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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

PROLOGUE

One

Cindy Thomas was working at the dining table she'd bought at a tag sale down the block. It was cherrywood, round, with a hinged leaf and the letters *SN* etched near the hinge. She traced the initials with her finger, imagining that the person who'd left that mark was also a journalist suffering from writer's block—and Cindy was as blocked as a writer could be.

Her full-time job was as senior crime reporter at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. She'd been covering the violent murders of a killer unknown. And then, at the end of his crime spree, caught by the police, this unrepentant serial monster had asked her to write the story of his life. And that's what she was doing—trying to do—now. It would be easy for her agent to sell this idea for a true-crime thriller about Evan Burke. He was a savage and highly successful at getting away with his kills. According to him, he was the most prolific killer of the century, and Cindy didn't doubt him.

She had no shortage of quotable and illustrated research.

Because Burke wanted Cindy's book to secure his place in criminal history, he had provided her with notebooks, as well as photos of his victims, alive and dead. He'd given her his maps to his victims' graves, which, when opened by homicide cops, had turned up bones, clothing, and other evidence of Burke's crimes. He'd been convicted of six murders, which in his mind was insufficient, but the prosecution was plenty happy.

Right now Burke was in solitary confinement at San Quentin State Prison, in the maximum-security wing. And at the same time, he was inside Cindy's head night and day. Thoughts of Burke's victims—what he'd done to those young women—never left her. She wasn't getting enough sleep and the writing she had done so far showed it.

Henry Tyler, Cindy's boss and mentor, and publisher of the *Chronicle*, had said to her, "This book is your big shot. Take it." And he'd given her two days off a week with pay so she could work on the book at home. Home was the small three-room apartment she shared with her fiancé, Rich Conklin, a homicide inspector who'd been a key member of the team that had captured Evan Burke.

Rich was giving her total support. He did the laundry. He read her pages for accuracy. He consoled her when the bloody murders made her cry. And since Cindy had commandeered the dining table for her book-in-progress, Rich had taken to eating his breakfast over the kitchen sink.

It was incredible to have Rich backing her up, but in a big way, he couldn't help her. It felt to Cindy as though her brain had jammed on the brakes—and it wasn't all about Evan Burke.

Outside, in real time, the city she loved had been divided by a restrictive new gun law that had sparked violence among the citizens of San Francisco. Lindsay Boxer, Cindy's closest friend and Richie's partner, had gotten burned while upholding this law.

Lindsay had recently been benched for an indeterminate time while an officer-involved shooting she'd been part of was investigated. There was no telling if the city would side with her and return her gun, badge, and police authority, or make her an example to help the mayor.

Cindy felt sick for Lindsay. And in trying to help her, she had only made things worse.

Two

Cindy closed her laptop and shoved it aside, making room on the table for her crossed arms. She put her head down, thinking again about her call to Lindsay last night. When Cindy had asked how she was feeling, Lindsay had lied, saying, “I’m fine. I’m not worried, so don’t you worry, either.”

But Cindy *was* worried that Lindsay was being made a target for upholding this new law, even though anyone in Lindsay’s place would have taken the same shot.

Cindy had written about the incident in her crime blog, sure that support would pour in. That hadn’t happened. So many crazed and furious readers had jammed her inbox that Henry Tyler had called her on her cell phone, sounding upset. Raising his voice, which he almost never did with her.

“You’re looking for trouble,” Tyler had said. “Stay out of this.”

“What, Henry? It’s no different than what I write every day.”

He’d made himself perfectly clear. Her half-page blog post had thrown gas on the fire caused by the new gun laws in effect in San Francisco and other large cities across the country.

A national resistance movement was mobilizing.

They were calling themselves Defenders of the Second, and their motto was “We will not comply.”

Tyler had ended his tirade, saying, “Full pay while you write your book, Cindy. It’s a gift. Until it’s done, you’re off Crime and on the Weekend section. Now go. Write.”

Cindy hadn’t cried, but she’d wanted to. Henry was right. She’d missed the big picture and made the blog post personal.

Just then her phone rang again. She grabbed it from the dining room table and said, “Hello?”

A man’s voice shouted into her ear, “My gun is my business. Read the Consti—”

Cindy clicked off. *How did the bastard get my cell phone number?*

She had to go out. Somewhere. She dressed quickly in jeans, a cardigan, running shoes, and Richie’s leather flight jacket. She checked that the stove was off, fluffed her hair, and closed the curtains. Last, she stuffed her laptop into her backpack along with her police scanner and dropped her phone into her pocket.

Cindy headed out, walking east on Kirkham, squinting into the morning sunshine. At the end of the block, she turned north toward Golden Gate Park. There was a bakery called Sweets down the street, and she had an idea to bring fresh-brewed Sumatran coffee and cookies to Lindsay. Being together, commiserating, could cheer them both up.

Cindy texted for an Uber to pick her up at Sweets, on the corner of Twenty-Fourth Avenue and Irving Street, then drive her to Lake Street to see Lindsay. The bakery was in sight when a black sedan pulled up to the curb.

“Ms. Thomas?”

“Right. Give me a second, will you? I’ll be quick.”

The driver called out, “There’s no parking here.”

“Five seconds.”

Cindy turned her back on the driver as he drove at walking speed behind her. He called her name again. She turned, impatient now, and was surprised to see three men, boys really, get out of the car.

“What’s the matter? Look, forget it...,” she said to the one who had been driving. The words were just out of her mouth when she saw a gun in the driver’s hands. She looked into his eyes as he growled at her, “Get in the car, bitch. We need to talk to you about your friend Lindsay Boxer. This is on her.”

Shocked by the threat, Cindy yelled loudly, “Get away from me.”

She was reaching for her phone when a fist came at her and slammed into her face. There was a split second of sharp pain, but the lights were out, and Cindy went down.