

TEASER

The idea for Sloane and Company to add on the bright all-glass atrium between their two dull gray buildings resulted from one of the company's managers going through a motivational course on employee relations. Giving the diligent worker ants a congregating spot, a place where they could socialize during their ten minute breaks and unpaid lunches, would increase employee morale several hundred percent. Or so went the sales pitch.

What the atrium had actually become was more of a last minute limbo, a temporary haven in which workers snared by average pay and good benefits made personal phone calls, grabbed something from the coffee stand in the back, or caught the most up-to-the-minute news on the trio of six-by-nine foot screens before heading upstairs to take up their cog positions in the corporate machine.

Morale had yet to increase.

Balancing an extra large coffee from the cart, Morgan Levering stood in a group of employees waiting to cram into the next elevator up. Most days, Morgan was very much like the rest of them; bored, listless, completely lacking in individuality between the hours of nine and six, but this morning she was starting her workday out in a considerably more aggravated state than most of her colleagues.

"Isn't your boss back today?" Alice asked as she squeezed up beside Morgan, to the grumbles of the rest of the cluster. Alice was one of the few people that Morgan knew by name in the building, and the only one she spoke to on purpose. Though she worked with these people every day, she paid them about as much attention as any other stranger on the street. Sloane was known for being the best short-term, sale-enhancing advertising firm in the city, not for having unsurpassed camaraderie.

"Yeah," Morgan responded, with a frustrated sigh. "Two weeks isn't long enough. The day before she left, she told me that I would be wise to arrive at six every day this week to help her catch up. I've been here three hours already. Guess who never showed."

"God what a bitch," Alice responded, low enough as to not be overheard by any of the office's opportunistic tattle tales.

"I should have known," Morgan shook her head. "It was totally just a power trip. I don't know why I even put up with her crap."

"Because this is the best firm in San Francisco. Hopefully you'll be promoted out of her department sooner than later."

"It can't be soon enough," Morgan responded sullenly. "Do me a favor. If you happen to find her before I do, call me and let me know where she is. I'm going to try to avoid her all day so I don't say something that gives her cause to throw things at me."

“Sure thing,” Alice replied with a small laugh that could only come from someone who didn’t have to actually answer to the bitch.

An elevator arrived before them, the doors parting to release the few people who’d ridden it down to the lobby. As if synchronized to the opening of the doors, there was a sudden surge of power. The people in the elevator rushed out, looking incredibly grateful that it hadn’t happened a moment earlier. The lights flickered rapidly, there was a noisy clatter in the middle of the room and several simultaneous screams from around it.

Morgan spun to look, coffee sloshing with burning quickness down her arm. Trying to shake off the hot beverage and the resultant pain, she forgot about it completely when Alice’s hand grasped her forearm, squeezing with unrelenting force. Morgan followed her gaze up to the naked, battered body dangling from the rafters, frowning when it twirled in her direction and she instantly recognized Felicia.

“Found her,” Alice announced from beside her.

Twenty minutes after Felicia Watkins plummeted without warning from the ceiling of Sloane and Company, Lindsay stepped through the front doors and into the sunlit atrium. She glanced up at the naked, bound and broken body and she knew. She didn’t need scripture. She didn’t need hard evidence to tell her this wasn’t the product of just any murderer. This was the artwork of a sadistic madman, someone who felt spiritually inspired to be as brutal as he wanted to be. And, as far as she knew, there was only one of those trolling her city at the moment.

ACT I

Claire preferred to think of her place as on the ground, not fifty feet up in a metal basket. If she had checked the “levitate in the air while trying to perform a detailed job” box on her career day quiz, she would have been working for Cirque du Soleil, not the medical examiners’ office.

“Shouldn’t we get her down?” a voice asked too close to her shoulder.

Claire turned and stared her young protégé a step backwards, before returning to the task at hand. The new intern at the M.E.’s office, Paul, asked all of his questions in a voice that was half morbid curiosity and half repugnance. Claire had yet to determine if he was going to be an excellent M.E. or a sociopath.

“If we move her, we may lose any physical evidence,” Claire responded, glancing down for the hundredth time at the distant floor below. “We’re probably losing evidence now. We’ll get her down when I’m done.”

“How do you know those will hold?” he asked, looking over the straps of leather dangling Felicia Watkins’ body precariously from the ceiling.

“We’ll get her down when I’m done,” Claire repeated more forcefully and the M.E.-in-training nodded and shut up.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Paul unnecessarily stated. Claire had several long years under her belt, and she’d never seen anything like it. “Her body is completely mutilated, but her face barely has a scratch on it.”

“Except for what’s missing,” Claire swallowed. But other than the gaping hole where she’d once had a right ear, and the bloody streaks stained beneath her left eye, those things didn’t show. “All the other marks on her face are defensive wounds.”

“How can you tell?” Paul asked.

“They’re very shallow,” Claire explained. “If he’d wanted to cut her face, they would be gashes, not just nicks. She probably leaned into the blows trying to protect some other part of her body.”

“What part could he have been going for where she’d rather take it in the face?”

Claire knew a few of the answers to that question, but not all of them. She wasn’t sure that she really wanted to.

“I don’t know,” she murmured, “but I do know he didn’t mean to get her face. He wanted her recognizable.”

“For who?” Paul questioned. “Us?”

“For everyone down there I suspect. All the people she worked with,” Claire responded, eyes drifting up to the pallid face angling down above her. “Okay, I can be done. We’ll let them get her down. I can do the rest on the table.”

With a nod, Paul turned to the controls, and slowly lowered the basket of the mechanical lift.

Pacing the floor by the food stand at the back of the lobby, Jill monitored Claire’s descent, doing everything in her power to avoid looking at the decimated body or the specks of blood that dotted the marble floor beneath it.

“It should be, at most, a couple of hours,” she stated into her cell.

“Are they sure it’s him?” Denise returned, voice breaking up slightly.

“Yeah, it’s him,” Jill whispered.

Jill heard Denise’s heavy sigh across the line, but Denise didn’t continue the thought with words. Jill couldn’t think of much to say either. She was just infinitely grateful that Denise wasn’t feeling the need to comment on her commitment to the Hallelujah Man or to the club. If she kept this reasonable attempt at civil behavior up, Jill might have to buy her something decent come

Boss' Day.

With neither of them speaking, the hush in the room became deafening. Despite the number of cops in the glass-enclosed space, silence reigned supreme, as if everyone knew what they were up against and none of them wanted to discuss it. Despite the recent slayings in their city, San Franciscans were going about their daily business. The fact that there was a serial killer amongst them was one of the most poorly kept secrets ever, but it hadn't changed much. It wasn't exactly the city's first brush with such renown. But now a few hundred civilians had gotten a really good look at exactly how they could end up if the fanatic disciple got his hands on them. It was going to make everyone that much more uneasy, and the pressure on the police department that much more intense.

"Just fill me in when you get here," Denise finally dismissed Jill.

"Will do," Jill said shortly, snapping her phone closed and glancing over at Lindsay, who had been hovering in the shadows off to the side of the room ever since Jill arrived.

Lindsay watched a couple of guys from forensics cut the leather straps binding Felicia Watkins' body in midair, and lower her slowly onto a simple stretcher. They balanced it between them in the small metal basket of the lift and brought the victim down. Intent on her study of the process, and lost somewhere inside her own mind, Lindsay didn't hear Jacobi's not-particularly-stealthy approach.

"According to the CEO," Jacobi started, pausing when Lindsay startled at his voice. "Sorry."

Trying to look unruffled, Lindsay dropped her eyes to the floor and turned to face Jacobi, arms crossed over her chest.

"According to the CEO," she prompted.

"She left for a two-week vacation on the fifth of November," Jacobi informed her. "We called the airline. She never got on that flight. Today was supposed to be her first day back."

"He had her the whole time," Lindsay deduced.

"Looks that way," Jacobi said with a solemn nod.

"We're not going to want to hear what Claire has to tell us." Lindsay stated, looking back at their victim's body, finally at ground level and being zipped into a body bag.

"I can't see how it's going to be pleasant," Jacobi acknowledged.

"To have staged this, he had to have gotten in here," Lindsay said, studying the thick glass, of which all the panes were still perfectly intact, before trailing her eyes to the high tech security system wired around the door. "That couldn't have been easy."

“He had to know someone,” Jacobi assumed. “There are six hundred people working in this building. It could take a while to find out who he made friends with. Even if we do, they won’t know to tell us. Whoever it is couldn’t possibly have known they were making friends with the Devil.”

“No,” Lindsay agreed. “And whoever he used to get access must be pretty clean. Or at least look that way. If they were anything less than pure, he would have killed them. I really don’t see him letting one sinner slip through his fingers just because they’ve given him a way into a building.”

“So we start with the most boring, least-likely-to-sin-in-the-open people,” Jacobi suggested. “Accounting?”

While the attempt at levity was appreciated, it fell flat in the dismal ambiance.

“How is he finding these people?” Lindsay wondered aloud. “What is the link between them?”

“Maybe there is no link between them. Maybe they’re all just...”

“Sinners,” Lindsay filled in.

Jacobi gravely nodded.

The hush and gloom pressed in on them like physical entities, and Lindsay felt suddenly claustrophobic.

“I’ve gotta get some air,” she said, heading for the door without waiting for a response.

The irritable staff of Sloane and Company was imprisoned on premises by yards of bright yellow police tape and a dozen unsympathetic uniformed officers. None of them particularly wanted to be there either, but considering a woman was slaughtered and dropped into their midst on an otherwise perfectly tolerable weekday morning, no one had any choice in the matter.

Pen at the ready in her right hand and a fresh notebook clutched in her left, Cindy weaved through the masses, trying to be inconspicuous. Ducking the tape was surprisingly easy with that many anonymous people already standing on the other side of it. With any luck, she’d be able to work her way to the front of the building, and with the right distraction, slip past the officer guarding the door.

Most of the comments Cindy caught pieces of as she moved through the cranky employees were of the expected variety: complaints about being held hostage by the police department, concerns over when bathrooms would be made available to them, the occasional disturbed utterance indicating that some of these people could really use a sedative. But then there were those that were staggering.

“All the blood was kind of gross, but I was impressed by the outfit,” Morgan was joking to Alice as Cindy happened by them.

More or less aware of what had transpired in front of these people not that long ago, and knowing the unfortunate likelihood that this was more than just some random crime, to Cindy the statement sounded exceedingly vulgar. She should have let it go, it would have been the wise thing to do, but wisdom being one of her weaker attributes, she turned a sharp about-face and backtracked.

“Did you have something you wanted to offer about the victim?” Cindy questioned, pad and pen moving to note-taking position.

“Who are you?” Morgan returned, giving Cindy a rather unappreciative glower.

“Cindy Thomas. San Francisco Register. What’s your name? I’d love to quote you.”

Morgan opened her mouth, and Cindy knew by the snarl of the woman’s thin lips that she was about to get blasted with a snarky retort. Which gave her that much more motivation. If they were going to engage in a war of words, she was well-armed and had no doubts as to who would emerge victorious.

“Thomas,” a familiar voice interjected sharply from behind her.

Unsure whether to wince or to swoon, Cindy turned to find Lindsay standing there looking intensely authoritative and infinitely sexy. One hand rested on her hip, just above her gun, revealing her badge, which had the beneficial effect of frightening the other woman into withholding her comeback.

“What are you doing?” Lindsay’s voice gentled, lulling Cindy into a considerably more Zen state.

“Just doing my job,” Cindy replied.

“She was harassing us, Officer,” Morgan asserted.

Temporary calm dissipating as rapidly as it had come on, Cindy rotated back to her momentary nemesis.

“That was not harassing you,” she heatedly stated. “I can if you want to see the difference.”

The full sentence barely made it out of her mouth before she felt Lindsay’s fingers in the crook of her elbow, dragging her away from the woman. Morgan gave Cindy a triumphant smirk and a little wave, increasing Cindy’s ire tenfold.

“You just waltz onto the crime scene and then try to draw attention to yourself by picking a fight?” Lindsay questioned disbelievingly, hauling Cindy across the landscaped courtyard. As if

she possessed the power of Moses, the sea of employees parted before her.

“I wasn’t trying to pick a fight,” Cindy corrected, her feet moving with unnatural rapidity to try and keep up with Lindsay’s determined gait. “She was being so freaking disrespectful. Who would say that about someone who’d just...”

Pulled around the curved corner of the atrium and into a passageway almost too small for the two of them, Cindy shut up at once as she was pushed back, somewhat roughly, against a dull gray wall. She might have protested the unnecessary manhandling if not for Lindsay’s lips capturing hers a split second later much more softly than her demeanor up until that point would have implied.

Dropping the impediments, Cindy slid her hands up the soft leather to fist in Lindsay’s jacket, giving consent instead, and hung on as Lindsay kissed the fight out of her.

“What was that for?” Cindy asked breathlessly when Lindsay finally pulled away.

“For me,” Lindsay replied.

It would have been sickeningly romantic if not for the firm set of Lindsay’s jaw, the dread darkening her eyes.

“Bad?” Cindy softly questioned.

“Yeah,” Lindsay rasped harshly.

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

Lindsay gave a slight nod, wishing she didn’t have to confirm that particular deduction, and stared wantonly at Cindy’s lips. If there was one thing that could make her forget about everything, even if only for a minute... But before Lindsay could commandeer Cindy’s mouth again, Cindy was stepping forward into her arms, her head dropping down on Lindsay’s shoulder and her arms closing tightly around her waist.

It was nothing that Lindsay wanted and everything that she needed. As weak as it made her feel to require such comfort, she indulged in it nonetheless, because once her arms clasped across Cindy’s shoulders, she simply couldn’t let her go.

Lindsay had no idea how long they’d been standing that way when she heard her name being called, in clear bewilderment, from the front of the building. She slowly opened her eyes, sending a displeased expression toward the passageway’s opening. Cindy retreated from her arms and inspected the inspector. She reached up to turn down the collar of Lindsay’s jacket where she’d accidentally popped it, assuming that Lindsay didn’t want to appear before her colleagues looking her 1980’s best.

“To be continued?” Lindsay softly inquired.

Cindy gave a head bob in the affirmative. “So, should I wait ten seconds before following you out?”

Without verbal response, Lindsay tugged on Cindy’s sleeve, Cindy bent down for her dropped note-taking tools, and they walked out of the narrow passageway together.

Officer Cho had made it to their side of the courtyard, and was instantly relieved when he spotted Lindsay emerging.

“Inspector Boxer. They’re waiting for you,” he said, sending a friendly smile in Cindy’s direction. “Hey Cindy.”

“Hey Cho,” Cindy returned quietly, but Lindsay didn’t miss the way that Cindy instinctively stepped behind her.

Much like Lindsay, Cindy had a tendency to say that she was perfect when in fact she was only adequate, or maybe didn’t even reach that level. Though she had played off Kyle Graham’s menacing attempt at courtship, Lindsay hadn’t been blind to the effects. Cindy had been a little more guarded, abnormally wary in the presence of anyone who showed her any kind of attention outside of club members, and, oddly enough, Jacobi, who’d been behaving in a rather fatherly fashion ever since finding Cindy in Jill’s office much too close to something that could have turned really ugly really fast. There were plenty of strangers with a fifty-fifty chance of being dangerous walking the streets. The last thing that Cindy had needed was a blow to her trust in the people who had always been nice to her.

“They ready?” Lindsay asked to draw Cho’s attention away from Cindy’s rather obvious reaction.

“Yeah,” Cho replied. “We’re all set up.”

Lindsay nodded at him, and Cho led them to the door, holding it open. Fleetingly wishing that her job belonged to someone else, Lindsay stepped past him into the atrium. She’d only made it five steps when she heard Cho clear his throat.

“Um, Inspector Boxer?” he hesitantly queried.

Lindsay turned back to him. On another day, she might have gotten a good laugh out of Cho’s uncertainty as to whether or not Cindy was supposed to be trailing them inside, manifested in one long arm blocking the entrance. For her part, Cindy looked ready to limbo beneath his outstretched appendage.

“It’s alright,” Lindsay husked. “Let her in.”

“Sorry,” Cho shrugged to Cindy, moving well out of her way so that she could walk inside.

Cindy didn't offer much of a response, barely meeting his eyes as she walked by and followed Lindsay to Jill, Claire and Jacobi.

"How's it goin'?" Jacobi asked lightly.

"I could take being on a beach right about now," Cindy responded.

"Ain't that the truth," Jacobi replied.

Tom finished giving orders to a flock of uniformed officers and joined the group, less than enthused to have returned from vacation and back into this mess. Clearly surprised to see Cindy not just pushing in a little closer on the sidelines but right smack in the middle of a crime scene, he did them the courtesy of not saying anything about it.

"Ready?" Cho asked Tom, who nodded roughly.

"8:53 a.m.," Cho began, reading from a small notepad, "sixty percent of the company's employees are in the lobby. According to the head of security, that's an average number. At the exact moment the clock ticks over to 8:54, Felicia Watkins body drops from the ceiling. Ten seconds later, this video tape starts rolling on all of the screens around the building."

Cho gave a nod to a man at the security desk, who pressed something on his panel, and white lines rolled down the three oversized screens around the atrium. From the corner of her eye, Lindsay saw Cindy produce a small digital recorder from her bag, tossing her a nervous sidelong glance before pressing record.

A small flash of light, and the screens switched to a live image. Or at least what had been a live image at some point.

Felicia Watkins stared out at them, completely naked but for the blood and bruises covering her body. A leather collar matching the leather leashes that had been used to suspend Felicia from the ceiling was wrapped around her throat, chains from all sides holding her in place like a dog. The same graphic image that might have been a turn-on for some of the people in the room if staged for the purpose of fantasy was, as reality, turning their stomachs.

Felicia's hands were almost black, her fingers unable to grasp the white sheet of paper she held. Instead, the page was just pressed between her two shaking hands down by her abdomen, as if she didn't have the strength to lift it any higher. The ear was already gone, Claire noted, but she still had both eyes at the time that the video was made.

"My name is Felicia Watkins," she started, her trembling wisp of a voice resounding like a bellow in the still room. "I have been imprisoned in this church for two weeks so that I may atone for my sins."

Tears falling from her eyes, Felicia was plainly struggling to read the words through them, the movement of the paper in her unsteady grip no help to matters. When her efforts persisted

without success for well over a minute, the sudden appearance of what looked like a fireplace poker flashed into the side of the screen. The tip plunged into Felicia's side, and the voice that had up until that point been notably feeble produced a startlingly loud scream. All spectators flinched in unison at the sudden display of brutality.

Crying only amplified as a result of the vicious prodding she'd been given, Felicia exerted more of an effort. She bent as far as her binds allowed to retrieve the paper she'd dropped on the floor, her useless limbs making the process more difficult. When she rose back up, the paper once again pressed between her blackened hands, it was through pure will that she forced out the words.

"Stop judging, that you may not be judged," Felicia read from the paper. "For as you judge so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you."

She paused too long and the poker made another appearance, burying itself through two ribs. Felicia's scream was just as real, but more subdued, as if she was expecting it this time. And, as if they too were already anesthetized to the violence, there wasn't a flinch to be found amongst the audience.

"Matthew, chapter seven, verses one and two," Felicia sobbed, looking up from the paper, her eyes focused upward, as if in silent appeal for some kind of intervention. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Felicia dropped her head with the same resignation with which the paper fluttered from her wrecked hands. Resigned to a certain fate. She had to know that, even after following all given instruction, she would never walk out of there alive. If she still retained the ability to walk at all. Felicia's weeping face grew larger on the screen, the focus moving in for a tragic close-up. For a moment, it seemed a dénouement.

Then rapidly shuffling footsteps drew Felicia's gaze up and she tried to back away. But there was nowhere to go. When the backdrop behind Felicia changed suddenly, everyone knew that they were getting their first glimpse of the Hallelujah Man, mere millimeters of torso, clad in all black, around the edges of Felicia's head.

There was movement in the room, cops and other concerned parties pressing in closer as if they could identify the unidentifiable. This perpetrator knew exactly how to be seen and not be seen, his victim a shield to hide behind. For all of his bold decrees about other peoples' transgressions, it was the modus operandi of a coward.

His arms, concealed in black, came around Felicia's head. Felicia's mouth opened at once in a gasping sound that could only be described as a pre-scream, as if she knew that the Hallelujah Man was about to give her good reason to release one that curdled the blood.

One black-gloved hand palmed Felicia's face, the thumb and index finger spreading Felicia's left eye. The other brought the fireplace poker back into the picture. Felicia struggled against the threat. She gave it everything that she had, shaking his hand off once, but simply didn't have the

energy left to resist his intentions. The gloved hand returned to its position, spreading Felicia's eye open even wider.

"No," Felicia begged as the poker moved in a slow, measured path toward her face. "Please God, no. I'll do anything. Please. I'll do anything. I'll do anything."

Lindsay knew how Jill and Claire would react without looking. Jill would concentrate somewhere else, eyes averted and ears as closed as they could be without sticking her fingers in them, trying not to throw up and spatter her own DNA in the middle of the crime scene. Claire wouldn't want to watch, but, for the sake of being informed, she would. But Lindsay was almost positive that Cindy had never had to witness anything even close to this. She looked over to find Cindy staring up at the events unraveling on the screen, looking predictably disturbed in a way that Lindsay had never seen her. Cindy didn't want to see what was about to transpire, but she couldn't quite look away from it either.

"Turn it off," Lindsay ordered.

When the image didn't promptly disappear at the command, Lindsay shot a deadly look to the man at the security desk controls, who was almost as fixated as Cindy.

"Turn it off," she said more forcefully.

The man snapped back to the moment, fumbling at the controls, and turned the image off just before the poker made contact with Felicia's eye. Somewhere in Claire's bag, the initial report already summarized the outcome.

"Did these people watch this whole video?" Tom asked the question of no one in particular.

"No," Jacobi assured him. "Somebody had the good sense to hit the EPO before it got this far. It shut down the whole building."

Lindsay glanced at Tom's blank expression and translated her partner's shorthand.

"Emergency power off button."

Appearing somewhat frozen, Tom belatedly nodded. "Good."

Lindsay's eyes tracked to Jill and Claire, the latter whose hand was resting on Jill's back, ready to catch her should Jill decide to faint or comfort her should Jill decide to get sick, either of which looked highly possible at any moment.

"You alright?"

They both nodded in response, Jill's a little less believable than Claire's, and Lindsay returned her focus to Cindy. She was still staring up at the screen as if the show were still taking place. In reality, it was more than likely burned onto the back of her brain.

“Cindy?” Lindsay questioned softly.

Cindy’s eyes dropped down to hers, blinking slowly several times as if reorienting herself to her surroundings. A haunted soul stared out at Lindsay from a body that normally housed a positive, lively spirit. Lindsay barely refrained from throwing Cindy over her shoulder and hauling her out of the traumatic atmosphere. She couldn’t refrain, however, from raising her hand to Cindy’s cheek, thumb lightly brushing over her jaw line in a soothing gesture. Involved as all others in the room were in their own disquiet, no one even noticed.

“I guess I was wrong about the pattern,” Cindy whispered.

On the outskirts of the yellow tape, inside which Sloane and Company’s employees had grown rather vocal about being let go, an impromptu club meeting was in session. The quadrangle in which they often stood had become a line, stretching down the side of Lindsay’s SUV, where even Jill in her expensive black pantsuit wasn’t above leaning against the edge of the dirty vehicle for support.

Comparing the four of them with the annoyed and lively people on the other side of the police tape perfectly illustrated the difference between people who’d only seen a little of that video and those who had seen too much.

“I can only guess as to the extent of it,” Claire broke the silence in a low voice. “I know for sure all of her fingers were broken. Pieces of her scalp are missing. Part of her tongue.”

“We’ll go over it back at the hall,” Lindsay said quickly, casting her eyes to Cindy.

Feeling that ‘never’ would be her ideal time to finish the conversation, Claire nodded in hasty agreement.

“We’re definitely going to have no problem getting this guy the chair,” Jill offered with a shudder.

“I’d love to help strap him down myself,” Lindsay declared. “The problem is getting him there.”

Still focused on Cindy, who’d been abnormally subdued, Lindsay saw her take a deep breath and push away from the front of the car, the first one to stand on her own two feet since they’d made it outside.

“What can I do?” she asked. That gritty determination was going to be the death of her.

“We’re all going to be pretty busy for a while,” Lindsay responded, eyes traveling over Cindy’s face, trying to see everything that she was trying not to show. “I think you should just head back to the paper for now. We’ll keep you posted.”

“When are you going over the evidence?” Cindy asked.

“I’m not sure,” Lindsay said simply. Feeling caught in a lie, though she wasn’t actually telling one, since she really did have hundreds of witnesses to pick through, she looked away from Cindy’s overly attentive gaze.

“Well, I could still work on something at the office,” Cindy volunteered.

“I don’t know what you could do,” Lindsay replied, shaking her head. Looking into Cindy’s singularly-focused expression, she knew that answer wouldn’t suffice. “I’ll try to come up with something.”

“When are you going to watch the rest of the video?” Cindy questioned softly.

“No one needs to watch the rest of that video,” Lindsay swallowed, eyes dropping to the toe of her boot as she dislodged a piece of asphalt and kicked it away.

Cindy looked down at Jill and Claire, both of whom met her eyes briefly before looking away.

“Alright then,” Cindy said, gaze trailing back to Lindsay. “Anything you want withheld?”

“Since there are hundreds of witnesses, withholding is kind of pointless.” Lindsay admitted. “I would appreciate if you would paraphrase instead of using a direct quote. People don’t need to know quite how much access you’ve been given to crime scenes.”

That almost brought a smile to the group. Almost.

“Okay,” Cindy conceded. “Just call me?”

At Lindsay’s nod, Cindy hesitated as if she didn’t know quite how to walk away from her without more. She looked desperately in need of an extended hug that Lindsay wasn’t sure how to provide without being completely obvious. Finally deciding that she didn’t really care, Lindsay was beaten to standing by Claire, who tugged Cindy into her arms.

“We’ll all talk later,” Claire promised as she released Cindy.

“Thanks Claire,” Cindy returned, glancing at Lindsay before she walked away.

Feeling fairly incompetent at everything important in her life at the moment, Lindsay at last made it to her feet as well, watching Cindy walk off before turning to face Jill and Claire.

“Are you alright? Really?” Lindsay asked, motioning in the direction that Cindy had just gone. “I know that she isn’t. Are you?”

“All in a day’s work,” Claire replied.

“If I’m not, I’ll have to get over it before trial,” Jill answered. “Can you imagine how Denise would react if I ever lost a case because I demonstrated my weak stomach in the courtroom?”

It was almost a hopeful moment. If Jill was facing this videotape in court, it would be because they had someone to prosecute. That seemed sort of far off considering they didn’t even have any suspects.

“What about you?” Claire quietly questioned.

Much more comfortable on the asking end, Lindsay shrugged self-consciously. “Is it terrible to say that I’m getting used to it?”

“It’s a lie,” Jill countered.

Lindsay shivered and crossed her arms. “I’m fine.”

“I should get back to the lab,” Claire stated. “Obviously this will be bumped to the top of the caseload.”

“I know you’re training right now, but -”

“Don’t worry, Lindsay,” Claire promised. “I’m not going to let a newbie get his hands on this victim.”

“Thanks.”

“I should get back too, let Denise know what we’ve got,” Jill declared, pushing off the car and dusting off her slacks, before looking at Lindsay. “What are you going to need?”

“I’m not entirely sure yet. Jacobi and I will be here for a while, trying to decide who’s worth the trouble of dragging back to the station,” Lindsay said, scanning the corralled Sloane and Company employees and lighting on the girl that Cindy’d had her confrontation with in the restless crowd. “Starting with her.”

ACT II

“I have been waiting for three hours,” Morgan announced as Lindsay and Jacobi walked through the door of the interview room. “Why did I get picked to come down here? Because of that little redhead?”

Jacobi whistled low. “I’d watch what you say about the redhead. She’s got a fan base around here.”

“But that does about cover it,” Lindsay admitted. “She told me that you were talking rather cavalierly about the deceased. That’s her word, not mine.”

“That’s what this is about? Seriously?” Morgan scoffed. “Listen, I’m not glad that Felicia’s dead, but I’m not sorry. No one deserves it more.”

Understanding vividly now the kind of gut reaction that goaded Cindy into her spur-of-the-moment row with the woman, Lindsay pulled out a chair, sank into it, and stared across the table at Morgan until the fidgeting began.

“She was tortured for over two weeks. Her fingers are all broken. Part of her scalp is missing, part of her tongue, her ear, her eye. Think about your own sins, Miss Levering. How might someone choose to punish you?”

Lindsay’s question succeeded in making Morgan appear more troubled than inconvenienced for the first time all day.

“I think what my partner is trying to say is that it would really help to know which of those things Felicia had coming to her and which seem excessive,” Jacobi threw in.

“That’s not…” Morgan whispered, turning her head as a tear slipped down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away. “That’s not what I was trying to say.”

“Then feel free to give us a more accurate statement.”

“When I interviewed for my job with Sloane, Felicia asked me if I would do anything to get it. How was I supposed to respond? I needed the job, so I said yes.” Morgan paused, shaking her head in unwelcome remembrance. “Felicia, she sat back all smug and told me that people who were smart enough never had to be willing to do anything.”

Morgan dropped her head into her hand, and Lindsay glanced at Jacobi. With a “that sounds familiar” sigh, Jacobi returned her gaze.

The interview room adjacent to the one they left Morgan Levering in held a witness selected due solely to the fact that the guy, as Jacobi described him, just looked cagey. He seemed to be doing his best to disappear into the crowd back at Sloane and Company’s offices in an effort not to be noticed. And indeed, as they walked into the interview room to talk to him, the man was a study in anxiety.

“So, Nick Webster,” Jacobi addressed him, before popping a file and getting right to business. “According to the company organizational chart, you worked directly under Felicia. You were one of her administrative assistants.”

Nick nodded, looking back and forth between Jacobi and Lindsay agitatedly.

“Did you like her?” Jacobi asked.

“She didn’t want people to like her,” Nick muttered.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Jacobi countered. “Is it a no?”

“What do you want me to say?” Nick asked, waiting for a moment before he realized no response was forthcoming. “No, okay. I didn’t like her. No one liked her.”

“Did she do something in particular to you to make you not like her?”

Nick awkwardly shrugged.

“And I’ll take that as a yes,” Jacobi responded to it. “We know she wasn’t pleasant. But what did she do to you?”

Seeming about as loathe to tell his story as Morgan had been to share hers, Nick finally shifted forward, resting his forearms on the table, and began folding the silver gum wrapper in his hands.

“I was working in the mailroom when I applied for Felicia’s department,” he said. “I submitted my application for a copywriter position. During the interview, Felicia asked me if I would do anything for the position. I told her almost anything. Then I laughed. I thought she was kidding.” The movements of his hands became more brusque and angry. “So then she asked me if I would work as an administrative assistant for two years. She made it pretty obvious that it was either that and maybe get the copywriting job at some point, or not taking the job and having no chance at the one I wanted in the future. She controls people, that’s what she does.”

“Not anymore she doesn’t,” Lindsay reminded him.

“So, you were forced to be at the beck and call of a woman you can’t stand,” Jacobi summarized. “Must have made you pretty angry.”

In less than three seconds, the guy lost his hand. He fumbled the gum wrapper, flushed an interesting shade of red, and wasn’t the least bit straight-faced.

“What did you do?” Lindsay demanded.

“I didn’t kill her,” Nick stated emphatically.

“We don’t think you did,” Jacobi assured him. “But you did do something.”

Guilt oozing over him, Nick unfolded every fold that he’d put into the gum wrapper before looking up with tear-filled eyes.

“She made me look after her house while she was gone. It wasn’t a choice. It was just deciding whether or not I wanted to keep my job,” he said, tears falling in a sudden rush down his cheeks and spattering on the table. “I poisoned her dog.”

Nick began crying in earnest, sobs racking his lanky frame. Not expecting the response at all, Lindsay and Jacobi were held in place by the sincere sounds of the man’s regret.

“I’m sorry,” Nick said, sniffing. “I’m so sorry.”

Interviews done for the moment, Lindsay and Jacobi sat in a state of minor shell-shock. While Lindsay stared holes into her desk, Jacobi sat at his, hands behind his head, looking blankly off at the stairs.

It was hard to not let Nick go with a warning. The amount of guilt the kid was clearly harboring about what he’d done was a decent indicator that they would never have to worry about him getting into any trouble again. But they couldn’t let it go just like that, so they brought him up on a cruelty to animals charge and sent him off to Central Booking.

“How much must this woman have been hated?” Lindsay posed, just loud enough for Jacobi to hear her over the noise in the busy station.

“I think we’re getting a pretty good picture,” Jacobi replied.

“She made the lives of everyone around her a living hell,” Lindsay declared, mind drifting back to Felicia Watkins’ body dangling a hundred feet up in the atrium of Sloane and Company. “And she still doesn’t deserve what happened to her.”

Jacobi nodded in solemn agreement. “It seems our victim has her own M.O. that came back to bite her.”

“Sounds that way,” Lindsay agreed.

But Morgan Levering claimed not to have made any new friends recently. Of course, all it would have taken was Morgan telling the story about Felicia’s distinct interview style in public where the Hallelujah Man could overhear it. He seemed to have a way of discovering people in need of “saving”.

Reaching out to grab the evidence bag on the edge of his desk that had been taunting them ever since they finished up with the interviews, Jacobi dangled it before Lindsay and tilted his head in the direction of the conference room.

“Should we get this over with?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Lindsay responded, pushing up from her desk before she changed her mind.

Looking around at their colleagues as if they were about to do something they shouldn't, Lindsay and Jacobi walked with a death row pace into the conference room. Jacobi closed the door behind them, hesitating for only an instant before locking it.

Lindsay walked the perimeter of the room, pulling all the blinds closed, while Jacobi set up the tape from Sloane and Company. He pressed play and moved back to where Lindsay had taken up a position on the edge of the table.

It was exactly the same as before. It didn't take huge dimensions to make Felicia Watkins' suffering unbearable to witness. In fact, in the intimate setting, it was all the more real. Felicia's fear. Felicia's tears. Felicia's voice. Her broken hands that were useless, but kept trying anyway. This was the portrait of a woman who had been broken down to her utter being.

Lindsay's thoughts jumped between Felicia Watkins, staring out at her from the screen, and Cindy, hopefully back at her desk where she'd been advised to go.

Cindy had seen all of this. She'd wanted to. Of course she did. Cindy always wanted to see everything. It was her damned curious nature that made it impossible for her to differentiate between the things she actually needed to see and the things that she never should. But maybe Cindy hadn't seen nearly as much as she thought that she had. Because, earlier in the day, when they had stood side-by-side staring up at the larger-than-life image of this absolutely brutalized woman, the *look* on Cindy's face had shaken Lindsay to the core. That look was like her innocence had been ripped out of her and trampled on the floor beside the drops of Felicia Watkins' blood.

And it was all Lindsay's fault. She could have made Cindy wait outside. She should have made Cindy wait outside. It was protocol. Cindy had an active imagination. She could have gotten the gist without needing to bear firsthand witness.

This was Lindsay's world. Her life. She chose to chase monsters, and, as a result, she was subjected to their handiwork on a regular basis. But Cindy didn't have to be, and now Lindsay felt wholly responsible for increasing by fathoms the dark recesses to which Cindy's thoughts could delve.

The Hallelujah Man moved in behind Felicia. They struggled. He got the upper hand.

Lindsay heard the deep, measured breaths of Jacobi beside her as her fingers clutched with painful force at the edge of the table.

Just as they'd anticipated, the fireplace poker plunged straight into Felicia Watkins' eye.

Like one half of an old west gunfight, Jacobi drew the remote lightning fast and muted the scream.

Still not quite up to par following her less-than-ideal morning, Jill pushed open the wood and glass door and headed for the desks of Lindsay and Jacobi. She'd really expected to hear from one or the other of them by now. It would have been a nice change if they didn't need anything, but since the Hallelujah Man had decided to reappear, she doubted it seriously.

Finding their desks empty, but Lindsay's jacket still hanging on the back of her chair, Jill turned and ascended the steps to Tom's office. Sitting sideways behind his desk, Tom stared unblinkingly at the bank of monitors displaying the happenings in all parts of the station. He didn't seem to notice her arrival, so Jill knocked lightly on his door.

"Hi," Tom said, turning in her direction

"Hey," Jill returned. "Do you know where Linz is?"

Tom swiveled his chair sideways again, pointing toward a specific monitor.

Stepping further into his office, Jill stopped at the side of Tom's desk and looked. She recognized Lindsay sitting in the conference room with Jacobi right away. It took her a moment longer to realize what they were doing.

"Do you need something from her?" Tom asked.

"No. I just..." Jill turned away from the screen, looking down at Tom. It was astounding that someone could come back from vacation and look that tired already. "I figured she'd know by now what she needed from me."

Tom nodded and dug through some paperwork on his desk, finding a file and flipping it open.

"We're going to need a court order for the files of everyone who worked under the victim, as well as any information the company has kept on the people she may have interviewed. We'll ask nicely, but you know how that goes."

Jill nodded, eyes trailing back to the bank of monitors.

"We also need the search warrant for Felicia's house to include any evidence of her dog being poisoned," Tom continued.

That snapped Jill's focus right back to him.

"It's a long story," he told her.

"It would have to be," Jill shook her head. "I'll get to work on it."

"Thanks, Jill."

Tom gave her a small half-smile, and Jill smiled back. As angry as she had been at him recently for dragging Lindsay back into all of this well before she was ready, there was something about this particular killer that made every conversation feel like an excellent occasion for making amends.

For the first twenty minutes, Claire had allowed Paul to observe the autopsy of Felicia Watkins. With the extent of injuries, it would have added up to an excellent learning experience for him. How to clean up enough blood to see the wounds that caused it. How to find a wound within a wound; Felicia's body had plenty of examples of that particular phenomenon. But, even though Paul had been nothing but respectful, he'd also asked a lot of questions, and when Claire really got into the thick of things, she'd found that she couldn't answer them. Not because she didn't know the answers, but because she didn't want to tell him. He was twenty-two years old, and this case was no way for him to decide whether or not he wanted to pursue a career as a medical examiner.

With the lab to herself, Claire had just spent four hours alone with Felicia Watkins ghost whispering every gory detail to her. Each wound revealed a little more truth about what had been done. Every bruise spoke volumes. And the echoes of how each of those things must have felt ricocheted around the empty morgue.

Claire went into her office, peeling off her lab coat and aimed for the coat rack. When it missed and landed on the floor, she made no move to recover it. Legs feeling feeble and overloaded, Claire walked to her desk, crashing into her chair. She pulled Felicia's chart over in front of her, scanning her initial report, and realized just how many injuries she had to add.

A seriously strong desire to cut and run seized her, to leave the work half done and go home to her kids' smiling faces. Even if they weren't smiling when she got there, she took some parental joy in the fact that it was never too hard to make them laugh. Which meant that she and Ed hadn't screwed them up too much. At least not yet.

But she couldn't just leave it this way. If she didn't finish the paperwork, it would just wait for her. And starting out another day with Felicia Watkins and the torture she'd endured in that church wasn't something she wanted to do. She just needed to write it all down, close the file, and look at it only as often as she had to.

She couldn't just run.

She'd promised Lindsay she would never do that again.

It took over an hour. Not for her to die, but for him to inflict all the wounds that he had left her to die from. He moved around her as if they were fencing, just outside the scope of the camera, thrusting the fireplace poker into Felicia's body again and again.

When Felicia Watkins' head dangled forward from her neck, because she lacked the strength to hold it up, Jacobi unmuted the sound. There were no agonized howls left in the woman. Now the noises she made were nothing more than groans and whimpers, indicating that the all-around pain had reached a level where she could no longer distinguish each plunge of the fireplace poker through her skin and muscle.

It was only after he was done, after every purposeful lesion was made, that the Hallelujah Man unclasped the chains and let Felicia fall forward. She dropped below the camera's sight, there was the scuffle of feet they could hear but not see, and Felicia made one final cry.

When the camera moved again a minute later, it was to refocus on Felicia's prone form, blood now pouring from her mouth, her tongue lying beside her on the floor. Peripherally, Lindsay saw Jacobi look away from the sight, glancing at her before his eyes returned to the screen.

The camera stayed on, so Lindsay and Jacobi continued watching. The sound of footsteps retreated from the room, and Felicia was left alone. She was unchained, liberated, and it was as if they half-expected her to try to get up and walk out of there.

But Felicia had no capacity to move. She was down for the count, her life draining slowly out of her. Looking at the collective picture left on display, only one thought occurred to Lindsay.

"How does he justify it?" she asked Jacobi.

"God," Jacobi said simply.

"No, not that," Lindsay returned. "If he is doing this for God, if he just wants to rid the world of sinners, how does he justify waiting until last to cut out her tongue if he didn't just want to hear her scream?"

Jacobi looked over at her, bottled rage. And just when Lindsay had thought they couldn't hate this man anymore.

A sudden sound turned both of their heads back in the direction of the TV, a slow, rhythmic speech pattern ever so soft, almost non-existent. Jacobi pressed the button on the remote to max out the volume and it grew as loud as a whisper.

"Is that him?" Lindsay inquired. "Is he chanting?"

"Praying?" Jacobi returned.

He rushed forward to pull the tape, and the two of them barreled from the room.

When she'd made it back to the *Register* earlier, Cindy had been immediately accosted in regards

to how long she'd been absent. She wasn't the only one in pursuit of this story. It was the biggie right now. Everyone wanted it. And everyone else who had gone after it had made it back to the office well before she did.

In no mood to argue or explain, Cindy had simply asked for an hour, sat down at her desk, and started writing. Somewhere in the bottom of her bag was the recorder on which Felicia Watkins' final words were precisely recorded. But Cindy didn't need it. She could remember everything that she had seen with perfect clarity.

Much to the dismay of everyone else seeking the top spot on the *Register's* website, the boss had awaited her late entry, and, of course, with all of her inside information, she'd handily beaten out the competition. But the thrill hadn't been there the way that it usually was. It was a rather hollow victory. And ever since she'd turned the article in, she'd been on permanent loop in her head, replaying things she really wished would just take their leave. She'd never given much thought to the downside of her eidetic memory. In the past, it had always been used for good, whether helping her ace a test she'd barely studied for or earning her club membership. But apparently it did have a negative aspect. Not being able to quote Felicia Watkins' by heart wouldn't be a particularly bad thing.

She was working through it, but not on anything newspaper related. She had an angle, but it wouldn't in any way benefit the *Register*.

"Thomas."

Cindy recognized her boss' voice behind her, and minimized the search window before she turned around.

"My office," he motioned for her to follow him.

Wondering if this was how Jill felt when she got that phone call from Denise that seemed to put her job in jeopardy, Cindy lugged herself out of her seat and trailed him to his office.

"Could you get the door?" he asked, moving around his desk to sit down.

Cindy pushed it closed, seeing several sets of eyes turn in her direction before it clicked shut.

"Have a seat."

Not sure if it was an invitation or an order, Cindy complied regardless, dropping into the chair in front of his desk.

"That was some article," her boss stated.

"Thank you," Cindy replied, forcing a somewhat insincere smile to back it up.

"I would like for you to take the lead on the Hallelujah Man cases," her boss informed her,

continuing when Cindy's face turned to one of mild shock. "I know I've been letting you all battle it out. I sort of think the competition is good for you. But I think you really have the inside track on this, and that's what we need."

Cindy heard the words, but their meaning seemed to get lost somewhere in translation. She thought she knew what he was saying, but it seemed just as likely that she'd accidentally ingested some crack on her way back to the office.

"This is a big deal, Cindy," her boss stated in response to her severe underreaction.

"I know," Cindy said quickly. And she did.

"But if you don't want it... if you don't think you can handle it."

"I can handle it," she assured him. "I can absolutely handle it."

"Good," her boss smiled. "Because you've been consistently turning in the best work on this. I'd like to see that continue."

"It will," she promised. "Thank you."

"Thank you," he returned.

Cindy gave him a small smile and got up from the chair. The trip back out to her desk wasn't the walk on air she'd always imagined it would be. This was the biggest story she'd ever been handed the reins to. She was supposed to be smiling with braggart grandiosity, but she was having a hard enough time keeping the small pretend one on her face.

When she passed Danny near her desk, her painted-on smile lifted a fraction of an inch in greeting.

"Amazing article, Cindy," he said.

"Thanks," she returned, sliding back into her chair as he continued on his way.

With a quick glance around, Cindy pulled back up her internet search, clicking on the next available link, knowing very well that this investigation would soon come down to hours on the phone. The information she needed just wasn't out there in cyberspace yet.

Grabbing gratefully at it when her cell phone finally buzzed, Cindy checked the caller ID before flipping it open.

"Hey Claire," she answered.

"Hey," Claire's soft voice returned. "How are you doing?"

“Apparently I’m wowing people with my exceptional insight on this case,” Cindy informed her. “I just became the go-to girl by accident.”

“Well that’s a good thing, right?”

“It’s an excellent thing,” Cindy agreed.

“On another day,” Claire filled in for her.

Cindy took a deep breath, shifting the phone away from her mouth so that she didn’t exhale loudly into Claire’s ear.

“How about you?” she asked. “Did you finish the autopsy?”

“Not long ago,” Claire responded.

Cindy played with the cord of her mouse, wondering if it was just her imagination that Claire was being evasive. While she was used to that with Lindsay, Claire was usually much more forthcoming with her thoughts.

“Anything you want to talk about?” Cindy encouraged.

“No,” Claire breathed. “Nothing. I just wanted to check on you, see if you needed a little friendly comfort.”

“I appreciate it. I definitely do,” Cindy said honestly, light bulb burning with sudden brightness in her brain. “But, Claire, you do know it’s okay to call me if you need that, right?”

For a long moment, Claire said nothing at all, and when she finally did, it was barely a whisper.

“Thanks.”

The excitement of having something incredibly solid to go on, or at least something identifiable, had turned to glassy-eyed mystification in the face of one of the tech girls who felt the need to explain everything that she was doing as she did it.

“It’s like you’re speaking in an invented language to us, Asha,” Jacobi informed her to stop the incessant nerd-chatter. “Just let us know when we need to listen.”

With a disappointed nod, Asha proceeded to work her magic in the system, removing what little sounds were left coming from Felicia, the creaks of the old building, and little by little the soft cadence of a man chanting became paramount.

“Is that Latin?” Lindsay questioned softly, trying to listen at the same time.

“I think so,” Asha nodded. “I can get it translated for you.”

She increased the volume, and Lindsay and Jacobi leaned in for a closer listen, looking at each other when several unexpected sounds became perceptible.

“That sounds like other people,” Jacobi stated, leaning ever closer.

“Shh,” Asha said, holding up a finger to quiet them. She pulled up another program, doing something that would only make sense to Lindsay and Jacobi if they sat through several seminars on computer forensics. “It’s not live,” she said at last. “It’s a recording.”

“How can you tell?”

“Would it make sense if I told you?” Asha fairly asked.

“Probably not,” Jacobi admitted.

Both Lindsay and Jacobi backed away, no longer as intent in their listening. It was a cruel blow after the belief that they had something that could possibly be used to identify the killer.

“This could still be helpful,” Jacobi offered, walking over to Lindsay. “It could be more helpful. We can find out what the recording is, find out where it can be bought, trace the sale.”

Lindsay nodded solemnly. “Think we can do all that before someone else gets killed?”

Sighing, Jacobi glanced at Asha, who was still working diligently at cleaning up the sound on the tape. The repetitive Latin continued to fill the room, and Lindsay and Jacobi just stood there as if they didn’t know what their next move should be.

Grateful for the interruption when Lindsay felt her phone vibrating on her hip, she reached for it, both less and more eager to answer once she saw that it was Cindy.

“Hey,” she answered softly.

“Hey,” Cindy’s calming voice returned. “What’s that sound?”

“Nothin’,” Lindsay quickly responded, motioning her escape to Jacobi before ducking out of the room and pulling the door closed behind her.

“How’s it going there?” Cindy asked.

“Not too bad,” Lindsay responded, heading off down the hallway.

“Good,” Cindy said. “Guess who was just given pole position in coverage of the Hallelujah Man cases?”

Drawn to a momentary stand-still by the unexpected news, Lindsay wished she could smile as she started walking again. “If you say it’s someone other than you, I’ll have to come beat up your boss.”

“Well, you can keep that Texas tomboy aggression at the hall,” Cindy assured her, the tone of her voice implying a genuine grin.

“I’m happy for you,” Lindsay stated, with half honesty and half concern about how much more tenacious this would make Cindy.

“So do you have anything for me?” Cindy predictably asked.

Lindsay paused, but not long enough to let Cindy know that she was determining how much to share with her.

“She wasn’t well-liked,” Lindsay stated. “Other than that, not so much.”

It wasn’t a lie. Not really. The recording may have been something, but they had no idea what it might be yet. And maybe the fact that Felicia had ended up pleading that she would do anything after telling employees that if they were good enough they never had to be willing to was worthy of note. But when Lindsay knew that for sure, she’d tell Cindy. At least that’s how she justified it inside her own head.

“Well, I’ve been trying to find abandoned churches,” Cindy informed her. “I figure, it has to be somewhere far enough away from everything that no one would have heard those screams.”

Just hearing Cindy utter that reminder, the urge to tell her to just stay the hell out of it was intense. But figuring that Cindy working on that would keep her from asking more difficult questions, Lindsay managed to refrain.

“Good thinking,” she forced instead.

“I’ll let you know if I find something,” Cindy promised, and Lindsay felt a pang of guilt knowing that, unlike her, Cindy actually would share any new information. When the voice came back over the line, it had softened into something less shoptalk and more intimate. “So, will I see you tonight?”

Lindsay stopped beside the elevator, one foot behind her on the wall to brace her as she leaned back against it.

She wanted that. In just a short time, she’d gotten rather used to sleeping next to Cindy at night, but as long as there was evidence to go through, she wasn’t leaving this. Not to mention, after what she’d just sat and watched, she felt painted black and really didn’t want any more of her darkness rubbing off on Cindy.

“Probably not tonight, no,” she responded.

“I didn’t figure,” Cindy returned disappointedly. “But I thought it was worth a shot. Do you think you’ll be exceptionally late getting in? Should I check on Martha on my way home?”

“Yes,” Lindsay said. “Please. Take her out?”

“Someone’s got to,” Cindy responded. “And, if anything changes you don’t have to call me. Just come over.”

Lindsay took a deep breath. She could really go for meeting Cindy at her apartment right at this very moment. “Alright.”

The fact that neither of them particularly wanted to say goodbye was obvious in the drawn out silence. Then Lindsay really wished that she had.

“Are you okay, Linz?” Cindy softly questioned.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Lindsay gave the stock answer, hitting the button for the elevator with her fist. “I’ve gotta get back to work. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay,” Cindy responded. “Bye.”

Lindsay flipped the phone closed.

She hated lying to her, but she couldn’t stand the idea of Cindy knowing the truth either. Cindy had a dangerous inclination toward risk-taking when she needed help, so Lindsay just had to make sure that Cindy didn’t know she was in need of anything.

Glancing up at the soft rapping on her door, Claire found Lindsay stepping into her office.

“Hey,” Claire said, a bit more morosely than usual.

“Hey,” Lindsay quietly returned. “What do we got?”

Resigned to the inevitability, Claire pushed back in her chair and grabbed Felicia Watkins’ file.

“Can’t we just go over it in here?” Lindsay asked.

“I’m afraid some of these wounds aren’t exactly easily explainable,” Claire informed her.

Not really wanting to go, especially following that prologue, Lindsay let Claire walk ahead of her. By the time she made it to her side, Claire had Felicia Watkins’ body pulled out.

“Let’s not repeat anything we already know,” Lindsay requested. “Sexual assault?”

“Numerous,” Claire confirmed. “With several different weapons. None of them human. And not just vaginal. I would love to give you an accurate estimate of how many times, but the damage is too extensive.”

Lindsay nodded, expecting it. “What else?”

“The bones in both of her feet are shattered. Her shins. Her kneecaps. The ligaments in her left shoulder are torn in two.” Claire paused. “Let’s just simplify this. Her skull is intact. Her brain is fine. Other than that, every bone, muscle and organ in her body has some kind of damage.”

“Anything painful,” Lindsay summarized. “Anything that would make her beg for mercy. Humble her.”

“And she did beg,” Claire said. “Her vocal chords are completely destroyed. If she had gotten out of this alive, she would never have been able to speak normally again.”

Lindsay cringed as she realized she needed a third go-around with the video of Felicia’s death with the sound on the whole time, in case she’d missed something.

“And there’s this,” Claire said, pulling the sheet down to expose Felicia Watkins’ entire torso. Her body bruised from throat to pelvis, the place on her abdomen that Claire pointed out was barely visible. The gaping wound, deep into the tissue, looked almost corroded.

“What in the hell did that?” Lindsay asked. “Acid?”

“They’re rat bites,” Claire uttered.

Slowly, Lindsay lifted her head, eyes locking with Claire’s. “I’ve seen rat bites, Claire.”

“And she has the kind that you’ve seen all over her, which really isn’t surprising. But these ones were inflicted before most of her other wounds,” Claire explained. “We just couldn’t see them for the blood.”

“It looks more like they sat down for a feast,” Lindsay hissed.

“Cindy could explain this much better than me, I’m sure. Why aren’t she and Jill here?”

“They’re busy,” Lindsay said shortly. “You explain it.”

“There was a medieval torture where they put rats inside a cage with an open bottom on a person’s body. The top of the cage was covered with hot coals. The rats try to burrow away from the heat,” Claire stated, pointing out marks on Felicia’s sides. “These marks are from a cage.”

“Jesus,” Lindsay spat, backing away.

Claire covered Felicia's body, retiring it to its temporary resting place.

"We do know one thing from all of this, Lindsay," she said.

"What do we know?" Lindsay asked helplessly.

"It was fairly evident at the other crime scenes, but with this one, it's irrefutable," Claire declared. "This killer has an incredible grasp of human anatomy. With Felicia, he brought her to the edge of death numerous times, and gave her just enough chance to heal so that she didn't die before he wanted her to. And when he did finally kill her -"

"He gave her exactly the right amount of wounds in all the right places so that she would die slowly and be in the most possible pain as she bled out?" Lindsay guessed.

"Yes," Claire replied, wondering where Lindsay had gotten that information.

"How long did it take her to bleed out?"

"From the state of the wounds and the time of death... seventy-two hours."

"This guy is seriously pissing me off," Lindsay snarled.

"Is that it?" Claire's question drew Lindsay's gaze toward her once again. "You're not scared at all? Because I'm scared, Lindsay. From what little I've heard," Claire emphasized the lack of information she'd been given, "this woman's only sin was being a bitch. This could be Denise lying on this table."

The fact that neither of them were big fans of Denise Kwon had little impact on the analogy. Seeing anyone they knew in a condition like Felicia Watkins was a terrifying prospect.

"I don't want to talk about this," Lindsay uttered.

"It's the truth."

"I don't want to talk about it," Lindsay said again, eyes boring into Claire. "And I don't want you talking about any of this with anyone, including Jill and Cindy."

"They're going to want to know, Lindsay."

"When they need to, we'll tell them," Lindsay declared with finality, heading off.

"You watched the tape, didn't you?" Claire asked.

Lindsay stopped cold in the doorway, tensing as she turned back around.

"It's my job," she said with an unfitting lack of emotion, and left Claire to feel on her own.

ACT III

At some point during the night, Jacobi had decided reading and re-reading all their interview notes and looking through old evidence was like chasing his own tail, and he left for a few hours of sleep in his own bed. When he returned, he took one look at Lindsay and knew that she had done little more than catch a quick shower and feed her dog before heading back into the station. He also had an idea as to what she'd spent those solo hours doing, but that was a conversation they could, and would, have later.

He refused to argue over who was driving, letting Lindsay know that she looked like she'd done six shots of Cuervo and an eight ball.

When they arrived at Sloane and Company, entering through a side door to avoid the still-closed atrium entrance, the CEO who had requested a conference kept them waiting forty minutes before he could meet with them. If they weren't in need of something from him, they would have left him to his ego.

"Felicia worked hard to get to where she'd gotten." He was the first person to talk about the victim with any sort of fondness. "I don't think she got people who don't reach her level, people who lack self-esteem, people who aren't one hundred percent confident all the time. She just thought if people could be more like her, they'd accomplish more."

"You seem to think highly of that," Jacobi uttered. "Our killer just saw it as pride."

The CEO nodded. "She was proud of what she'd done. She should have been."

"To the detriment of others?" Lindsay asked.

"I guess you could say that," the CEO shrugged. "A lot of people probably felt that way."

"So would it be safe to assume that every person Felicia came in contact with in her daily life she treated in a way that would make them a likely suspect?"

"I don't think any of them would kill her."

"I'm only asking how many of them have a motive," Jacobi rephrased.

"Felicia was pretty hard on a lot of people," the CEO said. "She was always nice to me, but then, I signed her paycheck."

"Why would you let this woman keep working at your company?" Lindsay questioned.

"Felicia made them hungry," the CEO said in fond remembrance. "She made them want to keep

moving up the ladder.”

“She made them miserable,” Lindsay said. “They only wanted to move up the ladder to get away from her.”

“Whatever it takes,” the CEO responded.

Lindsay and Jacobi exchanged a look of joint dislike of this asshole. If he had any clue as to how easily he could have been the Hallelujah Man’s victim in Felicia’s place, he didn’t show it.

“We’re going to need to see your employee files, as well as anything you might have on people who interviewed with Felicia and didn’t get hired,” Jacobi informed him.

“We’re going to need to see a warrant,” the CEO smugly replied.

“No problem.”

Grateful for Tom’s initiative, Lindsay produced it from her pocket and held it across his desk.

“What are you doing?” Denise’s voice pierced the peaceful quiet that Jill’s office had been up until her arrival.

“Patterson asked for help with research,” Jill explained.

“I know,” Denise responded. “He’s been beseeching the entire office with his story of woe. You’re the only one who gave in. Why aren’t you working on your serial killer?”

“Seriously?” Jill scoffed. “You’re going to get upset when I do work on the Hallelujah Man case and upset when I don’t?”

She wasn’t sure if Denise was angry or impressed as she stared in at her.

“I’m sorry, Denise,” Jill said with sincerity. “Apparently they don’t need my help with that case right now. But Patterson does.”

With a smirk, Denise let Jill’s outburst go. “I thought he was going to cry.”

For her sake, Jill managed a small smile.

“Well, good with the teamwork I guess,” Denise said and walked off.

Jill thought about calling a member of the club, but somehow knew that Lindsay wasn’t going to tell her anything. And if Lindsay wouldn’t, Claire probably wouldn’t either. Cindy would be the most cooperative, but she sort of suspected that Cindy didn’t know anymore than she did.

Fortunately, Cindy had held back just enough information from her initial article following Felicia Watkins' death to provide her with an attention-grabbing companion piece for today's front page. But she was quickly running out of inside information. And no one was providing her more.

When she'd talked to Lindsay that morning, she'd thought about asking again if Lindsay had any pertinent information for her, but Lindsay had said she'd keep her posted. And even though she knew Lindsay wasn't always forthcoming about cases with her, she really wanted to trust her.

Using research as an excuse to get out of the office, Cindy took off first thing, driving just over the bridge where she could be fairly certain that she wouldn't be seen by colleagues.

Now she was holing up in a small, new age coffee shop, where she had a feeling she would be consuming both lunch and dinner.

Plugging in her charger, and cell phone in hand, she settled in for the long haul. Maybe she didn't have anything in reserve to help her keep the Hallelujah Man story hers alone, but if she could get this information for Lindsay, it wouldn't be an entirely wasted day.

"Twelve boxes full of files are too many damn employees," Jacobi grumbled, cracking open another and tossing the lid aside.

"Well, maybe if Felicia didn't bully people into ambition, they wouldn't have seen such turn over," Lindsay returned.

Fed up with the fruitless search for something to jump out at them from the thousands of files to go through, Jacobi glanced around at their co-workers, who seemed a lot less busy than the two of them.

"We could use more hands in here," he said.

"I don't think we should get a lot of careless people in these files," Lindsay countered. "You know Tom will give us rookies."

"I'll take a pass on the rookies," Jacobi declared with a sharp shake of his head. "I was actually talking about your girl squad."

"They have their own things to do, Jacobi," Lindsay murmured without looking up.

"They don't mind putting their own stuff aside," Jacobi argued. "I've seen them do it."

“Not this time.”

There were a whole host of questions tickling Jacobi’s intrigued brain, starting with why Lindsay thought she should re-watch the videotape of Felicia Watkins’ slaughter without him in the wee hours of the morning and ending with why Lindsay’s personal team hadn’t already found this information, as was their habit. He wasn’t lazy per se, but he had gotten accustomed to the more monotonous parts of his job being handed to him with a big silver bow on top.

Before the interrogation could begin, however, they were interrupted by a lilting voice.

“Got your translations,” Asha practically sang at them.

Jacobi took the sheet of paper when Asha held it out to them, and Lindsay stood at his shoulder reading along.

Prayers, as anticipated; several different ones, repeated several times each.

“The spaces aren’t just spaces,” Asha informed them, brimming exhilaration. “Do you mind if I play it?”

When they nodded their consent, Asha looked like she’d been handed a golden ticket to something other than a serial killer’s mind. She pressed play and let the first couple of prayers fill the room before turning around to face Lindsay and Jacobi.

“I think he’s following a rosary.”

After Jill’s discovery, the link to Catholicism wasn’t terribly surprising, though it did offer some confirmation. Lindsay tried not to reflect too much on the fact that Cindy probably could have made the connection the first time through.

The soft chant continuing in the background, Lindsay scanned the transcript. Mixed in with the familiar “Our Father”s and “Hail Mary”s were several prayers she didn’t recognize.

“These prayers aren’t usually said in a rosary, are they?” She pointed two of them out.

“No,” Jacobi shook his head. “It’s like he’s substituting them in.”

“So what are they?” Lindsay asked.

“It’ll take some research,” Jacobi responded with a shrug, “but we’ll figure it out.”

Or it could take one short phone call. Telling herself it was for the greater good, Lindsay pulled out her cell phone and made the call before she could decide against it.

“Hey,” Cindy answered, sounding glad to hear from her.

“Hey,” Lindsay breathed. “I have a question for you.”

“Okay.”

“Will you see if you recognize this?” Lindsay asked.

“Um... sure,” Cindy responded in some confusion.

Lindsay pulled the transcript from Jacobi’s hand and found the first unknown prayer.

“Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I adore thee profoundly,” she read. “I offer thee the most precious body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ, present in all the tabernacles of the world, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges, and indifference by which He is offended. And through the infinite merit of His most sacred heart, and the immaculate heart of Mary, I beg of thee the conversion of poor sinners.”

Cindy probably only needed a small portion to recognize it if she was going to, but once Lindsay started reading, she couldn’t seem to stop. It was like a track straight into the Hallelujah Man’s psyche. This was what he was thinking. This was what he believed. He really did think that he was some holy entity, some blessed prophet.

“It’s a Fatima prayer.” Cindy answered without delay. Lindsay had known that she would.

“What’s a Fatima prayer?” she asked, glancing at Jacobi, but he was already writing it down.

“In 1917,” Cindy’s gentle voice informed her, “the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to three children in the town of Fatima. It’s one of the few earthly visits by a religious icon that the Catholic Church endorses as truth. I’m pretty sure that one’s the Angel Prayer.”

Mentally noting the information, Lindsay moved down the transcript.

“My God, I believe, I adore, I hope and I love thee. I beg pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope, and do not love thee.”

“That’s another one,” Cindy confirmed. “Linz, these prayers are not regularly prayed. Most modern Catholics don’t even know about them. Where did you get this?”

Trying to decide how much truth she owed Cindy, Lindsay was as honest as she could bring herself to be.

“Evidence at the scene suggests that our killer knows about these prayers,” Lindsay said.

“What kind of evidence?” Cindy asked, waiting Lindsay’s silence out for a reasonably long spell, before adding, “I’m not going to print a story about it. I just want to know.”

“Can we just... could we talk about it later, please?” Lindsay pleaded.

“Okay,” Cindy acquiesced. “How are you? You sound terrible.”

“I’m fine,” Lindsay said, turning away from Jacobi’s overtly curious expression. “How about you? Does this help you at all?”

“If that’s all you’ve got, it’s all you’ve got, Linz.”

Lindsay swallowed the guilt, knowing she was doing this for Cindy’s own good.

“Hopefully we’ll have more soon,” she said. “I’m going to go, okay? I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay,” Cindy said softly, not even hesitating before hanging up.

It was so abrupt, Lindsay wondered for a moment if she was as bad of a liar as Cindy.

Knowing that Lindsay would work herself well into the witching hours and rise before the rooster to work some more, Cindy stopped by her apartment to give some love and a potty break to the neglected Martha for the second night in a row, and then headed to the bar to take Jill up on her drink offer.

Claire was going to meet them, but decided at the last minute it was best to go home. So it ended up just the two of them. They drank margaritas and talked, with very little mention of Felicia Watkins or the Hallelujah Man, made effortless by the fact that neither of them had anything new to say.

At the bottom of her second glass, Cindy discovered an unwelcome thought. Looking up, she crooked her finger at Jill, drawing her across the table. Leaned in so close that she felt Jill’s tequila-and-lime breath hitting her cheek, Cindy kept her voice low as if worried about hidden surveillance.

“I get a feeling Lindsay isn’t telling me everything.”

Jill’s eyes narrowed slightly in reaction. With a sudden movement, she sat back, picked up her glass and clinked it into the side of Cindy’s in a bitter toast.

“Welcome to the club,” she said and tossed back the remainder of its contents.

Sporting a slight hangover from her idiotic attempt at keeping up with Jill, when her cell rang at ten ‘til five, Cindy recited every four-letter word she could recall and a few that she made up on

the spot. Reaching for it in a blind rush to make the noise cease, she knocked the phone from the bedside table, where it proceeded to blare up at her with the generic ring that told her it was no one she knew. Finally finding the phone in the darkness, Cindy flipped it open and fell back onto her bed in careless disarray.

“What?” she muttered, half-asleep.

“Ms. Thomas,” a deep, kind voice returned. “My name is Father Marino. I’m sorry to bother you so early, but I have confession from five to nine and your message said it was urgent.”

Forcing herself upright and feeling a deep sense of mortification, like the priest could somehow sense the rainbow of words with which she’d just colored her surroundings or knew how scantily-clothed she had fallen into bed, Cindy grasped at lucidity.

“Right. Father Marino,” she repeated, trying to puzzle out where in her apartment she might have dropped her notes when she’d come in just a few hours ago.

“You wanted to know about San Vincente’s,” Father Marino filled in the blanks.

“Right,” Cindy said, perking up instantly. “What can you tell me?”

“Boxer,” Lindsay husked, shaking out of her less-than-satisfying sleep on the couch in Claire’s office. Not quite sure how she’d gotten there, she came to the conclusion that staying up for the sake of the case may have crossed over into staying up too long.

“San Vincente’s,” Cindy said without preamble. “It’s near Sebastopol, on the Russian River. It’s been abandoned since 2005 when it was flooded. It’s not just sitting empty, Linz. It’s condemned. No one is supposed to go within fifty feet of it.”

Even to Lindsay’s sleep-deprived brain, that sounded about right.

“Okay, good,” she said, sitting up and looking with some confusion around Claire’s office.

“Jacobi and I will check it out. If there’s something you need to know...”

“I know,” Cindy sounded completely unconvinced. “You’ll call me.”

Lindsay didn’t know what to say. Cindy had a right to be doubtful.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?” she finally said.

It was only when she went upstairs and saw the dark outside the windows and limited personnel that Lindsay bothered to check the time. Deciding a visit to the church wasn’t pressing enough to disturb Jacobi at six a.m. – because if the Hallelujah Man was planning to clean up after himself, he would have already done it – Lindsay rummaged on her desk and Jacobi’s until she found the

four sought-after files and took them into the conference room.

She laid them in order on the table, each file flipped open. Dellan. Blake. Martin. Watkins.

Palms flat against the polished wood, Lindsay leaned over them, eyes scanning each one for the hundredth time.

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

Eyes trailing into Blake’s, Lindsay skimmed to the italicized verse. “Let moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.”

“For the love of money is the root of all evil,” Martin’s file threatened, “which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

The next she didn’t have to read. It was still imbedded into her brain.

“Stop judging, that you may not be judged,” she murmured. “For as you judge so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you.”

Perfect summation. He was trying to scare people into not sinning. Holy terrorism. That’s why the video this time. Everyone needed to know that God was watching and his disciple was at hand to smite them should they get caught in a sin.

When she emerged from the room for coffee, Lindsay was surprised to see the station already back to active, and Jacobi, who looked annoyingly refreshed, sitting at his desk.

“Want to take a ride?” she asked him.

“Want to take a shower?” he countered.

“Give me ten minutes,” Lindsay embarrassedly uttered, digging spare clothes from the bottom drawer of her desk.

Jacobi watched his partner walk off, wishing he had the ability to extract thoughts from her through mind control. Pulled from his ponderings by the fluttering arrival of Asha, he looked up as she perched at the edge of his desk.

“I was playing around with the voice recognition software,” she twittered excitedly, “and you are not going to believe who’s on our recording.”

Asha held out a piece of paper and Jacobi took it.

“Pope John Paul II?!?” he exclaimed, reading over the results.

Intent on his shock, Jacobi didn't notice Claire walk in, stopping just within hearing range.

“It's not a perfect match, but I was comparing it to one of his last speeches right before he died,” Asha explained. “It's close enough to make the assumption that our recording is old and his voice changed as he aged. It could be confirmed.”

“With the Vatican?” Jacobi questioned dubiously.

“Good luck getting their cooperation,” Claire declared, walking the rest of the way to his desk.

“Hey Claire,” Jacobi greeted.

“I'll see what I can find about it,” Asha promised, walking off.

“Where'd you get a recording?” Claire inquired.

“It was at the end of the video,” Jacobi responded. “Linz didn't tell you?”

Claire took a deep cleansing breath and released it. “She's been busy.”

“So we've got a recording by Pope John Paul II doing a rosary with the Fatima prayers,” Jacobi walked through the path of their evidence. “Lindsay and I apparently have somewhere we're supposed to be. And we have Asha doing the digging for us.” He didn't seem to like his odds, but brightened suddenly as he looked at Claire. “You don't suppose Cindy would be up for this kind of research, do you?”

“Oh, I think Cindy would love to help,” Claire replied. “I'll let her know.”

“Good,” Jacobi clapped his hands, much more confident in their chance of success.

“And I brought this for you,” Claire said, handing Jacobi a file. “It's a copy of Felicia Watkins' autopsy report. I thought you might want to look at it yourself... just in case Lindsay has decided not to tell you everything.”

As Claire walked off, Jacobi got an overwhelming feeling that all was not well.

Cindy was right. She'd narrowed down a wide search to one very likely location. San Vincente's was miles from anything. No matter how loud they became, no one would have heard Felicia's screams.

Lindsay and Jacobi stepped inside the damaged building and through the vestibule. The sanctuary was destroyed, but showed no signs that Felicia Watkins had ever been there.

But, though Felicia had told them it was a church, it had never looked like a church on the tape, so Lindsay and Jacobi ignored the ornate pews and altar for the steps at the back of the sanctuary that led down into the basement.

Pulling their guns as if the crime was still in progress, they descended the steep, dark stairwell and emerged into the pitch black below. Flashlights coming out, they walked a little closer together than usual as they moved through the room, like they expected the bogeyman himself to jump from the shadows.

When the small room opened into a larger room in the back, the chains were visible at a distance. It was only as they grew closer to the place where she'd been chained that they could distinguish every part of Felicia Watkins that hadn't made it to the morgue with her, left exactly where they had fallen.

"I'll call for a forensic team," Jacobi stated, pulling out his cell.

When Lindsay opened her mouth, it sounded like somebody else speaking.

"Tell Tom to be discreet, Jacobi. We don't need everybody knowing what's out here."

She assumed without looking at him that Jacobi had heard, though with the lingering screams of Felicia Watkins, she wasn't sure how.

Something heavy bumped Lindsay's foot. She aimed her flashlight down to see a massive rat scurrying across it. With a panicked kick, she sent it flying.

The gathering of evidence from the scene was a full day's work. Lindsay stood the entire time at the edge of the room, watching the forensic team pick up the pieces of Felicia Watkins.

"They're almost finished," Jacobi said as he walked up. "So, what's your plan for tonight?"

Lindsay gave him a look she hoped implied he was crazy. Did this really look like she didn't have plenty of work to keep her ass at her desk for two weeks?

"Here's what I think you should do," Jacobi completely discounted her stare. "I think you should call your friends, because I'm pretty sure one of them is pissed off at you. Then you should go home to your own apartment and get a real night's sleep that doesn't leave you looking like death warmed over... eaten... regurgitated... and warmed over again."

"You sure do know how to sweet talk a lady," Lindsay uttered.

How Jacobi managed to produce an authentic half-smile in this place, Lindsay had no idea, but she did envy him for it.

“Inspector Jacobi,” someone called from across the room, and Jacobi started off.

“Who’s pissed off at me?” Lindsay called at his back.

“Call them all, and you don’t have to worry about it,” Jacobi yelled back.

“So, I have a thought,” Cindy declared. “Maybe we should be narrowing our focus. If this guy wears a stole, if he knows about the Fatima prayers, he’s devout. He’s not your average, run-of-the-mill Catholic.”

“So you think he’s clergy?” Jill asked, having come to a similar conclusion.

“I think it’s possible,” Cindy said. “Then again, with what I learned about that recording, he could be far up in those ranks.”

Jill and Claire sat forward as if waiting for the big reveal. Their last club meeting over two days ago, they had a lot of catching up to do. But before Cindy could impart her awesome knowledge, the door opened and Lindsay sauntered in, plopping herself down in the booth next to Jill and drawing all eyes to her bedraggled form.

“Hey,” Lindsay said. “What did I miss?”

“Did you find anything at the church?” Cindy asked quickly.

“Unless it’s case talk,” Lindsay said. “I really can’t take any more of that right now.”

Catching the eye of the waitress, Lindsay motioned to Jill’s drink and received a nod of comprehension. The silence in response to her statement indicated it was indeed case talk. And the fact that no one started badgering her into talking about it made Lindsay wonder which of her friends, or her Cindy, was supposed to be pissed off at her.

“Claire’s office was broken into,” Cindy changed the subject.

“What?” Lindsay asked.

“It wasn’t wrecked or anything. When I got in this morning, I could just tell someone had picked the lock,” Claire explained.

Red-faced, Lindsay ducked her head.

“Yeah, that was me, sorry,” she said in one quick breath.

“Why did you break into my office?” Claire asked in shock.

“I don’t know,” Lindsay said. “I was tired and I just needed a place to crash. I guess in my somewhat altered state it seemed like a good idea.”

“You could have left me a note,” Claire contended.

“I know,” Lindsay said. “I should have, but Cindy called me super early and I wasn’t thinking.” She tilted her head in surrender. “I’m sorry I broke into your office.”

“Well, it’s better than someone else doing it.”

“Why didn’t you go home last night?” Cindy asked.

“I just... I was working late and I lost track of time.”

“What about the night before?” Cindy questioned.

Lindsay looked around, wondering where her drink was.

“Jesus, Linz! I know you said you were busy, but I thought you’d at least go home to sleep.”

Lindsay’s exhausted gaze held hers across the table, and Cindy was hit with a sudden instant replay of her last three sentences. Sitting back against the booth, she looked at Jill and Claire. Jill’s eyebrow was arched nearly to her hairline and Claire was wearing the expression she always wore when she was trying to keep a straight face but really wanted to grin.

“So how ‘bout them 9ers?” Cindy asked.

Lindsay used it as an excuse to spend the rest of the evening not discussing the case, and the entire time it felt as if there was a pink elephant in the room just waiting to crush them.

“You really do look exhausted, Lindsay,” Jill declared as they stood in front of Papa Joe’s preparing to part ways two hours later. “Are you sure you should be driving?”

“I’ll follow her home,” Cindy volunteered.

That Lindsay wasn’t about to decline. “I’m parked near you,” she motioned with her head. “Later you guys.”

“Night,” Jill and Claire said, watching Lindsay and Cindy walk off, almost disappointed when they just got in their cars and drove away.

Lindsay pulled into the driveway, climbing down from her SUV, as Cindy pulled in behind her and emerged from her own car.

Lindsay ambled back to her, leaning in so that Cindy was pressed back into the driver's side door. Knowing that there were things going on that weren't being spoken aloud, Cindy lost all ability to remember what they were when the metal pressed into her back and she was held hostage by Lindsay's intense stare.

"Come in," Lindsay husked.

"Linz, you need to sleep," Cindy said.

"I can sleep with you here," Lindsay reasoned.

Cindy's look clearly doubted that theory.

"You don't have to stay all night," Lindsay tried. "Just come in."

Completely incapable of saying no to her, Cindy dropped her keys into her purse and followed Lindsay inside.

Martha greeted them inside the door of Lindsay's apartment. Cindy bent down to give her a scratch, but had barely made contact when she was pulled back up. A soft tug and she was pressed firmly against Lindsay.

"I thought you wanted to sleep," Cindy reminded her.

"I want to do that too," Lindsay murmured, her lips occupying Cindy's an instant later in a decidedly pleasant invasion.

When Lindsay's mouth dipped to Cindy's jaw and down onto her neck, Cindy knew two more inches and she would lose all power of speech.

"Hold on, Linz," she panted. "Just a minute."

"Why?" Lindsay asked, moving to the hollow of Cindy's throat.

There were reasons. Cindy knew that. If only she could remember them.

Lindsay's tongue trailed slowly back up her throat and Cindy kissed her hard. Because she'd missed her like crazy. And she was fucking mad for her. But she also needed to know what was going on. As much as she wanted this, she felt like she was on uncertain terrain. She needed to know where they stood.

“I just want to tell you one thing,” she said, watching Lindsay’s eyes darken as she pulled away. “About the recording of the Fatima prayers.”

The question was practically written in neon on Lindsay’s forehead, but she couldn’t ask it. Asking Cindy how she knew about the recording would make it obvious she’d tried to keep it from her.

“Don’t tell me,” Lindsay whispered instead, her lips reattaching to Cindy’s neck.

Wanting so much to just give into it, because it felt so damn right, Cindy lightly pushed Lindsay away.

“It’s important,” Cindy said even as she followed the path that Lindsay was making to the sofa.

“I’m not worried about it,” Lindsay mumbled.

“You’re not worried about it?” Cindy asked.

“Not right now,” Lindsay declared.

“How can you not be worried about it?”

“Cindy, please just stop talking,” Lindsay pleaded.

Instead of the desired effect though, Cindy pushed Lindsay back. She fell softly onto the sofa, staring up blankly.

“What?” she asked.

“You are not not worried about it,” Cindy stated.

“Uh oh, a double negative. I’m in trouble now,” Lindsay teased.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Lindsay responded, getting up again and moving in Cindy’s direction.

“You went to the church today, didn’t you?” Cindy questioned. “It’s the crime scene?”

“Yeah,” Lindsay nonchalantly replied.

“And you didn’t tell us?”

“There was nothing to tell.”

“You have a crime scene, Lindsay,” Cindy stated. “I think we all would have considered that

critical information.”

“We didn’t even find anything,” Lindsay smoothly lied. “We will eventually. I’m just not worried about it. Not right now.”

Cindy evaded Lindsay’s grasping hands. “It’s not that you’re not worried about it. You just don’t want me to worry about it.”

“So what if I don’t? It’s not your problem.”

“How can you say that to me? Especially now?”

“When I find this guy, you’ll have your story, Cindy. I can’t give you what I don’t have.”

“So that’s my role again now?” Cindy asked in disbelief. “Why are you pushing us away from this case?”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are,” Cindy said, backing further away.

With every inch that Cindy moved away from her, Lindsay felt her body temperature drop a degree until she was shivering so hard her teeth knocked together.

“Can we not do this now?”

“We’re going to have to do it some time,” Cindy argued. “Why do you want to handle this case by yourself?”

“When can I ever do anything by myself?” Lindsay countered.

“But that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“What I want is for you to come back over here.”

“And what? Lay there and keep my mouth shut?”

“Yes!”

The silence that followed was more consuming and more painful than any of the ones they had been in lately, which was saying something.

“If that’s what you want Lindsay, maybe you should have just...” stayed with Pete, that’s what she thought, but it hurt Cindy too much to try to hurt Lindsay with it. She didn’t really want to hurt Lindsay anyway. She just wanted Lindsay to stop hurting her. “Why won’t you let anyone help you?”

“Because I never know when everyone will quit on me,” Lindsay exclaimed.

Regretting the words instantly, not because they weren't true, but because it terrified her to be that open with anyone, Lindsay dropped down to the sofa.

Forgiving the whole argument instantly, Cindy moved back over to the sofa, easing down next to her.

“Linz...” she said softly.

Just that small utterance was nearly Lindsay's undoing. Crossing her arms over her chest as if it could shield her from the vulnerability, she couldn't quite look at Cindy.

“I know that this is hard for all of you. I know that Jill and Claire regret what happened in the past,” Cindy murmured. “But I wasn't here then. When have I ever quit on you?”

She hadn't. And she never would. Lindsay knew this without fail.

“When have you ever been really tested?” she argued just to argue.

Mildly interested when Cindy took her hand, and even more interested when Cindy slid her fingers inside the open buttons on her shirt, Lindsay's stomach churned when hand met scar, her palm pressed against the raised skin, fingertips resting over a rapidly pounding heartbeat.

“You are doing it again, Lindsay,” Cindy declared. “You are letting him get inside of you. He doesn't deserve to be there. I want to be. But you can't pull me closer and push me away at the same time. You need to decide which is more important to you.”

Feeling abandoned when Cindy pushed her hand away, Lindsay watched as she grabbed her purse from where it had fallen on the floor and moved toward the door.

“There is only one documented time that Pope John Paul II prayed the rosary like that,” Cindy informed her. “May 13, 1982 in a church in Fatima. It took place after his public homily. Invitation only. And as far as reports go, no recordings should exist.”

Then she left. Lindsay didn't move until Martha started whining at her feet. She took her out and when they came back in, Martha rushed to lie down on the sofa. Lindsay looked at the rectangular entrance in the ceiling.

She pulled down the ladder that led up to the attic and, one rung at a time, ascended into old wounds. Kiss-Me-Not's crimes were still etched into every available space. Even after he was gone, it seemed, she had a hard time letting go.

She did want to protect Cindy. Her intentions were good. But maybe there was some truth in what Cindy had said. Maybe the person most in need of protection was her, and the person she

most needed protecting from was herself.

ACT IV

“Sorry I’m late,” Lindsay said, staggering past Jacobi to her desk.

“How is it that you finally went home last night and look even more tired today?” Jacobi shook his head.

Lindsay just waved her hand at him as if she didn’t want to get into it.

“Well, the good news is,” Jacobi told her, “our technology junkie is eager to please. She’s been researching this recording for us ever since yesterday. Maybe she’ll even find us an answer sometime next week.”

“You can tell her to stop,” Lindsay declared. “May 13, 1982 is the only time that rosary was prayed by John Paul II. There should be no known recording of it.”

“Girl squad’s littlest member?”

Lindsay nodded and gave him a hard stare. “I’d love to know where she got her orders.”

“Got me,” Jacobi shook his head.

Looking at the overwhelming pile of files left to go through without actually seeing them, Lindsay listened to Jacobi call Asha and give her the disappointing news.

“You’re a bad person,” he announced, dropping the receiver back into its cradle. “You broke that girl’s heart.”

“Well, better hers than the other’s,” Lindsay mumbled.

Not entirely sure if she meant to say that out loud, Jacobi let it go with only a curious look. “So on a positive note, you wanted a link between the victims. How about seventy-five percent?”

“What is it?” Lindsay asked.

“Justin Shawn,” Jacobi said, passing Lindsay a file. “He worked in Felicia Watkins’ department before he got moved up to sales. He had an account in one of Travis Martin’s banks...”

“Justin Shawn, that name sounds familiar,” Lindsay whispered.

“It should,” Jacobi stated. “You’ve seen it on the banned customer list from Nouvelle Fleur.”

“Blake’s restaurant?”

Jacobi nodded.

“That sounds like too much of a coincidence to be one,” Lindsay said.

“You want me to take it?” Jacobi offered.

“No,” Lindsay was adamant. “I’m in.”

While they didn’t want a genuinely nice young man with a beautiful family to be a serial killer, a little piece of both Lindsay and Jacobi would have liked to pin it all on Justin Shawn. But never in all their years of interviewing had any one witness been so absolutely convincing in his innocence. Or disbelieving of his bad luck.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” he told them, gesturing broadly in front of the windows in his office. “When Felicia’s body fell from the ceiling, I thought maybe I *did* have something to do with it, like maybe someone was following me or something.”

“Do you know Robert Dellan?” Jacobi asked.

“Never heard of him,” the guy said, and that too was the truth. He turned away from them and looked out the window. “The night that I got banned from Nouvelle Fleur was the night of my bachelor party. According to my friends, I really was that much of a jackass. The interesting part of the story is how much they let me get away with before I was banned from the premises. And then Felicia,” he shook his head, turning back around to face them, making the eye contact of an innocent man. “It really is just a bizarre coincidence.”

Lindsay hated that she believed him.

“Are you a religious man, Mr. Shawn?” Jacobi asked.

“Not really,” he responded. “But my wife observes the Jewish holy days.”

“Okay, Mr. Shawn,” Jacobi said, getting to his feet. “Thanks for your time.”

“It was worth a shot,” Jacobi said, pulling the car into a space.

“Yeah, and sometimes you just do something to do something,” Lindsay responded.

“No worries about the dead-end, though,” Jacobi spewed out-of-place optimism, which Lindsay was secretly grateful to hear. “We’ve got a lot of employees left to look through.”

Lindsay stared at the blank wall of the parking garage, thoughts running in chaotic disorder over the last few days. “Maybe we can get some help with that,” she finally said.

When she looked over at him, Jacobi smiled and nodded.

“I’ll see if I can’t enlist the girl squad for just a few hours,” Lindsay promised.

“See, I knew you liked that name,” Jacobi teased.

Lindsay wanted to know his thoughts. Because, while they shared a lot of things, more than partners should she sometimes thought, they never talked about this part, the part that wasn’t all blazing guns and bravado. The question was so close to the surface that Jacobi had to see it. It spoke volumes that he didn’t pressure her to talk, that he knew she would when she was ready.

“Does it scare you at all, Jacobi,” she asked quietly, eyes returning to the wall, “that this man is out there, indiscriminately killing people in the most sadistic ways, because he thinks that he has some sort of God-appointed purpose?”

“Yeah,” Jacobi answered without hesitation. “It scares me. It could be any one of us. We’re all at risk.”

“Not all of us,” Lindsay countered.

“You point out the person you actually believe hasn’t committed any of these seven sins, and I’ll point out the best liar,” Jacobi declared. “That’s why we’ve got to find this guy.”

Lindsay looked over at him and his resolve made her feel a lot less shaky than she’d been feeling lately.

“Should we get back to Sloane and Company’s vast numbers of disgruntled employees?” Jacobi suggested.

“Actually,” Lindsay said. “There’s something I’ve got to do.”

Jacobi nodded at the response. “You do what you got to do,” he returned. “And come back when you’re ready.”

Lindsay smiled softly at him. He smiled back and got out of the car. After the door closed behind him, Lindsay took a deep breath, dropping her head back against the headrest.

“What are you looking at?” Lindsay whirled from her pacing to ask.

“I’m just trying to figure out what brought you in here, willingly, to pace. Since obviously you don’t feel like talking.”

Dropping down on the faded sofa, Lindsay folded her hands, dangling them between her knees and looked up at the psychiatrist.

“I need to,” Lindsay struggled with the word, motioning with one hand as if to try to coax it out of herself, before letting her fingers link back together. “Talk.”

“Okay,” the psychiatrist responded.

As if it was that easy. Maybe for people other than her.

She lifted her shoulders and tilted her head to either side, treating the psychiatrist to a series of pops and cracks that would make Rice Krispies proud.

“I’m scared,” she finally admitted in a low voice, somewhat hoping he wouldn’t hear her.

“I know. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? Isn’t that the only time you come here?” he questioned. “Because it’s the one thing that you can’t admit to anyone else.”

Lindsay really hated being read like that. And he should have known that.

“There’s a serial killer stalking the city,” he said quietly. “It’s your responsibility to find him. I think you’d be surprised to find the people who care about you won’t take fear as a weakness. Everyone’s a little uneasy.”

With a curt nod of acknowledgement, Lindsay got up from the sofa and walked over to the window. She would have been a lot more comfortable leaving it like that, a half a truth that made her less exposed. But that wouldn’t fix anything.

“He’s not what I’m afraid of,” she said. “Or not the only thing I’m afraid of. He’s not what I’m most afraid of.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

Lindsay stared at the sky, feeling the bright blue over the city wasn’t entirely fitting right now.

“The obsession,” she confessed softly. “The last time I couldn’t find a killer, I…”

“You lost everything,” he finished for her.

Jaw set tight, she turned to face him. “I cannot lose what I have.”

He nodded in understanding. “There are no guarantees in this life, Lindsay. People unexpectedly lose things they think they can’t stand to all the time.”

“Is this supposed to make me feel better?” she asked.

The psychiatrist chuckled lightly before he looked up. “The thing is, if we’re losing something we don’t want to lose because of something we have done or are doing, we have the potential to stop it.”

Though it was a simple answer that she should have come to herself, Lindsay still found herself nodding along.

When she had to knock twice, Lindsay started to worry that Cindy wasn’t going to answer. When she finally did, dressed in striped PJ pants and a t-shirt several sizes too big, just the sight of her brought the kind of smile to Lindsay’s face that she hadn’t allowed herself in days.

“I thought I could buy you dinner,” she said, “but you look like you’re in for the night.”

Cindy didn’t slam the door in her face, but she didn’t smile either, so Lindsay determined the probability of being left standing outside the door of Cindy’s apartment to actually getting inside was about seventy-thirty.

“I should have told you about the church,” Lindsay acknowledged. And she wasn’t just saying it. She really should have. “I’m sorry. It was your tip. It was very helpful. In fact, you have been nothing but exceptional the past few days, even if I haven’t made it easy.”

Cindy just stared blankly up at her for a moment. Lindsay hoped it was a good thing, but doubted it seriously.

“That’s it? You think you’re going to compliment me and that’s going to fix everything?” Cindy finally asked.

“No,” Lindsay stated honestly. But if she had the slightest idea what would, she would do it, no matter how difficult or degrading.

“You don’t have faith in me,” Cindy said, her voice quavering, her eyes filling with tears that she tried but failed to hold back. “You think I’m going to quit on you.”

“No,” Lindsay shook her head.

“That’s what you said,” Cindy reminded her. “You don’t trust me. You don’t trust anyone. You think we’re all just -”

“I didn’t want you to see it,” Lindsay talked over her to stop the inaccurate reasoning that she’d given Cindy time to convince herself was truth.

She knew that she only had one shot at this. Letting any of those thoughts fester – thoughts that she had instigated but had never been true – they would be over before they really got started.

“I know,” she emphasized, “that I can count on you, Cindy. That’s what worries me. Whatever comes at me, no matter how horrible, you’re not going anywhere.”

Cindy wiped her fingers beneath her eyes, looking considerably less angry than she had when she’d answered the door. At first sight, Lindsay feared even Cindy’s adorable frog slippers might come magically to life and go on the attack. Figuring she must be doing something right, Lindsay took a deep breath and plowed on.

“You will always be right there,” Lindsay said straight-faced, “eight inches below me.”

Encouraged when Cindy fought a smile, Lindsay nearly raised her arms and praised Jesus when she finally spoke.

“Five inches max,” she sniffed.

The fact that her smiles were able to come so easily now, one right after the other, seemed a little odd to Lindsay. But then that’s what Cindy did. She made her smile. She always had. And, if she didn’t fuck things up too royally, Cindy might be willing to do it for a while.

“I love that you’re here,” Lindsay tried to be as open as she could be, despite the fact that every second of it felt like a freefall from a very tall building. Feeling a little more confident, she took that first tentative step past the threshold.

“I need you here.” Her left hand rose hesitantly to Cindy’s face, pausing in the air before gently cupping Cindy’s cheek. When Cindy turned into the touch instead of pulling away, Lindsay wondered, yet again, how she had overlooked this for so long.

“It is huge to me that you,” Lindsay lost her train of thought as Cindy dropped a feather-light kiss on her thumb. “That you... that you are willing to go wherever I go.”

Firming her hold on Cindy’s face, she made Cindy look up at her, relieved to see that any anger left was residual and fading quickly.

“But you don’t have to follow me everywhere, Cindy.”

Breathing out heavily, Cindy’s stare was unrelenting. “If you’re going, I’m going.”

It wasn’t what Lindsay wanted to hear. A nice, “Okay Linz, whatever you say,” would have been appreciated. But Cindy’s response wasn’t unexpected. Feeling that she hadn’t exactly won, but since she wasn’t on her way back to her apartment, she most certainly hadn’t lost, Lindsay decided to be thankful for small victories.

“Can I come in?” she asked hopefully.

Hands stronger than their size grabbed onto her jacket and pulled her the rest of the way into the

apartment. And when Cindy kissed her with a force that left no room for misinterpretation, Lindsay knew she would have at least a few hours of freedom before Cindy insisted that she get some rest.

Finally, they were getting a continuation of their moment outside of Sloane and Company... about three days too late.

Finally, they were getting a continuation of what started days ago in this very apartment. Weeks ago on a street in Potrero Hill. Months ago on the day of Tom's wedding. Just over a year ago in the offices of the *San Francisco Register*.

Lindsay hadn't known until a few seconds ago, when she was admitted back into Cindy's world with a small yank, just how badly she'd been needing it.