

## Methods & Madness

by liz\_estrada

### TEASER

Two San Francisco police cruisers idled in the parking lot of Jacobsen Memorial Animal Clinic. The four officers present were visibly upset and nervous, and with good reason.

Earlier in the evening, Officer Henry King was murdered while on a protective detail, shot once at close range while he sat in his patrol car. Inspector Lindsay Boxer – whom King was assigned to watch over – had subsequently disappeared from her girlfriend's apartment.

Cruelly, the kidnapper also drugged Boxer's dog, placed a fresh calf liver and lung on the table, wrote an insane, cryptic message in blood, and left the animal to die from an overdose of Diazepam. If the girlfriend hadn't arrived home soon after the assault, the poor dog would have died, and the killer's trail would have been even colder.

As it stood, a nationwide manhunt had begun for Peter Raynor, also known as the Kiss-Me-Not Killer. Airports were on alert to prevent international flight. Raynor was wanted for the abduction of Lindsay Boxer, and a multiplicity of homicides dating back to the spring of 2003.

With any luck, Boxer would not be joining the ranks of his victims. One phone call, one sighting, one tip – that's all they needed, and the full force of the California law enforcement system would slam down on Pete Raynor like the hammer of God.

Boxer's closest friends, including DDA Jill Bernhardt, medical examiner Dr. Claire Washburn, and San Francisco Register reporter Cindy Thomas (the girlfriend) were sequestered inside the veterinary clinic, awaiting word about the dog, about Raynor, but mostly about their missing friend.

As soon as these women set foot outside the safety of the clinic, they would be under constant “eyes on bodies” police surveillance, on explicit order of Lieutenant Tom Hogan. Failure to secure their charges would result in suspensions without pay – or worse.

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Everyone deals with stress in their own way, and the three women waiting inside the Jacobsen Clinic emergency room presented a cross-section of various coping methods.

Claire Washburn studied photographs of the crime scene, pored over Raynor's bloody message and that silly gilded mirror until the words turned to alphabet soup. If there was a clue in those words, something to help them find Lindsay, Claire would find it.

If there was no clue, if the message was simply a final taunt devised to maximize pain and confusion for Lindsay's loved ones... no. No, there must be something useful in the images. Claire took a deep breath, rubbed her eyes, and took another look at the photos.

Jill Bernhardt paced and made phone calls to investigators, checking to see if Lindsay's or Pete's credit cards had been used (not yet), whether anyone in or around Cindy's building had seen anything suspicious (they hadn't), and whether the wireless provider had been able to locate a signal from Lindsay's cell phone.

“Goddammit!” Jill spat as she ended that last call. “Maggie says there's no phone signal. He must have destroyed Lindsay's phone, or at least removed the battery. Bastard, bastard, BASTARD!!”

“Shhh! Keep your voice down, please,” Cindy Thomas requested in a heartbreakingly small voice. “Dr. Pam said Martha needs to rest.”

Jill nodded and apologized, even though she was angry enough to kick a nun directly in the face. Instead, she took a seat beside Claire and rubbed her shoulder to try and draw the tense woman out of her presumably dark thoughts.

“Did we miss something at the apartment?” Jill inquired. “Please say we missed something.”

“I wish I could say that, but I don't think there was anything to miss,” Claire regretfully admitted. “This just doesn't read like a 'come find me' scene. It's like he's... just...”

“Rubbing it in with one last sick joke,” Cindy supplied. “Like he's saying goodbye, because he thinks it's over and he's won. But he hasn't won yet, has he, girl?”

Cindy gently wrapped her fingers around Martha's leg and gave a light squeeze. The steady beeping of the dog's heart monitor provided some comfort. With counterfeit calm, she whispered to the sedated animal.

“You need to get better so you and Lindsay can go running when she gets home,” she said.

“How can you be so optimistic?” Jill sharply wondered. “I hate to be the voice of doom here, but Pete Raynor has years of experience at avoiding detection and capture. And

now, he has Lindsay.”

Turning to face her two compatriots, Cindy mustered a smile and gave her friends a simple reminder.

“And Lindsay has us.”

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In the pure white bedroom he'd dubbed 'the treatment room,' Pete Raynor stood beside his sleeping princess, his bound and manacled treasure, and laid a moist kiss upon her forehead.

Dressed in her white gown, with her black hair neatly plaited and her face scrubbed clean, she looked pristine. A perfect mate and match for Peter the Great in his tailored tuxedo.

Yet he knew that if she woke up just then, that would all change. She would scream and struggle to escape, she would reject his love and mercy... she would break his heart. He skimmed a fingertip across her antique silver manacles and sighed.

“If you loved me, we wouldn't need these chains.”

Pete pressed a button on a remote control, and steel shades fanned across the picture window. The room was pitch black and silent, save their breathing and his measured voice. By remote control, he activated a small spotlight over the bed.

“When you love me, and you will... I'll set you free.”

His fingers ghosted over the imprint of a gun beneath his jacket.

“I'll set us both free,” Pete promised.

He kissed her closed eyelids and felt them jump beneath his lips – an indication that Lindsay had entered REM sleep. He touched the electrodes on her scalp and glanced at the EEG readout to confirm that Inspector Boxer had, indeed, left the building.

“Where are you? Are you hiding from me?” he asked while stroking her cheek. “No matter. Wherever you are, I know you can hear me. I've made certain of that.”

His eyes strayed to the I.V. stand, to the bag of pale blue magic streaming into Lindsay's veins, into her mind. The drug should make her more receptive to suggestions, provided these suggestions were coded into memory engrams in a specific manner and sequence.

The human mind is an explanation engine. Give it new information, and it will melt and

bend previously known truths in order to accommodate the new data.

At least, that's what the Norwegian scientists who created the drug had claimed. Too bad about that lab fire that consumed all their research, and then that horrible skiing accident, where the entire team were mistaken for caribou and shot dead.

Pete snickered and rationalized what he was about to do, which took all of half a second. When you've managed to reason away bushels of murders, a little forced psychological resurfacing is hardly cause for guilt.

“We follow in the steps of Pygmalion and Galatea, Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle,” he whimsically explained. “This is merely a... a remediation for some of our unfortunate missteps. Don't worry, though. Nothing we can't fix.”

He took a seat in a straight-backed wooden chair at her bedside, hoisted a clipboard, and began to read his beloved a bedtime story woven from lies. With the aid of modern chemistry-cum-alchemy, these leaden lies would soon shine like golden truth within her mind.

“Five years ago, your father was killed by a junkie named Billy Harris. Marty was trying to stop Harris from robbing a convenience store in Santa Cruz. One month later, Tom Hogan left you for a schoolteacher named Heather.”

Pete stopped for a moment and savored the next part. He breathed softly, swallowed, and resumed reading in calm, even tones.

“I came back to San Francisco later that summer, and took you out to dinner. Even though we hadn't seen each other since college, it was like no time had passed at all. We were still in love, Lindsay. You and I have always been in love.”

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## ACT I

San Francisco police inspector Lindsay Boxer stood on the roof of the Hall of Justice as a chill pre-dawn wind ripped across the slumbering city.

She leaned against the low railing and looked out over the streets of her town, where a smattering of headlights and taillights buzzed around like fireflies caught in a maze. Engines roared and spluttered. Gears ground together in dying transmissions. Horns

tooted, signaling impatience.

Some motorists were headed to early morning jobs, while some were finally wending their way home after a long night of who knows what. Work, drinking, sex, or maybe all of the above.

Lindsay wished them all well. At that moment, she felt nothing but charity in her soul. Her flesh, however, shivered against the cool wind. She burrowed one hand into the pocket of her soft, somewhat thin, leather jacket.

With her other hand, she brought a lit menthol cigarette to her lips and took a deep, greedy drag.

On some level, she knew she shouldn't be smoking. Really, cigarettes kill people, right? Emphysema, lung cancer, stroke, heart disease... the list went on and on. And yet, here she was, calmly sucking in great, teeming batches of carcinogens as if that little paper stick was perfectly safe.

Truth be told, she was enjoying her smoke break. She loved this building, loved the view, and adored the fact that no one bothered her up here. Some potential interlopers feared her temper; others simply loathed smoking so much that they refused to keep her company.

In any case, these few minutes offered freedom and solitude, (and a tempting whiff of self-destruction) so Lindsay was willing to take the risk. The actual cigarette was beside the point. Boxer and Nicotine were not going steady; she just liked the company, or the lack thereof.

She'd come to depend on this time alone, away from all the sympathetic cooing and pitying stares sent her way by mostly well-meaning colleagues who politely waited to speculate about the Hogan/Boxer divorce until Lindsay had left the room.

Everyone in the Hall knew Tom had left her. Most had theories, Lindsay was certain, because that's what cops do. They speculate. Some probably knew that Tom had met another woman – a sweet, doting schoolteacher who probably genuflected every time Big Tom walked past – but they knew better than to mention this woman in Lindsay's presence.

*Because Tom didn't leave you for Heather,* said a little voice in her head. *You left him for a murderer.*

Well, that was... odd. Her initial instinct said that Tom had cheated on her with Heather, causing them to divorce. That wasn't true; the simple, horrible fact was that her marriage ended because Lindsay was obsessed with another man.

Granted, he was a very bad man, a killer who tortured women. A man who twisted

dreams of happiness into knots, into nooses, and hanged those women on gallows built of fantasy.

Lindsay thought she had caught that man, thought he was dead and in the ground, just like -

She felt tears well up behind her eyes at the mere memory of her late father, shot and bleeding on the floor of a convenience store. Harsh fluorescent light, racks of chips and candy, a wild-eyed young man with a gun. A pool of scarlet spreading across the black and white tiles...

*No. Not a convenience store robbery. What the hell, Lindsay? You know where it happened* , said that same inner voice. *You know why he died.*

She concentrated for a moment and dug another memory from her mental stacks, a recollection that cut deeper, felt more like the truth.

In this memory, Martin Boxer lay on the wooden floor of a remote little house while Lindsay grappled with a psychopath. Marty stared at her, steely-eyed and stoic through his pain, and willed his daughter to fight for her survival, which was evidently more precious to him than his own life.

“Dammit,” Lindsay breathed, a soft curse swept away in the morning wind.

Lindsay dragged her thumb across her eye, smearing tears down her cheek. She tucked the cigarette into her mouth and felt the slightly moist paper wrinkle as she pursed her lips. She touched her tongue against the tar-stained cotton filter and felt a soothing chemical burn as mentholated smoke whooshed down her throat.

*Wrong again. It's not cotton*, said the little voice. *Cigarette filters are made of cellulose acetate. Also? By the time Marty died, you and Tom had been divorced for a coon's age.*

Lindsay realized this was true, and shook her head to clear away a tickle of mental cobwebs.

“Why was I thinking he died in a convenience store robbery?” she queried aloud, as if asking the cosmos where she got such an asinine idea.

*And, again, why were you thinking that you and Tom just got divorced? By the time you buried Marty, your marriage was five years in the ground.*

For a brief, strange instant, she had genuinely believed those tragedies to be concurrent, or at least within close chronological proximity. But that wasn't true. Why had she felt it was true? Why was her sense of time so muddled?

She tried to remember today's date, but couldn't quite pin it down. It felt like a Thursday,

or maybe a Tuesday. Panic flared inside her skull. Not knowing something so basic and necessary made her feel strangely adrift, almost lightheaded.

With a flick of her wrist, Lindsay consulted her watch and belatedly realized it had no functions beyond a simple “17” for the day of the month.

The panic flare within her grew brighter, hotter, and she frisked her own pockets in search of a cell phone. A glance at the home screen would give a correct date and settle this confusion right down. She needed a cell phone.

In her haste, she fumbled the burning cigarette; as it fell, the glowing orange tip brushed against the back of her left hand.

“Oww! Christ Almighty!”

She angrily stomped the butt and ground it under her boot heel. A quick look at her hand revealed a dot of red skin and the white swelling of an incipient blister. Her thoughts lingered on self-pity for a moment, and then she resumed her quest for the correct date.

She really, really needed a cell phone, and nearly yelled from joy when her fingernails ticked over a slick plastic shell tucked into her breast pocket. Increasingly emotional, and in some slight physical pain, she jerked her hand from the pocket, and that unbelievably necessary cellular telephone went flying over the building's edge.

Without a moment's thought, Lindsay Boxer dove after it.

She leaped from the roof of the Hall of Justice and hung suspended above the street. Her open leather jacket fluttered like bat wings against the wind.

She should have fallen, should have dropped like a sack of wet cement and splattered on the street, but someone had taken hold of her foot. Illogically, she remained aloft on the breeze, now securely tethered by the firm grip of two hands around her ankle. She felt like a giant kite.

Aside from a quick lurch in her guts, the strangeness of this situation didn't frighten her. Instead, she stared over the ledge as the glowing phone slid down through the darkness. Although it was just a phone - \$99 with a two year service agreement – Lindsay felt inexplicably sad.

Profound quiet settled around her, as if the entire city observed a moment of silence in honor of her fallen mobile. There were no traffic sounds, and no wind noise; it was as if God himself had pressed the mute button on His Universal Remote.

Gradually, within this curious silence, she discerned one faint, monotone voice. Somewhere out in the black air, a man spoke in rhythmic patterns, but she couldn't make out his words.

The cumulative weight of all this weirdness began to settle on Lindsay, and her brain-breaking confusion was such that she wanted to cry.

*Maybe this is why you never dropped acid. Wonderland blows.*

Hands – presumably the same hands that saved her from falling – eased her back onto the gravel-strewn roof, then patted and rubbed her back in consolation. Lindsay turned to this person, to offer thanks for the help, and found herself face to face with her dead father.

He wore a navy blue pea coat and a woolen watch cap, like a longshoreman. His hands were strong and warm on her shoulders, and his eyes shone with pride and affection. Had Lindsay not been so upset about losing her phone, she might have hugged him.

“Forget about it, sweetheart. You don't need a phone,” said Martin Boxer. “You need a gun.”

He reached inside his coat and produced a nickel-plated 1911 pistol with walnut grips. Marty cocked the hammer and racked the slide, chambering a .45 round.

Lindsay set aside for a moment the surreal experience of watching a dead man load a gun. She knit her brows and shook her head.

“Marty... I don't know the date,” she confessed. “I was floating over the street, and my hand hurts, and I smoked a cigarette -”

“You don't smoke,” Marty interrupted. “And the date doesn't matter. Forget the phone. Take the gun.”

“Why? Who am I supposed to shoot?”

Marty pressed the pistol into her hands. He pointed a finger toward the roof stairwell door, where a familiar villain sat rigidly upright in a wooden chair.

Pete Raynor wore an immaculate, tailored tuxedo. Clean-shaven and smiling faintly, he looked as handsome as a fairy tale prince.

Lindsay nearly retched at the sight of him. Her grip on the gun tightened.

Beneath the dim light of the 'Exit' sign, Pete read aloud from a clipboard. His voice, plain and flat, recited lines as if on a pre-recorded loop.

“Five years ago, your father was killed by a junkie named Billy Harris. Marty was trying to stop Harris from robbing a convenience store in Santa Cruz. One month later, Tom Hogan left you for a schoolteacher named Heather.”

Lindsay shook her head and tried to shut out his words – which she knew to be lies – but the ideas seeped in and took root in her brain. As before, she could easily summon images to support these false memories. She could plainly see racks of candy and chips, a bloodstained checkerboard floor, and Tom smiling at Heather.

Pete spoke again: “I came back to San Francisco later that summer, and took you out to dinner. We hadn't seen each other since college, but it was like no time had passed at all.”

Marty laid a hand on Lindsay's shoulder. “Don't listen. You have to stop this.”

Pete's voice grew louder, stronger. “We grew up together. You were my best friend, and I was yours. I have always loved you, and you have always loved me.”

The invasive presumption of such a lie sickened Lindsay. Though her hands shook with rage, she raised the gun and leveled the sights at Pete Raynor. Marty reached over and supported her arms.

“Last month, I asked you to marry me,” Pete recited, now with some passion in his voice. “Your friends discouraged you. Jill is jealous and feeds off your misery. Claire says our relationship is co-dependent and unhealthy; she doesn't want you to grow up.”

“Honey, just shoot the son of a bitch,” her dead father whispered.

“But you followed your heart and said 'yes,’” Pete continued. “Beloved, we know each other so deeply, so intimately, that others cannot comprehend our connection. We belong together.”

*Wake up, Lindsay,* said the little voice. *It's the only way to make him stop. You have to wake up.*

“While the slumbering world dreams of happiness, we will live it. Forsaking all others, defeating all enemies, preserving our nation of two...”

Pete stood and held out his hand. His words should have meant little or nothing to Lindsay, but, quite against her will, she felt them deeply. Since a part of her found it easy to believe Pete's shimmering lies, she felt certain there was enchantment at work here. Surely, the bastard was cheating.

As a bulwark against the mental sorcery, Lindsay's mind conjured a beautiful auburn-haired young woman, with a bewitching smile which instantly bolstered her courage.

She thumbed off the 1911's safety.

“Live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove,” Pete intoned. “You will love me until the sun turns cold. You will be my true and only bride.”

“Like hell,” Lindsay said, and pulled the trigger.

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The .45 boom echoed across her San Francisco dreamscape, and Lindsay Boxer awoke.

Her eyes flashed open and found not a black sky overhead, but a white acoustic tile ceiling.

She lay partially upright in a hospital bed, cuffed hand and foot to steel side rails. She yanked at the shiny, odd-looking cuffs, but her weak efforts yielded only a pathetic rattle.

Upon noticing that she wore a spectacularly overdone white bridal gown – which belonged to Tom Hogan’s mother – Lindsay said the first thing that came to mind.

“Well... shit.”

The back of her left hand hurt. She glanced toward it, expecting to find a cigarette burn. The only wound present came from a needle; there was an I.V. port taped to her skin.

The attached plastic tube led to a bag of light blue fluid hung on a tower beside the bed. This light blue fluid was apparently flowing unabated into her bloodstream.

Looking around the room, she found all the correct visual cues to convey 'hospital.' Only one thing stood out; just beyond the foot of the bed was a large picture window with a stunning view of the sun rising over the ocean.

*Rising. Over the ocean. East coast. Oh, no.*

Before she could deal with that revelation, Lindsay took a moment to process that her Hall roof experience was merely a dream, a melon-twisting, mother-loving, drug-induced dream.

*Pete drugged me. At Cindy's place... he killed Martha. Or hurt her. I couldn't tell, couldn't even call for help before I passed out. Jesus, what's he dosing me with? That dream, the things I thought and felt about Marty and Tom... it all seemed so real.*

Snapping out of her reverie, Lindsay grasped that in her very real, very dire reality, she was being held prisoner in a hospital room or a clinic– evidently on the eastern seaboard – by a deranged, lovesick serial killer.

Silent as a cat, Pete Raynor approached from her right. His outfit looked more

appropriate for a black tie dinner than a torture session, but he came bearing gifts: one hand held a plastic anesthesia mask while the other opened the valve on a squat gas canister.

Casually, and with disturbing sweetness, Pete smiled at his captive.

“Your body chemistry is surprisingly drug-resistant. Maybe from all the drinking?” he guessed. “No worries. We'll simply adjust the dosage until we get it right.”

As Lindsay opened her mouth to speak, he covered her face with the mask and pressed down hard.

She stared at him, projecting every bit of hatred she could muster, until her breath ran out and she was forced to inhale the gas. As sleep grabbed at her limbs and pulled her down, she realized that the gas tasted of menthol.

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## ACT II

Once the national tip line went live, information flooded in from every corner of the country – information with wildly varying degrees of credibility and relevance.

“My brother used to run a coffee shop, and he said Pete Raynor ate at this coffee shop while he was in college. Good tipper.”

“Well, back in 1997, Pete Raynor rented my aunt's vacation houseboat on Lake Mead. He seemed so nice and quiet...”

“Shut-up, man! It's recording! Umm, yeah. Pete Raynor borrowed my dad's saws, and brought them back all covered in blood and stuff! It was soooo messed up!”

“The man you're looking for, he used to come to all our plays – we run a community theater in Stockton – and he was really quite lovely. He gave a sizable donation to the friends group, and used to hang out with the crew and help build sets... oh, I don't know. It just seems so out of character.”

“Pete Raynor is the biological father of Michael Jackson's children. I have a baby blanket and a soiled gym sock you can test for DNA.”

On and on and on went the messages, and Cindy Thomas was determined to listen to every damned one of them until something turned up.

Inspector Warren Jacobi might have thought it was pointless, that nothing good ever came from a tip line, but he understood the need to feel useful. At Lindsay's empty desk, he had set Cindy up with some headphones and digital voice files and turned her loose. Who could say for certain that she wouldn't root out a clue?

For his part, Jacobi was nearly climbing the walls waiting for a call back from Oregon State Police about a missing rental car. He clicked his pen, stirred his tea, closed his eyes and tried to breathe himself calm. It wasn't working; with every look across to his partner's desk, with every reminder of the woman who should be sitting there, Warren Jacobi knew the urge to murder a man.

As for the rental car, it was a genuine lead and he very badly wanted to fly to Oregon and run it down himself. A month ago, Pete Raynor walked into the LAX Hertz office and signed out a 2009 Ford F-150 truck.

The rental was open-ended, with all charges accruing to a pre-paid credit card, so the airport Hertz hadn't seen a problem – until Pete's mug was all over cable news last night for kidnapping a cop.

After the manager contacted police, the Ford's GPS signal was traced to the Coos Bay waterfront this morning. At last word, the state cops were surrounding the area, and Jacobi waited anxiously for an update.

“Damn this,” he whispered.

Just as he laid his hand on the phone receiver to call and pester the Oregonians again, the extension light blinked and the phone trilled beneath his fingers.

He snatched it from the cradle, barked his name, and listened intently. Jacobi's eyes went cool, and his jaw twitched.

Across the desk, Cindy Thomas shut off the tip line recordings and removed her headphones.

“I see,” Jacobi said. “Call me as soon as you identify the body.”

Cindy rocketed out of her chair and nearly tripped over her own feet. She scowled at Jacobi and raised a shaky finger.

“Body?” she whispered. “Oregon found a body. Was it...”

“No! No! No.” Jacobi waved his hands and shook his head. “White male. Blond, early twenties. Divers found the rental Ford by an abandoned dock. A dead man – with no identification on him – was belted into the driver's seat. It looks like the truck's been underwater for several days.”

Cindy stuttered out a sigh. She sat on the edge of the desk, hand over mouth, and tried really hard not to cry from relief, and from guilt. Pete had, in all likelihood, killed that man for some reason and ditched his body, but all Cindy could think was, “Thank God it wasn't Lindsay.”

Jacobi tapped her on the wrist. “I'm sorry. Didn't mean to scare you.”

Cindy shrugged and tried to smile. “That can't be helped. I'm gonna freak out every five minutes or so until she's home safe. You may as well get used to it.”

“There's no point in getting used to it. Before we know it, Lindsay will be back here annoying me and doing... whatever she does to you,” Jacobi awkwardly promised.

Cindy inferred something saucy and her eyes went wide. She blushed and bit her bottom lip.

Jacobi fudged up his mouth and wished he had put that differently. He tried to change the subject by asking whether Cindy had found anything useful among the tip line messages.

“I don't know. Some calls from idiotic attention-seekers, or old acquaintances angling for TV interviews,” she admitted. “Several people just called to say what a nice guy Pete was, or seemed to be. He tipped well, he was polite, he supported local theater -”

Cindy stopped short and reviewed that message in her memory. Something about Pete donating money to a community theater group and building sets with the crew just seemed so... wholesome.

'Wholesome' might not equate to 'incriminating,' but Cindy was going to go nuts if she just sat there listening to phone calls. Everyone else had something to do, some angle to work.

Jill was hunkered down with the feds and a representative from Interpol, coordinating case files and cross-referencing background information about Pete, including properties, taxes, and possible international bank accounts.

Claire was busy with the autopsy of Officer Henry King – Pete's most recent victim.

Jacobi and Snow were checking their own leads, both local and out of state.

Since Dr. Pam said Martha needed to rest at the veterinary clinic for a few days, there was really nothing else useful for Cindy to do but get in her car and follow her own less than wholesome instincts.

“Promise you'll call me the instant you hear anything,” demanded Cindy.

She shut off Lindsay's computer, grabbed her bag and started for the bullpen exit.

Officer Tim Dietz popped up from his chair near the door. The tall, wiry patrolman was assigned to keep both eyes on the reporter, and Dietz took those orders quite seriously.

Jacobi, startled by Cindy's abrupt departure, hollered after her. "Okay, but where are you heading?"

"Stockton," she called back. "I understand Pete enjoyed bad local theater."

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Lindsay felt the rough weave of a blanket under her fingertips and the spongy bounce of thick grass beneath her backside. She took a cautious breath, and the air smelled fresh, like May honeysuckle.

Hesitantly, she opened her eyes, and the beauty of her surroundings nearly stole the air right back from her lungs.

She found herself beneath a cotton candy sky of blue and pink. She sat Indian style on a red and white picnic blanket spread atop a patch of verdant clover which, in turn, grew atop a seaside bluff.

*Seems safe enough,* said her inner voice. *Or benign, at least. Safe ain't even on the table.*

An orange sun dipped low over the ocean, and this western descent gave her a sense of peace and home. That sense of rightness increased manifold when she heard someone call her name.

Behind her, trudging through cool green grass and awkwardly toting a rattan picnic basket, was Cindy Thomas.

"Thanks so much for all the help, lazybones," Cindy said as she dropped the heavy basket onto the blanket. "I am brimming with appreciation. Truly. Watch me brim."

The very sight of Cindy, sulking and barefoot in her pink sundress, made Lindsay too happy to say anything, so she just nodded.

"I make the sandwiches, I drive all the way up here to meet you, I carry the three-ton basket, and what do you do?" the woman continued. She stood at the blanket's edge, groaned dramatically and rolled her shoulders, as if she were Atlas newly shed of the Earth.

"You don't even say thank you. In fact, you don't talk at all! You just sit there, looking vacant and smug. It's like I'm Groucho and you're Harpo."

“I like you better without the mustache,” Lindsay absently noted.

“Oh, she speaks!” Cindy clapped in feigned delight. “Good girl.”

“Ruff,” said Lindsay.

“Ruff, huh?”

Cindy clicked her teeth and took two careful steps forward. She laid a hand on her lover’s head, petted her hair and tickled her ear. Lindsay leaned into her touch and looked up until their eyes met.

A warm sea breeze played against Cindy’s back, ruffling her sunlit hair and clothes. The hem of her pink cotton sundress brushed Lindsay’s bare arm and inspired an outbreak of gooseflesh. They stared at each other for several moments, lost in the simple pleasure of being together, alone, in a beautiful place.

“Well, we’ve already established that you don’t fetch,” the redhead finally said. Her voice had turned softer, now more tease than taunt. “I bet you can roll over and play dead like a champ.”

Lindsay grinned up at her. “Mm-hmm, but that’s not the trick I had in mind.”

A smile flitted across Cindy’s lips, and she prompted elaboration by waving her hand in circles.

By way of reply, Lindsay curled her hands around the backs of Cindy’s knees and gave each a quick, firm squeeze; reflexively, the young woman’s legs folded beneath her, and she landed squarely in Lindsay’s lap.

Cindy flushed deep pink down her neck and chest. Her mouth formed a tight, unreadable line, and her fingers flexed against Lindsay’s shoulders. She looked away toward the western horizon.

“Neat trick,” Cindy said through gritted teeth. “And I thought you were smug before.”

Lindsay shook her head; she didn’t want praise, didn’t want to be thought cool or slick. She wanted and needed something much simpler, and infinitely more tangible. She touched Cindy’s cheek and, with the barest pressure, turned her face until their lips met.

The kiss felt like a slow walk into the ocean – a warm, licking tangle that gradually turned deep enough for drowning. Their arms tightened around each other, cinching their ribs and chests and heartbeats together. Breaths quickened, hands burrowed down the back of a dress, under a t-shirt, and they tilted down to lay side by side.

They paused to regard each other. Cindy traced a fingertip along Lindsay's eyebrow and down the delicate bridge of her nose.

Both laughed softly in embarrassment over how easily this always happened, how it seemed they couldn't be in the same classroom, on the same campus, or even the same coast without falling together in a tight, magnetic smash.

As she kissed Cindy's smile, Lindsay experienced a glimmer of guilt, as if she were essaying something forbidden. She tried to shake it off, but it clung to her thoughts in messy strands, like melted gum on the sole of a shoe.

Outside their embrace, beyond their perfect little world on a red and white blanket, the ambient ocean noises died away. Lindsay heard only soft puffs of breath from her own lungs, and from Cindy's... but that sound diminished until all was silent.

Through the quiet came a distant, sad voice. From somewhere between the pastel clouds and green clover, a crying young man begged for her attention. As soon as Lindsay discerned that voice, her ears pricked up and she focused until she could understand his words.

*"Please, let her wait! Lindsay, please just hear me out," said the man. "After everything we've been through, you owe me that much."*

Compelled and confused, Lindsay pulled away from Cindy and stood up, scanning the skies and keenly listening.

*"I know it's been just you and me, Lindsay and Pete, stuck to each other since high school. I get that you're curious about other things, other people, but what you're doing with this... this girl... it's a mistake," the Pete-voice said. "She doesn't know you like I do. She's not serious about you, and you'll never be able to count on her."*

Cindy frowned and appeared deeply offended. She pointed to the sky and said, "That guy? Totally full of shit."

*"She won't last! It's a fling, and she'll get tired of you and move on," he insisted. "You'll finish your degree in May, but she's in school for three more years! She'll meet someone else, someone younger or with money, and she'll break your heart. You know it's true."*

"Don't listen to him," Cindy calmly advised. "You know who he is, and you know what he's trying to do. Everything he says is a lie."

With effort, Lindsay managed to turn her attention to Cindy. "But he sounds so upset. And it feels true, like I've known him since I was a kid," she said, and tapped her temple. "In here, it all seems true."

Cindy stood and pressed her palm to Lindsay's heart. "In here, you know it's all a lie."

Lindsay shut her eyes and tried to shut out the Pete-voice. "What the hell is he doing to me?"

"Crystal blue persuasion. You saw the I.V. bag, you saw the needle, and you saw the gas, right?"

"Yeah, I... I remember," Lindsay agreed. "The blue stuff. Cigarette gas."

"You shouldn't smoke," Cindy said, and gestured toward the lush clover, the muted sea and sunset beyond the cliff edge.

"You create this lovely hiding place, invite me to keep you company, and Pete comes chasing after you," she went on. "You know what he's doing. He's trying to knock down things you know and build something new from the rubble. Don't let him."

Lindsay eyed her girlfriend skeptically. "Is this the part where you offer me a gun?" she asked.

Cindy snorted and smoothed her hands along the sheer sundress. "Sorry. I left all my boom-sticks at home."

*"I love you. You know I love you like no one else ever will," said the Pete-voice. "You and I were made for each other, and I will never – EVER – give up on you!"*

"Jesus God," Lindsay muttered while vainly trying to plug her ears. "How do I make it stop?"

"Obviously, hiding doesn't work. I think you need to wake up – and stay awake."

Lindsay shook her head dismissively; she didn't see how she could fight off a constant barrage of doping. "He might keep trying until he overdoses me... or gets tired of waiting."

"So beat him at his own game," Cindy suggested. She tilted her head up and close, and whispered in Lindsay's ear. "Lie right back at him."

Upon hearing that eloquently simple suggestion, Lindsay broke out a smile so bright, it could have set paper on fire, or signaled passing jetliners. "You're devious."

"No, you are," Cindy corrected. "What you see before you is merely a figment of your crystal blue imagination."

Lindsay grinned at her steadily, and kissed her cheek. "Still... you're my girl."

“I am that.” Cindy planted a stout kiss on her mouth. “Now you need to shock yourself awake.”

Cindy pointed toward the bluff. In a show of absolute trust, Lindsay turned and took off running. She didn't stop until she cleared the edge and began to fall toward the rocky Pacific surf below.

Her stomach lurched and the wind tore at her eyes. As the ocean boulders roared up to smash her bones, she tried very, very hard not to scream.

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Lindsay didn't scream. She gasped, rather faintly, and her eyes snapped open.

Within the first few seconds, she realized that Pete Raynor didn't know she was awake, and hadn't expected her to regain consciousness so soon.

Lights burned low in the white room. A large flat screen television on a rolling stand loomed at the foot of Lindsay's bed. On the screen, a young man (who could pass for Pete's younger brother) pleaded for another chance to prove his love.

Pete himself sat a few feet to her left, still in the same rigid wooden chair, but he looked exhausted. His cheeks bore stubble and his shirt was wrinkled; his black tie hung loose around his collar, and his tuxedo jacket draped sloppily across the chair back.

With elbows braced on knees, he cupped his chin in one hand and stared at the floor.

Lindsay closed her eyes, steeled her nerves, and took a steadying breath to combat fear and dizziness.

*Showtime.*

“I'm sorry,” she whispered.

Instantly, she heard the creak of Pete's chair. He stood and stepped close beside the bed.

“I'm sorry,” she said again, and readied herself for the touch she knew would be coming. Pete's fingers tickled along her hairline. She heard a clicking sound, and the television switched off.

Lindsay opened her eyes and looked at him, this dashing, lonely psychopath who built castles just so he could burn them down. For perhaps the first time, she really saw him purely in the abstract, a man as a gaping pit of want and need, with sharpened stakes at the bottom.

*He's a trap - a polished, handsome trap, with a barbed wire touch, a tar pit where his heart should be, and an embrace like a straight jacket, she realized.*

*Struggling only makes a snare cinch down tighter. To stand even a beggar's chance of escape, I have to relax into the trap, make it loosen up.*

Lindsay looked to the bed rail and rattled her handcuffs a bit. "Why do I have that on me?"

"You've been sick, honey," Pete smoothly lied. "The restraints keep you from hurting yourself."

"Oh." She slid her hand sideways, covered his fingers, and squeezed.

Pete's eyes widened, from both suspicion and hope.

"Pete, did I... did I hurt you?" she ventured, with just a hint of hesitation.

"It's okay," Pete said, in a voice feather-light and brushed with tears. "I forgive you."

She canted her head and blinked at him. "I don't remember why."

Pete smiled with all his pearly whites on display; he was clearly delighted. "It doesn't matter. Everything will be okay – better than okay – as long as we're together."

Lindsay thought about agreeing with him, just to bolster his confidence, but decided that vomiting all over Pete might just tip her hand.

"I'm hungry," she said instead. "And my back hurts."

"I'll get you something to eat. Would you like to go back to your room now?" Pete asked, while stroking her hand. "You haven't slept there since you got sick."

*I'm not the sick one, Jack. My room? Christ, how long have I been here?*

Lindsay nodded and said, "Yes. Please."

Pete took a bright silver key from his pocket, unlocked her cuffs, and slipped them into his trouser pocket. Lindsay kept her eyes down, but got a good look at the key.

She struggled to sit up in bed, felt weak as a kitten. Pete dropped the rails and helped her onto her feet. With his arm around her shoulders, they shuffled toward the hospital room exit, and Lindsay vowed this would be the last time they touched without violence.

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Marjorie Fein, thin, blonde, and scrupulously maintained at age seventy-two, was the manager and chief patron of the Stockton Playhouse. She hadn't expected anyone to respond to her tip line call, but she was beyond ready to discuss Pete Raynor with the nice SFPD officer and the little red-haired reporter from the Register.

"When you first hear something like this, it's just, like... surreal. You know?" she said.

Cindy nodded and clicked her pen. "Boy, do I know."

"Pete was always so lovely, so generous to the arts – and such a mensch! He got along with the actors, the crew, everybody," said Marjorie. "But then, I guess that's how he evaded detection for so long. Nobody suspects the nice guy who brings donuts and muffins."

"Like Dexter," said Officer Tim Dietz.

As these were the first words he'd spoken for over an hour, Cindy kind of gaped at her cop escort. So did Marjorie Fein.

"Who's Dexter?" she asked.

"Serial killer on TV. He always brings donuts," Dietz explained.

"Oh." Marjorie blew air up through her platinum bangs. "I don't watch television."

"Did Pete ever discuss what business he was doing in this area?" Cindy asked.

"Well, he never really talked to me about anything other than theater business," Marjorie said. "Come to think of it, he mostly avoided all the female crew and the actresses, too. As you can imagine, we are now quite grateful."

"So did Pete hang out with anyone in particular?"

"I know he talked to Kelly a lot, and Bruce, and Harrison. All the crew hands, really. They talked about builder things, I suppose."

And maybe other things, Cindy thought. She asked for their phone numbers, which Marjorie happily supplied.

"You may not be able to reach all of them," she added. "I got a text message letting me know that a few of the boys wouldn't be back until next week. They were heading for a little wine country bender."

“ Like in *Sideways*,” said Officer Dietz.

“Oh, I know that film!” Marjorie crowed. She took Dietz’s arm and began to regale the handsome young cop with recitations of dialogue and various bits of vintner lore.

Cindy stepped outside Marjorie’s office, but she stayed within sight of her escort. The first call she made was to carpenter Bruce DiNallo; it rang sixteen times before Cindy heard a message indicating that Bruce’s message box was full.

“Hmm. Curious.”

She dialed the next number, for set builder Harrison Kohler, and got much the same result.

“Wine country, my ass,” Cindy murmured.

She punched in the final phone number, said a quick prayer, and reached out for help from a young actor named Kelly Unhak.

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### **ACT III**

Pete Raynor considered himself a good method actor.

Under a false name, he once enrolled in an acting workshop taught by Susan Strasberg, and she called him “intensely focused.” She also told him he should complete his post-graduate studies and plan a career away from the footlights, because most actors spend their lives unemployed and scrimping to survive.

Pete innately understood that this made actors, and others involved in the financially fickle entertainment industry, particularly susceptible to cash money persuasion.

Years later, when first he conceived the notion of his own 'dream house,' he imagined not a house in total, but a series of rooms. Each would be designed to evoke a mood or enhance a state of mind – like sets in a play. Who better to help him birth this dream than the experienced, efficient (and cheap) crew members from a struggling local theater company?

For months, he attended terrible productions of Shakespeare, Shaw, and O'Neill, all the while building a rapport with the actors and laborers of the Stockton theater company.

They liked Pete; he spouted flattery and treated them to drinks and dinner whenever he passed through town.

Pete knew people in the industry, people at Fox Reality and The Learning Channel, and he said he could probably get them some work doing dramatization clips, or maybe off-book (non-Union) set construction for above scale pay – provided they would sign confidentiality agreements about any potential projects.

He pitched them a reality show set in a warehouse filled with theme rooms where “celebrities” would attempt to emulate normal, everyday life. They would take out the garbage, cook their own meals, pay bills, and attempt to engage in other scintillating simple activities, all the while being sabotaged by the production team.

Watching them fail would provide the sadistic viewer with hours of dark, warped pleasure – it was bound to be a massive hit.

Pete told them that Gary Busey and Janice Dickinson had already joined the cast, and his producer friend was still trying to boat Perez Hilton.

It sounded disgusting, and completely plausible, so they bit down hard on the bait. Pete even provided them with a rented Ford truck for their tools, and arranged a group cover story about a wine country vacation.

When Bruce and Harrison and Kelly arrived on the job site, they were surprised to see that Pete himself was shooting the dramatization clips, and that Pete - a world-class architect – had designed the sets for this silly show.

Pete explained that without a guaranteed network pick-up, initial costs needed to stay low. He was doing this for fun and as a favor to his buddies – who were all terribly busy in Los Angeles and, sadly, could not visit for a while. The Stockton crew took Pete's cash and bought his story.

Inside a massive warehouse in the middle of nowhere, Pete had laid out plans for a perimeter of rooms parallel to each wall. The building's center would house a master control production room.

The guys expected generic, Wisteria Lane, suburban home-type rooms, but the set designs were fairly specific, some unusually so. One looked like a high school girl's bedroom from the 1980s, another like a sterile hospital room, and another like a posh hotel bridal suite.

The money was excellent, and Pete was his usual charming self, so they kept their mouths shut and their phones off (as per the production company's confidentiality agreements), bunked on site, and worked day and night until the project was complete.

One room had a fake view of the Atlantic Ocean, courtesy of overhead LCD projectors,

complete with 24 hour loops of beach sounds. It was... weird. Still, they didn't complain, and they finished the sets in short order. Amazingly, it only took about a week to rough out all the rooms. Pete said someone else would handle all the finish work and decoration.

The only hiccup occurred when Bruce mislaid a hammer, and Kelly lost his cell phone while rolling out insulation in the warehouse ceiling. His friends tried calling the number, to no avail. Kelly must have left it set on vibrate, he reasoned.

The hammer was no big deal, but no one mentioned the lost phone to Pete, since their confidentiality agreements contained explicit rules about communication while on the work site. After a day or so, it was forgotten and written off as a casualty of the job. No matter, they said. Each man should get paid enough to afford a few dozen phones, plus unlimited data plans.

Pete threw them a wrap party after the final nail was set. They ate heartily and drank deeply, barely noticing when the normally convivial Pete chose to abstain.

He thanked them for their work, toasted them with bottled water, and watched impassively as Bruce and Harrison drank strong table wine containing massive doses of potassium chloride, and suffered agonizing, fatal heart attacks.

The last man standing was Kelly Unhak, a handsome, blond actor of twenty-three years. Young Kelly was spared, for he still had some work to do.

At gunpoint, Pete made the weeping thespian dig two graves and bury the dead.

He made him send text messages to the dead men's families and friends, things like: *hey bb! wine ctry rawks! all going great, c u soon!*

He gave him a script – several melodramatic monologues about young lovers breaking up – and promised that a good performance would ensure mercy.

Kelly Unhak acted his heart out, using his own fear like a true professional. He cried sloppy tears for the camera. He pleaded for the heart of a girl named Lindsay as if he would die without her love.

Pete Raynor considered himself a good method actor. He appreciated how the kid enlivened the monologues by incorporating his own terror.

Out of respect for the craft, when Kelly finished the last scene, Pete applauded. Then he fired three bullets into the actor's heart.

“There's only room in my world for one happy ending,” Pete explained.

Kelly's final facial expression conveyed horrified shock – organically, and right on cue.

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Pete stood just inside the door of the bridal suite, where he soon hoped to become reacquainted with his intended.

Between the soft lighting, luxury bedding, chilled wine and fresh-cut flowers, he believed he had thought of everything.

Lindsay was coming around. Out of all the treatments he'd administered over the last twelve hours, she had woken prematurely only two times. The first time was during her initial treatment, and she rebelled. Her second unplanned awakening, during the sixth treatment, was far more heartening.

Pete remained fixated on that second incident, replaying it over and over in his mind.

*She reached for me. She held my hand...and said my name.*

His joy overwhelmed him, and he lay down on the bed to rest in his simulated hotel room. This room had triple-thick walls and double insulation for maximum quiet. And yet, inside this room where you couldn't hear traffic from the highway, or jets overhead... something was buzzing.

Pete sat bolt upright and listened until he pinpointed the origin of the buzz – overhead, in the ceiling.

He dragged the writing desk beneath the sound, stood atop it and bumped loose one of the drop ceiling tiles. Trapped between the tile and the bottom layer of insulation was a buzzing, glowing cell phone. Pete palmed it and looked at the incoming call number – which he instantly recognized.

Without conscious thought, he tapped the 'answer' button, and silently waited on the line.

*"Hello? Mr. Unhak? Is anyone there?"*

That voice, that goddamned annoying vibrato chirp, sounded to Pete Raynor like a death knell.

*"My name is Cindy Thomas, and I write for the San Francisco Register. I was hoping to talk to you about Pete Raynor."*

"No," Pete said, and disconnected the call. He hurled the phone against the wall and ran from the room.

Like a shot, he was back in the control room and punching up his GPS tracking program. During the last several weeks, he had placed small and relatively inexpensive location devices on a number of vehicles, for it behooved a villain to know where the law dogs (and their bitches) roamed.

Every blinking green dot was right where it should be – clustered around the Bay – except for one. That errant little dot, representing one Cindy Thomas, winked at him from downtown Stockton.

*No. Twenty minutes away. No. She's coming. No. She'll ruin everything.*

“No,” said Pete. He slammed a fist against his chair arm.

“No.” He raced out of the room, down the hall and into Lindsay’s latest cell – a nicely appointed bedroom with yellow walls and pale oak furnishings.

Lindsay looked up in surprise. She remained cuffed to the run line (a steel cable bisecting the room along the ceiling) by one hand and one foot. These were second tier restraints, a concession because Pete thought they were making progress.

And perhaps they were, since Lindsay didn’t appear to be up to anything. In benign confusion, she sat on the bed lazily finger-picking the simple dinner Pete left her – half a roasted chicken and some fries on a Styrofoam plate.

Regardless, Pete still felt threatened by circumstance. “What’s going on?” he demanded. “Do they know where we are?”

Lindsay’s blood went cold; her face froze in what she hoped was a neutral expression. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Does anyone know where we are?” he repeated, louder this time.

“I’m telling you, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lindsay said, and covered a bit. “Explain it to me?”

“No!” Pete shouted, and then held up a placating hand. “Sorry. I’m sorry. It’s just... I wanted us to be alone. If we’re going to make this work again, we need time together, just us, with no distractions.”

He began to pace in front of the open door; beyond him, Lindsay could see a hallway with a cement floor, and another open door leading to a room filled with monitors and computers and –

“You know what? Don’t worry about it,” he said, with a sudden smile. “Enjoy your dinner, honey.”

And with those words, simultaneously innocuous and sinister, he departed.

Lindsay heard the heavy deadbolt throw on the door, heard his swift footsteps racing away down the hall. In the silence that followed, she also picked up something that sounded like a big garage door – steel on rollers – and the ignition of a large engine.

*Someone's looking for us. Local cops, maybe? I don't know how the hell they managed to rattle his cage, but he's moving to head them off. I need to move, too, before he gets back.*

She counted ten, took a deep, slow breath to quiet her thoughts, and urged her hands into action.

She peeled back the skin and meat on the chicken and removed a partially cut wishbone. The thick joint at the top was still intact, and that was the part she needed. If she eyeballed the key and the antique silver cuffs correctly, the bone end and key head should match up almost...

Lindsay slipped the chicken bone into the shiny cuff lock, turned it gently clockwise, and felt a faint click.

*Perfectly.*

She swiftly picked the ankle restraint and left the cuffs dangling from the run cable. The door of dead-bolted oak was not a viable exit, and she didn't waste time on it. Instead, she ripped off the bottom half of a bridal gown she was clearly never meant to wear. She shook out her legs, did a couple of quick stretches, and climbed onto the tall dresser.

She reached overhead and bumped loose one of the drop ceiling tiles. Her hand searched through rough, itchy insulation until she found the edge of a ceiling joist.

*Okay, old bitch. Let's see if you've still got some hops.*

She bent at the knees and jumped high enough to grasp the joist edge, and the rest was a kicking ruckus of legs and bare feet and puffs of pink insulation. It wasn't pretty.

Inspector Lindsay Boxer – heavily drugged, scared half crazy, and wearing the bustier of Emily Hogan's ruined wedding dress – was making a break for it.

*Now if I can just manage to not fall through the ceiling...*

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After a very confused and angry three-block sprint away from the playhouse and back to

her car, Cindy Thomas calmed down enough to attend some basic human functions.

She found a coffee shop ladies' room and freshened up a little. A splash of cold water revived her tired eyes. A few wet towels cleaned sticky flop sweat from her neck and arms.

Cindy addressed herself in the mirror, told herself that panic would get them nowhere. So what if some dumb actor didn't want to talk about Pete? So what if he was rude and abrupt, and apparently didn't care that his buddy was a serial killer and kidnapper and general, all-around human detritus?

"Screw you, Kelly Unhak," Cindy grumbled. "You could have at least said, 'no, thank you.'"

She flung a wet paper towel at the mirror. Lindsay was much better than she at this cool, flip, cavalier stuff. Cindy well and truly wanted to scream, then cry... then have Lindsay walk up behind her and hold her very, very tight, and say that it was all just a bad dream.

The tears were coming – she could feel them burning just below her skin – and she slapped her palm against the cold porcelain sink.

"Keep it together," she told herself, and harshly pushed the tears back down. "You can fall apart once she's home."

Diligent Officer Tim evidently heard noises; he knocked at the bathroom door and asked if she was okay.

Cindy lied that she was fine. She returned to the coffee shop, where she and her escort enjoyed the world's most awkward ten minute diet soda date.

There were no safe topics. Just looking at the little reporter, Dietz could tell that anything he said about Boxer or Raynor would cause her pain. Nothing about the inspector's fate was certain, but the dread was choking-thick and he had to try something.

"I got their addresses," he said. "Those three guys you were calling, I got their addresses."

Cindy squinted at the lanky, sort of cute copper. "Mrs. Fein said she didn't have them."

"Guess she lied," Dietz offered with a shrug. "She gave me her phone number, too. She needs a life drawing model."

Cindy grimaced and looked away. "You know what that is, right?"

"Naked posing stuff?"

"Yeah. Naked posing stuff."

Dietz shrugged again. “It’d be worth it, if we find Raynor at one of these addresses.”

Cindy dropped a ten on the table and they stood to leave. “It certainly would.”

A block from Cindy’s car, they passed a vacant storefront bordering an alley.

Pete Raynor emerged from that alley, grabbed Tim Dietz by the hair, and pushed an eight inch hunting knife through his throat.

One heartbeat later, he fired a barbed tranquilizer dart into Cindy Thomas’ back; she dropped before her breath became a scream.

He dragged a stumbling Dietz around the alley corner and left him propped against the wall, choking on his own blood.

He hoisted Cindy over a shoulder, laid her in the truck bed and covered her with a heavy tarp.

Pete Raynor was on his way out of Stockton, a mere thirty seconds after the attack began.

He turned on the CD player and tapped the steering wheel, drumming along with Def Leppard.

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## **ACT IV**

Jacobi was down in the morgue office, conferring with Claire and Jill about their progress – or, more specifically, their cumulative lack of progress.

“I’ve gone over Officer King’s body twice. There’s no trace evidence on him, and nothing on his cruiser,” Claire said. “Best guess is that Raynor simply walked up to the car and fired through the car’s open side window, then went right up to the apartment.”

Jill nodded and chewed her bottom lip. “Did you run Martha’s blood samples again?”

“I did, but Dr. Pam was right. Martha was given a heavy dose of Diazepam, enough to cause unconsciousness, impair heartbeat and breathing, and eventually kill her.”

Claire sighed and leaned back in her desk chair and stretched her tired, aching arms. She saw her own exhaustion mirrored on the faces of her friends. Since leaving the animal

hospital last night, she and Jill hadn't set foot outside the Hall.

Warren Jacobi had made a few runs with Maggie Snow, checking possible leads, but most of his time was spent manning the phones and waiting for other departments to call back. Claire knew it was driving him crazy.

“Oregon M.E. hasn't called back yet?” she inquired.

He grumbled and shook his head. “Guess they're not as fast as you.”

“Few are,” agreed Claire. She tried to smile, but her face couldn't quite pull it off. Her lips twitched a little, and she awkwardly wiped her mouth with a tissue.

“We might have a few new properties to scout,” Jill announced. “The IRS guys found a hiccup in the property tax records for one of Pete's building suppliers. Waterman Materials went out of business two years ago, and someone started paying the taxes with money orders.”

Claire scrunched her brows. “And that means what?”

“After the real estate market crashed, some companies sold off assets for cash so they could keep the money and avoid paying creditors. Maybe a third party – like Pete – took over Waterman’s physical locations on the cheap. Trouble is, we can't find any title transfers. Maybe they never made it official.”

Jacobi hopped from his seat, already feeling the itch to jump in the car and speed off somewhere. “What kind of locations are we talking about?”

“Seven lumber and plumbing warehouses, spread between San Diego and Eureka,” Jill answered. “But we can't get search warrants without proof that Pete was the mystery buyer or taxpayer.”

“Christ Jesus,” Jacobi muttered.

“Treasury agents are going through the old photostatic payment records as quickly as they can,” Jill promised. “If we can get a partial handwriting match from the money orders, that might work.”

He jammed his hands into his pants pockets and started pacing the floor. “We don't have time for this! Isn't there anything – right now – that you can use as grounds?”

Jill shut her eyes and inhaled slowly, trying very hard to not to feel as if Jacobi was blaming her personally for the infuriatingly slow grind of bureaucracy.

“No, I don't,” she answered. “I'd say we're lucky to have found even a possible link between Pete and these properties. In case you haven't noticed, he doesn't like leaving

clues.”

Jacobi turned on Jill with a menacing glare. “In case you haven't noticed, counselor, Pete murdered another cop and kidnapped Lindsay. Unless we find her soon, you know he's going to -”

“Stop right there!” Claire shouted. She snatched up her heavy office phone base and growled through clenched teeth. “If you so much as whisper those words in my presence, Warren Jacobi, I swear to God that I will throw my phone at you.”

Jill palmed her much smaller cell phone and cocked her arm. “Me, too. With the phone throwing.”

Faced with these threats, the veteran policeman shrank back and nodded his surrender. Jacobi took his own phone from his pocket and tapped it against his head.

“I know,” he said softly. “We can't afford to go there.”

“We're all worried for Lindsay, but let's bear in mind that she has a few things going for her that none of Pete's other victims had,” Claire began. “First of all, Pete is obsessed with her, so whatever he has planned, it will take time. Secondly, thousands of law enforcement officers are on the lookout for their faces. Third – and most important of all – Lindsay is not going to make this easy for him.”

“She'll fight,” Jill agreed, nodding quickly. “She'll try to buy us more time.”

“And something will turn up,” added Jacobi, just before his phone rang. He answered, turned on the speakerphone, and Maggie Snow's voice blared through the morgue office.

“Oregon just called with a name for that body found in Coos Bay,” she said. “Kelly Unhak, twenty-three years of age, resident of Stockton, California. No distinguishing marks, except for a little comedy/tragedy mask tattooed on his rear.”

Jacobi inhaled sharply, and his eyes went wide. “Like theater people... shit. Shit!”

Jill and Claire both perked up and waited for an explanation, but Jacobi was already hanging up on Snow and calling the cell of Officer Tim Dietz. After six rings, the call went to voicemail.

“Dietz! This is Inspector Jacobi! Secure Miss Thomas and get her back to the Hall immediately – and I don't care if you have to drag her kicking and screaming. Cuff her if you have to,” he ordered.

“What the hell is going on?” Jill demanded.

“Cindy's in the middle of something,” Claire guessed. “Again.”

Jacobi snapped his phone shut and hit the expository high points. “A tip line call came in about Pete frequenting a little playhouse in Stockton. Cindy and Dietz went up there this morning.”

“Have you heard from them since?” asked Claire.

“Once, around noon; Dietz said they were going to talk with the theater manager.”

While they talked, Jill dialed Cindy's cell; that call, too, went to voicemail.

“She's not picking up,” Jill shakily announced. “Cindy, you... idiot.”

Warren was already headed for the elevator. “I'll tell Tom. We'll contact Stockton, and get state cars on the roads up there.”

Claire reached for Jill's hand and squeezed it tightly. “It's only been a couple of hours since she called in, right?”

Jill thumbed a tear from her eye. “Right.”

“How much trouble could Cindy find in two hours?”

As soon as she spoke the words, Claire regretted them, because they both knew the answer to that question.

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In the ceiling, Lindsay moved with great care. A thick pad of fiberglass insulation lay atop the drop ceiling tiles, which she knew could not support her weight. Instead, she sprawled across the grid of solid wood joists and began a spider crawl through the dark.

Her toes curled against one joist while her fingers scrabbled for the next hold. She imagined herself climbing a very large ladder while lying flat on the ground.

The air was stifling hot, and the temperature easily exceeded ninety degrees. Within minutes, the stiff dress bustier grew damp and clung to her torso like a second skin.

As she moved, the rungs (boards) pressed into her ribs. They felt solid and real – almost safe – and she wondered how long she could survive living up here in the ceiling.

“Three days without water, seven without food,” she whispered. “Pete would find you

long before then, dumbass. Keep moving.”

And she did just that. Deliberate and determined, she crawled through the dark in the ceiling of a murderer’s playhouse. After a few minutes, her eyes acclimated to the low light. She searched for the slope of a roof, but found no sign of a structure anywhere near her head.

Plainly, she had room enough to stand up, but she still felt a little wobbly and didn't want to risk losing her balance and crashing through the ceiling. Even if she escaped the fall uninjured, she would lose valuable time. She needed to find a way out of this madhouse, and fast.

The only way to do that was to keep moving, so she crawled forward through the black until her hands encountered an obstacle – a cool, thin wall of pressed steel, rippled with seams and fastened with grooved nails which could not be dislodged by hand.

*Must be the outside wall.*

She stayed close to it, using it as a guide and a brace.

Every few feet, it seemed that her hands or knees or feet were getting snagged by cables and wiring, and it was seriously pissing her off. The next time it happened, she grabbed for the wire and yanked hard; a ceiling tile popped loose, and the sudden influx of light from the room below drew her attention.

She blinked and peered down into the room, and got smacked by a major rush of déjà vu. The paisley comforter and the ragged blue throw rug, the brass bed and the rickety Sauder desk, even the watery green paint on the walls – all were perfectly replicated details from her childhood bedroom. There was even a Def Leppard band poster on the wall. She noticed that drummer Rick Allen still had his left arm.

She shut her eyes and felt woozy as her mind choked up a recently ingested memory of Pete lying beside her on that ragged blue rug as Leppard’s “Rock of Ages” roared from her stereo. She could almost feel the music vibrating the floor beneath her back, could almost feel the warm press of Pete’s hip against her thin adolescent thigh...

*Stop it. Not real. Never happened. Move on. Just keep moving.*

She dropped the tile and crawled sideways, trying to put some distance between her and the disturbing, implanted memory. She wondered how many more little experiential land mines Pete had planted in her mind, and then decided that now was not the best time to fret about it.

In the sidelong scramble, her hand pressed down on something plastic and mushy. It felt kind of like a garden hose, and she pulled it close to her face for inspection.

The tube, about two inches in diameter, was clear and empty. The open end was fastened to the air vent above her simulated childhood bedroom.

“Gas?” she wondered aloud. “Been gassing me, too? Jesus...”

In a brief fit of pique, Lindsay tore loose the clear tube and flung the end off into the darkness. She tried again to crawl away, only to find her foot snared by yet another wire. Again, she grabbed for it, and again it came free. She brought the broken end close to her face.

*Coaxial cable. Asshole probably has the whole place wired for video and sound. Asshole. Sick, voyeuristic, blood-soaked, life-eating sonofabitch!*

In her anger, Lindsay found some small measure of strength. With that strength, she fed her anger. The more she thought about Pete watching her every move and every breath for hours on end, the more intense this feedback loop became.

Before she had a chance to really think it through and calm down, Lindsay was skittering across the ceiling joists, ripping out every wire she could find. Thin wires, thick cables, tubes with plastic or foam insulation – it made no difference – all she found, she destroyed. And, for a few brief moments, it made her feel good.

Then she found something that made her feel even better. Behind a mass of rent wiring, trapped between a joist and the steel outer wall, she found a hammer.

Lindsay balanced on her knees and grasped the fiberglass handle in two fists. She waved the hammer to and fro, getting a feel for the heft of the cold steel head.

She imagined swinging the claw at Pete Raynor and ripping out his throat.

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Maggie Snow came tearing into the morgue office like her hair was on fire. Jill rocketed up from the couch and Claire from her desk. They both started asking for information at maximum volume, and Maggie had to repeat herself twice before they could understand her.

“Verizon just confirmed activity on a flagged cell phone,” Snow explained again.

Jill balled her fingers into a fist. “Is it Lindsay?”

“Or Cindy?” Claire asked.

Snow wrinkled her forehead. “Cindy’s missing?”

“Maybe, or she might just be scaring us for no damn good reason,” Claire huffed. “About the phone?”

“Maybe twenty minutes ago, someone tried to call Kelly Unhak,” Snow explained.

Jill groaned and rolled her eyes. “Since he’s in an Oregon morgue, I’m assuming he didn’t answer.”

“Well, someone did. Unhak’s phone took a call, less than a minute in duration, from another California service customer,” Snow explained. “Guess the caller didn’t know he was dead.”

Snow flipped open her notepad and recited the phone number which originated the call; she didn’t have a name yet, because Verizon was being cagey about customer privacy. As it turned out, she didn’t need their help. Jill and Claire yelled the answer in unison.

“That’s Cindy’s number!”

Maggie’s eyes bulged. She pinched the bridge of her nose, exasperated. “I swear, you people...”

“Is Unhak’s phone still transmitting?” Jill asked.

“Yeah, from outside Lodi.”

Claire gasped and covered her mouth. “Dear Lord. That’s only twenty minutes from Stockton.”

“Waterman Materials had a warehouse in Lodi,” Jill added. “This means something.”

“State police and sheriff’s deputies are moving in to check the area,” Snow said.

Jill was already grabbing her purse and preparing to light out; Claire was half a second behind her. They slammed through the morgue doors, leaving the inspector nonplussed and alone.

After a beat, Jill ducked her head back in. “Maggie? Are you coming or not?”

Snow shuddered a bit. “To Lodi?”

“To find our friends,” Jill clarified, and promptly vanished again.

“One for all, all for one,” Snow muttered, and lit out after Jill.

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After crawling for what seemed like an hour – actually making a near complete circuit of the building – Lindsay finally located a chink in the steel sheeting, a spot where the seam joints buckled out beneath her fingers. A sliver of sunlight came through between the steel and wood. She wedged the hammer claw into the tiny opening at the base of the sheeting and, after several tries, managed to pry up the corner.

Eagerly, she ducked her head down and peered through the six inch gap.

She could see a field of dirt and scrub plants, surrounded by a chain link fence, stacks of old tires, and a rusted out cargo trailer with a large faded logo on the side.

“Waterman Materials,” she read aloud, but the name rang no bells.

Below the business logo were the words “San Diego to Eureka – we deliver!”

Upon reading this, Lindsay realized that she was likely not on the east coast, but still in California. She also realized that people she loved, people who were probably trying very hard to find her, might be much closer than she thought.

She attacked the steel siding gap with renewed vigor, and nearly doubled it by the time she heard the sickening sound of tires squealing on a nearby road or driveway.

*Maybe it's not him, maybe it's the police, or the feds, or -*

That hope died with the sound of a heavy garage door lifting on rollers. She knew that law enforcement would have surrounded the building before attempting entry. She knew that Pete was back.

Fast as she could, Lindsay dug the hammer under the siding and pried loose two more nails. The gap looked wide enough to accommodate her legs and hips. She peeked out again and judged that she was no more than twelve feet above the weedy ground.

*I can make that. I can make that, roll and run like hell. I can make it.*

In the rooms below, she heard the slamming of doors and the frantic beat of footsteps as Pete raced around searching for her.

He shouted her name from the adjacent room. He was so close.

Lindsay knew she had to go and go now. If she didn't, Pete would catch her and drug her and break her mind. Eventually, he would kill her.

She tucked her feet beneath the curled metal edge, slipped her legs outside, and felt fresh

air kissing her skin.

“Lindsay,” Pete called – now from directly beneath her. “I can hear you. You should come down now.”

Clinging tightly to the hammer, her only weapon, she eased her hips over the board and through the gap. Fully half of her body was dangling outside the building.

“Someone else was looking for you. Come down here, right now, and I’ll let her live,” he said.

Lindsay froze and prayed that he was lying. She hungered to escape, to jump down from this prison wall and run until her heart popped.

She knew it was entirely possible that Pete had captured some unlucky police officer who was searching the area, and brought them back as a hostage for additional leverage.

“Come down!” Pete shouted. “Or I swear to you, I will kill her.”

Lindsay heard scuffling below, followed by a woman’s faint moans. Dear God, how she wanted to run away... but she couldn’t do it. Beneath honor and ethics and above her numbing fear, Lindsay’s soul simply would not allow her to flee for safety, leaving another to suffer and die in her stead.

“Okay,” she called out. Her voice broke; she felt doomed and robbed, bankrupt of hope.

She drew her legs inside and pried up the closest ceiling tile. Shaking and fumbling, she dropped down into the room – the replica of her teen sanctuary – and stood before Pete with the hammer clenched in her fist.

Lindsay wanted to stand tall and glare at him, to feign courage in the face of defeat, but a soft moan from the other side of the bed drew her attention. She turned to check on Pete’s new hostage, and saw Cindy Thomas crumpled against the wall.

A sound escaped her mouth, a cross between a sob and a growl, and the hammer slipped from her grasp. Without thought or hesitation, Lindsay rounded the bed and knelt beside Cindy. She checked her pulse and scanned her body for blood or signs of injury.

“I didn’t hurt her,” Pete said, sounding resentful that Lindsay had assumed otherwise.

He stood by the door holding plastic zip cuffs and two thick steel cable locks of the type used to secure bikes and motorcycles. Tucked inside his belt was a slim black pistol.

Cindy moaned; she was beginning to wake up. Lindsay dreaded the moment when Cindy realized where she was and understood their situation. She turned to Pete, fully prepared to grovel and beg on her knees, to promise him total supplication in exchange for mercy.

Pete cut her off with a shake of his head. “No one is leaving. We can all play nice.”

He tossed over two zip cuffs and a cable lock, and pointed toward a seemingly random eye bolt protruding from the wall.

“Cuff her feet and hands. Loop the cable through the bolt, through the hand cuffs, then lock it,” Pete instructed. “And don’t worry about twisting those butterfly bolts loose – they’re fastened through the wall studs.”

Numbly, Lindsay did as she was told. As she snapped the cable lock shut, Cindy’s eyes fluttered open. The moment she saw Lindsay, sweaty and filthy in a tattered white gown, she began to cry.

Lindsay smiled at her and made a bare shushing sound. She wanted to say something kind, something reassuring, but her muddled mind would not cooperate.

“Your turn,” Pete said. With the barrel of his tranquilizer pistol, he motioned Lindsay across the room and made her repeat the cuff and cable procedure on herself.

He glanced up through the ceiling, saw the breach in the outer steel wall, and clicked his tongue.

“Such tenacity!” he proudly exclaimed. “One of many admirable qualities I will gladly demolish in order to raise up the perfect bride.”

“Drop dead, asshole,” Lindsay said, with no ambiguity.

“Guess I’ll have to buy you a new wedding dress.” Pete snickered and gave her a haughty smirk. “I never liked that one, anyway.”

He stepped out and locked the door behind him.

At the top of her rusty voice, Lindsay cursed Pete Raynor with everything she had, spitting venom and cruelty, damning him to the fires of hell, until her breath ran out and she slumped over in a pile of scraped, filthy limbs and shredded silk.

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In the hallway, Pete tried to pretend he didn’t hear Lindsay’s curses. He fastened both hands over his ears and waited for her to stop screaming, to stop fighting him.

Everything would be so much better if only she would stop fighting him, if only she would submit to his indomitable will and cease this futile struggle.

With his spirits flagging, Pete sat down in the control room and pulled up the video feed from the bedroom.

He looked at Lindsay and felt some slight compassion for her woeful physical state, even though he knew it was her own fault.

For the life of him, Pete didn't understand where she got the energy to fight through the drugs, devise an escape, and remain angry enough to bless him with a demon's tongue. He hadn't a clue what could fuel such passionate resistance.

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Cindy Thomas stared at a Def Leppard poster tacked to the wall. She glanced down at her shoes, up at her bound hands, then on toward the ceiling and the thwarted escape route. Funny that after so many prayers to see Lindsay Boxer's face again, she couldn't bring herself to -

"Please look at me," Lindsay softly asked.

Tears sprang to Cindy's eyes, and she furiously blinked them back. "I can't."

"Please."

Cindy sniffled and shook her head. "I'm such an idiot. You must hate me. I mean, you were nearly out the door!"

Even if that were true, Lindsay couldn't stand hearing the guilt and anguish in Cindy's voice. She had no formal acting training, but when circumstances called for it, she could lie with her whole heart.

"I wouldn't have made it. With all the drugs in my system, I'd have dropped face-first on the driveway," she said, despite knowing the adrenaline in her system would have probably kept her running for a mile or more.

"Come on. How can you know that?"

"Admittedly, I lack even prima facie evidence," Lindsay lightly agreed. "I'm just assuming there's a driveway."

"Don't joke! Jesus, please don't try to make me feel better!" Cindy barked. "You'd be free if it wasn't for me. Now we're probably both going to -"

“I love you.”

Cindy stopped speaking so quickly, she almost bit her tongue. Her head jerked up and she gaped, utterly dumbfounded, at Lindsay.

“Are you mental?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lindsay confirmed. “And I’m doped up, covered in smut and fiberglass, wearing the worst wedding dress ever, and I’m pretty close to terrified. I do hate that you’re here in the middle of this freak show, but I can’t hate you for trying to help me. It’s who you are – a damn good reporter, a better friend, and maybe the best girlfriend who ever drew breath.”

With those words, all the tears Cindy had struggled to restrain broke loose and coursed down her cheeks. She made a small choking sound, and wiped her eyes on her sleeves.

“Maybe?” she petulantly quipped.

“Definitely. No matter what happens, you better know that I love you,” Lindsay repeated, “and if this goddamn cable was a little longer, I’d crawl over there and kiss the daylights out of you.”

Cindy’s breath caught in her throat. She yanked on her restraints, stretching her arms and wrists and the zip cuffs as far as they would go, just to scoot a few precious inches closer.

Almost frantically, Lindsay did the same, but they were still too far apart to even hold hands. Desperate for some bare instant of contact, she laid flat on her back and stretched out her legs until her filthy, itchy toes grazed Cindy’s heel. Cindy pushed off her shoe and pressed the soles of their bare feet together.

They both sighed at the touch, the grubby skin to skin reminder that they would not face danger, or even death, without having known love. Mutual, stupid, fearless love, the want of which sometimes drove men mad.

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Seated before a large HD monitor, Pete Raynor watched this mute scene unfold.

He couldn’t hear the women speaking. Evidently, during her escape attempt, Lindsay had somehow cut the audio feed to several rooms.

Had he been able to hear their words, it would have made no difference. Like a trained parrot, he could repeat phrases of great beauty and never comprehend or experience the emotions which inspired them.

Reaching up, Pete stroked his fingertips over the cool monitor screen. He gently touched Lindsay's face as she smiled and cried and found joy in her darkest hour.

Pete Raynor had always known what love should look like. He could envision and create perfect scenarios in high definition detail, but he couldn't climb through the screen and build a home within his fantasies.

He wondered for a moment if he could find contentment simply observing that kind of connection, living vicariously through their messy, foolish love...

Lindsay said something then, and wiggled her toes against her lover's instep. Cindy laughed.

Pete roared and smashed the scene with his fist, cracking the monitor and cutting his hand in the process.

His other hand raced toward a recessed red button, the trigger for his final solution – a flood of cyanide gas through the air vents of every room save the control room – but his fingers curled into a knot. He wasn't ready to let her go. Not yet.

He couldn't stand to watch them together, yet he couldn't seem to look away. Pete just wanted them to be quiet and still until he decided what to do next. He keyed in access to the bedroom's environmental controls, and triggered a release of homemade knock-out vapor – a halothane/fentanyl cocktail popular with Russian commando units.

He slid from his chair, cradling his bleeding fist. Pete Raynor was well-aware that no one gave a damn for his pain; he suffered alone, and no one would be coming to rescue him or give him comfort. The sadness of that realization was so sharp that he almost felt a moment of empathy for his many victims.

Almost.

In the humming warmth of his electronic nest, Pete curled into a fetal ball on the floor and squeezed his eyes shut, determined not to move until sleep claimed him.

Truthfully, he craved not the oblivion of sleep, but entrance to the realm of dreams. There, he was king. There, she was queen.

In his dreams, love bent to the king's will; his methods of persuasion were effective and flawless, and his narrative became law.

In the waking world, love seemed to him a whispered riddle with an answer forever withheld. Fantasy and death were poor methods for deciphering the riddle, but Pete had long believed they were his best bet.

He would likely revert to old habits in dealing with the dissolution of his fondest fantasy, but he wished for a visionary dream, and a better solution.

He fell asleep hard and fast – too fast – no doubt due to the cloud of sleeping gas settling around him. Heavy halothane/fentanyl vapor seeped down through cracks between the control room ceiling tiles, courtesy of a hastily and accidentally re-routed two-inch plastic tube. He went under without a fight or a cry.

Pete Raynor couldn't hear the approaching sirens of overzealous sheriff's deputies; he was lost in his own twisted dream of the world, ironically chained to a dark sleep by the woman he sought to enslave.

In an adjacent room, lashed to a forgery of her childhood bed, Lindsay Boxer heard the sirens.

Cindy Thomas heard them, too. She had the good sense to be frightened.

They both looked at the bedroom door and waited for Pete to come crashing through, bearing blades and bullets, spewing desperate rage.

The door remained closed. Seconds mounted up, amassing ten and twenty and more.

Lindsay turned her eyes toward Cindy. She was not tearful, and her voice did not shake.

“No matter what,” she said.

Cindy met her eyes and nodded. “No matter what.”

END