

## *Begin Again*

“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.

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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.”

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### *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.

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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.

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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.

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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.”

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“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.

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“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."

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"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.

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## ***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.

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“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."

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"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.

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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.

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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.

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### ***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.

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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.

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“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.

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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.”

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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.

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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.

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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.”

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*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.

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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.”

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*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.*

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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