

Women's Murder Club Virtual Season (2)

Episode # 6 - "Apostate Blues"

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****Teaser****

Standards for what constitutes a 'large individual' have changed over the course of human evolution; the first Australopithecus to scamper across the Tanzanian plain was likely no more than four and a half feet tall. Now, some seven million years later, when people have become almost inured to the sight of a seven foot, 300 LB man dunking a basketball, it takes a spectacular specimen of biggitude to transform sophisticated urban citizens into paralytic gawkers.

San Francisco Homicide Inspectors Lindsay Boxer and Warren Jacobi waited breathless in the back yard of a dilapidated Seeger Street row house. Their jaws remained agape, eyes unblinking and wide as their murder suspect – a mid-fifties white male dressed in a blood-soaked tweed suit – put a fist on the dirt and stood up, unfurling his body to its full, hellishly intimidating height. Clutched in a lefty death grip, the man held what appeared to be a gore-caked chef's knife.

Not four hours before, officers following an anonymous tip discovered five dead bodies in a drug-strewn dump up the block. Three men, two women, all dispatched by deep, precise wounds to the heart and throat, some liberally dusted with a mixture of crystal meth and cocaine.

Boxer and Jacobi were interviewing various blind, deaf and dumb area residents in the vain search for a witness when a terrified neighbor waylaid them to this yard, to this impressively built, knife-wielding fellow who fit the description of 'likely suspect' so perfectly, he may as well have wrapped himself up as an early Christmas present.

"Have mercy," Jacobi muttered, before loudly ordering the man to drop the knife and raise his hands.

The suspect appeared confused. His brows twitched and forehead wrinkled. Traces of rusty white powder flaked away from his nose and mouth.

To Lindsay, the flakes resembled a grotesque Van Dyke beard of blood and cocaine. A man that size would be difficult to subdue under any circumstances, but if he was nuked on stimulants? Reloading might be necessary. Her finger remained at index on her Beretta's trigger guard, and she repeated Jacobi's orders.

"Police! Drop it! Hands up!"

Only after she gestured emphatically with her gun did the suspect seem to understand his life hung in the balance. Weary blue eyes registered comprehension, and he nodded. His

kielbasa-sized fingers uncurled painfully slow, like they'd been clenched for hours. The knife dropped point-first and stood wavering in the soil. He lifted his arms in surrender.

Barked orders and body language cues sent the suspect to his knees, and Lindsay covered him while Jacobi snapped on cuffs with the suspect's full cooperation.

"You're under arrest," Jacobi began, and tugged with great effort to get the man back on his feet. "You have the right to remain silent -"

"Nu culpa," the man whispered, followed by a string of heavily accented words that sounded like a prayer.

Jacobi cast a questioning glance toward Lindsay, who responded with a helpless shrug. "Greek to me. I'm a lapsed Baptist."

Reading the Miranda rights to suspects was protocol, regardless of their ability to understand, so Jacobi frisked him thoroughly and completed the legalese litany while Lindsay bagged the knife.

"No wallet, no phone or keys," Jacobi reported. "No cash. No identification."

"International man of mystery," Lindsay quipped. She took a quick look around the neighborhood, and was gladdened to find their little side-street jaunt hadn't drawn the baying media's attention. "Let's scoot before the hounds catch our scent."

"Didn't see the littlest bloodhound over there," Jacobi noted.

"Yeah. Can't believe she's missing this one." Lindsay had also clocked the peculiar absence of Cindy Thomas, the San Francisco Register's ace crime reporter, and she tried to hide her disappointment. "Good thing, though," she added. "We might make a clean getaway."

Across town at the Register offices, the reporter in question packed up her desk and struggled desperately with the desire to cry. Or throw something heavy through the conference room window, just to scare the poop out of the chicken-legged editorial staff.

"It's not like we're letting you go, or even suspending you," the managing editor told her. His shirt bore wide sweat rings under the arms, and he smelled like a man besieged by the panicked whims of others. "Just take it easy at home for a little while, do some softer stories until this business gets straightened out, huh?"

"This is ridiculous," Cindy repeated. She'd said that at least five times, partly because it was true, and partly because the repetition kept her from screeching neon blue profanity.

She picked up her purse, a banker's box full of research material, and a small canvas tote bag – a bag which contained the very reason for her banishment from the paper – and elbowed her way around the cubicle partition.

“We're just being cautious, trying to avoid a workplace incident,” the sweaty eddie explained again. “It's temporary.”

“It's ridiculous!” Cindy bellowed.

She made it down to the parking garage before she lost it. In the safe privacy of her car, which didn't really feel all that private or safe anymore, Cindy cracked a little. She almost laughed and almost cried and almost allowed for the possibility that it wasn't ridiculous, that her editors and colleagues were right.

Maybe the Hallelujah Man had a crush on her.

****Act One****

Getting the Hummer-height suspect into their low-ceilinged unmarked unit proved tricky for Boxer and Jacobi; they bumped his head twice before he settled in the back seat. All the while, he remained oddly docile for someone who might be high, especially calm for someone who recently slashed five people to death.

On the drive back to the Hall, he kept his eyes low and continued to mumble foreign, sacred-sounding words. Lindsay caught the occasional 'deo' or 'judico' from Latin, but the rest was a wall of sound her brain could not penetrate.

After only a few blocks, her curiosity and annoyance boiled over. She half turned to face him. “Hey. Hey, what's your name? Where you from?”

At first, he didn't seem to hear her at all, and continued his prayers.

“My name is Boxer. His name is Jacobi,” Lindsay enunciated, pointing helpfully to herself and her partner. “Your name?”

After a few moments, the prisoner quieted and looked up. His bloodshot eyes held a natural confidence and intelligence, and Lindsay was surprised to find his pupils were not dilated. He quirked his mouth flat, as if sealing his lips, and shook his head.

“Okay, Mr. No-name. Are you enjoying your crime spree in America? Carving up half the junkies in San Francisco?” she said, while pointing out the windows at their beautiful city scrolling past.

A flash of something near happiness loped across his face. “Ahh, America. San Farnciska. Yes.”

Lindsay whispered sideways to Jacobi, "I think he's Canadian."

Jacobi's stomach clenched with a stifled laugh. On days like this, days when they missed sunrise while cooped in a rank toilet of a house, spent breakfast staring at the horrified dead tarred with thick strands of their own syrup... well, a joke could make the difference between letting the black seep in, or keeping your professional remove. On days like this, humor was crucial.

"Nu Canada. Romania, yes. Sibiu," the prisoner cheerfully announced.

Lindsay drew back and blinked rapidly. She was surprised by how normal he sounded at that moment, his apparent relief at the prospect of communication. "Do you speak any English? At all?"

He frowned. "Putin englezeste. Little?"

Frustration scuttled through Lindsay's brain. She scanned her memory and realized she knew painfully little about eastern Europe. "How 'bout Russian? You guys speak German?"

The suspect made a dismissive face and spit toward his feet. He said something that even Lindsay could recognize as profanity. "Romanian," he repeated. Turning aside, he resumed his prayers.

She turned around and muttered to Jacobi. "This is gonna be fun. I thought even schizoid killers spoke more than one language nowadays."

Jacobi lifted a brow and humphed at his partner. "Well, you don't. And before you even say anything, Texan is not a formally recognized dialect."

"Aw, shut-up. You're no Rosetta Stone, old man."

"I speak-a the Italiano," Jacobi corrected.

Lindsay sneered at this patently false claim. "Barely enough to seduce a cocktail waitress. That doesn't count."

He hissed through his teeth. "I'll chalk that one up to envy and let it slide. Not my fault your man's across the Pacific."

Lindsay's shoulder tensed in a faint flinch. For the first time that already too-long, too-gruesome day, she gave a thought to the man of mention. Pete Raynor was probably tucked away in his Cambodian offices, working late into the evening to get another building permit cleared through the Phnom Penh bureaucracy. At some undetermined point during their separation, Lindsay had come to realize the phrase 'out of sight, out of mind' was more than an empty cliché; lately, it rang like truth.

Quite unbidden, her thoughts jumped onto a parallel line and Cindy Thomas was suddenly front and center in her brain, looming near with cream-pale skin, warm eyes and thick auburn hair. Sense memory is a powerful thing and, in that instant, Lindsay could almost smell her breath, taste her mouth. She stared blindly into space and let her tongue glide across her bottom lip, as if some trace of a week-old kiss still lingered on her skin. Some sweet hint of lip gloss, or the earthy splash of rainwater...

Jacobi popped his fingers near her face. "Boxer."

She snapped back to reality and gave him a bleary, blinky grin. "Yeah?"

He leaned in through the driver's side window and jingled the car keys. "If you're done chewing on your lips and daydreaming, maybe you could help me take Bigfoot upstairs?" he asked, and jerked his head toward their placid, praying prisoner.

Lindsay looked around and saw they were in the Hall's parking garage. She'd missed half the drive back, lost in recollection of one guilt-stained, extracurricular smooch with a female reporter ten years her junior, a kiss stolen while squished between too many stressful cases, and while her own alleged boyfriend was eight-thousand miles away.

"I'm in trouble," she said, and slammed the car door.

Clumps of uniformed officers parted like a dark blue sea as Inspectors Boxer and Jacobi sailed into the squad room - the enormous, ghastly prisoner ambling before them made for a very effective prow. No one drifted within six feet of the man, and Deputy District Attorney Jill Bernhardt couldn't blame them. Giant, blood-spattered homicidal maniacs gave pause to most sensible people.

Jill sat at Lindsay's desk with a cell phone pressed to her ear while, on the other end of the line, the Deputy Mayor's hostile barking (decrying both Bernhardt and her little SFPD playmates as ultra-morons who flattened the Mayor's approval numbers by allowing serial and spree killers to run rampant throughout the city) turned to irrelevant background noise.

She picked up a folder and waved until she garnered Lindsay's attention, then exaggeratedly mouthed, "Is that him?"

In response, Lindsay raised the evidence bag containing the gory knife and gave her friendly neighborhood prosecutor a cross-eyed smile, which Jill translated thusly: "Der. Of course it's him, genius."

"We got him," Jill announced into her phone, provoking a stunned silence from which she drew immense personal satisfaction. "Yes, mere hours after the crime scene

discovery, a suspect is in custody and police have recovered the possible murder weapon. If you like, you may now retract all previous statements regarding my competency and that of the intrepid public servants investigating these murders.”

The line went dead. Jill flipped shut her phone and sighed. “Guess that's a no-go on the apology. Shocker.”

Not that she was genuinely disappointed; no, for Jill, the current standard for disappointment was learning exactly how many thousands of designs of priest's stoles were available, how many different countries were involved in their manufacture, and how difficult communication with Chinese and Polish textile producers could be – they cooperated only slightly more than the paranoid bureaucrats of the Catholic Church. Ergo, Jill's Halloween party insight regarding the origins of certain crime scene trace evidence had thus far proved difficult to develop.

Like so many other potential Hallelujah Man leads, it curved back and formed a circle, trapping investigators inside while the killer rolled free. Still, even clotheshorse Jill was impressed by the wide array of fashion choices for members of the clergy; the vestment-and-stole combinations alone were almost limitless.

Across the room, Lindsay was briefing Lieutenant David Carbahal – a sub for the vacationing Tom Hogan. He didn't talk much, nodded a lot, napped at his desk and took three hour lunches. He made everyone miss Tom's hunting dog energy.

Once Carbahal departed, presumably to make a few calls and go back to sleep, Lindsay darted around front of the prisoner to open the interrogation room door. As Jacobi led him inside, the suspect suddenly turned and addressed Lindsay.

“Boscher? Boscher.”

Evidently, he listened well enough to catch a semblance of her name. His eyes remained steady, and his voice retained that strangely reasonable, lucid quality which again caught Lindsay's ear. Still, his movement was jarring, so her cautious left hand perched on the butt of her pistol.

“Scuzati-ma,” he said, shaking his head to allay her distress. “Boscher. Nevinovat - nu culpa, ah?”

“Yeah-huh. Obviously all just a big misunderstanding,” Lindsay said. She helped Jacobi secure the suspect foot and hand, then they left him under guard and moved into the observation room, where Jill waited for a briefing.

“Am I mistaken, or did that coke-faced behemoth in the O-positive suit just tell you he didn't do it?” Jill asked.

“That's about all he can say – he doesn't, or won't, speak English,” Lindsay told her.

“Says he's Romanian. And, despite the hydrochloride facial, I honestly don't think he's high.”

“Sure doesn't act like it. Calm as anything,” agreed Jacobi. “We'll have him tested once he's booked, after forensics gets up here to collect evidence. Ten'll get you five that dust around his nose matches our crime scene blizzard.”

“I like those odds,” Jill said. “Please tell me that knife was on his person at the time of arrest.”

Lindsay gave her a grin. “In his very hand, counselor.”

Jill pumped her fist and hissed out a thrilled “Yes!”

Her overt joy was understandable because the city's law enforcement apparatus – the D.A.'s office in particular - was under pressure from City Hall to win back public confidence. Lately, there were too many weak plea bargains, and too few straight-up trial convictions with hard sentencing. After layering that atop a general lack of progress on the Hallelujah Man murders, Jill felt she was overdue for a high-profile slam dunk, and she looked ready to kiss Lindsay flush on the mouth for giving her a clear path to the basket. Perhaps Jacobi, too, though with considerably less vigor.

“I freakin' love you guys,” she burred, bouncing on her tippy toes.

“All we did was put him in the car,” Lindsay deflected. “You should thank the tipsy old neighbor lady who found a 'loony whacker' passed out in her azaleas.”

“If we can put this one to bed clean, I'll swing by with roses and Dom,” Jill proclaimed, raising two fingers to seal the promise. “Meanwhile, I'll try to corral an interpreter for Vlad the Inhaler.”

Lindsay wrinkled her nose over the rotten (possibly inaccurate) pun and watched Jill nearly skip out the door. She couldn't help smiling; seeing Jill in such a buoyant mood was a rare treat these days. Additionally, the sight of those lean hips jiving in a narrow skirt reflexively lit the reptilian areas of the Boxer brain. Though her staring barely spanned a three count, it was enough to warrant notice from her grouchy, perpetually observant partner.

“Good grief,” Jacobi complained.

“Good grief, what?” Lindsay couldn't believe it; this legendarily houndish man, now sour-faced and cross-armed, was daring to judge her for a little glance? “Oh, leave me alone.”

“Clearly, you've been left alone too long already. Do us all a favor - check yourself before you do something incredibly self-destructive and stupid. Again,” he added, plainly

referring to her ancient indiscretion with an engaged ex-husband.

“It's time to write that one off, okay? I'm not doing anything...” Lindsay's voice softened and trailed away. Her sharpshooting eyes had traded Jacobi for a distant target – specifically, a smallish, red-headed bullseye wandering near the squad room entrance.

Lindsay Boxer focused on Cindy Thomas, because that's what she did now, because once the thought of her cropped up, there was simply no other option. At unpredictable intervals and often at the worst possible times, her world would shake until all non-essential contents scattered like chaff, until it all winnowed down to one increasingly necessary person. This violent, tectonic process invariably left Lindsay feeling dizzy, muddled, and starving.

“Stupid,” she finished and summarized.

She watched Cindy shift a canvas tote from one shoulder to the other and approach the paired desks Lindsay shared with Jacobi. Watched Cindy's expression change from confusion to dismay at Lindsay's apparent absence. Watched as a handsome young uniformed officer approached Cindy.

Graham, Kyle. A shiny, crew-cut newbie from Nowhere, Florida with good teeth and broad shoulders. He touched Cindy on the arm. Gestured for her to take the empty chair beside the desks. Brought her water and knelt before her, smiling.

Cindy smiled back at him.

Lindsay's brows instantly crashed together. Her chin dipped low, and her nostrils flared. One boot scuffed against the floor, a tentative pawing before blast-off.

“Toro, toro,” Jacobi whispered, as his bullheaded partner charged off to blindside the unsuspecting young toreador. “Woman never listens.”

Cindy Thomas felt highly uncomfortable walking into the Hall of Justice, and that in itself made this a very unusual day. Her visits were normally work-related and therefore solidly in her comfort zone. Those visits had little to do with her personal life, except on that rare occasion when she made a work-related excuse to spend time with a certain inspector.

In the past, she'd been guilty of dropping in with inane questions about a story or case, questions which could have easily been answered with a phone call, simply to be close to Lindsay Boxer, to perch on the edge of her desk and lean in close, whispering questions and soaking in breathy, drawled answers as if they were discussing national secrets instead of subliminally flirting.

That was before. Before the simmering, scantily acknowledged attraction between them took the form of one exceptionally sweet, tragically brief kiss – a kiss they hadn't spoken of since. Lindsay had dodged her calls this past week and avoided being alone with her, sending the clear message that maybe they'd jumped the gun a bit.

Emotions were running high that night; maybe Lindsay had kissed her while gripped by gratitude or relief over learning that the late Martin Boxer wasn't really a dirty cop. Maybe it didn't mean what Cindy thought, or hoped, at all. Maybe Lindsay took some time to think and came to her senses.

Lindsay had a boyfriend, a successful, handsome, age-appropriate partner with one significant drawback: Pete Raynor was physically absent. Meanwhile, perpetually present Cindy had given Lindsay an irrefutable confession of romantic intent by trying to suck the lips right off her face.

Though it hadn't been like that, not really. Cindy's overactive memory sometimes gave it a garish tint, but she knew it was a bona fide sunrise event – it shimmered, welcome and right, just on the horizon. They would talk about it sometime soon, Cindy knew, just not this morning.

This morning, she walked into the Hall with a literal sack full of problems which, sadly, had naught to do with kissing her favorite cop.

Cindy wound up her courage and crossed the homicide bullpen, headed straight to the familiar paired desks, but neither Boxer nor Jacobi was anywhere in sight. Her resolve faltered for a moment.

“Miss Thomas?” a man's voice called from behind. “Can I help you with something?”

She turned around and found herself nearly nose to chest with a solidly built uniformed officer. “Ooh. Hey, there.” She took a step back. “No, I'm good. I'm just... waiting.”

“For Inspector Boxer,” the officer said, with a sly, knowing smile.

Cindy wondered if she was so terribly obvious, if everyone knew the moment she set foot in the squad room that she was coming to see Lindsay. “Yeah, actually. Is she around?”

The young officer nodded and crossed his beefy arms. “Man, you reporters are fast. She just brought the suspect in a few minutes ago.”

“Just brought in the suspect,” Cindy repeated, trying not to sound bitter. The multiple homicide from Seeger Street wasn't her story, but she was heartened to know that SFPD had the killer in custody so quickly. She thought it better to keep secret her real reason for visiting, and so played along. “We're not as fast as you guys sometimes, but we try to keep up.”

The officer – Graham, by his shiny name tag – waved a hand toward the empty chair by Boxer's desk. “Guess it's okay if you take a seat. Can I get you anything while you wait? Coffee, maybe?”

Pleased and surprised by this courtesy, Cindy asked for and received a cup of water. Coffee was out of the question; her nerves didn't need any extra stimulation. She carefully settled her purse and canvas tote out of sight, under Lindsay's desk.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” Officer Graham asked. He knelt before her chair and kept his voice confidentially soft. “You seem kind of... I dunno. Out of sorts?”

She gave the kid a smile and told a smooth, simple lie. “I nearly got smeared by a taxi this morning. Shook me up a little.”

“Wow. You gotta watch out for those cabbies – they'll run you down, then get out and demand a tip,” Graham joked.

It wasn't terribly funny, but Cindy appreciated the effort and kindness, so she faked up a chuckle. She stopped laughing when Lindsay Boxer clomped up beside Graham, looking like she wanted to kick somebody square in the face.

“Officer? You got somewhere else to be?” the inspector rumbled.

Graham looked up and swallowed hard. “Uh... yeah.” He stood and gave Cindy an embarrassed grin. “See you around. And keep an eye out for those taxi drivers, okay?”

Cindy clicked off a half-salute. Lindsay stared napalm at Graham's back until he departed the room. “What's that about taxis?” she asked.

“Nothing. Didn't happen,” Cindy said. “Do you have a minute for me?”

“Jeez, Thomas. The suspect hasn't even said anything yet. He might be faking, but I don't think he speaks English. And he literally spit when I asked him about German or Russian.”

Cindy pulled a silly, grossed-out face. “He spat at you?”

“Not really. It was more like a 'hell, no' kind of spit.” Lindsay paused as if mulling something over. “Say, you don't happen to speak Romanian, know any Romanians, da-da da-da?”

“Romanian? No, can't say I do.”

“Shoot. Figured it was worth asking,” Lindsay said, shrugging. “Can't rule much out with you.”

“Sorry. Actually, I'm not here about the drug murders - someone else is on the story. Although I'm pleased as punch that you nabbed the psychopath.”

“That's another thing – I don't think he's crazy, or even high. I don't know what his deal is.” Lindsay cast her eyes toward the interrogation room. The forensics team had arrived to collect evidence, presumably the knife, samples from the suspect's grimly powdered face, and every stitch of his blood-spattered clothing. She gestured toward Jacobi, asking if he wanted her to come back over, and he shook her off. Evidently, the erstwhile slasher was still on his best behavior.

“No diminished capacity plea, then. Jill must be thrilled,” Cindy noted. “Hey, back to me for a second? I need to talk to you about something else. Something personal.”

Lindsay, assuming personal meant romantic, visibly stiffened. Thinking about kissing Cindy was one thing, but discussion of said kiss remained a dismaying proposition. “Look... I don't even know what to say about that yet. I know I should have called you, but once we met Jill and got started on the fibers and everything, I just - ”

“Not that, either,” Cindy interrupted, though she was clearly pleased to learn their impromptu sidewalk make-out session remained near the front of Lindsay's mind. “Make no mistake, we will discuss that at some point, even if I have to tackle you and strap you down. There may be truth serum involved – I haven't decided yet.”

The suggestive threat caused Lindsay's eyes to widen. She emitted a nervous laugh and leaned against her desk. “Consider me warned. So what's up? You look kinda whipped.”

Cindy grumbled agreement while she retrieved her tote, then laid three plastic zip bags onto the desktop. In each was a 3 x 5 index card and a bundle of pale yellow wildflowers – the ubiquitous California Poppy. One tiny bouquet was pressed flat, as though it had been tucked inside a weighty book for preservation. Lindsay fluttered her lashes in puzzlement.

“About a week ago, I found this note and a little bundle of flowers on Maggie's windshield,” Cindy began. She held up the baggie with the flattened flowers, and displayed the note so Lindsay could read the blocky, printed inscription.

“You are an exceptional person. In case no one has told you lately... you're beautiful,” Lindsay recited. She paused and squinted, trying to hide her unease. “Okay. That's bizarre.”

Cindy frowned and let her shoulders slump. “Gee. Thanks a lot.”

“Oh – not bizarre that someone would think you were beautiful.” Lindsay's face contorted wildly as she backpedaled toward contrition. “It's true, you know. Both parts. I meant the method of conveyance is weird.”

“Mmh. I thought so, too,” Cindy agreed. “And thank you for the half-assed compliment.”

Lindsay flashed a relieved smile. “My specialty. Moving on?”

“Moving on. This one was dropped off at the Register yesterday morning, with another little bouquet.” Cindy held up the second bag, containing a note which read:

“We don't always know what's good for us. Sometimes we need to be protected from the things we want.”

“Oh, boy. Whatever happened to 'Hey, cutie, let's grab a coffee'?” Lindsay wondered.

Cindy swallowed a zinger about how she'd wondered the same thing lately, though not exclusively about the stalker – now was not the time. “I questioned our building's desk attendant, but he said the note and flowers were waiting at the front door when he opened up,” she added, as her expression turned sulky and angry. “Word got around fast, and someone pushed the panic button. Office gossip says the Hallelujah Man is reading my articles and wrote me a love note-slash-death threat.”

“That's crap,” Lindsay muttered. “It's dangerous to spread that kinda talk. They should know better. Plus, the idea of that pious sicko sending a note just to say you're special and pretty and whatever - it's ridiculous.”

“That's what I said! Or shouted, really.”

“You should have shouted!” Lindsay boisterously agreed. “I would have hollered my guts out.”

Cindy sniffed up a faint laugh, heartened by her friend's vicarious outrage. After the paper raised a white flag so quickly, it felt good to have someone to take up her colors and give a rebel yell in support. “Yeah, well... the managing editor said he couldn't risk a 'workplace incident,' and didn't want to take any chances. They've asked me to do scut work from home until this gets sorted out. That's why I'm not on your super-nasty Romanian slasher case,” she woefully explained.

“Jesus. I'm sorry.”

“Please don't apologize. They're the ones with feathers on their legs.”

“Pardon?”

“Chickens,” Cindy clarified. “Bok, bok.”

“Oh. Right.” Unsure what else to say, Lindsay sighed in sympathy. She motioned for Cindy to continue her show and tell presentation.

“Right. Okay. The third, which I found this morning, was taped to the door of my apartment building,” Cindy said, with a light tremor in her voice. She steadied her hand and raised the third note.

Lindsay scowled as she read the words aloud. “Blindly following our passions will bring misery and ruin. Be strong and walk the righteous path.”

Cindy laid the plastic bag aside. She wasn't scared so much as anxious; the notes weren't overtly malicious, but the notion of being watched by someone bold enough to physically invade her life, someone opinionated and righteous enough to judge her professional (or personal) choices – it was distinctly unsettling. When Cindy looked up, she found Lindsay's expression had washed down to a stern, rocky shoal.

“From vehicle to work to home within a week. Seems you've got yourself a rapidly escalating stalker,” said the peeved inspector. “Why'd you wait so long to tell me about this?”

“Aside from the fact that you've been ducking me?” Cindy fired back, causing Lindsay to lower her eyes. “Alrighty. Got that out of my system. I shall let it drop.”

“I'd 'preciate it,” Lindsay muttered.

“Thing is, that first note and the flowers came right after... after that incident we're not talking about just yet. Truthfully, I thought it maybe it was from you.”

“Me?” Lindsay straightened up, looked genuinely slighted. “You think I'm some cheapskate weirdo who leaves unsigned notes and flowers yanked off a highway median?”

“Hey, I've never been courted by you! You might write poetry and send wine and roses for all I know! I don't know what to expect, if I should even expect anything,” Cindy whispered at a hot ramble, all while blushing a fetching shade of irked. “The first note was kind of sweetly innocuous, and the timing... I mean, it came right after we - ”

“Yeah, okay,” Lindsay interrupted, hoping to spare herself another distracting trip down memory lane. “I savvy your logic about the first one. Those other two are raising my hackles.”

“Are we talking Hallelujah Man hackles, or just generic, overprotective cop hackles?” Cindy squinted out a weak smile. “Please say it's the second one.”

Lindsay sensed how hard Cindy was trying to hide her fright. She battled down an urge to slide off her desk and hug the girl – just wrap her up and hold on until the world slowed down. The fear that she couldn't offer support to her friend without the intrusion of sexual tension or awkwardness made Lindsay feel like a coward and a damned fool. She magicked up a comforting smile instead.

“Second one. There's a religious tone, for sure, but no malice. They seem corrective, sort of like...”

“Vaguely non-secular pedantry?” Cindy supplied.

Lindsay chortled over the reporter's concise, ripping assessment. “Mmm-hmm. This might be someone who reads your articles pretty regular. Maybe they saw you at a crime scene and thought, 'Hey, she's just a cute, fluffy runt.’”

“Whoa, now -”

“A vulnerable, innocent kid seduced into danger by the glamorous world of criminal justice.”

Cindy's mouth fell open in a quiet gasp. “That is so grossly offensive, I don't even know where to -”

“Easy, now. I know you're a piranha. I've seen those teeth at work,” Lindsay said, showing her palms in a placating gesture. “I'm just saying certain ignorant people might mistake you for a defenseless little kitty in need of rescue. Happens to the best of us.”

“Oh.” Cindy took a moment to smooth down her ruffled pride. “Piranha?”

Lindsay jutted out her bottom teeth and clicked bright choppers in goony, underslung affirmation. It worked – Cindy smiled, even laughed a little.

“Anyhow, they've grown so invested in your safety that he – or she – is reaching out, in their own yucky way,” Lindsay continued. “First thing we do is file a report so there's something on record - I'll do that as soon as I get a minute. Second thing, you take this stuff down to Claire and let her do all the usual checks. Third thing, you start being extra careful.”

“I've already skipped ahead to number three,” Cindy told her.

“Good. Don't go outside without a finger on that pepper spray trigger, you hear me?”

“Yup. Loud and clear.”

Across the room, Jacobi emerged from the interrogation room with the forensics techs. He waved his partner over. Lindsay nodded, rolled a hitch from her tense shoulder and leaned a smidge closer to Cindy. “For the record, I have sent flowers, but never in all my days have I written poetry.”

Cindy mustered a grin. “That's a shame. Some of the best American poets are cowboys.”

Lindsay snorted and rolled her eyes. Despite a cellular ache to stay with Cindy and play watchdog, both knew that wasn't really an option. She stood and readied herself for the shift back into case-closing mode. "This deal here will probably wrap up fast. Soon as I can, I promise we'll take care of this."

"Thank you."

"Stay alert, but don't get too worried." Though she wanted to stay, wanted to offer something more solid than a promise, Lindsay gave Cindy's arm a brief squeeze and backed away. "It's gonna be all right. We'll find this crank and put the fear in him, okay?"

With a confidence she didn't fully own, Cindy nodded and gathered her things. She watched Lindsay join Jacobi and examine a slip of paper. They spoke excitedly and departed the bullpen at a trot, presumably following a hot lead. Cindy was inconsolably jealous.

Moments later, two officers led a stunningly large prisoner out of the interrogation room. On his massive body, the prison scrubs looked like doll clothes; the cuffs barely reached his armpits, and the trouser hems rode high on his calves. Cindy imagined that with a strong sneeze, he could rip the stitching at several stress points, like Bruce Banner during a green mood.

"Holy sheep," Cindy murmured. The impolitic reporter in her yearned to rush over and fire a few incendiary questions (in German and Russian, just in case he was faking). In this case, good sense did overrule her passion. Her stalker would be so proud.

On her way out, she called the Register's managing editor directly and tipped him that SFPD had a suspect in custody – nothing more. Her abrupt announcement sent the clear message that she felt snubbed by not getting the assignment. She was too preoccupied to properly flaunt the consequences of his cowardly misstep.

Once trapped in the crowded elevator, Cindy Thomas struggled with an unusual sensation of claustrophobia. Every brushed arm or bumped shoulder reminded her that privacy and personal space were illusions; when someone wants to insinuate themselves into your life, there really isn't much you can do to stop them.

She drew her arms in and tucked against the back rail, tight-shelled as a walnut. Despite the fact that she was surrounded by police officers sworn to protect and defend, she didn't feel safe.

****Act Two****

Medical Examiner Claire Washburn was literally up to her elbows in a body when Cindy Thomas entered the morgue. The crime reporter had built up a healthy resistance to gore

over her relatively short career, but the sight of a vivisected body still managed to chill her blood. Four gurneys bearing sheet-draped bodies were lined up for post-mortem exams. Staffers buzzed around, collecting and classifying as quickly and efficiently as they could in the cramped space. Cindy hovered near the door and cleared her throat.

Claire looked up at her half-expected guest and shook her head. “Honey, I just got started. There's not much I can tell you.” Her hands roved around the corpse's chest cavity, and the sickening squishes made Cindy cringe.

“I so wish I was here for official business, but I'm not on the slasher story,” she explained, hoisting the canvas tote filled with quasi-evidence. “Lindsay said I should bring this stuff to you.”

“She did, huh?” Claire huffed. Her hand emerged from the corpse with a neatly punctured heart in tow. She weighed the heart and recited the results to her assistant. “Is the inspector aware that I am currently, for lack of better words, totally slammed?”

Abashed by her friend's unusual brusqueness, Cindy grimaced and nodded. “Sorry. You know what? It's not a big deal, just personal stuff. It can wait.” She slumped in defeat and turned to leave.

“Cindy.”

The young woman turned back and found Claire looking at her intently.

“You're already here. Speak it.”

Aware that Claire had bigger fish to fry, Cindy cut right to the point. “I kind of... have a stalker? Weird notes. Flowers.” Suddenly feeling silly, she snickered and bowed her head. “Like I said, it's not a big deal.”

Claire's hands went still. Her face, partially obscured by her mask and safety shield, measurably softened. “Are you okay?”

“On the ten point freak-out scale, I'm pulling a five,” Cindy admitted.

“Hmm.” Claire whispered something to her assistant. She pulled down her mask and de-gloved, approached Cindy with her hands out. “Give it over. I'll run some tests once I'm out from under this mess.”

Cindy surrendered the tote and smiled her thanks. Claire grasped Cindy's elbow and they retreated to the relative calm of her office.

“How long has this been going on?” Claire asked, in a voice mercifully free from recrimination.

“About a week. I’ve been pinged three times so far.”

Once the baggies were spread out on her desk, Claire immediately noticed the flattened, preserved bouquet. “I’m guessing that one arrived first. You planned on keeping it, so... did you assume it was from a secret admirer?”

Cindy instantly blushed. “Well... sort of. 'Stalker' wasn't the first thing that leaped to mind.”

“Way I see it, secret admirers aren't much better,” Claire said. “Who'd you think it was from?”

“Doesn't matter. I asked, I was wrong, that's a dead end,” Cindy explained, trying to neatly end that line of questioning.

Claire tucked her chin low and looked suspiciously giddy. “But you had your hopes.” She bumped Cindy with her hip. “Come on. Spill it. You know you want to tell me.”

Cindy took a step back and crossed her arms. “Maybe someday when you aren't totally slammed,” she said, tilting her head toward all those bodies waiting for the doctor's attention.

“The truth takes less time than all these evasions.”

“Oh, no,” Cindy moaned. “Believe me. The truth would take so, so much longer.”

“Now that's just fuel on the fire. You've got a sweet spot for somebody, and I will have that name,” Claire proclaimed, despite being 70/30 sure she already knew the name quite well. “Mark my words, child.”

With a beleaguered droop of her head, Cindy tried again to divert Claire's deft perception to a more productive topic. “I appreciate that you're trying to distract me – thank you – but I'm really more concerned about the person who sent me the flowers than the person who didn't.”

“Uh-huh.” Claire stared at her for a moment more, then looked over the notes and flowers. “Might be late this evening before I can get to it. If you don't want to go home tonight, you know we'd be happy to have you at Casa Washburn.”

The offer was especially generous, considering the difficulties Claire and husband Ed had endured of late, but Cindy gently refused. “I'm still only registering a five. If that changes, I may show up on your doorstep with my pillow and blankie. And my trusty can of pepper spray, since Lindsay forbade me to leave home without it.”

Claire smiled and patted her arm. She looked past Cindy and saw her assistant busily logging autopsy data, and she felt a pang at having to leave her friend in distress. “You

look tired. If you don't have somewhere to be right now – and if you don't mind the constant whine of a Stryker saw - you're welcome to hang out here. Rest a while.”

Nodding gratefully, Cindy slumped onto Claire's battered sofa. “I haven't been sleeping well,” she said, clutching a throw pillow to her chest. “Maybe just for a little bit.”

“As long as you need. I'm gonna order in some sandwiches, so plan on staying for a late lunch,” Claire said, and closed the door behind her.

Strange as it might have seemed, the morgue office had taken on an aura of safety for Cindy; it felt almost like the basement of a friend's house. Cindy closed her eyes and imagined a pool table and a bar, an old television set with a rabbit ear antenna. Her sense of well-being gradually returned. Her heart rate slowed and her breathing leveled out.

She fell asleep to the sound of a Stryker saw, and the memory of Lindsay Boxer's calm voice promising her everything was going to be alright.

Lindsay loved her partner like nobody's business, but there was one thing about the man that made her crazy: when they weren't heading toward an emergency call, Warren Jacobi drove like a granny bound for church. Lindsay fiddled with the radio, changing the station a dozen times. Looked out the window at the city crawling past. Loudly and deliberately cracked her knuckles.

“Can you hold still?” Jacobi suddenly snapped.

“Can you speed up?” she countered. “Bicycles are passing us. I'm startin' to think you're lost.”

“I know exactly where we're going. It's my day to drive, so suck it up.”

She tried to suck it up, she really did, but Lindsay didn't want to be here. She wanted this case over and done so she could figure out what to do about Cindy's stalker – and what to do about Cindy. After a few painfully quiet moments, she started playing the drum solo from “Wipeout” on her thighs.

Jacobi sighed and rubbed his eyes. In a show of détente, he pressed a tad harder on the accelerator. “What's up with you?” he queried. “We've got the suspect, got the murder weapon, got a clue to follow... as far as multiples go, this one's been a cakewalk.”

Lindsay knew he was right about the case. Rarely did a violent perp covered in damning evidence simply fall into SFPD's collective lap. Rarely did they get such quick replies from immigration authorities, who claimed they were busily tracking down names for recent U.S. visitors of Romanian extraction.

And the clue Jacobi mentioned held promise as well; forensics found an address scrawled on a slip of paper in the suspect's shoe. It might lead to their mysterious giant's secret identity, or help explain his motive. If Jill could manage to wrangle an interpreter, they'd prize out a confession and all the pieces would snap cleanly into place.

"It's not about the case," Lindsay confirmed.

"Okay. Problems with a certain reporter, then."

She tried for a dismissive tone. "Shuh... what makes you say that?"

"I'm a genius detective," Jacobi teased. "Come on. The girl hasn't been around for a week or so. Shows up today, flirts with that gym-built uniform - "

"Please! She was not flirting with him."

"Maybe, maybe not. Pointless if she was," Jacobi said with a grin. "Graham is gay."

Lindsay snorted in disbelief. "Nuh-unh. Every time I see him, Graham's talking about girls," she asserted. "The guy's a loud-barking dog."

Jacobi didn't see the point in criticizing Lindsay's faulty gaydar; the irony would be lost on her. "Fine. Sexual orientation notwithstanding, he appeared to be flirting with Cindy, and you were ready to stomp that boy's soft parts."

"I was not!"

"Be easier on everybody if you'd just face facts. Pete's grown. He'd understand."

"Warren, knock it off."

"Okay," he said, though he was plainly not finished. He waited a few ticks and sallied forth again. "It probably wouldn't be as tough as you think."

Lindsay slammed her eyes shut and prayed with all her might for Jacobi to shut his yapper before this developed into a full-fledged argument.

"1288 Parson," he said. "Not all who wander are lost."

The car came to a stop. Lindsay opened her eyes and found her prayers answered; they had arrived at their destination.

"All I'm saying is - " Jacobi began.

Lindsay was already halfway out the door. She slammed it shut on his unwanted advice and charged up the front walk as if fleeing a fire.

Even from the sidewalk, the house simply didn't look right. Weathered green paint hung off the siding in curved scales, peeling loose like snake skin. All first floor windows were obscured by heavy, dark drapes. Despite the chilly fall temperature, several of the second floor windows gaped wide open.

As Lindsay approached, she noted two broken glass panels on the open front door – a sign of forced entry. She looked back toward Jacobi, pointed at the door, and unholstered her gun. In a flicker, he was at her side.

Lindsay took point and knocked on the door. Even that modest touch made the loose, creaky door swing open wider. She craned her head around to see through the gap, but the room was full dark. She called out loudly. “San Francisco Police Department. Anybody home?”

When no answer came, Lindsay asked Jacobi for his penlight and flashed the beam into the darkened foyer. On the floor, showing black in the pool of illumination, was a trail of blood droplets.

“We got blood,” she whispered, affirming both exigent circumstances and a possible second crime scene. They exchanged a practiced look, held fast for a silent three count, and went through the door as a tight tandem unit.

Barely five steps in, they found the first body. A thin black man wearing a wife beater and pajama pants lay sprawled on the filthy front room carpet. Two wounds were evident: one clean punch through the heart and a wide slash across his throat. He would have exsanguinated almost instantly.

“Same wound pattern as the Seeger vics,” Jacobi said. He pulled out his cell. “I'll call it in.”

“There's two more on the couch.” Lindsay aimed the flashlight toward the claret-drenched sofa, where another man and woman lay dead. Their pale bare feet and hands protruded from beneath a fuzzy blanket. “No visible defensive wounds. Might have caught them sleeping, or passed out.”

Jacobi nodded. “Or maybe they knew him.”

A scrabbling sound from the kitchen made them both jump, and Lindsay swung her light and gun toward the noise.

“Police! Raise your hands and come out - ”

“NO! NO! I AM SORRY!” a woman screamed from the kitchen. She darted past the beam of light and ducked out of sight. “GO AWAY! I'M SORRY!”

The scrabbling sounds resumed. An object whizzed out of the darkness and plunked Lindsay hard on the mouth, then fell to the floor with a woody clonk. Lindsay felt her top lip split and a trickle of blood ran over her teeth. Two more projectiles flew out of the kitchen. One caught Jacobi on the shoulder, the other cracked his cell phone against his ear. He yelped and scrambled for cover beside the kitchen door.

“Dammit!” Lindsay shouted, and squeezed the trigger of her Beretta, firing a quick shot into the floor. The booming noise barely died away before she shouted again. “Police! Stop throwing shit and get out here, right now!”

“I DIDN'T KNOW! I AM SORRY!” the woman yelled again, her thickly accented voice ripped and raw. She crawled into the front room and collapsed in a sobbing, fetal heap.

Lindsay covered her while Jacobi finished calling in backup. He snapped on a set of cuffs and hauled the hysterical woman to her feet while Lindsay searched for a switch and flipped on the overhead lights.

Her slick boot sole landed on something round and her balance went momentarily sideways. Lindsay righted herself, looked down and saw a wooden apple and two wooden lemons, like the kind used in tacky 1970's centerpieces. She licked her bloodied lip and privately cursed the flung apple that stung like a softball.

The crazed apple-hurler herself appeared physically unharmed. She wore a long, dark raincoat over a sheer nightgown – a gown crusted with the dried blood of others - and a pair of sneakers. Her gaunt pallor was classic junkie chic.

“Is anyone else in the house?” Jacobi asked her, but she didn't seem to hear him. Louder, and with greater insistence, he repeated the question.

“Shh, shh. Don't wake them,” she whispered, staring blankly into Jacobi's eyes. She shook her head violently side to side, as if trying to fling out a memory. “I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know.”

“What the hell did these people get into?” Lindsay asked, while the traumatized lone survivor, much like the murderer, chanted a mantra of exculpation.

“I didn't know,” she said. “I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know.”

****Act Three****

“Her name is Jana Macek, twenty-nine, immigrated from Romania seven years ago,” Lindsay told Jill as they marched down a whiteout hospital hallway, heading toward the private detention rooms for patients on psych hold.

“She's a senior research assistant for Lavin Pharmaceuticals in Brisbane. One arrest for illegal drug possession last month. Her supervisor says Jana got hooked on meth through

a boyfriend, and she's currently AWOL from rehab, paid through the company's insurance.”

“I'm guessing her job is history now,” Jill said.

“Correct. Boss says she's a really smart girl, but they're cutting her loose.”

“What about the other victims?”

“One was Jana's boyfriend, Lyle Overbey, former chem major at Santa Cruz and convicted meth cooker. No names for the other two yet, but I won't be surprised if they're in the system. Birds of a feather and all that.”

“So Parson Drive was definitely a cook house?”

“Oh, yeah. There's product scattered everywhere - cocaine, oxy, a little weed, and a lot of crystal. The entire second floor was a lab set-up. Looked real professional, though a lot of the equipment was smashed to junk,” Lindsay recounted. “Sorry you couldn't tour the scene. DTSC said it'll take a while to get the hazardous crap cleaned up and processed for evidence.”

“It's okay,” Jill assured her. “I'm not eager to die of toxic shock.”

“CSU worked the first floor pretty hard. Plunkett says these three victims were killed first, about two hours before the Seeger Street murders. Since our guy had the Parson Drive address on him, it looks like he went there first, stab-slash-stab, then visited Seeger. Stab-slash-stab, repeat as necessary.”

“Any idea why Jana Macek wasn't killed with the rest?” asked Jill.

“We got ideas out the wazoo. Mine is that Vlad was really looking for the second house, but didn't know how to get there. He storms the first house and does everyone but the Romanian girl, because he needs her help to find his real targets,” Lindsay theorized. “Jana had on a coat and sneakers with her nightgown. Since the Seeger house is only about three miles away from Parson, and since no one in this drama owns a car, I'm thinking they walked over and she got him through the door.”

“Still, once he's in the house, she becomes a liability,” Jill persisted. “Why not kill her then?”

“With five victims at Seeger, things might have gotten out of hand. Maybe she skipped during the riot.”

Jill anxiously chewed her bottom lip. “Sounds plausible, but there's wiggle room in that schedule. Even at twenty minutes a mile, that leaves Big Vlad time for reflection before going in.”

“Yeah.” Lindsay grimaced and shook her head. They paused to show their identification to the duty nurse and were buzzed through double doors into the secure ward. “I keep thinking, what if he stopped somewhere else along the way? We could find a third scene, a fourth...”

“Shhh!!” Jill flailed her hands at the notion of a Michael Myers-style spree killer carving a gruesome path through their city's trashy underbelly. Between the ancient Zodiac killer, the recent Kiss-Me-Not murders, and the current Hallelujah Man cases, San Francisco already had an unsavory reputation as a Mecca for pattern murders. “Two scenes, eight bodies – that's quite enough.”

“I know, I'm just sayin' there's a dozen dope holes between Seeger and Parson.”

“Honey? Stop. Please. I beg of you,” Jill insisted, not actually begging so much as demanding. “Has Jana said anything useful?”

“Not unless you want to hear a shell-shocked junkie say she's sorry a thousand times.” As they came to a stop outside a numbered, barren hospital cell, Lindsay heard their lone witness jaggedly calling out in perpetual apology. “That started in the ambulance - five hours ago. They say she hasn't shut up yet.”

Jill bristled at the horrible, pathetic cries; the woman sounded terrified. Jill braced a hand against the steel door frame and peered through the narrow observation window. Jana Macek, strapped to a bed, writhed around like a snake doused with kerosene. “My God. Can't they sedate her?”

“They did. Twice. Girl's got the drug tolerance of a musk ox. The shrink just told me questioning her before tomorrow would be pointless,” said Lindsay. “How 'bout you? Find a passable translator yet?”

“The Romanian Consulate General's office is sending an attorney from Los Angeles tomorrow. They're concerned that we might not provide fair and impartial counsel for their mystery citizen – who, by the way, is still without a name,” Jill snitted. “We're trying to light a fire under the feds, but they're suddenly dragging ass on getting us an ID.”

“Which means one of two things: the giant is someone important, or someone who's not supposed to be here. They're playing CYA.”

“The bureaucrat's favorite game - cover your ass,” Jill concurred. She shut her eyes and ran a hand through her hair. “So much for my slam dunk. More like a lay-up and a hard foul.”

“Hey, you'll get your points. Our guy did it, we just don't know why.” Lindsay let out a weary groan and leaned against the wall beside Jill. “He gets caught with the knife in his

hand and leaves a living witness. Still, he keeps saying 'No culpa, no culpa' over and over. I don't understand."

"You will. We will. Tomorrow, all will be revealed," Jill said, wiggling her fingers as if summoning aid from the mystic forces of truth and justice.

"If only," Lindsay said, grinning. Her smile jerked into a wince as the swollen welt on her upper lip cracked a little. "Can't believe I nearly got taken down by a wooden apple."

Jill gave a sympathetic giggle and yanked on the sleeve of Lindsay's leather jacket. "Come on, sissy. Let your favorite lawyer buy you a drink. I'll throw in some extra ice for your war wound."

The exhausted cop reluctantly peeled herself off the wall. "Sounds like a plan."

"It's a fine plan," Jill agreed, tugging the taller woman along toward the elevators. "Sheer elegance in its simplicity."

Actually, the idea of spending a few hours with her best buddy, ratcheting up tequila theories about hit men for Romanian drug cartels, sounded pretty fantastic to Lindsay. They'd probably wind up discussing the serials as well, because the Hallelujah Dick was never far from their thoughts, and because Jill sometimes experienced Newtonian idea storms while drunk and dancing to eighteen minute reggaeton remixes.

Thing was, Lindsay had somewhere else she dearly wanted to be, and she was tired enough to admit as much to Jill.

"Can I get a rain check?" she ventured. "I wanna look in on Cindy."

If Jill was disappointed, she hid it well. Her sly smile indicated Lindsay's refusal wasn't much of a surprise. When she spoke with Cindy earlier, the reporter seemed pretty chill about the whole stalker thing - though she ranted a bit about chickens and piranhas, which Jill wrote up to frustration, work-related and otherwise.

In that conversation, Cindy had referenced Lindsay more than usual, enough to be conspicuous. Jill noticed that Cindy Thomas was steadily creeping up the inspector's priority list, too, though she remained too keen to say as much out loud.

"An even better plan," Jill asserted. "Call if you need backup. We'll shoot some Grey Geeses... or is it Grey Geese? Flip it - we'll kill some vodka."

Lindsay clicked out a silly wink/point combo. "Will do."

Cindy put the finishing touches on a mediocre, routine story about the county expanding

its enhanced 911 services, pasted the text into an email and flushed it from her computer toward the Register's story dump. It would resurface toward the ass end of the A-section, she knew, and her wobbly pride took another kick to the shins.

Still, it was work, and steady print jobs like hers were hard to come by. In the current turkey burger economy (as a certain Ms. Fey had put it), a working writer couldn't afford to make too many waves, unless they relished the idea of covering dry cleaner grand openings for the local penny saver.

She flipped shut her laptop and pushed away from the desk, rubbed the dancing light spots from her eyes.

“Dinner time,” she called out, and her voice rang through the empty apartment. At times like this, she wished she had a dog. Or a person. Whichever. Some sort of anchoring companion might help her feel less adrift in her own home.

Once in the kitchen, Cindy found she had neither the energy nor the self-esteem to cook anything real. Lean Cuisine and Diet Coke would suffice. While prepping the microwave meal, charitably labeled a 'Cafe Classic', she reviewed her scant list of options for company.

Danny would commiserate with her about the Register's weak-kneed reaction to her stalker; Claire would tell her to pack a bag and come over; Jill would take her out to get hammered and laid; Ellen would nag about why she never called her anymore; Lindsay would... would...

And there, Cindy's coherent train of thought derailed into memory. The memory of a thumb tenderly priming her mouth, of a kiss so dead solid sweet, it strummed her veins like nickel-wound strings and set her blood pounding in time with the earth's churning iron heart. There, looping within that memory, Cindy Thomas experienced four minutes of unrepentant nirvana as a soggy Halloween pirate, levitating above the city sidewalk while Lindsay Boxer kissed her.

The microwave mocked her with impertinent beeping, as if it had never been in love.

She ate her food-shaped food, drank her bubbly soda. Belched indelicately toward the television news anchor - a shellac-haired, dead-eyed dolly who criticized San Fran police for not apprehending the Hallelujah Man with the same tidy alacrity as today's junkie slasher.

“Moron,” said Cindy to the blithering blond. “You try catching one of these pricks.”

Try it, she thought. Let the cockroach crawl inside your head and slick up a nest from newspaper clippings and human blood. Let your failed pursuit of him define your career. Let him steal you away from your friends, your lovers, your life. Let him murder your family. Try it, Cindy thought, try sleeping on broken glass for a few years, then maybe

you'll have the right to run your mouth about the people chasing this vile, cunning freak.

“Moron,” she said again, for it bore repeating.

She went to the kitchen to trade her soda for a beer, but heightened paranoia made her glance toward the front door, the small gap at the bottom. Cindy's breath hitched and she froze in place. A shadow slithered under the lit gap. It departed, then returned. This indecisive spill of anti-light rhythmically oozed across her hallway floor several times.

Cindy figured it must be the stalker, out there pacing, debating whether to leave another note/flower combo or just skip straight to the kidnapping and murder.

Not one to dither in the face of danger, and already spoiling for a fight, she snatched up her pepper spray and - for good measure – her French rolling pin, and crept toward the other creeper.

On the count of five, because three wasn't quite long enough, Cindy threw the locks and flung the door wide. She screamed bloody hell and charged into the hall with spray at the ready and her rolling pin raised high, like the club of a savage barbarian who was learning to make her own pie crusts.

Lindsay Boxer nearly pissed herself from shock. She stumbled back against the wall, one hand raised in surrender and one hand covering her eyes, just in case Cindy got trigger happy with the Capsicum. “Jesus H. Christ, Thomas! Don't shoot!”

Cindy's fearsome shout wilted to a meek eep, and she lowered her ersatz armaments. “Sorry! Sorry.”

Sick to death of that word, Lindsay shook off the apology. “My fault. I should have called first.”

“That might have helped. God, Linz, you nearly scared my hair white.”

“Back at ya.” Lindsay managed a thin smile, impressed by Cindy's assertive response to a perceived threat, but concerned that this wasn't the safest approach. “Did you call 911?”

“Err... no. There wasn't time.”

“Well, if this happens again, call for help before launching your attack.” Lindsay squinted at Cindy's oddball secondary weapon. “Is that a rolling pin?”

Cindy brandished the kitchen implement in a martial manner. “Don't laugh at me. I'm in a Naomi Campbell headspace.”

Lindsay quailed at the very notion. She shoved her hands in her back pockets and looked toward the open apartment door. “Feel like talking?”

“No.” Cindy crossed her arms and immediately reconsidered. “Maybe. I don't know! I hate feeling trapped in my own house, I hate missing out on your funky-up case, I hate that big-mouthed, empty-headed bimbo on Fox News, and I really feel like hitting somebody! Is this normal?”

“You've traded spooked for pissed-off,” Lindsay said, with a sage nod. “Excellent – that's progress.”

“I acclimate quickly,” Cindy said, finally relaxing enough to recognize an opportunity. “I find that cold beer aids me in this process. Care to join me?”

“Thought you'd never ask.”

Lindsay's slasher case update was handled fast and neat while popping beers in the kitchen, and Cindy broke the bad news that Claire found only one set of prints on the notes – Cindy's own.

The flowers were generic roadside poppies, bound in everyday, dime-store kite string. A scant trace of powder was pulled from each note - perhaps an indicator that the stalker used latex gloves - but Dr. Washburn postponed chemical analysis of this powder when a stream of late afternoon corpses flooded the morgue.

“That was totally inconsiderate of you, by the way,” Cindy quipped. “Commandeering my personal forensics expert for actual police work.”

“Sorry. Them's the breaks.”

All the while, they were careful to stand several feet apart. In the living room, they didn't sit close. Once they exhausted work-related topics, conversation stalled like a cold engine. Things had definitely changed between them; their previous sense of ease had been magnetized into simultaneous attraction and repulsion via one electric kiss.

“This is weird for me,” Cindy stated. She curled her legs into her chair as Lindsay slumped deeper between couch cushions. “Is it weird for you?”

Lindsay sipped her beer and thought it over. “Yes,” she said.

Cindy waited for elaboration, but none came. “Yes. And...?”

“And... I don't know.” Lindsay shrugged. She stared at her boots and latently realized she was tracking microscopic amounts of meth and blood all over Cindy's floors. Another guilty straw on her choke-a-horse bale. “It's weird.”

The reporter clenched her teeth and wondered if anyone had ever used torture to make Lindsay talk. Though she had no branding irons or pliers handy, she could probably improvise an Inquisition-style scenario with dripped candle wax and a garlic press. “You should know, this taciturn thing? Is doing nothing to quell my violent urges.”

“So hit me. I probably deserve it.” Lindsay grinned and shrugged again. “Just not on the mouth, okay?”

Cindy instantly seized a throw pillow and flung it at the other woman's head. The quick-handed cop batted it aside and laughed. Only then did Cindy notice the slight plumping of her friend's upper lip. “Someone already bopped you on the mouth?”

“The crazed potential witness at the second – or first – crime scene. She threw wooden fruit.”

“Ouch. I'd offer to kiss it better, but you might not call me for another week,” Cindy joked.

Lindsay swallowed her smile. She had avoided talking to Cindy for the same reason she had dodged Pete's calls all week: she hated hurting people. The very thought of it made her stomach ache, made her spine wilt like overcooked pasta. Still, procrastination was rarely a sound method of problem solving, especially when the solutions were so obvious, so inevitable.

“I didn't want to talk to you until things were settled,” she finally admitted. “Things with Pete. And I've put that off because - ”

“You're not sure about this,” Cindy guessed, pointing between them. Though her hand was steady, she couldn't hide the waver in her voice. “You're not sure about me.”

“Cindy, when it comes to stuff like this, I wouldn't know 'sure' if it jumped up and bit me,” Lindsay confessed. She lowered her eyes, thinking the words might come easier without seeing Cindy's face.

“I've spent a long time on my own. Mostly because I wouldn't settle for less than I had with Tom. I believed if I was patient and it was meant to happen, I'd find that again. It took a while, but eventually Pete came along. He's patient. Seems to understand me. Maybe he's the man I've been looking for.”

Somewhere above Cindy's head, an invisible guillotine blade trembled on a wire. She'd spent so much energy wishing that Lindsay would talk, and now she prayed for her to stop. She felt a sick stab of envy for Pete, and bit down before it flourished into something worse. Wide-eyed and paralyzed, she waited for the blade to drop.

Luckily, Lindsay hadn't quite finished her thought.

“Then again, maybe not,” she said. “Fact is, I'm not sure about him. Fact is, I don't think about him much anymore...”

Here, Lindsay took a deep breath and fixed Cindy with a warm, steady gaze.

“... because I think about you all the damn time. Not just about kissing you again, or even taking you to bed – although, God knows, I want you something awful.”

At last, Cindy blinked. Her guillotine sprouted wings and flew back to French history. She lightened inside, her blood fizzed like champagne, and she held her chair arm to prevent a collision with the ceiling.

“There's more to it. I feel like... like we'd be good together. I know there'd be problems. I mean, you drive me absolutely crazy sometimes, you know?”

Cindy snorted softly and nodded.

“Still, I think it might be worth the trouble, if you want to take a run at something.” Lindsay glanced away and absently wrung her hands. “But I don't want to pressure you.”

“Pressure me?” Cindy croaked, stunned as a lottery winner. “Linz, everything you just said - I've been there for about a year.”

Lindsay looked equally stupefied. “No.”

“Yes. Seriously. Welcome. So glad you could make it,” Cindy said, and wondered for the hundredth time how this woman could be so crazy honest and so oblivious in equal measure. “You and me? It's happening. Actually, it's been happening for a while now. I suspect you're the last to know.”

“Aww, man.” Lindsay let her head fall back against the couch. “You could have warned me.”

“Why? So you could run screaming in the opposite direction?” Cindy clucked her tongue at that silly suggestion. “You had to muddle through on your own, without a map. Like Lewis and Clark.”

Lindsay frowned sourly. “At least Pocahontas had their backs.”

“That was Sacajawea,” Cindy blurted, then shook her head to avoid getting sidetracked by trivia. “Now that we're on the same page... are you going to talk to Pete? I mean, like, soon?”

She sounded so eager, so ready to let Lindsay bulldoze her life, that the older woman smiled and waltzed straight through her anxiety. “Yeah. I will.”

“By way of incentive - you're not seeing my birthday suit until you're officially single,” Cindy vowed.

Lindsay raised her brows at the enticing prospect of a barenaked redhead. Though Cindy's rowdy good cheer was doing wonders for her own mood, Lindsay knew there was another potential hindrance. “Same applies for you.”

“Me? I'm good to go,” the reporter insisted, snapping her fingers. “Strip right now, if you like.”

“But... I thought you were seeing somebody.”

Unwilling to squander their momentum, Cindy downplayed those concerns. “Nothing steady. I haven't talked to Ellen or anybody else since you put the smack on me,” she explained. “That kiss essentially ruined my social life.”

Lindsay chuckled and stretched out her legs in a half-conscious, preening display of denim and sinew. “I'd apologize, 'cept I'm not sorry.”

“Nice. I'm digging the arrogance.” Cindy perched on the chair's edge and considered whether she would need specialized tools to extricate Boxer from those skin-tight Sevens. “Would it be completely tasteless to ask you to call Pete right now?”

“Completely. I'm burnt tonight. I swear I'll call tomorrow.”

Lindsay tried in vain to stifle a yawn; after today's trials, jump-starting her lazy speech center had drained the final amps from her battery. Still, even this weariness held a certain satisfaction, like her plain, hardy words laid the keystone for a bridge, and tomorrow promised a new crossing. As she moaned and stretched her arms high, her shirt rode up and flashed a band of sun-gilt stomach.

Cindy's eyes homed in on the bare skin. She licked her bottom lip and said, “Let's send him a text message.”

“No! Jesus.” Begging the universe for a little more strength, Lindsay straightened her top and ground out a long breath. “I should probably go home while we're still pretending to be civilized.”

“Hey, I can restrain myself. Literally. I have some cuffs in the fun drawer.”

The words 'cuffs' and 'fun drawer' gave Lindsay a humid jolt somewhere south of the border. “Oh, brother...” she said, and readied herself to get up and run.

“Wait – I'm kidding. I'll meditate, or think about baseball or something. You don't need to go.” Cindy shifted a bit, quietly unnerved at the thought of being alone again. “Do you need to go?”

The idea of spending a night on this couch held little appeal for Lindsay. The couch was too close to The Bed, where slept The Cindy, who was still off-limits. Despite her own instinct to push people away when she was in crisis, Lindsay understood the need for fellowship during a siege, and she wouldn't embarrass Cindy by making her grovel for solace.

"I'll have to bolt early," she said. "Jacobi would give me hell if I showed up tomorrow in these same clothes."

Cindy stood and breathed a sigh of relief. "Early is good. I'll make breakfast."

Lindsay drained her beer and pulled off her boots. She placed her gun on the coffee table and splayed across the sofa while offering a warning. "I don't usually eat much breakfast. Don't go to any trouble or you'll spoil me."

"Oh, the spoiling will commence forthwith, on a variety of fronts, so I advise you not to fight me," Cindy replied. "Besides, you haven't really had breakfast 'til you've had breakfast with me."

"Oh-ho! Now who's being arrogant?"

"My dad always said it's not bragging if you can back it up," Cindy explained. On her way to the bedroom, she heard a low, sweet whistle, and smiled.

She brought back a pillow and blanket and shut off the lights. She hesitated near the end of the couch, wanting to say something more serious, when Lindsay's rusty voice whispered through the darkness.

"It's gonna be okay," she said. "Seems like a lot right now, but we'll work it out. All of it."

When Lindsay said things that way, with such surety and conviction, Cindy believed as though she'd brought truth down from the mountain on lightning-scribed tablets. She bid her guest a good night, knowing she would sleep well for the first time in a week, and hopeful this would be the last night they'd spend apart for a while.

For Lindsay, sleep remained elusive; while listening to Cindy prepare for bed, she thought about Pete and flushed hot with guilt. She thought about Claire and Jill and how they would react to the changes which seemed certain to occur. She thought about Jana Macek screaming horror, and guiltless men who murdered as if they had special dispensation from God. She thought about catching Cindy's stalker in the hall and stepping on his neck.

Somewhere along the line, her restless imaginings transitioned to better dreams. Though she slept alone that night, it felt like Cindy was already in her arms.

Of all the ways to wake up, rousing to the smell of coffee and cinnamon ranked pretty high in Inspector Boxer's good books. She rolled off the couch and shuffled to the bathroom in her sock feet, cleaned up and met Cindy in the kitchen.

“Cinnamon rolls, fruit, coffee,” the reporter announced, already dressed and astonishingly perky for the early hour. “I kept it simple.”

“Beautiful.” Lindsay helped herself to coffee and watched with hooded eyes while Cindy alternately nibbled on a roll and slices of orange.

“You're staring,” Cindy mumbled. “What's wrong?”

Lindsay wasn't fully awake, and her inhibitions still ran low from a night of pleasant dreams. “Nothing's wrong,” she said. “Just thinking how good you'd taste if I kissed you right now.”

Cindy promptly choked on her orange slice. She coughed and spit the mangled fruit into the sink.

“I shouldn't have said that out loud.” Lindsay blushed and rubbed her eyes. “Sorry.”

Still red and dizzy from coughing, Cindy mildly jiggled her head. “It's okay. Just don't talk like that while I'm chewing. I could meet a tragic, senseless end before we even get started properly.”

It was a joke, Cindy's reprimand, but it still made Lindsay flinch. She sipped her coffee and nodded agreement to the first rule of their incipient relationship: no spicy talk during meals. She nabbed a cinnamon roll and took a bite, and her eyes nearly rolled back in her head – it was that good. Or she was that hungry, that happy. Maybe a blend of all three factors. “Wow,” she whuffed between bites. “Since when can you cook like this?”

“Since enlisting in Alton Brown's culinary army. Once I establish a breakfast beachhead, lunch and dinner will fall trembling at my feet,” Cindy proclaimed. She snapped her heels together and marched from the kitchen.

Lindsay saluted and held quiet, too charmed to ask who Alton Brown was.

Cindy ducked out the front door and retrieved the paper, hoping against hope that her 911 story got decent placement. She popped the rubber band, spread the Register out on the counter, and her breath ran short.

“Lindsay...”

Accustomed to bad news, the inspector immediately assumed something humiliating and scandalous had made its way onto the front page. “What? Did they get a shot of Vlad in his blood suit?”

White-faced and mute, Cindy pointed to the 3x5 index card taped to her paper's masthead, a card with this simple, block print inscription:

“Can you not see that your soul is in danger? Sodom burned, and all the infidels with her.”

Dr. Claire Washburn had barely rolled out of bed when the call came. Thirty minutes later, she arrived at the forensics lab to find Lindsay Boxer and Cindy Thomas waiting in the hallway, huddled tight on a bench. They saw her approach, and Lindsay discreetly unwound her arm from the reporter's shoulders.

“You okay, honey?” Claire inquired, with a sympathetic smile.

“I regret every time I ever wished for fan mail.” Cindy looked up and sighed. “From now on, I'm incognito. I'll wear a blond wig to crime scenes. My new pen name is Kitty Pimms.”

Claire squatted before Cindy and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “You'd make a cute blond, but I like you the way you are. And you don't look like a Kitty to me.”

“Me, neither,” Lindsay interjected. She jutted out her lower jaw, clicked her teeth, and Cindy smiled like that gonzo face was the loveliest thing she'd ever seen.

Though she knew she was missing something, Claire didn't disrupt the moment by asking. Every time she witnessed Lindsay behaving this way toward Cindy, all protective and sweet, she felt a fragile tickle of potential. The sensation was kind of delightful and kind of scary, like a tiny fish swimming around her ankles in murky water.

“Are you sure you don't mind doing this for me?” Cindy asked. “I feel like I'm jumping the line.”

“It's one of the benefits of club membership,” Lindsay asserted. “This, and a complimentary beat-down when we find this guy.”

“Amen.” Claire extended her free hand to Lindsay. “Gimme the note. I'll run it for prints and start the powder analysis.”

“You're the best ever, Claire,” said Cindy.

“Tell that to my husband,” Dr. Washburn said. Through the plastic bag, she read the

note's plainly homophobic inscription and frowned nastily. Then she gave Lindsay a funny, questioning appraisal (same outfit as yesterday? or do all her clothes look that much alike?) and turned for the lab. "Call you when I get something."

With Claire in the lab and another M.E. on duty in the morgue, Cindy decided she'd feel more comfortable hunkering down elsewhere for the workday. The homicide bullpen was too open, and it wasn't entirely kosher for a reporter to embed with the squad, anyhow. One phone call to Jill Bernhardt solved the 'where to put Cindy' problem, and the reporter was happily ensconced in Jill's office by eight, where she immediately logged on to the web for research-slash-distraction.

Jill herself was heading for the hospital to question Jana Macek in the presence of a psychiatrist and a public defender. She tucked the Seeger & Parson murder files into her valise, checked her identification and issued Cindy a warning. "Don't mess with my bookmarks. Don't move any files, don't clean or fix anything."

"And if I do?" Cindy dared, for Jill's computer was in sad disarray and she ached to neaten it up.

The attorney made a dangerous face and waggled her fountain pen like a lead sap. "I will make you sorry," she promised. "There may be pinching."

Cindy grinned, looking so grateful for the teasing that Jill couldn't maintain her distance. She walked over and put a hand on her friend's shoulder, leaned down and kissed her cheek. Just about then, her door burst open, heralding the arrival of Inspector Lindsay Boxer and Jill's boss, acting District Attorney Denise Kwon.

"If that oily midget thinks we're stupid enough to send a foreign prisoner to his embassy, he's got another thing coming," Denise was saying as she donned her coat. "Possession being nine-tenths of the law, if he wants to see our guy, he'll play by my rules."

Lindsay made affirmative noises and shot her friends a helpless glance. She looked morbidly tired, and Jill could tell she was currently being swept along in Denise Kwon's terrible wake.

"What's happening?" Jill asked.

"The Romanian consul's attorney is trying to dictate terms for questioning." Denise snorted and wrapped her throat with a fantastic emerald scarf. "I told him he could meet us at the detention center, or walk west until his hat floats – I don't care which."

Cindy giggled, and Lindsay gave her a slow, warm smile. Jill blinked at them, cleared her throat, and asked Denise how she could help.

“I need that witness statement.” Denise held up her BlackBerry and canted an eyebrow at her most reliable legal eagle. “Send me highlights as soon as you can. If the suspect won't talk, I'll need leverage.”

Denise turned heel and blew out of the office. Lindsay was clearly reluctant to follow; she lingered near the door and balled a fist against the frame. “Sure you're good?” she asked Cindy.

The reporter gave a calm, steady nod. “Go do your thing. I'll be right here... fixing Jill's computer.”

Jill sneered and thumped her friend's skull. She gathered her things and went to stand by Lindsay. “I'll get back as soon as I can. Don't worry, though – there's a hundred hunky cops downstairs who would love nothing more than to rescue a beautiful, helpless girl.”

Lindsay stayed mum, but her jaw flexed like she was chewing rubber.

“I'm not helpless,” Cindy growled.

Before Jill could recant, Denise materialized behind them like a well-dressed, angry specter. “Ladies? We need to hustle,” she barked, and finally seemed to notice Cindy Thomas was present, and didn't appear to be leaving. “Someone tell me why there's a reporter lounging in Bernhardt's office.”

Cindy piped up and answered for herself. “They're hiding me from a creepy, God squad stalker. The paper chucked me out because they think it's the Hallelujah Man.”

Denise's eyes bulged. Her glove squeaked as she gripped her briefcase handle.

“It isn't him,” Lindsay added. “We're ninety-nine percent sure.”

“No one knows she's here,” Jill interjected. “We promise, there won't be any trouble.”

Looking from one pleading face to the next, Denise could tell it was pointless to argue impropriety; for these women, friendship had nullified the meaning of that particular word. She couldn't comprehend that kind of bond, and the resulting green zap of jealousy erupted from her mouth.

“Sometimes your little club seems like a co-dependent cluster of ass pain,” Denise said, and hied away down the hall.

Jill choked back a laugh. She pointed at Lindsay. “Ass pain.”

“You are,” Lindsay cleverly deflected.

They smiled and waved goodbye to Cindy. Just then, it felt like an ordinary morning, and

did right up until Jill locked the door.

The detention center consult room was barely big enough to contain the assembled group, so Lindsay and Jacobi stood behind Denise, with the mammoth prisoner and his ratlike counsel seated opposite. Denise cued the guards to begin recording the interview. The prisoner whispered something to his attorney, and pointed toward the police contingent. He actually smiled and nodded at Lindsay as if they were old friends.

“He tells me to relate every word properly, or he will dismiss me,” the lawyer explained. “His English is perhaps not so bad as I thought.”

Denise smelled a full confession in the offing, and told him to start at the start. For the next several minutes, the strangely mellifluous voice of a spree killer held them all entranced; the translated English echo seemed like subtitles on a gripping foreign film.

“My name is Vladimir Zmed. Two nights ago, I took eight lives. By the grace of God, I feel no guilt over these actions,” he began, ending much of the suspense early.

“In Romania, I was a doctor of medicine and a biochemist. As a loyal Party member and government consultant, I made powerful enemies. I was jailed for twelve years after the revolution – after Ceaușescu was hanged – on false drug charges. My ideology failed me. I was a broken man. This pain became a blessing, for during my imprisonment, I disavowed the Party and welcomed God into my heart.”

His broad mouth curved into a beatific smile. “I broke with my past and surrendered my will to Him – and He gave me peace. After my release, I had no license to practice medicine, and was forbidden to leave the country for ten years. I started a small laboratory outside Sibiu, where I tested people and animals for illegal drugs. It was piss and blood everywhere, every day, but I was happy. I bothered no one. I married a kind, simple woman, and we made a son.”

He stopped for a moment and breathed deep and slow, as if trying to steady himself. Lindsay watched him closely, and she recognized the pain in his eyes. She knew what was coming next.

“The baby was sickly, born with neuroblastoma, and he... he died in my arms. I spent that night wandering the streets. At home, my wife closed the windows and went to sleep with the gas on. I buried them both in one day. It was more than I could bear, so I raged at the Lord and demanded His reasons. One night, He gave me the answer in a dream: I was to cure my son's illness. It took me six years, but I did His will – I killed the cancer.”

“The letters started coming a few months ago, all written in Romanian, all marked

'Official' or 'Urgent' and things like that,” Jana Macek explained.

She sipped some water and rubbed at her wrists, chafed and raw from a night spent battling her restraints. Whatever medication cocktail the doctors served up seemed to be working; she was lucid and spoke in a plain, factual monotone, but she seemed rather disconnected. Dr. Luke Bowen once said it was called a 'flat affect,' a severe reduction in emotional expressiveness, and Jill still thought of it as such.

“Dr. Zmed is totally xenophobic – he hates foreigners. My name was listed on the Lavin Pharma website, so I guess he checked me out and decided to contact me about his miracle cancer vaccine.”

Jill raised her eyebrows. “A cancer vaccine?”

“Yeah. It's not as far off as you'd think,” Jana said. “He was injecting viral loads into tobacco plants - using them as replicators, like some of the Mayo Clinic experiments - and he claimed he'd had a breakthrough. He wanted me to come to Sibiu and help him, but I was... I'd met Lyle by then. All I wanted to do was get high and screw, you know?”

Pink flared across Jill Bernhardt's cheeks. “Mmh. Go on.”

“I stopped corresponding with Zmed. I thought he would drop it and leave me alone. He had told me he couldn't leave the country, so I didn't give him another thought. Until he showed up on my doorstep three days ago. God, was he angry...”

“Greed never changes. It took half of everything I had, but I bribed the right government officials and obtained false German travel papers. I arrived in New York last week and used the other half of my savings to get my samples past those port criminals.”

He paused there and nodded at the attorney's translation, indicating he was pleased with the man's veracity on this touchy point.

“I came here, to Jana, and told her my plants would arrive in a shipping container the following morning. We could take them to her lab and she would see... but she didn't care.”

Zmed flicked his fingers and sneered. “She was rude and skinny and stunk like a whore, and her home was full of vermin. Her lover, the black man, told me to go. I left Jana a hotel card with my room number, and I went away. I told myself I would try again tomorrow when I had the plants.”

“Lyle had some of his friends over, asshole tweakers from Seeger Street – did I tell you

they stole my TiVo?”

Jill was not surprised and did not care. “Bummer.”

“Yeah. Assholes. Anyway, they were freaking out about Zmed. He's a really big guy, you know. Like... really big. Like a redwood that talks, or something.”

“Yes, I've seen him,” Jill assured her. She sensed the girl's mind beginning to wander, and routed the conversation back toward relevant matters. “What happened next?”

“Oh, they wanted to know why he was there, and I told them he was a doctor and had some fabulous new miracle drug for Lavin. They seemed so interested, but I didn't want to talk about it with them. Because they were assholes.”

I just bet they were interested, Jill thought.

“Zmed called again the next day, and I didn't answer. I thought about calling him back and telling him to try another company, but I couldn't find the card from his hotel.” Jana pressed her fingers against her mouth like she was smoking a phantom cigarette. Her hand started to tremble. “I guess Lyle's friends had already taken it.”

“They kept saying Jana's name, and I opened the hotel room door. They hit me with a metal bat. They stole my cases, all the vials and all the plants... it was everything I had, you understand? There are no other successful cultures. I had to get them back. This was not simply my work. This was God's work.”

He laid his hands flat on the table and examined them, as if expecting divine light to emanate from his ordinary, mortal flesh.

“I went to Jana's house and she would not let me in, so I broke the door. Her man tried to push me out. I believe he was altered by drugs. He became very angry – angry like me. He went to his kitchen and returned with a cook's knife. He presented it like an offering, and I knew what God wanted me to do.”

Zmed looked straight at Lindsay. “I took the knife and pushed it through his heart.”

“He killed everyone except me. He made me take him to Lyle's friends,” Jana recalled. “Once he went into the house and started cutting people, I ran back home. By then, I was gone inside, like my mind shut down. He killed them all, too. Didn't he?”

Jill said that he did.

Jana nodded thoughtfully. "Do you know what happened to the plants they took?"

This tardy concern seemed like an afterthought, an insult to everyone involved.

"No," Jill said. "There were no tobacco plants logged at either scene."

"That's a shame. I know Zmed's crazy, but what if he was right?" Jana belatedly wondered. "Wouldn't it be funny if those idiots smoked the cure for cancer?"

Jill wanted to reach across the table and smack her. She had what she needed, and so ended the interview and fled the hospital before she lost her temper.

"Some ran, some threw their drugs at me, some begged... they all died. I never found the plants. They probably threw them away or destroyed them when they saw no narcotics in my belongings," Zmed said.

"Regardless, I tore the house apart searching. I even dug through garbage cans of other houses until sunrise. I was cold and tired. I fell asleep near a heating unit, beneath a hedge. Then Boscher found me, and now I am in jail for what I did."

Jacobi glanced at his partner, who stared at the floor. She didn't like the shape of her name in this man's mouth; it sounded warped, like his faith.

Denise Kwon tapped her nails against the table.

"Okay, then," she said. "I take it Dr. Zmed doesn't want a trial?"

His attorney conveyed the question, and Zmed opened his hands and shrugged.

"God will judge me innocent," he said. "I will await Him in prison."

No one spoke as they left the detention center. Denise broke off and headed for her own car. Even though it was her day to drive, Lindsay handed Jacobi the keys to their unit and took the passenger seat.

She grew up thinking God, church and fellowship should mean love, acceptance and family. For many people, that was no longer true. Moral relativism apparently creates a sub-class of zealots who imagine God as an intolerant, bloodthirsty Caesar, and themselves as his Praetorian Guards. If the end is Heaven, the means is always justified.

Something was broken in these people's hearts and minds, and Lindsay Boxer couldn't fix it. She could only clean up their messes once the damage was done. Like a janitor with a

gun.

Lindsay's phone rang halfway back to the Hall. She answered it quickly, hoping for good news. "Hey, Claire. Please tell me you got something."

"You're not gonna like it," Claire began. "The powder residue is an exact match for the gloves we use here in the lab."

"Son of a -" she began, and bit back the curse. "So the notes were contaminated during testing?"

"Nope. I was extra careful," Claire assured her. "Lindsay, these gloves are special ordered for investigations and forensics. The powder is unique for evidence elimination purposes."

When it dawned on the inspector what her friend was trying to imply, her blood went cool. "You're saying the stalker is a cop."

Cindy squeaked surprise when the shave-and-a-haircut knock sounded at the door. She knew it was probably too soon for Jill or Lindsay to get back, so it was probably someone looking for -

"Miss Thomas?"

Looking for her, evidently. Who knew she was up here, anyway?

"It's Officer Graham."

Oh. Cop. Nice guy with the chair and the water. Recipient of her 'I nearly got hit by a taxi' lie. But what did he want?

"Just checking in to see if you want some coffee or a muffin or something while you're waiting for the inspector to get back."

Nice. Lindsay sent him to check on me, Cindy assumed. She had the mid-morning blahs, and fresh coffee and carbs sounded like heaven.

"Sure thing," she called out. She peeked through the blinds, just to be sure, and opened the door. "Dude. You're an angel."

Over a tray of coffee and pastry, Graham gave her a shy grin. "I try," he said.

**** Act Four ****

“I’m only saying the stalker is using our gloves,” Claire stressed. “I’m not accusing anybody.”

“Goddammit, Claire, I want you to accuse somebody!” Lindsay kicked at the floor mat and ignored Jacobi's resulting scowl. “We need to narrow it down! Fast!”

The urgency in Lindsay's voice made Claire rethink her diplomatic approach. Apparently, when it came to Cindy, all that 'thin blue line' stuff went straight out the window. “A forensics pro would know about the signature powder,” she said. “And a good investigator would probably use drugstore gloves for the extra layer of anonymity.”

“So maybe a newbie, a uniform?”

“Maybe,” Claire hesitantly agreed. “There's also civilian workers. Interns. Friends and family could get the gloves through pilfering...”

“A uniform.” Lindsay already had someone fitted up in her mind. “Claire, can you get up to Jill's office and check on Cindy?”

“Of course. I'll go right now.” Claire's rapid footsteps were audible over the phone; more secret was the sound of her wrapping and pocketing a scalpel – just in case.

“I'll call to let her know you're coming.”

Officer Kyle Graham couldn't stop smiling.

Since childhood, he'd been told that the right woman would come along, and all his queer foolishness would fade away like the smell of brimstone. Since tenth grade, when the elders pulled him naked from Trey Leinert's pickup and hauled him out to the swamps, he'd known there were consequences for breaking with the church.

He went to Exodus camp and did Bible study. He masturbated to pictures of women. He grew strong in his faith. He moved toward the Bay as Daniel entered the lion's den, and he prayed for God to send the woman he'd been promised, so that he might live righteously.

From the first time Kyle saw Cindy Thomas, he knew she was that woman. She was smart and pretty, and flawed in a way that he understood. She was perfect for him, and he knew they could be perfect together. If only he could make her see, as he had seen...

“So you're from Florida. How do you like San Francisco?” Cindy asked. She tried to be polite, since it didn't seem like Graham was in a hurry to get back to work. She stirred her coffee and waited for an answer.

His rigid grin flexed slightly. "It's challenging. That's good, though. I came here to test myself."

"As a cop?" Cindy asked, squinting a bit.

"As a man," he said. "In this city, temptation waits around every corner. Not everyone is strong enough to resist."

Right on the heels of that verbal cue, Cindy's eyes went round as saucers. Her fingers jumped so tight, she nearly crushed her little Styrofoam coffee cup.

Graham made a soothing noise and shook his head. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm here to help you."

She looked at her purse, across the room on Jill's desk, and wished for her pepper spray. In the bag's outer pocket, her cell phone emitted Lindsay's ringtone. Out of sheer longing, Cindy took one step toward it.

Graham stopped her with a look of warning. Resting one hand on his pistol butt, he backed up to the door and locked the handle.

"Miss Thomas?" he began. "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal savior?"

Lindsay's call went to voicemail. Stricken and furious, she clenched the phone in her fist. She left a message for Cindy to call back immediately, if not sooner.

Their flashers and siren cleared off some traffic, and Jacobi drove as fast as possible, but he knew they might not be fast enough. Stalkers are opportunists, and if this one was a cop, he would be thrilled to find Cindy staked to a post in his backyard.

"Call the desk sergeant. Tell him to pin Graham down and send someone to look in on Cindy," Jacobi suggested.

"I don't know for certain it's Graham – that's just a bad feeling. And nobody wants to listen to me, outside of you and Tom," Lindsay said. "You're here, he's not, and everyone else is a suspect."

"You're being paranoid. Don't tar the whole department with that brush."

Lindsay didn't want to argue that point. They were a few short blocks from the Hall, and by the time she explained herself to the desk sergeant, she'd already be in the building. "Please, Warren... please just get me there."

On hearing the desperation in her voice, Jacobi set his jaw and laid on the horn. Today, they would be fast enough.

Cindy didn't know how to answer his question. If she said yes, Graham might shoot her to send her on to Heaven. If she said no, he might whisk her away for a permanent baptism. She chose to stall for time, to follow the sexual/moral through line of his notes.

“When I was a kid, yeah,” she began. “Sometimes, I think it wore off when I grew up. I met someone I really wanted to be with... and things got complicated.”

“Complicated – yes. I understand. I know what it's like to hear one voice from your soul, and another from your body. After all, we are beautiful and wondrously made,” Graham told her. “But the immortal spirit holds a price above all flesh. Perversion is a flowered path to hell.”

Oh, how she wanted to shake some sense into this boy! But she needed time. Eventually, Lindsay or Jill would come back, or Claire would come up. They'd sound the alarm and negotiate Graham out of the room. Cindy needed to wait it out and keep him talking; to that end, she essayed theological debate with a gun-toting, sexual apostate stalker.

“Do you really believe God would condemn us for loving someone? I mean, didn't he make us this way?”

“We are all born innocent,” Graham said. “Then the world teaches us to follow our passions, to lust and fornicate, to steal and lie – and look! Look what's happening in this very city! He has sent a shepherd, to employ the rod and guide us back to the flock.”

Cindy felt a spike of temper pierce her brain. As usual, it damaged her inner censor at the worst possible time. “The Hallelujah Man is not a shepherd,” she said, somewhat fiercely. “He's a class-A sinner, a deluded murderer who understands irony about as well as Alanis Morissette.”

“This isn't simple murder. God condones the killing of men, when the cause is just,” Graham replied. “You and I both know that your precious Inspector Boxer wouldn't hesitate to take a life.”

“Only to protect others or defend herself,” Cindy snapped.

“Yes. Now extend that same rationale to the shepherd. If he kills an arbiter of corruption, is he not defending the souls of all men?”

“He's not doing this to protect people! You can't make bad people into good people by terrifying them!”

“But you can sway the weak toward righteousness,” Graham insisted. “That’s why you and I need to work - ”

“Whatever!” Cindy waved her hand dismissively. “If someone can’t freely choose to be good or evil, then nothing they do has any moral weight! This whole shepherd-and-rod thing is a fallacy. Totally spurious argument.”

Graham gave an agitated snort. “Wow. You really are complicated.”

“Brother, you ain’t kidding.” Cindy casually walked to Jill’s desk and stood near her open purse. “Since I’m an exceptional person, I’m willing to let you convince me.”

“I can, but not here. This won’t be easy... and it’s not all talk.” Kyle Graham recalled night-long prayers from the elders, while he hung lashed to a cypress trunk with blood drying on his thighs. He shook his head so violently, his eyes boggled like dice. “We’ll need privacy. You have to come with me.”

The glass office door suddenly shook with a determined knock. The knob jiggled, and Claire Washburn called Cindy’s name from the other side.

Cindy’s sneaky hand froze halfway into her purse. She felt the steel edge of the pepper spray canister, cold against her fingertips.

Graham drew his gun and aimed it at the door, roughly in the area of Claire’s chest. He looked at Cindy and pressed a silencing finger across his lips.

Cindy closed her eyes. Nodded. And grasped the canister in her fist.

Lindsay burst through the Hall’s front doors, horse-collared a messenger out of the stairwell entrance, and devoured each upward flight in two leaps.

Her heart rate climbed above 210 for the first time in her life.

Claire knocked again. “Cindy? Honey, are you in there?”

The responding silence felt too quiet. Wrong, somehow. Cindy wasn’t the type to wander off carelessly. She would have called someone.

Claire took the extra keyring from her bag and sorted out the one for Jill’s office door. In her other hand, she held a blue surgical towel sporting a hidden inch of razored steel.

She stepped to the side of the door frame and inserted the key.

Something exploded inside the office. A hollow-point bullet snicked through the safety glass door and missed Claire's arm by about ten inches.

The gunshot jolted Cindy into action. She pulled her spray can free, ducked behind Jill's desk, and launched a ten-foot stream of chemical fire toward Kyle Graham's head.

He screamed and clawed at his eyes. When the world went red, his language went blue. He cursed Cindy for a stupid bitch, damned God, and fornicated Jesus with an H. He pointed his gun toward the desk.

Then came the sound of shattering glass. Louvered blinds over the office door blew aside as if propelled by the Santa Ana winds. Graham spun toward the gust of noise and motion.

He couldn't see Lindsay Boxer's face, but felt her hand jerk his wrist upward as he pulled the trigger. His second shot burrowed into the ceiling.

Three pounds of blued steel Beretta crashed against his temple. Graham dropped to a crouch, lost his gun. A boot to the jaw cracked two molars and put him on the floor.

Clamoring stars washed over his world. A breath-stealing knee hammered his back. Handcuffs snapped on tight.

Warren Jacobi rounded the corner about then. For the third time in two days, he hauled up a suspect while his partner covered them. "We got us a routine going," he told her, and smiled blessed relief.

Still kneeling in a pile of safety glass, Lindsay couldn't speak. Her cardiopulmonary system was working so hard, she felt like she'd swallowed an exhaust fan and a drum machine. She holstered her gun and gestured for Jacobi to please get the guy out of her sight.

Graham dug in his heels. His eyes were almost swollen shut, so he spoke toward Lindsay's last known location. "Don't think you've saved her," he said. "When judgment comes, she'll pay the same as you. You're damning her."

"Shut your mouth," Claire Washburn hissed. "I am sick to death of people wiping their asses with the Bible." Though her hands shook with fury and fear, she pushed at Graham's back until he disappeared into a throng of confused cops and curious lawyers.

As Claire returned to the doorway, Cindy rounded the desk and offered Lindsay her hand.

The wrung-out inspector hesitated. Her ebbing adrenaline washed fine muscle control out

with the tide, and she feared standing might lead to falling. She crossed her ankles, breathed deeply, and leaned back against Jill's desk. "I'm good down here," she said. "Are y'all okay?"

Cindy nodded. She was scared half to death, to be honest, but managed a brave, shaky smile. "I'm tip-top. Claire's the one who nearly got plugged."

"That shot didn't come near me," Claire lied. "I know better than to square up on a bad door. But if anyone tells Ed about this, I will eat their soul."

Lindsay looked ready to start apologizing, but Cindy cut her off at the pass. "Boy. This was kind of a close call," she whispered, and plopped down on the floor by her friend, so snug they could feel each other breathing. She dusted a few pieces of plastic-coated glass off Lindsay's jacket. "Do you feel like calling Pete?"

At first, Lindsay stared at her in total non-comprehension. Even Claire seemed baffled by the suggestion; after all, if Cindy really did have designs on the inspector (as Claire suspected), she shouldn't encourage contact with Pete the Impediment.

It took a few beats, and a long look into Cindy's fluent eyes, before Lindsay got it. Her breath sculpted a crumbly laugh. "Maybe when we get done here. Once I'm home."

"Okay." Cindy leaned her head against Lindsay's shoulder. "Let me know how it goes."

Stealthy as a ninja, Claire Washburn had stepped out and almost closed what remained of the door – to preserve the scene, as it were – when Jill Bernhardt bulled through a clump of colleagues.

Jill saw the shattered glass at Claire's feet, the wounded plaster wall opposite, and the story came together in a thunderclap. She only had one comment.

"Christ on a crutch. Does the fun ever stop?"

Lindsay entered her apartment with the shuffling walk of the condemned. The entryway lamp cast warm light over the room, and her faithful dog charged up and gave her hands a sweet, needy nuzzle. Neither the comfort of home nor the affection of a true friend made much difference in her bleak mood.

"Hey, sweet girl," she said, and ruffled Martha's furry neck. The dog bounced in place, dancing for favor, begging politely to be taken out for her evening stroll.

"Gonna have to wait. I've got something to do, and if I put it off again..."

Martha seemed to intuit that no walk was forthcoming, and she let out a single, pitiful

whine. Lindsay knelt down and gave the pooch a hug, more for her own benefit than to placate the disappointed animal. Martha wandered off to her doggie bed and curled up in a sulky circle.

After a scalding shower, Lindsay went to the refrigerator and fetched herself a beer. Leaned her back against the counter and felt something pop near her hip – a reminder that her spine needed strengthening in more than a figurative sense. She cracked the top off the squat bottle of Anchor Steam and took a long, slow pull. Checked the clock on the microwave and double checked the time with her watch.

“Christ. Just do it. Man up.”

Once settled in front of the computer, she adjusted the web cam while the system booted up. Ran through her semi-prepared speech, replete with hackneyed phrases like 'it's not you, it's me,' and 'you're such a great guy,' and 'you can do so much better than me.' Although Lindsay felt these sentiments were absolutely plausible, none of them sounded like the truth.

She picked up her scratch pad and read Pete's careful instructions, followed them to the letter. Within minutes, the connection was made and the die was cast.

Pete Raynor's smiling face beamed at Lindsay from her computer screen, live and in color from his downtown office in Phnom Penh. He waved and spun around in his chair, obviously delighted by the success of his Luddite girlfriend's initiation of a video rendezvous.

“Yeah! I knew you could do it!” he crowed, slapping a palm against his desk. “Now admit it – that wasn't nearly as hard as you thought it would be.”

His words came through loud and clear, but his motions were herky-jerky and strange. And something was off about the colors, too. Lindsay couldn't quite figure it out.

“I can do hard stuff when I have to,” she said. She moved closer to the camera, and Pete's expression showed concern as he peered back at her.

“You okay, Linz? You look beat.”

Evidently, eight thousand miles and the vagaries of web video did nothing to soften her own clouded, cheerless countenance. “Couple of bad cases. One guy killed eight people 'cause they stole a bunch of... nevermind. Doesn't matter. We got 'em, it's closed.”

“Eight? He killed eight people?” Pete asked, shrinking back from shock. “All at once?”

“Three, then five. Two different places.”

He rubbed his stubbled chin and sighed. “Jesus. I wish I could hold you right now. I'm

listening, if you need to talk.”

Lindsay tapped a nail against her beer bottle. “Seriously, it's done. I'd rather not get into it. How're you doing?”

He nodded, though he seemed hesitant to drop the subject so quickly. “Well.. I got the approval for the parking expansion today. After some serious arm twisting and several expensive dinners for the planning commissioner and his family, his friends, his distant cousins visiting from Laos - ”

While Pete talked, while he made charming insinuations about using corruption and greed for the betterment of Cambodia's tourism industry, Lindsay figured out what was wrong with the video, why the colors seemed askew. It wasn't that the transmitted image of the man was blurry or grainy; in fact, the connection was quite good.

Pete Raynor simply didn't appear to her as someone living and real viewed from a distance. He looked sort of yellow and still, like something ancient trapped in amber. Through the eyes of someone who had already moved on, he looked like history.

“I need to end this,” Lindsay said suddenly, in a very clear voice.

Interrupted and brought up short, Pete fumbled for a reply. “Are... are you tired? If you need to get to bed, we can try again tomorrow.”

Frustrated by the misunderstanding, she grunted and rubbed at her tensing forehead. “Not the call. Us. I mean... I need to end... us.”

There was no room for misinterpretation in that statement. Pete's smile flatlined and he took a moment to adjust. “You're breaking up with me. On a video conference.”

Lindsay heard disbelief, a plea for correction in his tone, and she determined that her pabulum, pre-written speech absolving him of all responsibility was not the way to go. “This isn't working. We're putting our lives on hold for something that might fall apart once we really get to know each other.”

“But... I thought we knew each other well enough to take the chance,” he offered.

“No. At first, I thought maybe, yeah, but... no. We both deserve a shot at something real, not just something we made up and hoped could be real down the line.”

He shook his head, balled his fists on the desk. He leaned forward, and his handsome face and pleading eyes filled the video frame. “Lindsay. Don't. It's too soon to give up.”

“I'm not giving up.”

“That's what it sounds like to me.” He closed his eyes and shook his head again. “I don't

want to lose you. I can get someone to take over for me here.”

“No. Don't do that.”

“I could take some time and be back in San Francisco within a couple of weeks,” Pete continued, as if he hadn't heard her. “We can work this out.”

“That wouldn't change anything,” Lindsay sadly admitted. “It's too late for that.”

“Dammit, no!” he spat, anger briefly flashing between his hurt and confusion. “How can you say that? How the hell do you know?”

It was time. She had to say the words, since it was obviously the only way to make him see that this was not a fearful surrender or a lonely whim, but an absolute necessity. Lindsay drew a stuttering breath and stared levelly into the camera lens. “Pete. I need to end this because I'm falling for somebody else.”

He didn't react. Didn't breathe or even blink. If not for the progressing seconds on the call clock, Lindsay would have thought time itself had stopped while Pete processed her confession.

When he finally moved, when he finally regained his voice, he sounded less wounded and more resentful than she had expected. “Your ex, right? You started up with him again.”

Lindsay snorted and made a bitter face. “Tom? Tom is happily married. That's over and done.”

“Okay. So who is he?” Pete waved a hand and casually reclined in his chair. “Wait – I bet he's a cop. Because no one could possibly share your burdens unless they're from your world, right?”

Her temper prickled at Pete's words and the nasty tone of his voice. Lindsay recoiled and huffed an instinctive denial. “No, she's not a friggin' cop.”

His eyes, no longer sad or pleading, widened in surprise. “She? She. Oh... that's just perfect,” he said, with a caustic laugh. “You're dumping me for Jill.”

“Oh, God...”

“I knew there was something with you two,” Pete rattled on, “I mean, the way she watched you was just south of obscene, and you had that same - ”

“It's not Jill!” Lindsay shouted and slammed her beer down on the desk. “And this isn't some stupid guessing game.”

“So tell me! Who?”

“Pete -”

“Look, I haven't cheated on you, although I've had plenty of chances, believe me. I think I deserve to know who my girlfriend is screwing while I'm stuck jerking off in a hotel room.”

Lindsay sighed, already weary of his venom, although she felt she deserved every drop. “I haven't slept with her.”

He paused then, let that sink in, and it seemed to blunt the edge off his anger. “Okay. Back to my earlier question, re-framed a bit – how do you know? How can you be certain you're not just lonely?”

She took the question seriously, because Pete wanted an honest answer. So did she. So did Cindy. She thought of telling him how easily the young woman invaded her thoughts, how she could picture a smile or a laugh and feel transported to somewhere better, how the memory of a simple kiss made her feel wakeful and dreamy at once. A sense of fair play and a desire to be done with explanations forced Lindsay to boil it all down to one simple statement.

“Everything I wanted to feel with you, everything I was trying to make real... I feel all that with her, without even trying. It's just there.”

He turned quiet again, though this time Lindsay could see the track of a tear glisten along the side of his nose. Time doesn't really stand still for anyone, least of all lovers estranged by oceans and the incessant turning of the world.

“I'm not playing some fairy tale game with you. I haven't mocked-up the way I feel,” Pete told her. “I know you a little, Lindsay Boxer. And if you know me at all, you know I don't give up easily.”

Lindsay didn't have enough strength to dissuade him any further, and Pete was done listening.

“Good night,” he said, rather pointedly. Pete smiled into the camera. He kissed two fingers, pressed them against the lens, and ended the call.

Lindsay stared at the empty screen for a while, feeling like she should cry or something. When several minutes passed with no tears shed, she went to the kitchen and poured her beer down the sink.

“C'mon, baby. How about we take an extra long walk?” she said, and clicked her tongue at Martha. The dog launched from her bed and scampered toward the door.

“If my guts hold out, I might not see you 'til tomorrow.”

When the buzzer sounded at Cindy's place, she made herself stand still for a count of five. Flying out to jump her intended in the hall lacked a certain dignity, and she'd fought hard all day to regain her composure. She straightened her clothes, smoothed her hair. Checked her breath. Then she flipped the locks and eased the door open.

And there stood the woman she'd wanted for so long. A woman with history etched into her skin and heart, a body lean from work and denial, and a soul framed by shadows. A sexy, jaded, good-hearted woman, with more loose screws than an epileptic carpenter.

Cindy wondered what she was getting herself into. She wondered if her own heart would still be in one piece a month from now, a year from now, and found she didn't truly care. On this matter, in this moment, she was fearless.

“I called Pete,” Lindsay said. She shifted her weight foot to foot, wiped damp palms on her jeans. “It's done.”

With great effort, Cindy squelched a smile. Only someone with no class would gloat at a time like this.

Lindsay smiled at her then - a fragile, hopeful grin - and Cindy decided class and dignity were overrated. She powered beyond all the junk of their days, past charlatans whose righteous veneers concealed twisted hearts, and Cindy beamed out her stout, genuine faith in the goodness of life.

“Come here,” she said, and opened her arms.

As she wished to do this morning, yesterday, and numerous times before, Lindsay wrapped her up tight and held Cindy for a good, long while.

After a spell, Cindy whispered something against her neck. “How hard can I kiss you?”

Drunk on hormones, Lindsay didn't follow at first. She hadn't thought about her bumped lip since last night. “Hard as you want. Long as you want.”

A heartbeat laugh skipped out through her nose. “So we're really doing this.”

Lindsay kissed Cindy's hair, grazed lips over her temple. “Yes,” she said.

Cindy nodded and loosened her arms. “Then we should probably close the door.”

They had all night, and time to do everything right. Easing into a kiss, balmy and sweet as their first, they held each other by waist and shoulder and danced a lazy shuffle step toward the bedroom.

Fingers skimmed hip and breast, touching lightly over clothes. Mouths made hungry noises as they dug in harder and deeper. If there was pain from Lindsay's meager injury, it burned away in the rocket fuel heat of her blood.

She reached for the hem of Cindy's sweater and tucked a hand beneath, palmed the gentle curve of her stomach. Smooth skin quivered beneath her touch, and Lindsay broke the kiss. "Is that good?" she asked.

"Mmh. Your hands are hot." Cindy rested her mouth at the base of Lindsay's throat and exhaled her own fire. "I like it."

Lindsay swallowed hard; she had her directive. Her right hand joined the left and roughed over Cindy's ribs. Thumbs glanced along the silky undersides of bra cups. Cindy raised her arms to let her sweater fly away.

Her breath stuttered when Lindsay's mouth wandered down to taste her cleavage, and stilled when deft fingers opened her brassiere and stroked her nipples.

She trembled and clutched at Lindsay's shoulders while kisses trailed over her chest, while a tongue laved her scar, and then moved down her stomach. Cindy was glad she hadn't lingered over the wound; being treated like a fragile bisque figurine was not sexy. As Lindsay gripped her bottom and softly gnawed at her side, she felt firm and dirty, beautiful, and wondrously made.

The buttons on her jeans soon gave way. Breath trickled between the spread fly. Fingers breached her panties, and stilled just beneath the waistband in a neat, happy tangle.

Lindsay hummed a satisfied sound and laid a kiss over her belly button. Cindy touched her chin, tilted her up, and smiled.

"You feared a Brazilian," she guessed. Lindsay made an apologetic face and nodded. Cindy haughtily shook her head. "Not for me. Clear-cutting is ecologically unsound."

Lindsay laughed out loud, a glorious sound that almost made Cindy lose track of what they were doing. When her jeans and underpants were peeled down and wadded around her ankles, when Lindsay bent her over the bed and strung wet kisses around her thigh... well, she snapped back into the spirit of things.

They had all night, and time to do everything right. Somehow, Cindy misinterpreted that as 'do everything right now,' and Lindsay felt like she was dying. From the roots of her

hair to the soles of her feet, every nerve throbbed with the pleasant ache of abuse.

Sprawled nude and prone across the bed with her face booked in a pillow, she tried to regroup while Cindy did some light ablutions in the bathroom. By then, it was far over in the night. A cool wind picked up and sent a draft through the poorly caulked bedroom window. Defenseless, Lindsay's bare back sprouted chill bumps, and she hadn't the strength to reach for a blanket.

There was, she'd discovered, a fine line between being plundered like a treasure chest and getting rolled like a dock wino. Shivering, half-dead and euphoric, she clung to that line.

From somewhere behind came footsteps, then a weight on the bed's edge. Lindsay felt the brushing sleeve of a thick cotton robe, then warm hands rubbed along her spine.

“Wow. You're all goosed-out,” Cindy observed.

Lindsay sent a 'yes' noise into the pillow, then turned her head a fraction. “S'cold without you.”

Cindy stilled her hands. She mounted Lindsay's thighs, untied the sash and opened her robe. The cold worked fast, pricked up her hairs and tightened her nipples in a flash, but when she laid her body down against Lindsay's back, they trapped July between their skins.

They moaned and snickered and smiled as one beast. They loved the world and all who walked it.

Graham said this would be a flowered path to hell. Cindy thought if feeling like this was a sin, bring out the posts, the hammer and nails. Spreading both arms out atop Lindsay's, she twinned her crucified pose.

She thought about the nature of sin, and wondered how many of the seven deadlies paved the road to this moment.

Really, is the desire to completely monopolize someone's attention not greed?

Doesn't a sense of exclusive entitlement to their affection spring from pride, or vanity?

If you feel resentment over time wasted, time you could have spent together, is that not anger?

Jealousy and envy had their day, and may again; at the thought of anyone else touching Lindsay, the word 'NO!' pierced knife-like through Cindy's brain.

As for the seventh, the mutual gluttony which had recently occurred in her bed was a moral crime only by the strictest interpretation.

For those who believed themselves Heaven's magistrates, gray areas did not exist. Cindy Thomas knew that, in their eyes, she would score a perfect seven out of seven.

“Some people would say we've been very bad,” Cindy announced. She combed dark hair aside and nuzzled her lover's nape. “Selfish, weak...”

Lindsay sniffled a little. “It's the human condition,” she said. “We want, we need. We all sin.”

“It isn't worth killing over.”

“No. Not much is,” Lindsay agreed.

Rather than issuing some rote promise about justice, she turned her head and found Cindy's mouth, fed on minty sidelong kisses until her appetite revived. She raised up and rolled them over, and when their bodies grooved together, when their eyes met, a sense of rightness and rectitude displaced all fear.

Cindy traced a thumb over Lindsay's smile. “I won't regret this,” she whispered. “No matter what happens.”

Lindsay blanked on a response. Regret was a recurring touchstone in her life, like mile markers to help her remember wrong turns. Regret wasn't all bad. Besides, saying 'no regrets' was tempting fate, and she felt that fate was already a capricious little bitch.

“This is where you admit you're mad for me, too,” Cindy suggested.

Lindsay brushed her nose along Cindy's chin. “Really.”

“Yes, really. Then you kiss me, very tenderly. Then do that thing with your thumbs - ”

Lindsay kissed her then, very tenderly, and they didn't speak for a while.

It was far over in the night. Like all lovers, they tried to escape the coming dawn.

END