

***Leap of Faith***  
***By Demeter***

The call came over the police scanner just when they were about to head back to the station.

*"3200 block of Sacramento Street with California tag 3-6-2-Mary-Whiskey-Bravo on a blue Chevy truck possible 102."*

Lindsay groaned at the description given by the officer. "Don't you just love those." A drunk driver. Nothing she really wanted to deal with at the end of a day like this. One murderer caught, the one who had inspired him, far more dangerous and unpredictable, still out there. Didn't she qualify just for a small break? High hopes, weren't they, because they were too damn close to the location of that vehicle.

*"10-4, 141,"* the dispatcher acknowledged .

Just maybe, this was ending as a regular traffic stop. They should be so lucky.

*"Headquarters, the vehicle is not stopping." Or not. "We're heading east bound on Sacramento Street."*

*"Unit close to back,"* came the dispatcher's voice.

"Unit 312 is enroute," Jacobi responded calmly. They were now on Washington Street, parallel to Sacramento. The next corner would be Leavenworth, the most likely way for the evasive driver to go. With a little luck, they could cut him off there.

Lindsay winced a bit as they sped around the corner. "Just whatever you do, remember this is my car."

"Always, partner."

"And try not to hit that--"

It was Jacobi's turn to wince.

"Trashcan."

*"10-4, 312. Headquarters will have Code 5 on channel one,"* the dispatcher informed other units to stay out of the communication.

*"Suspect vehicle now northbound on Leavenworth Street,"* the officer driving unit 141 updated.

"312, I'm southbound on Leavenworth Street," Jacobi returned.

Only moments later, they could see the vehicle in question, barely under the driver's control who was going way too fast, approaching head-on. Behind them, a police cruiser rounded the corner. 141. Nowhere left to go.

Could be said for either of us, Lindsay thought uneasily. She trusted Jacobi. He was a good driver. It was that person in the car coming towards them who was unpredictable.

"I like this car, Jacobi. I don't want to replace--"

At the very last moment, the other driver yanked the steering wheel to the side, slamming his car straight into the corner of a brick wall. Everything happened in the span of minutes; it was a near miracle no other cars were involved.

*"Headquarters, we have a 518, 518 at Clay and Leavenworth, we need fire and medics..."*

Jacobi hit the brakes, and they both stepped outside, their service weapons drawn. It didn't look like anyone would be able to run from a scene like this, but stranger things had happened.

The driver's side had been smashed together by the impact with the unforgiving brick wall; the driver lay slumped over in his seat, his face a bloody mess. Jacobi, who had reached inside to feel for a pulse, just shook his head.

In the passenger's seat sat a young woman. Her blonde hair was matted with blood, her eyes closed, but the small, pain-filled moan alerted them to the fact that she was still alive.

"Miss? Can you hear me?"

Lindsay leaned closer, almost gagging from the overpowering smell of blood, realizing the woman was not only injured, she was also heavily pregnant. *Oh no.* She yanked at the door handle, not very surprised when it didn't give right away. She tried harder, only vaguely aware of Jacobi running back to her car to update the dispatcher on the situation.

The smells of gasoline and smoke were a dead giveaway that they probably wouldn't have enough time to wait until the firemen arrived. Lindsay gave the door another, desperate pull, the sting of breaking fingernails barely registering, as the door finally opened.

It was tricky; she didn't know what injuries the woman had, and if she was making it any worse moving her. With the smells growing stronger though, it was clear that waiting would dissipate any chance she had.

Carefully, Lindsay removed the seatbelt, startled when she realized the woman's eyes were open, watching her intently.

"I think I can move," she said, tears running down her face from both pain and fear. She seemed to fully understand the seriousness of her situation. "Just whatever you do, please help my child. Please."

She was able to stand, even walk with support, but taking in her dress that was blood-soaked in the front down to her legs, it was sadly clear to Lindsay that this hope would be crushed soon. It took a lot less than a severe car accident to miscarry.

Just how did that happen?

One moment, she had half-joked about Jacobi nearly hitting the trashcan sitting haphazardly on the edge of the sidewalk, the next her hands were a deep, wet red from the blood of a woman who was begging her to save her child.

"It'll be okay," she said, almost choking on the lie, even as they stumbled for cover behind the sector car, a couple of seconds before the Chevy's tank blew up.

She shielded the woman with her own body best she could, feeling blood soak her own shirt. Drawing back, Lindsay could see the woman's eyes starting to glaze over, but her fingers gripped Lindsay's with surprising strength. "Promise me," she whispered.

"Come on, stay with me here!"

Her grip loosened.

"I promise!"

The woman was already unconscious, though, but now the paramedics took over. Lindsay closed her eyes for a second, then she pushed herself up from the ground just in time to see Jacobi come over.

"They got the guy out before it blew up, so -- Jesus!" he exclaimed.

She looked down at herself and winced. Not a pretty sight to behold. "It's not mine."

"You okay?"

"I said it's not--"

He gave her a 'humor me' look, and Lindsay shrugged, acknowledging he wasn't talking about any physical injuries any longer. "I will be once I am out of these clothes. Really," she added, slightly impatient.

She would be. This wasn't even their case. Tom wouldn't come knocking on her door tonight, and she wouldn't be crazy enough to -- the thought seemed so absurd these days that it made her smile, utterly inappropriate at the moment, but Jacobi had caught on anyway.

"Just make sure she doesn't see you like this," he said.

Lindsay clapped him on the shoulder, then winced again at the feel of the wet, sticky fabric moving against her bare skin. "Thanks for the advice, partner."

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He smiled to himself as he listened to the latest codes crackling over the police scanner. One dead, the woman severely injured. They had both sinned alright, even though he couldn't care less if they'd repent or not. They weren't among the chosen ones, but a mere distraction.

It had worked better than he could have imagined.

It was a fine coincidence to have Inspector Lindsay Boxer on the scene, the one who shared a bed with the reporter. Surprising that she wasn't here, but she was bound to be busy with another case, another story of hers. *The Hallelujah Man*.

He was going to get to know them better, both of them, but there was time. He turned off the police scanner and left the room. There was a lot to prepare for Judgment Day.

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## *Act One*

There were really no coincidences in life, just good timing and bad timing, Cindy thought as she caught Scott's smug smile at her. At 7:30 in the morning, here in the conference room, she couldn't have cared less about the office grapevine and his too-obvious attempts to steal one of her most important stories from under her. Since she'd been given primary on the Hallelujah Man, he was under pressure, and they both knew it.

Cindy wasn't worried about him, though. Whatever connection he had to the New Faith, a religious group who had gotten headlines when one of their members was killed in a pursuit with the police, she had a better one. Cindy was sure of that.

So far, New Faith was under close observation by Children's Services. Unlike most religious groups, they were eclectic, open to members of all faiths. Less open were their rules and guidelines for the lives of the women and men they took under their wing. While their doctrine and conservative propaganda was certainly enough to attract the interest of someone like the Hallelujah Man, it hadn't been said out loud yet.

It was only a matter of time, though.

New Faith was relatively new, but had attracted nearly a thousand members out in Arizona where they had started, two more groups on the East coast, and if their website was to be believed, two more in Europe.

Cindy had done her homework, even if her mind had been on other things lately. The leader, Michael Beaumont, was ex-army with a degree in biology and chemistry. He'd served in the Middle East for nearly six years, came back with the claim that God had told him to build the New Faith. Not a few believed him.

He had moved to San Francisco three months ago, leaving his longtime friend Gideon Ralph in charge of the Arizona compound.

Now the Register was going to run a story on them. If there was any connection to the Hallelujah Man, small as it might be, it would be Cindy's anyway. But she had one more ace up her sleeve.

"The FBI is now looking into them, but not just because of their potential for another Waco. Scott has something that seems to be related to your story, Thomas."

Cindy barely refrained herself from rolling her eyes. Boss-speak for 'if you haven't got something better, it might not be your story much longer.'

She wasn't much concerned, and she had a bunch of emails in her inbox, starting months ago, to keep her relaxed about this subject. "So?" she just said, and Scott's grin brought the 'cat that got the canary' analogy to mind.

"They ordered a lot of new Bibles from a local store. One from that order ended up in Christian Blake's fridge."

Cindy sat up straighter. That was indeed a surprise. Not the only secret kept from her, was it? She couldn't dwell on that now, though.

"I know an ex-member who was with them at the time," Scott continued. "He's willing to give me an exclusive."

Cindy smiled sweetly back at him. Bad timing for all those fears acting up inside of her; the thoughts that had kept her awake nearly all of last night and made her want to cry even now.

However, good timing for her career.

"I've got something better," she said. "I know a way inside."

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*The night before...*

Lindsay pulled her front door closed behind her, so tired she barely took in her surroundings. Lost in thought, she shook her head at the man they'd caught, a murderer trying to imitate a serial killer's M.O. and failing so badly on all counts.

If only all criminals were that stupid... if only Hallelujah Man was. However, he had yet to make his cardinal mistake, the one that would make them catch him. They had gotten closer, though. No way the creep would count down to seven.

Blake, Dellan, Martin, Watkins. She didn't need a room full of articles and gruesome crime scene photographs to bring these names home with her.

In between, the thought of Beatrice Lazar crept into her mind just as unbidden, her desperate plea to save her child. No matter how much the girls had reassured her that there was nothing more she could have done to help the woman, a tiny sliver of pain remained. The feeling of failure. Because it had already been there, and Lindsay wasn't quite sure if it would ever go away... but she didn't want to think about it tonight.

One step into the living room, she nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw the man sitting on the couch.

He was smiling at her, as if nothing was wrong at all. Also, he'd brought a bouquet of white roses, just like that first time, and put it into a vase on the coffee table.

*Too sure of yourself, aren't you?* She'd felt sympathy towards him, not so long ago, because Lindsay knew what it was like to be the one who was left behind. Now, she only felt anger.

"Pete! What the hell are you doing here?"

Lindsay had come home with the hope of having a late dinner with Cindy, talk shop a little, then cuddle up next to her and fall into a sleep not interrupted for the next eight hours, blessed oblivion. If there was anything she didn't need tonight, it was the conversation she was sure was going to follow.

She wanted Pete out of the apartment, before Cindy arrived. She wanted him out of her life, but as it seemed, that wasn't as easily accomplished as she'd thought it would be.

His smile widened, as he ignored her obvious irritation. "Can't I come to see the woman I love? We haven't seen each other in months."

Oh, that was rich. "I'd call it breaking and entering," she said dryly.

"It isn't. I've still got the keys for your apartment," he pointed out.

Damn, Lindsay thought. She'd forgotten that. *Careless*. She let herself be pulled into a hug simply because she was too tired to argue, but backed out of it rapidly when his hands started to wander.

"That's right. I'd like them back if you don't mind." Lindsay slumped into the armchair, feeling even more exhausted than she had just a moment ago, if that was possible.

"I thought we were clear on this." She noticed that Martha was very quietly growling, the way she used to do when she didn't agree to a visitor. Then again, Lindsay thought wryly, she had had that same growl for Tom, the night no one had ever talked about. Martha just didn't like men very much, except for Jacobi.

Martha loved Cindy even when she was the reason Martha had to sleep on the couch a lot lately. That thought made Lindsay want to smile, but she caught herself in time.

"I know we talked," Pete said, sounding calm and sensible, even though his words suggested the opposite. "I can't accept it. I want you back, Lindsay, and I'm willing to fight for you."

"That's... amazing. It's just that... I'm sorry. I hadn't planned this, but you know that I'm with someone else now. I guess we just weren't meant to be." All else was literally none of his business.

"I think you're wrong," he said quietly. "You don't really mean it. I believe you're just confused at the moment, with that girl, whoever she is. I'm patient, you know. I can wait until you see it, too."

"Never gonna happen. I think you'd better go." If the words had come out somewhat harshly, Lindsay couldn't bring herself to regret it. There was something about his tone that she didn't like, and that was seriously testing her patience. Sure, breaking up in a video conference hadn't been the most sensitive thing, but there had been no better alternative. At least she'd done it face to face, kind of.

Pete's mistake if he had to come all the way here to second-guess her.

He stood up, still wearing that friendly, cordial expression. Lindsay followed him to the door, and they said goodbye.

It wasn't until an instant later that she realized he still hadn't given her the keys back. With a curse, Lindsay yanked the door open, startling Martha, and hurried down the stairs. "Hey, wait!"

Pete turned on the stairs, returning to meet her on the porch, the smile reaching all the way to his eyes.

"Keys," Lindsay reminded him, utterly blindsided when he pulled her close and kissed her. Anger flared hotly within her at his complete lack of listening to anything she'd said. She pushed him back. Firmly.

He answered her glare with another of those smiles she had once been excited to see. "See you around, Lindsay. And remember - we were made for each other."

Just for a split-second, she had seen something else in his usually kind eyes. Disbelief? Ire? But it was gone just as quickly, replaced by friendly, unshakeable Pete, who handed her the keys without any further argument.

Back in the apartment, she told Martha, "Now, that was weird." The dog barked once in agreement. Shaking her head, Lindsay pulled the front door closed, wondering why Cindy wasn't here yet. She'd just grab a quick shower and then call her.

On a night like this, Lindsay just wanted to make sure that she was alright. That, and after Pete's strange visit, she really longed to see her.

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There was no way in hell this day could get any worse.

Up until this moment, Cindy hadn't even been sure what had spooked her most: Pete appearing literally out of nowhere, or the utter conviction, arrogance, he carried about himself. Something about too-good-to-be-true Mr. Scone Boy Pete had seriously freaked her out when she'd run into him in the parking garage with no one else around. He'd been nothing if not the perfect gentleman, apologizing and all, but somehow his idea to enlist her help in winning Lindsay back had shaken her even more.

She'd been driving too fast, giggling at the idea of having to confess to Lindsay that she'd gotten a ticket, then nearly cried. Cindy wanted to be with her badly, to be reassured that Pete's plans were nothing but his own private illusion.

About ten minutes ago, Cindy had parked Maggie a bit of a distance from Lindsay's apartment, for the lack of a better spot. It hadn't saved her from witnessing the scene on the porch. Her heart clenched painfully as she flashed back on it again: Pete had already been there. Lindsay calling something she couldn't understand from that far, calling him *back*, and they had *kissed*.

Cindy had sat and stared in mute shock, literally stunned into immobility.

When her cell phone rang only a couple of minutes later, and the caller ID showed Lindsay's number, the spell broke. She punched the steering wheel hard, seconds ticking by until the pain registered with her - outside and inside.

The tears finally came.

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When Cindy finally answered her phone, Lindsay's relief was so profound she nearly snapped at her: "Where are you?" The memory of Officer Graham wanting to lead Cindy back onto the 'right path' was still too vivid. Among others, that, she figured, gave her right and reason to be cautious.

There was a small pause, some static, and then Cindy said, "Just a block away. I'll be there in a few."

"Good. I brought that pizza. It's still warm... I think."

Cindy chuckled. "I'll hurry." The attempt at humor aside, she sounded just as tired as Lindsay felt. Figures. She'd been working nearly the same hours as they'd been, closing in on the murderer of

Charles Moore, not to mention the HM case. "Please do. I've got plans for you," she whispered. Innocent as they were and involving mostly sleep, they were plans all the same. Lindsay loved how a comment like this could sometimes get Cindy all flustered and blushing, or on other occasions, evoke a reply in kind, but it seemed like tonight she was too tired for either, so Lindsay just let it go.

"Drive carefully," she said softly. "I love you."

It wasn't good timing with the Hallelujah Man still out there, but then again, she wouldn't let her life revolve around another serial killer for years to come, wouldn't let him kill another relationship she believed in. Maybe with the copycat amateur behind bars, she could beg a few days off, and they could just go... somewhere. It didn't really matter as long as it was far away from the demands of their jobs, just the two of them, so she could prove to Cindy that she mattered more than anything.

When it came down to it, she mattered more than any case, and that was as big a commitment as Lindsay had ever made before.

Since she had asked Cindy to help her take down the pictures from the attic, they were certainly clear on the subject.

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Cindy let herself into the apartment silently, but Martha happily pounding her tail on the floor in anticipation of her favorite visitor had obviously alerted Lindsay to her arrival.

She stood by the door for a moment, the inner movie playing, scene by scene: Her leaving the Register, running into Pete, until just a moment ago when she thought she had calmed down enough not to give herself away. Jealousy, fear and anger finally melting away as she stepped into Lindsay's arms, holding on *tight*.

"Whoa, I'm happy to see you too," Lindsay said with just a hint of teasing. Fresh from the shower, the familiar scent of black currant and vanilla wafted from her still wet hair. Her hands came up to cup Cindy's face, then she kissed her softly, pushing the doubts further away. Just not all of them.

*How long has Pete been in San Francisco? And, were you going to tell me about it, or is it just not that important?*

The questions stayed in the back of her mind, and Cindy nearly groaned in frustration at her inability to give voice to them. There she'd thought the Hallelujah Man was their biggest problem, the one obstacle that could make them stumble.

Cindy was willing to give Lindsay the benefit of doubt, though. Pete had seriously underestimated her if he really thought she'd give up that easily. Help him? *In your dreams.*

"I hope so. You promised dinner?"

There was just the slightest hesitation on Lindsay's part to let go, and Cindy was determined to see it as a good sign.

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They had sat down to eat in the kitchen, ending up throwing half of the pizza away. Lindsay figured

they were both simply too exhausted. Cindy claimed she still had some work to do even though her article on the copycat was done, while Lindsay spared a thought for the man who wasn't a religious nut, but an abusive ex who had cost a life and wrecked others nonetheless. Not unlike the guy who had died in the accident today, if you thought about it. There hadn't really been a good moment to talk about it yet, and maybe it was better not to bring it up at all. Leave it in the past. Just like Pete Raynor.

She frowned as she gazed at the used dishes, the thought of doing them now holding absolutely no appeal. "Let's leave them," she suggested, reaching out briefly for her fingers to brush Cindy's before she got up.

"Sure." Cindy smiled, but she looked pale in the kitchen light, shadows under her eyes.

She sat in the same spot, intently staring at the screen of her laptop when Lindsay returned a few minutes later, waiting in the doorway. "You coming?"

Cindy seemed almost startled, but then she cast Lindsay an apologetic glance. "I'm almost done. Soon, okay?"

Lindsay walked back into the kitchen to stand behind her, bending to drop a kiss on her neck. "Okay. Don't stay up too long."

She'd hoped for some wise-crack like 'Yes, mom', but Cindy just gave her a tired smile.

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Secrets. Cindy had some of her own. Not regarding their relationship, granted, and they wouldn't be so secret anymore by tomorrow, but still. She'd almost jumped out of her skin when Lindsay had come back and nearly seen what was on the screen, no article, but the email she'd been typing in answer to the many she'd gotten lately.

Today, or tomorrow, she could just tell that Lindsay wouldn't be happy about it. The meeting she had with her boss tomorrow would bring the final decision, but there weren't that many possible outcomes for this. Cindy clicked on 'Send', trying to keep at bay the fear that she'd just made a big mistake. Was it really a smart decision to leave with Pete hanging around?

She remained restless, waiting for the light to go out in the bedroom, did the dishes next - supposing nothing short of an earthquake would wake Lindsay from her sleep now. There was nothing left to do then, and Cindy aimlessly wandered around the apartment, from the kitchen to the living room, and back again.

Martha was watching her intently.

Cindy stood by the window, gazing out into the night, wondering if he was out there, the Hallelujah Man, watching them, laughing at them. Despising them, because they couldn't see anything in him but a sick psychopath, not God's tool as he believed himself to be.

It was only one of too many subjects weighing on her mind.

She turned her back to the window, starting at the sight of what she could only think of as an insult.

Her first impulse was to rush into the bedroom, shake Lindsay awake and ask her what the hell this

was supposed to be. She didn't. Cindy kept standing in the same spot until her breathing calmed, practicing breathing exercises she'd learned in her Yoga class - *letting go*. The hell she was letting go, but this would have to wait.

A small bouquet of white roses. Cindy didn't assume it had been left behind by any serial killer - or stalker. They usually engaged in a bit more grandeur. This was more the style of someone who thought he'd already arrived where he wanted to be.

*Screw you*, she thought, the rudeness oddly satisfying. She wouldn't hesitate to say it to his face, the next time they met, which hopefully happened... never.

Why had Lindsay kept the flowers? Of course, she had been nearly asleep on her feet. Carelessness?

The conflicting thoughts didn't leave, not in the time she spent in the bathroom, staring at her still somewhat shell-shocked expression in the mirror, not when she went into the bedroom without turning a light on, slipping under the covers next to Lindsay.

She scooted close, laying an arm around Lindsay's waist, holding her. No way, she wouldn't let go of her, serial killer obsessions and all. Never in her life had she loved anybody like this. The ego of a man who'd known Lindsay for two weeks just didn't count in comparison. Her resolve and the close contact were calming her a little, but Cindy already knew that sleep wouldn't come for a long time.

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*Present*

Jill stared at the mess on her desk with a sense of trepidation. Could it really be only Tuesday morning?

The case of Allan Pierce should have been cut and dry; he'd stolen a car, forced his pregnant ex-girlfriend to accompany him on the ride during which he'd managed to cause considerable damage to property. In the resulting pursuit by the police, he'd eventually wrecked the car. Pierce was killed, Beatrice Lazar had a miscarriage and barely survived the accident. On top of it all, it was found that Pierce had been drinking.

Cut and dry, right? Only that Lazar had retracted her statement that Pierce had abducted her; according to her, it was all one big misunderstanding resulting in the death of her baby and the father.

Adding fuel to the fire was the fact that both Lazar and Pierce were members of a religious commune just outside of San Francisco that was claiming foul play by the system whenever Children's Services knocked on their door.

Jill sighed, reaching for the coffee mug, knowing the contents had long gone cold. She wondered how Lindsay was holding up, as that case was obviously bringing up some sad memories - *again*, though this time she felt assured that her friend would find less dysfunctional ways to deal with them.

Beatrice, however, was now looking into suing the SFPD. Not that she had the money, so there was most likely someone else behind that plan, but the press would be interested in the case anyway.

After a short rap against the glass, the door was opened, and she looked up to see Cindy standing in the doorway. "Speak of the devil," Jill said, smiling, the sight of her friend lifting her spirits.

"Do you have a minute?" Cindy didn't comment on the greeting.

"Honestly? No, but I love you for interrupting this, even more so for the coffee you brought, so come on in."

Cindy's smile was hesitant, and a closer look revealed her pale complexion and bloodshot eyes. She closed the door behind her and took a seat.

"You look worse than I feel this morning. What happened?" Jill asked quietly. There was some more hesitation, but then Cindy shook her head as if confirming to herself that she was not going to talk about whatever was bothering her.

"I'm preparing for an assignment," she said instead, "and I was hoping you could tell me anything I might need to know about New Faith, before I go to join them."

Now Jill sat up straighter. "New Faith? Does Lindsay know about this?"

Cindy shrugged. "The meeting was this morning, and she was still asleep when I left. So I came here first."

Jill took a moment to absorb what she had just said - and what had been left unsaid, but remained between the lines. They had all seen each other only yesterday, after the arrest of one of the world's most stupid murderers who, unfortunately, had not been the Hallelujah Man. Jill hadn't picked up anything unusual from either Lindsay or Cindy, nothing that suggested this tension. Trouble in paradise?

"Okay, what do you need? These people are all over my desk anyway, since Lazar decided the SFPD is to blame for the death of Pierce and her miscarriage."

Cindy gazed at the papers strewn all over Jill's desk, though she seemed uncharacteristically distracted. "Yes. I have three days, and I don't even know where to start. The contents of their websites are rather vague."

"How are you going in?" Jill asked, wondering what Lindsay would have to say about it. Hell, she didn't like it, but at times, they had to remind themselves that none of them really had a say in Cindy's work assignments.

"A source." Cindy shrugged. "She keeps telling me that they're just harmless people, open to anyone willing to leave their sins behind and serve God, but if that were all, the FBI wouldn't be looking into them, would they?"

"Hardly. Why don't we meet tonight and I'll see what I can give you on them?"

"That would be great. You know, I'm wondering if it's really just a coincidence - this group getting on the FBI's radar at the same time the Hallelujah Man shows up. Do they know something that we don't?"

Cindy seemed to expect her to have a theory there, but Jill could only draw a blank. Hadn't Lindsay said the trace regarding the Bible order had gone nowhere? "New Faith has gotten a great deal of

attention lately," she said thoughtfully. "Okay, now talk to me. What is it--"

She didn't get to finish the sentence, as Denise entered her office after knocking briefly. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were busy," she said with a smirk.

Jill barely refrained herself from sighing. Whatever was up with Cindy, she probably wouldn't get to hear it tonight at Papa Joe's with Lindsay around, and knowing Denise, there would be no opportunity to talk about it beforehand either.

"I need to go anyway," Cindy said quickly. "See you later."

Great timing.

Jill gave her boss a smile that did nothing to hide the displeasure at the interruption. "So, what can I do for you?"

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Reaching out blindly, Lindsay's hand encountered soft fur, making her snap her eyes open and sit upright in bed. Martha yawned and settled down again.

"Ah, no, haven't we agreed that this wasn't such a good place for you to spend the night anymore?"

There was no reaction from her bedmate. "And if Cindy has to go to work early, that doesn't mean that rules are suspended," Lindsay lectured on, well aware that her words fell on deaf dog ears. She felt too good to care after a good night's sleep, deep and dreamless, but with the lingering sensation of Cindy's embrace. It had proven to be more healing than any talk about yesterday's incident could have been.

A quick check told her that Cindy had filled the coffeemaker before she went. "I love you," Lindsay murmured, inhaling the aroma of freshly ground beans. While the coffee was brewing, she went into the living room barefoot, stopping at the threshold.

At that moment, Lindsay had a hard time figuring out whom she was more mad at - Pete for being that insolent, getting a vase from the cupboard and arranging the flowers in it as though they had still been lovers, or herself, for forgetting to dispose of them. They were beautiful, granted, but she didn't want this reminder of their brief and ill-fated relationship, and she certainly hoped that--

The thought left her literally winded for an instant. Even if Cindy had seen them, she couldn't have known who they were from, could she? It had been a mistake, one that Lindsay didn't want to discuss any longer with anyone, least of all with Cindy, and God forbid, Pete himself.

She fed Martha and made herself breakfast, but her good mood was gone as she recalled yesterday's unexpected visit. Hopefully the last one - if he showed up again like this, she'd go to Jill for a restraining order.

Before she left for work, Lindsay threw the bouquet into the garbage, thinking ruefully that there was a metaphor in it somewhere - something allegedly beautiful turned awry.

She closed the lid of the can resolutely. There wasn't really time to dwell on past mistakes and regret. The copycat was behind bars now, but it was all the more a reminder of the serial killer who was still out there. She had a job to do. The time-out was over.

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Cindy was last to arrive at Papa Joe's, and given the conversation they'd had this morning, Jill suspected it had been on purpose, if this was the first time Lindsay was going to hear about her plans. This wasn't going to be easy... and Jill felt torn about it already. So far, the pursuit all over the city ending with Pierce's death was the most spectacular incident associated with New Faith, but there were other rumors that didn't die down.

The suspicion remained when a group like this cut itself off from the outside world. Extremist ideas always began simmering behind closed doors. And there were many children on the compound, too.

Uneasy with these thoughts, Jill directed her attention back to Cindy. She was hurried and breathless, but lacking the usual bounce to her step. Jill noticed that Lindsay was giving her worried sideways glances, but she seemed clueless.

"I guess you've waited for me to make the big revelation," Cindy began after ordering a coffee.

Jill just nodded, trying not to be aware of Claire's and Lindsay's questioning gazes.

"Alright then. I've got a new assignment this morning... and it will require me to go away for two weeks." Cindy looked up at Jill briefly, then went back to studying the tabletop. "The Register is running a story on New Faith. I know someone who can take me inside."

Lindsay was silent, which could never be a good sign, her face unreadable, though this had to be a surprise for her.

"Why them?" asked Claire. "As far as I remember, they have been around here for quite some time, and they're by far not the only conservative group. What is different about them?"

"Well, you tell me. Why not start with the fact that they seem to use the same bookstore as someone else we all know?"

For long moments, there was an awkward silence in the wake of her question.

"It's not like we held something from you, Cindy. Not this time." Lindsay's words sounded honest, but they held a hint of regret, for sins of omission then and now, and for the fact that they'd probably cause her to lose the argument that was going to follow. "We looked into that Bible order, but there was nothing to suggest that there was a connection to the killer."

"You could have told me," Cindy insisted.

She wasn't entirely wrong about it. It had been months ago, the first and only time they had intentionally lied to her about inside information, but she hadn't forgotten. Jill thought that neither of them had. It was a barely healed wound, easily torn open.

"There was no point." The impatience was subtle, but noticeable to everyone who knew Lindsay. From the way Cindy's jaw tightened, she had noticed it, too.

"The truth is," Lindsay continued, "I don't think that the New Faith people are connected to our man in any way, however I do think that they are potentially dangerous, so I'd rather have you do your interview off their compound."

Cindy gave an unhappy laugh at that. "Not a chance. Scott is already breathing down my neck; I need more than just an interview. I need to find out how New Faith works from the inside, and I can. Remember the girl I knew in Heather's kindergarten class? Her mom became a member right after the shooting. She invited me."

Lindsay shook her head. "I don't like it. Do you even know who you're dealing with? Even if HM never set foot on their grounds, Beaumont, the guy who started New Faith, came here a few months ago from Arizona. They call him a *prophet*."

"I've been known to do research, Linz," Cindy said, a flash of heat in her voice. "Beaumont's got a degree in--"

"Biology," Lindsay cut in. "Worked for the army 'til 2003, then got *transformed* by his Faith. Cindy, there's absolutely no way you're going undercover in a group of potential terrorists."

"That is not for you to decide."

Jill winced, sharing a worried glance with Claire.

Lindsay tried to look annoyed, but didn't do a very good job to mask the raw hurt underneath. She had always tried her best to keep Cindy out of dangerous situations, but since they'd made the transition from friends to lovers, the obligation was even stronger. It didn't go unnoticed.

"I have to do this," Cindy continued, softer now. "And I'm going to need your help," she admitted.

Aware of the expectant looks on her, Lindsay murmured, "This is crazy."

Jill thought of the copies she had made while Denise was on her lunch break, and brought as promised. As for now, there was a lot of suspicion of New Faith. If any of this proved to be true, 'crazy' was a rather optimistic expression.

"Please."

That made Jill smile, because if Cindy used that look more often, it was easy to tell why Lindsay could hardly ever tell her 'no'. Resistance - futile. Indeed, you couldn't have missed the shift in Lindsay's composure, the relenting.

"I could talk to the cops who investigated the death of Allan Pierce," she offered finally. "There must be a reason why Lazar suddenly turned around and now wants to sue the department. I bet someone higher up gave her the tip, maybe Beaumont himself."

Jill rolled her eyes. "There's no way she could ever win such a case. It could be a distraction. It sure causes our office a lot of work."

"I can go over Pierce's autopsy report, see if there's anything unusual." Claire's eyes met hers for a moment, questioningly, and Jill shook her head in response. *I don't know what's up with them either.*

"Thanks." Cindy finally smiled, albeit with the hesitation Jill had seen on her all day.

"And I guess I can give you some advice on going... undercover." Lindsay was clearly not okay

with this, but she made an attempt at least.

"Too much information." Claire smirked.

"Hey, I didn't mean..." Lindsay protested.

It had the desired effect though, making everyone laugh for the first time since they'd arrived here. Jill couldn't help but feel the sentiment would be short-lived for all of them. There was a variety of reasons for investigating New Faith, and not a single reason that was not depressing in itself.

The amount of danger - hard to gauge.

She finally produced the manila folder she'd brought with her. "And that's what you get from me."

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"Please, don't go."

"What?" Cindy couldn't think of anything more intelligent to say. It could have been the absurdity of the statement, or maybe just the fact that her knees were weak from the frantic way they'd started making out here up against the door of Lindsay's apartment the moment they'd come in.

"Say you can't make it. You have your hands full with HM anyway. For once, let someone else have the story, and let's disappear for a week."

Cindy looked up at Lindsay, searching her face in the near dark. Trying to form any rational thought with Lindsay's hands all over her. She couldn't be serious about this, could she? Not Lindsay, who had given a serial killer's victims room in her own home. Was doing it again, if they were all honest, just not in the extreme graphic way it had happened last time.

"It's only a couple of weeks. Maybe less. You know I can't turn down that assignment, or Scott gets it. What's going on? You wouldn't drop everything in the middle of an investigation just to go on a vacation with me."

"You don't get it." If Lindsay was frustrated with the situation, she wasn't the only one.

"Maybe I don't. Because you'd never turn down a case just because I'd ask you to. Hell, I'd know better than to ask." Cindy flinched at the anger in her voice; worse, she knew where it was coming from, and it had nothing to do with their current argument.

She could tell that her words had hit home, because Lindsay had gone very still, maybe reminiscing on the moments they'd spent up in her attic. She didn't really have a lot of talking room where this subject was concerned.

"I'm sorry. I know you worry, but this is not a crazy risk I'm taking. It's plain work. I don't go, someone else will. How would you feel about the Hallelujah Man case being taken away from you?"

She half expected Lindsay to snort at her reasoning, but her lover's reaction was a different one.

"I have a bad feeling about this. They are... up to something." Subtly, she stepped a bit closer into Cindy's personal space, more seeking comfort than being demanding.

"Yeah, probably. Retrieving the money of their wealthier members."

"Your friend isn't all that wealthy. It can't be that alone."

"They are annoyingly conservative and probably condemning what we're doing. Right now." Sensing that Lindsay was about to give in, Cindy pulled her closer, sliding her hands under her shirt.

"The perfect environment for someone who thinks of himself a tool of God to punish the sinners. If not HM, then maybe another crazed individual."

Lindsay's voice had gone darker with the slight diversion of her attention. Though neither of them was exactly backing down, they both knew that this was a done deal; Cindy would go, and it only intensified the desperate pull between them.

"Then this will be my last opportunity to sin in a while."

She couldn't exactly say if Lindsay did it on purpose, a last attempt to hold her back, but Cindy didn't feel capable or even interested in analyzing it now.

As Lindsay bent to kiss her neck, she let the door support her, letting her head fall back. The infinite tenderness of the hands caressing her, starting to undress, warm fingers dancing over the skin revealed... Cindy was tempted. So very tempted. One entire week alone with Lindsay, a chance to leave the city and their jobs behind, it was indeed a heavenly prospect.

She also knew that as long as the Hallelujah Man was still out there, it wouldn't happen.

They might not have a lot of time, but they had tonight, and Cindy was determined to make the most of it. "We'll have that week," she said, her voice reduced to a breathless whisper. "No work, no cell phones, not even the club. Just us. Soon."

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Sarah was thrilled that Cindy had finally decided to follow her invitation, and she gave Cindy instructions needed for her first days with New Faith, from clothes to wear, to introductory classes to take, to the shared work. New Faith owned farmland, and they were nearly self-sufficient. Depending on their qualifications, NF members also taught or worked in administration.

Busy with all kinds of preparation, Cindy had hardly any time to obsess over the reason why she had accepted the assignment without even thinking, but it crept up on her at night. Despite the fact that Lindsay had been extra-attentive and gotten her inside material on New Faith that could have gotten her in a lot of trouble, or maybe because of it. She wondered how much of it was guilt.

And then, remembering that last email in her inbox, she felt guilty herself.

Lindsay had indeed tried her best to help, sought out the cops who'd been at the scene of Allan Pierce's death, although she'd made it clear she still wasn't happy about this endeavor. Half-joking, she had picked up the cuffs from the nightstand, metal glinting in the light of the little lamp as she let them dangle from her fingers.

"I wonder if there isn't any way to make you stay."

Cindy had frowned at her. "You're going kinky on me?" In another situation she might have appreciated it, and she couldn't deny the heat that idea sent coursing through her body, and the pleasant shiver at the imagined cool touch of metal against her wrists, fed by a very real memory.

*"Really? You... don't have to do that."*

*"You don't have to break and enter."*

She had pushed, because she'd wanted that story, and she'd wanted in on this extraordinary circle of successful, professional women - friends. As early as that, Lindsay had also made her way nervous for reasons completely unrelated to whatever charges she could possibly whip out, and they'd both known it. Lindsay had obviously enjoyed it.

"Then again, it could be worth a try." Cindy smiled invitingly.

"Another time, maybe," Lindsay said with a sigh, stretching out beside her, and they settled into a loose embrace. Who cared about the guy who lived a continent away anyway? "I'd let you, you know," Cindy whispered, enjoying that the suggestion made Lindsay shiver. Something to file away for later, after this temporary period of high collars, long skirts and pants, no heels, and wearing her hair in a braid.

"One more day, then."

"One more day," Cindy agreed, blushing at the blatant lie.

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Lindsay slammed the newspaper on the table with such vigor that Martha cringed and cowered under said table.

"How could you!"

Martha whined softly, and the sound broke through the haze of anger and disappointment that had enveloped her ever since she had found Cindy's note. The past few days... she had almost forgotten what would come after this period of preparation, had completely forgotten about Pete's eerie visit.

There had been a time and date set for when Sarah would come to get Cindy to take her to the New Faith compound, and it was supposed to be in a little more than twenty-four hours. Lindsay had been dreading that moment, she remembered, as she was pacing in the living room, but she'd done her best to help Cindy prepare for the assignment, and also arrange her own work schedule so that they could spend as much time as possible together those last few days.

Now, Cindy was gone, one day early.

She had spent the night, like she had most nights recently, and stole away, leaving behind a note that said something about how she was sorry.

"Why the hell did she do that?"

Martha, who had finally dared to come out from under the table, gave her what seemed a thoughtful look. "Yeah," Lindsay sighed, as she sat down, picking up the note again. "I'm just worried about

her, you know?"

*About us.*

But that, she didn't even share with Martha.

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## *Act 2*

Sitting beside Sarah in her battered Volkswagen, Cindy tried to sort out her mixed emotions. Terrified, excited, regretful, and most of all, longing to be back cuddling up to Lindsay in her bed, but it just wasn't possible.

While Sarah had assured her it was just a thing of convenience to have her come a day early, Cindy was quite certain that this was a first test, where New Faith determined how strong your ties to the outside world were. If you made it past the first two weeks into the introductory year, very little contact was allowed.

She had bought an extra cell phone to give away, as private communication was said to be monitored and permitted only in case of emergency. Cindy was pretty sure that they wouldn't see it as such to keep Lindsay informed.

"I'm so glad you're finally here." Sarah turned to smile at her when she had to stop at a red light. "I was so worried about you."

"Really?" Prior to her unfortunate observations regarding Lindsay and Pete, Cindy didn't think she had much to worry about.

"You seemed so sad, especially when you wrote me that last email," Sarah said softly. "I think our place will be great for you, clear up the confusion. I know it did for me."

"Confusion about?"

Sarah's gaze was on the road again. "Some of the choices you made... I take it that's why you'd been changing your mind and wanted to learn more about New Faith."

Cindy was aware she was treading a fine line; inwardly, she wanted to roll her eyes at her formerly open-minded friend, but Sarah's behavior also worried her. It didn't matter now; she had to stay true to her persona. "Maybe," she admitted. Sarah had moved in with the New Faith people after the shooting at Mission Day School. Chelsea had never seen the men that had killed teachers and classmates of hers, because she'd been sick and picked up by Sarah earlier. Reason enough to be grateful, indeed.

"No one will judge you. If we hadn't made mistakes ourselves, we wouldn't be here. But you'd better not tell anyone that your girlfriend is cop."

If Sarah was aware of how she'd just contradicted herself, Cindy found no indication for it. "Why's that?"

"Because they murdered one of us. And it's not the first time they got away with it."

"Allan Pierce?"

"If I were you, once we're there, I wouldn't mention that name all too often either," Sarah said dryly, almost familiar again.

"Gotcha." Cindy leaned back in her seat, mentally filing away what she'd already learned. This was going to be interesting. She didn't know yet whether to be disappointed or relieved that none of these tidbits Sarah had told her between the lines showed any relation to the Hallelujah Man.

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"Sorry, I'm late." The door fell shut behind a breathless Jill, and Claire noticed with some amusement her friend's obvious relief that there was no body on the table.

"Seems like you're not the only one. Any sign of the lovebirds?"

Jill smirked. "Haven't seen either of them this morning. Seems like they are *busy*," she sing-songed the last word.

"Yes, they are." Claire shook her head with a smile. "Getting Cindy ready for her assignment. Speaking of which, I found something in the Pierce autopsy report I'd like to share with you. Just waiting until they get here."

Thoughtful now, Jill continued, "I don't know if Cindy's assignment is a good idea. The whole situation with New Faith is...very murky. On the surface, they seem like the perfect law-abiding citizens, pay their taxes, no problems with Children's Services that we know of. Except they seem to think the police have it in for them wherever they go. They've filed numerous suits against police brutality in Arizona."

"Makes you wonder what's beneath it all," Claire summarized.

"I sure do."

They spun around at the sound of Lindsay's voice. Claire thought that her surprise was probably showing on her face just as clearly as it was on Jill's: Cindy was nowhere to be seen.

"Before you ask, Cindy left around 4 AM. Change of plans," Lindsay informed them curtly, making it clear that she considered that subject finished. "So what have you got, Claire?"

Claire had no intention of letting her off the hook so easily, but the information she had was priority even over her own curiosity. "You all know that Mr. Pierce was supposedly drunk when he drove off with Beatrice?"

"Yes." Jill made a disgusted face. "What was he thinking, getting behind the wheel with his girlfriend in the car when he was drunk?"

"Maybe he wasn't thinking too clearly at all. Alcohol wasn't all that was found in his blood."

"What else?" Lindsay definitely wasn't in the mood for small talk this morning.

"A neuroleptic drug called chlorpromazine hydrochloride, better known as Thorazine. It's used in the treatment of psychosis."

"The report didn't say anything about Pierce being psychotic."

Which certainly wasn't the reason for Lindsay's irritation. Claire was determined to find its cause right after they'd finished this conversation. "He probably wasn't. There's no evidence of longtime use, so here are several possibilities: He was only recently diagnosed. That kind of medication needs weeks to become fully effective, so it wouldn't be surprising if there were still symptoms, like, let's say, paranoia."

"He was also drunk," Jill reminded them. "Isn't it dangerous to mix alcohol with that kind of drug?"

"It sure is, and if those meds had been prescribed to him, his doctor would have most likely warned him. Which gave me an idea, so I asked a psychiatrist friend of mine, and he said it was possible."

Jill looked interested, Lindsay, like she was going to start tapping her fingers on the table anytime, so Claire decided to cut to the chase.

"If you are perfectly healthy and dosed with an antipsychotic drug, the opposite effect can occur. Especially in combination with alcohol."

"Someone wanted Pierce to freak out and get himself killed," Lindsay concluded.

"His death didn't seem to be accidental after all," Claire agreed. "Maybe his girlfriend can shed some light on this."

"Seems like she wants to shed light on anything but," Jill sighed. "What do you say we take this to the lunch table?" Her eyes met Claire's, and they silently agreed that there was more to be talked about over dinner than the news on Pierce.

Lindsay just resumed her silent brooding, which indicated nothing good.

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"You're still thinking about Kyle Graham."

"Aren't you?" Lindsay shot back, and Claire had to admit it wasn't too far off; she did have the occasional nightmare about the day Graham, who thought that the Hallelujah Man was somebody to admire, had almost shot her.

"Sure, but this is different. If anything, it will make Cindy more careful."

"Right." Jill nodded. "She'll gather information, write her article, and we'll be back to hunting our current sicko sooner than you think. Linz, it's not like she's doing this on purpose. We're doing our job. Let her do hers."

Lindsay didn't look much consoled. "Since when do you get to be the voice of reason?" she said gruffly.

Claire smiled and squeezed her arm gently. "Since my sage advice obviously isn't enough. Come on, we'll keep you busy these two weeks. Count down the days with you. *Relax.*"

"Yeah. Like there's any reason to relax. Didn't we come here to discuss options on how to nicely ask

Lazar for another talk?"

Claire stole another look at Jill, the two of them silently agreeing that these were going to be two very long weeks.

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Cindy was glad she'd had the coffee and bagel in the car with Sarah. She'd sat in the uncomfortable chair for nearly an hour, which was making her back hurt. Having been up for a while, she was tired and hungry, and she could practically feel her blood sugar creeping lower. Another test for sure, New Faith wasn't for wimps, but she wouldn't mind lunch anytime soon.

No such luck before she had her interview. It wouldn't be with Michael Beaumont, the leader himself. Sarah had told her that, at first, he had done all of them himself, but with the current size of the community and his growing responsibilities in turn, he couldn't do it all by himself anymore.

Finally, she was called into the office by a stern looking woman in her late forties. She introduced herself as Delia, no last name, and motioned for Cindy to take a seat in the worn leather chair in front of her desk.

"You have to understand that most of our members have come here via recommendation. There is a two-week orientation period which Sarah has certainly told you; after that, you and we both consider whether or not you stay for the introductory year."

"It seems like a peaceful place," Cindy said vaguely. "I could use some peace."

There was a flicker of scorn in the woman's eyes, and Cindy halfway expected her to say something, like, don't we all. Delia's disapproval had other reasons, though.

"Why did you choose New Faith? As you know, these two weeks are not a vacation. You are supposed to take a look inside yourself, and see how much you're willing to change. You'll also be given a task based on your skills."

"I want to do that, really. Change, I mean." Cindy wondered just how much Sarah had told the community about her and which aspects of her life a NF member would see necessary to change. Like, a relationship with another woman.

Before Delia could answer, the door swung open without any warning knock. The man walking inside didn't seem all that spectacular, the short clipped beard and glasses and the overall appearance of someone who wouldn't stand out in a crowd. The utter self-confidence he radiated, the way his interruption was accepted without any second thought, would have probably given him away - if Cindy hadn't seen his picture before.

"Delia, don't scare Ms. Thomas away, it's just the first morning," he said, smiling good-naturedly at Cindy as he extended his hand. "I am Michael."

"Cindy," she returned, trying not to act as blindsided as she unfortunately was. She hadn't counted on meeting him so soon - but now she was sure that it was, like her early departure, no coincidence. Sarah had to have told him some facts, such as her job, and the reason for her *confusion* - and he was bound to be curious about her.

"Nice to meet you, Cindy. Delia, why don't I finish Cindy's interview, and you go meet Zack? He

was looking for you."

While Delia kept a neutral face as she left the room, Cindy steeled herself, slipping further into the role of a woman who sought perspective and direction, and a change in her too-complicated life, like she had practiced for the past few days.

From what she knew about him, Michael Beaumont wasn't a man easy to fool.

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"Hey," Lindsay said after knocking on the door frame. "You got a moment?"

Tom looked up, the frown on his face indicating that his read wasn't a pleasant one. "Linz. Come on in."

"I need to talk to Beatrice Lazar," she said without preamble. It didn't seem necessary with a case that practically had everyone in the department holding their breaths.

His frown deepened. "You said there was no connection between the New Faith people and the Hallelujah Man."

"Not that we know of. Claire just found something--"

"Wait a minute. Why did you have Claire looking into that? I'm thinking you have your hands full with another serial killer case. This pursuit gone bad is for me to worry about. Unfortunately."

"It might be more complex than we thought it was."

"No kidding." Tom gestured for her to sit down, and Lindsay did, albeit hesitantly. He sighed. "I know you pulled her from that car, but that doesn't make it your case. It's not a homicide either."

"This isn't about her losing the baby. And I'm not completely sure about the homicide yet." There was an awkward pause, and she hastily continued, before memories would arise that would be inappropriate to dwell on now. "I'm sure Beatrice knows a lot more than she let on in her first interview. And maybe we abandoned a possible relation to HM too early."

"Says who?" It didn't take Tom long to make the connection though. "I'll be the last one to deny that Cindy Thomas has been an asset to many of your cases, but if I were you, I'd do my best to keep her away from New Faith. Beaumont moving to San Francisco, Lazar, it's no coincidence. Whether that involves our killer or not, they're up to something. Soon."

The fact that he shared her assessment somehow made her feel even worse about Cindy's assignment, and she wondered if it was a good idea to tell him. "I think you're right, and this bogus lawsuit is connected to it. So let me talk to Beatrice."

Tom regarded her curiously with a hint of amusement. "Something else I should know?"

"No, why, I... I mean, no. There isn't." He'd been asking about the *case*, damn it. There was no reason to be sputtering like this.

He considered her request for a moment, then said, "This had better be good, Lindsay. Be diplomatic, don't let her get away with anything, and make her change her mind about the

Goddamned lawsuit."

"Will do," Lindsay said with an improvised salute which brought the predicted headshake from Tom. It wouldn't be easy to get through to the woman, but the sooner they did, the sooner Cindy could return home, and that was one hell of a motivation.

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After the interview, Beaumont showed her around. The compound was much bigger than it appeared at first sight, with its school house, offices, living quarters and another building that housed the library, rooms where services were held and for meditation.

There was not much reason or motivation to deal with the world outside.

"I hear you've been working as a crime reporter. You must have seen some disturbing scenes."

Cindy shrugged, knowing that this question was all but casual. Nothing about this, the two of them walking together, talking, was. It was more a continuation of the interview. "Sometimes, but I guess so have you when you were in the army."

"Touché." He smiled. "You know we need to be careful; we want to offer our hospitality, but we also need to know to whom. I turned away from man-made authority. You know that we regard God, and the rules he gave us, as the highest authority - as I'm guessing that a young, educated woman like you would have taken the time to inform herself."

*Oh, flattery.* "Sarah invited me before to come, so I read your website," she admitted. "It sounded like an environment where one can truly find oneself." Cindy wisely did not mention that most of what she'd found on New Faith in internet forums and such uncannily reminded her of Kyle Graham, and an attitude that was everything but peaceful.

"So you don't want to work as a reporter anymore?"

"At the moment, I just don't know." Lies always came easily to Cindy with strangers she suspected of wrongdoing.

"Did you know that our publications are translated into eight languages, and read in more than twenty countries?"

Cindy hadn't known that, but the implied message sent a shiver down her spine. And New Faith was supposed to be just one of the smaller groups with a very narrow-minded interpretation of the term 'family', among other things. Sarah had once been proud to be a single mom, but now saw it as a result of earlier failures.

"That's... wow. Impressive," she said, and it wasn't faked a bit.

"We still need someone who oversees this department here in San Francisco, as our editor-in-chief here just left. From what Sarah told me about your qualifications... it's something I'd like you to think about in the next two weeks."

That was indeed an interesting offer considering the usual occupations of women in this community were in secretarial positions, teaching young children, or working in the kitchen. It came as no surprise, though, that Beaumont, New Faith's prophet, was a businessman, too.

Two weeks from now, Cindy hoped that she'd be back at home, her story written and published. "I will, thank you."

And before that, she'd go back to the library to take a look at those Bibles, one of which could have been in the Hallelujah Man's hands.

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Beatrice Lazar didn't seem to have consulted her lawyer, because she came alone, ten minutes before the scheduled 10 AM. She sat in the interrogation room, nervously wringing her hands.

Lindsay could see none of the cold calculation she had expected of someone who planned to sue the hell out of the city knowing they didn't have a single chance. Lazar was extremely nervous, and failing in her attempt not to show it. Maybe there was a way to appeal to her common sense after all.

Maybe she had waited for this offer.

Leaving her place where she'd leaned against the wall, Lindsay took a seat opposite from the woman. "Ms. Lazar, thank you for coming. We have a few more questions regarding your accident."

Disdain flashed in her green eyes. "Which we all know wasn't an accident."

"Right. Allan Pierce abducted you and damn near killed you trying to escape from the police. His actions caused you to have a miscarriage."

There was no answer, but Lazar's lips tightened in a grim line, her eyes growing bright. Lindsay allowed herself a brief moment of empathy, the flicker of an ever-painful memory on her mind, then she pressed on. "Why don't you tell us what really happened that day?"

"That'll be for the court to decide."

"Do you want to know what I think?"

Beatrice shrugged in a way that was supposed to communicate that she couldn't care less. Again, her body language betrayed the attempt. Her foot tapping on the floor. Her hands, never still.

"I think you're scared. We've been told that you wanted to leave New Faith, probably Allan, and start over with the baby." It seemed like a valid theory given Beatrice's very first statement when she'd still been in the hospital, and hopefully enough to draw her out. "Allan was trouble. He drank. He was psychotic. He wanted to get you back to them, didn't he?"

Silence. Beatrice Lazar had gone deathly pale. "No," she said sharply, jumping to her feet. "No. It's a total fabrication by the police. I came here freely. I think it was a bad idea. Allan didn't do any of those things. New Faith doesn't allow drinking."

Lindsay waited until she'd reached the door, then she said, "But he did, and now someone's supposed to pay. Was it Michael Beaumont who told you to sue the PD?"

Lazar's head whipped around. This moment was on knife's edge; she would either cave or run. For

Cindy's sake, Lindsay couldn't afford the latter. "Who are you protecting?"

In the course of seconds, Lazar seemed to age. Her slow walk back to the table was that of someone who was carrying a heavy load. She sat back down, resting her face in her hands.

"You got it all wrong. Allan wasn't trying to bring me back to New Faith," she said finally. "He was trying to get me out." Tears started welling up in her eyes. She began to sob.

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"What the hell is so *new* about you anyway?" Cindy mumbled to herself. Despite Beaumont's suspiciously generous job offer to a complete newcomer, her current occupation was to help Delia mail out brochures to subscribers from just about every corner of the world. Disturbing.

Delia looked up from the letter she was typing. "Excuse me?"

"Just talking to myself." She gave what was hopefully a charming smile, and they both returned to their tasks. Cindy had skimmed over the content of the leaflets and flyers which were, if a bit more detailed, pretty much what you'd expect from every conservative religious group; nothing to determine what was so special about the New Faith. Or, new.

She was bored and annoyed. She'd also woken up with a headache and sore throat this morning, the mundane task no real distraction from either. For the first time, she wondered if her boss, whose instincts were usually right on the money, had been wrong about the story.

She'd been hurt to find out that Lindsay hadn't told her about the Bible order, but if Cindy was honest, that wasn't what it was all about. Bad timing, the moment when she'd found out about it, her frustration fed from a different source.

Cindy wondered what Pete might be up to while she was cooped up in here. Or Scott, for that matter. Neither could be any good.

She bent down to get another stack of flyers from the box on the floor, letting them fall with a pained yelp when her back protested.

Delia jumped up from behind her desk. Cindy tried to breathe through the sudden pain, expecting the other woman to yell at her, but it didn't happen. Instead, Delia made her sit in the other chair, gathering the fallen papers. *'We choose our sins'*.

"Don't you worry," she said softly. "You can find the right path. I know. I've been there."

Cindy thought of Officer Graham and his attempts to 'help' her with exactly that. She shivered. "I hope so."

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Nearly two hours later, Lindsay was getting increasingly frustrated. It wasn't like Lazar hadn't been telling her story, about her and Pierce, an ex-New Faith member whom she had met a year ago. Lazar had just moved to San Francisco from the Arizona compound, and Pierce had tried to warn her early on, but she didn't want to listen to him.

She had no idea about the antipsychotic drugs, but she remembered that there had been something

off about him. She didn't want to get into the car with him, because he had been drinking.

There was more, though, Lindsay was sure of it, but she couldn't seem to find the right angle to get there.

A soft knock on the door preceded Jill coming into the room, which had Lindsay surprised and relieved in equal parts. She needed a break, because while Lazar's story sure was a heartbreaker, she had given her nothing that could help them with understanding what the real deal about New Faith was.

Jill introduced herself to Beatrice Lazar, then turned to Lindsay with a smile that showed a hint of triumph, enough to be hopeful. "Say you've got something for me to bring this to an end."

"You bet," Jill whispered back. "Do you mind?"

At this point, any interruption was a God-send, especially with the promise Jill had just made. "Go ahead."

"Ms. Lazar, I understand your ex-husband filed for custody of your son shortly before you moved to San Francisco?"

The guarded expression was back in a heartbeat. "Why are you asking me that?"

Lindsay got an idea when Jill held her gaze for a moment, and then asked, "Your son, Danny. Where is he now?"

"You can't help me. No one can."

The pieces fell into place to form a terrible conclusion. "Danny is still inside, isn't he? That's what Beaumont has over you."

The deep pain in Beatrice's eyes was all the answer Lindsay needed. That woman had lost a lot, her lover, the pregnancy, the promise of a life free of New Faith. It was kind of understandable that she would do anything not to lose the most important person in her life: her son.

"If they're holding him in there against your will, there's a lot we can do for you. It's kidnapping."

"And Nathan will win the custody suit. I lose either way."

"Isn't getting Danny out of there the most important thing for now?" There was a hint of anger to Jill's voice. Lindsay had an idea as to where it was coming from, though there was no room to deal with it now.

"That's right," she backed her up. "You work with us now, there's a chance the situation will be resolved quickly. The longer you wait, the more likely it becomes that your husband will win the case. Think about it, Ms. Lazar."

"There's no way you could win the lawsuit," Jill added. "But you can help your son. *We* can."

There was silence for almost a full minute. "Please help my son," Beatrice whispered finally, and for the first time, Lindsay really understood her words at the scene of the accident. She'd already known she'd lose the baby. Her plea had been for 10-year-old Danny, alone in the hands of her

fellow New Faith members.

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Delia gave her the afternoon off. Cindy gratefully accepted this opportunity to spend a little time on her own in her room, making some notes even though a persisting headache made it hard to concentrate. So many people living in relatively close quarters brought a considerable noise level that didn't help with her condition either. It hurt to turn her head, and her throat felt sore. Worst possible moment to get sick. She'd taken some Tylenol and hoped it would keep that oncoming cold at bay.

Sarah came to visit her, bringing Chelsea along. The girl hugged Cindy carefully. "Are you hurt?" she asked with wide eyes.

Cindy sat up, regretting the abrupt motion instantly. "Well, a little," she conceded, smiling through the pain, relieved when the girl finally let her go. "How have you been?"

Chelsea looked at her mother first, then sighed. "Fine," she said. Sarah smiled. "She wasn't too happy to be taken out of school at first, leaving her friends, but it's so much safer here. You saw it yourself. Anything can happen to children in a public school."

And you really think she's safer here? Cindy didn't ask the question out loud though. "I'm sure you did the right thing. So what are you two up to today? I must admit I still haven't quite figured out the schedule."

"Resting is on your schedule now. I'm going to help out in the kitchen later. See you at dinner?"

The idea of sleeping through it sounded so much better, but that wasn't what she was here for. "Of course."

Cindy waved goodbye to Chelsea, gingerly sitting back down after the door closed again. She was reluctant to call Lindsay so soon, especially since nothing special had turned up yet, but she longed to hear her voice. She had yet to find out how mad Lindsay was for sneaking out on her.

First of all, though, she'd pay the library another visit. Besides the vague Bible angle, she had to make herself familiar with the layout of the compound.

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"How much do you hate me?" she blurted out by way of a greeting.

The small pause indicated that even if hate wasn't involved, Lindsay had not been pleased with the course of events, as she seemed to be searching for the right words. "I don't hate you," she finally said. "Can you talk?"

Cindy breathed a sigh of relief. "At the moment, yes. And I actually have something to tell you." Trying to shift her weight, she couldn't stifle the painful gasp that escaped her.

"Are you okay?" Lindsay asked worriedly.

"Sure, just a little stiff and sore. I spent all day packing up some bad writing and sending it off into the world. I've been told though I've got a shot at chief editor."

Lindsay's laugh showed her relief clearly. "Sounds like fun." The tone of her voice changed then. "I could think of something nicer, too."

Cindy smiled, though the pain was still bothering her. The rush of warmth that came with Lindsay's words proved to be a nice distraction from it though. "Alright, they work, they pray, they're pretty conservative and paranoid when it comes to authorities. That's all on New Faith so far."

"No hint of anything about to happen?"

Cindy shrugged, wincing. "Hard to say. I didn't see them stockpiling any weapons so far."

"Okay, we wouldn't expect them to do that openly, right? Beaumont's buying your act?"

"I think so." She mentally went through the interactions they'd had, the offer he'd made. Whatever Sarah had told him about her, there was no indication that he was overtly suspicious towards her.

"Good. Listen, I want you to look out for a Danny Lazar. He's about ten years old and Children's Services will come looking for him soon, but until then, I need to know if he's okay."

"Sure. Wait a minute, Lazar? In any way related to--"

"Beatrice's son. Long story."

Lindsay sounded weary at that, and Cindy wished they weren't separated right now. "I know we never talked about it. It must have been hard for you to be at that scene."

She pictured Lindsay shrugging, as she said, "She already knew the baby wouldn't make it."

They were both silent for a while, knowing that the subject would inevitably come up again at some point. Just now was not the time. "So what's your story?"

"The Bibles indeed all look the same, but I had an interesting conversation. There was this guy a couple of months ago, spending his vacation here for the orientation period. Obviously, he talked about sin and punishment a lot. It's a reach - but it seems like he was a bit extreme even for the New Faith people."

"You didn't happen to find out where he disappeared to?"

"Unfortunately not. He said he'd come back early next year."

"So he's still in the area. Any word on his profession?"

"He seemed to be disappointed in the church. A former priest? That would explain the fibers, and it goes with Watkins' crime scene."

"Or just dressing as one, because he sees himself in that role. Of which neither explains why he came to possess the recording of the prayers." Lindsay didn't say what they both seemed to think. It was all a whole lot of nothing, at least where the Hallelujah Man was concerned.

"This is going to be the most pointless story that ever had my name on it." Cindy sighed.

"I don't think you're capable of 'pointless'," Lindsay said warmly. "After all, with the Lazar angle--"

A knock on the door sounded. "Thanks, but I really need to go now. I think I've got a visitor."

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"Lindsay Boxer?"

"That's right." Lindsay had been telling herself upon opening the door to a fresh-faced girl from the delivery service that taking out her frustration over the interrupted phone call on her wouldn't be fair. When she saw the item to be delivered, she nearly reconsidered. Even if it still would have been unfair.

"That's good. I was supposed to deliver these only to you. Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Extremely."

There must have been something in her tone that made the girl's face fall as she took a tentative step backwards. "Have a good day," she murmured, and turned to go.

Lindsay looked at the flowers in her hands for a moment, white roses, uncomfortably familiar. She didn't need a card to identify the sender.

"I don't think so."

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That evening, Claire arrived at Papa Joe's just in time to see Lindsay pouring what she hoped was only the first shot into her drink with a solemn expression.

"Whoa," she remarked, taking a seat across from her friend. "One of those days, huh?"

"One of too many," Lindsay muttered. "It all started when Pete--"

Or maybe it hadn't been the first one, after all. Lindsay usually didn't jump straight into these subjects. "Whoa. What about Pete?" Claire flinched, realizing she'd interrupted her rather harshly. More than that, she hoped there was no reason to get antsy about him.

"He is - or was - in San Francisco. Can you believe that? He came for a visit, let himself in with the keys he still had and waited for me. With flowers."

"I take it you were not amused." When Claire thought back on Lindsay and Pete, it was mostly with a trace of a guilty conscience. They had pushed so hard, wanting her to be happy so badly - and like Lindsay herself, they'd been blind to what was going on right in front of their eyes. Fortunately, that was an episode from the past - wasn't it? "Lindsay?"

The woman in question gave her a dismissing hand gesture. "I nearly had to throw him out."

Knowing Lindsay, Claire guessed this was only a very abbreviated summary of the actual events. "Did he threaten you?"

"No. Was just pretty annoying. So sure of himself! He has changed, for sure. If I ever knew him.

Not that it matters anymore." She downed the rest of her drink and signaled the waitress for another one.

"When did this happen?"

"The day we arrested Parker."

There was a bit of an impulse to lean forward and slam her head against the tabletop. So that was the missing link, the strange ambience between Lindsay and Cindy that she and Jill had picked up on earlier.

"Cindy was there?"

The mere suggestion was enough to put a slightly panicked look on Lindsay's face. "No. She doesn't know about it, and I want it to stay that way."

"You really think that's a good idea?" Claire asked doubtfully. Much as she wanted to put all the blame on Pete, Lindsay didn't have the best record of conflict management in a relationship. Cindy had a right to know, didn't she?

She ventured further into hazardous waters. "Have you spoken to Cindy yet today?" It was merely rhetoric, of course, but they both knew that her question didn't refer to any information on the case the reporter might have for them.

"Briefly, but let's wait for Jill, she should be here any minute." There was some hesitation, as if Lindsay wasn't quite sure whether to share what was on her mind or not. "I feel like she's withdrawing," she said eventually, the fear behind that suggestion coming across very clearly. "I feel it, and I don't know why, or what to do about it."

"Withdrawing how?" It was hard for Claire not to show her own unease with the subject. She had been so thrilled to find out that Cindy and Lindsay were together, finally. Claire knew best, though, that love wasn't always enough. The notion betrayed the hard work that relationships could actually be.

She couldn't imagine seeing these two fail any more than she could have imagined it with Ed and herself. Still, it had almost happened. Worse, she had seen that uncertainty in Lindsay before, months before she and Tom decided to get divorced. Or more correctly, before Tom had made that decision.

"We talked about the case. For about five minutes. That was all."

"Lindsay. She's under pressure. They're probably watching her." None of that was at all reassuring, but it had to be a valid explanation.

"I was wondering... if it was the reason why she went inside. If *I* was the reason. I feel like it's starting all over again."

"Linz, no." Jill had arrived in time to overhear the last part of their conversation. "Cindy is so much in love with you." That sounded just a tiny bit wistful and enough to make Claire look up, wondering what was up with their friends tonight.

"She's also doing her job right now," Jill continued, "and if she's a bit focused there, you should be

the first to understand."

The insinuation was clear, carrying with it the memory of endless discussions, and always, guilt because they'd let Lindsay down back then - and worry that it could start all over again. They just wouldn't let that happen this time. And Lindsay herself seemed very much aware of what was at stake.

"I know all that, and still, they're up to something. Beaumont doesn't have a sealed FBI file for nothing. I don't like these people."

"The feeling, as we all know, is mutual," Claire said dryly.

"Pierce killed himself and nearly a bunch of other people due to their interference, and they hold children hostage. Not to mention the fact that the FBI has an interest in them for a whole bunch of other reasons. All of that together is just..." She sighed. "I guess I just want her out of there."

Claire laid a hand over hers. "We'll all feel better when we have her back. So now, what did she have for us?"

Lindsay looked at their joined hands for a moment, then she started to relate her conversation with Cindy, "They had a visitor who sounds a lot like our man, but he's long gone. He could have been there and taken the Bible that ended up at Blake's. It's all pretty vague at the moment, but she was going to try and find out more from Beaumont. I also asked her to look out for Danny Lazar."

At that, Claire shared a quick look with Jill, reading in her eyes the same relief that she felt. It was bad enough. It would have been worse if the man they suspected to be the Hallelujah Man had still been there while Cindy was with the New Faith people.

"So we can only wait?" she concluded.

"I guess so," Lindsay conceded grimly.

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"Child Protective Services? Do you have, by any chance, too much time on your hands, serial killer and all?"

Jill restrained the impulse to sigh as she looked up to Denise standing in the doorway. "Actually, it might be related to Hallelujah Man. In any case, it's related to New Faith."

Denise made a disgusted face at that, and to Jill's surprise, she said, "They're a bunch of narrow-minded crazy people. Much as I wish you'd actually see the work I give you as priority, any child that doesn't grow up in there is a lucky one."

"It's about Beatrice Lazar's son."

Denise nodded. "Thank God Boxer convinced her nicely to drop the lawsuit. The paperwork would have been endless."

It could have been the imagination of her over-worked, sleep-deprived self, but Denise had actually smiled, so Jill offered a hesitant smile in return.

"Let's see what we can do to help get him out and any children who don't belong there as soon as possible. With these people, you never know."

Wonders never ceased... "Sure, I will."

But she was already talking to Denise's retreating back.

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"Sarah told me you were working closely with the police."

Here it goes, Cindy thought. He's changed his mind and thinks I'm too much of a risk to have me hanging around. So far, Beaumont had sought out her presence. It was hard to tell if he did it with all aspirants. If HM had been here, had the two men had long talks during walks across the compound?

"Well, yes, I think she also told you that was part of why I needed a break."

"It's a poisoning environment." It wasn't a question.

Like one where children grow up seeing women being mostly relegated to the kitchen mostly and gays being condemned for their 'sins'? Give me a break, she wanted to say. Delia had given her a stack of brochures to read for herself, and she'd found everything she didn't want in her life. So New Faith claimed to offer a shelter from false authorities, to people of all faiths. Their version of charity didn't extend to everyone though.

"It was hard sometimes," she said, truthfully, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

"You might not be able to fully evade it here."

"People have a hard time accepting what they don't understand. Is this about the pursuit?"

Beaumont took his time to answer, his face blank of any emotion as he answered. "It's part of it. They're denying their responsibility, looking for someone to blame."

"What can we do?"

He gave her a long, considering look, but no, Cindy knew she wasn't going to be initiated into the secrets of New Faith that were worth an FBI investigation on the second day. She was laying the groundwork for him to trust her, though. He wouldn't be the first person she had fooled into believing they were dealing with a cute, harmless girl. "You're dealing with lots of harassment, I guess," she went on, letting her question stand in the room as if rhetorical.

"We manage," he said. "Basically, this is a place people come to in order to avoid harassment. A shelter."

"There are many children here."

"We try to teach them, and give a real family to as many of them as we can."

Which sounded like a good idea at first sight. Why was it that people's own vanities and stereotypes always made those good intentions turn ugly?

"I imagine it's hard for them when parents want to leave and take them away from the safety they found."

"That hardly ever happens." Beaumont smiled. "Most of them come back in time - and they're always welcome here."

"Do you think Beatrice Lazar will come back? After all, she left her son here."

He didn't rise to the bait, though. "If it's God's will, He will bring her back into our midst, regardless of the obstacles that might be in the way. If not, he will find a family here. It wouldn't be the first time."

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Her next meeting fortunately took place inside, at the library. Her headache had taken a turn to worse in the bright sunlight, and she was beyond relieved to be able to sit down.

"You're asking a lot of questions. Why are you so interested in the guy?" Cindy took a moment to assess if there was any suspicion to the young man's question. Zack had found her in the library the other day, and while they'd talked, he had mentioned their temporary guest who seemed off even in New Faith terms.

Cindy shrugged, giving him a guileless smile, staying wary behind it. Zack seemed okay, but she couldn't let herself completely forget that he was coming from a similar belief system as Kyle Graham. Still, she had to have her answers, so she'd agreed to meet him again. He was 22, and about to get married next month, which hopefully put him on the safe side.

"Bad habit. Curiosity," she said. "That, and he sounded really weird. New Faith doesn't seem to condone harsh punishment."

"We don't. No one is without fault. Michael said he was going to learn that in time, but honestly, I'd be glad if he didn't come back." Zack looked almost startled at his own words. "You're not going to tell anyone, right?"

"Of course not," she assured him. He seemed to know a lot about what Michael did and didn't approve, so Cindy had decided that making friends with him could be helpful.

"He always said there are too many people who don't observe the Law of God, and that the Law of Men just wasn't enough at times," Zack recalled. "There was something he had to do first... and he'd be back afterwards. What about you? Do you think you're going to stay?"

"I might."

So. Not.

"That would be nice." He smiled shyly, then looked at his watch and did a double take. "Sorry, I'm late. I'll see you."

Cindy waited about two minutes, then she followed him, down the hallway, through the double doors and into another part of the building. He'd made that same hasty exit yesterday... Cindy was pretty sure it was something worth checking out.

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"I'll have you know that Beatrice betrayed us. The police department is not going to pay for Allan's death."

Shocked murmurs greeted this announcement. "It is like it's always been," he continued. "They cover up their own failures, like before. And it's worse, they're going to come for the child to rip him from our care."

"There will be others," a woman in her twenties said, holding on to her husband-to-be's hand. Zack's fiancée.

Delia was nearly white with disgust. "We can't let them!"

Everybody in the room seemed to agree with her; if anyone didn't, they didn't voice their opinion.

"And we won't. Each of you know what is at stake here. Our freedom. Our lives. Arizona depends on us. No police will set foot on our grounds."

"Never," a chorus of voices echoed.

"Never," Michael Beaumont confirmed.

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Cindy had the schedule established alright after the 5th day. The meetings took place daily, in a wing that Beaumont had not shown her. They were about a dozen New Faith members who held the future of New Faith in their hands. Cindy felt sorry for Sarah who had believed she'd found a safe place for her and her daughter. It wasn't. She also felt sorry for Zack who seemed to believe in a safe future for him and the family he wanted to have with his wife-to-be, but also believed religiously in everything Beaumont told him.

Beaumont's hate for the police remained mysterious, but he sure swore his followers in on it.

Everyone in New Faith believed that it was the PD's fault when Pierce had been killed - except, Cindy had learned, this dozen who *knew* that he'd been dosed on neuroleptics, because they'd been in on it. Because they'd planned it.

The office where they met had a computer terminal, but they always locked the door after themselves. She was pretty sure that if she found a way to the files on that computer, she'd get a lot more on Judgment Day than the rhetoric of these meetings. What would they ever do if the police came for Danny Lazar?

She hadn't found the boy yet. Cindy had decided she wasn't going to call Lindsay again until that had happened.

Her supply of Tylenol was about to run out, and the headaches and back pain hadn't gone away, but increased steadily. She'd been sleeping badly and had skipped lunch the second day in the row, because the smell of food and the noise level in the dining hall had made her feel nauseated.

Cindy was beginning to feel just a little claustrophobic.

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The camera showed the woman alone in her apartment, brooding over files. Just like he was used to seeing her. She was restless, getting up, pacing, sitting down again. Tonight, she was going to sleep alone, a thought that filled him with utter relief. He wasn't sure how much longer he would have been able to stand the smiles and the kisses, the touches and soft murmurs.

It wasn't right. It was his right and duty to rectify.

On a day not far from now, he would.

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### *Act Three*

"They are taking our children away from us. This can not be accepted."

"What are we gonna do?" Zack asked fearfully.

Cindy moved just an inch so she could see Beaumont getting up to walk over and stand before him. "Are you afraid, Zack?" The younger man clearly was, but he shook his head jerkily. Beaumont turned to each of the little group, Delia, Marcus and the others. "Are you?"

Each of them voiced their denial. Beaumont nodded. "Good. The Lord will give us the strength to fight them back as long as we can. If we can't, He is awaiting us."

He was greeted with agreeing murmurs.

Cindy felt herself shaking, praying that what she'd just heard didn't mean what she thought it did.

"For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

Silence. He looked at all of them intently again, then said, "You know what to do."

There were tears on Delia's face. It was the most emotion Cindy had ever seen from her. She felt dizzy, and the pain was almost killing her, but she couldn't afford to acknowledge it now.

Not so much symbolism when you thought about it. Beaumont and the people who believed in him - he'd basically said it would be better to die than to give in to those whom they saw as the enemy. Better for their *children* to die than live in an environment where they might have choices. Granted, choices weren't the same for everybody outside, but here at New Faith, a few 'chosen' were making them for everyone.

Including life or death.

Cindy shrank back further into the corner as the participants of the meeting left the room and went their separate ways. She waited for a minute, counting off the seconds. Then she took the key she'd stolen from the office and opened the door. If there was anything compromising against Beaumont, it was bound to be on this computer.

Silently, she slid inside the room, leaving the door ajar.

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"Cindy hasn't called back with any news on the Lazar kid. She would have if she'd found anything."

Lindsay paced the length of the wall, and back again. It was making Jill slightly dizzy. "I know, but that's no reason to worry, right? You said she was alright in there."

"Last time we talked, yes... I don't think they found her out. I'm just--" She broke off. "It might be silly, but she sounded so stressed and tired..." She shook her head in an attempt to clear it. "Is there something else we are supposed to be talking about?" she asked irritably.

"Actually, yes. Mr. Lazar's attorney has achieved a court order to get Danny out. Cindy doesn't even have to be involved with this. Could you sit down for a minute, please?"

Rolling her eyes, nevertheless, Lindsay did. They had gathered in Tom's empty office for a brief impromptu meeting, as this news was supposed to be going to him right away.

"It's okay," Claire chimed in. "We're counting down the days, too."

"There's probably someone else who's counting down days." Lindsay said darkly. "We still don't know who he is, or who he has chosen next, and all the connection we have is that they might once have harbored him. He might have inspired them to some craziness - that's all a lot of probability. I think--"

The sound of her cell phone interrupted her. "Cindy!"

Jill watched the conflicting emotions flicker over her friend's face, from relief to worry, to alarm. "You sure they haven't noticed anything? Good. Stay low-key, don't draw attention to yourself. As soon as there's a chance for exit, take it. Be careful." There was a small pause, as Lindsay listened, then she swiveled the chair away from the worried scrutiny of her friends, and whispered, "I love you too."

They were good for each other. They were in love. So much so that it was easy to feel happy for them, even with a tinge of bittersweet. Jill aborted the brief trip down memory lane when Lindsay said,

"What are you looking at? Never mind. I think Cindy has found why Beaumont left Arizona. He also brought a formula from which tons of fertilizer has been made, a lot more than they need for their fields. How's that for the dawning of Judgment Day?" She pinched the bridge of her nose tiredly. "Damn, I'd really like to see what's in Beaumont's sealed file now."

"Me, too, but at the moment, that doesn't seem like an option."

Jill jumped at the sound of a voice behind her.

They had company.

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Tom stood in the doorway, looking vaguely amused. "Looking for a new job, Linz?" he asked.

Lindsay jumped up from his desk chair, a bit mortified that she'd let herself get caught there, while Jill and Claire hastily said their goodbyes.

"Not at the moment, no. Nathan Lazar's attorney called... They have a court order now to have Danny removed from the New Faith's compound."

"They might not have to wait that long," Tom informed her, looking weary. "The FBI will be going in with a search warrant based on terrorist charges."

"What?"

"Don't be so surprised, that was always the question with them, wasn't it? Look, I know you were following the serial killer angle, but that's overruled for now. There are enough chemicals believed to be on their grounds to kill dozens of people. It is priority."

"Sure, but--" Lindsay bit her lip, but her shock had to be visible on her face. "So soon?"

Tom had already caught on. He got up from behind his desk, regarding her speculatively. "Linz, what aren't you telling me?"

She considered evasion for a moment, but it just wasn't an option, not with Cindy's life at stake. He could yell at her all he wanted to, it didn't matter as long as they got her out of there.

"When are they planning to execute that warrant?"

"Tonight."

"Oh, damn it."

"Excuse me?"

"Listen, it wasn't my idea. In fact, I was very much opposed to it. The Register is going to run a story on New Faith, and they sent Cindy in."

Tom stared at her in disbelief, and Lindsay inwardly winced, bracing herself. "I know, it's--"

"Do you even realize what you've done?!"

This probably wasn't a good moment to remind him that technically, she wasn't the one who had done anything.

"You knew, right? You already knew when you asked to interview Lazar. Did it ever occur to you, Lindsay, that I should be informed about these things when it's a case on our desks?"

"It's even worse, Tom. Cindy found evidence supporting the FBI's suspicion."

Tom ran a hand across his face in a quick, frustrated gesture. "Is this girl for real?"

Lindsay would have smiled at that if the situation hadn't been beyond serious. There was, in fact, nothing to smile about it. "They have weapons, not really an unusual amount, considering the size of their community. With or without licenses, I don't know. Something else they have is tons of

home-made fertilizer and secret papers describing preparations for Judgment Day."

Tom looked as sick as she'd felt when Cindy had first told her, but he was quick to react. "You tell her to get the hell out of there. Then I'll put the two of you in touch with the agent in charge. And Lindsay, I'm letting this go for now, because there are way too many lives at stake, but don't think we're finished here."

She didn't tell him that at the moment, she didn't care much, but simply started to punch Cindy's number into her cell phone, only to learn that Cindy's phone was now turned off.

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"Cindy, hey. You're up."

At the sound of Sarah's voice, Cindy nearly jumped out of her skin. "Only for a bit," she conceded, turning around as slowly as possible. Turning her head was out of the question, it just hurt too damn much to move. Add to that the steady nausea that was making her feel slightly seasick in addition to the thunder in her head every time she took a step. She moved stiffly to face her friend. "Do you know where Michael is? I need to talk to him."

Sarah shrugged. "I guess you'll see him at dinner. Is everything okay, Cindy?"

Cindy reined the inappropriate impulse to laugh, just barely. Everything was far from being okay, with the FBI probably already near the New Faith's gate, and Beaumont's plans to defy the 'enemy's' sinister plans. She had all of it on a USB drive she needed to safely get out of here. But there was something else she needed to do first. "Sarah, please, I can't really tell you much, but I want you to pack a few things for you and Chelsea, and leave for a day or two."

Sarah looked flabbergasted. "And just why would I do that?"

"Just trust me. Go today." Cindy knew that Sarah had bought into Beaumont's prophet act, but she couldn't not warn her.

"I guess I can do that."

"Thank you."

Sarah gave her a quizzical look before she headed for her room.

Cindy went to pack her own clothes, agonizingly slowly. They ended up in her back in an untidy heap; she just couldn't bring herself to care. Get out of here, get the evidence she'd found into the right hands and then find something that would give her a break from the pain. Sleep 24 hours straight *after* she'd written the story.

She went down to the hall to find Michael.

Stepping inside, Cindy realized that almost everyone she knew to be living in this building was assembled, including Sarah and Chelsea. Why hadn't she left yet as she'd promised?

No one had told her about the impromptu meeting. Not a good sign, just another indication that it was time for her to leave New Faith. *Today*. The pictures she had of the fertilizer, not just here, but also in Arizona, and the plans she had found were enough to bring Beaumont and his cohorts

behind bars for a long time - longer, if it could be proven that they'd willingly given asylum to another killer.

The moment she entered the room, all conversation seemed to stop, which made her even more suspicious.

Dizzy with the headache, Cindy walked to Beaumont's table, aware of everyone's eyes on her. "I've made a decision," she said without preamble. "My two weeks are almost up - I tried, but I don't think this is the right environment for me. I thank you for your hospitality, Michael... but I'm going home."

He stood up, looking at her intently, then he reached out a hand to touch her forehead. She flinched.

"That's alright, but I don't think you're going anywhere at the moment. You look flushed. I think you have a fever. Why don't we have the doc take a look at you, and you can go once you feel better?"

"That's... nice, but I really want to go home. I'll have someone pick me up."

Other than their exchange of words, the hall was tense with a brooding silence. Cindy wondered what would happen if she tried to run. The impulse was getting stronger.

"I really must insist. I can't let you drive like this. Delia, why don't you bring Cindy to her room, and I'll get the doctor?"

"No, thanks, I--"

Delia had already grabbed her arm in an iron grip. "This is ridiculous. Will you let me go now?"

"You're not getting delirious, are you? Come on, Cindy, I think it's better if you go lay down for a while."

They walked her out of the hall, ignoring her protests like everyone else. Once they had passed the threshold of the room, the conversations started again.

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Sarah closed the door of Cindy's room behind Dr. Lowman, a worried expression on her face.

"I don't need treatment," Cindy protested, though not very convincingly, given the fact she could barely move without pain. "Just let me out of here, and I'll get to a hospital."

Lowman laid a cool, dry hand against her forehead. "I'm sorry, Cindy, it looks like you'll have to deal with me for now. Just how long have you been in pain?"

"Sarah!"

The woman in question just shrugged. "There's a problem with one of the kid's fathers; he called the police on us. It's a lockdown - no one's going in or out."

"What?"

Sarah stepped closer to take Cindy's hand and squeeze it gently. "Don't feel guilty. Whatever happens from now, it's the Lord's will. Michael has received the word... we knew it wouldn't be easy."

"No! Sarah! You've got to think of Chelsea. He's planning to kill us all!"

Lowman exchanged a meaningful look with Sarah. "I can give her something for the pain for now. She's clearly delirious. When this is over, she should be in a hospital."

*No kidding.*

"I'm right here, and I'm not delirious. Do you guys really think he'll just let the FBI come in?"

"There's no FBI, Cindy," Dr. Lowman explained patiently. "Just a problem with Mr. Lazar and Children's Services to be resolved. The lockdown is just a safety measure. Now let me give you something to ease--"

Cindy was spared the effort to muster further protest, as Zack came rushing in. "Michael wants to see you two," he said breathlessly. "There's a problem with--" He broke off at the sight of Cindy, the information obviously not to be shared with her. "Let's go."

The door was locked from the outside.

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Number one on the speed dial. Thank God. Cindy wasn't even sure if she would have remembered the full number, eidetic memory and all; she just felt extremely drained. Even her fingers seemed stiff and uncooperative, and when Lindsay picked up mid-second ring, she could have cried with relief.

"Linz, I've got--"

"Whatever it is, it can wait," Lindsay interrupted her curtly. "Listen, you need to leave right now. The FBI is going in tonight. It's a matter of hours. I'm going to meet you outside, so you can take everything you have to the agent."

"But I--"

"That is non-negotiable. There's no saying how they react, you can't stay there any longer!"

"But I can't!"

There was silence for a couple of seconds, then Lindsay said, "Tell me what's going on." The softness of her words didn't betray the worry beneath.

Cindy felt tears well up in her eyes, a result not so much of fear, but her crappy overall condition and all that it entailed. Okay, maybe fear was part of it, too. Judgment Day was too damn close, and they weren't talking about it metaphorically. The San Francisco compound was where it was all supposed to start, a test run for all New Faith communities, should the 'enemy' come too close. "It's too late. They're not going to let anyone out. I didn't tell you, because I thought it was just the flu, but I don't know, I'm really not okay, and it's getting worse. They've locked me up in here."

On top of it all, she felt even worse for getting herself into this situation, as much as she was ever to blame, and for having to abandon all pride for the moment. "I need your help."

"That's okay. Just tell me where you are and I--"

Her relief about Lindsay taking this so well was short-lived, when then the door was opened, and Cindy managed to slip the cell phone under the blanket on her bed at the very last moment, interrupting the call before she did so.

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"You let a civilian waltz in there to find out about the inner workings of New Faith?" Agent Cornell asked. They were outside of the fences surrounding New Faith land. No one, Beaumont had claimed, would be questioned, or removed from the compound by the police.

For the first time, the threat was out in the open.

Cornell's anger struck Lindsay, not because he'd criticized her, but because in the past few minutes her worst fears were coming true one by one. Her gut reaction about Beaumont and the New Faith had been right - and she should have never let Cindy go.

"Excuse me. They offer open Bible classes to anyone," she snapped. Cindy had sounded scared over the phone, much more so than Lindsay had ever known her to be. Staying here behind the lines, not knowing what had happened after the call was interrupted, was slowly making her come undone.

"Not to those who enter the two-week orientation period. Whatever your friend has been telling them about her connection with you, it's what could kill her. If it hasn't already," he stated bluntly.

Lindsay was very aware of Tom watching them, so she reined the impulse to yell at the agent. "I talked to her. She's sick and needs to go to a hospital, just as much as we need that evidence she's found, but with the FBI surrounding the place, they won't let anyone out."

"Inspector, there are a lot of children still on the compound. Nearly a hundred people altogether. All of them are my concern, and we're trying our damned best not to let this become another Waco."

"Then what are you doing about it?" she seethed. Tom raising an eyebrow was the subtle indication that her voice had risen again.

"We'll send someone in for an exchange if they release hostages, no sooner."

"But they won't if we don't give them something first. Look, I know you're responsible for all of them, but she is sick in there, and we don't even know what it is."

"You took a huge risk there," Cornell said.

*Tell me something I don't know.*

Tom just looked thoughtful, and Lindsay wondered what kind of connections he was making. It didn't matter. Cindy's words about the New Faith's paranoia against the police, reinforced in those secret meetings, were still vivid in her mind. At the moment, though, she didn't really care. If Cornell chose one of his people to go inside, Cindy would just be any other hostage to them.

She couldn't let that happen.

"I know. I'm sorry. But I have an idea how we can proceed."

Cornell gave her a skeptical look, but waited for her to continue.

"You're worried about the children, so am I, but they would rather hurt an outsider than their own. Ms. Thomas joined them last, so she's most at risk here. We need to get her out first."

"And you're going to do that how?"

"I'll go in."

"Lindsay, no way!"

"It's the only way. We can't even assess the situation now. We don't know what the hell it is they are doing in there!"

"And you think Beaumont is going to invite you in and let you give status reports?" He'd be inviting her in alright, but Tom didn't need to know the exact reasons.

"I do," she simply said.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourself into." Cornell shook his head.

"Believe me, I do."

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"Cindy." Beaumont smiled at her, but even now, she was aware that his eyes stayed cold. "You'll get your wish... you can go."

She didn't trust him, but frankly, her head and back hurt too damn much to question his motives. *Everything* hurt. She felt sick. Cindy longed for a dark, silent room, far away from New Faith.

"Really?" Even the sound of her own voice was enough to send bright slivers of pain through her skull.

"Really. There's going to be an exchange. Your death is worth nothing to us. After all, you were never a true believer, were you?"

The words registered with her brain, but the only sense they made was that it meant her ticket out. Coming in was most likely an agent masking as a doctor. Someone who could handle this situation a lot better.

"I'll send Sarah to help you get dressed," Beaumont informed her. "We don't have much time. You can thank Inspector Boxer, by the way."

"What?" For a moment, fear took over even through her pain, leaving her breathless. *No police will set foot on our grounds.* "No," she protested, "I don't want a police officer to--"

"Don't bother, Cindy," he cut her off, making no attempt to hide his contempt. "You are not one of

us. You tried to make Sarah run. You are not worthy. I'll be back in a few minutes, and I want you ready to go."

When he was gone, Cindy opened the seam of her bra with trembling fingers. The metal of the tiny USB drive felt cold in her fever-warm hand, and she shivered, her eyes swimming with tears she didn't have time to cry. Pushing it beneath the fabric, she just hoped they wouldn't strip-search her before they let her out. If they let her out at all. If they did, it came with one hell of a price.

She wasn't just scared for herself any longer. Had Lindsay listened to a single word she'd said? Why her, of all people? She had to know it was crazy, suicidal...

The worst of it was the realization that Lindsay did indeed know, and she was taking the risk anyway. She might pay for it with her life.

No, Cindy couldn't afford to think like this, because it was tearing her apart. The trouble was, she wasn't really thinking too clearly at this moment, and that scared her. It was probably just a bad case of the flu, caught while being in such close quarters with many other people, but it was also the worst possible timing. A mistake could get her killed.

The ones she had already made, could get Lindsay killed.

She pulled down her shirt again. And prayed.

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The arrangement had gone over well with the New Faith leader, and it was arranged surprisingly quickly. Well, maybe not so surprising; they'd be sure to consider a cop more of a bargain than a reporter.

As Lindsay walked towards the gates of the New Faith, she wanted to run, but she forced herself to take measured steps, appear calm and even more importantly, harmless, disregarding her inner turmoil. Her footsteps seemed to echo loudly on the pavement in the strained silence around her. She walked on, very much aware that the closer she got to the compound, the more these God-fearing people would have a clear shot. Any mistake she made, they wouldn't hesitate. Maybe it didn't even take a mistake.

She stopped halfway, waiting for the door to be opened in the distance, then two armed men exited, Cindy between them. She hated that they even touched her, but a few steps further, Lindsay realized that she probably could barely walk on her own. Fear surged up inside of her. What kind of flu could make a person that sick?

One of the men, bearing an assault rifle, motioned her over, and Lindsay obliged, though her eyes never left her lover's shivering form. In the near dark of dusk, she could see that Cindy's eyes had a feverish glaze to them. There was recognition in her gaze, though, and she gave a brief, almost imperceptible nod. The evidence. She had it with her.

Lindsay reached out, Cindy did the same, and their fingertips touched briefly, a moment unreal before the armed men urged both of them on. Before she turned once to see Cindy collapse on the pavement.

"No!"

That moment, a part of her was ready to abandon all reason and ignore the gun to her head and the intent of the man who was holding it. She saw paramedics rushing towards her lover and let the NF men drag her towards the building, vaguely aware of the danger she was now in herself.

It was a calculated risk, Lindsay told herself. Dealing with criminals - that's what the NF folks were after all - was her job.

Not knowing what was wrong with Cindy, was by far more terrifying.

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The calculated risk had soon turned out to be something entirely immeasurable. She hadn't seen it coming, all thoughts focused on getting Cindy on the other side of the line, to safety. Once they were inside the building, one of the men punched her quickly and painfully to her side, making her stagger and fall. Next, a booted foot against her back. Then they pulled her up again.

The haze of pain lifted, leaving anger in its wake. How could she have not expected this? They hated what she stood for; Beaumont had brainwashed them well. She wasn't just an acceptable alternative hostage - compared to Cindy, she was a much better choice.

It didn't matter now. All she had to do was to hold on until the FBI stormed the compound. It couldn't be long now.

In the meantime, she was going to meet the 'prophet'. Michael Beaumont had been waiting for them. He didn't address her, only his men as he ordered, "Get her in here."

They made her sit in a chair in what seemed to be an office, wrenching her arms behind her back to tie her wrists together. Then they left the two of them alone, and Beaumont, for the first time, acknowledged her presence.

"Much to hate?" she asked wryly.

"It's not my place. I might not like the institution you represent, but ultimately, it's up to the Lord to deal with your kind."

He was clearly not talking about her being a cop anymore.

"Not like, huh? For someone who's committed quite a few sins, like kidnapping, and is about to commit just about every other sin, like murder? You have remarkably conservative attitudes."

He commented on her words with a hard slap that made her head snap back. Angry and worried in equal parts, she tried to let her body absorb the blow nevertheless, ran her tongue across her teeth a moment later to make sure none of them were loose. She tasted blood.

"It's the truth. You let Cindy Thomas walk out with evidence of it. What were you going to do with all that fertilizer?"

It could be a clever statement to make, or a suicidal one, hard to tell, but she had to say it to his face. Regardless of the danger, Lindsay was immensely proud of how Cindy had found a way to get away with the evidence, even sick as she was. God, hopefully they would learn soon that it was all harmless.

Appealing to God at the moment, though, had an ironic ring to it.

Beaumont leaned in very close, until his face was only inches from Lindsay's. "You," he said, "have no idea. There are a hundred people still on the compound, ready to give their lives. I can make them do that. Do you really think I feel obliged to answer to you?" He laughed.

Lindsay could have sworn there was a tinge of madness to it, only this man wasn't crazy. He was an organized criminal who thought his actions were completely justified - almost like the Hallelujah Man did. Unlike the killer who chose his victims one by one, Beaumont could be responsible for the deaths of a hundred people before nightfall. This couldn't happen.

"Maybe you're mistaken. Maybe not all of them are ready to kill themselves for the sham of a promise you gave them."

Beaumont laughed again, as if her words were some kind of joke between them. The sound grated on her nerves.

"Don't you worry about that. I imagine there will be a few apostates, but those who deny transition, will meet it in the fire. I guess you will, too."

That made her straighten in alarm, despite the painful pull on her arms. Lindsay wished she could find any indication that Beaumont's speech was simply rhetoric, but she already knew it wasn't. He had planned this scenario a long time ago, and he wouldn't leave anything to chance.

She opened her mouth to remind him what consequences this mass murder would have for him, realizing that it probably wouldn't have much of an effect. "I always knew religion wasn't worth dying for," she muttered, then looked up again.

He went over to the window, peering out between the blinds, then he came back to pull himself a chair and take a seat directly in front of her, close enough that his knees almost touched hers. "But it's more complicated than that, Inspector Boxer. I give them what they need... a chance to redeem everything they did wrong in the eyes of God. They pay me for that."

"And you don't need redemption?"

Beaumont regarded her with his clear blue eyes, unhurried, interested, the way you might regard a scientific specimen. Lindsay stared back at him, not flinching, though it was hard not to give in to the impulse. He made her skin crawl.

"Funny question coming from you, Inspector. Come to think of it, maybe I should tell them to start the fire right here."

She fought hard not to let her reaction show, but he must have seen the widening of her eyes.

"That's right, I am not going to be charged with arson, murder or anything of the kind. That will be up to others."

"You can't think that you'll make it out of here."

"I could say the same of you."

Beaumont got up, surveying the room, all the empty shelves and cabinets. He had cleaned up this room. Then he turned to her. "Now would be a good time to say your prayers," he said, making her

wonder if his rhetoric had inspired another murderer, the one who always talked about *sin and the need to repent* - or vice versa.

The smell of smoke was in the air.

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The relief of having Cindy back on the safe side of this nightmare, and Jill on the way to the hospital with her, was short-lived. Claire stared at the window exploding on the second floor, transfixed. She hated to be useless, to be unable to do anything but wait.

This was Beaumont's Plan B for those who weren't in on the suicide pact.

She jumped at the feel of a hand on her shoulder, spinning around to see Jacobi behind her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Claire shook her head. "No, I'm not. Aren't you just tired of people using religion, of any kind, to justify their sick ways?"

Jacobi didn't argue. "All those children in there." He shook his head disbelievingly.

Claire gave him a quick sideways look and found that he was probably, just like her, struggling to say what was weighing on both of their minds.

"What the hell was she thinking?" he finally said.

The same thought had crossed her mind, Claire had to admit, she hated for her friends to be involved in this mess. Still, it was very clear to her exactly what had been on Lindsay's mind. "If it had been Ed in there, I would have done the same."

"Cindy Thomas had no business being in there in the first place."

The anger in his voice surprised her, especially since she knew that he had a soft spot for the reporter. "It wasn't her fault that she got sick," Claire reminded him.

"You're right. That wasn't." He walked away from her in angry strides, leaving her alone with her own fears and doubts. Should they have seen the danger much earlier? Intervened?

\*\*\*

Stay calm. Think. It wasn't so easy with the purgatory about to happen very literally, but when Lindsay caught sight of the rough edge of the worn desk behind her, she felt what was perhaps a premature relief. It was worth a shot anyway. Most likely, it was her only chance.

The rough wood cut into the skin of her wrists, leaving splinters, but she gritted her teeth and worked on, until she felt the rope finally give. Just a little, but it was enough to give her hope she might make it out of here alive.

The air had gotten thicker, the smell more obtrusive. There were screams mingling with the sounds of panicked footsteps.

Small flames were licking at the doorframe now.

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Jill had no problem admitting to herself that she was absolutely terrified. When she sat in the waiting room all by herself, realizing her hands were shaking, there was nothing to distract her from the disturbing images playing through her mind. Some real. Some imagined. Both equally haunting her.

Cindy had only been unconscious for a short time, but she'd really been out of it. It had to have scared the hell out of Lindsay to see her like that. It sure had affected Jill, an uncanny reminder of another too close call they'd all done their best not to think about.

"Are you here for--"

On a day like this, it couldn't be any other way. It had to be Luke standing in the doorway, looking almost as startled as she felt.

"Jill."

It had been a long time since they'd seen each other last, longer even since they had talked, which was making the moment considerably awkward. It didn't really matter right now, though. "Can you at least tell me if she's going to be alright?" She knew he technically wasn't allowed to tell her even that, but hoped he'd make an exception. Not because they'd once been lovers, but because she couldn't stand not knowing.

Luke looked behind him, then closed the door and walked over to her. "Your friend is suffering from meningitis. We did a lumbar puncture to determine whether it's viral or bacterial."

She winced at the mental image of that procedure. "When will you know?" It wasn't like she knew a lot on the subject, but she did know that the bacterial kind was a lot more dangerous.

"In a few hours." He hesitated for an instant, then he sat down beside her, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep, come back later?" he asked gently.

"I can't. Lindsay would want me to stay. *I* want to stay."

"I've heard about the New Faith disaster. She's still out there?"

"I guess so. I haven't heard anything yet."

She was tired, ready to cry, and it would have been the easiest thing to just lean into him and... no. it wasn't possible. You couldn't turn back time, not even on a night like this.

"I'm sorry," Luke offered eventually. It didn't change anything, for either of them, but it was sincere. Jill gave him a watery smile. "Thanks. You'll keep me updated?"

"Of course."

She watched him walk out of the door, and the feeling of loneliness and regret was the same as when Lindsay had told Cindy over the phone that she loved her. Jill couldn't help it, even tied up in fear as she was for both of them.

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The hallway was filled with smoke, part of the staircase having caught fire already. Lindsay could barely see anything, but she tried to watch out for anyone who might need her help. The scene was chaotic, and it angered her that Beaumont would have an easy getaway in this mess.

A noise behind her made her spin around, and she noticed just in time the burning beam above, hanging precariously from the ceiling - and the boy cowering on the floor, too scared to move. Sparks flew as another part of the beam broke off. She reached for the boy's hand and pulled him aside, shielding him with her body, as the rest of the beam came crashing down.

He clung to her, shaking hard, the small clutching hands making her painfully aware of the bruises she'd obtained. "Hey," she said, stroking the hair from his face, hoping that the calming gesture would make him ease up on the death grip a little. "Let's find a way out of here, shall we? My name's Lindsay. What's yours?"

He stared at her with wide frightened eyes.

"It's Danny," he whispered.

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The firefighters had managed to control the flames fairly quickly. The 'apostates', the ones who had tried to save their own lives and those of their children had mostly sustained burns and smoke inhalation.

The sight that greeted them in the schoolhouse further back was worse though, where Lindsay had gone after leaving Danny in the care of a uniformed officer and a paramedic. There were still children's paintings plastered all over the wall of the room, some chalk drawings on the board.

The tables and chairs had been stacked against the wall to make room for the people who had chosen to follow Beaumont's call. He was, of course, not among them.

Lindsay kneeled down to touch the neck of the forty-ish woman, confirming what she already knew. She was dead, just like the young man in his twenties, and the woman of the same age whose hand he held clasped. Like the woman who was around Cindy's age and -- she turned away, unable to look any longer.

The room swam before her eyes and stabilized again.

"They've got him, Linz."

She spun around to see Tom standing in the doorway, his eyes widening at the sight. "Damn it."

"Yes. That's what Beatrice and her son managed to escape. Barely."

He nodded. "Come on, let's get you to the hospital."

"God, yes, I really need to know about Cindy, I--"

"Hey. Linz. Take a look at yourself. I'm glad we got her out, but you should let yourself get checked out right now."

She obliged, taking in the sight of the bloody circles around her wrists, raising a hand to feel the dried blood on her face. "Ew."

"Indeed. Let's go."

"Wait a minute." Lindsay walked back into the room, towards the woman and her daughter. The girl would have been in the second grade, at the most. Even though her body protested the movement, she crouched down and reached out to gently close the girl's eyes.

Her gaze drifted to the silver necklace she wore: *Chelsea*.

Cindy was going to ask about her friend and the daughter. Lindsay knew she'd have to be the one to tell her.

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#### *Act 4*

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty."

Jill opened bleary eyes to a sight she had very much hoped for, but she wasn't entirely sure if it was just her imagination.

"Lindsay!"

She jumped to her feet to hug her friend. Lindsay embraced her in return, though Jill had noticed her wince. "I'm sorry," she said, making herself let go even if she longed for the opposite. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Likewise," Lindsay rasped and then coughed. It wasn't until then Jill really noticed that she reeked of smoke.

"God," she whispered. "They burned down the compound?"

"Close enough. Have you... have you heard...?"

"It's meningitis. They've been testing as to which kind... we'll have to wait."

"Can't they tell from the symptoms?"

"No, honey." Claire closed the door gently behind her. "The viral form is much more common, and if it's that, she will most likely recover completely."

Sinking into the chair, Lindsay asked the question Jill had not dared to think:

"What if it isn't?"

Claire had no answer for either of them.

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She'd been standing too long in the hot shower, very aware of various aches, and at the same time dizzy and dissociated. Lindsay technically understood that with Cindy's already weakened immune system, a visitor coming straight from a crime scene was the last thing she needed.

She had promised to come back after getting rid of its traces and a couple of hours of sleep as well, even knowing that it was a promise she wouldn't keep, at least where the sleep was concerned. Both Jill and Claire had offered to drive, and she'd brushed them both off. Stepping out of the shower, she swayed slightly on her feet, eliciting what seemed like a worried glance from Martha.

"That's right, girl. Been better."

She went to the bedroom to pick some clothes. The freshly-made bed held no appeal for her as it did to Martha, who happily settled into a spot in the center of it. Lindsay's mind was still in overdrive, with thoughts not only of today, or the fear for Cindy's final diagnosis.

She remembered Glen Whitney and his lover who had built a life together, until it was ripped away from them by death, and then again by the lack of protection of their relationship by the law.

*Technically*, Luke wasn't supposed to tell her a single thing about Cindy's condition.

Within the span of a few months, her life had changed in more ways than she'd been able to catch up with. Lindsay couldn't deal with it all now. There was only one thing she needed to know at the moment.

"Sleep well, girl," she said to the snoring dog, and left her apartment.

\*\*\*

"She'll be fine, sweetie. It'll just take some time." Claire could tell from the still shell-shocked expression on Lindsay's face that she had a hard time believing it, and Claire couldn't blame her.

Cindy was on medication for the pain and fever, but she had been awake for a few moments. It had been clear that she didn't know who it was brushing the hair from her face softly, taking her hand so tenderly.

It was to be expected, or at least not uncommon.

It was clearly a shock for Lindsay, written all over her face. Whoever Cindy had been seeing, it was not her. "You sure?"

Even though Claire was just a little spooked herself, she could at least draw comfort from medical knowledge and statistics. By all means, the illness was one to be taken seriously, but knowing they dealt with the viral form was a great relief. In comparison. "I am," she said firmly, because that was the only thing Lindsay needed to know right now.

\*\*\*

"Good luck with that. I've been waiting for her for fifteen minutes."

Lindsay spun around, withdrawing her hand from the handle of Jill's office door to face Denise. "I guess I'll come back another time then," she said, feeling in no way like having small talk with the Acting D.A. at 8 AM. She hadn't missed Denise's eyes widening slightly at the sight of her.

Obviously, dark circles under her eyes made a nice addition to the bruises on her face.

"Let's wait together," Denise suggested.

It was not what Lindsay would have chosen, but she didn't have a good excuse ready, so she just leaned back against the door.

"It's good Thomas got us that information on Arizona," Denise went on. "A lot of lives could be saved."

"Yeah. Just not all of them." Lindsay's thoughts wandered back to the schoolroom of horror, and the bodies lying in a circle. Beaumont's chosen ones. He'd mixed up the concoction they had all drunk himself. That had to have happened before they let Cindy out.

She shivered, refusing to let the possibilities come to mind.

"They were unpredictable. The FBI didn't start to prepare their operation just yesterday; it had nothing to do with Lazar and her kid in the first place."

"Really?" Maybe she was just too tired to make the connection at the moment.

"Beaumont was on the FBI's radar long before that problem arose. They were going in for him anyw--"

"And you knew about that?"

Denise wisely took a step backwards.

All of a sudden, Lindsay felt very much awake. "You knew they were going in that day all along? What the hell were you thinking not telling us?"

"I'm wondering about that myself, but I think we can clear all of this up. Lindsay?"

Jill's slightly strained voice finally alerted Lindsay to the fact that backing her friend's boss into a corner wouldn't exactly be helpful. Although thinking of Cindy, who had been in a lot more danger than they'd all thought, made her want to yell some more.

"Come on." She shrugged off Jill's hand angrily, but obediently turned to follow her.

"Some of us have to play by the rules, a concept I know isn't very familiar with you," Denise added, which could have been for either of them. "Jill, I'll see you in my office in fifteen minutes."

"Of course." Jill offered a quick smile which literally slipped from her face when she turned to face Lindsay.

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"I know this is bad, but that's no excuse. I've entertained thoughts of getting into Denise's face. Thinking about it is fine. Doing it like that - not good."

"I know," Lindsay said from behind her hands. "Sorry." It didn't sound very convincing.

"Tell that to her."

Lindsay let her hands fall and frowned. "Really?"

Jill rolled her eyes. It was all the banter they got before the conversation returned to the more serious subject matter at hand. "Linz, I'm not defending her, but I think she would have given us a warning if she'd known about Cindy. You've been to see her this morning?"

"Yes. She was sleeping, I didn't want to wake her."

"You heard what Claire said - and Luke, actually. She will get through this."

Jill could easily guess what weighed on Lindsay's mind, besides Cindy's condition. She'd had the same thoughts herself. "We didn't have enough information. If we'd known what we know now... but last week, you couldn't have done anything to keep her from going - well except using your cuffs."

It was meant to elicit a smile from Lindsay, and that worked, though the faint blush brought Jill to another conclusion. "So you did try that too, huh?"

"You sure you want that image in your head with the meeting you have in, what, five minutes?"

Jill laughed. "I don't mind that image," she said with a wink. Then, more serious, "You should be home. Sleeping. You remember what 'sleep' is?"

"Beaumont's being questioned today. There's no way in hell I'm going to miss that."

It was on the tip of Jill's tongue to say that Lindsay probably shouldn't be anywhere near him right now, but she trusted Lindsay to know where to draw the line with him.

"I'll be there."

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"I don't need a lawyer," Beaumont nearly spat at the agent. "The Law of Man means nothing to me."

Cornell shrugged. "I'm surprised. If it doesn't, why did you advise Ms. Lazar to file a lawsuit against the police department? In fact, several of those were filed in Arizona. What's the deal?"

"You know nothing. Here, it was only the beginning."

"Where you wanted to try out that poison you conjured up? What did you promise them to make them drink it?"

"This conversation is utterly pointless." Beaumont gave the agent a grin, as if the next words were a joke they both shared. "It's happening all over the world as we speak. Judgment Day has come."

Agent Cornell took up a more comfortable position in his chair. "See, that's where you're mistaken. The reporter found all files on your hard drive. Except for here, no one died - but there have been a lot of arrests, including your friend Ralph. New Faith didn't last all that long, anyway."

"No!" The declaration of his defeat finally brought a rise out of Beaumont. He jumped to his feet, slamming his fists on the table, his cuffs clinking together. A uniformed officer was stepping towards him, but he'd already sunk back into the chair.

"You're lying," he hissed.

"You betrayed them. A lot of them finally understood that."

The look Beaumont flashed the agent was of pure hate.

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"So we meet again." Lindsay deliberately let the chair scrape over the floor. She took her time to sit down. "Didn't think that'd happen, did you?"

"You're not FBI. This is none of your business."

"You murdered twelve people in my jurisdiction. That makes it my business."

She had taken her time thinking about her approach for Beaumont, and she needed it to be cool and detached. She couldn't allow any thought of Cindy now.

"I didn't murder them. They gave their lives willingly."

"I guess you can see that potential in people, then."

"That's right. Cindy Thomas would have never made it to the introductory year."

*Thank. God.*

"Let's talk about someone who seemed to be more interesting to you. Someone who was very familiar with the concept of sin, and measures against it. Did he have that potential?"

"You've got to understand, Inspector, that I protect the people under my roof. The secrets that they tell me are safe with me. I don't betray them."

"One killer protecting the secrets of another?"

The pieces were finally beginning to fall into place. Beaumont was aware of the lives the New Faith members had outside the compound - if HM had been there, he knew it all. And Beaumont knew damn well who she was talking about.

"Look, unlikely as it seems, you could still get a deal. You saw him, talked to him. You probably know where he is now."

As much as this man annoyed her, he could possibly help bring this case to an earlier end than they all could have hoped. It was pretty much a deal with the devil, but it was their best bet to stop HM at the moment.

There was silence for long minutes, before Beaumont said, "I hadn't moved here yet. I don't remember his name, but I gave him one of our Bibles before he went. I'm guessing he used it for his own, twisted purposes."

Lindsay knew he wasn't going to give her any more on the mysterious New Faith visitor. She felt like she was going to be sick, spending one more minute in the room with him.

"Like you didn't."

She pushed herself off from the chair and left.

There was bound to be a survivor of the New Faith disaster who remembered the man who used the community to prepare murder. Little could he have known about how appropriate the company had been.

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One day bled into another, more interrogations, little sleep, hours at the hospital, until it was finally determined that Cindy could return home. She had been a lot more lucid, but still very groggy, so Lindsay kept evading the subject of what had happened on the New Faith compound.

In fact, Cindy had been hardly awake enough to agree to come home with Lindsay temporarily. While the pain and the nausea were receding, Luke had warned her that she'd still be exhausted. No kidding. As Lindsay got her settled into the guest room, Martha's enthusiastic welcome nearly made her topple over.

"Hey. No getting horizontal before I say so." As she wrapped her arms around Cindy's waist, Lindsay was struck by the fact that she had lost quite a bit of weight. She had plans to counter that.

Cindy leaned into her for a moment, giving her a tired smile. "Good luck with that."

It was the first time in a while that Lindsay could really bring herself to believe they were going to be alright. Despite the fact no one seemed to remember the man who Zack had been talking about with Cindy, the conversation she'd had with Tom this morning had been no fun, and there'd been a bouquet of white roses delivered to her desk at the station.

She allowed herself a moment to let it all slide, gently helping Cindy down onto the freshly made bed, as she listened to the muted sounds of Jill and Claire making coffee in the kitchen.

"So. Scott covered the New Faith?"

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." Cindy sighed, pulling the covers up to her neck. "I saw he even sent a card."

"This is probably not how he wanted to get to the story."

"You never know," Cindy muttered, and Lindsay felt overjoyed at this hint of her spirits returning. She should have known that the moment wouldn't last long, because there were too many questions still open. "Did you hear anything from Sarah? I think she was really pissed at me."

Lindsay pulled herself a chair and sat down slowly, moments in which she was fumbling for the right words to explain. In the kitchen, Claire was laughing about something Jill had just said. Cindy was watching her intently. "Linz?"

"You know Beaumont and the few who helped him, tried to burn down the main house. A few people were injured, but it's almost a miracle no one died in the fire."

Cindy reached out a hand, and Lindsay took it, holding it in both of hers. "People died, though, because they did exactly what Beaumont asked of them."

Cindy swallowed hard, probably thinking of NF members she'd met. "You saw them?"

"Yes, I saw them."

"I'm so sorry. You wouldn't have even been there if it wasn't for me."

"You don't know that." Lindsay's thoughts wandered back to that night, halting not on the violence erupting, the encounter with Beaumont, or her fear of what was going on with Cindy. She saw herself back in the schoolroom. The necklace.

"Cindy..."

"Did you hear anything about Sarah? Or Chelsea?"

Lindsay just squeezed her hand tighter, waiting for the horrible truth to sink in, hoping it would do so without the words she found herself unable to form.

"No. I told her to leave!"

"She made a different choice... for her and her daughter."

"No, this doesn't make sense at all," Cindy said angrily. "Chelsea escapes the shooting only to-- are you sure it was her?"

"I saw the necklace."

Lindsay had to blink back tears of her own as she leaned forward and held her lover close, letting her cry. She heard soft footsteps approaching, and Lindsay was grateful for the presence of her friends. They both needed them here, now.

After long moments, Cindy finally drew back, wiping her tear-streaked face. "Oh my God," she said.

"What is it? Do you need something?"

"Zack... what he said about the guy, that he claimed the Law of Man wasn't always enough. What if he meant that literally? What if he is working in law enforcement?"

Lindsay turned to see Claire and Jill's alarmed looks, she herself wanting to deny the possibility that seemed so logical after all, and so much worse than the theories they'd had before. It meant access to files, possibly evidence.

It meant the Hallelujah Man was probably aware of their every step.

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It was an evening like many, lately.

In the relative safety of her apartment, with the most important person in her life close to her, Lindsay still felt listless, her thoughts revolving around more than their newest theory of HM's background.

Cindy had done some reading, but had at some point fallen asleep next to her, so Lindsay stayed in the same spot, not wanting to wake her. Most of the symptoms had disappeared over time, just as the doctors had predicted. She still kept going back and wishing she could have somehow kept Cindy from taking that assignment, because she would have never gotten sick in the first place. She'd been run-down and tired before, but it was now clear that the virus had spread within the community, as more survivors of the New Faith disaster had obtained the disease.

Cindy still got tired quickly, and occasionally the headaches returned. It made Lindsay weary, too, to think of how much time had passed once more since they had vowed to take some time off, to be together.

Every dead body in between had made them reconsider, but how many second chances did you really get? Life could turn out to be damn short.

Lindsay held her sleeping lover closer to her, trying to breathe around the lump in her throat. All the doctors' reassurances couldn't keep the fear from rushing in every time she remembered the night at the hospital, when Cindy had been so sick she hadn't recognized her. She'd never told her.

Tracing her fingers over soft red strands, the touch more a comfort to her than to the oblivious recipient of the caress, her thoughts wandered back to Beatrice Lazar, the nature of loss, and the one that they shared.

Lazar would most likely lose custody of her son. She'd lost a lover who had been trying to save her from the clutches of New Faith. And - this.

In comparison, Lindsay knew she was so much better off. She hadn't lost everything, though it had been too damn close - again. She knew what it was like to lose a loved one; the bittersweet memories that remained, a barely healed wound over time - and she knew that this time, she wouldn't ever be able to go through it again.

Responsibility was actually kind of a selfish notion. Because now that she'd let her guard down, let Cindy in in every sense of the word, she couldn't imagine not having her in her life.

Trying to shake these dire thoughts, she reached out to pick up the Bible Cindy had left open on the table. There'd been a lot of scripture reading these past months, and when you thought about the reason for it, it was almost obscene. The Hallelujah Man, Kyle Graham and the poisonous social environment that had made him the way he was, Beaumont and his so-called New Faith, they had all twisted it for their own purposes.

Cindy had put a bright pink Post-it note on the page to mark a passage. Curious, Lindsay read: *"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay..."* And she began to understand that this wasn't any research for their case. *"Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me,"* from the Book of Ruth.

Lindsay had never drawn much comfort from religion; if anything, she got to see the results of its

severe misinterpretation, but reading these words now, there was a moment of understanding and acceptance for those whose beliefs carried them. Those who didn't try to force them on others.

These words, knowing that Cindy had sought them out intentionally, actually were a great comfort. With a smile, she closed the Bible and laid it back on the table, then gently shook her lover awake. "Hey. Time to get you to bed."

"I guess it is." Cindy hid a yawn behind her hand. "I'm sorry for conking out on you." There was a variety of emotions behind the apology. Cindy hated not being able to work full time yet. Among the many things they shared, impatience was one.

Lindsay cupped the side of her face in her hand, then leaned over to kiss her softly. "It's okay. I got some reading done." She had to laugh, because the look of suspicion on Cindy's face was just too cute.

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*Two weeks later...*

"What are you thinking?" Cindy asked curiously. The smug grin on Lindsay's face, as she leaned back against the pillow, hands linked behind her head, told it all.

"Thinking... would require higher brain functions. I guess I'm not capable of that at the moment."

Cindy drank in the sight of her lover, all relaxed and unselfconsciously sexy. All hers. She felt so happy it almost hurt, victorious; she'd finally reached the point to beat the illness back, a moment she had often enough feared would never come. But it had.

"I'd love to think I had something to do with that."

She settled into Lindsay's arms again, resting her head on her chest. Cindy would have been okay with just going to sleep like this, but when Lindsay spoke up again, it sounded too serious to dismiss.

"Cindy, I need to tell you something."

She could swear her heart had just missed a beat. It was now thudding uncomfortably, threatening to beat out of her chest. Slowly, she lifted her head to look at Lindsay.

"Pete is back in San Francisco. He came to see me before you went inside."

"Oh. Really."

Hadn't she just known that subject would come up again? *And did he try again while I was on the inside?*

Lindsay sighed, and it wasn't until she spoke again that Cindy let out the breath she'd been holding. "He's got this weird idea that we'll get back together... I had to set him straight." She laughed a little at her own, unintended pun. "You know what I mean. I won't change my mind. I just hope he got it this time, at least I haven't seen him since."

Finally, those were the words she'd been needing to hear.

With the tension evaporating from her body so suddenly, Cindy was glad she was already lying down. "That's good."

Her thoughts went back to the moments in the parking garage. He most certainly had not gotten it - but that was his problem, not theirs. She decided that she didn't need to share what had happened that day, his crazy idea that she might help him. She'd been upset at the time, but it didn't matter anymore. Much worse, she'd been worrying for so long and waiting for Lindsay to come forward, when she just could have asked. She wouldn't make that mistake again. So much could happen in a heartbeat, and there'd be no more occasions to redeem what was lost.

"Hey. You didn't think I'd want him back?"

"No way," Cindy said too quickly, the blush creeping into her face betraying her words.

Lindsay sighed and turned to her, regarding her thoughtfully. "Okay, you asked for this. Pete - aside from him turning into an arrogant jerk lately - he was the perfect guy."

Cindy clung to the fact that she'd used the past tense there, otherwise her words would have been a blow.

"Or that's what it looked like on the surface. I was mostly in love with the idea of what we possibly could be, and it was a welcome distraction. Because there was someone else I cared for so damn much it scared the hell out of me. And I can't believe you made me say this out loud."

Cindy smiled, while at the same time her vision was slightly blurring. "Say what?"

"I love you."

"I'm not sure I got that right. Could you say it again?"

An instant later, Lindsay was above her, her own smile somewhat predatory as she lowered her body over Cindy's, the sensation of skin to skin a sudden shock of pleasure. "Maybe if I show you? That'd be okay?"

They laughed together, happily distracted from the worries of the world before Cindy whispered, "Very much so," and she pulled Lindsay down for a kiss.

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They were just about to turn off the light, when a distinct sound interrupted the silence.

Cindy reached over her to the nightstand and picked up the cell phone. She flipped it open, and after one look at the caller ID, said, "Boxer."

Lindsay shook her head at her, but her dark eyes were full of mischief, and suggestion. Cindy gave her a smile which she hoped to be sexy. Giddy was probably more like it. "Hi, Jill. What's up?"

That Jill didn't call her on the joke should have been the first indication. "Jill?" Listening closely, Cindy realized her friend was crying even before she spoke.

"I'm sorry, it's late, and... is Lindsay there?"

Cindy felt inexplicably ashamed for her goofing around. Lindsay had picked up on the abrupt shift of her mood, watching her intently.

"Sure. I'll put her--"

"No, don't bother. Please, just tell her... tell her that William Carter has been arrested on assault charges. I need to see her at the Hall, my office."

"But don't you want to talk to--" Jill had hung up on her before Cindy could finish the sentence. She shivered, a bad feeling rising within like a premonition.

"Jill says to tell you that a William Carter has been arrested. Assault..." She broke off when she saw Lindsay go pale.

"*Damn* it!" The sentiment was obviously more anger than shock.

Without giving any further explanation, she was out of bed, reaching for her clothes, moving at a speed that had Cindy blinking.

"Who is this guy?" And why was Jill crying so hard she needed to break off the phone call?

Cindy had expected Lindsay to elaborate, but it didn't happen. "Bad news," she said darkly.

There were no coincidences in life, just good and bad timing.

Cindy had the feeling that the reappearance of the mysterious William Carter at this point was seriously bad timing.

FADE TO BLACK