Episode 2: Siege

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Make them shut up, or I will."

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

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

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

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

Act One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gunshots.

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

The young teacher nodded, fear written in her eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The footsteps of heavy boots echoed loudly.

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

"No."

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

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

"You two come with me," he barked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Him, and Lindsay Boxer.

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

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

Three, four, five times.

Tom was tapping his fingers nervously.

Six times.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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He had hung up on her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not that it was very likely now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell me more," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Damn it*!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The caller ID showed Jill's number.

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

"You let her go now."

"No!"

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

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

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

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Act Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Get them out of here."

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

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

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

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

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

At the moment, it was all they had.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But there's still access?"

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

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

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

"Boxer."

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

"Anything on why they would want her?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lindsay sat down across from her, laying her own hand over Graham's. "If you've got something to tell, please, do it now. One child has already been killed, and at least two of your teachers. Don't let the bodycount rise."

She had the uncanny memory of herself trying to make Kate Hammond confess to murder. She sure knew how to get them where it *hurt*.

Principal Graham was no exception as she looked up with tears in her eyes. "We only wanted to protect her!"

***

Cindy didn't have to think of a distraction after all; somebody else did it for her.

Once she was convinced the man who had just approached the officer would keep him and another colleague occupied, she slipped past the barrier and carefully inched closer. Briefly, the thought of what Lindsay would think of her doing this crossed her mind, but it couldn't be helped. The information Betty Lowan had given her was crucial, and Lindsay could blame Officer Clueless later.

The thought made Cindy smile. She wouldn't want to be in his shoes.

It wasn't like she was actually doing anything dangerous, just going to talk to Lindsay. Hopefully, she had good news on Jill and Claire. Cindy wondered how Lindsay was holding up, doing her job under this much pressure. She'd gotten a glimpse of it when Ramos' people had taken McCarthy's family as hostages, knew how focused Lindsay would be - it was reassuring.

Then again, there had been too much loss lately. Even with the images of the terrified people in the tent still vivid, it was hard to wrap one's mind around what was going on *inside* the building - and that their friends were right in the middle of it.

She couldn't bear to think about it too much. She would have been too terrified to move.

Not so Lindsay. Fear only spurred her further.

With the layout of the school, there was no way for the police to get very close; they would have had to set themselves up beyond a certain distance. Trying to make herself as small as possible beside the hedges, Cindy looked around cautiously for anything that could look like an unmarked police van. She edged further into the territory, still a good distance from the actual school building. *Which is fine with me, really. I'm not out to do something stupid.*

The school was to the right, the huge windows of the kindergarten area glistening in the distance. To the left, she saw the van; it had the sign of a construction firm on it, but the woman and man talking outside of it were familiar.

At the sight of Lindsay, Cindy breathed a sigh of relief. Talk about finally getting somewhere.

She allowed herself an instant to stop and watch, secretly admiring Lindsay's confident posture. She had to admit Lindsay had been right about going back to work - for some, it was the best therapy. And it wasn't like Cindy couldn't understand. After the shooting, she had returned to her own job as soon as possible. Too much time to think could kill you - sometimes literally.

Cindy was about to make her way to the van when a movement to her right made her jump.

The girl was about ten years old, and she had blood on her hands. "Please," she urged, reaching out. Cindy winced when the small fingers painted the skin on her arm crimson red. "My little brother is still there!"

"Come on. I'll take you to the police."

"No!" The girl shook her head, tugging on Cindy's arm insistently. "He fell. I can't carry him. Please!"

They weren't going to go into the building, right? It wasn't like she could tell her no. She just couldn't.

"Okay, quick. Show me where he is."

She had the sinking feeling that while it was the right thing to do, it wouldn't turn out to be the smartest thing.

***

Despite the circumstances, Inspector Warren Jacobi still knocked before he entered acting D.A.

Denise Kwon's office.

She gave him a quick, wry smile in acknowledgement. "I was going to call you," she said. "It took some calling in of favors, but here's what we have on the Jimenez family. It was hard to find anything on them, because they basically never existed. There was a car accident four years ago, two adults dead, a little girl - also dead according to the records."

"Maybe not an accident after all?"

Denise shrugged. "Likely, but it couldn't be proven. As I said, I owe favors to too many people now. They were in a witness protection program. The word was out that their identity had been found out, and they were going to be relocated. Martin Torres, the father, had been the main witness in the trial against Andrew Vasquez three years ago."

"The crime lord? That Vasquez?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"But wouldn't they know about the accident, in case it actually was one and they didn't help it happen?"

Denise shook her head. "It gets better from there... the girl who died in the car was not the daughter, Francisca. In fact, her name should sound familiar, as you and Boxer worked on the case. Isela Quiroga."

He must have gaped at her, because she laughed dryly. "I reacted the same way. And here's the last connection: The agent who was assigned to them worked undercover. As a kindergarten teacher."

"Anything else?"

Denise just smirked.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "We owe you."

She made a dismissing hand gesture. "I'm glad to help. I'm pretty sure the girl we got to see was really Torres' daughter. For some reason, it was Isela in the car with the Torres'."

"So we need to find the good Mr. Quiroga to clear this up. Thanks again."

Jacobi was already heading for the door when she called him back. "And... Inspector?"

"Yes?"

"You call me the minute you hear anything about--"

"Sure," he said, stifling a smile. Denise was as worried as all of them, but she had a hard time admitting it.

She sighed. "This will be one Career Day none of these kids will ever forget. I wish I hadn't made her go."

"No one could've known this would happen," he said, uncomfortably reminded of Jill's choice of

words.

'Gates of hell' seemed oddly fitting now.

***

Jill stroked the dark hair of the girl who had just curled up in her lap, trying not to think of what would happen to Heather and the other girl now. She had hope... they weren't just separating them in order to kill. As they all had learned before, these men weren't worried about killing with an audience.

Little Isela had scrambled over into her lap the moment her former teacher was gone from the room, and she hadn't looked up again.

It was a different kind of horror for her, Jill assumed, because she'd probably just started to feel safe after having strangers invade her home and kill her brother.

The warm weight in her lap was both reassuring and disconcerting. It spoke of life, and at the same time, its utter fragility.

Again, she searched Claire's face, finding solace in the nearness of her friend, something that Jill guiltily acknowledged. She wouldn't mind seeing Lindsay soon, either...

As if on cue, Claire said, "They're going to get us out."

"I know."

She watched the men pacing the room, their leader still with them. Was finding the Jimenez girl really all that was on their agenda? And if not, how had they planned to end this? They couldn't kill everyone in the room, could they?

She gave herself the terrifying answer.

Who would stop them?

They both jumped when a desperate wail filled the room. "I need to get out! I can't breathe! Please, somebody help me!"

This time, Claire didn't hesitate. While Jill kept holding on to Isela, praying that her friend wouldn't have to pay for her bravado, Claire crouched beside the teacher and shook her gently. "Miss? Please try to calm down. Take deep breaths. Yes, that's it."

One of the masked gunmen approached her, and she gave him a daring look.

He left her alone. His posturing was simply to remind her, to remind every one of them, of the threat.

***

"You won't do a thing about it. You're worried about your kid, I can understand that. My wife is in there too!"

Lindsay supposed it was not a good thing that Tom had Peral nearly by his collar. "Lieutenant. You should take a look at this." Both men looked equally unnerved at the interruption.

"There's new information. And we might have just found ourselves a way in."

Peral gave her the same presumptuous look as before. "Took you people long enough."

"Mr. Peral here wants to tell us how police work is done. Would you get someone to accompany him back to his car?"

"My pleasure," Lindsay said, stifling a grin.

Tom shook his head as they both watched him walk away. "He's crazy. Of course he's worried like the rest of us, but he actually offered manpower for the storm. Can you believe that? SFPD assisted by a gang leader. Now that would be a headline for your friend."

He laughed dryly, which Lindsay found slightly offensive, though she couldn't really say why. Maybe because she didn't have the time to remind him that Cindy didn't indulge in sensationalism like some of her colleagues did. And Lindsay didn't like that she had to remind him in the first place.

"Where is she anyway?"

"Outside of the barricaded area like all good reporters, I guess. Tom, Cindy isn't stupid."

He nodded, and it remained unclear if he trusted her judgment in this, or if he just didn't want to waste time with an argument. "Okay. What about that way in you were talking about?"

***

"No, absolutely not. I can't risk any of you breaking your necks!"

"Can you risk any more dead hostages?" Lindsay asked in a harsh whisper. "This is the only chance we have. We can come in from two sides, from the roof and through that shaft. From the ground, it will never work. They'll notice too quickly."

"Didn't you hear the principal? No one's been down there in forever!"

"Until today. Tom," she said firmly. "This is how we can end it. They're not going to give up. Torres and his wife may be dead, but Quiroga raised the daughter. If they make the connection, they're going to kill her anyway. Hell, they might be more eager to kill once they know we've figured them out."

Lindsay could tell he was torn. She would be too, making a decision that would hopefully save the lives of many people, including a loved one, but that could possibly endanger the women and men for whom he was responsible.

Time slowed down to a standstill before he said, "All right. We do it your way."

***

The boy looked at her with wide, terrified eyes, his small face tear-streaked. It made Cindy want to

cry, too, but she was aware that what would help them most was to get both of the siblings to safety as soon as possible.

She scooped up the boy. He had banged his knee when he fell, hence the blood on the girl's hands. It was a relief that it was nothing more serious. Not a gunshot wound.

The feeling was short-lived, though.

There were several men coming along the same path that she had taken, blocking her way back. They didn't look like plainclothes at all. And how naïve had she been anyway, thinking they wouldn't watch the territory, make their rounds in a wide circle?

Cindy backed away slowly, the girl's hand in hers, sticky-red.

The only problem was it brought her closer to the school, not further away.

The thought was slightly unreal, as was the hand over her mouth from out of nowhere, before she could scream.

***

All she could see was a black rectangle far above them. It was at that moment when Lindsay began to question the wisdom of her insistence, but it couldn't be helped now. She tested the lowest foothold, relieved to find it solidly bolted into the wall. She was also grateful she'd never been claustrophobic, because she wouldn't be able to do this now. No fear of heights either. The only way in was through a connecting tunnel in the neighboring building, and this one was two floors down.

Back when there had actually been an elevator in use instead of empty space, save for dust and possibly bugs, the school building had been much smaller.

Unlike the newer elevators, this one would have transported about four people, maximum. Aware of the expectant looks on her, Lindsay straightened and began the climb, wincing a little when dust rose around her. Focusing on climbing, she ignored the cottony feel of it under her fingers.

Graham had been right; no one had been in here for a long time. The upside of this was that the intruders would not expect anyone to come that way.

Behind her, a member of the SWAT team sneezed.

"Bless you," she murmured, trying not to breathe too deeply.

***

After Jamie Galvan had told her his name, there had been one unreal, terrifying moment in which Cindy had thought that he was going to kill her. He had turned out to be harmless, but the current nightmare she found herself in was anything but.

She had struggled, but ceased when the barrel of a gun was pressed into her side. They'd made a deal. He wouldn't hurt the children if she came with him quietly.

It wasn't much of a consideration.

What had her really scared, however, was that after he'd dragged her along the eerily quiet hallway, he pushed her into a room where none of the men wore any masks, and it made her think that they were far from being harmless like Jamie had been.

There were two of them, one who she quickly pegged for the one in charge, and one of his minions. Her mind already filed away descriptions, distancing herself from the likely fact that she wouldn't be able to tell anybody.

They weren't the only occupants of the room.

There was the little girl who they thought was the one.

Cindy could now easily tell that Betty Lowan had only told her half the truth. There was much more to this than a case of illegal immigration.

And in the middle of the room, tied to a chair, was Heather, pleading with the men to leave the girl alone. "Look, why don't you understand that you've got it wrong? I've been with the school for five years, there is no Francisca Jimenez. Certainly not her. Her name is Maria." Cindy noted that her clothing was slightly disheveled, but not so much as to assume something... worse had happened in here. She couldn't go there, not now.

They didn't listen to her, instead now turning their attention to Cindy who swallowed nervously.

"Found her snooping around," the one who had brought her in explained, giving her a rough shove that almost made her stumble.

He opened her bag and emptied the contents on the floor before leafing through her personal documents, coming up with her press ID.

The one who was so obviously the leader smiled at her when he saw it. Cindy suppressed a shudder. There was not a trace of emotion in his clear blue eyes. He'd kill with the same care that other people would switch off their TV.

"You wanted an exclusive?" he asked, sounding amused. "This is as exclusive as it's going to get, Ms. Crime Reporter. It's your lucky day - or maybe not."

It would have been easy to fall into that bottomless pit of fear that seemed to be opening up around her, but somehow Cindy managed not to. "Does that mean I get to hear why you are terrifying all these people, including me, when the girl you're after isn't even here?"

She closed her eyes for an instant, fearing he was going to shoot her right then and there.

It didn't happen.

Instead, one of the other men who had been standing by the window, said, "I don't like this, it can't be coincidence. We should pack up here."

He was clearly nervous, and Cindy wondered if he was the one to worry about more. Hell, who was she kidding? Neither of these people was in any way reassuring. And they had already killed.

"We will," his boss answered, unfazed. "You'll make another round and make sure that this time,

you don't bring anyone back. And you," he directed at Heather who cringed, "better tell me all you know about your agent colleague. I'd prefer a living hostage, but it's not mandatory."

He winked at Cindy. "Story of your life, huh?"

She honestly didn't know how to answer that.

***

The noise seemed deafening, making the windows rattle, and for a moment, Claire thought a bomb had gone off. She was still holding on to the woman who had had the breakdown earlier and was now quietly sobbing. Jill rocked little Isela who seemed so far gone she didn't even react to the overwhelming sound.

Had they gone crazy? Or were they trying to bring the whole building down with the hostages trapped inside now that they thought they'd found the child they had been looking for?

Claire found that she couldn't bring herself to fear much – any more than she already did, anyway. She was losing track of time. Part of her mind was aware that she was settling into shock like everyone else here, but it was still disconcerting.

The thought of the teacher in the hallway came unbidden and she lowered her gaze, trying to keep up the pretense of calm, though inside, she longed to scream.

The men were checking the doors and windows and speaking rapidly, which meant the hostages needed to keep it together. Because if the nervous reaction of the men was any indication, it wasn't them who had caused the explosion.

Whatever that meant.

***

"We can arrest all of these jokers later. In the meantime, the most important thing is that they don't interfere. Keep them out of the way."

Lieutenant Tom Hogan could barely restrain his anger when he'd realized what was happening. They'd wanted a slow, cautious approach, but that was no longer possible, thanks to Peral and his men who had used a grenade to create a diversion and start an operation of their own.

It was an act of arrogance that could probably cost more lives than they'd ever dared to fear, while he had teams halfway inside the building. Their lives were now in a lot more danger, too.

"Now that has to be the most unfortunate outcome," Nelson Wilcook said. "Didn't anybody see this coming?"

Tom wanted to slug him.

***

Act Three

The door to the hallway was almost in reach, some five feet away, when the explosion seemed to

shake the building. Not quite, but it felt that way in the narrow space. For an instant, her ears were ringing and Lindsay clutched the metal handholds even tighter.

Whatever it was, it meant that they had to hurry up, and also get out of there as soon as possible.

The flashlight illuminated the metal safety door, as well as numerous bugs scurrying away.

Somebody made a disgusted noise.

Changing the flashlight for the lock pick, she went to work. Since this door was so old, the school's current skeleton keys wouldn't be of any help, so this would have to be done the old-fashioned way.

It was tricky work in the near darkness, having to rely on her sense of touch more than her sight, holding on to the handhold with her right hand.

Under pressure to work fast.

Finally, she heard the reassuring click, as well as another sound; the crunch of metal in concrete loosening when the hold under her feet gave way.

***

Cindy realized several things at once. First, from the reaction of the men in the room, none of them was responsible for the explosion. So it was either the police coming in... or the group she had been trying to evade earlier, confusing them with the hostage takers, which had ultimately made her end up in here.

Lindsay would be mad, but it wasn't really her fault, was it? She couldn't have just left those kids to their own devices.

Come to think of it, if the worst that happened today was Lindsay yelling at her, Cindy wouldn't complain, because it'd mean that they'd both be alive.

If a competing group was trying to get control of the situation, what would that mean for the police?

She caught Heather's frightened gaze as one of the men, cursing, untied her.

"I want the child," the leader said, "and her," he pointed at Heather, "to keep the girl quiet." He turned to Cindy, again giving her a smile that did nothing to reassure her. "You're coming with us, too. You'll get your story."

She didn't want to go anywhere with him, but she had the unnerving feeling that refusing would possibly put her in a worse position.

"We'll meet outside," he told his men, 'outside' obviously not being random, but a very specific place. Of course. They were too organized to not have come with a plan B. "In the meantime, you go and take care of the folks next door."

The almost bored tone in which he'd said this sent a shiver down Cindy's spine. "What do you mean?"

He stepped closer to her, so his face was only inches from hers. "You be glad about your press ID,

little lady, because it's what's keeping you alive for now. What do you think it means?"

"No." She shook her head frantically. "No, you can't do that! There are friends of mine. They have nothing to with why you're here! Hell, you heard her, you even picked the wrong child. Why don't you just leave? I'm sure you've made your getaway plan before you came here. They'll be too terrified to even try and identify you!"

"All of my men have been masked inside. The only ones who could identify anyone are her, maybe the girl - and you. That's why you are all coming with us. For now."

He raised the rifle at her, and reluctantly, Cindy backed a step away.

It was so much worse knowing what the men who were leaving the room were about to do.

***

They had left two men in the room to guard the hostages. Others who had just come in were sent back outside to identify the source of the commotion.

Jill hardly dared to breathe. She could easily tell that it was the same for every one of the hostages in the room. Whoever was interfering with the intruders' agenda here, if they were their enemies, that should definitely mean something for all of them who were trapped in here.

Stroking Isela's soft hair, Jill scooted closer to Claire. They had to pay attention. They had to get ready.

For what, it wasn't quite clear, but then she saw the blur of movement outside the window, and had only a split second to shove Claire down and cover the child in her arms with her own body before the glass pane exploded.

***

There was no time, not even for her breathing to settle again. She had slipped for a moment, but found her footing again, and as Lindsay pushed the door open, finally on solid ground, there was not an instant to obsess over what could have happened.

She stepped into an empty hallway, but there were sounds to be heard, indicating they'd have company soon. Tom had informed her of the new development over the comms. It wasn't good, but they had to work with it now.

They were only a corner and two doors away from the room where the hostages were held.

Vasquez's people were nowhere to be seen, and when the shooting started, it quickly became clear why. Peral's men had taken the straight route in.

***

Katerina Peral screamed at the top of her lungs as she was picked up and carried out of the room, a hail of bullets separating the man who was carrying her from those all clad in black, up to and including their masks. They were firing back.

She was obviously out of her mind with fear, and there was hardly anyone in the room who couldn't

sympathize, because the men who had come to take her away were definitely not the police.

Two of the intruders were down, one of them reloading his weapon, cursing, as the man carrying the child was already out of the room. The one who was covering him got hit in the chest before he could make a retreat as well.

The adversary approached slowly, his expression unreadable under the mask as he raised the weapon, his finger poised over the trigger.

Still on the ground, sheltering little Isela from the view, Jill watched, wanting to keep the obvious from happening. But she just didn't know how.

She nearly fainted with relief when a familiar voice said, "I don't think so."

Lindsay stepped inside the room, her own weapon drawn, and the sight of her in the midst of this chaos was wonderfully reassuring. But only for a moment, before said chaos erupted anew.

Somebody dragged the fallen man out of the room, more police rushed in, and that's when she realized that one of the intruders who lay on the ground, bleeding from a gunshot wound in his side, was reaching for the weapon that he had lost when falling.

She reacted without thinking, taking it and pointing it at him. They all looked alike with their clothing and masks, but it didn't matter. All of them had come inside with the intent to kill, or at least none of them had ruled it out.

Like the man who had held the barrel of the gun to her neck this morning, who had forced her and Claire to leave the teacher, then, in a cruel twist, killed the man anyway.

Her vision began to blur.

"Hey. It's okay. You can give it to me now." There was a trace of worry creeping into the voice now, though the warm, soothing cadence stayed the same. "Jill, can you hear me?"

She took a deep breath, and her vision finally cleared to reveal Lindsay, looking all the part of the victorious warrior with the slightly disheveled ponytail and the smudge of dirt on her face.

It was over. Jill staggered slightly. "Did you come down the chimney?"

"Something like that," Lindsay said enigmatically. "Are you all right? Claire?" There was a hint of urgency in her voice. As much as she obviously worried about them, her responsibility extended to more people than just her and Claire, Jill realized.

Little Isela had no such reservations, though. "Lindsay!" she exclaimed, extending small arms.

There was a brief misty-eyed moment for all of them when Lindsay scooped her up. "Hi, honey. You are one brave girl. Would you mind staying with these ladies here for a little while longer?" Isela nodded against her chest.

Over the girl's head, Lindsay said quietly, "Take care of her, please. I'm going to find Heather."

What she didn't say came across just as clearly.

Hopefully, it isn't already too late.

***

The strange feeling didn't abate, and Lindsay could tell from experience that was not a good thing. If it stayed while clearing up a crime scene, it usually meant that there were things *left* to clear up. She'd been nearly breathless with relief at seeing her friends unharmed, save for some scratches from when Peral and his men had shattered the window. Now, as she and the rest of the team went through the school room by room, she wished they had found Heather just as unharmed. She didn't want to be the one to have to tell Tom... *stop it!*

They had to be somewhere in the building - Heather, the girl who they thought was Torres' daughter, and the man she'd spoken to on the phone hours ago. There was literally no way out.

This was what was causing the strange feeling. He wasn't among the men who had been arrested or shot, Lindsay was convinced of that. And if he hadn't made it outside the building, there were few alternatives. He could give himself up, although from what she knew about Vasquez's organization, that option was not likely. He could kill his hostages, and himself. There was a probability in this.

Either way, they didn't have much time.

The next door of the hallway was locked. Kicking it open, Lindsay found there was no one alive in there.

The body belonged to a woman in her early thirties, shot to the chest twice. Lindsay suspected she had found the agent who had been responsible for the Torres' girl, since no one had bothered to hide the bodies of the teachers and children they'd found so far, until now. Four adults. Two children.

Six too many dead.

She didn't want to add a single one to the count today.

***

The two men were arguing angrily about how to get out and still fulfill the contract they had with someone named Vasquez. If he was the one Cindy was thinking of, it made a lot of sense that he had ordered this siege in order to find the girl he was after.

They had stopped at a corner, their argument getting continually louder.

She exchanged a look with Heather who still had the child by her hand, before quietly taking a step backwards, closer to the corner.

Heather scooped up the girl, stealing a glance at the men who debated hiding inside the building versus trying to escape.

The leading man was watching them from the corner of his eyes, of course. They were just huddling closer together, two women who had basically nothing in common but fear and the utter, relentless will to survive.

When, for the blink of an eye, none of the men were looking at them, Cindy took her hand and they ran.

***

Her world spun for a moment, before it settled again and she couldn't ignore any longer what she was seeing. Lindsay crouched beside the clutter on the floor. Keys, sunglasses, a tube of lipstick.

A *notebook.*

Her hand shook for the first time today when she picked it up. Lindsay knew who these things belonged to, and seeing them in here without every missing person, let alone perpetrator, accounted for came close to cracking the professional persona that usually helped her make it through a day as bad as this.

They were Cindy's.

It was like waking from a nightmare and realizing it was all true after all. This whole day she had clung to the idea that at least Cindy was safe, only to find that was all it had been - an idea.

She clutched the notebook in her hand, trying to calm herself and get her racing thoughts into some kind of order.

Why? Cindy wasn't supposed to be in here, not even in the vicinity of this place. Lindsay remembered what she'd told Tom earlier, and she still believed that there was no way that Cindy would just accidentally have gotten too close. She was determined, but not stupidly careless. There had to have been a reason why she'd gotten caught up in here...

Lindsay wavered only for a moment, images of the dead teacher she'd just found mingling with memories of the day Cindy got shot. *No.*

She couldn't allow herself the thought. Not ever.

***

They had only moments before the men realized what was going on, and they didn't have any time for second guessing. There were no words being exchanged between the two of them, no expression of fear.

Soon they heard footsteps getting closer. Too soon, Cindy reflected. Their desperate attempt to make it out of this hell together wouldn't work like this. At this point the child might not even be that important to the men - nothing more than a hostage to help them get off the grounds.

Not that she was eager to sacrifice herself, but she saw how Heather struggled with the weight of the child in her arms while running. If she could find a distraction... Both the girl and Heather were possibly more at risk.

Heather, noticing that she was slowing down, turned to Cindy. "Please, don't give up," she said desperately.

Cindy shook her head. "I'm not. Let's just split up. So they won't get both of us."

For an instant, it looked like Heather was going to protest, then she nodded. As soon as she was out of sight, Cindy chose the opposite direction, coming to a door that lead to a flight of stairs. *Up.* It

made her feel slightly like the heroine in a horror film, *stupid, why up?,* but that was the only direction the stairs went. And if her plan worked, the open door would alert them, while Heather would hopefully run into cops outside of the school building.

Judging from the sounds of the footsteps, her plan was working.

Until the heel of her left shoe caught in a loose bit of the linoleum and she slipped and stumbled. The sudden pain shooting through her right leg wasn't even as bad as the grin of the man who had caught up with her. This wasn't the leader, the one who had promised her the story of her life.

This one, and the grin he gave her as he pulled her up, scared her much more than the others had before.

***

The sound of leaves being crushed made Lindsay spin around. She had no real indication as to where the perps would go, with the school surrounded, but the backyard with the hedges and the park behind had seemed worth a try.

Someone else obviously had the same idea. Carefully, she drew her weapon and inched around the hedge, close enough to have small branches scratch her skin.

"Freeze!"

Stepping around the hedge, Lindsay found herself face to face with a woman brandishing a shovel, probably from the janitor's shed, in shaking hands. A little girl with a tear-streaked face was hiding behind her.

Quickly, Lindsay holstered her gun and approached cautiously as Heather, still clutching the shovel tightly, seemed quite out of it. "Hey there. It's okay. You made it."

Seconds ticked by, then Heather dropped the shovel and stumbled forward, the girl's hand still in hers, as she wrapped her other arm around Lindsay and held on. When she started to cry, Lindsay returned the embrace reluctantly, for more than one reason. She wanted to find Cindy, make sure she was all right. She wanted it so badly she didn't think she could spare another minute on anyone or anything else.

Over the microphone, she alerted Tom. "Hey. I've got someone for you right here, and I think she'd rather see you than me now."

Heather gave her a watery laugh. "I'm sorry, Lindsay," she said, smiling self-consciously. "I didn't mean to cry on you again." Before Lindsay could answer that, she scooped up the girl. "Maria, meet Inspector Boxer. She's a very brave lady."

Lindsay smiled at her, but inside, the tension tied her stomach in knots. Her knees were weak with relief when Tom finally arrived with another officer who took the girl, while Tom and Heather embraced. His eyes were a little bright when he mouthed 'Thank you' over her shoulder to Lindsay.

"You're welcome," she said, not bothering with an explanation as she headed back towards the building.

***

In the back of the ambulance, Jill held on to Claire, not even sure anymore which of them needed steadying. Save for some scratches from the broken glass, they'd been lucky, but she just couldn't calm down, her mind still overloaded with the images. She remembered the feel of the gun in her hands... she'd almost shot a man. Of course, he would have shot her first without hesitation, and Jill preferred very much to be alive, but still...

She glanced at Claire, who was clutching a paper cup with hot coffee in her hands, looking lost in thought.

Obviously, she felt very much the same.

"I so hate this day," Jill sighed, her voice only slightly shaky. "The--"

"--drinks are on Lindsay," they said in unison, and her vision blurred just for a moment, as they laughed quietly. Then she had to fight back the tears.

Lindsay was still in there. It wasn't really over yet.

***

Stupid! Cindy berated herself for acting heroically again with disastrous results, and berated the man for having nothing better to do than planning to assault a woman in an empty stairwell when he had the chance to get away from the police.

The realization hit her like a bucket of ice cold water poured over her.

He had nothing left to lose. She, on the other hand, had a lot.

Her high-heeled shoes would have come in handy now, but she'd lost them earlier when he'd dragged her up and down the stairs. A kick with her stockinged feet would be nowhere near as effective - but when he wrapped a hand around her throat, Cindy realized there weren't many options left.

This wasn't going to happen, not with her and Heather having gotten away in the first place, and the police already in the building.

Not with Lindsay close.

She kicked as hard as she could, her aim a little off, but good enough to make his grip loosen. Then she screamed.

***

It all happened in a blur once she'd entered the stairwell. Lindsay had feared he would try to take Cindy as a shield, but instead, he shoved her aside roughly and barged forward, the knife in his hand coming out of nowhere.

Lindsay avoided getting stabbed by inches. They circled each other; he feigned a move, she dodged it, waiting, and the next time he moved, she kicked the knife out of his hand.

He recovered quickly, getting in a punch that had her side connecting solidly and painfully with the

wall. But he'd underestimated her, not counting in the anger that had flared within her the moment she had seen him with his hand on Cindy's thigh, pushing up the fabric of her dress, the intent clear.

She translated all that anger into her answering kick, another move, and he was down, clutching his shin. Before she could even think about how to quickly restrain him, a shot rang out, and another, and the man screamed, a red stain growing rapidly on his pant leg.

Lindsay turned to face a jovially smiling Carlo Peral. This time she couldn't help it and she rolled her eyes at him. "Shouldn't you be with your daughter?"

"You saved one of my men, who, actually, helped save my daughter. You have my respect, Inspector."

"Well, thanks. You're still going to be charged for interfering with a police operation."

"You want to arrest me, Inspector?"

"Get out of here, Peral," she said, already turning to Cindy who stood leaning against the wall, alarmingly pale.

All explanations could wait. Lindsay walked over to her, laying a hand on her arm and resting it there. "Are you okay?" Under her fingers, she could feel her trembling. The answer to that question was very obvious, though Lindsay reminded herself that it could have been worse. Much worse.

Instead of an answer, Cindy just melted against her, and Lindsay did what she had wanted to do all along. She pulled her close.

"I'm sorry. I'll get myself together in a minute, okay?"

"It's okay." Over her shoulder, Lindsay still kept an eye on the perpetrator, technically unnecessary, since she'd cuffed him before. He wasn't a danger any longer, but it was a good excuse to ignore the emotion welling up within her. Cindy didn't cry, but she also made no move to loosen her hold, so Lindsay let her, stroking her hand down her back in a calming motion, grateful for this lucky outcome in an otherwise horrible day.

Not everyone had been so lucky.

Lindsay knew how to put up a shield against the daily horrors of her job, but the sight of a child killed in cold blood put a crack in it every time.

With a sigh, she just leaned into the embrace, thinking she probably needed it just as much. Just a moment longer, until her colleagues would find their way in here.

And some time later, I'm going to find out why you were here in the first place.

***

Half an hour later Cindy was on the phone, standing off to the side. Lindsay couldn't help but watch her, knowing from Claire's indulgent smile that she was probably being too obvious about the need to assure herself that her younger friend was safe. She didn't care.

Only now, having her friends all in one place, the pressure of this day was alleviating slightly, but

finding Cindy's papers in the classroom had been an additional shock at a moment when the situation seemed almost resolved, and it still weighed on her.

Jill had been following her gaze, shaking her head with a fond expression. "She's always in the middle of it. Who could have expected anything like this to happen when visiting a kid she once interviewed in school?"

"That's why she was here?" Lindsay asked, puzzled, and also somewhat relieved that the explanation was this easy.

"She wasn't in the classroom with us, but yes, we met her before class. Lindsay, you didn't think--"

Claire's slightly admonishing tone struck. It wasn't like she really believed that Cindy would take a foolish risk for a story... but she was willing to take a risk, and at times, that was enough to terrify Lindsay. "No. No, I didn't."

"At least we had each other in there," Jill added meaningfully. "Imagine how it must have felt to know there was no way out, and being all alone."

Lindsay didn't want to imagine that. She was feeling very tired all of a sudden, and her side hurt where it had impacted the brick wall.

"At least Peral's troupe left enough of them alive to bring to trial and hopefully tie the murder of the Torres family to Vasquez. Jill, I see some overtime coming your way."

Jill just sighed.

"Poor Isela," Claire said to Lindsay's relief, going with her attempt to redirect the focus back to the case on their hands. "That'll bring up trouble for her and her father once again."

"Jacobi is talking to him. Hopefully this time, we'll get the whole story from him."

"Speaking of which," Cindy had ended her call and rushed back to their little group, "are we still going to meet tonight? It doesn't have to be long."

"I'd like that," Jill answered quickly. "We're back among the living. I wouldn't mind a stiff drink before this day is over - and mark my words, this will be the last Career Day Denise ever sends me to!"

Lindsay felt a smile tug on the corners of her mouth. "She was pretty helpful today. She really regrets having sent you."

"Sure, but for how long?"

Their banter continued until a scream nearby cut through the cacophony of sounds around them. It was followed by sobbing.

In the ambulance a few feet away, someone had lost a loved one. The knowledge silenced them, slamming home once more the fact that they had been aware of all this time, that showed in the looks they shared instead of words.

Today, it could have been any of them.

***

Act 4

She was surprised to see the lights still on in Tom's office, so Lindsay climbed the stairs and knocked softly.

"Come in," he said tiredly.

Lindsay closed the door behind her and leaned against it. There was a moment of silence, though a lot less awkward than it had been on earlier occasions. After a day like this, knowing everyone they loved was either safe at home or at Papa Joe's already, and having survived it themselves, personal issues became relatively unimportant in comparison.

"Shouldn't you be home?" she asked.

Tom's gaze went to the picture of himself and Heather he had on his desk. "In a minute," he acknowledged. "Heather knows I need to wrap things up here."

Lindsay nodded. "I'm... glad she's okay. Now get your butt out of here. The paperwork won't run away." That granted her the ghost of a smile.

"You know, it's ironic," he said. "You won't like this, but here's the truth - I used to worry about you. A lot. And it wasn't because I thought you couldn't do your job, I knew you did it better than anyone else. You were never afraid. On the contrary, you'd face the danger head-on. Maybe that was something I couldn't deal with."

Lindsay smiled ruefully, somehow touched. She had of course known about Tom's old-fashioned protective streak, but it had never really been spoken aloud.

"We made our choices. You don't expect to be almost killed in a kindergarten class," she said and then winced at her choice of words. This day had taken a lot out of her. The censors were down.

"Damn right, you don't."

"It's not your fault, Tom. No one can foresee these things."

"Does that make you feel any better?"

Lindsay considered this for a moment, the fear of making wrong decisions she could only really acknowledge after she'd known that her friends were safe. She hadn't even learned until the end that Cindy had been inside... to think of the possibilities was devastating. No one could understand Tom's mindset better than she did.

"No," she admitted, and they shared a smile.

Turning off the computer screen, he stood up and grabbed his jacket and keys. "Thank you, Linz. And... say hello to your club."

"How do you-- It's not a club," she protested out of habit, wondering about the office grapevine.

He just chuckled, and Lindsay shook her head.

They said goodnight.

***

Martha greeted her enthusiastically. Taking a moment to pet her and then preparing to feed her, Lindsay had almost overlooked the blinking of the answering machine. Or maybe she'd wanted to.

If the day had gone as planned, she would have liked to have taken that call, had a hot bath and a glass of wine while listening to her lover's voice a world away. But today's events had drastically altered her schedule, and everyone else's for that matter, so she opted for a quick shower. As always, she hastily grabbed some clothes out of the wardrobe, not sparing the bed a single glance. She would have to do something about it, to deal both literally with the bed as well as with her own avoidance of it - but not today.

Her friends wouldn't stay long, just a drink or two together, to remind themselves that they'd made it out in one piece and could -- what, go back to business as usual? Lindsay remembered the cry of the mother whose son had died in the ambulance, her throat tightening at the memory. Not everybody had been lucky. Two children, four adults - and the death toll could have been much higher.

In the bathroom, she leaned her forehead against cold tiles, taking just a moment to get her bearings.

She couldn't afford to let this get to her this much.

Vasquez might have been ruthless in his plans to kill the family of the man who'd testified against his organization, but tomorrow another even more vile predator was waiting for her.

Revenge was something humanly understandable - it was a world away from someone who considered himself an instrument of God, master over life and death, like the fanatic they were after.

Well, his delusion would come to an end, too. Lindsay straightened, taking a look at her tired face in the mirror. *Sooner or later*, she vowed.

And Tom had been right, she wasn't afraid to face the danger. She might have been spooked by the utter evil of those crime scenes, but not enough to look away. Where others ran, she took a closer look.

And she could do this because she had the support of a small group that consisted not only of her best friends, but also the sharpest minds in their fields.

A slow smile spread over her face at that thought. *Watch out*.

The phone rang again, and she considered not picking up, but then decided that Pete wasn't to blame for what had gone wrong today. So she answered.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, a smile in his voice. "Long day, huh?"

"Aren't they all? I'm - I'm sorry, I need to leave in a few minutes. It's good to hear you though." She just let the words tumble out, one after another, and finally took a deep breath.

"Going to meet your Girl Scout club?" It was probably friendly teasing, laced with a bit of disappointment that she was going to cut the call short, but the timing was way off.

"I thought you'd have an idea of the work we do," Lindsay retorted sharply, and regretted it immediately. She just couldn't have a sense of humor about this now. "Look," she said, pacing while she kept talking, "there was a hostage situation at the school where Tom's wife works. And--" The realization kept crashing down on her. "Jill and Claire were in the building for the kids' Career Day. Cindy was there, too. Those men killed six people, two children among them, and another died later in the ambulance."

"Oh my God, Lindsay, I'm so sorry. Are you - are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she choked out, relieved that he got it. Come to think of it, Pete had always been a lot more understanding about her job than she had given him credit for. He had seen her attic and was able to acknowledge that she had a job to do, rather than call her crazy. Or obsessed.

She could forgive him one misplaced joke, couldn't she?

"I'm sorry, I've got to go."

"I guess you have to. Take care of yourself."

"Always do."

"I love you," he said easily.

"Me, too, I mean... I love you, too." Not so easy at all.

Hanging up, Lindsay frowned, hoping that for an hour or so, she'd get something good out of this day after all.

***

"I'm not staying long," Claire gave an apologetic smile. "I nearly had to sneak out of the backdoor to come here in the first place." She and Jill were the first ones to arrive.

"They'll understand." Jill smiled warmly. "You've got your family waiting for you. However, the only person who'd maybe not get freaked if I wanted to talk about today would be Denise, and I so prefer your company."

They laughed together, in a kind of looking-over-your-shoulder sort of way, but were basically glad to be there.

"I won't be here long, either," Jill continued. "Since I'm not dead or injured, she'll expect me to come in at eight tomorrow morning."

"If that was meant to be a joke, you're losing your touch." Lindsay had arrived, taking a seat next to her in the booth.

Even with the disapproving words, Jill found her presence rather reassuring. In a way, she always had, but the feeling was definitely more pronounced after today's events. She just smiled at her

friend, and Lindsay's gaze softened.

She was probably about to say more, but then Cindy breezed in, immediately drawing the inspector's attention to her.

Jill thought wryly that if the young reporter hadn't been so clearly oblivious to the effect she had on Lindsay, and if she weren't the amiable person that she was and a good friend, it would have been annoying.

But it was Cindy, so she just sighed and smiled, and held Claire's knowing gaze.

I'm fine.

"At least you get to sleep," Cindy said, nearly humming with the residual adrenaline. "I, however, will probably get to write through the night. My boss only checked to see if I'm still able to do the job. Since the answer is yes, there'll be no reprieve."

"You should take some time off." The moment the words were out of Lindsay's mouth, Jill noted, she looked like she regretted them, and hastily added, "You all should."

"Not very likely, though. I think I remember you saying something about overtime... that was a really crazy thing Peral's people did."

"Indeed," Lindsay said darkly. "A lot more people could have been killed. What the hell was he thinking? Well, I know what he was thinking, but thinking about it just pisses me off even more, so I refuse to go there."

She leaned back into the booth with a sigh, wincing slightly.

Jill smiled at her empathically. "You got pretty banged up, didn't you?"

Lindsay shrugged and winced again.

"That was a pretty cool thing to do, climbing up the ladder in that shaft." Jill shuddered. "I could have never done that."

"I didn't know heights bothered you." Lindsay looked pleased with the compliment, though.

"They don't. But bugs do."

They laughed until Jill noticed that Cindy had gone silent all of a sudden. "Are you okay?" she directed at her. "That must have brought up some bad memories. I know it did for me."

"Well, thanks to Lindsay, I am okay," Cindy said quietly. "I know it wasn't very clever to go in there, but the girl and her brother needed my help. I had to do it. I checked on them though, they both got out okay."

"Wait a minute."

It was Jill's turn to wince, as she hadn't known there was an addition to that story. Like everyone else, she'd just assumed Cindy had gotten caught in the middle on her visit. Not her fault then. Now it seemed like things had been quite a bit more complicated.

Lindsay had been under a lot of pressure today... and yes, she was right to read Cindy the riot act. Tonight, though, with all the emotions still so fresh and raw, it didn't seem like a good moment.

"You were out of the school already?"

There was a dangerous tone to Lindsay's voice that normally signaled to a perp in the interrogation room that if he didn't tell the truth right now, he'd be digging his own grave, figuratively speaking. Jill shuddered. Not a good metaphor, not today.

But she did agree with Lindsay. Rescuing those children would have been the police's job. Cindy's actions had been as brave as they'd been foolish - but of course it wouldn't harm her story that she'd been right inside of the mess. She had crossed a line in every sense of the word.

"Lindsay," Claire said warningly, to no effect.

"I'm sorry, it's been a long day, so maybe I didn't get that right. Could you please explain it to me?"

"All right," Cindy held up her hands in defense, "I was just talking to the people in the crisis intervention tent, and a teacher told me about Isela, so I was going to find you. This officer wouldn't let me through, and then he was distracted when Peral arrived, and -- I swear, Linz, I was just trying to find you!"

Lindsay shook her head. "That's enough." She nearly jumped up from her seat, pulling Cindy up and out of the booth with a hand around her wrist. "Looks like we're going to have that talk now, and it'll be better outside."

"Lindsay, what the hell--"

Claire rarely cursed, but Jill agreed that this situation called for it.

Lindsay held up a hand. "I'm sorry, no, this is between Lois Lane here and me. I've had enough from a gangbanger treating a crime scene like his own little vendetta playground and endangering people's lives. I don't need a friend to do it."

Jill watched Cindy follow her outside reluctantly, wearing a defensive expression.

Part of Jill could sympathize with Cindy and her actions, but there was also another part of her that wanted to shake her. Putting oneself right in the center of a situation with bullets flying was by far the worst strategy to try and overcome the trauma of having been shot.

She looked up at Claire, her own feelings reflected in her friend's gaze.

They were worried for both of them.

***

"You are going to tell me from the beginning, every little detail. Are you hurt?"

"There is not a scratch on me. Yet." Cindy spoke slowly, for emphasis, and her words hit home.

Lindsay let her hand fall to her side, ashamed to see reddened skin where she'd clutched Cindy's

wrist, dealing with her like a disobedient child. The sentiment vanished quickly though with the thought that she wouldn't have had to come into that room to find Cindy being held there. She wouldn't have had to be terrified for her life - if Cindy had stayed where she was supposed to be.

"Go on. Tell me about that girl and her brother."

Cindy gave her a quick summary of how she'd ended up on the wrong side of the barrier with two children, finding that there was no way out the moment Peral's men were coming in.

"So you had to go rescue the boy too. You didn't think the police could have done it."

"I didn't think there was enough time! Lindsay, they had killed children!"

"I know. I was there!"

Lindsay didn't care about the strange looks the patrons just leaving Papa Joe's were giving them, or the snickers and murmurs about a 'lover's quarrel'. "And unlike you, I had a job to do there. Look, I know you'd do almost anything for a story, but this is too much. How am I supposed to trust you?"

"It wasn't for a story. Well, yes, I'll be writing it, but all I wanted to do was to get the information to you, because I thought it would help *you*!"

"It didn't help me when I realized you were somewhere in the building, and I didn't know whether you were dead or alive. It didn't help me when I--" She broke off just in time when her voice was about to break, and no, Lindsay didn't want to let it go that far. "You just don't get it, do you? Tell the others goodnight, I'll see them at work tomorrow."

"Lindsay," Cindy called after her, her voice uncharacteristically small. It took all the self-restraint Lindsay had left not to turn around and... well, damn it, possibly hug her again.

She quickened her stride, away from the argument, away from her own fears.

***

Cindy wiped her face hastily before she went back inside to get her purse she had left behind. Not like she could hide her shell-shocked condition from Jill and Claire, but she was at least safe in the knowledge that they wouldn't push.

"Don't mind her," Claire said warmly. "You know Lindsay. She'll come around eventually."

"I don't know," she choked out. "Whatever. I've got a long night ahead of me, I should go." Did she really know Lindsay Boxer? She had thought so, but at the moment Cindy was doubting that she did.

Jill offered no reassurance regarding Lindsay, though, and Cindy soon found out why.

"I know you won't like to hear this," she said, "but don't you think Lindsay has a point? I for one would have preferred to be on the outside."

Cindy needed a moment to absorb this, realizing that Jill was not going to side with her, and wondering what it would mean for the bond she'd thought they had formed ever since Jill had stayed at her hospital bed, waiting for her parents to arrive. Lindsay, of course, had had other plans

that night... she couldn't afford to dwell on those thoughts now. She had her own job to do.

Still, the accusation that had been in the room all along, that she'd done it for the story rather than trying her best to keep the children, Heather and herself from getting killed, stung.

"Me too, believe me."

"Really? You could have fooled me."

Whatever Jill's deal was in this, Cindy didn't feel like figuring it out right now. It was probably saner to go home and get started on her story. At least it would keep her from obsessing too much about today's events and the meltdown she felt like having.

"Goodnight," she said quickly and all but fled from the diner.

***

The first thing Claire did once back at home was to check on her sons and to thank God for the stomach flu that had kept Nate safe and at home today. Derek was still up, sitting behind his computer with some game. For once, she didn't have the heart to chide him for his late activities when there was school the next day.

Her throat tightened at the thought that, after today, some mothers would have to bury their children.

"So Dad has gone to bed already?"

The only answer she got was a nod and a sigh. She couldn't have hoped that the boys hadn't caught on to the tension between her and Ed. But tonight, it didn't really matter. When someone held a gun to your head and you were still coming home to your family, all else faded in comparison.

She'd thought Ed was asleep, but when she snuggled up against his back, curling an arm around his waist, he turned and pulled her close.

It was the first time today that she let herself relax, and Claire felt her eyes grow bright. She leaned into the embrace gratefully, relieved that Ed had been understanding about that one hour she needed to spend at Papa Joe's.

Not that their meeting had ended with a reason to be relieved, but she would worry about that another day. Same with the new serial killer who had chosen San Francisco for his turf.

Tonight, the two of them together was all that mattered. It had been too long since they'd had a moment like this.

***

Cindy stilled her hands for a moment, taking a deep breath when she realized she'd hit the keys almost hard enough to make her fingers hurt. Not good.

From the moment she had driven home to now, more than halfway through her story titled *'Vendetta against the Weakest'*, the scene had been playing through her mind over and over again. She kept seeing the girl with her brother's blood on her hands, kept asking herself if there had been

a moment when she could have acted any differently. Cindy couldn't come up with any.

What angered her most was that even though she knew Lindsay had overreacted, part of her was accepting the blame, already searching for a way to make things right.

It wasn't her call this time, though.

It didn't help either that the events of the day had left her wired and restless, and even as she finished with her task much sooner than she had estimated, Cindy knew she wouldn't get any sleep tonight.

Maybe this would be a good time to remember one of the "people" she'd dated lately. A quick glance to her watch told her that she would catch Ellen at her most awake. She was a web designer who worked from home and preferred to work nights.

Maybe that would, at least for a while, keep the nagging worry away that Lindsay was seeking permanent changes to their relationship, whatever it was these days.

***

Lindsay was obviously not keen on visitors tonight, but she seemed relieved that it was Jill on her doorstep. That was a beginning. She probably wouldn't want to deal with Claire right now, and Cindy -- most likely, she wouldn't have let Cindy in at all. Jill could sympathize with what she knew, but she suspected there was probably even more to it.

"It's late," Lindsay greeted her. "I was hoping to get some sleep before the alarm goes off."

Jill smiled ruefully. "Don't remind me." She followed Lindsay into the living room where they both took a seat on each side of the couch. Martha was wagging her tail happily; she welcomed the late night visit.

"And by the way, you promised to pay for the drinks."

"You came after me because I owe you ten bucks?"

"No," Jill said patiently. "I came after you because you might want to talk about what's been going on tonight."

Lindsay stared at her through bleary eyes. "Not really," she said tiredly.

"Look, I can understand you're mad at her. I am too. I'm not sure I would have been able to tell the girl no, but then again, I wouldn't have gone back in."

"She was close enough to see our van. That close to being safe. And in that classroom - her things were strewn all over the floor. It was like..." Her words trailed off, but Jill had no trouble understanding what Lindsay was referring to.

"That moment over and over again. I'm sorry, that doesn't sound right. It's not like knowing you and Claire were in there was freaking me out any less."

"You don't have to explain."

Lindsay looked a little doubtful at that, and Jill wondered if she really had any idea how obvious she could be at times. Of course, Lindsay didn't like to be called out on that, but as a friend, you sometimes had to take a risk.

"Because there is a difference, right?" Jill continued. "It's Cindy. We all know she's an adult, and she can handle herself, but still there's something about her... you just want to protect her. Besides the fact she got shot not so long ago. It makes all the difference in the world."

Lindsay's haunted gaze at that was all the answer she needed. There was more to it, Jill knew, but she also felt they had reached their limit of confessions and soul-searching for today. She got up to stand behind Lindsay, placing her hands on her friend's shoulders.

"Today was just a whole lot of bad luck mixed with Cindy's usual lack of a healthy kind of fear." Almost of their own accord, her hands started a slow soothing massage. And if the contact brought up a memory or two, it didn't matter today. "I agree we shouldn't just let it slide."

"It's like everybody knows how to do my job better than I do. Peral--"

Jill laughed dryly. "I thought they were going to blow up the school. So much for a rescue attempt."

"Then Cindy decides to be a hostage evacuation squad all on her own. It should have never gotten out of control like it did."

"Not your fault." They were probably thinking of the same thing now, that same event that was making her eyes grow bright, when they'd heard that scream coming from the ambulance of someone from whom this day had taken more than it had from each of them.

"I'm not so sure of that, but thanks for the vote of confidence. Please, don't stop what you're doing, by the way."

Jill smiled to herself. "I must admit to ulterior motives," she said. "I was hoping to earn myself a spot on your couch for tonight."

"Sure," Lindsay answered too quickly, stiffening under her touch.

"Sorry, it's probably not a good time. I should go."

She felt a little panicky at the thought that her request could have been misunderstood, as she'd meant no double-entendre. Jill admitted ruefully that part of her motivation to go after Lindsay was the prospect of not being alone tonight. She wanted to feel just a little safer than she had all day; to know that Lindsay and Martha were next door would certainly do the trick.

"No way," Lindsay finally said after a considerable pause. "It's yours. Just factor in that Martha might want to visit you."

"I'm fine with that."

"Okay then. Let's try and get about --" Lindsay checked her watch and sighed. "Four hours of sleep. What else is new?"

***

Lindsay leaned heavily against the door of her bedroom, feeling a drop of cold sweat snake down her spine. Martha, having no such reservations, jumped onto the bed and happily found herself a place right in the center of it.

Martha was the only living being who had touched said bed in weeks.

The whole room had been cleaned thoroughly after the CSU had finished and Corinne Stevens' body had been removed. Tom had promised to send someone to take care of it, and with too many other things on her mind, Lindsay had just let him.

It had smelled clean and fresh inside, new light blue sheets covering the bed. Nothing reminiscent of the fact there had been a woman who'd been stabbed to death left in it, her face grey, her lips sewn shut.

Nothing but her own vivid memory. The moment Lindsay had seen Corinne, she knew she wouldn't ever sleep in that bed again; possibly not even in the same room, but the jury was still out on that.

It wasn't like she wasn't used to the company of ghosts and death. They still lived upstairs in the attic, where she'd never gotten around to cleaning up after Kiss-Me-Not's death, something that was overdue. If she asked them, the girls would not hesitate to help her out with it, her own little exorcism.

Except for Cindy maybe, in whose face she had slammed the proverbial door tonight.

The memory made her chest tight with regret, the hollow fear of an uncertain future, even though she couldn't see how she could have handled things differently.

Thoughts were swirling in her head like leaves in the wind. She was probably just plain exhausted, but that didn't make them any lighter as they pressed in on her. At least Jill was with her on the subject of Cindy, though it didn't really solve any of her issues.

Truth be told, that conversation with Tom had her thinking too, about how he used to be worried about her, but somehow not so much anymore. His attempt at trying to tell her how today had been so much worse, because you didn't expect a kindergarten teacher to face mortal danger on her day job. Heather was supposed to be all about smiles and children's laughter...

... so where did that leave her? And could you really spend the majority of your life around evil without being touched by it?

It wasn't like she wanted Tom back. That was a chapter from the past that carried with it the sting of failure, but that was all. They worked well together. After all, she had Pete now, a man who, if not very available at the moment, cared and understood the demands of her job.

And it was almost a miracle that he wanted to be there, with the dark that was always so present in her life, embracing her, maybe even having become a part of her over the years.

It was coming back to haunt her in the form of a man who chose his victims on a seemingly random basis, exerting a punishment that, up to now, only made sense in his twisted mind. There was only one way to get to him: get inside his mind, open hers to him. It had worked with Kiss-Me-Not. It would work again.

And she had learned that it came with a price. Given what she had paid to stop Kiss-Me-Not in the

end, it was probably a good thing that Cindy was mad at her and Pete was in a foreign country on another continent.

At a safe distance from the darkness.

It was just so damn lonely to be alone in that space.

Martha regarded her worriedly as Lindsay sank to the floor, her back against the wooden door behind her, fighting back tears she told herself only came from pure exhaustion. As tired as she was, though, she couldn't bring herself to lay down up there, to share the bed with the ghost of a woman who could still be alive if only they'd made the connection earlier. And she didn't want Jill to know it.

Everyone had been mad at her for keeping Kiss-Me-Not's earlier threat a secret, but the truth was she would have done it all over again, if given the choice. She would have done anything to keep her friends out of today's mess - and away from this new psychopath with his bizarre rituals.

Lindsay couldn't. Because she needed their help; it was the ever-present dilemma that wouldn't go away.

With Kiss-Me-Not, she had gone to her father for help.

Lindsay took a deep breath, trying to chase away the images of Corinne Stevens that threatened to overlay reality as always when she spent more than a few minutes in this room.

Martha slept, snoring quietly.

With a sigh, Lindsay pushed herself up from the floor, grabbed a comforter out of the closet and then snuck back into the living room where Jill had fallen asleep in the meanwhile.

She sat back in the armchair and closed her eyes, hoping she wouldn't dream tonight. Except for the night she had shared on the couch with Cindy, ironically, her subconscious never failed to come up with fragmented images of those closest to her lying in Corinne's place.

Ironic, because this threat was gone for good. Come tomorrow, they would face another which was similarly dangerous, if not more so.

Tonight, the nightmares might bring her back to the stairwell of Mission Day School and what could have been. If she was really honest, Lindsay knew that moment, worse than anything that had already happened until then, was what had upset her most. Which made it seem rather unfair that she had unleashed all her fury on Cindy when she could have just tried to set her straight in a rational, sensible way.

All of a sudden Lindsay was very grateful that Jill was here, just a few feet away from her. It kept the chilling loneliness that had taken hold of her since she'd fled the diner at bay.

If only for the moment.

FADE TO BLACK