied behind her head. She craned her neck around and saw what was binding her wrists.

The stole.

A shudder wracked her body when the full magnitude of her situation came ramming home with the sight. The stole was wrapped around a heavy, wooden table leg. She jerked hard but the table didn’t even budge.

Her blue eyes took in her surroundings as she frantically searched for something, anything to get her out of this mess. It was then she realized that she was alone.

“Cindy?” she whispered into the darkness. There was no answer, and Jill felt grief well up inside her when she remembered her friend lying motionless on the ground of an alley. “No,” she moaned.

She could hear faint sounds as the structure she was in settled around her. It was so dark she could barely see, only moonlight from a nearby window offering any illumination.

She tipped her head back and almost screamed when she saw a figure looking down at her.

Jill had seen him before, in the pictures from the Watkins' crime scene. Jesus on the cross, hanging above the sanctuary in San Vincente's. The sight made Jill think of rats and what was done to Watkins' body. Suddenly every little sound around her made her tense.

Jill closed her eyes and focused. She had to think about nothing but surviving.

Right now it had to be all that mattered.

Denise was waiting for them when they entered the lobby of the Hall the next morning. Lindsay merely nodded at her, too tired for formalities.

"Counselor," Jacobi managed as a greeting. They'd seen Denise last night, of course. The attorney had stormed the bullpen when she'd been informed of Jill's abduction. When she'd learned who likely had her employee, Denise's knees had nearly buckled.

But now she was back in cool, iron control. Denise handed Lindsay a thick, padded envelope. "Everything is there. Her calendar, contacts, current cases.... Your people are sweeping her office now. I assume they'll take the computer."

"They will," Jacobi said as Lindsay slipped open the envelope and Jill's calendar came sliding out. He watched his partner as Lindsay opened it, studied the neat, precise handwriting inside. He saw her swallow once, twice. "Linz..."

The inspector looked up and met Denise's gaze. "Thanks for your cooperation."

"Anything," Denise said instantly. "Whatever you need."

Lindsay nodded.

"Lindsay," Denise said hesitantly as they started to walk away.

Lindsay was too weary to be surprised at being addressed so informally but some part of her brain was aware of the oddity.

"You'll find her," Denise said with conviction. "I know it."

The surprising faith got through some of the fog that seemed to shroud Lindsay's thoughts. She nodded again. "You're damn right I will," she promised.

Denise dipped her head once then went back the way she came.

Jacobi frowned. "Tell you what. Give me five minutes. I'm going to check in with the techs and see what ground they've covered."

Lindsay sighed but nodded. She wanted a minute or two to go through Jill's effects, and she needed to check in with Cindy. She walked outside and stood there on the steps of the Hall, the pleasantly cool February wind whipping her long hair around her drawn features. She was running on fumes, so tired she wasn't sure how she was still standing, but she couldn't rest. If she slept, Jill died.

It was as simple as that.

Even now, as she waited for Jacobi, she could feel time slipping through her fingers. She thought of Dellan who'd been beaten for three weeks. Of Martin, crushed beneath the weight of thousands of coins. Of Watkins, raped, beaten, her eye gouged out, the sound of those terror-and agony-filled screams.

Was Jill screaming right now?

Lindsay shut her eyes as she felt the shakes of fear shiver through her body. She prayed for her friend, prayed for some kind of clue that would lead her to Jill in time. The irony that Jill was in the hands of a man who fancied himself an instrument of the God she was begging for help was not lost on her.

Jacobi touched her elbow, and her eyes fluttered open as she turned her head to look at him.

"Linz, you need sleep," he told her.

She shook her head. "When we have her back."

He didn't bother to argue. He just nodded, his own eyes haunted as they watched the people come and go up the steps of the Hall. "Look at them all," he murmured.

Lindsay did. There was a lot of activity in court that day. Jill should have been among those faces, hurrying up the steps in her too-high heels as she headed for court. The sudden aching to see that sight brought tears to Lindsay's eyes.

"All walks of life coming and going today," Jacobi mused aloud. He shook his head. "Hard to tell who is good and evil among all those faces. One hell of a spot to people watch, though."

The wind, the murmur of voices, the traffic from the street, Lindsay felt all the sounds coalesce and slip into the background as her mind zeroed in on the clue she'd been missing. Maybe God answered prayers after all.

“Son-of-a-bitch.”

Jacobi seemed to have had the same realization as she did. He looked at her. “The bastard doesn’t work in a church. He works in the *Hall*.”

Act III

They scrambled to their desks. Lindsay snatched up Robert Dellan’s file and flipped it open as she reached for her phone with the other hand. She punched in his widow’s number. It took four rings before a timid voice answered.

“Ms. Dellan?” Lindsay said in a rush as she watched Jacobi snatch up his own phone and start dialing. “This is Inspector Lindsay Boxer.”

There was a beat of frosty silence, and Lindsay winced. Apparently Child Protective Services had been by. “I need you to answer one question for me, and I’ll let you go.”

“Fine.”

“Was your husband ever in court?”

There was a slow breath on the other end, and Lindsay could tell the woman was weighing whether or not to tell the truth. “Yes. Some of his vendors sued him to get their money when his company went under.”

“Thank you.” Lindsay hung up and picked up Chris Blake’s file, repeating the process.

When they were done, only Travis Martin remained, but there was no one left living to call. Jacobi thumbed the file.

“All of them were in court,” he said. “Blake was wrongly sued for supposedly stealing someone’s idea for a restaurant. Watkins was sued over copyright infringement. Dellan for skipping out on paying his vendors.”

Lindsay looked at the file as her mind sorted through where to start tracking down the information they needed. She slapped her forehead when she suddenly realized they didn’t need to bother. “His job.”

“What?” Jacobi asked.

“Even if Martin was sued somewhere down the line... the bank he worked for was two blocks north of the Hall. They’re on the same damn street.”

“Martin probably walked by there everyday.”

Excitement bubbled between them as they realized they finally had the break they needed. Lindsay just hoped it was coming soon enough to save Jill. “You tell Tom. I’m headed back to the Hall. We’re gonna need warrants.”

“We’ll get started on the backgrounds of all the male employees,” Jacobi told her.

“From judges to janitors,” Lindsay called out over her shoulder.

Jacobi picked up the phone and started dialing.

“Denise!”

The attorney turned her head at the sound of Lindsay Boxer’s voice. The inspector looked wired and restless, a complete about-face from this morning, as she hurried down the corridor toward her. Denise dismissed the DDA she’d been speaking with and met her halfway. “Do you have news? Did you find her?”

“Not yet,” Lindsay confessed out of breath. “But I need your help.”

“Anything,” Denise said instantly.

“We know where he works,” Lindsay announced.

Denise’s breath caught. “Where?”

“Here.”

Denise gaped at her and felt her ire rise at the mere suggestion.

“We know all of the victims were sued except Martin, and his bank is two blocks up the street,” Lindsay told her. “If he works here, or he’s one of the regulars in the gallery, he would have seen all of them, heard all about them, sat in judgment right here on all of them.”

“Oh my God,” Denise whispered as she realized Lindsay could be right. “You mean he’s been under our noses this whole time?” Her voice elevated in outrage.

“I need you to get warrants. We need to look into the backgrounds of every male working in the building. The murders took too much strength for a woman,” Lindsay quickly added when she realized Denise was about to object. “He’s here, Denise.”

Denise felt the odd mixture of fear and hope tumble around in her chest. She nodded. “I’ll get started on whatever warrants we need. In the meantime, I’ll free up as many

members of the female staff as I can to start reviewing records. If he's an employee here, we'll find him," she vowed.

"Look for someone who has been rejected from seminary school. Someone with strong religious ties in his background," Lindsay told her.

"We will. We'll find him," she vowed.

Lindsay put her hand on Denise's arm, appreciating the worry she could see in the attorney's eyes. "The faster the better. He's already had her almost fourteen hours."

Denise nodded, biting back the angry retort she wanted to make. She knew how long the killer had Jill in his possession. At times she felt like she could feel every tick of the clock inside her head. She watched Lindsay hurry away, feeling sick at the thought that the bastard had been so close. She probably passed him in the halls, probably knew his damn name.

And he had Jill.

But she'd be damned if she let him keep her.

Jill was shivering.

She was still damp from the last bucket of water he'd thrown all over her. There was no heat in the sanctuary, and the cool, dusty air blew without mercy over her chilled skin. Her whole body ached from its struggle to remain warm over the last few hours. She was starving, and her head and ribs stung so much she could barely think.

Jill had never known physical misery like this, and the thought that it was only going to get worse was terrifying.

Arnold was starting slow. Taunting her. He'd kicked her a few times. Doused her in water every few hours as he slowly tried to break down her spirit. She was doing her best not to give him the satisfaction. She had to hold on for as long as she could. Lindsay would be looking for her. She just had to give her friend time.

Jill thought of Cindy and tears burned her eyes. She had no idea if the reporter was alive or dead. When she'd seen her there on the ground, Jill had felt a wrenching pain in her chest that hurt worse than anything Arnold had done to her so far.

"Please," she whispered more for Cindy than herself as her gaze peered up at the crucifixion overhead. "Please God."

"Yes," a voice came out of the darkness making Jill tense. "You should pray."

This time Arnold held a Bible rather than a bucket, and Jill thought she was about to get another one of his sermons. She never thought he would start beating her with it.

Denise watched them. There were twelve women in a room working feverishly, all of them determined to ferret out a killer that had been among them. He had used this place to find his victims, and Denise wanted to crucify the religious son-of-a-bitch for that. As far as she was concerned, the law was as sacred as any religion, and she would nail this bastard's ass to the wall when she found out who'd perverted both for his own twisted means.

With a sigh, she headed back to her office, pausing a moment in Jill's doorway. She could smell the DDA's lingering perfume and the scent did something funny to Denise's stomach. She glanced behind her, half expecting Jill to be standing there. The sight of an empty hallway made her swallow hard. "Hang on, Jill," she whispered before moving back down the hall toward her own space.

Denise settled into her own chair and pulled down another folder off the top of her pile of files. She'd been at it for five hours when she'd taken a break to walk down the hall to check on the others. She flipped open the file and began to read.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw this employee used to work as a paramedic. Didn't they say the killer would have to have a pretty good working knowledge of anatomy to inflict the injuries he did without killing the victims? And then there was his knowledge of drugs...

Denise read further then picked up the phone and made a few calls. Within twenty minutes she had what she needed. She felt like someone had lit a fire in her as she slammed the phone down.

"Gotcha, you son-of-a-bitch." Denise snatched up her cell phone and searched for Lindsay Boxer's number. After four rings it went to voicemail. Denise flipped her phone shut with a curse.

She tried Jacobi. Tom Hogan. No one was answering their damn phones.

A thought struck her, and she skimmed through her list of numbers before dialing the editor of the Register. Jill wasn't the only one with friends at the paper.

Lindsay was talking to Tom on her cell phone as Cindy watched the buildings race by. They were driving back to the scene of Jill's abduction, to see if the location might jar any additional memories for the reporter. "Check vendors, too. I know it's a hell of a lot

of people!” Lindsay suddenly snapped. “But one of them has Jill, damnit!”

Cindy put her hand on Lindsay’s knee and squeezed in reassurance. She heard Lindsay take a deep breath.

“Please,” Lindsay said, now in a more subdued voice. “Denise is working the angle, too. Cindy has the Register on it. With our combined forces, we should be able to find this guy and quick.”

Cindy’s phone rang. She glanced down at the caller ID and sighed when she saw her editor’s name. She flipped the phone open. “Don’t fire me,” she said in a rush. “I really can’t worry about my job right now so you can just...”

“Thomas?” Denise Kwon’s voice was crisp and clear as it cut her off.

Cindy blinked, puzzled, and resisted the urge to check the caller ID again. “Denise?”

Lindsay’s head swiveled in surprise in Cindy’s direction.

“Is Boxer with you?” Denise demanded.

Cindy glanced at Lindsay. “She’s on the phone with Tom.”

“Thomas, I got him.”

Cindy drew in a sharp breath and whipped open her notebook and clicked her pen. For a moment she forgot all about her fear for Jill and her own distracting pain. “Go.”

“His name is David Arnold. He was rejected from five different seminary schools. His father was a lawyer for the Vatican. When he retired, Pope John Paul II gave him a blessed parting gift.”

“A Tyrian purple stole,” Cindy guessed as a fission of excitement skittered up her spine. “Oh my God, Denise.”

“He’s a bailiff,” Denise continued in a rush, and Cindy could hear the tears of frustration and fear in the other woman’s voice. “He’s a fucking *bailiff*.”

Cindy had a flash of her attacker’s face, of his silver, grey eyes. She had gotten a look at him after all. She’d seen him before. “He was at the Dow trial...”

“He lead you away in cuffs, Thomas,” Denise replied.

A shudder ripped through Cindy’s small frame, and she was only faintly aware of Lindsay telling Tom to shut up and hold on.

“Cindy,” Lindsay asked, her voice tight.

“Cindy,” Denise’s voice seemed to echo. “The church where Felicia Watkins was murdered? Arnold’s father was a member. He was their biggest donor.”

It all connected. Cindy felt it all snap into place. “Thank you,” she told Denise before hanging up and relaying the information to Lindsay.

Lindsay slammed on the brakes and jerked on the wheel, causing the vehicle to do a virtual 180-degree turn. The siren came on and the police lights sent flashes of blue and red across the buildings and street as Lindsay floored it and went back the way they’d come.

“You don’t really think he would go back to San Vincente’s, do you?” Cindy asked as she held on.

Lindsay finished telling Tom where to meet them with backup then snapped her phone closed and dropped it into her lap. “He did,” she said in a strained voice. “I know he did.”

“How?” Cindy asked softly.

Lindsay didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure she knew how herself.

“Claire?”

The medical examiner glanced up as Tom Hogan stuck his head in the door. The look on his face, the nervous energy radiating from his body, told her all she needed to know. She grabbed her purse.

“They found her,” she whispered.

“Maybe,” Tom said as he guided her out of the door with his hand in the small of her back.

“Do I need my kit?” she asked in a fearful voice.

“Let’s hope not,” he tried to reassure her. “I just thought you’d want to be there one way or the other.”

“You thought right,” she answered as they hurried toward his car.

The stole around her wrists went taught as Jill yanked hard and struggled for all she was worth. He was moving toward her with deliberate intent. Her eyes fixed on his belt buckle as she heard him loosen it, sliding the leather out and away. He set it aside then picked up a metal pipe that had been sitting on the altar.

“Nnnnn,” Jill tried to scream but the scarf he’d gagged her with an hour before slid further back in her throat as she bucked her body. She started choking, fighting for breath even as she continued to thrash wildly in an attempt to free herself. She knew his intent. Knew what he was going to cure her of.

Her sin.

He began chanting. The games were over. He was tired of toying with her. Now he was going to get down to his real reason for bringing her here. The beatings, the starvation, the excruciating cold, they were all about to feel like nothing.

The heavy table scooted an inch, scraping loud and long as she twisted, the sound echoing in the rafters of the church. When Jill looked up she saw Jesus looking down, his sad eyes a silent statement on what was about to happen.

Not even God could help her now.

“Stay in the car.”

“You’re crazy,” Cindy blurted. She sucked in a breath when Lindsay turned the full wattage of her laser vision on her, but she held her ground. “Jill is in there.”

“We don’t know that.”

“You don’t have backup.”

“Cindy...”

“I can yell really loud if I have to,” the reporter promised. She watched, confused as Lindsay’s hands went to the cuff of her jeans and rolled it up. She didn’t see the clutch piece until Lindsay was handing it to her. “Oh jeez.”

Lindsay said nothing as she thrust the gun into Cindy’s hands before quickly getting out of the car, hoping like hell backup would hurry.

Cindy scrambled out after her, the unfamiliar weight of the weapon a tangible reminder of how reckless she was being. It didn’t matter. Jill needed her, and she would pull the trigger as many times as she had to and at as many people to save her friend and protect Lindsay.

She just hoped she could actually hit something.

Lindsay didn't know how she knew he was in the church. She just did. It was the same feeling she got at all the other crime scenes. The sense of someone walking over her grave as Cindy had described it back at the Blake crime scene all those months ago. Lindsay tried the handle and was unsurprised when it turned easily in her hand. "You stay behind me," she ordered in a harsh whisper.

"Okay," Cindy said without conviction.

There was no time to reassure her, Lindsay realized. No time for goodbyes or declarations of love. Lindsay shouldered the door open and stepped inside, her gun sweeping the area along with the beam from her flashlight.

A muted noise reached her. It sounded like a muffled cry, desperate and weak. Lindsay's whole body jerked at the sound, and it took every honed instinct in her body to keep herself from running blindly toward it.

Cindy had no such reservations. She started past Lindsay, but Lindsay's arm shot out, blocking her progress. For a moment their faces were lit from the reflection of the flashlight beam off the faded white walls. Lindsay shook her head, and Cindy reluctantly nodded and moved behind her once more.

Lindsay felt her whole body beginning to quake in fear of what she'd find. Would she find Jill burned? Maimed? Would he assault her the way he'd assaulted his last victim? The woman whose pride had led to her downfall in this very church?

She thought of rats and cages and burrowing... The urge to wretch was overpowering.

"Please God," Lindsay heard Cindy whisper into the darkness.

They made their way carefully through the back of the church, past the door to the basement where another woman had died, and toward the string of sounds they could hear from the sanctuary.

Sanctuary. The name seemed horribly ironic to the reporter as she shifted her sweaty grip on the gun. She could hear a man's voice ahead of them, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. She could, however, hear the distinct sound of heavy wood scraping across the stone floor. She could hear Jill's muted, terrified cries with crystal clarity. Then there was the sound of something striking flesh and Jill screamed.

All training went out the window. Lindsay surged forward and kicked in the door that led to the altar. She saw a flash of his face as he lifted his gaze to meet hers. He was on top of Jill. Lindsay saw the pipe in his right hand, the one he'd just used to strike her best friend.

Her vision went red and her finger tightened on the trigger.

“Lindsay!” Cindy’s shout was drowned out by the retort from the gun as it bucked in Lindsay’s hand.

The killer jerked as if he’d been struck, tumbling off Jill’s thrashing body and rolling down the small set of steps before crashing into a pew. He staggered to his feet and bolted for the front of the church.

“Police officer!” Lindsay belatedly yelled as she sprang into motion after him. She’d taken no more than five steps when she saw a flash of metal and ducked, dragging Cindy down with her as bullets sprayed above their heads. Lindsay returned fire, squeezing off three rounds that boomed in the cavernous space.

“Stay with her!” Lindsay shouted as she went after him, her long legs not even bothering with the stairs as she leapt from the pulpit and ran up the nearest row of aged and rotting pews.

Cindy didn’t have to be told twice. She was at Jill’s side instantly, and Jill wanted to weep in relief at the sight of her. She could hear shouts from the front of the church, then the distinct sound of more gunfire. Muzzle flashes lit up the inside of the church, and Jill found her vision blocked as Cindy threw her small frame over her, shielding her from any more harm. There was a loud bang, like a door being thrown open with force, then quiet settled once more.

Jill whimpered and Cindy reacted, moving back and yanking at the scarf in her mouth, tearing it away and letting Jill suck in her first lungful of fresh air in an hour. She coughed and struggled weakly, needing to be free.

“Shhh.” Cindy reached for the fabric binding Jill’s wrists...

And froze.

It was a stole. A silk, purple stole.

Tyrian purple, her mind corrected and Cindy clamped her teeth together to keep from becoming ill. Her stomach twisted at seeing something so sacred used for something so vile. Seeing it used like that on Jill took the sight to a new level of disgust. “Let me get something to cut this...” She started to stand only to sink back into a crouch next to her friend when Jill cried out.

“Don’t leave me,” Jill whimpered. “Don’t leave me.”

“It’s okay,” Cindy promised as she glanced worriedly over her shoulder for any sign of Lindsay. She could hear sirens in the distance and prayed for them to hurry. She ran a

hand through Jill's hair, trying to soothe her friend, trying to soothe them both. "It's okay. Help is coming. I won't leave you."

"Oh God..." Jill visibly shuddered.

Cindy stood and peeled off her jacket before kneeling once more and using it to cover Jill's partially exposed body. The bastard had cut open Jill's shirt, leaving her in nothing but her bra and skirt. Cindy's gaze sought something, anything that could help her cut Jill loose. She wanted her friend out of here, wanted her covered before the cops came inside. Tipping her head back, Cindy found herself looking up into the downturned face of Jesus on the cross, his features covered with dust and grime. A shiver tore through the reporter, and she jerked her eyes away from the sight, not wanting to think about what the figure had witnessed this night.

Jill's belt was loose and so was the zipper on her skirt. Cindy felt the bile rise in her throat again when she thought about the killer straddling Jill as she and Lindsay arrived. "Jill... did he...?" Cindy couldn't make herself ask the question, but relief swept through her so sweet and strong it made her dizzy when Jill viciously shook her head. "Thank God..."

"The bailiff."

"What?" Cindy eased closer, Jill's voice hard to understand it was so raspy from screaming. Cindy noted the bruises on Jill's pale features, could see blood staining the side of the attorney's shirt. "Where in the hell are the paramedics?" She cried out to the church.

"The bailiff... in the Dow trial..." Jill was shaking so hard her teeth were chattering.

Cindy went rigid as she remembered his face, remembered him with his hand on one side of a Bible, hers on the other. "We know."

Jill nodded as the tears came again.

The door banged open and Cindy spun, pointing the small handgun toward the sound. Suddenly the weight of the weapon in her hand felt right, welcome, and she sighted down it with conviction, hoping the next face she saw would be the man who attacked her best friend.

She moved to put herself between the door and Jill, doing her best to shield the other woman. Her hands were shockingly steady.

Lindsay kept her head low and switched off her flashlight as she bounded out into the night. He'd taken a few more shots inside the church and so had she. By now they'd

both reloaded. She listened for sounds of footfalls, of breathing, but the night was shockingly quiet. She heard a click and she dove for the ground, feeling asphalt tear at her palms and cheek as shots punched into the door behind her.

She sprang to her feet when she heard him turn and run somewhere to her left. His shadow was briefly visible as he passed close to a streetlight. Lindsay zeroed in on him and ran.

“Police officer!” she yelled out of habit. Following procedure wasn’t going to matter, she decided as she gave chase. She had no intention of letting him live to see his day in court.

The old, abandoned buildings were like a maze, and Lindsay admitted he had her at a distinct disadvantage. She was on his turf, running around in the dark. It wasn’t smart. It was about the dumbest thing she’d ever done, but she was not letting him get away, even if he took her down with him.

Easing along one wall, she turned, staying low, and pointed her gun down an alley. Empty. She swore mentally and started for the next building.

There was a loud pop then pain bloomed along with a spreading pattern of blood on Lindsay’s left side. She sank to one knee and returned fire in the general direction of the shot, taking grim satisfaction when she heard her bullet strike flesh and a muted scream followed.

She fired again, hoping to kill him or at least keep him down. Lindsay staggered to her feet and ran blindly, firing as she went. She heard a car door close, an engine turn over; then a white panel van came hurdling out of the darkness. Lindsay swore and threw herself out of the way, rolling over the hood of a beat up, blue Chevy as the van crashed into the side where she’d just been standing and roared away into the night.

Lindsay landed painfully on her knees and had to stay there for several agonizing breaths. She gripped her side, feeling the warmth of the blood under her shirt and jacket. She’d hit him twice, though, damnit. He was in worse shape than she was.

With a groan, Lindsay put her hand on the hood of the car to haul herself up before heading back toward the church at an unsteady jog. She’d have Tom check every hospital, every backroom doctor they knew about. They knew his name, his face, and he was running wounded. It was only a matter of time.

“Cindy,” Jill’s voice was a harsh, ragged whisper.

Cindy shushed her as she positioned her feet shoulder width apart and tightened her finger on the trigger. He wasn’t getting to Jill, not again. The pain in her own head was

enough to make tears spill from her eyes, but she didn't move.

Suddenly a familiar figure entered a streak of moonlight, and Cindy wanted to collapse in relief at the sweet sight of Lindsay's familiar stride. "Thank God," she breathed.

Lindsay came jogging into the room, re-holstering her weapon as she approached. She watched as Cindy's shoulders relaxed and the gun dipped in the redhead's hands. At Cindy's questioning look she shook her head. "Got away," she said tightly as she drew even with her lover. She glanced at the gun then gave Cindy a fleeting look before moving to Jill. She dropped to her knees, wincing in pain as she did so before taking out the knife she carried and using it to slice through the stole.

Jill's arms dropped when released then came up and around Lindsay's neck in a fierce hug as she surged upward, needing to feel safe, needing to know Lindsay was real.

"I'm so sorry," Lindsay murmured into the crook of Jill's neck as she felt her friend tremble. She wasn't sure what she was apologizing for... that the killer had gotten away... that she hadn't stopped him sooner... Lindsay only knew that she felt like a failure and her mistakes had nearly cost Jill her life. "Oh God, Jill, I'm sorry."

Jill began sobbing in Lindsay's arms, her whole body shuddering with the force of her cries. Lindsay wrapped more of her body around her, holding her for all she was worth, not even aware when her own tears began to fall. The thought that she could be contaminating evidence on the floor, on Jill's clothes... it didn't matter. All that mattered was Jill.

Red and blue lights began to flash through the dull stained glass, bringing it to life with harsh flickers of color. Cindy came around Jill's other side and knelt next to her, putting one arm around her friend and the other around her lover. Cindy's features looked stricken, made all the more dramatic by the lurid bruises on her face as she and Lindsay locked gazes.

They knew him... his address... his face... But the knowledge had come at too high of a price.

Doors opened, voices entered. The first round of the nightmare was over.

The second was beginning.

A rape kit.

The doctors had insisted it was necessary. Jill could be lying that he hadn't touched her. She could have been so traumatized she didn't remember the assault. The cop in Lindsay knew they were right. The friend in her hated it with every fiber of her being.

Jill had already been violated enough. Her sense of safety was lost, her trust shredded. Lindsay didn't want to think what Jill must feel toward her. Damn it she was Jill's best friend. Her best friend the cop, and she'd failed to protect her.

There had to have been a clue. Something she missed. Something that could have prevented Jill from going through hell. Lindsay refused to think there was nothing she could have done, that the day's events were somehow a fate that could not be changed.

Cindy appeared with a cup of coffee and Lindsay took it without enthusiasm as her lover settled next to her in a chair. The doctors had absconded with both of them when they arrived, insisting that they get a closer look at her lover's bruises and the nasty gash Claire had already expertly tended on her forehead. Cindy had not been amused to discover Lindsay had an injury of her own and had hid it by zipping up her jacket. Lindsay decided she was lucky her lover was injured, or Cindy might have hurt her further.

Both of them were now sporting brand new bandages. Cindy had a small one on her temple just below her hairline, a replacement for the Band-aid Claire had provided the night before. Lindsay's was along her side, under her bloodstained shirt. Thankfully the bullet had merely grazed her. It was more of a nasty burn than anything.

"I got a call from my editor," the reporter said in a hushed voice in deference to the other people in the waiting room.

Lindsay turned her head and looked at her.

"He has everyone beating the bushes to find the guy."

"They should leave that to the police," Lindsay said wearily. "Tom has everyone he can spare all over it."

"I know," Cindy agreed. "But the more people there are looking for this guy the faster we catch him." She took a sip of her own coffee, so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. Her gaze wandered to the double doors at the end of the hallway as she longed for word on Jill.

Lindsay continued to watch her. Cindy seemed to have aged ten years in one night and a part of her ached for her lover. The rest of her was too tired to do anything about it.

"He wants me to come in," Cindy finally continued. "To write the article since I was there."

Lindsay swallowed her first reaction and held her breath.

Cindy put her head on the inspector's shoulder. "I told him to go to hell." She sipped her

coffee. "I am so fired."

Lindsay studied the red hair under her chin and smiled with pride. "He fired you?"

"Not yet. But he's probably gonna. Can't say I'm all that concerned, honestly." Cindy eased back when she felt a soft kiss on her head. "I can't believe he stood right there in front of me in court."

"He stood right in front of all of us," Lindsay murmured, not even phased by the sudden change in topics.

They lapsed into silence for so long Lindsay thought Cindy had fallen asleep until the reporter spoke.

"Lindsay?"

"Yeah?"

"Jill is going to be okay, right?"

The worry in Cindy's voice cut right to the heart of Lindsay's own concerns. "We'll make sure she is," she vowed.

"Hey."

The lovers glanced up as Claire came bustling down the hall. The medical examiner had arrived on the scene early and had fussed over all of them. She'd also been the one to bust Lindsay for hiding her injury when she'd seen her tall friend move the wrong way and blanch. Both started to stand, but Claire motioned at them to stay seated.

"How is she?" Lindsay asked.

"She's hanging in there. Wants to go home as you can well imagine." Claire sat on the edge of the table in the waiting room. "You two should both be admitted as well."

"It's just a scratch," both Cindy and Lindsay said in unison then looked at each other.

Claire almost smiled. "I thought you would want to know. The rape kit came back negative."

Lindsay closed her eyes as Cindy gripped her hand and squeezed. The inspector suddenly shuddered hard with relief, and she instantly felt Cindy move closer as Claire sank to her knees on the floor and hugged her.

All the fear, all the frustration... it came rushing forth in a flood of unleashed emotion Lindsay couldn't stop. She was too damn tired to fight it.

“You got there in time, sweetheart,” Claire murmured in Lindsay’s ear just as the first sob was torn loose from her friend. “You got there in time.”

Act IV

Hours later, Claire sat on her back porch, arms hugged to her body against the morning chill as the sun slowly rose. She needed to see it before she gave in to the heavy desire for sleep. Needed to see the beckoning light of a new day to know yesterday was finally over.

It had taken all her considerable persuasive skill to get Cindy and Lindsay to leave. She didn’t tell them that Jill didn’t want to see either of them. Her blonde friend didn’t need any more reminders of the night, and she seemed to be feeling a measure of embarrassment with the way she’d reacted when the pair had shown up to save her.

Strangely, Claire realized, it was that embarrassment that made Claire think Jill would be okay. If she was worrying about appearances after everything she’d been through then that was a sign of normalcy peeking through. But the attorney had scared the hell out of her when she’d first arrived at the hospital. When the doctors and nurses had been performing their tests...

Claire closed her eyes, remembering how docile her friend had been. It was as if all the fire in Jill’s soul had been extinguished. Jill suffered through everything in silence, her blue eyes occasionally meeting Claire’s who had sat beside her through the whole thing.

The anguish she’d seen in those eyes would haunt her. Claire knew it. She only wished she knew what to say, what to do, to make it go away. What was more worrisome was how quiet Jill had been. She’d barely said a word.

In all the years Claire had known the attorney there was only one thing that made Jill fall into silences like that. Guilt.

Claire knew in the pit of her soul that Jill blamed herself for what happened to her, blamed her choices, her lifestyle... even though time after time Jill had stood before a judge and jury and said the victim’s choices were never to blame for an attack and delivered every word with conviction... this was different. This time Jill was the victim.

“Hey.”

Claire glanced up and only managed a meager smile for her husband. He rolled out onto the porch in his wheelchair and arranged himself next to her, offering her a blanket that she accepted gratefully.

“I’d tell you to come back inside...” he began before his voice faded into nothing.

“Yeah,” she answered in a faint voice.

“I remember this one really bad night years before I met you. A bust went bad. Six cops died.”

Claire turned her head and looked at him.

“I needed to see the sun come up, too. Needed to know that day was over. Needed to know life still went on.”

Claire gave him a watery smile then got up from her chair before sliding onto Ed’s lap and wrapping the blanket around them both. “Just a few more minutes,” she whispered into the familiar smelling skin of his throat.

“As long as you need,” was his understanding reply.

Cindy stared at Lindsay’s clutch piece. It sat on the nightstand, next to her lover’s service weapon and badge. The gun was smaller than Lindsay’s 9mm but no less lethal in the right hands.

Cindy picked it up, cradled the small revolver. She wasn’t even sure what kind of gun it was, what name Lindsay would rattle off for it. She only knew that the gun didn’t frighten her anymore. In fact, it made her feel more settled to hold it, to feel the textured grip in her palm. Her dad had carried a weapon similar to this one. He’d offered to show her how to use it, but she’d always had a healthy respect for the weapons and what they could do. In other words, they scared the hell out of her. But she hadn’t hesitated when Jill’s life had been at stake. She’d pulled the weapon and aimed it with every intention of firing it.

That would have been fine, she thought as she slid the gun back into the ankle holster. What worried her was the thought that she would have fired it even if the killer had been unarmed. What had this case done to her? That it had changed something fundamental inside her was a given. Cindy just wasn’t sure what that something was. She only knew that it felt like some small part of her had died.

Warm lips were suddenly on her neck, and Cindy closed her eyes, leaning back into Lindsay’s heat with relief.

“Why are you staring at my guns?” Lindsay asked quietly against the soft skin of Cindy’s throat. She’d just stepped out of the shower, and the towel she had wrapped around her was scant protection against the chilly morning air. “Don’t tell me you have a secret fetish,” she teased, trying to lighten the heavy mood they were both in since getting home

in the middle of the night and falling into an exhausted but restless slumber.

Cindy smiled and turned in Lindsay's arms. "I have a secret fetish or two," she replied with a weak smirk. "But they have nothing to do with your guns."

"Oh my," Lindsay drawled. She dipped her head and kissed the reporter, meaning the gesture as more an affirmation than the beginnings of a seduction, but Cindy's enthusiastic response soon had the inspector out of breath and warmed up quite nicely. They parted slowly, and Lindsay looked down into Cindy's warm, whiskey-colored eyes and felt her whole world stabilize. "I love you," she whispered. "I am so damn lucky to have you."

Cindy blinked. "Likewise. Now do me a favor?"

"Anything," Lindsay promised.

"Make me forget last night. Make me forget this case. Just for a little while?" Cindy stared up hopefully at her lover as her hands parted the ends of the towel keeping her from Lindsay's warm, damp skin.

Lindsay stared at her lover; frightened by the need she could hear in Cindy's voice. The case had taken a toll on the reporter, had taken a toll on all of them, but knowing the light in her lover's soul had been dimmed, even just a little, made Lindsay's heart ache. She threaded her hands through Cindy's hair and kissed her again, losing herself in Cindy's heat and touch.

The reporter wasn't the only one who needed to forget for just a little while.

The courtroom sat empty.

Denise Kwon knew she only had twenty minutes or so before that would change and that was fine. She was in no mood to linger, but she'd had to come here. Had to see and remember.

David Arnold.

Such an innocuous name for such a cold-blooded killer. She'd seen him, of course. Every attorney that worked in the Hall had seen him. He'd sworn in her witnesses for months. He'd sworn in Jill.

Jill.

The attorney put her hand on the witness box and remembered seeing Jill sit in that chair, remembered Nicole Honeycutt's best efforts to parade Jill's love life out there for all to

see. In doing so, the defense attorney had led Jill straight to a killer.

Denise heard the doors open and close behind her and turned her head, expecting the first on-looker of the day to be arriving, looking for the best seat. She went still when she saw who was standing there.

Jill was in jeans and a loose white sweater. She looked exhausted and pale save for the lurid bruises on her face and the vivid blue of her eyes. She stared at Denise for a long, silent moment.

“All those months,” Jill finally croaked.

Denise didn't move or speak. She didn't know what to say.

“All those months we looked for him, and he was right under my nose. He was in court with me. I passed him in the halls...” Jill slowly came down the center aisle and opened the swinging door that separated the gallery from the bench. “I flirted with the son-of-a-bitch.”

“Jill,” Denise finally found her voice only to find she didn't know what to say with it. She watched as Jill passed her before stepping up into the witness box. Denise flinched when she saw the hideous abrasions on the blonde's wrists. She'd read the police report, knew what caused them.

Jill slowly sat and looked out at the empty gallery. “I want to say it started here, but it didn't.” She looked at Denise. “I want to say this is Nicole's fault. That she put my choices out there to be judged.”

Denise sensed where this was going, and she put her hands on the witness box. “What happened to you was not your fault.”

“Wasn't it?” Jill shook her head. “I'm a slut,” she stated bluntly. “I'll do anything that moves. Isn't that the office gossip?”

“Stop it,” Denise warned. “He's insane. Arnold is insane. Who you sleep with doesn't matter. Your choices don't matter.”

“They do matter!” Jill shouted at her and had the perverse satisfaction of seeing Denise Kwon shocked speechless. “I would never have been on his radar if I hadn't made the choices I made.”

“You never would have been on his radar if your stepfather had left you the hell alone!” Denise bellowed back.

Jill went still, staring wide-eyed at her boss. Denise's gaze couldn't hold her own, and she stared hard at the floor before taking a deep breath. She didn't know what to say as

she watched Denise try to rein in her anger.

Denise finally looked at her again. “Look. I’m way out of line, but we’ve both seen it in one too many cases, Bernhardt. I’m not a shrink, Jill, but I’ve been at this job long enough to know what your sex life probably compensates for.”

Jill jerked when Denise’s hand suddenly covered one of her own. Her gaze leapt to Denise’s, seeing a human being looking back out at her rather than a boss. That look tempered her anger and the fear that she knew Denise was right.

“You know it too, Jill.” Denise held her gaze. “You’ve just never cared.” She watched as her subordinate swallowed. The topic was inappropriate, Denise knew, and as much as she wanted Jill to place blame where blame was due, it wasn’t Denise’s place to guide her there. She changed the subject. “Know why I’m so hard on you, Bernhardt?”

“Because you hate me?” Jill asked bluntly, too tired and still too much in shock to care about Denise’s reaction.

“Because I see a hell of an attorney in you. Maybe one of the best this city has ever seen. You have a thirst for justice and a drive that doesn’t quit even when it should.”

“How can you say that?” Jill asked. “I gave up on Lindsay with the Kiss-Me-Not Killer. I damn near got myself raped and murdered by another one...” She swallowed and willed her hands not to shake, especially when Denise’s grip on one of them tightened. “I’m an idiot. I flirted with him. I fucking flirted with him!”

“Jill.”

Jill ripped her hand out of Denise’s grip and got to her feet. “I’m not fit to be an attorney if I can’t see a killer when he’s right in front of me.” She brushed past her boss on shaky legs and was almost to the door when Denise’s voice stopped her cold.

“Why did you come here?”

Jill put her hand on the old oak door then turned her head to look at Denise. She wanted nothing more than to be out of the room suddenly and the pain in her wrists and ribs was beginning to ramp up as her medication wore off. She watched as Denise approached, stopping only a few feet away, so close she could smell her boss’ perfume.

“You came here, Jill, to court. The place where you come alive and realize all the potential God gave you.”

“Don’t talk to me about God,” Jill croaked.

Denise took one more step. “He gave you your gifts as an attorney, Jill,” Denise said simply. “And he gave you the friends who saved your life last night.”

Jill's eyes started to tear again and she looked away. She didn't know if Denise believed her words or was simply being the brilliant attorney she was and making her want to believe the lie. "He made the man who tried to take it all away."

"He made him," Denise agreed. "But the devil owned him." Denise watched her, waiting for Jill's gaze to finally meet her own again. "Don't let him win in the end, Jill. Don't let him take your life from you." She offered a slight, hesitant smile. "And I don't want to lose you."

Jill's gaze sharpened.

"As an attorney," Denise clarified, obviously realizing how personal that sounded.

Jill blinked a few times, almost wanting to laugh at the idea her mind had jumped on at Denise's words. She took a breath and looked around the courtroom. "How can I...?"

"Jill," Denise interrupted. "He worked here for thirteen months. Before that he was a paramedic. Not a patient, not an attorney, not a judge or even a single cop that sat in this courtroom knew. What makes you so damn special that you should have seen what the rest of us couldn't?"

Leave it to Denise to use brutal honesty to be persuasive, Jill thought, but she was grateful for it. It made sense, got past the arguments her wounded psyche wanted to throw up as a defense. "Harsh," Jill finally answered but she couldn't hide the tiniest of grins.

Denise took a deep breath in relief at seeing that smile. "When have you known me to be anything else, Bernhardt?" she asked practically.

Jill studied her for a quiet moment, seeing her boss a little differently. "Right now," Jill answered softly. "Thank you."

Denise seemed uncomfortable with the gratitude. She fidgeted before nodding once. "Well. I have court in twenty minutes."

Jill knew that wasn't true, but she nodded anyway. "Don't let me keep you." She stepped aside and smiled to herself as Denise hurried away.

Alone in the courtroom finally, Jill took it in. The polished wood, the marble, even the sound the air made as it moved around the room was all as familiar to Jill as her own heartbeat. For the first time in her career, Jill realized how much a church and a courtroom had in common.

Denise was right. About everything. Most importantly, Jill admitted that she belonged here. She was herself here more than she was anywhere else. David Arnold was not

going to take this away from her.

Jill sat in the closest row and relaxed for the first time in days. They knew his name. They knew his face. He was wounded. They were closing in now. It was just a matter of time until they stopped him.

Just a matter of time, she told herself with hardening resolve.

She sighed, knowing she needed to get back to her apartment. If any of the girls showed up there and found her missing they would have a conniption. She had promised the sun, the moon and the stars to the doctors at Mission Cross North Hospital if they would just let her go home to her own space to recover, that she would stay there and not leave her bed for days.

Bless Jacobi for stepping in and offering to stay with her along with the protective detail she'd been assigned until Arnold was caught. She appreciated the muscle the two young officers represented, but they were also a constant reminder that the man who tried to kill her was still roaming the streets of San Francisco.

Jill heard the door open behind her, and she resisted the urge to turn and see who it was. Some part of her already knew, and her lips creased into a hesitant smile.

A minute later, Lindsay eased down into the row behind her. "Hey," she said softly.

"Hey," Jill answered.

Lindsay leaned forward and rested her elbows on the back of the pew Jill was seated in. She could see Jill's profile with ease and was grateful to see the small smile she was sporting. "You're supposed to be at home. Resting."

Jill glanced at her watch. It was ten minutes to eleven. The courtroom would be crawling with people in short order. "I got bored." Jill's eyes narrowed, and she took a sniff of her friend. "Have you started wearing Cindy's perfume?" She watched out of the corner of her eye as Lindsay's cheeks turned scarlet, and the inspector scratched at the back of her neck self-consciously.

"How did you know to look for me here?" Jill asked when Lindsay couldn't seem to formulate a response. "You ask the protective detail or did you just know this is where I'd be?" She turned her head and looked at the dark-haired woman, her thoughts still on Denise's words.

Lindsay considered that. "First place I looked," she admitted.

Jill nodded. "But not because of him," Jill said. "Not because Arnold worked here."

"No," Lindsay agreed. "I don't think of him here. I think of you."

Jill turned a little more then winced as her abused ribs protested. Going home and taking some more meds and resting was probably a damn good idea. When she looked at her friend again Lindsay's features were stricken. "This isn't your fault."

"I just..."

"Lindsay, don't." Jill's voice was stern. "I'm dealing with enough right now. Don't make me deal with your misplaced guilt, too."

Lindsay closed her mouth then looked at her hands for a moment. "I'm sorry." She felt like crying. Like running until she couldn't go another step. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm not okay," Jill said. She met Lindsay's worried gaze without flinching. "But I will be."

That pretty much summed it up for all of them, Lindsay thought. "It's almost over," she promised. She scooted closer and put her head down on Jill's shoulder. "We'll stop him." When Jill tilted her own head to rest against Lindsay's it almost broke her. The relief that swept through her at feeling Jill alive and whole right next to her was so palpable Lindsay felt like she could almost touch it like a physical thing.

"Of course we will," Jill agreed with a trace of humor. "We're a club after all."

At first, Lindsay had been shocked by Cindy's request. Of all the things she'd ever imagined the reporter might ask her to do, the lines she might ask Lindsay to blur, this wasn't one of them.

But after she'd stormed from the apartment, left Cindy near tears to take a long walk around the neighborhood alone, Lindsay began to understand. She didn't want to step over that line again. Lindsay had been inching closer and closer to the edge of it since the Hallelujah Man's first murder. She had to admit both feet were planted firmly on it since Jill's abduction. Now Cindy was not only asking Lindsay to take that final step that would tip her from driven to relentlessly obsessed, but her lover was already on the other side and holding out her hand to help.

When Lindsay had returned home after driving Jill back to her apartment she'd found the reporter in the last place she'd expected.

The attic.

The chalkboard's surface that had so recently been wiped clean of the names of Kiss-Me-Not's victims was now covered with Cindy's neat handwriting. Seeing the names of

HM's victims, including Jill's, had hit Lindsay like a visceral punch in the gut. It had sent her reeling, and she'd refused to listen as Cindy had tried to explain.

So Lindsay had fled into the afternoon, needing air, needing distance, and needing perspective.

She realized what Cindy was doing wasn't a choice the reporter wanted to make. There was no way Cindy would ask her to cross that line again unless Lindsay needed to, and maybe Cindy needed her to as well.

Lindsay took a breath and mentally steeled herself as she opened the front door before ascending the steps to her apartment. She let herself in quietly, pausing in the hallway to see if she could hear her lover. A rustling from upstairs settled her nerves a fraction. At least Cindy hadn't left. God help her if the day ever came when that happened.

Lindsay climbed the steps to the second floor then glanced up at the attic opening and frowned. She heard a box move across the wood floor above followed by the low murmur of someone talking. She climbed the steps, her boots clomping loudly on each one, until she emerged once more in this little corner of a killer's mind that she'd once shaped for herself.

Cindy straightened, a smudge of dust on her right cheek. She had a box of photocopied case files at her feet and one folder was open loosely in her hands. "Hey," she greeted carefully.

"Hey," Lindsay said slowly. She turned her head and met Claire's steady gaze, feeling it anchor her in the storm of emotion she'd climbed up there with.

"Hi, sweetheart," Claire said.

Lindsay felt the unexpected burn of tears and shame. Claire and Jill knew about this space, but they'd never seen it, never been allowed to be tainted by it or to know the full spectrum of her obsession with Kiss-Me-Not. Lindsay was more grateful to Cindy now than ever that they'd taken every last scrap of that killer down from the walls.

Lindsay cleared her throat and put her hands in the back pocket of her jeans. Her gaze cut to Cindy. "Sorry," was all she offered.

It was enough. Cindy smiled. "Me, too."

Lindsay glanced back to Claire only to suddenly have her hands full of a box as the medical examiner thrust it at her. "Watkins," Claire said. "Why don't you start putting her up on that wall behind you?"

Lindsay looked at the lid before her gaze tracked back up to Claire's face. "You're helping?" she blurted in surprise.

“I’m helping,” Claire replied and for a moment their gazes held and the past floated between them, the regret and weight of mistakes on both sides hanging heavy in the air.

Lindsay had to swallow past the lump in her throat. She nodded. “Thanks.” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“Should have done this the first time,” Claire confessed, her own eyes shining. “Besides, you two should be resting given those injuries of yours. I’m here to make sure you don’t overdo it.”

More footsteps sounded on the stairs to the attic, and Lindsay didn’t have to be a cop to guess who they belonged to. She set the box aside and all of them clustered around the opening, waiting for Jill’s blonde head to emerge. Lindsay took the DDA’s hand and helped her the rest of the way, flinching a little when Jill grimaced in pain.

“The inner sanctum,” Jill drawled when she was standing next to them. She looked around, her gaze fixing briefly on her own name on the board before skittering off and taking in the rest of the space. “Yep. Good, creepy spot for this.”

Cindy slipped her arm around Jill and gently squeezed. “You didn’t have to come.”

“My name is on that board,” Jill said. “I had to come.” She held up a brown paper bag. “But I also need to be marginally drunk for this.”

Claire smiled. “Now you’re talking.” She took the bag and peeked inside at the two six packs of cold beers.

“Wait,” Cindy said. “Should you be drinking while you’re on pain medication?”

“Don’t be a killjoy, Lois Lane. Besides, we’re all on pain meds but Claire,” Jill teased tiredly and the others felt relief sweep through them at the flash of Jill’s personality peeking through. “We got a doctor here.”

“One or two should be fine with what you’re taking. No more,” Claire informed her.

Jill rolled her eyes as she accepted her first cold bottle of the night. Cindy and Claire moved off to return to what they were doing, leaving Lindsay and Jill alone for the moment. Their gazes met and held.

“You didn’t have to come,” Lindsay said in a low tone, echoing Cindy’s words.

“When I got the call from Cindy, I almost didn’t.” Jill glanced at the board again. “Wasn’t crazy about seeing my own life scattered among all the victims up here.”

“Then why did you?” Lindsay asked in a huskier voice.

“Because I’m not letting you go this alone,” Jill answered honestly as she took her first sip of beer. “I should have been here the last time. Maybe we would have caught Kiss-Me-Not sooner. Hell, maybe you could have left your attic as a storage space instead of a shrine to a killer. Maybe your dad...” Jill paused, then took a deep breath. “We know who he is, Lindsay. Let’s put our heads together and stop the bastard before he hurts anyone else.”

“I never wanted you and Claire to be a part of this.” Lindsay glanced at Cindy. “Or her, either.” Her voice was weak.

“Honey,” Jill said as she stepped closer, the bruises on her face a little more apparent as she stepped into the sunlight filtering through the window. “We’ve always been a part of this. And we will never leave you to walk any of this path alone again.”

They were unaware that Claire and Cindy were watching with small, hesitant smiles as Jill and Lindsay clinked their bottles of beer together in wordless truce as past hurts were finally laid to rest.

“All right,” Claire announced, breaking the moment. “Let’s get started. We’ve got work to do.”

FADE TO BLACK



DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Teaser

“I never thought there was a killer out there who could scare me more than Kiss-Me-Not,” Lindsay murmured. She sat on the old, faded sofa, her shoulders slumped and her brown eyes rimmed with red and deep, dark circles. She looked like she hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in days... maybe weeks.

The psychiatrist tilted his head. “Does he?”

“Scare me?” Lindsay asked. “Yes,” she whispered. *Hell yes*, her thoughts added.

“He’s made it personal.”

“So did Harris. He killed my father.”

“But this is different,” the shrink pointed out gently.

“Yeah.” Lindsay’s voice was a faint imitation of itself. “This one is different.”

Lindsay stood, crossing to the window before sliding her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. She looked out over the city, the city it was her sworn duty to protect, and felt like a failure. She didn’t care about the majority of the people going about their lives below, even though any one of them could be the Hallelujah Man’s next victim. Today her thoughts were only for three people. Three women she’d left surrounded by death in her attic.

Lindsay felt like a coward coming here, like she was weak. But she couldn’t unburden herself on her friends and her lover. Not after what happened to Jill. There was too much emotion, too much guilt for them to deal with her coming apart at the seams now, even though they all knew she was unraveling... that she’d be unraveling for years. Did Jill, Claire and Cindy see she was hanging on by a thread now? If they did, none of them were calling her on it.

Cindy had been unusually quiet since the night she and Jill were attacked. The reporter was spending a disturbing amount of time up in the attic, and Lindsay found herself in the odd position of seeing how obsessed she must have looked to Tom and her friends with the Kiss-Me-Not case. It seemed like fitting karma that she should watch someone she loved withdraw further and further, sinking down into the mind of a killer in order to stop him.

And Lindsay had no idea what to say, what to do, to make it better. Especially when witnessing Cindy’s obsession only fueled Lindsay’s own desire to stop Arnold to a deadly degree. She could only watch and go down that dark tunnel with her lover, holding her hand when necessary and chasing after Arnold’s shadow.

Everything would go back to the way it was if she could just catch the bastard.

“What are you thinking about right now?”

Lindsay rolled her eyes at the question. “A friend.”

“DDA Bernhardt?”

Lindsay counted to ten and weighed her answer. “My girlfriend.” She glanced back at him, expecting a reaction, but he simply looked at her with polite interest. She was slightly disappointed that she hadn’t shocked him.

“What about her?” He asked mildly.

Lindsay leaned against the windowsill. “The case is taking a lot out of her.”

“Is she another police officer?”

Lindsay shook her head. “Although she’d make a damn good one,” she said with a faint smile.

He leaned forward. “So why were you thinking of her just now?”

The inspector took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Every case steals something from you. Most of the time, it’s a tiny piece of your soul. When you’re lucky and you catch the guy, you see the family get closure, you might get that piece back.”

“Most of the time?”

Lindsay’s gaze went inward. “But sometimes you lose more. Sometimes a case takes someone you love... takes you away from someone you love.”

“Is this case taking you away, Lindsay?”

“It has on occasion,” Lindsay admitted. “But I’m afraid... I’m afraid of what it’s doing to her.”

“So she’s somehow involved in the investigation?” He guessed.

Lindsay nodded as she watched him scribble down more notes. She really wished he wouldn’t do that. It made her feel even more self-conscious than she already was. Sighing, she turned her gaze back to the window. “He’s out there somewhere,” Lindsay finally continued when the shrink’s silence got to be too much. She thought too much in the silences. It was better to keep talking, keep moving.

“I suspect so.”

“I know his name, his face, where he lives. I shot him twice. *Twice.*” Lindsay fixed her gaze on the Golden Gate Bridge some distance away on the horizon as she braced her hands on either side of the windowpane. “Why haven’t I found him? Where is he?”

The psychiatrist leaned back and watched her. Fatigue was etched in every line of her body and yet she still fidgeted, still possessed the reckless urge to move, to act. “And what will you do if you catch him?”

“I *will* catch him.” Lindsay’s voice was cold as she turned to look at him. “It’s just a matter of time.”

“Okay. What will you do *when* you catch him?”

Lindsay had to look away. She couldn’t reveal her plans for David Arnold, plans that involved her putting one more bullet in the bastard. He’d pay for hurting Jill... for hurting Cindy. “My job,” she finally answered, but it felt like a lie.

“That’s the most important thing to you, isn’t it? Your job?”

The question sent Lindsay into chaos as her heart and mind warred with each other. “Used to be,” she murmured. The inspector fell silent, unwilling to say more on the matter.

“How is Deputy District Attorney Bernhardt doing?” The doctor astutely changed the subject after jotting some notes on the pad of paper resting in his lap.

“She’s fine,” Lindsay replied tightly, cursing herself for coming here and feeling way out of line for even talking about Jill with this man. Her gaze landed on the door as she considered walking out.

“Are you sure about that?”

Lindsay spun to look at him more fully. “She’s my best friend. I would know if she’s fine or not.” He merely regarded her placidly, and something about his lack of reaction grated on Lindsay’s nerves.

“You don’t know. Do you?” He asked carefully. “Just like you don’t know where Arnold has gone to ground.”

Lindsay swallowed hard and mentally cursed the man for reading her so accurately. It was unnerving, someone knowing her so well just by what she said or didn’t say. “She won’t talk about it. Not even to Claire.”

“Is Claire someone she trusts absolutely?”

The inspector nodded. “No one keeps a secret like Claire. No one keeps a confidence

like she does.”

“Then how do you know Jill hasn’t talked to her?”

Lindsay frowned then glanced at the doctor again. There was a slight teasing tone to his voice, and her body relaxed marginally in reaction to it. He had a point. “Touché.”

He smiled and dipped his head in response. “Inspector,” he said slowly. “You’ve had an unimaginable year. The end of the Kiss-Me-Not case, the death of your father, another serial killer to contend with, and now the abduction of one of your closest friends.” He waited until Lindsay looked at him with dark, haunted eyes before he motioned her toward the couch again. “You would have to be crazy not to want to talk to a shrink. Your being here is a good sign.”

Lindsay stared at him for almost a minute before snorting. She didn’t sit, however, choosing to look back at the view, a soft sigh escaping her as she did so. “I’m not sure I can do this,” she confessed in a hushed voice.

“Do what? This session?”

The inspector shook her head. She looked at the floor and took a breath, finally admitting something that had kept her up at night since Jill’s abduction two weeks ago.

“I’m not sure I can keep being a cop.”

David didn’t understand.

Was it a test from God that he felt so much pain? He’d been forced to remove the bullet from his own side. The other had passed cleanly through his shoulder. His training as a paramedic had come in handy, but his lack of access to medication had made practicing his skills an experience in sheer agony.

“Oh God,” he cried out as he knelt in the small, empty chapel. “Why have thou forsaken me?”

David thought of Jill Bernhardt. He’d failed to save her. Was this his punishment? This endless pain? The growing infection that was beginning to contaminate him from the inside out? The wound at his side was an angry red. He needed antibiotics. He needed food.

Tonight, David decided, he would have both. He would do what it took to procure them. And when his strength returned, Jill Bernhardt would be delivered to the Lord. It was his only way to return to his Father’s good graces.

“Thy will be done,” David promised.

Act I

The voice came to her faint and repetitive. Some distant part of her realized it was her name being called, but Jill’s gaze was fixed on the photograph of the crucifixion at St. Vicente’s. For hours she’d looked up into those anguished eyes and she’d prayed; prayed shamelessly to a God that she hadn’t known she’d still believed in until her life was in peril and her body was being endlessly abused.

And her prayers had been answered.

Jill was sitting there now, in Lindsay’s musty attic, the afternoon sun sheeting through the windowpane and warming her back nicely. Four other victims hadn’t been as lucky. It put the pain she was still enduring into perspective.

A paperclip struck her in the chest and Jill blinked, her head coming up in surprise. Claire and Cindy were watching her, and it was clear by the grin on Cindy’s face that she’d been the one to get Jill’s attention. “Huh?”

“Well that was articulate,” Claire jibed before smiling and taking another sip of her cooling coffee. “You were a million miles away, sweetheart. You okay?” She eased herself down on a stack of boxes and crossed her ankles.

“Yeah,” Jill said, her voice husky. She cleared her throat and slid the photograph inside a folder. “Sorry. Just blanked out there for a second.”

“Claire and I can handle this,” Cindy offered, not for the first time that day, or that week even. “You should be home resting.”

Jill rolled her eyes. “You try resting when there is some religious whack-job out there who might still want to kill you because of your sex life.” There was no rebuke in Jill’s tone, just a statement of fact. “I don’t understand how he’s managing to hide. Where the hell is he?”

Cindy plopped down on a rickety chair only to nearly hop out of it when it shifted and almost toppled her over backward. She managed to right herself before smiling sheepishly at her grinning friends. The reporter cleared her throat and tried to look like she didn’t feel like an idiot. “We’ll find him.”

Jill shook her head. “I’m going crazy,” she announced. “All I do is spend my days watching soap operas or looking at crime scene photographs. Denise won’t let me come back until she gets the all clear from the doctor.”

Cindy frowned. "I thought your doctor gave you a clean bill of health... that all you were dealing with now was residual soreness and bruising."

Jill hesitated. "Not that doctor," she admitted before tapping her temple.

"Really?" Claire drawled with interest.

Both Claire and Cindy leaned forward, and Jill looked from one to the other in consternation. "Hello? Why is that so interesting?"

"You're seeing a shrink," Claire pointed out. "And you think that's *not* interesting?"

The attorney sighed. "Denise insisted."

"You know," Cindy said as she turned to look at Claire. "I'm kind of starting to like Denise."

"Don't you dare," Jill warned her as she stood and stretched. "Denise is sent from Satan to make my life hell. Like her and you like the devil."

Claire grinned. "She helped us find Arnold, kept you from quitting your job, is making sure you take care of yourself... yeah. Denise is being a real witch," Claire agreed mockingly.

Jill's answer was to stick her tongue out at one of her oldest friends.

A knock below had them all frowning. One by one they descended from the attic and made their way to the front door. Claire peered through the peephole then swore softly.

"What?" Jill demanded. She took a turn as well, peeking through the hole then leaning back to glance at Claire then Cindy. "This is gonna stop." Jill yanked open the door, startling Pete Raynor so badly he jumped. There was a bouquet of white roses in his hands.

Pete froze when he saw the three women looking back at him. Finally his face eased into an embarrassed smile. "Hi."

"Look," Jill said without preamble. "It's time to buy a clue. Seriously, scone-boy, leave Lindsay alone."

Cindy swallowed and glanced between Claire and Jill, wishing she could just blend into the woodwork.

"She's the love of my life," Pete started as if they should know that.

"Sweetie." It was Claire's turn to talk. "You knew her for two weeks."

“But...”

“No,” Jill and Claire said at the same time.

Cindy thought it would have been funny if the whole situation didn't make her feel so damn uncomfortable. “Maybe you should leave,” she suggested timidly.

“Is Lindsay here?” Pete asked, ignoring the reporter. “Can I just talk to her for a minute?” He started to step into the apartment.

Cindy took a step back and both Claire and Jill noticed. They stepped between the reporter and Lindsay's ex-boyfriend, blocking his path.

Claire put a hand on his chest to stop his progress before he could cross the threshold. “I don't think that's a good idea,” she said in her best “mom is not amused” voice. “Lindsay has had a tough few months and she doesn't need you adding to it.”

“But I want to help,” Pete protested as his gaze went to Jill. “I've come by your place a few times. I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am about what happened, that I'm glad you're okay.”

Jill's blue eyes didn't soften in the least. “I appreciate that.” There was a notable lack of sincerity in her voice. “But, Pete, you and Lindsay are over. You need to let things go.”

“But I...”

“Pete,” Jill's voice hardened suddenly. “Back off, or I'm going to get legal on your ass.”

He frowned as his gaze went from one woman to the other. None of them looked remotely friendly. His eyes lingered on Cindy too long to be casually observing before he nodded once and held up his hands. Pete smiled.

“I'm leaving,” he announced breezily. “Sorry to interrupt.” He started to walk away.

Cindy pushed between her friends and picked up the vase of flowers he'd left behind. “Pete.” He turned and she shoved the vase into his hands. “Lindsay doesn't want these.”

His usually friendly eyes grew colder as his gaze locked with Cindy's. “I think Linz is just confused. She'll remember what she wants, eventually. She just needs a little... persuading.”

It felt like a threat. Cindy knew she was overreacting, but the knowledge didn't stop a chill from skittering down her spine. “Leave her alone.”

Pete just smiled as he dipped his head at them before leaving.

Cindy stepped back in the apartment and closed and locked the door.

“Jill,” Claire said after a lengthy silence among them.

The attorney took in a slow breath and tamped down her anger at Pete. “Yeah?”

“Get legal on his ass anyway.”

The attorney nodded in wholehearted agreement.

“Linz!”

Lindsay pivoted on her heel and looked up. She nodded as Tom beckoned her up only to wince when he disappeared back into his office. “Great,” she grumped. “What did I do now?” With a quick glance around for her seemingly absent partner, Lindsay reluctantly climbed the steps and entered Tom’s office. She was startled to find he wasn’t alone.

A woman sat on the other side of Tom’s desk. Her hair was a light, wavy brown that cascaded a few inches past her shoulders. She was maybe thirty-five with an attractive profile and toned calves to die for on full display thanks to her knee-length dark skirt. Something about her screamed “cop” as loud as a police wailer even if she wasn’t really dressed for chasing down perps.

“Linz,” Tom said with a smile. “Meet Inspector Margaret Snow.”

Lindsay blinked stupidly before shifting her gaze to the newcomer. “Oh. She’s... you’re...” Lindsay tried to make words come out of her mouth as the woman stood and offered her hand.

“Starting here in homicide today,” Snow helped her out. “Please, though, call me Maggie.”

Her grip was as cold as her name and almost crushing, Lindsay thought. She returned the gesture and pressure in equal measure as they sized each other up. “Sorry. I didn’t know we were getting someone new today.”

“You should check your in-box from time to time,” Tom jabbed playfully.

“After Arnold is in custody, I’ll get right on that,” Lindsay volleyed.

Snow smiled. Lindsay noticed she had what could only be described as arctic blue eyes, and she shook her head a little at her mind’s odd fixation on all things chilly this morning. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Lieutenant Hogan has been telling me all about the case you’ve been working, the Hallelujah Man.”

Lindsay eased her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, feeling a mild pang in her side where a bullet had grazed her two weeks earlier. A flare of protectiveness rose over her case even though a half hour ago she’d been wondering if she could even do the job anymore. If this woman thought she was going to make a name for herself in the department by coming in and trying to take over... “Oh really?”

Snow kept smiling. “I imagine I’ll be working plenty of other cases, but if there is anything I can do to help... even if it’s to pull paperwork, let me know.”

Lindsay hesitated, wondering if she should feel sheepish for her initial distrustful reaction, but decided it wasn’t worth the effort. She still wasn’t convinced this woman was honestly interested in helping anyone but herself. Snow would get her chance to prove herself, but Lindsay didn’t trust blindly just because someone wore a badge. What happened between Cindy and Graham had taught her that lesson loud and clear. “Hopefully he’ll simply turn up dead in an alley somewhere.”

“But you don’t think he will,” Snow guessed.

Lindsay glanced at Tom before looking back at the newcomer. “I think evil is harder to kill than we’d like.”

Snow tipped her head at that. “We had a killer like this guy in LA. Murdered seven people before he was stopped.”

“Hopefully our body count won’t get that high,” Tom added to the conversation. “Linz put two bullet holes in him. That’ll make it hard for him to snatch anyone, let alone torture them in the manner he prefers.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Snow agreed. “Nice shooting, Tex.”

Tex? Lindsay’s eyebrows shot skyward, but she opted not to comment. Instead, she glanced at Tom and smiled sweetly causing him to wince in reaction.

“So...” Tom said nervously as he cleared his throat. “Linz, why don’t you show Inspector Snow to her desk? I put her in her Fong’s old chair.”

At that moment, Lindsay actually missed Fong and his propensity to stare at her ass. He’d moved to narcotics six weeks ago. “Sure,” she said slowly. Lindsay motioned toward the door and waited for Snow to walk out before looking back at Tom.

“Tex?” Lindsay hissed in a harsh whisper.

Her ex-husband just gave her a pained smile.

Lindsay joined the new detective on the stairs.

“Nice place you guys have here. The room has character. I worked out of a cinder block building in LA,” Snow commented as they descended almost side-by-side.

“We like it,” Lindsay replied, feeling inane. She motioned toward an empty workspace. “This is it. Your new home away from home.”

Snow dropped her purse in the chair and regarded the desk and the view she had of the bullpen. “This will work quite nicely.”

“I doubt you’ll be spending much time sitting here,” Lindsay informed her.

“Wouldn’t be doing my job otherwise,” Snow agreed. She looked at Lindsay. “I meant what I said up there. If there is anything you need with this serial killer case...”

“Look,” Lindsay cut her off politely but firmly. “I appreciate the offer, but this case isn’t about making a name for yourself. It’s about stopping a killer.”

“I get that,” Snow replied with the first edge to her voice that Lindsay had heard. “But who says you can’t do both?”

“I do,” Lindsay answered. “I’m the primary on this case, and until that changes, I say what goes. You got your ambitions to one day sit in Tom’s chair? Fine. But if your ambition crosses one of my cases, I’ll make sure you get busted back to uniform. We clear?”

Snow smiled. “You don’t mess around, Tex.”

“Don’t call me Tex,” Lindsay told her.

“Linz then?” Snow asked cheekily.

Lindsay smiled. “Only my friends call me that.”

“And your boss,” Snow added.

Lindsay’s smile darkened. “Something tells me you already know why he gets that privilege.”

“A little friendly competition never hurt anybody,” Snow told her. “Lighten up, Lindsay. I’m still about finding justice for the victim first. Ambition comes second. And there is nothing wrong with having a little.”

“Knock yourself out.”

“You should be flattered,” Snow told her as Lindsay started to walk away. “I only compete with the best.”

Lindsay merely tossed a wave over her shoulder and kept going.

“See you around, Tex,” the new inspector called after her.

Lindsay’s teeth ground together but she didn’t respond. She vowed that Snow better stay the hell out of her way. Nothing and no one would come between Lindsay and her final showdown with Arnold. A score needed to be settled, and Lindsay intended to settle it with a bullet.

Everyone had best just stay out of the line of fire.

“Sit.”

Cindy did as she was told. When Claire commanded you like that you obeyed without question, even if it made you feel like a misbehaving puppy. The reporter settled on Lindsay’s couch and watched as Jill sank into the orange leather chair as Claire took up residence beside the redhead. “I...”

“Ah!” Claire held up a hand, and Cindy lapsed into instant, surprised silence. “Do not even try to con me, young lady.”

“Con you?” Cindy asked only to grimace at how lame her attempt to sound clueless came off.

“The way you reacted to Pete,” Claire continued. “Cindy, honey, you seemed almost afraid of him.”

Cindy licked her lips and shot a quick look at Jill that Claire didn’t miss.

“You know what this is about?” Claire demanded of the blonde.

Jill’s blue eyes widened. “Uh...”

Claire shook her head. “Spill. What are you two keeping from me and, I strongly suspect, the absent Inspector Boxer?”

The reporter sighed and looked to Jill once more.

Jill leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. “Pete came to see Cindy his first

night back in San Francisco. He cornered her in the parking lot at the Register.”

Claire absorbed that. “Before or after he went to see Lindsay?”

“Before,” Cindy replied quietly.

“Did he threaten you?”

“No! God, no!” Cindy said quickly. “It was just... he caught me off guard. He wanted me to help get her back...”

“Cindy,” Jill started. “Something about Pete is scaring you. Are you sure he didn’t say something? Do something?”

Cindy flapped her hands. “He just... it’s something in his eyes... the way he looks at me.”

“Like you’re in his way,” Jill commented. She noted Claire’s startled look. “To him she is, Claire. Cindy is the competition, and Pete seems like he’s in this to win.”

“He doesn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell,” Claire answered. “You’ve seen the way Lindsay looks at her. She never even looked at Tom like that.”

“I know,” Jill agreed. “But muffin man hasn’t picked up the ringing clue phone yet. All he has to do is take one look at Lindsay around her and even a blind man could see she’s loopy in love.”

“Hello,” Cindy timidly interjected. “Sitting right here listening to you talk about me and my girlfriend like I wasn’t.”

“Honey,” Claire said as her attention shifted back to the reporter. “Something about Pete gave me the willies today.”

“Seriously?” Jill asked in surprise.

“Is that bad?” Cindy wondered.

“When Claire gets the willies about someone? It’s like Armageddon time.” Jill looked thoughtful. “Maybe I should call the office, get them started on a restraining order.”

“Lindsay doesn’t know he talked to you that night, does she?” Claire asked the reporter gently.

Cindy shook her head.

“Linz doesn’t know that Cindy saw Pete kiss her that night, either,” Jill added. She

looked at Cindy. “We never really got the chance to talk about this again after...” The attorney trailed off, remembering the moment where she’d stepped out of the club and found Arnold on top of Cindy. A second or two later and the reporter would have been dead. Jill’s blue eyes tracked to the fading bruise at Cindy’s temple. It, and the one along her left cheek, was obscured mostly by makeup and healing nicely.

“We’ve had more to worry about than Pete Raynor,” Cindy said. “He’s annoying, but he’s not dangerous.”

“Are you sure about that?” Claire asked.

“You saw him just now...” Cindy started.

“Cindy.” Jill paused to find the right words. “You’re afraid of him. Not because you think he’ll come between you and Lindsay, but because there is something about him that makes you physically frightened. Do not take that instinct lightly.”

Cindy looked from one friend to the other before rubbing her hands across her face in frustration. “I just don’t know what to do!”

“Have you told Lindsay about the kiss?” Claire wanted to know.

“What do you think?” Jill huffed with a roll of her eyes. “They’re the perfect match. Both of them keeping stuff from each other all the time.”

“Hey!” Cindy dropped her hands and looked at Jill in consternation.

“You telling me you don’t?” The attorney asked blandly.

“Cindy.” Claire put her hand on the reporter’s knee and waited for her dark brown eyes to turn her way again. “That’s why you ran off to New Faith, isn’t it?”

The redhead squirmed a little before reluctantly nodding. “I just...” Cindy went silent for so long the others almost thought she’d decided not to talk. Finally she took a breath and started again. “I keep waiting for the other shoe to fall,” she slowly confessed.

“The other shoe?” Claire prompted.

“Look at me,” Cindy said. “I’m nothing all that special. I talk too much. Get myself into trouble at every turn. Get myself arrested at every other turn.” Cindy studied her linked hands where they rested in her lap. “I pinch myself everyday because I can’t believe Lindsay could love me... not the way I love her.”

“Honey...” Claire murmured.

“I know she loves me,” Cindy hastened to say. “It’s just...”

“When you want something this much it makes you that much more afraid you’ll lose it,” Jill said with quiet understanding.

Cindy nodded. “And then there is Pete... and Tom... and...” She shook her head. “I just... I guess I keep waiting for Lindsay to come to her senses.”

“She did,” Claire told her with a wry grin. “When she opened up her heart and let you in.”

Cindy’s eyes brimmed with tears that didn’t quite spill over. “I’m so scared something is going to take her from me... someone...”

“Not gonna happen,” Jill announced with conviction. “Aside from the fact that Lindsay loves you more than anything, Claire and I would so kick her ass.”

Cindy laughed and dabbed at her eyes.

“I think the two of us together could take her,” Claire said drolly.

Jill looked from one friend to the other. “Now let’s talk about what we’re going to do about creepy Pete. I’m getting sticky from all this sap.”

Cindy had to nod, feeling grateful for the presence of her friends at that moment. At least Pete was something they could actually handle right now, unlike David Arnold who had apparently vanished into the ether.

“Tex.”

Jacobi sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. “You really need to let this go.”

“She called me *Tex*, Jacobi,” Lindsay groused from her position in the passenger seat. They’d just done another sweep of St. Vincente’s and had settled in the car.

“I know. You’ve mentioned it five times already.”

“Where does she get off calling me anything but Inspector, Boxer, or Lindsay? I told her she could call me Lindsay. I should have kept my mouth shut.”

Jacobi was wishing his partner would do that now. “I’ve heard Cindy call you Tex from time to time.”

“That’s different. That’s sweet and affectionate and...” Lindsay screwed up her face in a scowl. “Gah! I don’t like this woman already!”

Jacobi chuckled. “Where to now, partner?” The past two weeks, other officers had been checking on the spots David Arnold had been known to reside. Today, Lindsay had wanted to give them another try herself. They’d run by Arnold’s apartment, the unused rooms of the Hall, the church. So far nothing had popped. Arnold had just vanished. Jacobi kept waiting for the call that his body had been found rotting somewhere.

Lindsay stared out the windshield at the empty buildings around them. “You think he’s in one of these? Watching us?”

“They’ve been checked, Linz.”

“Maybe they need to be checked again.”

“We don’t have warrants.”

“We could get ‘em.”

“You wanna call Denise or shall I?”

Lindsay scowled again.

“You are in a mood this morning,” Jacobi informed her.

“I want this over,” Lindsay grumped. “I want to know where the bastard is. I want to get on with my life without having to worry that he’s gonna make another run at Jill or anyone else.”

“We all want that, Linz,” Jacobi answered her with the patience of a saint. “He’ll turn up.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Lindsay finally voiced her fear out loud. “I keep promising Jill we’ll catch the son-of-a-bitch, but what if we don’t?” The threat of failure seemed to hang over Lindsay like a pall these last two weeks. Hell, the whole year, really, she thought bitterly.

It was a fear of Jacobi’s as well, but he refused to admit it. “Not going to happen. We’ll find him. No matter what it takes, we’ll find him. You, me and that little club of yours.”

Lindsay gave him the laser vision and he just chuckled. He yanked the key out of the ignition. “You know... screw the warrants. Let’s have a look around those buildings. I’m sure we can find an open door or window.”

“Or we can make one that way,” Lindsay replied with a sly smile.

“I did not hear you suggest that.”

On the third building, they hit pay dirt.

“Lindsay!”

The inspector jerked as her name echoed in the rafters. They were currently prowling around inside an old warehouse that smelled of rust and rotting wood. Lindsay was checking the front office while Jacobi was in the back. She stepped out of the room and shined her flashlight toward the general area she knew her partner was in. The distance was enough that the beam of light barely lit Jacobi’s face.

“You need to see this,” he shouted to her.

Lindsay’s heart kicked against her ribs as she broke into a jog toward her partner’s position. Her boots sounded like rifle shots on the concrete in the empty space. He waited until she was almost to him before he stepped through a doorway.

“What did you find?” she asked, slightly breathless, as she rounded the corner.

Jacobi grimly pointed to a bookcase. “The other cops must have missed this on the first sweep. Look at the floor.”

Lindsay glanced down, seeing a sliding pattern in the dirt and grime. It looked fresh. “Someone moved it.”

“Recently,” Jacobi agreed.

Lindsay un-holstered her gun and pointed it at the bookshelf. She nodded at Jacobi who grabbed one side and gave it a tug. It swung open easily, and the older detective stepped back and drew his own weapon as they shined their flashlights inside.

It was empty.

“Damnit,” Lindsay hissed. She glanced inside, noting the shelving. Someone, at some point, had been up to no good with this little room she was sure. Now, though, it was empty.

“Wait.” Jacobi moved forward into the space, his flashlight illuminating something on the floor. Lindsay watched him as she slipped her weapon back into her holster. Her breath caught when he lifted the item with a pencil.

It was a rag soaked in blood.

Lindsay smiled darkly. “I knew I hit the bastard.”

“Denise!”

The Acting District Attorney paused in the hallway and sighed. Reluctantly she turned around to find Jill Bernhardt jogging toward her. Jill looked much better than the last time Denise had seen her in the courtroom two weeks ago when the blonde had been covered in bruises, scratches and abrasions. Jill’s skin had regained more of its usual glow and her blue eyes were as vibrant as always. “DDA Bernhardt.”

Jill smiled at the formal greeting. She really had no idea what was going to come out of Denise’s mouth at any given moment. It was one of the few things she found fascinating about her boss. “Hi.”

Denise raised one elegant eyebrow and waited. She’d spoken with Jill numerous times by phone since the attorney’s attack and the topic was always the same. “I haven’t heard from the shrink, Jill.”

“You will,” Jill promised as she pointed her finger at Denise with conviction. “I just came from another session, actually. Dr. Frasier said I could get back to work.”

“Oh really?” Skepticism dripped from Denise’s voice.

“Well... soon. She said I need a few more sessions still. She wants to...” Jill hesitated. “She wants to talk about William Carter.”

Some of Denise’s rigidity relaxed with Jill’s honesty. “That’s... probably a good thing,” she admitted.

“I don’t know about good,” Jill said with a weak smile, “But probably necessary.”

“So what brings you by?” Denise asked as she got to the point. As good as it was to see Jill looking more like herself, she was due back in court in twenty.

“I need a search warrant.”

Denise crossed her arms. “Bernhardt, maybe you don’t fully understand how medical leave works...”

“I was hoping you would execute it,” Jill said seriously.

Denise’s brow knitted in consternation. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

Jill licked her lips before tugging Denise inside an empty office. “Inspectors Jacobi and Boxer... took a look... around some of the empty buildings near St. Vincente’s.”

“Took a look? You mean they broke in?” Denise’s voice elevated. “Are they trying to blow this case?!”

“They’re trying to catch the guy who beat me with a fucking Bible, Denise,” Jill replied, her voice colder. “And they found something. I’m asking you to legal this up so we can use it if we need it. As soon as they found something they backed out, left it alone until we could get a warrant.”

Denise shook her head in disgust. “You need to learn a thing or two about the law, Jill.”

“And maybe you need to learn a thing or two about friendship,” Jill countered.

“We’re not friends,” Denise fired back only to swallow around the strange lump that seemed to have formed in her throat.

“I didn’t say we were,” Jill conceded feeling oddly disappointed with Denise’s words. “But Lindsay and Jacobi are putting themselves on the line for me to catch this guy. You want Arnold to kill someone else because Linz and Warren didn’t follow procedure to the letter?”

Denise stared at her hard for a disconcerting moment. With an exasperated breath, she shoved the files in her arms into Jill’s hands. “Better get to Judge Lyman’s courtroom and ask for a continuance.”

Jill glanced down at her sneakers, jeans, and light blue sweater. “I can’t...”

“If I’m going to bend the law, you sure as hell can show up a little underdressed to represent it.” Denise stomped away in a huff.

Jill watched Denise go and shook her head when her boss was out of sight. “I will never get that woman,” she muttered before heading for Lyman’s bench.

ACT II

Lindsay Boxer and Warren Jacobi were leaning against a silver SUV when Denise arrived at the warehouse. The crime lab was already there as were several uniformed officers. At least they all appeared to be waiting and weren’t prowling around where they weren’t supposed to be.

The attorney got out of her car and watched as Lindsay shoved off the SUV and sauntered closer. Denise made no move to meet her halfway, waiting expectantly for Lindsay to come to her.

“You got it?” Lindsay asked.

“Of course. But you have no idea the tap dancing I had to do to get it.” Denise slapped the papers into Lindsay’s palm. “You owe me, Inspector. And don’t think I’ll forget that you sent Jill to do your dirty work.”

Lindsay straightened, stung a little by the rebuke. “She offered.”

“And you gladly accepted, I’m sure.” Denise glanced around. She noted the old church, but her eyes didn’t linger on it. Watkins had died screaming in there. And Jill... Denise swallowed and looked away. “Where is it?”

The inspector tamped down her anger and pointed at the front of the warehouse.

“Let’s get this over with.” Denise marched away from them.

Lindsay glanced back at Jacobi who raised his eyebrows in mild surprise as the attorney led them toward their crime scene. With a sigh, Lindsay fell in step behind the other woman.

“Thank you,” Lindsay managed to ground out. “For helping us with this one.”

“This has nothing to do with you. If it were any other case, I would have told you to go fuck yourself for breaking and entering,” Denise replied, her voice low so the other officers wouldn’t hear. “But this bastard was right under my nose. He swore in my witnesses. I want him hung by his balls from the highest cross I can find. If that means bending the law to make it happen, then I’ll do it.”

Lindsay blinked but wisely chose to remain silent. They arrived at the entrance to the warehouse and Denise motioned toward the door as two uniformed officers stepped up with a battering ram. It seemed like overkill since Denise knew there was an unlocked door or window somewhere, but they had to make it look good for the courts.

“Take it down,” Denise ordered.

Minutes later, they were inside and the bloody rag was being bagged and tagged. There was evidence of more blood and a lot of it once the techs got some lights into the room. Denise hung back, watching the proceedings with a combination of hope and anger. The cops were swarming all over the room, paying her no attention whatsoever.

A noise to her left made the attorney turn her head. What she saw made her go deathly still. Staring up at her from behind a grate in the floor was a pair of silver gray eyes. They blinked at her then just as suddenly disappeared as their owner turned and fled.

For a long moment, Denise couldn’t find her voice, couldn’t move. Her whole body felt paralyzed with shock, but then some angry part of her brain started yelling at her to

move, to stop him...

“Lindsay!”

The inspector turned in surprise where she’d been talking to Jacobi.

Denise pointed at the grate, unable to do anything more.

It took Lindsay about half a second to understand. She shouted orders to the other officers as she came running, drawing her weapon and pointing it down at the grate. Lindsay saw nothing and gave Denise a quick look. “You’re sure?” she demanded.

Denise nodded vigorously.

Lindsay toed the edge of the grate, flipping it over. She eased to the edge, shone her flashlight into the hole. There was a tunnel below and the impression of two fresh footprints was visible in her beam of light. “Shit.” Without thinking, she re-holstered her weapon and clambered down the short ladder.

“Lindsay!” Jacobi shouted as he tried to catch up. He cursed his partner’s name then scrambled after her.

Denise took a step back until her back hit the wall. She’d just looked into the eyes of the devil, she realized as the attorney started to shake all over. Denise thought seeing him wouldn’t affect her, but knowing what he did to Jill... she was both terrified and so enraged she could barely think.

Cobwebs brushed Lindsay’s features with a ghostly touch as she ran down the tunnel. The inspector had her gun out again as well as her flashlight, searching in vain for any sign of Arnold. The smell of age, dirt and stone made the air feel thick to breathe. The tunnel branched off every so often, and Lindsay would slow each time, easing around those corners and making herself as small a target as possible. Every time, the tunnels were empty.

“Lindsay!” Jacobi shouted again as he finally caught sight of his partner and hurried to catch up. “What in the Sam Hill do you think you’re...”

The bullet impacted the wall next to Lindsay’s head, and she ducked before firing blindly into the darkness. Behind her, she heard Jacobi go down, and she hoped he was merely seeking cover. Her ears rang from the gunfire in the underground space and some distracted part of her brain realized she was going to have a hard time hearing the next few days.

“David Arnold!” Lindsay yelled into the dark tunnel. “This is Inspector Lindsay Boxer with the San Francisco Police Department. I order you to put down the gun and...”

More bullets struck the wall next to Lindsay and she dodged, feeling a few chips of stone or brick sting her cheek. She fired toward the area where she was sure she'd seen a muzzle flash then waited. Distantly, she heard running.

“Jacobi?”

“I'm good,” her partner replied, but he sounded pissed.

They started after Arnold. Lindsay heard a bang up ahead, like a door being thrown open. There was a glimpse of sunlight followed by the return of darkness. She picked up the pace, feeling rage driving her. When she rounded the corner where she was sure he was hiding, Lindsay did it with gunshots.

“Lindsay!” Jacobi shouted in horror.

When the echoes faded, the only sound was harsh breathing. Jacobi pointed his flashlight up to reveal a trapdoor. He knew there was no point going through it. Arnold was either long gone, or was waiting to pick them off like fish in a barrel when they tried to come through. He swung the flashlight around to illuminate Lindsay's bleeding features.

“What in the hell?” he demanded.

Lindsay shoved past him, furious that Arnold had gotten away. Again.

Cindy could tell simply by her lover's walk that Lindsay was upset. Her brown eyes were locked on the inspector's figure, watching her pace back and forth as she spoke into her cell phone. It was times like this that their respective positions really sucked, the reporter mused. She itched to duck under the police tape and skirt the patrol officers that were milling about to get to Lindsay's side. Watching the tense set of Lindsay's body was causing Cindy's back to tighten in empathy.

Lindsay pivoted then seemed to do a double take when she spied Cindy waiting not so patiently behind the crime scene tape. A tiny lift of Lindsay's lips made the whole world seem better, the reporter decided, and Cindy dipped her head and offered an encouraging smile of her own.

The redhead was so lost in observing Lindsay that when a hand landed on her shoulder, startling her so badly she dropped her notepad, Cindy almost screamed.

“Ms. Thomas, if you would come with me.”

Cindy blinked and looked at Warren Jacobi like he'd grown a second head. She stooped to pick up her notebook, wondering why he sounded so formal, before following along.

“What did you do this time, Thomas?” One of the other reporters asked and the men and women around him chuckled.

Cindy ignored him and trotted after the fast walking Jacobi. She assumed he was going to sneak her back to talk to Lindsay so she was a little surprised when he detoured and took her around the corner behind a crumbling building, out of the line of sight of the entire scene. “Inspector Jacobi,” she teased, continuing his formalness and going so far as to drop her voice to a manly-sounding register. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is your girlfriend is losing her damn mind,” Jacobi replied as he put his hands on his hips. “She was running around in that damn tunnel getting us both shot at.”

Cindy’s breath hitched at the mere thought of someone shooting at either of them. “Tunnels?” The reporter blurted instead of addressing the obvious.

“Cindy, can the questions right now. I’m serious. I’m not talking to you as a reporter. I’m talking to you as the one person who can get Lindsay to see some damn reason.”

Cindy took a deep breath, unsettled by how upset Jacobi clearly was. And he was saying “damn” a lot which never bode well. When Jacobi started cussing in earnest then he had to be seriously pissed. “Was it wrong to chase the suspect?”

“It is when the damn tunnel is as black as pitch and there is nowhere to get out of the damn line of fire.” Jacobi snatched off his glasses and rubbed furiously at his eyes. They still bothered him from the dust and dirt that had been down there, some of which still liberally covered his clothes. “That’s not what worries me most, though,” he admitted.

The reporter felt the bottom of her stomach drop. “This sounds bad.”

“It is bad, very bad, as in I’m leaving it out of my report so Lindsay doesn’t get fired bad.”

Cindy licked her lips and braced herself to hear something she was sure she didn’t want to hear. “What happened?” she asked again.

Jacobi sighed. “We thought we had him cornered. Lindsay…”

And suddenly Cindy knew what her lover had done. Just like the night when they’d first come face to face with Arnold, when he’d been on top of Jill about to do God only knew what with that pipe. “She went in shooting,” she guessed.

Jacobi nodded, his surprise at her response clear on his face. “She wasn’t trying to apprehend him, Cindy. Lindsay was trying to kill him and damn near got us both killed in the process.”

The redhead swallowed and looked back the way they’d come. Cindy was feeling almost

ill, and she fingered the barely visible bruise at her temple as a headache began to throb behind her eyes. “Warren...”

Jacobi realized he’d upset her, and he stepped closer, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Talk to her,” he told her. “Make her understand that she is not a judge, jury and executioner.”

“She won’t listen.”

“Cindy...”

“It’s Jill, Jacobi. Arnold would have raped her... tortured her... *murdered* her. There is nothing I can say that would stop Lindsay from putting a bullet in him if she got the chance.” A single tear slipped down her cheek. “I’m not so sure I wouldn’t go in shooting either...” The truth made her shudder.

“Hey.”

At the sound of her lover’s voice, Cindy wiped her face. She could hear Lindsay’s boots crunching on gravel as the inspector came closer. A moment later, Cindy took a deep breath of Lindsay’s perfume, and it had the odd effect of making her feel both warm and unsettled.

“Any luck?” Jacobi asked casually as he gave Cindy a second to compose herself.

“Still canvassing.” Lindsay drew even with Cindy only to frown when she got a look at her profile. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Cindy answered as she turned to face Lindsay, hoping this would be one of the rare times she could get something past her perceptive lover. Cindy frowned when she saw bleeding scratches on Lindsay’s cheek. “Are *you* okay?”

Lindsay’s hand reflexively went to the injury. “Fine.” She forced a smile as her gaze went to the stewing Jacobi. Her jaws clenched when she deduced what the pair had probably been discussing. “Not interrupting anything, am I?” Lindsay asked her partner, her eyes narrowing.

“Not at all,” Jacobi answered dryly. “Take care, Thomas.” Jacobi moved past them both and left without another word.

“He told you.” Lindsay’s accent was as thick as her voice was rough.

Cindy looked up into Lindsay’s eyes. “You did the same thing inside the church.”

“He was about to hit Jill with a pipe. Was I just supposed to let him while I took the time to properly identify myself?” Lindsay snapped.

“If you’re going to yell at me for caring about you, I have other things to do,” Cindy replied softly.

Cindy couldn’t have shut Lindsay up any faster if she’d slapped her, Lindsay thought. Her head rocked back and she blew out a frustrated breath as she jammed her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. “He got away again,” she said tightly.

“I know.” Cindy’s voice was soft, soothing.

“He’s still out there. He could still come after Jill.”

“I know.”

“Cindy...” Lindsay couldn’t look at her as she focused her gaze on the ground. “I can’t... I can’t promise you I won’t...”

“Kill him?” Cindy asked.

Lindsay nodded.

“That’s not what scares me, Linz.”

Lindsay’s head came back up and she looked at the reporter in surprise. “It’s not?” she blurted.

“What scares me...” Cindy’s lower lip began to quiver as tears pooled in her eyes and slipped unchecked down her cheeks. “What scares me is how much I want you to.”

Lindsay went deathly still. All the anger, the feelings of failure, and the rage at Arnold... they all dissolved in the wake of that one almost whispered sentence. Lindsay swallowed as she felt bile rise up in the back of her throat. What had this case done to Cindy? What had *she* done to Cindy? There were no words... nothing Lindsay could think to say that would make either of them feel any better in that moment.

“It isn’t you,” Cindy got out, thinking that there was a better place and time for this talk. “Don’t think this is about something you’ve done to me... that you’ve tainted me or...”

“How am I not supposed to think that?” Lindsay asked, her voice huskier and deeper than normal. “You never felt like this before you...”

“The man who shot my father,” Cindy cut her off. “He didn’t get the death penalty. He might even get out on parole in another ten years.” She wouldn’t meet Lindsay’s gaze but she could feel it boring into her. “I asked you to step back up into that attic, Linz. You didn’t want to go. Maybe... maybe I’m the one who’s doing the tainting here.”

Lindsay could feel her body shaking. She shook her head. “No...”

“I have to go,” the reporter announced. Without another word, Cindy turned and fled, leaving a shocked Lindsay too stunned to follow.

The sun had slipped below the horizon hours ago by the time Lindsay finally let herself into her dark apartment. She closed the door behind her and waited, listening for sounds of Cindy moving about the space, waiting to feel that wave of warmth she always experienced just knowing the reporter was there... waiting.

Silence beat back at her, and Lindsay closed her eyes. Cindy hadn't answered her phone the rest of the day and the lack of contact was driving Lindsay nearly insane. The silver lining was that she was so busy worrying about her lover that she'd barely thought about Arnold slipping through her fingers again. Lindsay just needed to see Cindy, hear her voice, know that they were going to be okay...

The inspector slowly slid down the door, drawing her knees to her chest just as Martha came around the corner and happily trotted up to her owner. The dog slowed as she came closer then whined when she saw the tears tracking down Lindsay's face. She began licking them, catching them with a sloppy tongue that made Lindsay laugh just a little through her tears.

Lindsay buried her face in the scruff of the dog's neck and Martha let her, as if the dog understood that her human just needed a moment. Martha's head came down on Lindsay's shoulder and they simply stayed that way for several minutes.

“Thanks,” Lindsay finally whispered as she kissed the dog on the head.

Martha whined again.

“You miss your buddy? Me too...” Lindsay's voice broke and she cleared her throat. “Maybe she'll be back tomorrow.” The thought that maybe Cindy wouldn't be was so terrifying Lindsay could barely breathe. “When did I get to need her so much, huh, girl?” She ran her hands through the dog's thick coat. “This place feels so empty without her now, doesn't it?”

And so did she, Lindsay had to admit.

Deciding some alcohol was in order, Lindsay slowly got to her feet and moved toward the kitchen. She was on her third glass of Scotch when a knock at the door drew her attention.

Her heart leapt into her throat and she moved quickly to answer it, hoping Cindy had finally decided to talk. Flinging the door open, Lindsay went stock still when she saw

who was on the other side.

“Pete.”

“Hey,” he said gently as he took in her features. “You okay?”

Lindsay shook her head then laughed bitterly. “Perfect,” she said. “Just perfect.”

He moved past her as if he’d been invited in, as if it were perfectly natural for him to be in her home. Lindsay couldn’t believe the gall of the man as she followed him into the kitchen. He picked up the bottle of scotch as he sat down.

“Trouble in paradise?” he asked with a slight smile that should have been comforting but only managed to aggravate the inspector further.

Once she would have found that smile welcoming. Once she found it sexy as hell. Now she just wanted to wipe it right off his face. “I am not in the mood for company, Pete.”

“So you’re keeping company with a bottle instead? Just because we’re not dating anymore doesn’t mean I can’t listen, Linz.”

“Pete...” Lindsay tried to control her rising temper. “You need to go. Now.”

He picked up her cell phone and fiddled with it between his fingers. “I bet you took my number out of this already, huh?”

Lindsay’s jaw set and she rolled her shoulders, trying in vain to loosen up some of the almost unbearable tension that had settled in them when she’d seen him on the other side of the door. “Look... I really can’t do this tonight...”

Pete sighed and dropped his hands into his lap. “Why won’t you just talk to me?” he asked. “You broke up with me over the damn Internet, Lindsay.”

“I know it wasn’t the best way to handle it...”

“I mean... you aren’t even giving us a chance to be friends here.” Pete shook his head and looked up at her. “I still care about you, Linz. I came over here to talk... to try to understand... but you’re clearly hurting right now. You can talk to me.”

“No I can’t,” Lindsay said but her tone had softened marginally. “I appreciate the offer but...”

“But you’re upset about... your girlfriend...” he said slowly.

“Pete...”

“What happened with you and Cindy?”

Lindsay took a slow, measured breath. She’d suspected that Pete had figured it out, the man wasn’t stupid, but it still made her uncomfortable that he knew. “You need to go.”

“Lindsay...”

“Please, Pete. I promise I’ll call and we can talk at some point... just not tonight.”

He sighed again then got to his feet. He still fiddled with her cell phone for another moment, spinning it between his fingers. “I really wish I knew if I was still in here,” he said with a sad smile as he set it on the table. “Goodnight, Lindsay.”

She stood there, listening to him leave. Her fingers snatched up her phone when the door closed and she flipped it open, thumbing through the numbers until she came to his. With two presses of a button he was gone. She wished it could be that easy to get him out of her life.

Lindsay walked and fed the dog but opted to skip dinner herself. She called Cindy three more times to no avail. Her lover clearly didn’t want to talk. Lindsay knew she wasn’t being fair about the whole thing. There were plenty of times where she didn’t want to share and had just closed off, but being on the other side of it was driving her crazy.

There was nothing left to do but get ready for bed so Lindsay did so with little enthusiasm. Finally she stood next to her bed in maroon shorts and a matching t-shirt. She picked up the phone next to her bed and tried Cindy’s number one last time.

It immediately went to voicemail.

Something inside Lindsay snapped. She flung the phone and watched it shatter against the wall. It wasn’t enough to satisfy her anger, to ease the maelstrom of frustration raging inside her, so she started grabbing at anything she could get her hands on. She threw pillows, a vase, her keys... toppling over bottles on her dresser, sending glass shattering in every direction as the vase busted through the mirror and turned her reflection into thousands of broken shards.

She grabbed her badge off the nightstand and hurled it with all her might, mentally cursing the gold shield that she both loved and loathed now, blaming it for every bad thing that had happened to her in the last year.

It slammed into her vent with enough force to sound like a rifle shot. Lindsay turned back to her dresser to grab the lamp.

Behind her, something clattered and fell over inside the vent.

The inspector slowly turned around, her anger still simmering just under the surface, but

the cop in her was too curious about the sound to ignore it. She grabbed a chair and pulled it below the vent before standing up and looking inside.

What she saw made her boiling temper ice over.

ACT III

“Who is it?”

“Open the door, Skipper.”

Cindy sighed and banged her head against the wood. After calling her boss and feigning something close to a terminal case of food poisoning, Cindy had retreated to her apartment to hole up, drink, and eat an entire tube of cookie dough, without baking it. She was miserable, and she wanted to be left to wallow in her misery. Cindy felt like that’s what she deserved after leaving Lindsay like that today, knowing what was probably going through her lover’s mind right now.

“Cindy,” Claire’s voice was warm and beckoning. “Open the door.”

With a sigh, Cindy yielded and unlocked the numerous locks to allow her friend entrance. She was caught off guard when she found Jill standing next to Claire. “You both came? Who is with Lindsay?”

“Actually,” Jill said as she moved past the redhead, sneaking a quick, impressed glance at Cindy’s exposed legs where they stretched out from underneath a maroon San Francisco 49ers jersey, “a whole squad of crime scene techs is keeping Linz company right now.”

“What?” Cindy’s head swiveled in Jill’s direction, as Claire entered and shut the door behind them.

“Get dressed, sweetheart,” Claire instructed.

“Wait. What happened? Is Lindsay okay?” Cindy’s gaze went back and forth between her friends.

“I’m not going to say she’s fine,” Claire told her honestly. “But she’s not physically hurt.”

Cindy felt her heart jerking in her chest from fear. “I don’t... what...”

“Get dressed,” Jill said this time. “We’ll explain in the car.”

“A camera.”

With her protective detail in the car behind them, Jill drove toward Lindsay’s apartment, leaving Claire to handle Cindy in the backseat.

“In the vent in Lindsay’s bedroom,” Claire said again as she waited patiently for Cindy to process what she was telling her. Before they left, the reporter had quickly changed into jeans, sneakers and a dark green sweater. She looked like a fresh-faced college student rather than one of the city’s premiere crime reporters, Claire thought.

“So someone was... watching...” Cindy swallowed hard.

Claire and Jill said nothing.

“Oh my God,” Cindy breathed.

Claire slipped an arm around the reporter’s shoulders and pulled her in close. Her gaze met Jill’s in the rearview mirror. Jill shook her head and sighed before refocusing her attention on the road.

“Banner year for the club,” the attorney murmured under her breath. In a strange way, Jill was almost glad to have this new problem to focus on. It gave her something to think about other than her own problems for a change. Still, if she found out who violated Lindsay and Cindy like that, she was going to get so legal on their ass they would be lucky if they could sit down for a month when she was finished.

“Cindy, Lindsay seems upset about a lot more than this.” Claire kept her voice gentle. “Why would she send us to get you instead of just calling herself?”

Cindy closed her eyes and seemed to shrink into the leather of Jill’s backseat. She missed the worried look the attorney shot her in the mirror. “We... had a fight.”

“A pretty good one, I’m guessing,” Claire replied.

Cindy shook her head. “A really, really bad one. I think I...” The reporter swallowed again only to lurch forward suddenly. “Stop the car.”

Jill slammed on the brakes just as Cindy bolted from the backseat, stumbling out onto the deserted sidewalk and heaving into someone’s trashcan. The blonde winced and looked away, wishing she could ignore the noise as well.

Claire scurried out after Cindy and murmured reassuring words until the reporter finally sagged against her. She waved at the two officers that had pulled up behind them to stay in their car.

“I really shouldn’t have eaten the whole tube,” Cindy muttered.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Claire ducked back into the car and took the bottle of water Jill was offering. “Drink this, sweetie.” She handed the bottle to Cindy.

Cindy did as she was told as she leaned heavily against the car, her legs wobbling.
“Sorry.”

“What happened between you and Linz today, hon?” Claire brushed Cindy’s hair away from her sweating features.

Brokenly, Cindy told her about the church, about what happened in the tunnels and about her own reaction to what Lindsay had done. Claire listened motionless. Jill leaned back in the front seat, listening to every word intently.

“Cindy...” Claire whispered when the reporter was finished.

Tears slipped from the reporter’s eyes. “Everybody thinks that I’m this... perky... happy-go-lucky girl... that I don’t have any darker angels.” She looked up at Claire, her brown eyes full of pain. “I never... I thought being a part of us... of what we do would satisfy that craving for justice.”

“Are you saying it doesn’t?” Claire asked softly.

“Usually,” Cindy admitted. “But this time... when he would have...” Cindy swallowed and took a deep breath, willing herself not to get sick again. “He went after Jill, and that was unforgivable. What he would have done...” Cindy moved away from the car so she could see both of them. “And now look what I’ve done. I pulled Lindsay back into that attic...”

“Cindy.” Jill got out of the car and joined her friends on the sidewalk. “Lindsay has plenty of her own darker angels. We all do. You didn’t push her to this. This has been coming since Kiss-Me-Not murdered his first victim.”

“I don’t want to be this person I’m turning into,” Cindy confessed. “I don’t want to encourage her to be a killer.”

Jill and Claire glanced at each other. Hearing those words come out of that sweet face shook them both.

“We so need group therapy,” Jill announced suddenly.

They looked at each other for a string of heartbeats then burst into laughter.

It felt so good it almost hurt. Cindy wrapped her arms around the two women and held them close as they all giggled helplessly, laughing at things that weren't even remotely funny. Sometimes the truth was so ludicrous there was simply no other choice.

When their laughter wound down they still held one another, each acutely aware they needed to get to Lindsay's but that this moment was equally as important.

"We all have those moments," Claire spoke into the quiet. "Those moments where we want vengeance so much that we can taste it. It's a part of what makes us human. We want to hurt those that hurt the ones we love... because that love is so strong and we would do anything we could to protect it."

Jill and Cindy looked at each other, understanding that Claire was talking from her own experience. Ed, her husband, forever confined to his wheelchair because some bastard had put a bullet in his back while Ed had been doing his job. His shooter had never been caught.

Then there was William Carter who'd taken away Jill's childhood and her ability to ever completely trust a man.

And Cindy, wishing she could go back and shake sense into a poor woman who was too scared to file charges against her abusive husband. In the end it had cost her her life, the life of Cindy's father who had tried to save her, and Cindy a piece of her soul.

"Guess we all have our demons, huh?" the reporter asked in a rough voice.

"We wouldn't be so damn good at what we do without them," Jill said with conviction.

Cindy nodded, feeling more centered than she had in months. Her turmoil had been building ever since she'd seen Teresa Watkins tortured on those big screens. She felt like she'd failed the woman, that she had somehow been responsible for not figuring out who the Hallelujah Man was before he'd claimed Watkins so brutally as his next victim.

The reporter realized she understood Lindsay Boxer better in this moment than she had in any other. She cleared her throat. "Thanks guys."

"What are friends for?" Claire asked right before she kissed her friend on the temple.

They slowly got back into the car, and Jill couldn't help the silly grin she was sporting. No doubt her protective detail was thinking they had all just lost their minds. Their report on the evening's activities was one Jill actually wished she could read.

The pain meds swam through his system, putting a warm, liquid barrier between him and the lancing agony he'd been immersed in.

Arnold let the syringe roll from his grip to clatter on the table. He'd waited patiently in the ambulance bay for his chance, slipping inside one of the rigs the first moment he could and raiding their supplies. Cameras would catch his actions but he knew he'd be gone before anyone was alerted.

So what if they knew it was him? Who he was...

There had been a newspaper in the ambulance. It was a few days old, but he'd seen the headline above a picture of his own face. They were calling him a killer. A murderer. They didn't understand what he was trying to do. He was saving souls, not destroying them. Why didn't people understand?

He studied the reporter's byline with blurry eyes. Cindy Thomas. He'd wondered if she lived after he'd had to subdue her in the alley. Even now, he could remember how sweet she smelled, how fiery her red hair had been splayed out across the asphalt as he'd reluctantly raised the rock to bash her skull in. He'd hated to do it, but he felt certain her soul was safe, and she was between him and Jill Bernhardt. Thomas was her friend, surely she would have understood in the end... would have thanked him for giving Jill eternal life rather than her being condemned to an eternity of torment.

Arnold tucked the paper into his backpack. He decided even in his drug-induced fog that he needed to set Cindy Thomas straight. He needed to make her understand. She could help him. Maybe she was the only one who could.

Inspector Maggie Snow perused the space curiously. She never would have guessed that Lindsay Boxer had a flair for color and decoration but the evidence showed she clearly did. Snow filed that away for further consideration later as her eyes took in the dog curled up protectively at Boxer's feet. Lindsay was sitting at her kitchen table with their Lieutenant who was taking notes as the inspector absently petted the dog on the head.

Snow felt bad for Boxer in that moment. True, Lindsay was top dog at the precinct and Snow had every intention of outshining her before the year was over, but she wouldn't wish this kind of intrusion on anyone, especially not someone coming off the year Boxer had just endured.

"Tex," Snow greeted as she entered the kitchen.

Lindsay just tilted her head and looked at her for a long moment. "Hollywood," she replied with a sarcastic smile.

Snow's lips twitched and she nodded. Lindsay was going to make this competition fun.

“Sorry about all this.”

Lindsay rubbed her bottom lip and sighed. “I’m not much thrilled about it, either.” She glanced at her watch, wondering what was taking the girls so long. “Did they find anything else?”

Snow eased into a chair at the table and let Martha sniff her fingers. The dog seemed to reluctantly approve and gave them a little lick. “Another camera in the living room vent. Same make and model as the one we found in here and your bedroom. A few bugs.” She laced her fingers and put her hands on the table. “We got them all.”

Tom flipped his notepad shut. “Let us put you up in a hotel tonight, Linz. I know you won’t get any sleep here.”

Lindsay turned her head and looked at him. “You know I’m not the only apartment you need to sweep,” she told him as if Snow wasn’t at the table.

He licked his lips and nodded. “I figured we’d tell them when they got here.”

“How do you know they’re coming?”

Tom just smiled, and Lindsay found herself hesitantly returning the gesture.

“Someone want to let me in on the joke?” Snow asked.

There was a commotion at the front door. Lindsay glanced up and was rewarded with the sight of her lover who came all but flying into the room, a patrol officer hot on her heels. Jill caught him and held him back, clearing Cindy’s path to Lindsay who clamored to her feet and caught the reporter in a crushing hug.

Tom had to look away.

“I’m sorry,” Cindy’s voice was muffled from where her head was buried against Lindsay’s shoulder. “Linz...”

Lindsay shushed her, all the trials of the day melting away in Cindy’s welcome embrace. “Me, too,” Lindsay confessed as she rubbed Cindy’s back, savoring the heat of her. Cindy’s presence eased her nerves like a sedative. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Snow got to her feet, startled by what she was witnessing. She felt like an intruder and decided to step out to give the two a moment. She ran into someone and turned to apologize, only to have her words die on her tongue.

“Sorry,” Jill said with a hesitant smile for the woman she’d just crashed into. Jill blushed slightly when she realized she was being openly appraised. “Um...”

“No,” Snow said as she snapped out of the spell she seemed to have fallen under. “My bad. Completely.”

“I don’t think we’ve met,” Jill said slowly. “I’m DDA Jill Bernhardt.”

“Inspector Maggie Snow. Just started today.”

“Ah. Explains why I’ve never seen you before.” Jill’s gaze slipped past the attractive woman and her eyes brightened when she saw Lindsay and Cindy in a hug so tight they looked like a crowbar couldn’t pull them apart. She grinned helplessly in response.

Maggie turned her head and noticed where Jill was looking. “Striking pair,” she ventured.

Sharp blue eyes returned to Maggie’s features. “You have no idea,” Jill teased.

Claire stepped up behind them and smiled when she saw the scene in the kitchen. “Now that does a weary soul a right nice thing to see.”

“Doesn’t it, though?” Jill asked. “Dr. Claire Washburn, meet Inspector Maggie Snow.”

Claire held out her hand and Maggie took it with a firm grip. “Nice to meet you, Maggie,” Claire said. “I’m the medical examiner.”

“Likewise,” Maggie replied, liking the woman instantly. “I wish it could have been under different circumstances.”

“You and me both,” Claire agreed. “Excuse me.” She moved toward the kitchen, nodding in greeting to Tom who looked grateful to have someone to talk to as Cindy and Lindsay continued to murmur words for only each other to hear.

“I’m an idiot, I’m an idiot, I’m an idiot,” Cindy kept repeating until Lindsay laughed softly. The reporter tipped her head back and looked up into Lindsay’s soft smile. That smile always did things to her, melted her insides and made her thoughts turn to a puddle of mush. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Lindsay cupped her cheek with her left hand. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I do. I should have...” Cindy shook her head then glanced around noticing with some embarrassment that they were the center of attention as several officers averted their gaze. “Maybe we should talk about this somewhere else.”

Lindsay chuckled again before kissing Cindy’s forehead. The relief she felt at having Cindy in her arms made their current situation infinitely more bearable. “Claire and Jill told you?”

“Yeah.” Cindy reluctantly eased back. “God, Linz... he saw us...” She waved her hands if that explained everything.

Lindsay couldn't help but smirk. “Well he certainly got quite a show,” she murmured only loud enough for Cindy to hear. She almost laughed when her lover turned scarlet.

“Good Lord,” Claire muttered. “What did you say to get a blush like that out of the girl?”

Tom motioned Jill over and Maggie followed. He waited until he had them all together. “Jill, Claire... Thomas,” his voice hesitated only briefly on Cindy's name. “We're going to send squads over to check your places as well.”

“You think the Hallelujah Man is behind this?” Claire asked.

“Maybe.”

Jill raked her hands through her hair and sighed.

Maggie wanted to smack herself for not putting it together faster. Bernhardt was the DDA the killer had almost claimed as his next victim. She studied Jill's profile before her eyes traveled to the fading bruises that wrapped around the woman's pale wrists. Her estimation of the woman rose a notch. Now she was impressed with her beauty and her bravery.

“We'll put all of you up somewhere.” Tom glanced down at Martha. “Martha can come home with me. Heather keeps pestering me about getting a dog. She can try yours out for twenty four hours,” he joked faintly with his ex-wife.

Martha growled.

“That dog would do things to your shoes just for fun,” Jacobi announced as he arrived and moved into the center of the group. “Martha can come with me, right girl?”

The dog thumped her tail in happy response.

“You okay?” Jacobi asked his partner.

Lindsay nodded, her emotions too all over the place to feel anything but numb at the moment.

They all talked for a few more minutes before disbanding and leaving Lindsay to pack a few items. Cindy followed her lover into the bedroom only to freeze in the doorway when she saw the level of destruction.

“Hello.”

Lindsay looked sheepish. "I got... a little... upset."

Cindy picked up Lindsay's badge and looked at her for a long, understanding moment. "I went home and ate a tube of cookie dough and drank."

The mental picture made Lindsay laugh. "I think your way of handling frustration is much better than mine."

"Tell that to Jill," Cindy answered. "I almost puked in her car on the way over here."

Lindsay just looked at her for a long, sweet moment. She put her stuff down and moved closer, wrapping her long arms around her lover. "I know we're not okay right now," she said in a low voice. "But I want us to be. I need us to be."

The redhead nodded, reassured beyond measure by the words. "Me, too," she agreed softly. "I don't want to be without you in my life."

The words brought tears to Lindsay's eyes. "I'm not coming back here," Lindsay admitted. "My space being violated once was bad enough. Twice..."

"Yeah," Cindy sighed. "At least you know you didn't lock Martha in the closet now."

The inspector considered that, realizing that they could pinpoint the exact day that someone had started monitoring them. "I'm going to get a new place."

"Makes sense," Cindy told her.

Lindsay took a breath and swallowed, feeling light-headed over the decision she'd just reached in her mind and heart. "I want you to get one with me."

Cindy's eyes widened.

"You don't have to answer right now..."

"Yes," Cindy whispered.

"Just like that?" Lindsay asked in wonder.

"Just like that," Cindy agreed solemnly. "I would so kiss you right now to prove it, but I really need a mint."

Lindsay snorted before pulling her into a hug and holding on, a ray of hope pushing back some of the darkness that had sent her into a destructive tailspin hours ago. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

The next morning Jill, Claire, Lindsay and Cindy gathered in Tom's office to hear what the techs had found the night before. Tom was waiting with them since Maggie had offered to look into the matter, and it was her report they were about to hear.

The new inspector strode in five minutes late and gave Tom an apologetic smile. "Sorry. Needed to check on something."

"Well?" Lindsay asked impatiently.

"No cameras at either Ms. Thomas' apartment or Dr. Washburn's."

"What about mine?" Jill asked.

"Nothing we could find, but we checked the roofs of some neighboring buildings. It looks like someone might have been watching you from there." Maggie flipped open the folder she'd walked in with. "Here is the really weird part."

"Besides the cameras and listening equipment?" Jill asked. "There is something weirder than that?"

Everyone smiled just a fraction.

Maggie handed the folder to Lindsay rather than their boss. "The equipment found in DDA Bernhardt's office after her abduction doesn't match the equipment found in your apartment."

Lindsay frowned and looked at the inventory of evidence. "Fingerprints?" she asked as she flipped through the rest of the report.

"On the camera and bug at the Hall. Nothing on those found in your apartment," Maggie told them.

"Arnold's fingerprints?" Lindsay's frown deepened.

Maggie nodded.

"What is it, Linz?" Claire asked.

"Why buy different models of camera and listening devices? And why would Arnold keep his prints off the equipment in my apartment but not off the stuff at the Hall?"

"You got someone else that might be watching you?" Maggie asked matter-of-factly.

A name flashed through Lindsay's mind but she quickly dismissed it. She was being

paranoid, she decided.

“Pete,” Jill and Claire said in unison.

Cindy looked caught, and she knew she was about to have her whole run-in with the muffin man outed.

“C’mon,” Lindsay said. “Be serious. He’s annoying but...”

Tom looked at the women. “Wait. Pete Raynor? Lindsay’s boyfriend?”

“Ex.” Cindy shrugged when all eyes turned on her. “Ex-boyfriend. Just wanted to clear that up.”

Lindsay winked at her before turning to face the others. “He wouldn’t do this.” She thought of Pete mentioning Cindy by name last night and a chill took her.

“You need to tell her what happened,” Jill said to Cindy.

“Tell who what?” Lindsay asked before glancing back at her lover.

“Pete... came to see me his first night back in the city. He’d been waiting for me in the parking lot at the Register.” Cindy found it tough to maintain eye contact.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Lindsay asked, her voice holding more hurt than anger.

“I was going to, but when I showed up at your apartment...” Cindy swallowed.

The inspector closed her eyes, realizing instinctively what Cindy had witnessed, what had caused her lover to withdraw that night and had sent Cindy running off to the New Faith compound. “Dammit...”

“It’s not like he threatened me or anything,” Cindy hastened to add. “He creeped me out, but I don’t see Pete sneaking into Lindsay’s apartment and putting cameras in her vents.”

“We can’t rule it out,” Tom spoke with authority on the subject. “Inspector Snow, you still want to look into this?”

Maggie nodded. “Sure.”

“Start with Pete Raynor, he’s a contractor. Get me everything you can on the guy.” Tom didn’t bother to tell her he had his own folder already pulled on Pete and sitting in the bottom of his desk drawer. He’d give her that when Lindsay left.

Maggie nodded and with a dip of her head at the others she left.

Lindsay pinched the bridge of her nose as a headache bloomed behind her eyes. She didn't know what to deal with first. With a sigh, she focused on the current investigation. "What turned up in the tunnels?"

Tom sat up in his chair. "They're prohibition tunnels, but since Thomas's paper ran a front page story about them I'm sure you already knew that."

"I took the afternoon off," Cindy stated. "I haven't even seen the paper this morning."

Tom picked up the one on his desk and tossed it to her. Cindy opened it and started reading.

"We've got every treasure hunter in the city trying to get down in those tunnels now. The city didn't know this stretch of them was there." Tom scratched the stubble on his cheek. He was still in the same clothes as last night, having spent the night at the precinct much to his wife's displeasure.

"Any of them leading anywhere interesting?" Jill asked.

"If by interesting you mean churches or other religious places in which this nut case might take refuge? No."

Jacobi stuck his head in the office. "Morning all."

"Morning, Jacobi," Lindsay greeted, her voice gruff but friendly.

"Got something you'll want to see."

Lindsay backed the video up and watched it again. Arnold was in the back of an ambulance at Mission Cross North Hospital, raiding it for supplies. He moved stiffly, like he was in pain, and Lindsay took grim satisfaction from that.

"When was this taken?" she asked.

"Last night," Jacobi informed her and Tom. The others were out in the bullpen. Jacobi had wisely decided Jill didn't need to see the footage, and the other members of the club were smart enough to catch on and distract her.

"He's hurting," Lindsay said.

"He grabbed a lot of pain meds," Jacobi agreed as he consulted the police report. "Some antibiotics, too."

"Any of those tunnels open up near the hospital?" Tom asked.

Lindsay reached back and grabbed the folder on the table she was sitting on, sliding the findings toward her and flipping it open. She snorted in surprise.

“What?” Jacobi asked.

“One of the tunnels opens up two doors down from Papa Joe’s.”

Jacobi and Tom failed to see the significance as Lindsay shook her head.

“Closest one is about six blocks from the hospital. There was an opening in the back of a closed restaurant. Says here the owner came in this morning and damn near fell down the hole.” Lindsay slapped the file closed. “He’s got to be somewhere close to there. He’d be exhausted after yesterday. He’s medicated, in pain...”

“I agree. I’ll send some units to check out the area.” Tom left.

“You okay?” Jacobi asked when their boss was gone.

“Tired,” Lindsay confessed. She put her hand on Jacobi’s when it came to rest on her shoulder and squeezed. “But we’re closing in. I can feel it.”

“Linz...”

“I know,” she said softly. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“We’re going to talk more about this,” he promised before he squeezed again and left the way he’d come, knowing this wasn’t the time to talk about it further. He cleared his throat as he opened the door so Lindsay would look up and see Jill standing there. She reached across and snapped off the monitor as Jill stepped inside and shut the door.

“Hey,” Lindsay greeted carefully.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Pete and Cindy,” Jill said.

Lindsay nodded. “I understand. She’s your friend too.”

“You mad at her?”

Lindsay’s mouth formed a wry grin. “I’m so relieved that she still wants to be a part of my life that she could commit felony B & E right now, and I’d forgive her.”

Jill smiled briefly before her face became serious once more. “I need to talk to you for a minute.”

“Okay,” Lindsay said slowly as she watched her blonde friend come closer. Jill settled

next to her, and Lindsay could tell whatever Jill wanted to talk about was serious.

“What will you do when you catch him?” Jill finally asked.

The shrink had asked her the same question. Lindsay swallowed and looked away. Obviously Cindy had shared the topic of their argument yesterday with their friends. She couldn't meet those blue eyes, but she could feel them on her profile, assessing. Lindsay kept her gaze focused on the edge of the table where her forefinger traced the pattern in the wood grain between them. “What do you want me to do?” she evaded but was truly curious about Jill's response.

“I don't want you to kill him, Lindsay.” Jill's voice was firm and held the weight of her conviction behind it.

Lindsay's head came up. “He hurt you. He would have...” Lindsay shook her head not wanting to dwell on what could have happened. “He would have killed you... killed Cindy... Think about what he's done to his victims. What he's done to...”

“You. Think about what he's done to you, Linz. You want the man dead. You want him dead because he's evaded you, killed more people on your watch, and made it even more personal with Cindy and me. This isn't about you doing your job, it isn't about searching for some vengeance for me... this is about you, Lindsay, about your need for revenge.”

Jill grabbed her friend's arm and dragged Lindsay up and to the door, opening it and pulling Lindsay out into the hallway where she could see Cindy and Claire chatting at Lindsay's desk. “Look at her, Linz. Look at Cindy. That is the best damn thing that has ever happened to you. So help me, if you fuck up something as beautiful as what you two have for something as ugly as revenge... Don't call me. Don't talk to me. We're over. Done.”

Lindsay could only look at Cindy's beautiful profile as Jill continued.

“For what it's worth,” Jill said in a quieter voice. “I need him alive. I need him to be caught... to go to trial. If you kill him, you rob me of that. You rob me of the chance to find the closure I need, Linz. I was the one he beat. I was the one he would have raped and killed. Don't take this from me, Lindsay. When you find him, and you will find him, do not kill him unless you have to in order to save your own life.”

“He deserves to die,” Lindsay retaliated weakly.

“He does,” Jill agreed. “He deserves to burn in hell. But it is not your place to kill him. You're a cop.”

“Maybe I don't want to be a cop anymore,” Lindsay murmured. Her gaze shifted to Jill and she was startled to see how angry she looked. “I don't know if I can be a cop anymore. Not after all this. Not after Harris.”

Jill swallowed. "Maybe you shouldn't be," she agreed. "You sure as hell aren't acting like one and you sure as hell don't sound like one. You sound like a killer." Jill gripped Lindsay's arm so hard the inspector winced. "Do you love her, Lindsay?"

"What kind of question is that?" Lindsay demanded, her anger finally starting to surface.

"Just answer it."

"Yes."

"Then don't kill him for her."

"She wants me to kill him," Lindsay confessed in a bitter whisper.

"A part of her does, just like a part of me does and a part of Claire... but it's not the logical part, Lindsay. We all love you and your soul is more important to us than his death." Jill held her ground when Lindsay looked at her with a lost expression. "Do. Not. Kill. Him. Promise me."

Lindsay took in an aching breath.

"You promise me, Lindsay," Jill pleaded as tears gathered in her eyes and her voice shook. "I know you. Mentally, emotionally, hell, even biblically... you promise me, because I know you'll keep your word. You want to do this for me? Stop him for me? Then bring him in alive and give me and the law the chance to make him pay."

Lindsay closed her eyes and felt all the energy drain from her body. The thirst for revenge had been the only source of strength she'd had left to draw on, but she couldn't deny Jill this request. With the memory of Cindy's face swimming before her closed eyes, she knew she didn't want to. "I promise."

ACT IV

Long after Jill, Cindy and Claire left, Lindsay sat at her desk, her thoughts and emotions churning. She knew she should be making phone calls, canvassing the neighborhood where they suspected Arnold was hiding, hell, maybe she should even try to track down Pete, but all Lindsay could do was sit there and stare into space. The inspector was finally facing what the year had done to her. The damage Harris had caused her by killing her father. The parts of her psyche Arnold had wounded as he claimed more and more victims until Lindsay had been forced to watch every moment of Teresa Watkins death. Could she keep doing this? Keep being a cop?

Did she want to?

“Linz?”

Lindsay snapped out of her trance and looked up into the worried features of her ex-husband. “Tom.” She had to clear her throat.

“You okay?”

Slowly Lindsay shook her head when she realized the magnitude of what was at stake. More than her relationship with Cindy, Lindsay knew her very soul was hanging in the balance. Catching David Arnold wasn’t going to save it.

Lindsay took a breath. “I…” She swallowed, feeling the words stick in her throat.

“Hey.” Tom settled on the edge of her desk. “What is it?”

“I need some time,” Lindsay said in a faint voice as her pride began to scream in protest. For once, she didn’t listen to it.

“Time for what?” Tom asked.

“To grieve for my father. To get my head on straight about Harris. To decide if I can keep doing this job.” Lindsay looked up at him, seeing shock and something more reflected in his gaze.

“After Arnold is in a cell you can have it. You take as long as you need.”

Lindsay shook her head. “There will always be someone to take his place, Tom. Another Harris. Another Arnold…”

“He attacked Cindy and Jill,” Tom protested, barely able to believe what he was hearing.

“Which is exactly why I shouldn’t be on this case,” Lindsay countered. “I promised Jill I wouldn’t kill Arnold. I can’t keep that promise if I catch him.”

Tom went cold at the words. He licked his dry lips. “Linz… you’re a good cop…”

“I am,” Lindsay agreed. “Give me a shot at staying that way,” she pleaded.

Jacobi had been a relief. When Lindsay had told him her plans he’d smiled instead of yelled. Hugged her instead of slugged her. Lindsay had known he’d been worried about her, but apparently his concern had been graver than she’d realized. He’d been all too happy to look after Martha for a spell.

She'd called Claire on her way to the Register. Her plans had been met with shocked silence followed by a heavy sigh of relief. Claire had sounded like she'd had tears in her voice when she told Lindsay to take whatever time she needed.

A rueful smile edged onto Lindsay's features as she got into the elevator, a duffle bag slung over her shoulder. Apparently all her friends had been secretly hoping she'd come to this point a lot sooner. Once they had gotten over the shock that she'd finally gotten to this point at all, they were giving her their blessing.

She could only wonder what Jill and Cindy would think.

Would they think she was running? Giving up? Or would they see it for the last ditch effort Lindsay needed to save herself? To save all of them and what they meant to each other?

The doors parted and Lindsay entered the bullpen of reporters, heading toward Cindy's desk. Her steps faltered when she saw Jill sitting on the edge of it. Cindy was nowhere to be seen. She cleared her throat and Jill glanced up in surprise.

"Hey," Jill greeted hesitantly.

"Hey." Lindsay sat the duffle bag down on the floor and watched as Jill's eyes tracked to it then back to her face.

"Going somewhere?" The attorney joked.

Lindsay cleared her throat. This was the part she hated the most, the part she feared the most. Would Jill think she was abandoning her at a time like this? Was she? "Actually, maybe."

One blonde eyebrow rose expressively.

"Where's Cindy?" Lindsay asked with a look around.

"Getting coffee." Jill tilted her head. "So..." She motioned at the bag. "What's up?"

Lindsay slipped her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. "I need to ask a favor."

Jill took a breath and sat up a little straighter. "Okay," she replied, her voice soft.

"I need you to let me go."

Jill blinked, not sure she understood what Lindsay meant. "Let you go?"

"Away for a while." Lindsay looked at the floor. "I'll stay if you ask me to. I don't..." She took in an uneven breath. "I don't want you to think..."

Jill eased off the desk. “You’re taking some time,” she guessed, her voice sounding fragile. She wasn’t sure how she felt about this, about Lindsay leaving now of all times, but after she’d ditched Lindsay during the darkest days of the Kiss-Me-Not case Jill really didn’t think she had any right to ask the other woman to hang around.

Lindsay nodded, the motion jerky. “I... want a shot at keeping my promise to you,” she confessed.

“Lindsay...”

“But... you know I’ll stay. All you have to do is tell me to. I... I feel like I’m letting you down here... it’s just...”

“You’re drowning,” Jill said in understanding. “You have been for a long time, Linz.”

Lindsay nodded again and had to look anywhere but at Jill’s accepting gaze. “I feel like I’m failing you. Again.”

“This isn’t failing me,” Jill promised her. She forced Lindsay’s hands out of her pockets and held them between her own. “Lindsay, I’m so scared you’re going to do anything to catch this guy. I’m scared you’re going to end up on a slab in Claire’s office before it’s over with.”

The inspector swallowed and cast her gaze about for the reporter once more before her eyes locked on Jill’s. “I don’t want to let you down.”

“You dying would do that,” Jill said bluntly. “And the way you’ve been going... Cindy slowed it down, Linz, but Arnold taking me sped it back up. You’ve been on a one way trip to hell ever since the Kiss-Me-Not killer claimed his first victim.”

Lindsay didn’t deny it, and Jill saw that as a breakthrough she and Claire never thought they’d witness.

“Honey,” Jill said softly. “I don’t just want you to take the time, I need you to. I need you in my life, Linz. So does Claire.” Jill’s blue eyes lifted and caught sight of Cindy headed their way. “And so does Lois Lane over there.”

Her eyes brightening with unshed tears, Lindsay smiled weakly as Jill leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips.

“Hey!” Cindy said as she walked up. “No kissing my girlfriend,” she joked.

Jill smiled as she took a cup of coffee from the redhead. “She’s all yours. I actually need to visit the ladies room.” She smiled encouragingly at Lindsay, deciding this really was for the best, before she left her two friends alone.

Cindy watched her go, not sure what she felt at seeing Jill kiss Lindsay with such easy familiarity. “So... what was that about?”

Lindsay turned to look at her. “Um... I think I just got her blessing.”

“Blessing?”

“To run away with you for a week.”

Cindy blinked and stared at her lover. “What?” Her phone rang and Cindy jumped, her heart starting to hammer as she considered Lindsay’s words. “Hang on.” She snatched up the receiver. “Crime desk, Cindy Thomas.”

“I’m glad you survived.”

For a string of heartbeats, Cindy felt like she couldn’t breathe. “David?” she said more for Lindsay’s benefit than to be polite. “Is that you?”

Lindsay moved closer, slipping her cell phone out and punching Jacobi’s number. “I need a trace on this number now,” she almost whispered before rattling off Cindy’s number by memory.

“You remember my voice.” It was a statement rather than a question. “I’m sorry for what I had to do to you,” Arnold continued. “But you’re her friend. I know you understand. You did what you had to do to save her in court. Now I must do what I have to in order to save her soul.”

Cindy stalled as Lindsay made a motion with her hand to keep him talking. “And beating her with a pipe was going to save her soul?”

“I just want her to know the kingdom of Heaven.” His voice was weak and he sounded like he was in pain.

Cindy swallowed the bile she could feel rising in her throat. She glanced helplessly at Lindsay. “You were going to kill her.”

“It’s the only way. Don’t you understand? I had to drive the sin from her. Make her repent so she could know the glory of God. Please, you have to make your readers understand. Your paper calls me a murderer, a serial killer. It isn’t true.”

“Jacobi?” Lindsay demanded as she saw Jill returning.

“We’re closing in. Keep him talking,” her partner replied.

Lindsay met Cindy’s gaze and held it.

“Can we meet somewhere?” Cindy suggested as she tried to ignore Jill. If she focused on her friend she’d lose it. “You can tell me your side of the story.”

Jill stiffened when she realized what was happening... who was on the other end of the phone. Lindsay gripped her hand and kept her grounded, kept her from running away in fear.

“I only wanted to save her,” Arnold said and he began to cry. “I’ve failed her. I failed God.”

Cindy shuddered and looked beseechingly at Lindsay.

“Got him!” Jacobi’s voice was loud enough to be heard by the three of them. “Corner of 5th and Main. Payphone.”

Lindsay squeezed Jill’s hand and gave Cindy one last long look. “On my way,” she said in a low voice to her partner before snapping the phone closed. “Keep him talking,” she whispered to her lover before pivoting and running away.

Cindy glanced at Jill who looked like she was ready to chase after Lindsay. Something was going on between them, some secret that made the reporter sick to think about. Jill looked terrified for Lindsay, and it took everything Cindy had not to hang up the phone and run after her lover. “Tell me how you failed, David,” Cindy managed. She closed her eyes as she began to listen to the ramblings of a madman.

Why didn’t she understand?

David held onto the side of the phone booth, gripping it as pain pulsed through him. He could feel one of his bandages soaking through as his stitches gave way and his blood began to flow anew. “Please,” he begged. “Help me save her. You have to help me save her. You risked your career for her. You risked your life. Help me save her immortal soul. Bring her to me. You have to...”

A hand came down, terminating the call. David turned his head and looked into the blue eyes of the person suddenly next to him.

“Brother,” the newcomer said. “God has sent me to help.” He smiled.

David shook his head in confusion. It was getting so hard to think clearly. The pain was too much. It was everywhere. “God sent you?” he asked weakly, hopefully.

“Yes.” The man smiled, his sky blue eyes crinkling at the corners. “You can call me Peter.”

Blood was everywhere when Lindsay arrived a mere minute before the black and whites. It was smeared on the receiver, drops of it peppered the concrete at her feet, but there was no sign of the man who'd left them.

Lindsay pivoted, her dark eyes looking everywhere for him, for some place for him to hide. But there was nothing.

Nothing.

She yelled and kicked at the phone, sending the receiver dangling and swaying haphazardly. The dial tone mocked her as she stepped away, turning her back on yet another failure. Cindy had called her, had warned her when Arnold had just abruptly hung up. He'd had a thirty second head start on her. Thirty damn seconds.

Jacobi pulled up, brakes screeching. He bolted from the car only to slow down as Lindsay shook her head.

"He knew we were coming."

"He knew we were tracing the call," Jacobi guessed as other squad cars began to descend on the area.

Lindsay shook her head and kept pacing. "He kept talking to Cindy. He wasn't thinking clearly. Dammit!" She kicked Jacobi's police issue vehicle.

Jacobi looked less than pleased but he didn't scold her. "It's like someone tipped him off."

"Who in the hell would tip this guy off?" she demanded.

Jacobi had no answer.

"Have a seat, brother."

David did as he was told, settling into the pew with relief. The church he found himself in was under renovation. Plastic sheeting protected the stained glass, causing the afternoon sunlight to bathe the sanctuary in gauzy, muted colors. Warm air blew in from the open doorways and sawdust drifted lazily around him. The room smelled of Murphy's oil and wood, two scents that soothed his frenzied soul. "You are a saint among men, Peter."

Peter merely smiled. "Call me Pete, and I doubt many would think so."

"God sent you. He sent you to save me so I can continue to do my work." David bent forward and crossed himself as he stared longingly at the beautiful crucifixion before him. It was larger than the one at St. Vincent's, its colors vibrant and beckoning.

"Jill Bernhardt," Pete said softly.

"Yes." David nodded vigorously as sweat began to trickle down the sides of his face. "I must save her."

Pete moved behind him, his eyes fixed on the crucifix as well. "She has sinned much," he agreed.

"But her soul can still be saved."

"Perhaps," Pete said. "But right now, the only soul you should worry about is your own."

David felt the rosary come around his throat. He was jerked backward, into Pete's larger bulk, as his saint turned into his destroyer. David choked, feeling his lungs scream for air. He clawed at the man behind him, but he was too weak to fight for long, had lost too much blood to put up much of a struggle.

Pete tightened his makeshift garrote, smiling as blood began to ooze from under the rosary and slip down Arnold's neck. "You should have stayed away from Jill Bernhardt," he breathed. "She's a friend, you know," he said casually. "But you know your greatest sin?" he whispered into Arnold's ear. "You hurt Lindsay Boxer."

Arnold pawed weakly at Pete's hold as his body began to shudder and thrash.

"And Lindsay Boxer is mine." With a twist, Pete snapped the man's neck, smiling in satisfaction as Arnold's body slumped to the floor of the sanctuary. He looked back up at the crucifix and his smile broadened. "You like your imagery, Dave," Pete said to the dead man. "Well so do I. Nothing like a little dramatic flair to capture the police and press' attention."

He left San Francisco's latest serial killer on the floor and went in search of rope. He had work to do.

Cindy, Jill and Claire turned at the chime of the elevator, relieved to see Lindsay walk through the doors when they parted.

Lindsay's gaze went to Jill first and she shook her head.

Jill closed her eyes and sank back down onto the corner of Cindy's desk. She wasn't sure what to feel. Fear that Arnold was still out there or relief that Lindsay hadn't killed him.

Cindy met Lindsay halfway, wrapping her arms around the taller woman and just holding her. "What happened?" she murmured into the sweet smelling skin on Lindsay's neck.

"I think someone tipped him off," Lindsay admitted. "Witnesses saw a black panel van pull up. They said a blonde-haired man in his mid-thirties got out and hung up the phone."

"And he drove Arnold away?" Cindy asked incredulously, still not releasing her hold on her lover. Her hands mapped the familiar territory of Lindsay's back and she was pleased when she felt some of the tension leaving Lindsay's tall frame.

"Yeah."

"So maybe Arnold does have a disciple," Claire pondered out loud.

Lindsay looked at her. "He got help. That much is at least true."

"Who would help that guy?" Jill wanted to know.

Lindsay shook her head again and pulled Cindy tighter. She looked at her duffle bag that was sitting next to Cindy's desk, exactly where she'd left it, before running off after Arnold.

Jill noticed where Lindsay was looking, could see the expression of longing enter her friend's eyes. "It's okay, Lindsay," she promised. "You should still go."

Cindy turned around in confusion. "Go where?"

"I came here to run away with you for a week," Lindsay admitted wearily.

The reporter's head snapped back in Lindsay's direction. "What?"

"I should never have worked this case," Lindsay admitted. "Not after my dad, after Harris... I let my pride get in the way, and I put us all at risk."

"Linz..." Claire began.

Lindsay held up her hand. "I need to take some time. Figure some things out. Not the least of which is if I still want to keep being a cop."

Cindy swallowed and watched her lover worriedly. "Lindsay..." She shook her head. She'd known Lindsay was retreating further and further into her dark thoughts, but she'd naively believed she could hold onto her, keep at least one foot planted in the light.

“You should go,” Jill said again before her eyes drifted to Cindy. “Both of you. This case has torn all of us up. Hell this year has torn all of us up. We should all go the hell away.”

“And leave Arnold out there?” Cindy asked almost angrily.

“The entire San Francisco Police Department is looking for him,” Jill replied. “What makes us so damn special that we think we could find him first?”

“So that’s it? You’re all just giving up?” Cindy couldn’t believe it. “After all we’ve been through? After all he put us through? You would just walk away?” She felt Lindsay’s touch on her shoulder and she turned to look at her lover again.

“Cindy, we’re just trying to...” Lindsay sighed. “We’re trying to save our souls here,” she confessed, appreciating the irony of the statement given the killer they were chasing. “You can’t tell me that this case hasn’t hurt you... that it’s not weighing on you...”

“I thought you’d stop at nothing to catch this guy. That you’d kill yourself to stop him before he hurt anyone else.” Cindy was shaking as she spoke.

“The old me would have,” Lindsay admitted. “But then I fell in love with you.” Lindsay swallowed. “And I don’t... I’m not ready to...”

“And she wants a life with you,” Jill said for her inarticulate friend. “She’s not all about the job anymore.”

Lindsay cupped Cindy’s cheeks, her thumbs lightly skimming the smooth skin. “We’ll stay until they catch him or until he turns up dead. But the minute we know he’s been found...”

“You’ll take me away?” Cindy asked with a hesitant smile.

“Wherever you want to go,” Lindsay vowed.

Both confused and hopeful, Cindy sank back into Lindsay’s embrace.

The inspector looked at her friends over the top of the reporter’s head. They were both smiling tiredly at her.

“About time you figured it all out, skipper,” Claire murmured.

“I had a little help from my friends,” Lindsay said as she looked at Jill and winked. The attorney’s smile became more pronounced.

Claire’s phone chose that moment to buzz. She unclipped it and answered. “Washburn.”

The others watched the medical examiner as she listened, her smile vanishing as her gaze jerked up to Lindsay's brown eyes.

"I'll be right there." Claire hung up, her heart hammering as she weighed what to share after the heavy moment they had all found themselves in.

"What is it?" Jill asked.

"It's Arnold," Claire said slowly.

"What about him?" Lindsay demanded.

"His body was found in St. Michael's Church... the one that's being renovated three blocks down from the Hall."

All four women went silent as they absorbed the news.

Slowly, Jill slipped from the desk, picked up the duffle bag and handed it to Lindsay. "Time to go," she said softly.

"I should go to the scene," Lindsay murmured.

"I need to write the story," Cindy protested.

"You need to be together," Claire disagreed. "You need to go live and get away from all this death for a while."

Lindsay looked at Jill as if asking permission.

"There'll always be another case, another story." Jill smiled as she tried to process that she was free now, safe. She was also angry, angry that she'd been deprived of justice. She pushed the thoughts to the back of her mind, deciding she'd ride with Claire to the scene and see Arnold's corpse for herself. Then she could let go of the fear. For now, her friends were more important. "Go, you two." She touched Lindsay's shoulder. "I'm safe now. He can't hurt me anymore."

Lindsay took a breath and looked at Cindy. "How about it, Lois Lane? You willing to run away with me?"

Cindy finally smiled, feeling the weight of the last six months slip from her shoulders. "Take me away, officer."

The smile that transformed Lindsay's face was a sight to behold.

“You really don’t have to do this,” Claire told Jill as they made their way past sawhorses and lumber to climb the steps of the church. St. Michael’s was small but pretty and Claire was angry that Arnold had gotten to die in such a Godly, beautiful place. Sometimes there was no justice in the world.

But it wasn’t her place to understand God’s plan. She just had to accept it and hope at some point she would figure it all out.

“Yes, I do,” Jill vowed. She brushed a lock of her hair out of her eyes as the wind whipped up. She could smell sawdust and paint as they stepped inside. “So where do you think they’re going?”

“Lindsay and Cindy?” Claire asked as they ducked under another round of police tape.

“Yeah,” Jill said almost on a sigh.

“Does it matter?” Claire replied, hoping her friends were beating tracks out of San Francisco as they spoke.

Jill’s blue eyes tracked to Claire’s face and she flashed a tiny, brief smile. “Lucky bastards,” she joked faintly.

“Ah-ah,” Claire remonstrated. “House of the Lord.”

Jill rolled her eyes as several police officers moved aside for them. They were suddenly in the church, and Jill felt her breath catch as she heard Claire’s do the same.

David Arnold had not died from the gunshot wounds he’d received in his gunfight with Lindsay. He was roped to the crucifixion in a disturbing parody of Christ. Even his feet and hands had been staked into the religious symbol.

“Mother of God,” Claire whispered.

“DDA Bernhardt.” Inspector Maggie Snow’s voice made them both tear their horrified gazes away from the scene. “You shouldn’t be here,” Maggie said as she reached Jill’s side. She grabbed the attorney’s elbow and tried to lead her from the room, but Jill jerked free.

“If there is anyone who deserves to see this, it’s me,” Jill countered roughly. She brushed past the inspector and moved toward Arnold’s body. He was hanging considerably high and his features weren’t easy to make out, but Jill knew it was him. She would never forget that face. Her steps slowed, as she got closer, as she got a better look at his features. Something was wrong. Something was off. Arnold’s chin was against his chest, partially obscuring the lower half of his face, but there was an odd shadow...

A shiver wracked Jill's body when she thought about what that shadow reminded her of...

"Jill," Claire spoke finally. "Maybe..." She lapsed into silence as her friend walked to the front of the church. Claire glanced worriedly at the inspector.

Maggie pointed at the ladder they'd set up next to the body. "Thought you'd want a look before we cut him down." She took a breath. "Sorry to call you in on this one, Doc."

"I was on duty," Claire replied without rancor.

"Should I call in Boxer?"

Claire hesitated. "No," she said in almost a whisper. She would catch heat when Lindsay got back, but that was okay. With a sigh, Claire followed Jill.

The medical examiner hesitated next to her friend. They both stared at the body for a long, silent moment. Claire finally turned her head and looked for confirmation of what she was seeing from Jill. Jill's blue eyes were wide and terrified when they met Claire's. They couldn't be seeing what they thought they were.

They just couldn't.

A few minutes later, Claire was at the top of the ladder. She wasn't especially fond of heights and her grip on the wood was almost painful. Claire hadn't looked at Arnold once as she climbed, keeping her eyes focused on the rungs instead. Now she had to look, had to do her job, and Claire took a deep breath and prepared to gaze into the dead features of the man who had almost ruined everything that mattered to her.

Nothing could have prepared her, however, for what she saw when she finally looked upon him. It hadn't been a shadow. It hadn't been a trick of the light. She and Jill had seen what they were both afraid they had. The shock was so intense, the ensuing wave of horror so terrifying she almost toppled off the ladder.

"Claire?" Jill's voice was sharp and strained as she saw the ladder shudder.

"What is it?" Snow yelled up to the medical examiner.

Claire felt a heaviness press down on her chest as angry tears sprang to her eyes. She looked down at Jill, saw her friend's eyes narrow as the truth was silently conveyed. Claire licked her lips; her voice was ragged when she spoke.

"His lips are sewn shut."

FADE TO BLACK