



So Lethal

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Category: Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

Description: FBI Special Agent Faith Bold doesn't believe she can ever return to the force after the trauma she's been through. Suffering from past demons, she feels unfit for duty and content to retire—until Turk walks into her life.

Turk, a former Marine Corps dog, wounded in battle, suffers from his own demons. But he never lets it show as he gives everything to Faith to get her back on her feet.

Each are slow to warm up to each other, but when they do, they are inseparable. Each is equally determined to hunt down the demons chasing them, whatever the cost, and to watch each other's backs—even at the risk of their own life.

A page-turning and harrowing crime thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured FBI agent, the Faith Bold series is a riveting mystery, packed with non-stop action, suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night. Fans of Rachel Caine, Teresa Driscoll and Robert Dugoni are sure to fall in love.

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PROLOGUE

Monica Smith had been born completely deaf. She'd never once heard a sound. She could "feel" sound waves on certain occasions: the rumble of an approaching train, the pounding of music through an amplifier, and the thump of the dumpster as the garbage truck set it back on the ground. She had never actually heard sound, though, and the softer, more beautiful sounds of the world were a complete mystery to her.

But if her hearing was impaired, her sight was extraordinary. From a young age, she could perceive subtle nuances in light and color that others couldn't. Her mother told her that she had always been drawing from the time she could pick up a crayon.

Nowadays, crayons were reserved for semiannual visits to her niece in Boise. Monica's tools of the trade were almost completely digital, but she still reserved a few hours every Saturday to compose with oils and watercolors, or to sketch with pencils.

And she was—in her humble opinion—a damned good artist. Not just her opinion, though. Monica's Design Studio was the most successful independent graphic design studio in San Jose and the second most successful in the Bay Area.

Best of all, she had built that business herself. From the ground up. Not a single loan, not a single financial stake paid to anyone else, not even a handout from her parents. They were completely supportive and would have given her anything she needed, but she really wanted to do it herself, just to silence the tiny little whisper in her head that still insisted she was less than because of her disability. This studio was her studio. No one else's.

Sure, there had been a few weeks eating ramen and white bread with butter for all three meals, but she had pushed through that. Now, she could afford wheat bread and peanut butter.

She giggled at that thought. She couldn't hear her laugh, but she could feel the spasms of her throat muscles.

Actually, she could feel something else too. Some low rumbling under her feet. She frowned. The waste management company picked up the trash on Tuesday mornings. This was Monday night. Late Monday night.

The rumbling grew "louder," and Monica got to her feet. It was an odd and strangely alluring sound. It reminded Monica of the day she visited the Port of San Francisco as a child. A massive cargo ship was testing its engines prior to being tugged out to sea. The deep rumble of the diesel was powerful enough to send vibrations that reached from the water to the dock and travel up her feet.

This wasn't a cargo ship, though. She lived two miles from the nearest beach and farther from the nearest port.

She got to her feet and followed the sound. She felt the slightest touch of misgiving as her mind warned her of some unseen danger, but she pushed it aside. What danger could there be on her own property in a secured lot protected by patrolling safety officers?

She stepped outside, and the rumble increased in intensity. She was so transfixed by the noise that she didn't register the approach of the figure to her right.

She felt the cord wrap around her neck, though. Before she could react, her airway was cut off. She might have cried out, but she wouldn't have been able to hear it if she did.

CHAPTER ONE

Special Agent Faith Bold took a deep breath and looked at the impressionist landscape of San Francisco Bay that sat on the room's bookcase. That allowed her to avoid Dr. Keraya's eyes. "So I messed up."

As always, Dr. Keraya waited three seconds before replying in her buttery-smooth voice, "How so?"

"You remember I told you that my partner and I decided to publish the letters that Dr. West's fangirl wrote to him?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, it's not working. No one's coming forward. What's happening instead is that West is once more a celebrity, and I'm once more in the hot seat with the Bureau."

Dr. Franklin West was Faith's first therapist. He would have been her best therapist had he not also turned out to be the Copycat Killer, a prolific serial killer and the self-proclaimed disciple of the original Donkey Killer, Jethro Trammell, most famous for having killed Faith's friend and mentor Jack Preston and nearly Faith as well. After a grueling manhunt, West had finally been kidnapped and was currently on trial for thirty-two confirmed murders.

But of course, his reign of terror had inspired another copycat, the seemingly even more deranged Messenger Killer, whose "letters" to Faith consisted of horrifically mutilated corpses and messages written in blood. The Bureau—and Faith herself—now believed that the Messenger was female and a hybristophile obsessed with West.

She had killed three people so far, among them Faith's boss and one of the most

celebrated agents in Bureau history, SAC Grant Monroe. Faith was trying desperately to lure her out into the open so she couldn't kill anyone else.

“But she hasn't killed anyone else, has she?”

Dr. Keraya's question was so in tune with Faith's own thoughts that Faith had to take a moment to process the question. “No, she hasn't.”

“Then you haven't been entirely unsuccessful, have you?”

Faith cracked a smile. “No, I suppose not.” Her smile disappeared a moment later. “But she will. She's only laying low until people move on. Once everyone's looking the other way, she'll strike again.”

Dr. Keraya leaned forward in her chair. “I notice also that you said it was yours and your partner's idea, yet you said only that you messed up. Why is that?”

Faith stifled the urge to roll her eyes. She really wasn't good at therapy. It irritated her how therapists had to poke and prod at everything you said. That conversation somehow always led back to the conclusion that Faith disliked herself in some way.

“My mistake was allowing Michael to pursue an idea that I knew wouldn't work.”

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“But it has worked. The Messenger Killer is no longer murdering people. Or do you believe there is another reason for that?”

“No, the public exposure is probably the greatest contributing factor,” Faith admitted, a little reluctantly, “but we still haven’t caught her.”

“And you believe it is entirely your fault?”

“No, I’m just saying that I messed up.”

Dr. Keraya leaned back and crossed her arms. This was a sign that she was preparing for an argument. “My concern with you, Faith, is that you always take responsibility for everything that happens around you. Your pursuit of the Messenger Killer is a team effort, yet you insist on taking full blame for the fact that she is not in custody yet. You consider yourself responsible for West’s murder of your mentor, the murder of your former Marine colleague, and the beating of your boyfriend. You believe that you failed to notice him when he was your therapist, and that your failure is the reason he was able to remain at large for so long.”

“I know it’s not my fault,” Faith replied. “I’m just upset that it happened. It’s frustrating that I didn’t see it for so long.”

Dr. Keraya wagged a finger again. “You see. Once more, you’re upset that it happened, and in the next breath, it’s frustrating that you didn’t see it.”

“Well, it is. It doesn’t mean I think I’m a bad person.”

Dr. Keraya leaned forward and set her notepad on the table in between her chair and Faith's. Faith resisted the urge to sigh and roll her eyes. Whenever Dr. Keraya set her notepad down, she was going to be stubborn and insist on something Faith didn't want to hear. She wondered if Dr. Keraya analyzed her physical responses the way Faith analyzed Dr. Keraya's.

I can psychoanalyze too, doctor, she thought with a brief internal chuckle.

"This is our fifth session, Faith," Dr. Keraya said. "In all of our sessions, whenever I try to approach your problem with self-blame, you throw up straw men to avoid the argument. You're blaming yourself for not catching the Messenger, not saying you're a bad person. You're blaming yourself for West's elusiveness, not saying you're a complete failure. You're blaming yourself for not being ready to marry your boyfriend, not saying you're a shitty girlfriend."

"I'm not sure I see your point," Faith replied.

"My point is that you create worse effigies of yourself and say, 'Well, hey, I'm not that bad.' In so doing, you are refusing to face your true self-perception. You might not consider yourself evil, but you carry a great deal of guilt for what you perceive to be failure, and you stubbornly refuse to consider that what you believe to be failure might not actually be failure. So I have to ask: why do you find self-recrimination so comfortable?"

Faith didn't reply right away. How on Earth did they get from her frustrations about the Messenger case to a claim that she despised herself?

She shook her head and clapped her hands together. "I... I mean... Wow. Sorry, I'm really kind of thrown by that question. Um... I'm not... looking for an excuse to hate myself. Is that what you're asking?"

Dr. Keraya leaned back in her chair. “I’m not suggesting that you hate yourself. I’m suggesting that you feel more comfortable blaming yourself for things outside of your control than you feel accepting that some things are simply not within your control. You and your partner cannot control how the Messenger Killer will react to having their love letters with West exposed. But you blame yourself because they didn’t react the way you wanted them to. You cannot control how Franklin West behaves, but you blame yourself because he fled justice and murdered your friend.”

“I don’t... I’m not... I mean, I’m not saying it’s my fault that he’s a murderer. Or that they’re murderers. I just...” Faith sighed and rubbed her temples. “I’m just mad that what I tried didn’t work.”

“But that’s not what you said,” Dr. Keraya insisted. “You said that you messed up.”

“Well, yeah, if I try something, and it doesn’t work, then I messed up. What I tried was the wrong thing to try. What would you say?”

“I would say that what I tried didn’t work.”

Faith threw her hands in the air. “How’s that different?”

“Because when I say that something I tried didn’t work, I acknowledge that my attempt didn’t produce the results I desired. When I say that I messed up, I state that the attempt itself was a mistake.”

“I’m still not following.”

“It is fine to believe that you made an error in judgment, Faith. It is not fine to believe that every time you act and don’t receive the results you desire, it’s due solely to your failure. Especially when success relies on the actions of other people, actions you cannot control even if you want to.”

Faith rolled her eyes. “That’s my job, though. I hunt bad guys. It’s my job to know how they think and outthink them so they can’t hurt more people.”

Dr. Keraya sighed. “I will not argue with you any more today. This is a difficult problem to approach, and I admit that I can’t understand the struggles you face as an investigator. But we will talk more about this. I believe that you carry a lot of misplaced guilt, and I believe it is that guilt that lies at the core of your concerns over your work and your personal relationships.”

The timer on the table chimed, and Dr. Keraya smiled and said, “In any case, that is the hour, so you escape my probing regardless.”

Faith offered a half-smile in return. That seemed to satisfy Dr. Keraya. The two of them stood, and Dr. Keraya shook Faith’s hand. “I will see you next week. Your homework between now and then is to make a list of things you believe you are guilty of.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “You want me to work on being less guilty by focusing on everything I feel guilty about.”

“I want you to confront your guilt instead of remaining comfortable with it,” Dr. Keraya countered. “But we will talk more next week. Have a pleasant day.”

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“You too.”

Faith left the room and pulled out her phone to call David and let her know she was on her way home. As she did, a high-pitched whine filled her ears. She winced and lifted her hands to her ears, shaking her head and trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. It sounded like the buzz of a power line and drowned out all other sound.

“Miss Bold? Miss Bold?”

The voice seemed to come from far away. Faith looked around and spotted the receptionist looking at her with concern. She shook her head, and the whine slowly subsided.

“Do you want me to call someone?” the receptionist asked.

“What?”

“I asked if you were all right, and you shook your head. Do you need me to call someone?”

“Oh. Oh no, I’m fine. Sorry. Just had a ringing in my ears for a moment.”

“Oh, you should get that checked out,” the receptionist offered helpfully. “My cousin got tinnitus, and he ended up going completely deaf.”

Thanks for that, Faith thought drily. Out loud, she said, “Ah. Well, I’ll make sure to

look into it.”

She left the office and called David. The two of them had lived together for the past several months, and Faith was finally getting used to sharing her space with another person. It helped that she was in love with this other person, and it really helped that he looked very good naked.

She wondered what Dr. Keraya would have to say if she knew that Faith was about to go home and jump her boyfriend’s bones to distract herself from the session and the brand-new worry of tinnitus. Probably something about hiding behind temporary endorphins instead of confronting the core of the issue.

Well, whatever. What was the point of living with a man if she couldn’t treat herself to a few endorphins every now and then?

David answered with his typical cheery demeanor. “Hey hot stuff. How was the session?”

“Wonderful. Dr. Keraya said I should come home and tear your clothes off as soon as possible.”

“Ooh. I think I like her.”

Faith smiled. “Yeah, I figured you’d approve of that.”

“Well, I was going to start dinner, but if you’re fine with takeout, I’ll just get a head start on the clothing removal so we can get down to your prescribed treatment.”

“I’m very much in favor of that.”

“Well, hurry home then. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

She hung up and sighed contentedly. Sure she was shamelessly using David to avoid confronting her emotions, but hey, he was getting something pretty good out of it too.

And anyway, Faith had a whole week to complete her homework. She would be fine taking one night off to do something fun.

CHAPTER TWO

Faith sat next to David on the couch. Their clothes remained off, but both wore bathrobes—not matching ones, thankfully—and enough skin remained exposed to give Faith a healthy boost of oxytocin even though sexy time was done for the evening.

The remains of their dinner sat on the coffee table, and Turk—Faith’s K9—eyed the leftovers longingly. Faith smiled at her dog. If David wasn’t here to scold her, she might have relented and given him some orange chicken, but David was a vet, and not only a vet but Turk’s vet. She had been scolded enough for one day, so Turk would have to content himself with healthy dog food.

After several minutes, Turk gave up begging. He sighed and trotted dejectedly to his bowl.

“Oh, quit whining,” Faith called after him. “You’re eating marinated steak and whole grain rice. It’s a lot healthier than what I’m eating.”

Turk cast her a look reminding her that healthy and flavorful rarely went hand in hand. He started into his meal with reasonable excitement, though, so maybe his healthy food wasn’t so terrible after all.

“I hope you enjoyed your takeout,” David told her. “You bribed me with your body tonight, but tomorrow, we’re having a healthy meal that I will cook myself.”

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Faith scoffed. “You and I both know I can bribe you with my body every night, and you’ll succumb to my wiles. But I will allow you to make healthy food tomorrow.”

“You’re right and thank you.”

She laughed and patted his rock-hard abs. She was unashamed to admit that his six-pack was her favorite feature of his. “I appreciate your willingness to succumb to my wiles today. After that therapy session, I really needed to unwind.”

“I thought therapy was supposed to help you unwind.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” she replied. “But Dr. Keraya is more the type of doctor who likes to pick at a problem until it’s completely understood and solved.”

“You mean like you?”

She frowned slightly. “You’re only saying that because you know it’s too late for me to deny you sex.”

He laughed. “You know I can’t resist the urge to tease you at every opportunity. On a serious note, though, that’s a good thing, right? I mean, she’s helping you confront things. That’s what a good therapist does.”

“It’s what an annoying therapist does. But yes, I supposed it’s good.” She sat up. “I just...”

She wasn’t sure exactly how to put into words what she “just,” so she ended that

sentence with a sigh. David gently rubbed in between her shoulder blades. “I know. It’s tough.”

“We talked about the Messenger Killer,” Faith said. She wasn’t sure why she was bringing this up with him, but it felt better to talk about something than nothing.

“Oh yeah? How’s that going?”

Faith sighed. “Well, there’s a reason I told you I didn’t want to watch the news.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yep. West is the face of the media again, and somehow I’m the heel despite the fact that he’s a serial murderer, and I’m the person who spearheaded the effort to stop him. Everyone loves the idea that the Messenger Killer is Juliet to his Romeo, and for some reason, everyone loves the idea that it’s somehow my fault.”

“Really? I haven’t heard anyone blame you.”

“No one’s coming out and saying it, but I can tell that’s what they think.”

“How can you tell?”

This was starting to sound like a therapy session, so she deflected the subject. “I don’t know. I think I’m just pissed that she didn’t show herself. I thought that publishing those letters would cause her to come out of the woodwork.”

“You thought she’d take credit for writing them?”

Faith poked at a nearly empty carton of chow mein. “I didn’t think she’d walk into the Field Office and say, ‘Hi guys, it’s me. I’m the killer. Don’t you like those letters

I wrote?" but I thought they'd send an anonymous note that we could follow up on and start narrowing down the field."

"Yeah? I'm sorry, Faith."

Sorry didn't do shit for anyone, but one lesson Faith had managed to take to heart from therapy was to accept sympathy from people, so she managed to reply, "Thank you," and not feel the accompanying rush of irritation that typically followed such a statement.

She crossed her legs on the couch and said, "I'm just worried that she'll fade into the background. West is going to be found guilty eventually. This little media circus gave him a momentary breath of life, but he's going to be found guilty, and when he is, interest in him will fade. He'll be sentenced to life without parole or to death, and—"

"You think he'll avoid death?"

Faith shrugged. "I don't know. There's talk about the prosecution asking the governor to lift the moratorium on capital punishment, but I don't think they'll fight very hard for it."

"It's a federal case, though, isn't it?"

"There is a federal case, but this is the state trial for Pennsylvania since all but one of his murders took place here. We could pursue the death penalty for killing in multiple states and crossing state lines to flee, but I'm fine with life without parole. That's life with no relevancy, and for West, that's a fate worse than death.

"Anyway, the point I was making is that he's going to be sentenced, and the world will move on. He won't be interesting anymore. The Messenger will probably stay underground now that she's spooked, and no one will want to look for her."

David shrugged. “I mean... as long as she’s not killing people anymore, right?”

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Faith's eyes narrowed. "No. That's not good enough. I'm so sick of people saying that. People shouldn't get away with murder. A serial killer shouldn't get away with brutally killing innocent people just because it's easier to let the case go cold. So she doesn't kill anyone else. That means her victims don't get justice?"

"All right," David said, lifting his hands in a placatory gesture. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I was just trying to look at the bright side."

"The bright side is that bad guys go away," Faith said tersely. "They go to prison, a mental hospital, or a pine box. Getting away with murder and spending the rest of your life free and clear isn't a fucking bright side."

David didn't say anything. Faith took deep breaths until her anger subsided, then nudged David. "Sorry. I just... I really hate failing."

Thank God David didn't try to make some bullshit argument about how she didn't fail. Instead, he said, "I know. I'm sorry, baby."

Sorry might not do shit, but it felt good to hear this time. Maybe because she really was annoyed by his bright side comment. She sighed again. "Well, it's not over yet. We'll keep looking. People like this screw up eventually. We'll find her."

"Yes, you will," David said. "You always do."

Out loud, Faith said, "Damn straight." In her head, she said, Yes, I always do. But usually, I have to find a few more victims first.

That was the real frustration, the "core of the issue," as Dr. Keraya would say. Faith was by some metrics the most successful FBI agent in history at finding spree killers and serial killers. The problem was that after Jethro Trammell, there were a lot more spree killers than serial killers, meaning killers who killed a large number of victims over a short amount of time. Traditionally, serial killers took their victims over a longer period of time.

Other than the timeframe, though, these killers all fit the definition of a serial killer. They were highly organized, they had specific profiles, and they had ritualistic MOs. Not all serial killers exhibited that behavior, but no spree killer did. Spree killers acted opportunistically and spur of the moment. They also acted—usually—with only limited concern for how the deaths were brought about. The name of the game was body count.

The strange mixture of characteristics that the killers Faith hunted exhibited had led the FBI to consider labeling a new type of killer, the highly prolific serial killer. That label would probably change a dozen times before they settled on a final one, but Faith thought highly prolific was a good way to think about it. These killers would take their victims within days of each other. That meant that each time Faith had a case, she had hours to find the killer before they killed another victim.

And they always killed another victim. Sometimes two or more. Faith was fast, but she wasn't that fast. It bothered her, especially when her leads ran dry, and she was stuck almost waiting for a serial killer to murder someone else so she could have more evidence to dig through.

And that's why she felt guilty. She could never save everyone. Yes, she caught the killers eventually, but not until they murdered other people first. She was supposed to protect them, and she couldn't.

A furry head wrestled its way onto her lap. She looked down and saw Turk gazing up

at her. He must have sensed her discomfort and come over to make her feel better. She smiled and ruffled his fur.

Content that Faith was well enough to not need his immediate attention, Turk sat across hers and David's feet and watched the tv. David had put on a movie about a group of middle schoolers who stumbled across buried treasure only to learn that the mob was after that treasure too. It was meant as a comedy, but all Faith could think was how terrified those children must have been knowing that professional killers were chasing them.

Her phone buzzed. Her partner, Michael. She got to her feet and moved to the kitchen, Turk following curiously. "Hey, Michael. What's up?"

"Got a new case. Tabitha's still pissed at you, so she called me and told me to tell you."

Assistant Special Agent in Charge Tabitha Gardner was the temporary head of the Philadelphia Field Office. She really didn't like Faith, and the feeling was mutual. "Got it. What's the case?"

"Couple of murders in the Bay Area."

"The Bay Area, California?"

"Is there another bay area?"

"Quite a few, actually."

She could almost hear Michael roll his eyes. "Well, yes, the San Francisco Bay Area. Specifically San Jose and San Francisco."

“San Jose, huh? Your old stomping grounds.”

Michael was born and raised in San Jose, California, but had moved east upon graduating from college. He rarely mentioned his hometown, but when he did, it was always with a level of pride that Faith found odd considering he hadn't lived there in almost twenty years.

“Yep. Did you know it's actually bigger than San Francisco?”

Faith smiled slightly. “Really? That's really big.”

“Yeah, it's the third...” He stopped as Faith's sarcasm reached him. “You know what, I don't need this kind of abuse.”

Faith laughed and said, “All right. I assume this is the part where you tell me I have to leave now.”

“Yep. I'm coming to pick you up. Did I interrupt anything spicy?”

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“No, we got that out of the way earlier.”

“Yeesh. My fault for asking. See you in a bit.”

He hung up, and Faith returned to the living room. “Sorry, David. That was Michael. We have a case.”

He smiled wryly. “Oh yeah, I can tell you’re sorry. It was the grin that gave it away.”

Heat climbed her cheeks. “Well, to be honest, I am also excited to have something to do. It’s been over a month since my last case, and since my efforts with the messenger have yielded nothing, I might as well catch another bad guy while I’m waiting.”

“That’s the spirit.” He got to his feet and kissed her softly. “Go get ‘em, baby.”

She kissed him back just under his jaw. “I will. And I will come back and happily give you some more of the sexy time we got to have today.”

He chuckled. “Sounds good. I’ll see you soon.”

She kissed him a final time, then said, “Hey Turk, guess what? We get to go catch another bad guy.”

Turk barked excitedly. Faith crouched low and pulled him into a bear hug. The discomfort that lingered in her mind after her therapy session dissipated. She was back in her element.

CHAPTER THREE

Faith, Turk, and Michael arrived at Monica Smith's studio in San Jose at six in the morning. Two officers were still at the scene, a uniformed sergeant and a plainclothes detective. The detective glanced at their FBI IDs and offered them a half-wave for a greeting.

"Detective Ferris," he said, sticking out a hand with the most impressively thick fingers Faith had ever seen.

"Special Agent Faith Bold," Faith replied. "This is my partner Special Agent Michael Prince and my K9 unit Turk."

Turk barked formally. Ferris nodded at him, then gestured for the three of them to follow him through the gate. "Cooper, watch the door, yeah? Make sure no looky-loos come inside."

The street was completely empty, but Cooper nodded and said, "You got it, Ferris."

Just inside the gate was a small yard that looked like it was used for storage. Canvases were stacked under the eaves, and cans of paint were lined up on either side of the steps that led into the unit. Other materials—clay, marble and half-finished bronze statues—stood at odd places along the poured concrete panels that formed the yard.

"I thought she was a graphic designer," Michael asked.

"She was," Ferris replied. "She did creative art on the side."

"Got it."

Faith and Turk moved immediately to the most conspicuous object in the yard, a chalk outline where a few hours ago the San Jose Police Department had found Monica's body. Turk put his nose to the ground and began sniffing for clues. Faith had already picked up a few of her own.

"No blood?" she asked.

"No. The cause of death was asphyxiation by strangulation. The killer wore gloves and used a latex rubber ligature. ME thinks a tourniquet."

"Any sign of a struggle?"

"No defensive wounds," Ferris replied. Looks like she scratched at his face, but he wore a ski mask. Fibers come back as bargain-basement polyester, the type you can grab for five bucks out of a bin at your local Wal-Mart. I said it was quick, though. Unconscious in five seconds. The ligature was pulled very tight."

Faith's eyes traveled over the outline. "He laid her down carefully. Arms and legs don't fall straight like that."

"Yeah, we figured he was trying to avoid noise?"

Faith shook her head. "Maybe, but that's not all of it. Laying her down like that suggests care."

"You think it was a boyfriend or something?"

"Let's get a little more info before we decide on an avenue of investigation," Faith replied. "What time was the body discovered?"

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“Eleven last night, right before we called you. Rigor had set in already, so time of death was before nine.”

“Who reported the death?” Michael asked.

“Homeless guy who peered over the fence. Said he was looking for a place to sleep. Saw her and knew she was dead because her tongue and eyes were bugged out, and her face was all purple.”

Faith grimaced at that image. “Were you the responding officer?”

“No, that was Cooper. He called me after he did the initial report.”

“Did he notice any sign of a break-in?” Faith asked. “Doors forced, windows broken, latches pulled off, anything like that?”

“No, nothing. There are scuff marks on top of the fence, though, right over here.”

He led them to the fence a few yards from the gate and pointed at the top of the wood. “I can get you a stool if you want. Rubber soles, slip resistant material. Size is a men’s nine through eleven.”

“So a male killer?” Michael asked.

“We believe so. The only reason I don’t say yes for sure was because of the Bitch of the Bay.”

Faith frowned. "Who?"

"The Bitch of the Bay. This was about nine years ago. Killer would kidnap college boys from San Jose State and torture them over a period of twenty-four hours before breaking their necks and tossing them into the bay. We all thought it was a pervert like Dahmer. A guy, right? Turns out it was a woman. Professional weightlifter named Caroline Galton. Six-two, two-thirty-five, arms like Ahhnold."

He chuckled at his own joke. "Yeah, we never got a good motive from her. The boys weren't sexually abused, and Caroline was a confirmed lesbian. We asked her why, and she would just shrug and say, 'Just felt like it.' She's down in the Chowhouse. That's the Central California Women's Facility."

Faith looked back to the studio. "Were the lights on when Cooper arrived?"

"Yeah, they were. The door was unlocked too, but there's no sign that the killer entered the studio."

"What about the homeless guy who called it in?" Michael asked. "He didn't take anything?"

Ferris chuckled. "No, he saw the body and ran the other way. Found a donut shop a mile down the road, sat there and refused to move until we got there. Spent most of the time insisting that it wasn't him."

"Was it him?"

"No, we have him on security camera out by the strip mall on West and Fifth. He was there up until a half-hour before he called it in. With rigor already set, he couldn't have been here when Monica was killed."

Faith walked up the porch steps and opened the door. Turk trotted ahead of her, nose to the ground.

The studio was a fairly decent size for an art studio. This room contained a few canvases with half-finished oil paintings. Through one door, Faith could see clay statues—also in varying degrees of completion. Monica clearly took her side gig seriously.

She walked through a door at the opposite end of the room. This door was slightly ajar. Faith opened it to see the actual working part of the studio. Two brand-new Mac Pros hummed quietly on opposite corners of a desk. Four monitors stretched across the desk, and when Faith tapped the mouse, all four of them opened to logos of Monica's Design Studio.

“Haven't had cybercrimes out to crack the password,” Ferris mentioned. “They usually start at nine. This being the San Francisco Bay Area, tech guys are revered like gods.”

There was a touch of sarcasm to his voice, but Faith wasn't concerned with his genial animosity toward Cybercrimes. “Let me know what they find,” Faith said. “On the off chance any of them are afraid of the FBI, feel free to tell them that I will follow up personally if they drag their feet.”

Ferris chuckled. “It will be my pleasure to tell them that.”

“So what do you think, Faith?” Michael asked.

Faith looked at the desk chair. “Was this moved?” She asked Ferris.

“Nope. Cooper's an old hat. He didn't touch anything.”

Faith nodded. “So Monica Smith is sitting in front of her computer working on something. She hears a noise, gets up—”

“Oh,” Ferris interrupted. “Actually, she didn’t hear a noise.”

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Faith lifted an eyebrow. "How do you know that?"

"She was deaf."

"Ah. So she didn't hear a noise. Maybe she saw something and got up to check it out. She walks through her studio and enters the backyard. Then the killer sneaks up behind her, and that's all she wrote."

"That's pretty much what we think happened," Ferris said.

"Hmm. What about this other victim?"

"James Porter. He lived in San Francisco. Found dead two nights before last, strangled in his backyard, just like Monica. Also, just like Monica, he was deaf."

Faith tilted her head. "Did they know each other?"

"We're looking into it, but Porter's wife says no. He worked from home, and they had security cameras, so she doesn't think he was stepping out on her and no one came into the house."

"No one showed up on the security cameras?" Michael asked.

Ferris sighed. "Unfortunately, none of those cameras show the backyard. We can see Porter walking through the back door, but that's it."

"We'll want to talk to the wife," Faith said, "but we'll finish up here, first."

Ferris nodded. “Well, that’s pretty much all we have. I mean, the basics on the victim, I guess. She was twenty-seven, five-two, one-twenty, brown curly hair, hazel eyes. Nice smile going off her website.”

“Any sign of sexual assault?” Faith asked.

“No. No marks on her at all except for her throat. Not that sex isn’t a motive. Killers sometimes substitute the act of death for the act of orgasm. That’s especially true of stranglers. But you probably know that already.”

Ferris had watched too many TV shows, but Faith didn't say that out loud. She returned to the studio, entering the sculpture room. Most of the clay statues were of featureless male figures with lithe bodies and narrow jaws twisted into poses that were suggestive of pain, sexuality, anguish, and animal energy all at once. Despite not having any features, the faces seemed to stare intensely at something in the distance.

She was good.

“Did she ever try to sell any of these?” Faith asked.

“You thinking the jealousy angle?” Ferris asked. “Disgruntled artistic competitor kills her in a fit of rage?”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. “I wasn’t, but that’s not a bad angle. We’ve seen jealous artists do similar things before.”

“I’ll look into it,” Ferris replied.

“Have you talked to the neighbors yet?” Michael asked.

Ferris shook his head. “The only folks who were open were the liquor store down the street. They didn’t notice anyone headed this way, but they admitted that they wouldn’t have paid attention if anyone did. They face the cross street. I asked them about suspicious people, and the owner said, and I quote, ‘We’re a liquor store, man.’” He grinned, but seeing the agents’ faces, he coughed and added, “But seriously, they said they didn’t notice anyone out of the ordinary.”

“They busy on Monday nights?” Faith asked.

“They’re always busy.”

“What about the unit above the studio?” Michael asked. “Is that Monica’s?”

“No, that’s another guy. He’s not home, though.”

“Figure out who it is,” Faith told Ferris. “And track him down. He might know something.”

“I’ll do that,” Ferris replied. “In the meantime, if you guys are interested, I know a great breakfast place a mile from here. I could really use a ham and cheese croissant and a latte.”

“Same for me, but with a cappuccino instead,” Michael replied.

“Breakfast sounds good,” Faith added without volunteering her meal preference.

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The group left the studio and took Ferris's cruiser to the breakfast place, leaving Faith and Michael's rental at the studio. Ferris invited Cooper to come with, but the uniformed officer declined and went home to have breakfast with his kids before school instead.

Turk looked subdued as they drove, and Faith reached over to scratch him behind the ear. "Never gets any easier, does it buddy?"

"What's that?" Ferris asked.

"Oh, I'm talking to my K9," Faith replied. "He gets a little down sometimes after looking at a crime scene."

"I get that," Ferris replied. "Dogs are empathetic creatures. My sister had a golden retriever once that used to cry during sad movies."

Ferris was apparently one of those cops who needed to talk all the time. Faith didn't mind that as long as they didn't expect her to keep up with them. When she was on a case, she only talked when she was working through a problem.

She wondered who might have wanted to murder Monica. The connection between her and James Porter was their mutual deafness, but why would someone want to murder deaf people? It seemed an odd group to fixate on.

But then, she had seen many killers fixate on people for reasons that made no sense to a healthy brain. It was even possible that their deaths had nothing to do with their hearing but were due to some as yet unknown commonality. Or nothing at all. The

worst killers were those like West, who picked their victims at random, not caring who they kill but just reveling in the vicious joy of murder.

And somewhere in the back of her mind and the streets of her city, another vicious killer lurked, perhaps waiting for the chance to send Faith another message.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What’d I tell you?” Ferris said, grinning proudly at Michael’s look of approval.

“Damned good sandwich,” Michael agreed.

“Best in San Jose. What about you, Bold? You digging the sausage biscuit?”

The sausage and egg biscuit that Faith was now halfway through was indeed delicious. The biscuit was buttery and soft with a perfect golden brown crust, and the sausage was seasoned generously without being overly salty. The true piece de resistance was the egg, which was fluffy, light, and fresh.

Faith gave Ferris a brief summary of this description in the form of the words, “Yeah, it’s good.” The detective looked even prouder. Maybe his brother owned the shop or something.

To be honest, Faith barely even tasted the food. She was playing Monica’s last moments over and over in her head. The more she thought about it, the more the killing became harder and harder to believe. The studio’s backyard was visible from Monica’s office through the open door, but the desk was out of sight of the yard. Even if Monica just happened to be in a position to see it, would she have really gone to investigate the presence of a stranger?

Maybe. It wasn’t impossible. But it seemed odd to her.

So what else could have brought her outside? Lights, perhaps? If the killer had police lights on his vehicle, then she might have gone outside to see what was going on. But then again, the presence of police activity would probably have interested a liquor store far more. At the very least, they'd want to know if there was a safety issue they should be aware of.

Faith took a bite of her sandwich and tried to focus on the flavor to give her mind a chance to reset. Having two deaf victims cast an interesting layer over the case. She'd never considered how much she took her hearing for granted before now.

That thought brought a reminder of the tinnitus she'd experienced outside of Dr. Keraya's office. She felt a flash of fear and took another bite of her sandwich.

"Neighbor's back," Ferris said. "Just called the department to ask about the tape in front of the building and if it was safe for him to go into his apartment. Dispatch told him yes."

"Perfect timing," Michael said, polishing off the last of his croissant.

The group left the restaurant and drove back to the studio. The city was waking up, and traffic, though still light, was beginning to show the first signs of the gridlock that would choke it in another hour. Faith was used to traffic in Philadelphia, but something about the mindless movement of the masses unknowing and uncaring about the one of their own who was just plucked out of existence in an instant disturbed her. It was a feeling she got every now and then when working a case. People cared only about their own problems and their own lives. That worked until they were the victims.

They parked in front of the studio and climbed the narrow staircase to the neighbor's apartment door. Ferris lifted an eyebrow when he saw Turk trot up the stairs. "Wow. He's good with stairs, huh?"

“He’s good everywhere,” Faith replied. “He’s saved my life and solved cases for me more than once.”

“Damn,” Ferris replied reverently. “We oughta to get one of those for homicide.”

“You don’t have K9s?”

“Not for homicide. Vice has a bunch and traffic has one or two, but the brass figures that CSI can handle the forensic side of homicide.”

They were at the door already, so Faith didn’t have time to answer. Michael knocked on the door, firmly but not too aggressively. A moment later, the door opened to reveal a rotund man who could believably have been any age between fifty and seventy. He wore a pair of beach shorts and an open bathrobe and blinked filmy blue-gray eyes at the four of them. “Hello. You’re here about what happened below.”

“We are,” Faith confirmed. “Any idea what might have happened?”

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He sighed and shook his head. “No idea. Everything was fine when I left for work.”

“What time was that?”

“Nine-fifteen. I take the train to Fremont. I work for BART as a scheduler, so I get to ride for free. I start at ten, but I like showing up fifteen minutes early so I can grab a danish and a cappuccino from the vending machine and a copy of the Mercury from the newsstand at the Fremont station.”

Maybe it was a San Jose thing to be especially talkative with strangers. Not that Faith was complaining. “I’m Special Agent Faith Bold. This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince, my K9 Turk, and Detective Ferris of the San Jose Police Department. Do you mind if we come in and talk to you for a few minutes?”

“Sure,” the man replied. He looked at Turk. “He doesn’t bite, does he?”

“If you’re nice, he’ll be nice.”

The man shrugged, apparently satisfied with that answer. “Come on in.” He left the door open and shuffled deeper into his apartment. “Names Cliff, by the way.”

“Is that your last name or your first name?” Ferris asked.

“First name. Last name is Kowalski.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Michael replied.

The apartment was modestly appointed. The floor was vinyl laminate, and the woodwork was pine. The stain was fading in most places, leaving both the same shade of washed-out beige. The leather sofa and easy chair had once been of decent quality but due to age was cracking and wrinkling. It was reasonably clean, though, and it had a pleasant smell that reminded Faith of teak and tobacco.

“You folks want coffee? I still have a half-pot left.”

“I’m all right,” Faith replied. “We just had coffee.”

Cliff nodded. “If you’re in town for a while, you should check out Bert’s Bagels. Best ham-and-cheese in the city.”

“We just came from there,” Ferris said.

“No kidding? Good stuff.”

Cliff poured himself a cup of coffee, then said, “Well... Like I told you all, I left for work at nine-fifteen. Lights were still on downstairs, so I figured Monica was working late. She usually does. Most of the time, she’s out by eleven or twelve, so I didn’t think anything of it. What happened? Someone rob the studio?”

“No,” Faith replied. “Someone killed Monica.”

Cliff blinked at her, disbelieving. “Killed her?”

“Yes. Strangled her to death.”

Cliff sighed heavily. “Oh, boy. That’s horrible.” He sat down in an easy chair and looked at the wall. “Damn. Poor girl.”

“Where were you before you left for work?” Michael asked.

"I was here," Cliff replied. "I work from ten at night to six in the morning. Get home at six-thirty, make breakfast and shower, in bed by nine. Sleep until four-thirty, then wake up, make some dinner, watch some TV, iron my clothes, get dressed, and go to work."

“You don’t ever drop in to say hi to Monica?” Faith asked.

“From time to time. She and I weren’t exactly close. I mean, she was a good neighbor, and I don’t think she had any problems with me either, but we had different lives. You know how it is. They’re just people you live next to.” He sighed again. “Still sucks to hear she went that way. It wasn’t... I mean, she wasn’t... assaulted, was she?”

“No,” Faith replied.

"Oh good." He shook his head. "It's just terrible what these people do to girls nowadays. I tell my niece to make sure she carries mace wherever she goes. You never know with some people. I heard about a guy in Milwaukee who used to pretend to be a high schooler online and lure girls out to fast-food restaurants. He'd slip something into their food to make them sleepy, then take them out to the woods."

“So you heard nothing at all before you went to work? Nothing suspicious?” Faith asked.

“And no one we talk to will have seen you leave this apartment before nine-fifteen?” Michael asked.

“No, I was in this apartment the whole time,” Cliff insisted. “As for your question, Agent Bold, I heard a kind of rumbling sound around eight-thirty.”

“A rumbling sound?”

"Yeah, like an old diesel engine. You know, like on an old semi. My brother drove Kenworths for Amsoil back in the eighties. They used to rumble like a son of a bitch. Nowadays, they're all whisper quiet because of sound and emissions regulations. I kind of miss the way they used to sound."

“Did you happen to look out the window and see a truck?” Faith asked.

“Oh no, this was like miles away.” He tilted his head. “Well, maybe not miles. But it was far away. The rumble was quiet.”

Faith and Michael shared a look. That noise could mean absolutely nothing, or it could be the key to their case. Not knowing exactly what made the noise made it difficult to determine where it might have come from. “And you didn’t try to investigate?”

Cliff lifted his hands in a what do you want me to do gesture. “Well, it wasn’t that out of the ordinary. Hell, I only brought it up because you guys seem pretty sure that I must know something. I really don’t.”

“Did anyone else ever come to the studio?” Faith asked.

“Not that I ever saw,” Cliff replied. “You know how artists are. They’re real private types. They like to be alone with their art.”

“And Monica didn’t mention anyone new in her life?” Michael asked.

“I don’t think she’d tell me,” Cliff said.

“Did she seem different to you at all?” Ferris asked. “Any unusual moods?”

Cliff lifted his hands again. “I think you guys aren’t hearing me. I barely knew her, okay? I’m happy to help as much as possible, but if you’re looking for me to solve the case for you, I can’t do that.”

The agents shared a slightly irritated look. Faith looked at Turk, but nothing in his behavior suggested suspicion. She sighed and pulled out a card. “If you think of anything else, please call me,” she said.

"Yeah, I'll do that," Cliff replied. "I'm really sorry about what happened. I hope you don't think I'm an asshole."

“I don’t think that,” Faith reassured him. Just blind. Like most people.

The group headed downstairs. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Ferris asked, “Do you think he’s hiding something from us?”

Faith shook her head. “No, I think he’s telling us the truth.”

“How can you tell?”

She crossed her arms. “I think the person we’re looking for is going to be more introverted. I think he’ll be awkward and clumsy and uncomfortable around people.”

“He seemed pretty uncomfortable with us,” Ferris pointed out.

“He seemed irritated with us,” Faith corrected. “But not at first and not in a suspicious way. Keep an eye on him just in case, but I don’t think he’s our guy.”

Ferris sighed. “Well, phooey. I guess it was too much to ask for it to be easy.”

Faith gave him a tight smile. “It never is.”

He sighed again. “Well, I’m beat. I’m gonna head home and get some shuteye.”

“Sounds good. Before you go, can we get the address for James Porter? Michael and I are gonna go talk to his wife.”

“Sure.”

He wrote the address down on a notepad and tore the sheet off. “Good luck, agents.”

“You too, detective.”

They split up, and the FBI agents returned to their rental. As Michael drove away, Faith looked in the rearview mirror at the receding apartment. She wondered how long Cliff had lived next to Monica, only for her death to matter little more than a brief sigh of guilt. But then, how well did she know her own neighbors? In the city, your house was just where you lived, and your neighborhood was nothing more than a random collection of strangers pursuing random careers.

Monica Smith was dead, and that death was going to have almost no impact on anyone else. Faith hated that.

I'll remember you, Monica, she promised. I'll make sure you're not forgotten.

CHAPTER FIVE

In morning traffic, it took them nearly two hours to reach the Porter residence in Pacific Heights, an upscale neighborhood in the northwest corner of San Francisco. On the way, Faith looked up James Porter.

He was forty-nine years old with two grown children, the youngest of whom had just graduated from MIT. He worked as an accountant for a property management company that owned thirty properties in the Bay Area. During the pandemic, he had started working from home and hadn't stopped. He was a member of a golf club that met infrequently. None of his social media pages indicated any connection with Monica Smith besides the fact that both were deaf.

He had been married to his wife, Barbara, for thirty years. They had been high school sweethearts who married as soon as she turned eighteen. As nearly as Faith could tell, they had never looked back.

But then, thirty years was a long time, and nineteen years old was adult only in the legal sense. It was a long shot, but Faith wasn't dismissing the possibility that James had met Monica somewhere and hit it off with the attractive young deaf woman.

"Would you ever cheat on Ellie?" she asked Michael.

Ellie was Michael's wife. The two had met a couple of years ago and married about a year after that.

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I’m not going to tell her your answer.”

“I’m still not happy about the question,” Michael retorted. “You want to give me some context?”

“I’m trying to think of a connection between Monica Smith and James Porter. The only thing I can come up with besides them being deaf is that they had a thing on the side and Mrs. Porter had them killed.”

“You think she could have strangled them both to death?”

“I won’t know until I meet her, but it’s possible. Or she could have paid someone to do it.”

“You don’t think them being deaf is enough of a connection?”

"Come on, Michael. There are nine million people in the metro area. There's got to be thousands of deaf people between Monica's studio and James's house. Why are these two people an hour away in no traffic and two hours away in traffic?"

Michael shrugged. “Well, no, I would never cheat on Ellie. I can’t imagine putting her through that kind of pain. If we were ever on our way out, I’d talk to her. It’s a tough conversation, but I would be an absolute piece of shit if I ever betrayed her that way. Does Porter seem like an absolute piece of shit to you?”

“No, the opposite. His social media is active and full of people who seem to genuinely love him.”

“Well, you never know what’s under the surface, I guess, but we should reserve

judgment until we talk to Barbara.”

“Yeah. Fair enough.”

They pulled next to the curb in front of a three-story Victorian mansion with a white façade that might very well have been real marble. CPA work apparently paid very well.

There was a car in the driveway, a late-model Lexus sedan in immaculate condition, so Faith assumed Barbara was home. Turk looked around and sniffed every few yards but showed no sign of suspicion or wariness.

Michael knocked on the door somewhat more gently than he had at Cliff Kowalski’s apartment. Faith heard shuffling, and a moment later, the door opened. A woman in her late forties stood in the doorway. Her hair was blonde with a liberal amount of gray sprinkled in, and her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed. She wore a plain cotton nightgown that didn’t at all flatter her figure that had once been statuesque but seemed to have softened considerably as she aged.

In other words, she looked exactly like a woman who had just suffered a devastating loss.

“Yes?” she asked. “Can I help you?”

“Barbara Porter?” Faith asked.

“Yes.” She looked at their uniforms. “Is this about James?”

“Yes,” Faith confirmed. “We were hoping to ask you some questions.”

“Oh. Okay. Come on inside.”

She led the two of them inside. The contrast between the cheap, faded interior of Cliff Kowalski's apartment and Barbara Porter's mansion was profound. The floors here were granite tile polished to a mirror-like shine. The countertops were of darker stone, some sort of basalt, and equally shiny. The furniture was all oiled maple and richly upholstered with leather that was neither wrinkled nor cracked. The walls were decorated with art ranging from oil paintings of abstract shapes and colors to equally abstract statuary that looked the way a person might look if a farsighted man took his glasses off and squinted into a funhouse mirror. Faith thought the décor would look much better with a few of Monica Smith's statues.

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“You can sit in the living room if you’d like,” Barbara said. “Do you two want anything to drink? Maybe some water for your dog?”

“Water for Turk would be nice, thank you,” Faith replied.

“Water will be fine for us too,” Michael added. “Thank you for taking the time to speak to us. I know you’re going through something terrible.”

She sniffled. “Yes. It’s...” Her lower lip trembled, but she took a deep breath and kept from crying. “Why did they call the FBI in? Was James in some sort of trouble?”

“They called us in because there was another murder,” Faith replied, taking a seat on the expansive sofa. It was unfairly comfortable.

Barbara blinked. “Another?”

“Yes,” Michael confirmed. “A woman named Monica Smith.”

Faith watched Barbara closely, but she showed no sign that the name was familiar to her. “I don’t know a Monica Smith. Was she one of James’s coworkers?”

“No. She was a graphic designer. She lived in San Jose.”

“Okay,” Barbara said. “How does this relate to James’s death?”

“Both were... the circumstances of their deaths were similar.”

“Oh.” Barbara took another shuddering breath. “It’s just horrible. Why would someone do that to James? I don’t know this Monica, but I assume she was a decent person as well.”

“All signs point to that,” Faith replied. “To answer your question, we’re not sure. That’s why we want to talk to you. We’re hoping you might be able to tell us something helpful.”

Barbara shook her head. “I wish I could, but I don’t know why on Earth anyone would want to hurt James. Everyone loved him. We hosted the Christmas party for his company every year, and they all adored him. He was so kind to everyone.”

She pressed her fingers to her eyes, and her lips trembled again. After a moment, she stood abruptly. “I forgot your water. I’ll be right back.”

She stalked away, and Faith got the impression she was trying not to let them see her cry. Turk whined softly and watched her go with an empathetic stare. As soon as she returned to her seat, Turk stepped over the bowl of water she’d brought him and laid his head on her lap. Barbara smiled slightly and stroked his fur. “We never had a dog. James was allergic. He would have put up with one for my sake, but I didn’t want to do that to him.”

“You seem to have loved him very much,” Michael said.

“I will always love him. He was my only one. I fell in love with him the day we met. He was fifteen, and I was fourteen. He had just moved here from Wisconsin. He had this wide, goofy smile and the kindest eyes I’d ever seen. My parents were wary at first on account of him being deaf, but after they got to know him, they accepted him as one of their own.”

“Why were they wary about his deafness?”

Barbara gave a soft little wave. “Some older people believed that deafness was a sign of mental handicap. Obviously, that isn’t the case, but my parents were raised in a very traditional manner. Needless to say, they didn’t believe that for very long.” She sighed wistfully. “I’ll never forget the day he told me he loved me. We spoke in sign language before then—I started learning as soon as I met him—but he practiced saying it in his own voice so he could tell me on the day of our senior dance.”

Her eyes took on a beatific look. "He had such a beautiful voice. Rich and strong and deep. I loved hearing him talk. He rarely did in front of others, but at home, I would listen to him speak for hours." She shook her head. "It's strange. I thought that over time, our love would soften. I knew it would remain strong, but I thought it would become more of a friendship than a romance. I was wrong, though. I was head over heels for him. Always."

She bowed her head, and this time, she didn’t try to hide her tears. Turk looked up at her and whined softly. Faith felt a lump form in her throat and had to look away. She knew already that Barbara wasn’t the killer. It was true that sociopaths could put on a convincing show of love, but Faith was trained to see past that falseness. It was clear that there was no falseness in Barbara’s devotion. She would never have killed James.

After a few minutes, Barbara’s tears subsided. She took a deep breath and wiped the tears from her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’ve been a mess ever since he died.”

“No need to apologize,” Michael said gently. “We’re so sorry for your loss.”

“Can you tell us what happened that night?” Faith asked. “I know it’s painful, but anything you can tell us would help a lot.”

Barbara chuckled bitterly. “I wish I could. I just don’t know. I didn’t find him until the morning after.”

“Just tell us what you know,” Faith said gently.

She sniffled, then said, “Um... We went to bed at eight-thirty like normal. We’ve always been early birds. We fell asleep, and then...” She took another deep breath. “I woke up at four. He wasn’t in bed, so I assumed he had gone outside to wait for me. When we woke up early, we’d make coffee and wait for the other in the backyard. It was our little ritual to watch the sunrise together and talk before we had to work. So I went to the backyard, and... and...”

She began to hyperventilate, and Faith quickly went to her side. Barbara stroked Turk’s hair and slowly calmed herself. She looked straight ahead at the wall, her eyes wide as she recalled the shock.

"You can't imagine how horrible it is to see the person you love like that. To see him hurt so badly, to know that he struggled but couldn't even scream because of what the murderer did to him. To know that I was so close, but I couldn't help him because I couldn't hear him."

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“So you didn’t hear any noise at all?” Faith asked. “Nothing like a low rumbling?”

Barbara’s brow furrowed. “A rumbling? No. Why? Is that important?”

Faith and Michael shared a look. “We’re not sure yet. It looks like it might not be.” She pulled a card from her pocket and set it on the coffee table. “If you think of anything else, please call me. And please don’t be alone. I know it’s hard to see other people right now, but if you have family or close friends you can be with, please do so. It helps.”

Barbara nodded. “Thank you. I will.” Her face hardened, and there was steel in her eyes when she met Faith’s gaze. “You find them. Whoever did this, you find them, and you make them suffer.”

Faith couldn’t promise to make someone suffer, even if it was a vicious killer, but she decided it was better not to point that out to Barbara. “We’ll find the killer,” she replied.

Barbara nodded again. “I hope you won’t think me rude if I don’t walk you to the door. I think I’ll just rest here for a while.”

“Of course,” Michael said.

The three agents left the house. The brilliant sunshine outside was almost offensive after what they’d heard.

They were silent as they entered their car and began the return journey to their hotel,

but all three of them wore the same determined look. They would find justice for their victims and for the loved ones each had left behind.

And while Faith couldn't promise anything, she hoped very much that the killer would suffer.

CHAPTER SIX

All of life was suffering now. The killer could hear no music, no laughter. The killer could no longer enjoy the background of traffic or the chime of cell phones. Closed captioning and subtitles made television accessible, but reading the words on the screen instead of hearing them made them seem impersonal, like records of a dream.

That suffering was made bearable only by the knowledge that the killer could spare others that suffering. The killer pondered this while consulting the information needed to select the next person to be liberated.

That's what this was. This was liberation. Sound was such a critical part of the human experience. To think that the killer's mission had once been to design a weapon to destroy people's hearing.

Hence this punishment. The killer had tried to take hearing from others. Instead, it was the killer's hearing that had been lost.

Now, the killer was tasked with liberating those innocents who didn't deserve to suffer the cruelty of living in a world without sound. Much like the man in this movie who killed those who had lost all joy in life, the killer liberated those whose handicap prevented them from truly enjoying life.

The killer sipped water and swirled the liquid around. The sensation of jaw muscles working and liquid swirling was the closest thing to sound the killer could

experience. That and the deep rumble his machine made when in contact with the ground.

The killer knew that some deaf people claimed to be able to hear music through their feet. Their bones could allegedly pick up vibrations that the brain would interpret as sound. The killer had found out the hard way that claim was bullshit. The faint throbbing one experienced was hardly sound. But the machine worked for the killer's purposes. It brought the chosen closer so that the killer could liberate them.

The killer looked over at the machine, which sat against the wall next to a pair of slip-resistant boots that the killer wore when liberating to ensure surefootedness. That was critical. The world wouldn't understand that the killer was liberating people. They thought the killer was just murdering people. The killer hoped this would change in time, but the world's perspective was so skewed.

People refused to see pain. They stopped their ears, closed their eyes, and insisted that pain was just another form of pleasure. People who suffered were "blessed" to have some unique struggle and "brave" for existing in spite of that struggle. Normal people, whole people, loved to talk about how fortunate handicapped people were, as though having two working ears were some sort of hassle and they would be so much better off if they lacked some part of themselves.

Arrogant fools. Stupid, arrogant fools. The killer had first decided to avenge the sufferers by killing those arrogant fools, but that wouldn't do anything to help the deaf. They would still be unable to hear.

No, the right thing to do was to liberate them. There was just no point in living when one couldn't hear anymore.

Maybe the killer would be liberated one day. Maybe after enough undeserving sufferers had been freed, the killer would have achieved what was expected and could

join them in freedom.

But not yet. So much more work remained to be done.

The killer switched off the television to avoid distraction. Not that it could distract much when the killer had to stare at it to understand anything that was happening.

The killer had several options for the next person to be freed, but the most deserving one was a recent sufferer. The first two had never known what it was like to hear. That was a tragedy, of course, but it could be said that they, at least, didn't know what they were missing.

Sarah Martinez knew what she was missing. She had been able to hear up until sixteen months ago, but a severe inner ear infection had taken that from her. The killer had seen her a few times at the support group she attended. It was clear she was not coping well, and who could blame her?

"I'll fix it for you," the killer said.

At least, that's what the killer hoped. All the killer was aware of was the movement of lips and tongue. For all the killer knew, gibberish had just come out. Another thing lost to the killer's affliction.

There would be no fixing that. Not until the killer was ready to join the others in the next life.

But the killer couldn't do that yet. There was still work to be done.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I've got something," Michael said.

Faith sat up straight and looked at him. "Oh yeah?"

The two of them had been working for the past forty-five minutes to find a connection between the two victims that was more meaningful than the simple fact that both were deaf.

"Check it out."

Michael turned his laptop so Faith could see. She walked to him and looked over his shoulder. "Well, look at that."

It seemed that both Monica Smith and James Porter had once been treated at the aptly named Auditory Research Center, a private clinic in Fremont run by a Dr. Thomas Crane.

"It gets better," Michael said. "I looked up this Crane guy, and apparently he was reprimanded several times by the American Board of Audiology for unethical research practices. His board certification was suspended for a year following the last of those reprimands five years ago. He's avoided problems since, but other researchers have expressed disappointment in his methods."

“What methods are those?”

“I can’t seem to get details, but it looks like the board’s issue was that he rushed human trials on some experimental techniques to cure hearing loss.”

“Hmm. Were our victims unhappy with their treatment?”

“It doesn’t say, but both were among a group of individuals who left a trial early four months ago.”

“Aha. That sounds like motive to me.”

“I don’t know about that just yet, but it sure as hell sounds suspicious.” He stood up. “Shall we, mademoiselle?”

“We shall, Herr Prince.”

“Wrong language, but all right.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

Fremont was an affluent city a few miles north of San Jose. Like many cities in the Bay Area it was full of tech businesses in just about every industry there was. The Auditory Research Center was located in a medical center that contained no fewer than seven different “Research Centers” in different medical specialties.

The Auditory Research Center occupied the first floor of the five-story central building. Its interior was modern and sleek with tinted glass walls, gleaming tile floors and whisper-smooth elevators. Medical staff in coats as spotless white as the

tile moved back and forth, leading patients both hearing and deaf to different rooms.

The three agents approached a reception desk where a smiling woman with an intense stare asked, “Hello. How may I help you today?”

She spoke with a slight lisp, and it occurred to Faith that she was deaf and her intense stare was because she was reading their lips. “We need to speak to Dr. Crane.”

“Of course,” the receptionist replied. “Do you have an appointment?”

Faith and Michael shared a look. Michael met the receptionist’s eyes and tapped the FBI logo on his jacket. “This isn’t about an appointment.”

The receptionist’s smile faltered, but she recovered quickly. “Let me see if he’s available.” She looked over the counter. “Um... I’m afraid we’re not allowed to have dogs in here. Even K9 units.”

“Then Dr. Crane can meet us outside,” Faith said.

The receptionist looked about to protest, but Faith’s expression must have made it clear that she didn’t want to hear it. “Of course,” the receptionist replied. “There’s a cafeteria with outdoor seating through that hallway to your left. I’ll have him meet you there.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Enjoy your day!”

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The agents moved down the hallway. Halfway to the exit, Faith turned around and looked at the receptionist. She was talking on the phone and staring at the retreating agents, no longer smiling.

The exit opened into a courtyard decorated with clusters of fountaingrass and lilyturf. Tables sat in groups of four at four separate corners of a diamond-shaped central area sporting a single maple tree about fifteen feet tall.

“You want to get some lunch while we’re here?” Michael asked.

Faith stared at him for a moment. “How about we interrogate the suspect first and worry about food later?”

He lifted his hands. “All right. No need to get ornery, I was just asking.”

Faith rolled her eyes and picked a table that allowed them to monitor the entrance to the building. Several groups of nurses and doctors entered and left the courtyard. “This place seems to be doing well.”

“Yeah, it looks like his almost-malpractice hasn’t hurt his financial prospects,” Michael agreed. “Might make him really touchy about people threatening this good thing he has going on.”

“It just might,” Faith agreed.

Another doctor entered the courtyard and approached them with a purposeful gait. His hair was solid gray, which threw Faith off for a moment, but as he drew closer,

she realized that this was Dr. Thomas Crane.

The two human agents got to their feet. Turk growled softly. It wasn't a foolproof sign that he had found their killer, but it was a damned near foolproof sign that the doctor had something to fear by talking to them.

"Hi," he said, stopping about eight feet in front of them. "Kimmy said you two wanted to see me?"

"That depends," Faith replied. "Are you Dr. Thomas Crane?"

"Yeah," he said simply.

"Then we want to speak to you. Would you like to have a seat?"

Dr. Crane blinked. "Um... is this going to take a long time?"

"Won't be a minute," Michael said breezily. He pulled out one of the upholstered wooden chairs and gestured gallantly toward it.

Dr. Crane blinked and, after a hesitant half-step, accepted the chair. "I really wish you guys had called ahead," he said. "I have a very busy schedule today, and I'm keeping patients waiting. What is this about, anyway?"

Faith and Michael took their seats. Turk positioned himself in between Faith and Dr. Crane and kept a steady, watchful eye on the doctor.

"We're investigating the murders of Monica Smith and James Porter."

Dr. Crane blinked again. "Okay?"

“Those names don’t ring a bell?” Michael asked.

“No. Are they patients of mine?”

“They were,” Faith replied. “They were part of a trial four months ago for a new method of combating hearing loss. They were two of eight individuals who left the trial early.”

“Oh. Right.” Dr. Crane folded his hands on the table. “Right, Monica was the artist, and James was the accountant.”

“So can you tell me why they left your trial?”

“Well, they were”—he cleared his throat—“they were unsatisfied with the lack of results. So were the others.”

“Did they threaten to make trouble for you?”

“Oh no. I mean, they called me names, but they didn’t threaten to hurt me or anything.”

He unfolded his hands and leaned back, then started to tap his heel on the floor. He was nervous and possibly lying.

“They didn’t threaten to file a complaint against you with the Board of Audiology?”

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Dr. Crane released a single cough of laughter. “No, they didn’t. Even if they did, it wouldn’t matter. They signed the waivers. A medical trial is exactly what it sounds like: a trial. We test things to see if they work or they don’t work. That treatment only worked on thirteen of twenty-one patients in the trial. We took it back to the drawing board and eventually concluded it wasn’t worth our time to try to make it work for more people. We’re pursuing surgical alternatives now.”

“I’m sure you’re legally protected, Dr. Crane,” Faith replied. “Still, considering your reputation, I can’t imagine you’re pleased when people threaten to soil it.”

He frowned. “My reputation?”

“Your board certification was suspended at one time, wasn’t it?”

His eyes narrowed, and his hands closed. Turk noticed the fists and gave him a warning growl. He glanced at Turk, confused, then realized what his hands were doing and relaxed them.

“Yes,” he admitted. “It was suspended for a period of one year five years ago because the Board didn’t believe I had been rigorous enough in my research and had proceeded to human trials too quickly. I accepted their judgment and altered my approach. The trial in which Miss Smith and Mr. Porter participated didn’t suffer from the same issues. In any case, why are you jumping right to murder? What could it possibly gain me to kill them?”

“A very rational question,” Michael replied. “Only when you’re really pissed off, it’s hard to think rationally.”

Dr. Crane rolled his eyes. “Okay, well, I didn’t kill them. I didn’t even know who they were until you told me they were both at the trial four months ago.”

Turk growled again, baring his teeth slightly.

“Okay, does your dog have a problem?” Dr. Crane asked irritably. “Is he going to bite me or something?”

“You play nice, and he’ll play nice,” Faith replied.

“Well, I’m playing nice, and he’s looking at me like he can’t wait to eat me.”

Faith crossed her arms. “You’re replying to our questions with hostility. He notices that. So do I. I’d very much like to know why.”

“Because...” He pressed his lips together and tapped his heels again. “You’re accusing me of murder!”

“We haven’t accused you of anything,” Michael said. “You jumped right to accusation. For all you knew, we could have just wanted to know if they mentioned anything to you that suggested someone else was after them.”

“Oh please,” Dr. Crane scoffed. “You’re here now? Four months later? There’s no chance I’m among the last people to see them alive, and as for knowing anything about them besides their medical records? Guess what? I saw them four times in two weeks. Medical trials are handled by nurses and PAs. The MDs show up at the beginning and then during occasional checkups. I wasn’t their friend. But you know that. So you’re not here looking for information. You’re here because I happen to be a common connection between two deaf people who were murdered, both of whom had a poor interaction with me. Not even with me, just associated with me. But you get my point. No way you don’t suspect me.”

Faith thought for a moment and decided to be blunt. They weren't getting anywhere being coy. "Yes, Dr. Crane. We suspect that you might have killed Monica Smith and James Porter. Further, we suspect that you might be planning to kill the others who exhibited dissatisfaction with your trial."

"Oh, for God's sake," he said, getting to his feet. "That's so stupid. I won. I still have my license, my certification, and my funding. I still have my medical practice, and I'm still conducting research trials into the effectiveness of different treatments for hearing loss. A few people whining that their specific trial wasn't a medical miracle isn't going to ruin my life. You know what will ruin my life? Murdering people."

"So you can tell us where you were last night and Saturday night?" Michael asked.

"I was home. No, no one can corroborate that story. No, I don't have security cameras that could show my face. I was home like a normal person who doesn't think he needs to create an alibi for murder. But you have nothing on me. You have old history with the Board of Audiology and a one-sided spat with two trial participants from months ago. Do some detective work. Find some real evidence. Stop wasting my time."

He spun on his heel and started back toward the building. Turk growled again, and Faith patted his shoulder. "Easy boy."

The agents watched the doctor throw the door open and storm back into the building. When he turned the corner out of sight, they got to their feet and headed back to their car.

"Well, that was interesting," Michael said.

Faith frowned. "He's not wrong. Our evidence is pretty thin on the ground right now."

“I think we should take his advice,” Michael replied. “I think we should find some real evidence.”

Something in his voice caused Faith to raise a questioning eyebrow.

“I think he did it,” Michael clarified. “I think he’s grandstanding because he’s scared. I think if we put some elbow grease into looking into him, we’ll find the evidence we need to pin him.”

“You don’t think we’re jumping to a conclusion?”

“No, I think we’re following a lead, and after our conversation with him, I think that lead delivers us right to the doorstep of one Dr. Thomas Crane.”

Turk snorted approvingly. Faith wasn’t as certain as they were, but she did have to admit that his behavior was rather suspicious.

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They got into the rental and headed back to their hotel. Faith replayed the interaction with Dr. Crane in her head. It wasn't quite enough to convince her that the doctor was guilty, but it was definitely worth a closer look.

All right. Elbow grease it is.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They stopped at a drive-thru on the way back, a hole-in-the-wall burger joint called Porky's Patties. It advertised its wares with a cartoonish smiling pig extending an impossibly greasy and impossibly colorful burger toward the viewer. The restaurant itself was the opposite of colorful. It was painted the greenish-tinged tan that was popular in the seventies, made more drab by decades of minimal maintenance and a liberal coating of dust. The health certificate in the front window proudly displayed a grade of A that Faith didn't trust for a minute.

"You're sure this place is healthy?" she asked.

"The sign is a picture of a cartoon pig shoving a greaseburger in your face," Michael replied. "If you're feeling like a salad, this is not the place to get it. On the other hand, if you want the best damned hamburger in the Bay Area, this is where you want to be."

It did seem to be popular. There were eight cars ahead of them in line. Maybe that wasn't much for a lunch rush, but it was a lot more than Faith would have expected. "An old favorite of yours, I'm guessing?"

“Oh yeah. This place used to be a small chain. There were eight locations in San Jose when I was growing up. It’s fallen on hard times, but the founder still keeps this one. Trust me, it’s worth it.” He turned to her, “And anyway, when did you get so snooty? This place isn’t any dirtier than the cheesesteak place you go to by your place.”

Faith shrugged. “I guess the pig just threw me off.”

“Yeah, he’s a pretty aggressive advertisement,” Michael agreed. “But trust me, he’s worth it.”

They moved forward a car length, and Faith looked around at the patrons sitting on the small patio. There was a pair of landscapers in khakis and t-shirts bearing a liberal coating of stains from dirt, sweat, and grass. They wore the blank expressions of average Joes just going through the motions of another day. At another table, a pair of high school kids ate French fries and milkshakes and did their best to seem cool and adult, which of course made them seem more awkward. A family occupied the final two tables, two parents and seven children who behaved just well enough to spare the parents the need to physically chain them to their seats.

Fast food restaurants really were a slice of working-class America. They were as ubiquitous as shopping malls but without the façade of status that many shopping malls tried to present. Michael had a point. You didn’t come to a place like this hoping for trendy, health-conscious food that your doctor would be proud of. You came here for quick, filling food stuffed with chemicals that would fire enough endorphins to give you the strength to make it through the next few hours of struggle until you could sleep and start all over again in the morning. When you looked at it that way, the pig with his greaseburger made a lot of sense.

A low whine started in her ears. At first, she thought that the landscapers might have finished their lunch and started to work on the grass in front of the restaurant, but when she looked over there, she saw the landscapers still in their chairs staring

stoically ahead and mechanically eating their burgers. The whine grew louder, and with a brilliant flash of fear, she realized she was suffering another episode of tinnitus.

She lifted her fingers to her ears and pressed the little flap of cartilage on the underside closed. That didn't help at all, and it occurred to her with another flash of fear that the sound wasn't actually a sound at all but a perception of sound that wasn't there. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

It's all right. It'll pass. Just breathe. Let it happen, and it'll all be better in a moment.

In the back of her mind, however, she knew that this sort of ailment was the kind that got worse over time, not better.

"Faith!"

Faith stiffened and looked over at Michael. He was frowning at her. "You all right? I asked what you wanted like five times."

She blinked and noticed that Turk was also looking at her, a worried expression on his face. "I'm fine," she said. "Um... Just... a basic cheeseburger. Whatever that is."

"Fries too?"

"Sure."

"Milkshake?"

She sighed. "Just get me whatever you're getting. Get Turk a few plain patties. No cheese or bread."

“I’m getting an Oinkburger with bacon and a fried egg.”

Faith lifted her hands and looked to the ceiling. “A basic cheeseburger with fries. No milkshake.”

“All right, all right. Just asking. You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

“Okay.”

They waited for their food in silence. Turk stuck his nose in between their seats and kept empathetic eyes on Faith. Michael didn't stare, but the occasional glances he sent her way weren't any less annoying. She was grateful when their food arrived, and he turned his attention wholly to the bounty on his plate.

“Oh yeah. This is the good stuff right here,” he said appreciatively, taking a healthy bite of a hamburger that looked big enough to feed the entire family sitting on the patio.

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Bacon grease and egg yolk ran down his chin, and Faith rolled her eyes and looked away. “Oh yeah. That’s attractive.”

“All for you, pumpkin,” he retorted genially.

“You want to maybe finish that at the hotel?” Faith asked. “We are trying to solve a case.”

“I need fuel, just like any other well-oiled machine,” Michael said.

He put the car into gear, though, and pulled out of the parking lot back onto the busy street. “You should try your burger while it’s fresh,” he suggested. “It’s good stuff.”

“Seeing as how this is important to you, I will give it a try,” Faith relented, pulling the burger from her bag.

A copious amount of grease drained from the wrapping when she opened it, and she looked dubiously at the soggy slab of meat coated liberally with the kind of pasteurized processed cheese food that sold for a dollar-ninety-nine a pack. Even without the bacon, fried egg, and extra patty, it still looked big enough to choke a horse. She took a bite and managed to minimize the amount of grease that ran down her face by leaning forward and holding the burger over the bag.

“Well?” Michael said. “What did I tell you?”

“It’s pretty good,” she admitted. “Still a little greasy, but I like the char on the meat.”

“Real meat too, not that bullshit soy filler crap you get from other places. That’s why it’s greasy.”

“It’s a good burger.”

Turk whined, and Faith tossed him his three plain patties. He ate all three of them in quick snaps and whined again.

“I’ll give you some food at the hotel,” Faith promised. She held up her burger. “You don’t want this. This’ll clog your arteries faster than you can say, ‘who needs all that grease anyway.’”

Thankfully, they pulled into the hotel parking lot a minute later, so Faith was able to stop thinking about tinnitus and burgers and pour her attention back to the case. A few minutes of work revealed that Dr. Crane had moved to Washington State shortly after his board certification was revoked. Prior to that, his practice was located in Louisiana.

The real interesting news came when she searched for that practice. A news story came up about a twenty-three-year-old deaf woman who had died after suffering a seizure during Dr. Crane’s trial.

“Hey, check this out,” Faith said, showing Michael the news story. “Looks like Dr. Crane has experience killing people.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “Well, that’s interesting. I wonder if Monica and James might have found out about this case and threatened to expose him.”

“The case is public information, so they’d need to know more than just that,” Faith said. “Why don’t you call the board and see if they’ll tell you why his certification was only suspended and not revoked? I’ll talk to the DA for Rapides Parish,

Louisiana and see if they can tell me why he wasn't charged with negligent homicide."

Michael pushed the last of his hamburger into his mouth and gave her a thumbs up. He looked like an overgrown kid wolfing down a burger, and she couldn't help but chuckle. "If only Ellie could see you now."

She dialed the number, and after going through the process of confirming her identity, she found herself on the phone with Alcide Dubois, the Parish Attorney for Rapides Parish.

"It's been a while since I've heard that case brought up," Alcide told her. "Sad stuff. The girl was... let's see... Lauren Poitier. She suffered profound hearing loss as a result of a soccer injury in college. She joined Dr. Crane's trial and suffered a seizure due to the sound waves."

"Sound waves?"

"Yes. I'm a little foggy on the medical details, but the trial was intended to test the efficacy of using targeted subsonic and ultrasonic sound waves to stimulate the auditory organs so they could hear again. Like I said, I'm not sure of the medical details, but I am sure that Lauren died as a result of negligence on the part of Dr. Crane. Unfortunately, I was only the assistant Parish Attorney at the time. My superior didn't believe we had enough evidence to convict and dropped the case."

The gears in Faith's head were turning now. "I see. Thank you, Mr. Dubois. I think I have what I need."

"Of course. Good luck to you, Special Agent. I truly hope you bring that man to justice."

She hung up and turned to Michael just as he ended his own call.

“The Board declined to say anything more than that they felt their decision was appropriate given the circumstances,” Michael said. “I’m guessing they didn’t have enough to pin malpractice on him.”

“Or murder,” Faith added. “I just talked to the Parish Attorney. He had a nice tidbit of information for me, though.”

“Oh yeah? I like tidbits.”

“It seems that Dr. Crane’s trial involved using sound waves to heal hearing loss.”

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Michael raised an eyebrow. “Sound waves like a low rumbling sound that seems like it’s coming from far away?”

“Might be. That could be how he’s luring them outside. I dismissed it as a possibility at first, but if there’s even a smidgen of truth to the idea that certain sound waves can stimulate hearing in deaf people, then we might have the missing piece of our method.”

“I think it’s worth another conversation with Dr. Crane at the very least,” Michael said.

“Agreed.” She got to her feet. “Come on, Turk. We’re going back.”

The three of them rushed to their car and moved equally as fast back to the clinic in Fremont. Their rental didn’t have police lights or a siren, but Michael demonstrated great prowess maneuvering through traffic, and they were fortunate enough not to encounter any traffic cops on the way.

When they reached the medical center, they found a cluster of staff standing in front of the clinic. Faith saw Kimmy—the receptionist from before—and tapped on her shoulder. Kimmy flinched and stared at Faith in shock.

“Sorry,” Faith said. “I just wanted to know what was going on. Why is everyone outside?”

Kimmy sighed and wiped tears from her eyes before replying, “Dr. Crane closed the clinic. He let us all go.”

Faith's blood ran cold. "What? Just now?"

"Two hours ago, right after you guys left." She cast an accusing gaze at Faith. "What did you say to him?"

Faith didn't reply. She pushed past Kimmy and worked her way through the crowd to the front door. The building was dark, and a padlock secured the door handles. A typed memo taped to the door bore the simple message: EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, THE AUDITORY RESEARCH CENTER IS PERMANENTLY CLOSED.

A hand tapped Faith's shoulder. She turned around to see an angry nurse ask, "Excuse me, we haven't been paid yet. Dr. Crane owes us our wages through the end of this pay period."

"You'll have to file a complaint with your local district court," Faith replied. "That's not what I'm here for."

She left before the irate nurse could reply. Michael and Turk followed her back to the car, their expressions as grim as Faith's.

"Put an APB out on him," Faith said. "Make sure it goes to the entire Bay Area and California Highway Patrol. Airport police too at SFO, SJO, and Oakland."

"I'll make sure the All Points Bulletin gets to All Points," Michael replied.

"Not in the mood right now," Faith snapped, getting into her seat and slamming the door.

She wasn't entirely sure about Crane before, but now she had no doubt. They had spooked their killer, and now he was getting away.

CHAPTER NINE

Sarah Martinez struggled to remember the sign for hope. She thought for a second, then smiled sheepishly and spelled the word out instead.

“That’s wonderful!” the support group host said.

She signed it as well, but Sarah understood because of the exaggerated movements of her mouth, not the sign. Like she was talking to a five-year-old and not a thirty-three-year-old MA who owned an advertising business.

“It’s important to never lose hope,” the host continued. “It’s also important to remember that being deaf is not a disability. You can still have a normal life!”

Oh yeah, Sarah thought bitterly. It’s perfectly normal to never be able to listen to music again. It’s just fine to not understand my sister when she speaks to me. And hey, it’s okay that literally no one knows what the fuck I’m saying because there are twelve people on Earth who understand sign language and I’m not one of them. Just peachy-keen.

A few other people “spoke.” Sarah picked up a word or two here and there but didn’t understand anything until the host flapped her lips like a cartoon character after every single share. She made sure to smile and clap and give sympathetic nods when she saw others doing it, but inwardly, she was seething.

This wasn’t fair. Maybe it was fine for people who were born without hearing. They didn’t know what they were missing. But Sarah was born normal, and she couldn’t stand knowing that she’d never be normal again. You weren’t supposed to say that deaf people weren’t normal, but you know what? They weren’t. She was normal, and now she wasn’t normal, and it wasn’t goddamned fair.

She managed to control herself long enough to get through the meeting. She even managed to make small talk with a few of the others when it was over. Very small talk. No one here knew anything more complicated than, “Hi, How are you? I’m good. It’s a beautiful day. See you next time!”

But she pushed through it. It wasn’t anyone else’s fault that she got a strep infection in both ears that left masses of scar tissue where her eardrums should be. That was just a shitty thing that happened to her. There was no need to be rude.

This would be her last meeting, though. The support group wasn’t helping at all. She was tired of hearing people tell her to be brave and have hope and realize that she could still live a normal life. None of it was true. If other people could convince themselves of that lie, then good for them, but Sarah wasn’t one of those people.

She reached the parking lot and pulled her keys from her pocket. Her key fob had a function that started the engine before she entered the car. She liked it because it would run the air conditioning or heater for a few seconds before she stepped inside.

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Before she pressed the button, though, she heard a low rumbling sound. At first, she thought that she must have pressed the button accidentally when she pulled the keys out of her pocket, but when she looked at her car, the lights were still off. She looked around but saw no other cars on the floor of the parking garage.

This must be one of those phantom sounds the doctors warned her about. Even though her eardrums were useless now, she would still “hear” sounds from time to time, especially in the beginning. The brain would sometimes pick up flashes of stimulation from the auditory nerve that it falsely interpreted as sound. Just another reason her life was now a piece of shit.

She walked around her hood and saw the person crouched behind her car. She had just enough time to register the ski mask and the length of rubber in the figure’s hands before it rushed her and twisted her around.

The rubber was around her neck and pulled taut before she could start to fight. The figure pulled her to the ground behind the car, hiding her from the elevators so no one could see her.

In her last moments of life, Sarah Martinez realized that death was far worse than life without hearing. Her last thought was a silent, desperate plea that someone, anyone, would save her.

No one did.

CHAPTER TEN

“We’ve got Highway Patrol watching for his vehicle too,” Ferris told the two federal agents. “Won’t help much if he’s in a friend’s vehicle, but we did confirm he hasn’t rented a vehicle, so he’d have to be in a stolen vehicle or catch a ride.”

Very little of that was helpful, but Faith got the sense Ferris was more comfortable thinking out loud. She didn’t mind so much, but she was very upset about the fact that their suspect was almost certainly in the wind. The San Francisco Bay Area was a major transportation hub on the West Coast. In San Jose alone, there was an international airport, multiple major highways and different rail lines that could take Dr. Crane anywhere he wanted to go.

With the APB forwarded to every agency in the area including the TSA, it was unlikely that Dr. Crane could escape using public transportation if he was still in the area, but like Ferris pointed out, all he needed was to find someone willing to give him a ride, and he’d be in the clear. What truly worried Faith was that he was already gone. If he left straight from his office, then two hours was enough time for him to get to San Jose International Airport, buy a ticket on the first international flight, and be in the air before Faith and Michael even realized he was gone.

She looked out of the window and frowned at the darkening sky. He could even potentially have landed already if his flight was a hop to Tijuana or Vancouver.

Michael handed her a cup of coffee. “Stuff’s actually pretty good. I guess there’s a major coffee chain headquartered in Berkeley that donates coffee to the police departments in the area.”

The three FBI agents were at the San Jose PD South Precinct—Ferris’s home turf. After putting out the APB, there was nothing to do but wait and hope. Dr. Crane had no friends in the area, and he was estranged from his family. Who also weren’t in the area. His now-former employees all said that he was a fair boss but very introverted and difficult to talk to. None of them had spent any time with him outside of work.

A search of his home had been equally unhelpful. He hadn't emptied the place, but if there was anything incriminating, he'd made sure to take that with him. They found a ransacked room with clothing strewn about and furniture that was of middling quality, none of which had hidden compartments or holes cut into the upholstery were evidence might have been stashed.

Faith sipped her coffee too quickly and snarled through the burn. Turk pricked his ears up and glanced at her. When he confirmed that Faith wasn't in danger, he closed his eyes and resumed his nap. Faith was rarely upset with her dog, but it bothered her immensely at times like these that Turk couldn't understand abstract concepts well enough to realize that their damned suspect was gone and had quite possibly gotten away with murder.

Michael's hands closed around hers. "Why don't we put the coffee down before we get really mad and throw it at your partner's face."

Faith surprised herself by being able to chuckle. She set the cup down and shook her head. "It's just annoying. I keep going back over our encounter with him, but I can't see how we missed anything."

"We didn't miss anything. We suspected it was him, and it looks like we were right."

"Yeah, and then we let him get away."

"What else could we have done? We didn't have enough to arrest him. We had a barebones suspicion. That wouldn't hold up in any court of law. You know, I love you, Faith, but you have a bad habit of blaming yourself for things outside of your control."

Faith's lips thinned at the callback to her session with Dr. Keraya. "We could have staked out the clinic," she replied. "We could have waited to see how Dr. Crane

would react to our accusation. We could have done further research in the car. If we'd done that, we would have seen him flee."

Michael lowered his eyes. "Okay. Can't argue with that. But don't beat yourself up. Everyone makes mistakes."

"When we make mistakes, innocent people die, Michael."

"I doubt like hell he's going to kill anyone else. He's going to lay low under an assumed name for the rest of his life, probably not in the United States."

"Then innocent people don't receive justice!" Faith snapped. "Stop trying to cheer me up!"

Michael looked like he wanted to say something else, but he thought better of it. Instead, he picked up Faith's coffee and said, "If I hand this back to you, will you throw it in my face?"

Faith sighed and took the coffee. She sipped more carefully this time, and the warmth of the brew relaxed her slightly. "You know, I really wish you could turn off the schtick every now and then," she complained. "I like it most of the time, but this is serious."

"It's always serious, and you brood more than Batman. You need a lighthearted, wisecracking sidekick to balance you out."

"I have Turk."

"Ouch. So I'm chopped liver, I guess."

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“You’re something,” she said drily.

Ferris pumped his fist in the air and cheered, pulling the attention of all three FBI agents to him. He grinned at the trio and said, “Crane popped at the Amtrak station on Monterey Boulevard. Amtrak’s holding the train for us so we can pick him up.”

Faith’s irritation evaporated. She offered a cheer of her own and joined the others as they rushed to Ferris’s cruiser. Ferris called dispatch as he jogged, calling for more officers to meet them at the station and cordon off the area.

“We’ll have nine units there within seven minutes,” he told them.

“That long?” Faith asked.

“Well, for all nine of them, yes. We’ll have two units there in one minute.”

“Why wouldn’t you lead with that?”

“I don’t know! Fine! We’ll have a bunch of cops there soon. Happy?”

“You two related, by any chance?” Michael asked.

“Go to hell,” Ferris and Faith said together, to Michael’s great amusement.

Faith rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t manage to be upset right now. They had found the bastard! He had tried to run, but he hadn’t run fast enough.

They reached the Amtrak Station five minutes later. Three other cruisers were there, but none of the officers had gone inside yet.

Ferris took the words out of Faith's mouth when he said, "What the hell are you all doing? We have a multiple murder suspect in there! Get off your asses and go arrest him!"

The waiting officers leaped into action, but Faith, Turk, and Michael were several steps ahead of them by now. Faith tried not to let anxiety overwhelm her. Damn it, if those assholes lost him again, I swear to God, I'll kill them.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she jogged onto the platform and saw Dr. Crane arguing with Amtrak employees and station security officers. "Go get him, boy!"

Turk leaped forward, barking loudly. Dr. Crane's eyes snapped toward him, and his face went white as a sheet. He pulled an object from his pocket that reminded Faith of a ray gun from fifties comics and pointed it at Turk.

"Hey!" she called, drawing her weapon. "Shoot my dog, and I shoot you!"

He pulled the trigger, but no bullet or laser left the small dish at the end of the barrel. Whatever he'd done was enough to incapacitate Turk, though. He yelped and dropped to the ground, whining and rubbing his ears on the platform. He got up and tried to continue but stumbled and fell to his side.

The blood drained from Faith's cheeks. "Turk! Hey!"

She snarled and aimed at Crane, but he was already running. He'd forced his way onto the train and was now moving toward the back, shoving passengers aside. Security ran after him, but he had a good head start, and with all due respect to the hardworking security officers, they all seemed very out of shape.

Michael came to a stop by Faith, but she waved him onward. “He’s on the train! Go after him!”

Michael nodded and continued pursuit while Faith tended to Turk. He was on his feet again, still shaking his head and wobbling a little. She dropped to his side and held his eyes to hers. “Hey, boy. Are you all right?”

Turk blinked and dipped his head in acknowledgment. His eyes were clear but showed amazement. It was rare that anyone managed to take him down, and never from a distance like that. No doubt he was just as surprised as Faith was.

“Is everything all right?” Ferris asked, joining them with his officers. “Are you hit?”

“No, I’m fine,” Faith said. “The suspect had some sort of acoustic pistol that disabled Turk. Michael’s pursuing him on the train.”

Ferris looked up and swore. “He’s going out the back. He’s going to try to hop the fence at the end of the yard and escape to the parking lot.”

“Head him off,” Faith said. “Secure his vehicle and put patrol units at every cross street near the station. I’ll head to the back of the train.” She rubbed Turk’s cheeks. “Stay here, boy. Okay? Stay.”

Turk didn’t look happy to hear that instruction, but he stayed put as Faith sprinted down the length of the platform toward the train. She leaped off of the platform and rolled to her feet when she landed.

The Amtrak train had seven passenger cars. Faith looked through the windows of each one as she ran but didn’t see anyone. When she reached the last car, she found Michael on his hands and knees with his head in between his arms.

“Michael!” she cried, dropping to the ground. “Are you okay?”

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“Got me with a flashlight,” Michael mumbled. “Ugh. Bastard.”

Faith moved his hands away from his head. There was an ugly bruise above his left temple. The Amtrak security officers staggered out of the last car, huffing and puffing with exhaustion. “Did you see what way he ran?” she asked Michael.

Michael pointed to his right. The opposite direction from where the police had gone. She sighed. “Of course. I’ll continue pursuit.” She turned to the security officers. “Take him back to the station and administer first aid.”

The security officers looked profoundly relieved that they didn’t have to chase anyone anymore. “We’ll take care of him.”

With Michael in good hands—well, in hands, anyway, Faith ran across the tracks and called Ferris over her radio. "Be advised, the suspect has fled on foot and is moving east. Repeat, he is moving east."

Ferris’s reply matched Faith’s own attitude. “Son of a bitch! He duped us!”

“Send units after me,” she said. “He injured my partner. He is to be considered dangerous and possibly armed.”

She jumped over the fence at the end of the train station and nearly landed on top of Dr. Crane. He was hiding in the ditch on the other side of the fence, covering himself with branches for concealment.

“Son of a bitch!” he cried out.

He leaped to his feet, but Faith drove a knee into his groin and dropped him right back to the ground. He lunged for her legs, and she kicked her way out of his grasp and drew her weapon. “Don’t give me a reason, asshole!”

Dr. Crane sighed and rolled his eyes. He put his hands up and said, “Fine. You got me. Goddamn it.”

“On your knees!”

Dr. Crane complied.

“Hands on top of your head!”

He moved his hands and didn’t resist further as Faith handcuffed him. She holstered her weapon and pulled him to a sitting position against the fence. “You’re in a lot of trouble.”

“You don’t say,” Dr. Crane said drily.

Faith pulled out her radio. “Suspect in custody. We’re just outside the east fence.”

“Hell yeah!” Ferris cheered. “Damned good job, agent!”

“Thank you, Detective. Can you do me a favor and send a cruiser to pick him up?”

“They’re already on their way.”

“Thanks.”

She put her radio back and hauled Dr. Crane to his feet. “All right, asshole. Let’s go have a nice little talk.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dr. Crane looked from Faith to Michael to Turk and back to Faith. He saw no sign of forgiveness on any of their faces. He swallowed and waited for one of them to speak.

Faith opened the interrogation. “Why’d you run, Doctor?”

He rolled his eyes. “Why do you think?”

“Honestly? I think you killed Monica Smith and James Porter, figured out that we’re onto you, and tried to flee rather than face justice. How close am I?”

“Not close at all. I didn’t kill them.”

“Then why did you run?”

“Because I knew that you thought I killed them. I knew that you’d find out about... I mean, I already knew that you knew about the complaint against me.”

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“Find out about what?” Faith asked.

“The complaint. The whole thing about the board suspending my certification.”

Faith leaned forward, boring into him with her eyes. “That’s not what you were going to say.”

His left eye twitched, but he didn’t say anything else. Faith helped him out. “Lauren Poitier. That name ring a bell?”

He sighed and dropped his head, then lifted it and began to fidget. “She signed the waiver.”

“Boy, you’d be an awful poker player,” Michael remarked. “Fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, shaky voice, the whole nine yards.”

“She signed the waiver!” Dr. Crane snapped. “What the hell do you want me to do, all right? I mean, for God’s sake. I’m not God. I’m trying to do some good in the world, and I have to follow all of these bullshit rules to even start, and then anytime the smallest thing goes wrong, I get looked at like a pariah! But I’m still out here, still trying to help people. Then you guys show up, and all of a sudden I’m a murderer again.”

“The smallest thing, huh? The death of Lauren Poitier is a small thing?”

Dr. Crane fell silent and stared in between the two of them. “It’s a tragedy, obviously, but it happens. It’s impossible to control every variable. And hey, have I mentioned

recently that it was a trial? You know, like a test?”

“Your empathy for your dead patient is admirable,” Faith said drily.

“Oh, for...” He sighed and fidgeted some more. “Look, I’m sorry, okay? I am. I didn’t want anyone to die. There’s evidence to show that neurons can be retrained, especially in young brains. I really thought that I could train Lauren’s brain to hear again. Not just hers, but everyone suffering from hearing loss.

“Think about it. Think about how important hearing is to you. Think about what life would be like without it. It’s horrible. It’s like having a leg cut off. So much of the human experience is foreign to you. I try to help those people achieve normalcy again.”

Michael scoffed. “Oh yeah. You’re a compassionate person. An angel, some might say.”

Dr. Crane rolled his eyes again. “I tried. I tried really hard. I thought that a targeted pulse of infrasound followed by a targeted pulse of ultrasound repeated hundreds of times would sensitize the auditory nerve so it could hear even without the structure of the inner ear. The preliminary research was promising. I thought...” His voice trailed off. “Hell, I don’t know. I did my best. I really didn’t try to kill anyone.”

Faith let him stew for a moment. He was slumped forward, his eyes downcast. It was difficult to tell if this was due to remorse, exhaustion, fear, or some combination thereof.

But one thing she couldn’t get past was the fact that he’d run instead of talking to them. “So how do Monica Smith and James Porter fit into this?”

“They don’t!” he insisted. “This was what I was worried about. I knew you’d make

the connection between Lauren and these guys and think you had me dead to rights.”

“So you stay and talk to us,” Michael retorted. “You work with us and demonstrate your innocence.”

“I thought it was the other way around,” Dr. Crane said, glaring at Michael.

“We’re not going to debate semantics right now,” Faith said. “Start talking.”

He lifted his hands and let them drop. “I don’t know what you want me to say. The trial with Monica Smith and James Porter was a chemical treatment designed to eliminate scar tissue and repair the eardrums. A lot of deaf people are born deaf because of damage to the inner ear during fetal development. Like I told you earlier, it worked for some people but not for all. Monica and James were two of the not all. But like I also told you, it didn’t work for a lot of people. That’s not something you kill people for.”

Faith nodded. Then she reached into her bag and pulled out the sound pistol Dr. Crane used to disable Faith. “Can you tell me about this?”

Dr. Crane sighed. “It’s a sound pistol.”

“Why were you carrying one when we arrested you?”

“Self-defense.”

“From dogs?”

“Looks like it came in handy,” Dr. Crane retorted.

Turk bared his teeth, and the doctor paled a shade.

“Oh, sure,” Faith said. “You picked up assault on a peace officer. Add that to aggravated battery on a peace officer for hitting Special Agent Prince with a flashlight, fleeing and eluding, resisting arrest, and maybe a trespassing charge for boarding the Amtrak train without permission.”

“Okay, fine. That doesn’t mean I killed anyone.”

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Faith sighed and leaned forward, folding her hands over the table. “You have to look at this from our perspective, Doctor. We talked to you earlier today. You were clearly nervous when you talked to us. Then we leave for a couple of hours, and you close a highly successful clinic with dozens of employees for no reason, pack a bag, flee your home, and try to flee the area.”

“Yeah, what was the plan?” Michael asked. “Mexico?”

Dr. Crane nodded. He looked miserable.

“What were you going to do in Mexico? Do you speak Spanish?”

Dr. Crane shifted in his seat and didn’t reply.

“Where were you last night, Doctor Crane?”

“Home,” he insisted.

“And Saturday night?”

“Home.”

“And you’ve had no contact with Monica Smith and James Porter since the end of the trial.”

Dr. Crane rolled his eyes. “I don’t know how many times I have to say it. I didn’t kill them. I didn’t see them. I didn’t even hear their complaints. I read about them on the

patient feedback report.” His face hardened. “You know what? You guys don’t have anything on me. That’s why you keep asking me the same questions over and over. You’re hoping I’ll say something that will get me convicted.”

"So, just so we're clear on your story," Michael said. "You fired dozens of medical doctors, nurses, orderlies, PAs, receptionists, and janitors because you were afraid that we'd connect you to Lauren Poitier and assume that her death—accidental according to you—was related to the deaths of Monica Smith and James Porter."

He shrugged. “Well, you did.”

“Yes, we did,” Faith agreed, “and if you were innocent, you would have stayed and talked to us. You would have gone through the process instead of trying to throw your life away and flee to Mexico.”

Dr. Crane tapped his fingers on the table. “I panicked. I don’t really have a life here. I have a job here. I wanted to try one last time to make a difference.”

“Bullshit,” Michael scoffed. “This had nothing to do with helping people. You were just trying to establish your legacy.”

Dr. Crane rolled his eyes. “Okay, I wanted to try one last time to do something that mattered, something that people would remember. Then it all blew up. Again. I don’t want to be looked at as a murderer anymore, so I panicked. I figured I have enough money. I can get a small house in Cancun or something and just live out my days on the beach. Not a bad way to fail.”

“I’ll give you that,” Michael said. “Too bad I don’t believe you.”

“Well, go to hell,” Dr. Crane retorted. “What you believe doesn’t determine the truth.”

Faith and Michael shared a look. Faith stood, and Michael followed suit. “We’ll give you some time to think about this,” she told him. “But I’m telling you right now, Dr. Crane. It doesn’t look good for you. I would seriously consider coming clean if I were you. California still has the death penalty. Your case checks all the boxes prosecutors and judges look for. You want us to be on your side while you still have time to change that outcome.”

The three agents left the room. Turk offered Dr. Crane a final growl as he followed the human investigators to the room on the other side of the two-way mirror. When the door closed behind them, Faith asked Michael, “What do you think?”

“I think he’s clamming up,” he replied. “I think he’s going to stay that way until we finally slip the oyster knife into his shell. Then he’s going to say lawyer and clam up again. That’s a problem because we still don’t have any hard evidence.”

“They didn’t find anything in his belongings?” Faith asked.

“Nothing. They found our victims’ files at the clinic, but there’s nothing there that we can use to establish motive.”

“What about the sound pistol? We have a witness who heard a noise at the Monica Smith crime scene.”

“And no such witness at the James Porter crime scene,” he reminded her. “The only clear connection we have between our victims and Dr. Crane is that they both participated in a clinical trial four months prior. If we can’t get something out of him, we’re back to square one. Well, maybe not square one but a soft square two.”

Faith pressed her lips together and looked through the two-way mirror at Dr. Crane. The doctor was staring at his hands and tapping the table, looking miserable and terrified. “How long can we hold him?”

“We can ask for no bond because of the fleeing and eluding,” Michael asked. “But once he gets a lawyer involved, it’s game over. Two days, maybe? No chance he spends the weekend here.”

“Two days it is then,” she said. “We need to go through every single thing in his home and his office. Somewhere in all of that is proof that Dr. Crane is our killer or a complete lack of proof that he is. If it’s the latter, then...” she sighed. “Well, then maybe we were wrong. But we need to be damned sure of that before we let this guy back out on the street.”

Michael nodded. “Do you want to keep talking to him, or should I have the COs put him back in his cell?”

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She shook her head. "Send him back. He's just going to stick to his guns. While we're at it, let's have Ferris get people to interrogate every member of his staff. Prioritize anyone who worked on the clinical trial."

"Will do."

The door opened, and Ferris walked inside looking grim. Faith had seen that look on the faces of many law enforcement officers in the past. She knew what Ferris was going to say before he said it.

"We've got another body, guys. Parking garage of the South Bay Community Center. Victim was last seen alive forty-five minutes ago."

"Which means it couldn't have been Dr. Crane because he was in custody forty-five minutes ago," Michael said. "Damn it."

Faith's shoulders slumped. All of that effort wasted. Turk and Michael injured for nothing. They had chased a rabbit up a tree only for the branch to snap underneath them.

And once more, Faith's fixation on a lead had allowed the real killer to take another life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Faith stared at the woman in the front seat of the late model Lexus sedan and tried not to lose her self-control. She was tall and athletic with chocolate colored skin and eyes

the color of black coffee. She had noble features and full lips that no doubt made the heartbeats of many quicken.

An hour ago, this woman had been alive. While she put handcuffs on an innocent man, the real killer had been lying in wait for her. While she and Michael were browbeating Dr. Crane for information he didn't have, this woman had lain in her sedan, the life choked out of her.

This was the worst part of the job, and twelve-plus years later, it hadn't gotten any easier. Turk trotted around the corner and stopped in front of the rear passenger seat. He looked at Faith and barked once.

"Victim is Sarah Martinez, thirty-eight," Ferris informed them. "She lost her hearing a year and a half ago when she caught strep and it went to her ears. Doctors were able to save her life, but she lost her hearing."

"What was she doing here?" Michael asked.

"Support group for those with hearing loss," Ferris said. "It's a charity function of St. Teresa's Hospital. That's where Miss Martinez was treated."

"I don't suppose Dr. Crane was involved in her treatment," Faith asked.

Dr. Crane wasn't a suspect anymore, but if Sarah was also treated by him, then he would still be a connection between the victims, and it would be worth continuing to follow up on that lead.

"We'll pull her medical records to confirm, but St. Teresa's did tell us that Dr. Crane isn't affiliated with their hospital."

Faith sighed. "Check anyway, just in case she got a second opinion or something

from him."

"Yeah, we'll do that." Ferris looked around and scratched his head. "I can't figure out how the killer stayed out of sight. There are three different entrances to the garage."

"He crouched behind the rear driver's side door," Faith said, pointing to the spot where Turk sat. "He wouldn't be visible to the entrances from here. We're on the tenth floor of the structure on a Tuesday night, so I don't think there would be a lot of people up here. Maybe no one else."

"Why would she park up here by herself?" Ferris asked.

"So no one would talk to her," Michael speculated. "She wasn't born deaf like our first two victims. She lost her hearing in an accident. It would be painful for her to interact with people when she couldn't hear or speak to them anymore."

Ferris sighed. "Yeah, I guess so."

"So he waits behind the car," Faith said, "Kills her, then puts her in the front seat. Then he gets out of Dodge." She looked around. "Do those security cameras work?"

"I'll find out," Ferris said. "Last time the killer wore a ski mask, though."

"We can still get some basic identifying data," Faith said. "Height, build, clothing. We can probably determine if it's a male or a female too. Anything helps at this stage of the game."

"Good point. I'll see what I can do."

Ferris left, and Faith looked back at Sarah. She had come here looking for help coping with her affliction. Instead, someone had killed her for it.

“We’ll look for a connection between the three obviously,” Michael said. “But let’s say we don’t find a connection. Why these three victims? We have a woman in her late twenties, a woman in her late thirties, and a man in his late forties. Are we looking at a man in his late fifties next? Or a teenager?”

Faith frowned. “That’s not funny, Michael.”

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“I’m not joking,” he replied. “That’s the sad part. I really don’t know where to go from here.” He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “She lived in Fremont. She passed five other hospitals to get treated here in St. Teresa where no one would know her.”

“So she was ashamed of her deafness, you think?”

“I don’t think shame is the right word. I do think we should talk to the woman who runs the support group. She was one of the last people to see Sarah alive. She might be able to shed some light on the case.”

Faith nodded and turned to the medical examiner's crew, who stood five yards to the side, waiting patiently for the investigators to finish. "Go ahead and take her. Turk! Come on, boy."

Turk dutifully joined Faith as she and Michael walked over to Ferris. Ferris was on the phone with someone, and whatever he was hearing, it wasn’t good news.

“All right,” he said into his phone. “Thank you.” He hung up and swore softly.

“What is it?” Michael asked.

“Cameras don’t work. The system’s eight years old.”

“Is that old?”

“In this day and age of digital marvels and cloud-based storage, yes. It was in the

process of being replaced. They've gotten to floors one through nine. They haven't gotten to ten."

"Check the footage anyway," Faith replied. "We could still see someone going upstairs or taking the elevator and not getting off on floors one through nine."

"Sure," Ferris replied. "He's sending me what they have. We'll do our best." His phone beeped, and he chuckled bitterly. "Look at that. More good news."

"What now?"

"Confirmation that Dr. Crane never saw Sarah Martinez. That puts the cherry on top of the ice cream sundae of Dr. Crane is innocent and we were wasting our time with him."

Faith nodded. She'd already dealt with these realizations and couldn't feel anything more than numbness hearing it again. "I want to talk to the person who leads Sarah's support group."

"Sure thing. She's downstairs. I'm going to stay up here and coordinate everything. This is starting to become a grade A clusterfuck, and my bosses are getting antsy."

The FBI agents took the elevator down to the first floor of the parking structure. The machine hummed as it slowly lowered them to the ground. It reminded Faith of the rumble Cliff Kowalski described.

The door opened to reveal a much busier floor. Vehicles moved in and out, carefully navigating around the two police cruisers parked perpendicular to each other to block off a section of the floor where two officers spoke with a middle-aged woman with an average figure and a beehive hairstyle. The woman looked to have been crying but remained in control as she spoke with them.

Faith flashed her IDs at the policemen. “We’ll take it from here, boys. Any reason to keep this garage blocked off any longer?”

The older of the policemen shook his head. “If we’re done talking to her, we can open it up.”

“Go ahead and do it then. I don’t want this to go viral and prompt a media frenzy.”

The officers shared a sober look. Few things annoyed law enforcement more than nosy reporters. “We’ll get out of the way, ma’am,” the younger one said.

Faith turned to the woman. “I’m Special Agent Faith Bold. This is Special Agent Michael Prince and our K9, Turk.”

The woman took a shaky breath. “I’m Beth. Beth Rosenberg.”

Faith nodded. “Let’s go take a seat inside.”

The four of them entered the building. The lobby contained glass display cases with artifacts from San Jose’s history and large murals depicting the same thing. There were far more people here than Faith would have expected for this late on a Tuesday night, but then San Jose was a big city. There were plenty of people on different schedules.

“We can talk in here,” Beth offered. “This is the room we reserve for our group meetings. The next group doesn’t arrive for thirty minutes.”

“There’s an eleven o’clock Tuesday meeting here?” Michael asked incredulously.

“I believe they’re a Dungeons and Dragons group,” Beth explained.

“Ah.”

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They filed into the room. As soon as the door closed behind them, Beth burst into tears. Faith put a comforting hand on her shoulder, and Beth stiffened and pulled away. She seemed to realize her rudeness a moment later, because she quickly apologized. “I’m sorry. I’m just... I can’t believe this. Poor Sarah. She’s very close with her sister, and I just hate thinking about what will happen when they tell her.”

That prompted fresh tears. Turk pressed his head gently to her legs and looked up at her until she calmed. She smiled down at him and stroked his fur. “Good boy.”

The four of them sat—Turk still close to Beth—and Faith began. “How long did you know Sarah?”

“Eight weeks,” Beth replied. “She joined us on the recommendation of her primary care doctor when she refused to see a therapist. We were her compromise, I guess.”

“How did she seem to you?”

Beth frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Was she generally happy, sad, friendly, aloof... I’m just trying to get a sense of who she was.”

“Oh. Well... she tried very hard to look happy, but she wasn’t. It wasn’t hard to see under the surface. She was very angry.”

“Angry at anyone in particular?” Michael asked.

“No, just at life. She thought it was unfair of her to lose her hearing. She didn’t think she deserved to suffer like that.”

“She told you this?”

“Yes. During our first session, I asked everyone to tell me how they felt about their hearing loss. There were two others who said the same thing Sarah did. That’s very common among hearing people when they lose their hearing.”

“Not fear?” Faith asked.

“Not usually at this stage,” Beth replied. “Fear happens when someone is in the process of losing their hearing and shortly after. People wonder if they’ll be able to take care of themselves or if they’ll ever live a normal life again. Sarah had lived with hearing loss for over a year. She was functioning very well. She wouldn’t have had those concerns anymore.”

“Was she friendly with other members of the group?” Faith asked.

Beth considered for a moment. “She was polite. I wouldn’t say particularly friendly. She would go through the motions of talking to people, but she never made friends.”

“Do people usually make friends in groups like this?”

“Not always,” Beth admitted. “But there’s a bond people feel when they’re going through the same journey, especially a difficult one. Sarah did all of the right things, but I always felt as if she was... resentful, I guess.”

“Resentful of what exactly? Her hearing loss?”

“Her hearing loss and the fact that we expected her to be happy with her life anyway.

She seemed offended by my claims that it was possible to live a normal, fulfilling life with hearing loss.”

“She told you this?”

“No. It’s just an impression I got. Her shoulders would stiffen, and she’d fold her hands tightly in her lap like she was fighting the urge to shout at me.”

“Did anyone try to make friends with her?” Michael asked.

"I did. I noticed that she was keeping herself at arm's length from everyone. In week five, I asked if she would join me for coffee sometime so we could talk one on one. She gave me a look of pure rage. Not at me," she added quickly. "Grief that expressed itself as rage."

“So no one showed a special interest in her besides you?” Faith asked.

Beth sighed. “No. No one disliked her, but everyone could tell, I think, that she preferred to be left alone.”

Faith nodded. “One last question. Do you know a Monica Smith or a James Porter?”

She watched Beth closely as she replied. Beth’s brow furrowed. “No, I don’t. Should I?”

No sign of recognition. No sign of fear or guilt. No sign from Turk that he detected any of those emotions either.

Well, Faith hadn’t expected anything. It was just a shot in the dark. Like every shot in this entire damned case. “No,” she replied. “I was just curious.”

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“Do you think they had something to do with this?”

“No,” Faith replied. She got to her feet to head off further curiosity. “Thank you for talking to us, Beth. If you think of anything else, please give us a call.”

She pulled a card out and handed it to Beth. Then, she and her two companions left her and returned to their car. As they approached the parking garage, Faith saw the medical examiner's van pull onto the street and accelerate away, carrying the body of Sarah Martinez. She wondered what Sarah felt in her last moments. Was she relieved to have been freed from a life she despised, or did she realize in that moment how precious life was, even a life without sound?

Either way, Faith would see to it that she received justice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lillian Martin watched David Friedman pull out of his driveway and accelerate down the street. She waited until his car turned out of the residential neighborhood, then got out of her car and approached the house.

She wasn't afraid of being seen. She'd watched this neighborhood for the past five weeks. She knew that everyone on this street left for work by nine in the morning. It was now nine-thirty. She also knew that David spent every Saturday golfing when Faith was away. He'd be gone until at least four in the afternoon.

She wouldn't need that much time. She just needed to send a little message.

Faith had her residences locked down tighter than San Quentin, but Faith didn't live by herself anymore, and apparently she hadn't been able to convince the good doctor to turn his home into a fortress. The locks had been replaced with sophisticated mechanisms that couldn't easily be defeated, and cameras covered every square inch of the property, but the panic alarm that had alerted the Philadelphia Police to West's intrusion into Faith's old apartment hadn't made its way here. Lillian was certain that Faith reviewed the home's security footage religiously, but she was betting the good Dr. David didn't.

And Faith was gone now. This was Lillian's chance. She walked to the home, smiled, and flipped off the cameras. It wouldn't matter if anyone saw her face when she was done. She would be in the wind before anyone realized what had gone wrong. She was good at being in the wind. She would leave clues so West would find her when he broke out, and then they could be together forever.

The doors were locked well, but the windows were your standard, everyday panes. It was simple enough for Lillian to jimmy one open. She climbed in, closed the window, and then got to work.

"You stupid bitch," she whispered. "You stupid fucking piece of shit worthless goddamned whore."

She giggled softly. That felt good. She hated Faith Bold, and one day, she would say so to her face, along with every colorful phrase she felt like. Then she'd cut her stomach open and pull her intestines out. Then she'd strangle her to death.

That was her latest fantasy. Before that, she had imagined tying her to a pole by her throat and watching her slowly choke to death. Before that, she had imagined hogtying her and sticking a knuckle spreader into her mouth, then opening it until her jaw broke. That probably wouldn't kill her, but she'd figure something out after that.

She couldn't understand what in God's name West had seen in Faith. She wasn't especially pretty. She wasn't especially smart. She hadn't been the one to kill Jethro Trammell, the Donkey Killer that West considered his inspiration. That was her partner, Michael Prince. She hadn't been the one to catch West either. That had been a couple of city cops responding to one of Faith's home security alarms.

Yet for some reason, the only man Lillian Martin had ever loved was obsessed with this stupid, fucking bimbo bitch FBI agent whose biggest claim to fame was having a cute dog.

She grinned at that thought, showing her teeth. "She won't have a dog much longer," she said in a singsong voice. "Because Silly Lily's gonna kill him dead."

She giggled at that. Silly Lily. That would have been a good nickname for her. She wondered what her old counselor would have said to her if she suggested that.

Good ol' Dr. Ramon. He of the wandering eyes and just enough intelligence to know that trying to touch her would have meant getting his dick ripped off. Maybe one day she'd pay him a visit.

First things first, though. She needed to kill Faith Bold. She needed to show Franklin West that she was the one he wanted, not this FBI slut.

She couldn't do that with the dog, though. Frank had beaten Turk in a fight before, but Frank was a strong man. She was athletic, but she was petite. She could only kill people by sneaking up on them, and she wasn't going to sneak up on a trained police dog.

"Nope! I'm going to poison him!"

She opened the bag of dry food and sprinkled the cyanide salt all over it. She giggled,

imagining Turk taking a bite of the food and wondering why it tasted different. Would he wonder that, or would he just go nom nom nom like the big dumb mutt he was.

“Gonna kill Turk dead, gonna make Faith watch him diiiieee.”

She finished with the dry food and looked at the wet food. All sealed cans. Nothing to do there. If she opened a can, Faith would know someone had been there.

Well, that was all right. Turk would eat dry food eventually. She'd keep watching until she knew Turk was dead. After Turk was dead, getting to Faith would be easy. She was so much less dangerous than she thought she was.

And once Faith was dead, Lillian would go to West. She'd break him out of jail, and the two of them would be together forever and ever and ever and ever and ever.

She giggled and clapped her hands. Then she put everything back where she had found it, left the house, locked it, and returned to her car.

Only a matter of time, she thought. Then I'm going to tear you to fucking pieces, you asshole bitch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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The next morning found Faith refreshed and able to think more clearly. She didn't like that they were back to square one, but that was where they were, and Faith needed to deal with it. That meant going back to good old-fashioned police work.

To that end, the two of them were interviewing the other members of Sarah Martinez's support group. Beth Rosenberg had volunteered to attend as an interpreter. That required them to clear her completely as a suspect, easily done when she proved she was out of state the night of James Porter's murder.

Their first several interviews went much like the interview with Beth the night before. Sarah was polite but aloof. She didn't seem to really be looking for healing. She clung tightly to bitterness. A few other responses that said pretty much the same thing.

Faith noted with some irritation that most of the respondents were sorrier for Sarah's sister than for Sarah herself. Obviously Faith felt bad too, but it wasn't just Sarah's sister that had suffered. Sarah had lost her life. Sure, she was having a harder time than the others were, but it bothered Faith that they had just written her off so easily because she wasn't as eager to heal as they were. Faith didn't know if she was justified feeling that way, but it was how she felt.

By lunchtime, they had worked their way through eight of the twelve members of the group. They took a break to eat sub sandwiches catered by a local shop that donated regularly to the community center.

"I'm not sure exactly what you're hoping to learn," Beth said. "I don't think anyone here could possibly be involved in this."

“We don’t either,” Faith replied. “But we think the killer is targeting deaf people.”

“Well, Sarah wasn’t deaf,” Beth clarified. “Deaf people are born without the ability to hear. Sarah had hearing loss.”

“I don’t think the killer would make that distinction,” Faith said.

Beth’s brow furrowed. Then her eyes widened. “Those other two people—Monica and John.”

“James,” Michael corrected.

“Right. Those are other victims, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Faith said. “We’re trying to keep this case low-profile right now, so I’d appreciate if you didn’t spread that news. But yes, we believe that there’s a serial killer targeting deaf people in the Bay Area.”

Beth’s hand came to her mouth. “Oh my God. That’s horrible.”

“Yes,” Faith agreed. “It is. We’re still not sure how this killer is selecting his or her victims, but it could be that the others in your support group have interacted with or seen the killer at some point.”

“Oh my God,” she repeated. “Are they in danger?”

“It’s hard to say,” Faith replied. “The victims were killed at distant locations from each other. Still in the Bay Area, but...” She stopped herself. She had already shared more about the case than was prudent. “Anyway, we’re trying to see if anyone noticed something or someone suspicious.”

“Oh my God,” Beth breathed a third time. “I just can’t... Why are some people so evil?”

Faith smiled grimly. “I’ve had this job for over twelve years, and I still don’t know the answer to that question.”

“They don’t always see it as evil,” Michael offered. “In a lot of cases, serial killers manage to convince themselves that what they’re doing is good. Sometimes it’s due to mental illness, and sometimes it’s just an incredibly powerful ability to justify bad behavior, but...” His voice trailed off when he saw Beth’s expression. He cleared his throat. “Anyway, we should get back to the interviews.”

The group returned to the conference room. Beth left to bring in the next interviewee, and Faith scolded Michael. “Way to make it worse, dummy.”

“Hey, you started all of that,” he retorted.

She glared at him for a moment, but he was right. “Yeah. I guess I did.” She shook her head. “We should learn ASL. There are too many hearing-impaired people in America for us not to know how to communicate with them.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Michael said. “If we can ever find the time.”

“What are you talking about? We have a lot of free time.”

“No, you have a lot of free time because you have a very kind partner who’s willing to do almost all of the paperwork for you,” Michael replied. “I do not have nearly the same free time.”

She rolled her eyes, but once again, Michael was right. If she had a weakness as an agent, it was her contempt for paperwork. She really appreciated that Michael was

willing to handle as much of it as he could.

"So, do you think this killer is evil?" Michael asked.

She frowned. "Do you think he isn't?"

"I'll rephrase. Do you think he knows that what he's doing is wrong, or do you think he's convinced himself that it's right?"

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She shook her head. "I think both are possible. But if you're asking me to build a profile, I'd have to say I'm not sure. I still don't buy that these victims are only connected because they're deaf. They're too far apart for that to be the only connection. There's a reason why it's these specific targets. Hell, we're talking to eleven other hearing-impaired people today. Why did he choose Sarah?"

"She was aloof from the group and she parked on the tenth floor even when it was empty."

She frowned. "Well, shit. So much for that." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arm. "I just don't buy it, though. One victim in San Jose, one in San Francisco, and one in Fremont. He can't just randomly happen to be in all of those places at different times and randomly stumble across deaf people in each location."

"To be fair, Sarah Martinez lived in Fremont but was killed in San Jose," Michael clarified.

"Fair enough," she allowed. "Either way, he picked these particular victims. Even if he just wanted one of the people from this support group, he still picked this support group. I want to know why."

The door opened, and Beth led a short, bespectacled man with a ring of dark brown hair circling a shiny bald pate. Faith would have to save brainstorming for later.

"Hello," she told the man. "I'm Special Agent Faith Bold, this is my partner Special Agent Michael Prince and my K9 unit, Turk."

Turk barked a greeting. A touch of grief crossed the man's face. He signed something, and Beth interpreted. "His name is Ethan. He says he misses hearing his dog bark."

Faith offered a sympathetic smile. Turk sidled up to the man and laid his head in his lap. Ethan sighed and signed something else. "He says he's sorry to hear about Sarah. He was afraid something like this would happen."

Faith's smile vanished. "Why would you say that?"

Ethan frowned and answered through Beth. "I thought she killed herself. It wasn't suicide?"

"No," Faith replied. "She was murdered."

Ethan's jaw went slack. He shivered and signed rapidly. "I didn't know that. I thought for sure she had taken her own life. Murdered? God, that's horrible! Her poor sister."

"Why did you think she killed herself?" Faith pressed. "Did she seem suicidal to you?"

"Oh yes," Ethan signed back. "Especially after her fight with..."

Beth blinked. "Oh... I didn't know about that."

"Know about what?" Faith demanded. "What did he say?"

"He said that she got into a fight with Marcus."

"Who's Marcus?"

“He was one of the other students here. I had to kick him out after week five because he was being belligerent with me. He was surly with other students too.”

“And you didn’t think to mention this?” Faith snapped.

Beth paled. “I... I didn’t think... I mean, I didn’t believe that he’d do something like this. And I didn’t know that he had argued with Sarah.”

Faith sighed. “What’s his last name?”

“Wolfe with an e.”

“W-O-L-F-E?”

“Yes.”

Faith turned to Michael. “Find him. Beth, give him any contact information you have.”

“I deleted his number from my phone after I kicked him out, but St. Teresa’s might still have it.”

“I’ll call them,” Michael said.

He got to his feet and walked to the back of the room, pulling his phone out of his pocket as he did. Faith turned back to Ethan. “Tell me about this fight.”

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Ethan began to sign rapidly again. Beth translated, her voice shaky. “After the week three meeting—I was home sick that week, so they had a different moderator—Marcus approached Sarah and started yelling at her. He was drunk, and he accused her of being a privileged b-word. Sarah was upset by that, of course, and asked him why he said that. He went on a long rant about Sarah having it easy because she was rich, how she could probably get her hearing fixed by paying the doctors a lot of money when his insurance wouldn’t even cover the cost of a cochlear implant. She told him to go eff himself, and he tried to slap her, but a couple of the other men intervened.”

“And the guest host didn’t tell you about this?” Faith asked Beth.

“No. I’m just finding out about it now.”

She signed something to Ethan, who signed back and then lifted his hands.

“Have this conversation later,” Faith said. “Ethan, were there any other interactions between Sarah and Marcus?”

“No,” Ethan signed. “They ignored each other the next two sessions, and then Marcus was gone.”

“And no one at any time thought it would be a good idea to tell someone that a belligerent drunk had argued with and tried to assault Sarah?”

Ethan reddened and lowered his eyes. “We wanted Marcus to get help. We all felt bad for him. He was struggling more than any of us.”

Faith had to take a moment to calm down. Of course, they would sympathize with Marcus but not with the woman he assaulted. How did people make decisions about who they cared about and who they didn't care about? Was it really just because Sarah was rich and Marcus wasn't?

“Do you really think Marcus killed her?” Ethan asked.

Faith didn't answer that question. “Thank you, Ethan. That's all we need.” She handed him a card. “If you think of anything else, call me and let me know.”

“Do you have TTY?” Beth explained, “That's a teletype machine. Hearing-impaired people use it to communicate.”

“The Philadelphia Field Office does,” Faith replied. “That's the office number. I'll let them know to keep an eye out and contact me if they get anything.”

Ethan nodded and got to his feet. “I hope you find whoever killed Sarah,” he signed. “She was a good woman. She didn't deserve that.”

Faith's anger softened a touch. At the end of the day, Ethan was only a civilian. Civilians weren't supposed to be able to think like investigators. “We will. I promise.”

Ethan smiled and gave Turk one last pat before leaving the room. When he was gone, Faith turned to Beth. “We don't need to talk to anyone else right now. Keep your phone on, though. We might need more help.”

“All right. I'm sorry. I never would have thought that Marcus could do something like this.”

“We're still not sure that he did,” Faith replied. “Focus on your surviving students for

now. Let us handle the hunt for Sarah's killer."

"Okay. Thank you both. I'm glad someone's speaking for Sarah. No one should have to die alone like that."

Faith thought of Gordon Clark and Grant Monroe, friends and mentors of hers, both murdered alone by serial killers obsessed with her. She swallowed the lump in her throat and said, "Have a good day, Beth. At the very least, have a better one than yesterday."

Beth chuckled and wiped tears from her eyes. "I will. Thank you again."

Michael approached Faith after Beth left. "I've got an address for Wolfe."

"Good. Let's go see what he has to say for himself."

As they left the community center, Faith wondered how many killers got away with murder just because the thought of murder was unfathomable to most people. How many people had looked at Ted Bundy and assumed that there was no way such a charming and handsome man could be responsible for cutting women to pieces with a hacksaw? How many people believed that Richard Ramirez was just a weird, angry guy and never considered how deep his depravity actually ran?

How many people looked at Franklin West and saw only a psychologist in a turtleneck? It wasn't healthy to assume that anyone around you could be a serial killer, but it was true.

Sometimes Faith wondered if anyone was ever truly safe, or if they were only lucky that the predator's eyes were aimed elsewhere.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Growing concern in San Jose as Channel Ten News has just learned that there is possibly a serial killer targeting hearing-impaired people in the Bay Area. According to an anonymous tip from a social worker who leads a support group for hearing-impaired people at the South Bay Community Center, three hearing-impaired people have been killed over the past three days by an as-yet unidentified individual. The killer is believed to lie in wait for his victims and then strangle them. Among the victims are San Jose artist Monica Smith, a graphic designer by trade whose recent entry into the Bay Amateur Art competition won silver.”

The reporter continued to talk about the victims and shared the sobering news that the FBI still had no leads on the suspect. The killer listened, somewhat amused at the sensationalism the news was lending the story but mostly irritated at the way the deaths were presented. Monica’s artistry was celebrated, but no mention was made of the fact that the musical arts were inaccessible to her. She spoke at length about James Porter’s contributions to his local community and not one person mentioned that he had no idea what birdsong sounded like. Sarah Martinez was depicted as a loving mother, and no one gave a damn that she couldn’t hear her sister’s voice anymore.

Why would they want these people to live such a shitty life? Were they that cruel? Could they not understand mercy when they saw it?

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The killer sighed and switched off the tv. People took so much for granted. The killer would guarantee that if any of those people lost their hearing, they would understand exactly how horrible life was for the “victims.”

"No one should have to live like this," the killer said. Or at least I intended to say. For all the killer knew, the words came out as unintelligible grunts and moans.

The killer stood and headed to the kitchen to prepare dinner. As the killer mixed flour and spices to bread the chicken breasts that would be served with mashed potatoes and steamed asparagus, thoughts of the next killing came to the forefront.

The public was too focused on the violence of the act. That was the problem. Honestly, the killer would rather allow people to become comfortable and liberate them with an injection of some powerful barbiturate so they could ease into freedom. The issue with that was the fact that the people the killer liberated didn't seem to understand their deaths as liberation. The killer didn't blame them for that. This was the only life they knew, even if it was a poor one. They didn't understand that beyond the threshold of physical death was something greater: freedom from the struggles of this life.

The killer needed to show that something greater. But how to show something that couldn't be experienced with the senses? How to convince people to have faith that there was a life waiting for them free of ailments like the ones the deaf suffered?

The killer would need to think on that for a while.

As the killer finished dinner, his body reacted as it always did when it was hungry.

Anticipation of the meal ahead drove away grief at the life the killer lived. The taste of the chicken costoletta and the pinot noir served with it could for a moment make the killer forget about deafness. The body was deceptive, and the mind—desperate for any relief from this hell—clung to every lie like a drowning person to a life raft.

But it was only temporary. The meal would end soon, and the killer would have nothing but remnants. Sight remained, but what was sight without sound? Reading words off of the television screen wasn't the same as hearing them spoken aloud. Gazing upon someone beautiful was empty when their physical appearance was left unenhanced by an equally beautiful voice.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

The killer's fingers tightened around the wineglass. The killer set the glass down to avoid shattering it. The killer's hands bore scars from the time a glass shattered due to the killer's emotions.

The killer thought of the safe in the basement. That safe contained weapons the killer eschewed for the mission of liberation.

But they worked. They would liberate the killer. Punch in the code, grab one of the weapons, probably the forty-five, press the barrel to the temple and squeeze the trigger.

Freedom. Liberation. Rest.

But that wasn't the killer's lot. Not yet. Not until more were freed.

So although the killer wished desperately to be rid of this life, it would have to wait. After dinner, the killer sat in the living room and thought about how to make the message clearer next time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Marcus Wolfe lived in Campbell, a town just southwest of San Jose, in one of the few low-income neighborhoods in the area. Relatively low-income, anyway. Compared to some of the places Faith had seen, the neighborhood here was solidly middle-class. The houses were older but looked decently well-built. The grass was mostly green, suggesting that people here could afford their water bills. Most telling was the lack of illegal activity. In truly poor urban neighborhoods, minor vices like drug use, dealing, and in some places even vandalism and prostitution were tolerated so long as nothing rose to the level of violence or became so blatant that cops had no choice but to stop looking the other way.

This was just a quiet, ordinary neighborhood. Still, that didn't mean Marcus Wolfe wasn't struggling. Faith had looked up the cost of a cochlear implant on the way. Without insurance, the lower end of the spectrum was thirty thousand dollars, with some people spending up to one hundred thousand dollars depending on the specific device and their individual cases. That was simply inaccessible for a lot of people.

That didn't excuse murder, though. Like many Americans, Faith disliked a lot of health insurance realities, but killing people never made anything better, and there was no reason to target these victims anyway.

Marcus's house was a little dirtier than the others, and the grass was a little more overgrown, but those seemed like recent problems. The truck parked in the driveway was an old Toyota, but at a glance it appeared to be in good running shape. It was one of those vehicles that no one would think twice about seeing, even in wealthy neighborhoods. The landscapers that Faith had seen at the burger place yesterday drove a similar truck.

So witnesses could have easily overlooked the vehicle at the mixed-use neighborhood where Monica Smith was killed and the wealthy enclave where James Porter was

murdered. It would be a little trickier to manage Sarah Martinez's murder since people there would recognize him and presumably his vehicle too, but the community center was busy, and he could have easily parked somewhere else and waited until everyone was in the meeting to head to the parking garage and lie in wait for her.

Turk didn't growl or bark as they approached the house, but he kept his eyes open and his ears lifted, alert for any sign of danger. Faith unclipped her shoulder holster in case she needed to draw quickly, then knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

She knocked again. Still no answer.

"Hello?" she called. "FBI. Is anyone inside?"

No response. Either the house was empty, or Marcus was the only one inside and just couldn't hear them.

She looked at Michael. "What do we do if he doesn't answer?"

Michael took a deep breath. "Well, we need to talk to him. We can walk around the house and see if we can see him through a window or something to get his attention."

"They can feel things through the ground, right?" Faith asked. "Would he hear it if we stomped on the porch?"

Michael stared at her, and heat climbed her cheeks. "I was just trying to think of an option."

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“Let’s try knocking one last time,” he said. “Then we’ll walk around the property and see if we can get his attention.”

He knocked firmly, his “cop-knock” that worked wonders for startling suspects into either opening the door or trying to flee. Either would be fine with Faith at this point. With Turk here, there was almost no chance of Marcus successfully fleeing.

“He ain’t gonna hear you!” a voice to their right called. “He’s deaf! Lost his hearing in a gas explosion last year.”

The voice belonged to a middle-aged man in a dirty wifebeater who leaned out of his window and squinted at them. “You’ll have to call him. He’s got a machine that types whatever you say on a piece of paper.”

“Thank you,” Faith said. “What’s your name?”

“Name’s Casper. Like the ghost.”

“Thank you, Casper. Are you going to be here for a while?”

Casper chuckled. “Rest of my life probably. I’m retired.”

“Good for you. We might come over and talk in a few minutes.”

Casper scratched his nearly bald head. “All right. Marcus in trouble?”

“We’re not sure yet.”

The door opened, startling Faith. She spun around, hand flying to her shoulder holster. She found herself staring at a tall, muscular man with a week-old stubble, a mop of unruly hair, and rheumy blue eyes that blazed with grief, irritation, contempt, and despair all at once. The pungent odor of sweat and alcohol washed over her, almost enough to make her eyes water.

This specimen—Marcus Wolfe, surely—held a note in front of her face. On the note, scribbled in jerky handwriting, was the message, get off my property.

Faith took her hand off of her gun and raised it and its companion, palms outward. “Sorry to bother you, Mr. Wolfe,” she said slowly and clearly. “I’m Special Agent Faith Bold. This is my partner—”

Marcus pointed to his ears and chopped his hand across his throat in an exaggerated gesture.

“I understand,” Faith continued, slowing her speech further. “I’m with the FBI.” She pointed at her vest. “F... B... I. I need to talk to you about—”

Marcus slammed the door into her face. Faith turned to Michael. Turk growled this time, softly but enough to let Faith know he was annoyed by their suspect’s reaction.

“He can’t hear you!” Casper called again.

Faith rolled her eyes. “We got it. Thank you, sir. Go on inside, and we’ll talk to you in a moment.”

“All right,” Casper replied in a slightly injured tone. “Just trying to be helpful.”

Faith waited until she heard the window shut, then said, “We’ll try your idea and go around the house to try to get his attention. If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to—”

The door flew open again. Faith jumped backwards and cried, “Jesus!”

Marcus shoved another note into her face. This one read, are you stupid? I can’t hear you, dumbass!

“We need to talk to you,” Faith said. She pointed at herself, then at Marcus. “I need to talk to you.”

Marcus stared at her like she’d just announced her candidacy for President of Jupiter. He lifted his hands into the air, shoved the note into her face again, then stormed inside and shut the door.

Faith looked at the porch and sighed. “Okay, this was a bad idea.”

“We can call Beth and see if we can get her to interpret for us.”

“Do that,” Faith said, “but first, call Ferris and see if he can put two officers on Marcus. I don’t want another incident like we had with Dr. Crane.”

The three investigators crossed the yard to Casper’s house while Michael made the phone calls. “I got Beth’s voicemail,” he told Faith. “Ferris said he can have officers in the area in ten minutes.”

“That’s good enough. Thank you.”

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“Don’t mention it. What are we talking to the neighbor for?”

“I want to know if he saw Marcus leave his house on the nights of the murders. If the timeline matches up, then we might have enough evidence to bring him in for questioning.”

Michael looked doubtful, but he didn’t question her. Faith knocked on the door, and this time, it opened immediately. Casper was a full head shorter than Faith thought he would be. He grinned up at Faith with his squinty eyes and said, “Couldn’t get nowhere with Marcus, huh?”

Faith left that unanswered and asked, “Are you two close?”

Casper scratched his belly button and said, “Well, I don’t know about that. We get on all right, I guess, but we don’t talk or anything.”

“How about the rest of the neighborhood?” Faith asked. “Does he have any problems with anyone?”

“Not that I know of,” Casper replied. “He’s not the friendliest type, but before the gas explosion, he was all right.”

“And now?”

“Now he keeps to himself. When you do talk to him, it goes kind of like your conversation did. He gets real upset on account of the fact he can’t hear you.”

“Has he ever been aggressive toward you or anyone else that you know about?”

Casper blinked a couple of times. “You mean like violent?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “No, not really. Say, do you two want to come inside? I just made some soup if you’re interested.”

“We’ll pass on the soup,” Michael replied, “but we’ll have a seat on your sofa if that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

He turned around and shuffled deeper into his house. The interior here reminded Faith a lot of Cliff Kowalski’s apartment except that instead of faded vinyl laminate, the floor was faded and threadbare carpet. The two agents took a seat on a sofa that has absolutely no support after decades of abuse from Casper’s compact but prodigiously overweight body. Turk sat in front of them and watched Casper carefully lower himself into an easy chair.

Casper sighed with relief and said, “It’s a real sad thing what happened. He used to work for Pacific Gas and Electric. He was working on a gas line for Western Telecom’s building when the line blew. Fortunately for him, he was outside when the explosion hit, so he survived, but the noise blew out both of his eardrums.”

“Did he tell you all of that?”

“No, I heard it on the news. They didn’t give his name, but when he was gone for two days and came home with bandages around his head, I knew it must be him.”

“And he’s been in a bad mood ever since?” Michael asked.

Casper chuckled. “Well, I’d be pretty upset if I lost my hearing in an explosion too.”

“Has he gone out at night recently?” Faith asked.

Casper scratched a thin layer of stubble on the wattles of his neck. “Well... he used to go out Tuesday nights, but I haven’t seen him do that in a while.”

“Within the past week, has he gone out?”

“He heads out to stop by the liquor store sometimes. Poor feller’s figurin’ to drink himself to death, I think. I’m usually in bed by eight, though, so I don’t know if he’s gone out any later than that.”

“Would the other neighbors have seen anything?” Faith asked.

Casper shrugged. “You can ask them, but I doubt it. Folks here don’t pay much attention to other people. It’s kind of sad if you ask me. No one cares about their neighbors anymore. Used to be if folks were in trouble, there’d be a community around to help them out. Even if you weren’t friends, you took care of each other. Now everyone just goes through life alone.”

He tilted his head. “Maybe I’ll go see Marcus. I’ll bring him some donuts, just to let him know someone’s thinking about him.”

“Give that a few days,” Faith said. “We need time to figure out what the deal is with him.”

“Yeah, that reminds me. You ain’t told me what he’s in trouble for.”

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“I’m not at liberty to talk about the case to unrelated individuals,” Faith replied. “But I would suggest leaving him be for now.”

Casper nodded. “Sure. All right. I hope he’s not in any serious trouble. I don’t think he’s a bad man. He’s just suffering.”

The three agents left Casper’s house and headed back to their car. They caught sight of a police cruiser approaching the house just as they pulled away. A part of Faith hoped that Marcus would do something stupid and get himself arrested to make their lives easier. Another part of Faith hoped that if he was innocent, they would figure it out quickly and stop making a difficult time for him even more difficult.

Either way, they needed to find an interpreter—Beth or someone else—and talk to him ASAP.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When they reached the hotel, Faith decided to look for another interpreter. Beth still hadn’t gotten back to them, and Faith didn’t want to wait. Besides, Beth hadn’t asked to be involved in this case. She might be ignoring their call on purpose, which was fine with Faith. There were professionals trained to interpret for law enforcement.

“I’m going to call the San Francisco field office and see if they have an ASL interpreter available,” she told Michael. “I don’t think Beth’s—”

Her phone interrupted her. She frowned when she saw the number. “Shit. It’s Tabitha.”

Michael grimaced. "Oy. Good luck."

She answered the phone, and before she could say anything, her boss shouted, "What the hell is going on, Faith?"

Faith blinked. "Um... We're working the case?"

"Are you talking to the news while working the case?"

"No."

"Well, someone is. Someone told the news that there's a serial killer on the loose in the bay, and they just told them that Faith Bold and Michael Prince are the ones investigating. Now your name's right at the top of every news headline again."

Faith frowned. "I can see how that's frustrating, ma'am, but that's bound to happen. We're working with local law enforcement and interviewing people of interest. The media is eventually going to figure out who's working the case."

Tabitha sighed. "I know, but the fact that it's you makes it a news story. Christ, why the hell..." She took a deep breath, and to her credit, she tried to use a more professional tone when she spoke again. "I'm assigning a new investigator to the case, or rather, I'm going to call San Francisco and have them assign one. I really don't know why we ship our investigators across the country when there are perfectly good field offices in every major city in the United States."

Faith's frown deepened. "We send people who are best suited for each investigation. I'm the most experienced agent in cases like these. That's why I get sent instead of local agents."

"I'm not disparaging your skillset, agent, but we've talked about the danger that your

celebrity status poses to the FBI. I can't have this kind of media exposure."

Faith fought to keep her voice even. "With all due respect, ma'am, you already have it. If you remove me from this case, the news media is going to wonder why. And if there are any more victims, they're going to decide that it was your interference that led to that."

"Don't threaten me, Special Agent!"

"I'm not threatening you," Faith insisted. "I'm making you aware of the side effects of a decision to remove me from a case, especially one you assigned me to. You did assign me to this case, right?"

Tabitha sighed. "Yes. I thought it would take you out of the spotlight since you and your partner decided to publicize the Messenger Killer and turn it into another goddamned media circus. God, what happened to us being detectives? What happened to undercover work? When did we go Hollywood?"

Faith listened to the ASAC rant, sharing a dry look with Michael. Tabitha had legitimate reasons to be concerned, but she catastrophized even the slightest attention from the media. It was unavoidable in a day and age when any teenager with a cell phone could broadcast anything they wanted to the world via the internet.

"Shit. All right, you're still on the case. But for the love of God, Bold, please try to act like an investigator and not a supermodel."

Faith's fingers tightened around the phone. "I will continue to conduct myself with professionalism and integrity as an FBI agent, just as I always do, ma'am."

Tabitha sighed again, then hung up without another word.

Faith set the phone down and sighed. “How did she get her job?”

“Technically speaking, she still doesn’t have it. She’s interim.”

“It’s been months. When are we getting someone else?”

“The Bureau has a shortage of agents with supervisory experience who don’t very quickly despise leadership with every fiber of their being. And the field office is trucking along just fine. It’s probably not high on Smythe’s radar.”

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Faith glared at him. "Word of advice, Michael. When Ellie complains about something to you, don't explain to her why the things that irritate her actually make sense."

Michael rolled his eyes. "Fair enough. But since you're my partner, not my wife, my advice to you is to learn to let the idiocy of the brass roll off your back. We were spoiled with Grant. Now we're dealing with a perfectly normal moronic ASAC. It happens."

"How would you know? You never had anyone but the Boss," she replied, using Grant Monroe's nickname.

"I talk to other people," he quipped. "It's a skill you should learn someday."

She gave him the finger and slumped in her chair. "Beth's probably the one who called the news."

"Probably," Michael agreed. "Should we scold her?"

Faith shook her head. "No, there's no point. Like I told Tabitha, the media was going to find out about this sooner or later. We're not going to use her as an interpreter, though, so we need to find someone else."

"Are you still planning to call the San Francisco Field Office?"

"Yeah, I'll give them a call. Can you feed Turk? He's giving me puppy eyes again."

“That’s not just his face?”

“His food is on the bottom shelf of the mini fridge.”

“I know where it is, Grumpy,” Michael said, leading an excited Turk to his soon-to-be-filled bowl. “Call Frisco.”

Faith did just that, only to learn that the Field Office's only ASL interpreter was on vacation for the next six days. She called Ferris and learned that San Jose PD didn't even have an ASL interpreter. "We usually hire out for that," he told her. "I'll text you the number of the agency we use. They're very good."

“I’ll take it, thank you. While I have you on the phone, is there any news on Marcus Wolfe?”

“Nope. He’s still in his house. Neighbor keeps poking his head out the window to see if anything’s going on, but that’s about it.”

Faith nodded. “All right. Keep that unit there as long as you can. If nothing else, it might spook him into staying put and give us some time.”

“Try not to take too much time,” Ferris replied. “We don’t really have a good reason to be there. If someone complains—Marcus included—we might have to vacate.”

Faith sighed irritably. “Well, if anyone in the damned Bay Area wants to translate American Sign Language for me, I’ll be there this afternoon.”

“You got it. Call that place I forwarded to you. They’re good.”

“I’ll do that.”

He hung up, and Faith rubbed her temples for a moment before calling the number. She had never been good at dealing with these little inconveniences in the middle of a case, and this was the second time she and Michael had a suspect but couldn't manage to have a productive conversation with him. Her tolerance for incidental delays was very low right now.

She dialed the number and got a very pleasant woman named Darla who informed her that they could have an interpreter to her within an hour. That did wonders for Faith's attitude.

"That would be great, thank you. We're at the Westin South Bay, room eleven-thirty-seven."

"I'll have Rebecca meet you there. Do you have an email address I can send her profile to?"

Faith's brow furrowed. "Her profile?"

"Yes. We send profiles of all of our interpreters to our clients so you know who you're working with. It's an extra layer of security, and we like our clients to see the human side of the work we do. Deaf and hearing-impaired people are one of the most underrepresented groups in the United States. This is one of the little ways we hope to change that."

"You're telling me," Faith said.

She gave Darla her email, thanked her again, then hung up. A moment later, she got the email. Rebecca Thorne, thirty-four. She had been with the interpreter service for two years and had "spoken" American Sign Language for seven. Among her previous employment was a four-year stint at a deaf school in San Leandro, a middle-class suburb in the East Bay a few miles south of Oakland.

Faith noted that she also worked as a volunteer interpreter for the South Bay Community Center. She frowned and noted the dates. She'd started volunteering three months ago, right when Sarah Martinez's support group started.

That probably meant nothing, but it sent Faith down a rabbit trail. She pulled up the community center website and searched for events tailored to the hearing-impaired.

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The very first event was a career exhibition that had taken place two weeks after Rebecca started her employment. It featured different deaf people in the Bay Area who enjoyed successful careers. Deaf students could visit with them and learn all of the wonderful career opportunities available for the hearing-impaired.

Among those careers were graphic design—hosted by Monica Smith—and accounting—hosted by James Porter.

A kernel of suspicion sprouted in Faith's mind. "Michael, can you call Beth again, please?"

Michael frowned. "I thought she was out."

"She is, but I want to ask her a question."

"Sure." As he dialed the number, he asked, "What about?"

"It looks like Rebecca Thorne had contact with Monica Smith and James Porter."

Michael's eyes widened. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. She hosted a career day for the hearing-impaired at the South Bay Community Center. I guess she volunteers there. I just want to see if maybe she had contact with Sarah Martinez as well."

Michael lifted a finger. "Yes, hello, Beth. I'm going to put you on speaker. Faith has a question for you."

“Hello?” Beth’s nervous voice wavered from the phone.

“Hello, Beth,” Faith said.

“I’m... I’m sorry...” Beth said weakly. “I know you told me not to tell anyone, but I thought that people should know, and—”

“I’m not calling about your talking to the media,” Faith interrupted. “You absolutely shouldn’t have done that, but I shouldn’t have told you anything about the case in the first place. I’m calling because I was wondering if you had the name of the guest moderator for your week three support group session.”

“Oh.” She sounded relieved. “Oh, sure. I can get that for you. One moment.”

Faith heard the sound of rummaging. A few seconds later, Beth said, “I have it here. The guest moderator’s name was Rebecca Thorne.”

Faith’s heart leaped. She kept her voice calm as she replied, “Thank you. That’s all I needed. Try to stay away from the media, okay?”

“Yes, of course. I’m so sorry if I caused you any trouble.”

“Take care.”

She hung up and turned to Michael. “Well, look at that. I guess we have a new suspect.”

A better suspect, too. Marcus was connected only to Sarah so far. Rebecca Thorne was now connected to all three of their victims.

There was a knock on their hotel room door. Faith looked through the peephole and

saw a woman outside. Her hands were in plain view, and Faith didn't see any sign of a weapon, so she opened.

The woman at the door was tall, about five-eleven, and of sturdy build without being fat. She wore a knee-length skirt and a long-sleeves suit jacket, but if her toned calves were any indication, she was in great shape.

Killing shape.

She smiled, revealing twin rows of perfect white teeth set under emerald-green eyes and framed by wavy reddish-brown hair. "Good afternoon! I'm Rebecca Thorne."

Faith stepped aside. "Come on in, Miss Thorne."

Rebecca stepped inside, her heels clacking softly. Faith closed the door and said, "Why don't you have a seat, Miss Thorne? We need to talk."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rebecca's brow furrowed slightly, but she kept her bright smile as she took one of the desk chairs. Faith took the other one, and Michael sat on the edge of one of the two queen beds.

"So you volunteer at the community center in addition to your job with the ASL interpreter service?" Faith asked.

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“I do. Is that how you heard about us?”

“Actually, no. Your firm was recommended by Detective Ferris of the San Jose Police Department.”

“Ah. Yes, we do a lot of work for them.”

“We heard about your work at the community center through their website,” Faith explained. “I understand that you hosted a career fair for the hearing impaired a few months ago.”

Rebecca’s brow furrowed again. “Yes, I did.”

“And the following week, you moderated a support group for the hearing impaired.”

“I... yes, the support group leader was out with the flu. May I ask what this is about?”

“Do you remember Monica Smith, James Porter, and Sarah Martinez?” Michael asked.

Rebecca looked between the two agents and then at Turk, who stood in between them, tail switching slowly back and forth. Her eyes narrowed further. “I remember Monica Smith from the career fair. She was a graphic designer and amateur artist. There was a woman named Sarah in the support group who was involved in an altercation with another member of the group. I don’t remember her last name, and I don’t remember a James Porter. Can I ask what this is about? I thought I was here to

provide interpretation services for you.”

“We’ll talk about that in a moment,” Faith said. “I’ll answer your question, though. Monica Smith, James Porter, and Sarah Martinez were all murdered over the past several days. They were strangled to death by a rubber ligature, probably a tourniquet.”

Rebecca blinked. Her eyes widened. “I remember now. This was on the news. I didn’t pay attention to the names, but now I get it.” She took a deep breath and chuckled slightly. “Sorry. I thought I was in trouble for a second. I’ll help out anyway I can. I didn’t know them well, but if there’s anything I can do to help you guys catch the people who did this, I will.”

“I appreciate that,” Faith replied. “Can you tell me where you were last night?”

Rebecca’s smile faded. “Oh my God. You think I killed them?”

“We’re just asking where you were,” Faith demurred. “We’re not charging you with anything. We’re just going through standard questions we always ask people of interest.”

“Well... If this is an interrogation, I would prefer to have a lawyer present.”

Faith lifted her hands. “Like I said, we’re not charging you with anything right now. It’ll just help us clear your name from the list if you can confirm your whereabouts.”

“Why did you have me come out here? Why wouldn’t you come to the office?”

Rebecca's voice was loud, and her words clipped. She was getting nervous. It wasn't a sure sign of guilt, but that coupled with her evasion of the question definitely made Faith suspicious. "If you can provide an alibi for last night, then it'll be clear to me

that you're not our killer. That's all I'm asking you to do."

"Okay," Rebecca snapped, getting to her feet. "This is... I can't believe this. I want a lawyer. You guys are literally assuming I'm the killer because I happened to be in the same place as these guys months before their murders?"

"You happen to be the only person so far who has had contact with all three of our victims," Faith said. "You would have had contact information for Monica Smith and James Porter because of their involvement with the event. You wouldn't need Sarah Martinez's address because you knew that she would be at the South Bay Community Center every Tuesday night. It wouldn't take much work to figure out that she parked on the tenth floor so she didn't have to interact with other people when she left the session."

Rebecca pointed a finger at Faith's nose. "This conversation is over. Screw both of you. Damned power-tripping asshole cops."

"Quite the temper you have," Faith observed.

Rebecca threw her hands in the air and shook her head at the ceiling as though to ask Heaven, are you hearing this? She turned on her heel and took two steps toward the door when Michael said, "Hey, Rebecca, why did you leave the San Leandro School for the Deaf?"

Rebecca froze and stiffened. Faith lifted an eyebrow and leaned forward. "Rebecca?"

Her lips trembled. She lifted a hand toward the handle but stopped before she grabbed it.

"Would it help if I said that I already know?" Michael asked.

She lowered her hand and turned toward them. Her face was white as a sheet. “If you already know, then why are you asking me?”

She looked like she meant that to be forceful, but her voice was thin and trembling when she asked that question. Michael kept his own tone gentle but his expression firm. “I’d like to know if we can count on your honesty. Otherwise, we’ll proceed with charges and go through the process of gathering hard evidence.”

Faith controlled her reaction. Michael was bluffing—rather dangerously in Faith’s opinion. They didn’t have remotely enough to charge Rebecca with a crime. Michael was banking that Rebecca’s anxiety would cause her to want to talk to them and get this over with as soon as possible.

And his bluff paid off. Rebecca took a shuddering breath and said, “I was fired for assault—I got into a fight with another teacher.”

Michael nodded. “That’s what I see here too.”

“What was the fight about?” Faith asked.

Rebecca rolled her eyes. Now that she had decided to talk, some of her anxiety had receded, replaced with anger. “She and I disagreed on the necessity of cochlear implants for the hearing impaired.”

Faith raised her eyebrows and shared a look with Michael. Marcus Wolfe had caused trouble at the support group because of his frustration at being unable to procure those implants. “What was the disagreement? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Rebecca sighed. “She believed that the more advanced systems could eventually eliminate hearing impairment. The word she used was ‘cure.’”

Her lip curled slightly upward when she said that. “And you didn’t agree?” Faith prompted.

“I don’t agree that deaf people need to be cured,” Rebecca replied. “I don’t even like calling them impaired. An impairment is something that makes it difficult for you to function in your everyday life.”

“You don’t think being unable to hear well qualifies?”

“It shouldn’t. I mean, it’s so easy to make the world accessible to deaf people. You know those crosswalks that speak so that blind people can hear when to cross?”

“I’m familiar,” Faith said.

"Well, we can do the same for deaf people, and it would be even easier. Sight is already the most important of our senses. So, just make things visible. Require subtitles or closed captioning for all news broadcasts. Send emergency notifications by text. Use flashing lights and vibration for alarms instead of just sound."

“We already have all of those things, don’t we?” Michael reminded her.

“We do, but it’s not as ubiquitous as it should be,” Rebecca replied. Her anxiety was completely gone now, focused as she was on an issue she was passionate about and not the fact that two FBI agents were questioning her about multiple murders. “But even so, that supports my point. Deaf people can live perfectly ordinary lives. That was the whole point of the career fair. Hearing loss isn’t an impairment. It’s not a disability. It’s not a syndrome. It’s like how some people can see without glasses, and some people need glasses. Do we call those people visually impaired?”

“Yes.”

Rebecca’s jaw tightened. She really did have trouble controlling her temper, especially when people disagreed with her. Faith could easily imagine another teacher pointing out a flaw in her argument and Rebecca losing control. She wondered what would be happening right now if they weren’t FBI agents.

"My point is that I think it's unhelpful to teach people with hearing loss as though they're less than. Instead of spending all of this money trying to make them like us, why don't we spend the money teaching society to accept them for who they are? It's not even about cochlear implants. It's about treating people like they're human even if they aren't exactly the same as we are."

“Bit of a stretch to call them a protected class, don’t you think?” Michael asked.

“Oh, are you deaf?” Rebecca asked sarcastically. “Do you know what they go through?”

“Are you deaf?” Faith replied coldly. “Do you know what it’s like to be able to hear one day, then not hear the next?”

Rebecca blinked. “Well... That’s... I mean, hearing loss is different from deafness.”

“We’re getting off track here,” Michael said. “Do you have an alibi for last night or no.”

Rebecca shook her head and looked up at the ceiling. She opened her mouth to respond, but just then, Faith’s ears began to whine. This one was far worse than the past events, powerful enough that Faith winced and brought a hand to her ear.

She noticed Rebecca and Michael both looking at her with concern. Michael said something, but the whine was still too powerful for Faith to hear through.

Then Turk barked. Faith knew he did because she saw his mouth open, but she didn’t hear the sound at all. Turk, like most German Shepherds, had a loud, powerful bark that carried for dozens of yards. Faith didn’t hear it at all.

Fear gripped her, twisting her spine and driving the air from her lungs. Before she was entirely aware of what she was doing, she was on her feet and rushing from the hotel room.

Her heart thumped, and the sensation of it pounding in her chest was close enough to sound that she clung to it as she reached the elevator. She pressed the button several times, but when she saw the floor indicator showing that the elevator was ten floors below her, she took the stairs instead.

The pounding of her feet as she descended was like sound too, but not really. Nothing was like sound. Sound was like sound. That was it.

Faith knew then that she had taken sound for granted her entire life. She had an idea now what Marcus Wolfe must have felt as he picked himself up from that gas explosion and realized that the ringing in his ears was the last thing he was ever going to hear.

She sobbed, the noise a gasp as much as a cry. When she realized that she had heard that sound and not just felt it, she sobbed again—this time with relief—and collapsed on a landing. She heard Turk barking, and a moment later, he pressed himself against her. She held him tightly, clinging to his warmth and the softness of his fur, breathing deeply until her own heart calmed.

Her phone was ringing. Michael.

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Seeing his name, embarrassment started to set in. She had lost her hearing for a few minutes and collapsed into a nervous wreck. It was just a little tinnitus, and it had just started. There was time to deal with it. She'd see a doctor as soon as she got home.

Get your shit together, Faith.

She answered, and Michael asked, "What's going on? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sorry," she said. "I got a headache all of a sudden."

"That's not a headache. You ran from the room and down the stairs. If it hurts that bad, you need to get to the hospital stat."

"No, it's..." she rolled her eyes. "Look, my ears started ringing, okay?"

Michael was quiet for a moment before he said, "Your ears started ringing?"

His attitude cut her. "It was scary, all right? I couldn't hear for a minute." Her voice sounded plaintive and weak, and she felt a surge of anger. "I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I freaked out, and I didn't think about what I was doing. Let me take a moment to calm down, and then we can keep interviewing Rebecca."

"I finished interviewing her. She has an alibi for last night."

"You finished her? That quickly?"

"She gave one to both of us," Michael said. "You're tinnitus must have started off

when she gave us that information. When you didn't answer my first three phone calls, I confirmed the alibi before calling again. She's clean."

Faith slumped forward and sighed. "Right. Okay. Let's go talk to Wolfe."

"Okay," Michael replied. "No problem. Call me when you're on your way back to the room."

He hung up, and Faith buried her face in her hands. She didn't weep this time, but the burning she felt on her cheeks wasn't much better.

This was now a race to see which would break first: the case or Faith's hearing.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Marcus Wolfe finished the last of his bourbon, tossed the empty bottle next to its companions on the couch, buried his head in his hands and wept. That's what Marcus did most days now. Woke up, got booze, and got drunk. His banking app could deposit his disability checks over the phone, and there were cheap takeout places in this part of Campbell, so the only people he ever had to see were the Majumdars, the elderly Sikh couple who ran the liquor store. They didn't feel a need to sympathize with him for being deaf, and they didn't feel a need to talk to him without giving a shit that he was deaf, so he didn't mind it so much. Plus, they sold him as much booze as he wanted, so there was that.

He hated this. His life was fucking awful now.

"Least those fucking cops are gone now."

He sighed and wiped his tears away. He got to his feet, swaying a little, and walked to the kitchen to grab a bag of potato chips. He made the journey relatively free of

incident, only bumping his knee a little on the coffee table. That would leave a bruise, but not much of one. He could handle a few more drinks.

He laughed. Who gave a shit? Why not drink until he passed out again? Who was gonna stop him?

Thirty years. Thirty years he worked for PG&E. He never realized before now how much the job meant to him, but without it, he could barely stand to wake up in the morning. Maybe he was nothing more than a gasman, but that meant something. It was his job to make sure that buildings had heat, that residents could cook their food, that city buses could refuel. All of that gone because some idiot in a budgeting office decided to gamble that a ninety-year-old gas main could handle a few more years of deterioration.

He grabbed the chips and a bottle of vodka and stumbled back to the living room. The Sharks were playing tonight. He could watch the game with subtitles. It was something to do.

He plopped on the couch, opened the vodka and drank a healthy swig. His old buddy Angel told him that there was fine vodka out there that wouldn't burn when you drank it, but this wasn't that stuff. This was rotgut, the cheap kind with a screw off cap that the Majumdars sold for five dollars a fifth. It seared his throat and sent fire through his sinuses.

He coughed and twisted the cap back onto the vodka before setting it on the couch. Then he popped open the bag of chips.

He couldn't hear a damned thing. Not a fucking thing. At one point, he could have given an eloquent explanation of all the ways that hurt him, but now his alcohol-soaked mind just kept fixating on the pertinent point. He couldn't hear a single thing.

A lump formed in his throat, but he didn't bother to cover his eyes this time. He just sat on his couch and watched the Sharks score the opening goal against the Ducks, sniffing, sobbing and shaking.

At some point, he'd have to figure this out. He couldn't drink himself to death. Well, he could, but even now at the darkest point in his life, he knew he would get through the pain. If he came through it with a shot liver and thirty extra pounds around his gut, he would regret that, so he had to figure something out sooner or later.

Damn it, if only the insurance company had paid for his damned cochlear implants! He wouldn't have collapsed like this. He wouldn't have gotten into a fight with that prissy bitch at the support group.

That was why the FBI was here earlier. He knew that. He'd seen on the news that Sarah had died. He didn't know who the other two were, but he figured the police would eventually want to talk to him. He wasn't sure why the FBI was here, but he wasn't surprised by it.

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Whatever. If they came back with an interpreter, he'd talk. He knew ASL well enough now that he could get the general gist of things. Otherwise, they and that dead stuck-up bitch could go screw themselves.

That thought brought a flood of remorse. Sarah hadn't done anything to deserve that anger. And she was dead now. Had he really fallen so far that he was going to delight in a woman's death?

He looked at the bottle of vodka and made a choice. No more. He figured he'd have a bad couple of days of withdrawals, but he'd get through it. Then he'd find something else to do. His disability wasn't much, but that with his pension and the social security checks he would start getting in seven months when he turned fifty-five would be enough to keep him alive. Thank God he had finished paying his mortgage. He could take walks, he could travel, he could see movies at the Regal downtown. They had a screening of each movie reserved for the hearing impaired. He'd be okay.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. God, he was drunk.

A soft rumbling came to his ears. He stopped dead still. His ears. A rumbling came to his ears.

A cascade of emotions ran through him. You're probably just so shitfaced that you're hallucinating.

But he heard it again, and there was no mistake, that's what it was. He heard it. He heard the sound of... what was it?

He got to his feet and followed the sound. It was coming from his backyard. A mountain lion, maybe?

He grabbed his shotgun by the door, just in case, and headed into his backyard. There was nothing there.

His heart dropped to his feet. It was a hallucination. There was no sound.

The grief was so sharp that his earlier resolve wavered. Maybe he'd just have one more drink and throw everything away tomorrow.

He turned around and saw a blur of motion. Something hit him hard on the jaw, and he dropped to the ground. Consciousness faded before alarm could reach the forefront of his mind. Darkness settled over him, and peace returned once more.

Then everything was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Faith rejoined Rebecca and Michael at the room.

"I'm very sorry," Rebecca said softly. "If I'd known you were suffering from hearing loss, I wouldn't have been so rude. I didn't mean to minimize your fear."

Faith forced a smile and said, "That's all right."

"Just so you know, there are resources all over the country for people like you. There are advocates who will help you—"

"I appreciate that," Faith said, "Thank you. I'd rather focus on the case now, so if you are still willing to interpret for us—"

"Oh yes, absolutely. I was a little freaked out when I realized that you guys suspected me, but I definitely want to help you find the killer if he's still out there. I don't know if Marcus was a killer, but he was definitely violent, so it wouldn't surprise me."

"Well, we'll handle the detective work. You just need to make sure we all understand each other."

"Of course. And if you need—"

"That's all I need," Faith said bluntly.

Rebecca reddened slightly and lowered her eyes. "Right."

Michael frowned at Faith, but the last thing she needed from him right now was judgment. She brushed past Rebecca and left the hotel room. The others followed, Turk right at her side looking at her with concern. She reached down to scratch him behind his ear. "I'm all right, boy."

Turk's expression suggested he didn't believe that for a second.

Michael kept up the conversation with Rebecca as they drove to Marcus Wolfe's house. He was probably doing that so Faith didn't have to talk with her and could have time to calm down and focus on the task ahead. Faith had time to calm down, but she didn't do a very good job of focusing on the upcoming interview with Marcus.

Why had she reacted like that? It was fine to be afraid of losing her hearing, but to lose control like that? What was going on?

She had been emotionally fragile in the past, beginning with her recovery from the torture she'd endured at the hands of Jethro Trammell. Turk had come into her life

and helped her through that, but then the Copycat Killer had come up, and Faith started to suffer from nightmares. When that copycat killer was revealed to be none other than her therapist, Dr. Franklin West, she had come dangerously close to going off the deep end.

Now she was teetering on the edge again, and it wasn't just a little hearing trouble that was doing it. There was a third killer out there, also obsessed with Faith, also killing people close to her in vicious ways to get her attention.

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Also, doing a good job of staying hidden. That was one thing that Trammell, West, and this Messenger Killer had in common. Faith could ordinarily find a ritualistic serial killer within a few days, maybe a week or two at most. These ones eluded her for months. True, she wasn't allowed to work the cases officially, but even when she was working on them in spare moments without the FBI's knowledge, she couldn't make progress. She had been so excited by Michael's discovery of West's fan mail, but that had failed to produce any leads, and now they were back to square one.

That was it. That was why Faith was so off balance. In a way, Tabitha was right. Faith's celebrity status was a problem. Not because the media paid undue attention to her but because she had somehow become the fixation of three separate serial killers.

Why? What was it about her that made her so "special?"

"We're here," Michael said.

That was another courtesy. Michael could tell that Faith was lost in her thoughts, so he told her where they were, knowing she wouldn't even look through the damned windshield to see. Her cheeks burned as she got out of her car. She looked at Michael and said, "You take lead this time."

Michael nodded, showing no sign of concern in front of Rebecca. Faith knew she'd get an earful of that concern later, but she'd deal with it when it came.

They stood on the porch, and Michael dialed Marcus's phone number. "Marcus Wolfe, this is Special Agent Michael Prince. My partner and I were here earlier today. We've come back with an interpreter. We need to talk to you. Please come to

the door.”

He hung up and asked Rebecca, “How long does it take for those TTY machines to work?”

“They should be instant. Older ones would need a second to catch up to the words, but newer ones use laser or inkjet printing. They should be just as fast as speech.”

Michael nodded. He put his ear to the door. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Could you really hear something that way?” Rebecca asked.

“We should,” Michael replied. “But I don’t hear anything. No movement, no television, no appliances running.”

“He could be asleep,” Rebecca suggested.

“At seven-thirty?” Faith asked.

“If he’s a chronic drinker, that’s not out of the question,” Michael pointed out.

Faith sighed. “Right. Call him again. We’ll give it a few minutes, and if he doesn’t answer, we’ll pick the lock and go in.”

“Can you do that?” Rebecca asked. “I thought that was illegal.”

Faith’s lips thinned. Technically, it was illegal, but sometimes, it was okay to bend the rules if it didn’t hurt anyone and got Faith the answers she needed.

And what were they supposed to do, anyway? They couldn’t let their suspect use the fact that he couldn’t hear as an excuse to impede their investigation.

Faith sighed. “Well, call him, and we’ll go from there. And Rebecca, I really need you to stay quiet and let us do our jobs.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Michael left another message. The group waited a few minutes with no more response. Faith sighed. “Okay, Michael, you stay with Rebecca. Turk and I are going to go around the house and see if we can find Marcus.”

“You got it.”

Faith and Turk moved to the side of the house, and Turk barked almost immediately. He rushed forward but only made it a few steps before yelping and dropping to the ground just as he had at the Amtrak station when Dr. Crane shot him with the sound pistol.

The whining noise came to Faith’s ears again, but she didn’t panic this time. She was almost certain that the killer’s sound weapon was causing this latest episode.

She rushed past Turk and rounded the corner. The whine faded, replaced by a deep rumbling sound.

That was telling, but more telling was the figure standing in the backyard holding a black object about the size of an old Walkman CD player. The two of them stared at each other for a moment before Faith drew her handgun.

The figure twisted a knob on the object and threw it at Faith. The rumbling became a deep basso roar in Faith’s ears. She winced and batted the object away. It hit the ground and split into two pieces. The rumbling stopped, and Faith breathed a sigh of relief.

And remembered that she had just drawn her weapon on a suspect. She swore and looked ahead, expecting the killer to be rushing her.

Instead, he was rushing away. She just caught sight of his silhouette in the darkness ahead.

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She swore and drew her flashlight. The killer was running in between the houses, using the darkening night to conceal his movements. Faith sprinted after him, calling, “Stop! FBI! Stop running!”

That command worked as well as it always did, which was to say not at all. The killer ran quickly and easily, his movements urgent but self-assured. Faith brushed away the blow that dealt her pride and focused on how to overcome his size and speed advantage. Turk was usually how she did that, but apparently he hadn’t recovered from the earlier attack because he hadn’t followed her.

You’d better not have hurt my dog.

She aimed her handgun and shouted, “Stop now, or I’ll shoot!”

That was an empty threat. She couldn’t shoot in a neighborhood like this, where a stray bullet could easily kill an innocent person. She was hoping her killer didn’t know that.

He did. Or he felt he could still get away. Whatever the reason, he didn’t slow or stop at all.

She bared her teeth and increased her pace, her feet pistoning back and forth like a track star. She wasn’t gaining any ground, but she wasn’t losing any more ground either.

They reached the end of the neighborhood now and came to a city park. The killer continued to run, sprinting into a cluster of trees. Faith kept her light on him, and

holstered her handgun, pulling her taser out instead. She still didn't want to risk a shot here, but she felt comfortable with less lethal options.

She entered the trees and saw branches rustling ahead. "Stop now!" she called. "You're going to get tased!"

The killer didn't reply, so Faith continued to pursue. The trees were dense here, and her light reflected off of their branches and made it impossible for her to see the suspect, but she followed the rustling branches and kept up with him that way.

Her radio chirped. "Faith? Where are you?"

"I'm pursuing the suspect, Michael. He injured Turk with a sound weapon and ran. I'm in a city park about a half mile north of the residence. Do you have eyes on Turk?"

"Yeah, I have eyes on Turk," Michael replied. "He's okay."

Faith saw rustling right in front of her. She caught a blur of dark clothing and tackled it.

She was rewarded for her troubles by a screech and a flash of fangs. She cried out and stumbled backwards just in time to see the possum she had tackled rush to the higher branches of the tree. She stared at the animal in disbelief for a moment, then heard an engine revving. Headlights switched on, and a moment later peeled away.

That would be her suspect escaping while she was wrestling with an animal. She pounded her fist into the ground and cried, "Damn it!"

Her radio chirped again. "Did you get him?"

“No. He got away.” She stood and brushed herself off. “Damn it! I didn’t even get the make and model of the car.”

“Well, you should probably come back here and look at what Turk found. Or rather, who Turk found.”

Faith’s heart dropped to her feet. “Who?”

“Marcus Wolfe.”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

“This is new,” Michael said, a note of dejection in his voice.

Faith didn’t have a response. She just sighed and looked at Turk, who sat with his hands in between his legs. He whined at the body, and Faith said, “It wasn’t your fault, boy. We just didn’t quite get here fast enough.”

That thought brought a stab of guilt. They could have gotten here fast enough. If Faith hadn’t had a complete meltdown over a ringing in her ears, they could have been here before their killer finished with Marcus, maybe even before he started. The same would have been true if they hadn’t interrogated Rebecca Thorne, but she could forgive herself for that. She had a history of violence, she knew the victims, and she had strong opinions over how hearing-impaired people should view their condition.

But she couldn’t excuse her tantrum. Dr. Keraya could spin that all she wanted, but that was absolutely Faith’s fault.

And Marcus Wolfe had suffered for it.

He had been strangled to death like the previous three victims, but the killer had

thrown a little extra flair into this murder. Instead of just leaving the body where he'd killed it, he had set up a little shrine in Marcus's toolshed.

Marcus was suspended from the ceiling of the shed by wire tied around his wrists and around the rafters. He was naked, and crude papier-mache angel wings were secured to his back with duct tape. Blood trickled from both of his ears where the killer had used a sharp object to puncture them.

Minutes. They had been minutes behind the killer. If she had just shown a little backbone...

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The door to the shed opened, and Detective Ferris cleared his throat. “Miss Thorne’s on her way back home. I have Cooper giving her a ride.”

Faith nodded. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Don’t mention it.” He gestured at the body. “Sick stuff, huh?”

“Yes.”

"Not the worst I've seen, but sure ain't pretty. Any thoughts why he's escalating?"

Faith took a deep breath. “I think he’s trying to send a message.”

“What, like, you can’t catch me? I can do more, and you still won’t find me?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I think he’s been sending a message the entire time, but it’s not coming through the way he wants it to. You remember how I noticed at Monica Smith’s studio that the killer used care to lower her body to the ground?”

“Yeah. I remember that. That’s why we thought it might be a lover for a second.”

Ferris thought it might be a lover, not Faith or Michael, but Faith let that pass. “I think he wants to show us that he cares about his victims.”

Ferris scoffed. “Cares about them? By killing them? Sick freak.”

“I won’t argue with you about that,” Faith said, “but that kind of false benevolence is far from unheard of in serial killers. A lot of killers have a mercy fetish where they believe they’re helping their victims by killing them. I worked a case in Washington State this past winter where the killer murdered people who were abusive to animals. She did this because she had abused animals in the past and believed she was going to hell for it. She killed her victims thinking she was saving them from judgment.”

“Christ,” Ferris said. He put his hands on top of his head and stared at Marcus’s body. “Ahh. What a mess. You said you saw the killer, Faith?”

“I did.”

“Can you describe him?”

Faith sighed. “He was definitely male. Tall, I think six-five or so. Slender build but athletic, like a runner. I think he is a runner, actually. He fled on foot and did a good job doing it.”

“That’s it? Tall, skinny, and fast?”

Faith’s lips thinned slightly at Ferris’s tone. “He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and a ski mask. It was dark already by the time we arrived, so I couldn’t see the color of his eyes.”

Ferris swore and kicked a rake that leaned against the wall of the shed. It bounced fell over, the handle pointing at Marcus’s body as though to say, look what you caused, Faith.

She turned away. “Go ahead and send CSI in. This was a more complicated crime than the earlier ones. It was also his first time with the new MO. He might have made a mistake.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

She left the woodshed and headed to the house, Turk and Michael following. Michael trotted next to her and said, “So this killer is showing his care for them with the angel wings and the ruptured eardrums?”

“I think so,” she replied. “He doesn’t see this as killing his victims, but as liberating them. The pierced eardrums represents him ‘destroying’ their ailment, and the wings are obviously meant to symbolize their souls escaping to Heaven.”

“So he thinks their lives are shit, and this is how he’s helping them?” Michael scoffed. “I have to agree with Ferris. This is sick shit.”

“When is it ever not sick?” she asked drily. “What about the device he left behind? Have you looked at it yet?”

“CSI has it now. They’re not supposed to give us an official answer yet, but they told me it’s an amplifier that creates a powerful subsonic frequency. It’s not something ordinary people can hear.”

She frowned. “But I heard it. My ears started ringing when it went off. And Turk heard it too.”

“The way they explained it was that this isn’t about sound so much as it’s about pressure. I didn’t hear a thing, and neither did Rebecca, but people with more sensitive hearing—like Turk, and you right now—would experience extreme discomfort, and people without hearing would feel the actual pressure waves. They’re very high-intensity for sound waves but very low-intensity for pressure waves. That’s why Cliff could feel the rumbling in his cheap apartment above Monica’s cheap studio while he was awake, but Barbara Porter sleeping soundly in her sturdy McMansion couldn’t feel a thing.”

“But hearing-impaired people are more sensitive to pressure like that, so they would pick it up,” Faith inferred. “That suggests medical knowledge.”

“Maybe. Could just be that our killer’s deaf too, so he knows what deaf people will pick up on.”

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Faith tilted her head. "I hadn't considered that our killer would be deaf too. That raises a lot more possibilities."

"Is that a good thing?" Michael asked.

"Not by itself, but it's another angle to consider." She stood and started pacing the kitchen. "If our killer wasn't born deaf but lost his hearing the way Marcus Wolfe and Sarah Martinez did, then he wouldn't see hearing impairment as normal the way Rebecca Thorne does. He would be more likely to view it as a tragedy like Sarah and Marcus did."

"And he would feel like it was better to die than suffer with this," Marcus added.

"Yes."

"Well, that explains Marcus Wolfe and Sarah Martinez. They were both clearly broken up over their condition. It doesn't explain Monica Smith and James Porter, though. They were born deaf and by all accounts happy as clams."

"That wouldn't necessarily matter to the killer. Just because he's benevolent doesn't mean he's not self-centered. He views hearing loss as a tragedy, so it's a tragedy for everyone whether that's how they feel about it or not."

"So he just sees deaf people and thinks, 'Gee, they'd be better off dead. I should help them be dead.'"

"More or less."

Michael sighed heavily. “That’s just not enough.” He glanced at Faith. “Sorry. That didn’t come out the way I meant it.”

“No, you’re right,” she replied. “It’s not enough. It tells us why deaf people, but it still doesn’t tell us why these deaf people. I can already say it’s no one from Sarah’s and Marcus’s support group because no one was tall enough to be the killer.”

“We can have Ferris look through Monica’s clients and Porter’s coworkers,” Michael suggested.

She bit her lip. “Yeah, we’ll do that, but that’s a crapshoot. There aren’t a lot of six-foot-five males as a percentage, but there’s bound to be a bunch of them in a metro area this size. We might get lucky, but we’d have to get lucky to find anyone that way, and I really don’t like relying on luck.”

“Well, detective work isn’t getting us shit,” Michael replied sourly, “So I’ll take luck if that’s all we’re left with.”

He sighed and dropped his head into his hands briefly. When he lifted them, Faith saw his eyes were red-rimmed with exhaustion that she was sure was mental and emotional and not physical. “Sorry. I’m just pissed at this.”

“Me too.” She gave him a sad smile. “It never gets easier to be just a half-second too late to save a victim.” Her smile faded. Except it was my fault this time.

“No, it doesn’t,” Michael agreed. “So what do we do now?”

Before Faith could answer, she heard shouting outside. She frowned and looked through the window. When she saw the bright white lights of a news van shining on a platinum-blond reporter who was arguing with a sergeant over whether her cameramen could take pictures of the outside of the house, she swore. “Crap. The

news is here.”

The blonde turned toward the window. When she saw Faith, her eyes got big. Faith swore again and closed the curtain. “Shit. They saw me.”

“Seriously? Why are you staring?”

“I don’t know, I just wanted to know what was going on!”

Michael threw his hands in the air. “Shit, Faith. Tabitha’s gonna have a conniption.”

“Hey!” the sergeant shouted. “Hey, you can’t cross the yellow tape!”

A moment later, Faith heard rapping on the window. “Hello? Special Agent Bold! Bold, can you make a statement, please? Hey! Take your hands off of me!”

“Behind that tape!” the sergeant barked, “or I’ll arrest all of you for interfering with police business! You can print that too! Sergeant Cooper, badge number five-three-eight!”

The back door opened, and Ferris walked into the kitchen. “Wolves are here.” He tossed Michael his car keys. “I’m parked on the street behind the house. Give me your rental keys, and I’ll drive it tonight. We can switch back in the morning.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Ferris,” Michael replied. He fished the rental keys out of his pocket and handed them to the detective.

“Damned vultures,” Ferris growled. “Defense attorneys and reporters are the lowest scum of the Earth.”

Faith whispered a thank-you and hurriedly followed Michael out of the house. Turk

trotted next to her.

As soon as they stepped outside, Faith saw a camera flash and heard a voice call, “Special Agent Bold! A statement, please! Who do you believe is perpetrating these crimes?”

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Another voice asked, “Could this be the Messenger Killer following you across the country?”

Faith stiffened. She almost turned around, but Michael grabbed her shoulder firmly and pulled her along. She pressed her lips so tightly she could feel their circulation cut off.

Assholes. Goddamned assholes.

They reached the cruiser, and Michael quickly pulled away from the curb. He drove away from the neighborhood and then turned right instead of left, taking a circuitous route back to the hotel so the news van didn’t catch them.

Faith slowly calmed down as they drove away. Somehow, despite her celebrity status, she'd managed to avoid personal interactions with the media while investigating her cases. If that was going to change, then Tabitha might have a real point about keeping her out of the field.

Maybe that was for the best. Maybe she couldn’t handle the job anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Michael handed Faith a bag and set a cup of coffee next to her. “In that bag is your very own individual pepperoni pizza, a bag of Cheetos, and a pack of Hostess powdered donuts. If you eat all of your good food, there’s Reese’s peanut butter cups to share.”

She chuckled. “Good food?”

“I didn’t say healthy food. Just good.”

She laughed again. “Fair enough.” Her smile faded, and she looked away.

“Hey. Stop beating yourself up because some dipshit reporter revealed herself to be a dipshit.”

“That’s not it,” she said. “I just... I can’t stop thinking that if I hadn’t lost my cool over the ringing in my ears, then we would have been at the house ten minutes sooner, and we might have saved Marcus.”

“We wouldn’t have saved him. CSI report just came back. Marcus was dead for thirty minutes before we got there. The killer took a while to get him set up in the woodshed.”

“Well, we might have been able to catch the killer, though.”

“Maybe. Or maybe Turk would still have been affected, and he still would have gotten away from you.”

He sat on the other chair and rested his forearms on his thighs. “Look, I’ve worked with you for a long time, Faith. I understand the urge all law enforcement officers have to blame themselves when things go wrong, and I understand that urge is a thousand times stronger in your case, but it’s misplaced and not helpful.”

Faith didn’t want to get into an argument with Michael now, so she said, “You’re right. I know. I’m just upset.”

“Hence the junk food. Eat it, it’ll make you feel good.”

“Or it’ll make me groggy and slow.”

He rolled his eyes. “Which is why you have coffee. For God’s sake, when you’re moody, you are determined to stay that way.”

She couldn’t quite resist a chuckle. “Thank you, Michael. This was really nice of you.”

“See? Was that so hard?”

“Quit while you’re ahead.”

She reached into the bag and pulled out the pizza. It bore a picture of a cartoon man with an impossibly wide mouth and eyes that pegged him as a heavy meth user in the middle of his best high. He held a slice of pizza up like a ceremonial goblet and proclaimed—according to the speech bubble over his head—that the pizza was hot and fresh.

It was neither hot nor fresh, but it was salty and savory and greasy, just like pizza should be. Against all odds, the tension in Faith’s shoulders relaxed somewhat, and she was able to think rationally again.

“We need to roll this back to basics,” she said. “We’ve been chasing the flavor of the moment when it comes to our suspects. We need to figure out what the connection is between all of them, not just the most recent connection to the most recent victim.”

“I agree,” Michael said, “with the additional criterion that the connection has to be more than just the fact that they’re all deaf or hearing impaired. We believe that’s what motivates the killer to ‘liberate’ them, but we still need to know why them specifically.”

“Well, Monica and James were both at the same clinical trial,” Faith suggested. “They were also at the same career day at the community center. Marcus and Sarah were both attending a support group at the community center.”

“True,” Michael said, leaning back and crossing his arms, “but Sarah and Marcus never saw Dr. Crane.”

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“Maybe the killer was in both places, though. Maybe he attended the trial and the support group.”

“We know he didn’t attend the support group, though. No one there matches your description of the killer.”

Faith frowned. “Right. Maybe he was at the career day and Dr. Crane’s trial.”

“That’s a lot of people,” Michael said.

“At the career day, yes, but not at the clinical trial. We can start with the trial, filter out anyone who doesn’t match the description, and then see if anyone remaining was at the career day. It’s probably not going to be a large number. There aren’t a lot of people six-four plus in the world.”

Faith nodded. “Okay, good. We’ll start there.”

“How do we get the info on the people in the clinical trial, though? The Auditory Research Center is shut down, and I don’t think Dr. Crane is going to be very excited to talk to us.”

“He’s not going to have a choice unless he wants to catch another obstruction charge.”

“He can cry HIPAA and make us go through the process,” Michael countered. He pulled open his laptop. “Let me see if I can get the records from the Board of Audiology.”

While Michael did that, Faith looked at Turk. The big dog was sleeping now that his meal was finished. His muzzle was a little grayer, but he was still sleek and strong. He was nearly ten years old now, almost a year older than the mandatory retirement age for FBI K9 units. She had fought hard to get permission to keep him on active duty, but there was no hiding from the fact that he would be too old eventually.

The two of them had been working together for over three years. She hoped they could work together for another three years, but still, how did the time go so fast?

Her heart ached. Dogs didn't live long enough. Ten to thirteen years on average for German Shepherds, and if they made fifteen, that was considered exceptional.

It wasn't long enough. They were such perfect, pure, beautiful creatures. If anything, they should be the ones with long lifespans, and people should be the ones granted a decade and change.

She chuckled at that. The noise made Turk's ear prick up but when no potentially threatening sound reached his ears, he lowered it again. Listen to me. Acting like a crazy cat lady.

Still, she wasn't looking forward to the day when she would have to say goodbye to her best friend. Whether it was three years from now or five years from now or ten years from now, it would be too soon.

"Got it," Michael said. "See? The Board's not going to jerk us around."

She turned back to the laptop and looked at the information Michael had. All but one of the subjects were under six feet and could be immediately dismissed, but one, Carl Sampson, was six-foot-four and a sleek two hundred ten pounds with ten percent body fat.

She smiled and said, “Wonderful. Now we call the community center.”

“Are they going to have someone there this late?”

She shrugged. “It’s worth a shot. They don’t close for another twenty minutes.”

He shook his head. “It’s crazy that they’re open so late. When I was a kid, we had the old community center, and that place was locked by six o’clock.”

“Times change, old man.”

He smiled sweetly and lifted a finger. She chuckled and dialed the number.

A moment later, a bored-sounding woman who was probably barely old enough to qualify as an adult replied, “Thank you for calling the South Bay Community Center, this is Rose, how may I help you?”

“Rose, this is Special Agent Faith Bold with the FBI. I need your help with a case.”

Rose sighed. “Jenna, I swear to God, if you’re prank-calling me at work again—”

“Not a prank call,” Faith interrupted. “Look up the FBI ID check database. When you’re ready, I’ll read you mine, and you can verify that I am who I say I am.”

After a brief pause, Rose said warily, “All right.” A slightly longer pause, then. “Okay. I’m ready.”

Faith read her the ID number. A third brief pause followed, then Rose gasped. “Oh my God! Oh, this is about that woman who was killed the other day, right?”

“Yes. I need your help verifying something for me.”

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“Oh, that was so horrible. My friend Hector works the desk during the day, and he told me—”

“Rose, I need you to focus for me. Four months ago, the center hosted a career day for the hearing impaired. I need to know if a particular individual attended that event.”

“Oh, there’s no way I can verify that. It was an open event. Anyone could have walked in. I can tell you who presented or ran a booth.”

“I’ll take it. The man’s name is Carl Sampson.”

“Carl... Sampson... Yeah, here he is. He ran a booth talking about auto repair. I guess he owned a shop in Fremont.”

Faith pumped her fist. “Thank you, Rose. You’ve been a big help.”

She hung up and said, “Carl was at the trial and at the career day.”

“Hell yeah,” Michael said. “Let’s give him a call.”

Faith dialed the number and put the phone on speaker. A moment later, a slightly groggy and more than slightly irritated female voice replied, “Hello?”

“Good evening. This is Special Agent Faith Bold with the FBI.”

“So you really are the FBI? Why is the FBI calling me at ten-forty in the evening?”

"I apologize for the inconvenience, ma'am," Faith replied. "I need to speak to Carl Sampson. Is he available?"

The phone was silent for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was laced with venom. "Is this a joke?"

Faith's brow furrowed. "No, it's no joke, ma'am. In fact, it's a very serious matter. I need to speak to him as soon as possible."

"Carl died two months ago."

Michael cursed softly. Faith could only manage a weak, "I see."

"Why are you looking for him now? Was he involved in something?"

Faith sighed. "I guess not. I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am."

She hung up and folded her hands on the desk, resting her forearms on her closed fists. "Well, shit. There goes our lead."

Michael stood. "I'm going to bed. We're not getting anywhere grabbing at straws. Let's get some rest, and we'll reapproach the problem in the morning."

"I really, really, really hate that," Faith said.

"If you have an idea where to look next, I'm all ears," Michael replied. "Otherwise, I think our best bet is to get some shuteye and hit it with fresh minds tomorrow. He's already killed someone tonight, and he came within a hair's breadth of getting caught. I doubt seriously he's going to try anything stupid again before morning."

Faith nodded. Michael was right. They'd pulled all-nighters before, but they had

nowhere to go right now, and driving themselves to exhaustion chasing their tails wasn't going to help them catch their murderer.

She sighed again. "Yeah, all right. Damn it."

Michael laid a hand on her shoulder. "We'll get this guy. We're closing in on him, I can feel it. We just need to find the last missing piece."

She managed a half-smile that did nothing to hide her frustration, then went to the bathroom to change. This was the hardest part of every case. Coming within literal feet of catching their suspect only for him to flee galled her. Maybe Michael was right, and it wasn't really her fault, but it was hard not to think of everything she could have done differently that might have changed that outcome. And to find a promising lead only to lose it in a few minutes didn't help her mood.

By the time she left the bathroom, Michael was fast asleep. She envied him that ability. She'd had it once herself, back when she was a Marine and life was simple. Dangerous and terrifying, but simple. Since Trammell, though, she hadn't been able to find sleep nearly as easily.

She lay in bed and spent a while staring at the ceiling and trying to put a picture of their killer together in her head. Try as she might, his image remained vague and featureless.

Eventually, exhaustion overwhelmed her impatience. Her eyes closed, and she fell asleep, the apparition of their killer still haunting her.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

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The morning brought better news. Faith woke to the feeling of Michael shaking her awake. She frowned, but when she saw the excitement in his face, she came straight to alertness and sat up. “You have something?”

“Yep! I woke up an hour ago and couldn’t get back to sleep, so I started digging into the victims’ histories again. And guess what I found?”

“A connection between all four?”

“A solid connection.”

Faith squealed and threw her arms around Michael, hugging him tightly for a moment before releasing him. “What do you have?”

“An otolaryngologist.”

“A what?”

“Otolaryngologist. An ear, nose, and throat doctor.”

“All three at once?”

He rolled his eyes. “Do you want to discuss medical specialties, or do you want the lead?”

She got to her feet and brushed hair out of her eyes. “The lead. What is it?”

“Who is it,” Michael corrected. Faith frowned, and he quickly added, “Amanda Hayes. Apparently, she’s one of the leading researchers on hearing loss treatment in the Bay Area. She has a practice in Palo Alto.” He grinned. “Guess who four of her patients were?”

Faith squealed again and gave Michael another embrace. “Hell yeah!” she cried. “Good job.”

“I’m the best,” Michael said. “Obviously, she’s not a suspect since she’s not a guy, but she can probably point us in the right direction.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Faith replied.

Turk barked, and Faith turned to see him looking quizzically at his humans, probably wondering why they were awake. Faith walked over and gave him a hug too. He endured the hug, then growled softly. Answer me!

Faith laughed and ruffled his fur. “We got a lead, buddy.” She looked at Michael. “What time does the practice open?”

“Eight A.M.”

“Perfect. Enough time for showers and breakfast. Then we head straight there. I want to be the first people through the door.”

Palo Alto was an affluent community northwest of San Jose in the renowned Silicon Valley region of California. The city was wealthy even compared to the other very wealthy cities of the Bay Area. The streets were all landscaped beautifully, and the buildings ranged from Spanish mission-style to ultramodern glass walls. All of them

looked expensive, even the chain stores and restaurants. The cars were all late-model luxury sedans, most of them high-end even for that class.

Faith had toured Wall Street before and was awed by the wealth she saw there, but this place screamed a different kind of wealth, a casual superiority that was so far removed from the struggles of the working class that such problems wouldn't even register. It struck her as odd that anyone privileged enough to live this life would want to risk it killing people, but then again, wealth brought power, and power made people believe they were untouchable.

Dr. Hayes' practice was in a medical center that looked like it had been pulled off of the cover of a magazine. The circular building was designed for artistic appeal more than practicality. The windows were curved glass that reflected the sunlight almost painfully. The upper floors were terraced and lined with exotic plants that draped over the lower floors and mitigated the glare of the highly reflective windows somewhat.

The people walking into and out of the center were an odd mix of people dressed in extraordinarily expensive business suits and absurdly casual outfits. One man around Faith's age walked in with a white t-shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops.

"Gotta love NorCal," Michael said.

She was about to crack a joke, but when she saw the nostalgic smile on his face, she curtailed it. Well, everyone has reasons to love their hometown.

The receptionist's reaction only further illustrated the difference between this place and other parts of the country. Typically, people reacted to the arrival of federal agents with wariness or fear. This receptionist—a man in his mid-twenties dressed like the maitre'd of a Michelin Star restaurant, looked them up and down and frowned with not-so-slight contempt.

He allowed the frown to remain on his face just long enough to ensure the agents saw it, then plastered a fake smile on his features. “Good morning. What can I do for you two?”

“We need to speak to Dr. Amanda Hayes,” Faith said.

“Of course. Do you have an appointment?”

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Faith pointed at the letters on her vest. “Do you really want to get in the way?”

The receptionist considered for a moment, then decided he didn’t want to get in the way. He arrived at this decision with a flash of annoyance rather than fear. “One moment.”

He dialed a number and spoke softly to the person who answered. When he was finished, he rolled his eyes, then put on another fake smile. “She’ll see you now.”

He looked expectantly at them, probably hoping they would ask where her office was so he could provide another display of haughty superiority. Faith didn’t give him the satisfaction. They already knew from her website that she was on the fourth floor in suite four-oh-eight.

They left the disgruntled receptionist and took a whisper-smooth elevator polished smooth as glass to the fourth floor. As soon as the door opened, a passing nurse snapped her fingers and said, “No. Uh-uh. No dogs allowed here. I don’t care if you’re FBI, police, Secret Service...”

The three agents passed her without a word. “Hey!” she called. “Excuse me! Did you hear—”

Faith whirled around on her. “I will charge you with obstructing an investigation if you say another word.”

The woman pressed her lips together. Like the receptionist, she decided not to be the person to get in the way. She informed Faith that she would call the San Francisco

field office to report her, then stalked off without a reply.

“Gotta love NorCal,” Faith grumbled.

Michael shrugged but didn’t offer a rebuttal.

They walked into suite four-oh-eight and found Dr. Amanda Hayes waiting for them. She was a short, squat woman with hair dyed coppery-gold and an irritable frown on her face. “What’s this about? I had to push back a patient appointment to talk with you.”

“We’re investigating the murders of four of your patients,” Faith said. “We were hoping to get some information from you.”

Dr. Hayes blinked. “What? Murders?”

“Yes. Monica Smith, James Porter, Sarah Martinez, and Marcus Wolfe.”

“Oh.”

Her attitude changed. She dropped the arrogance and sighed heavily, sitting in a richly upholstered chair behind a maple desk.

She rubbed her forehead and said, “I should have assumed that. I heard about their deaths in the news. Another serial killer freak, right?”

“I’m afraid so.”

She sighed again and folded her arms across the desk. “Well. I’ll help out anyway I can. Take a seat if you like.”

The agents pulled two chairs close. These chairs were somewhat less opulent than the one on which Dr. Hayes sat but were still far more comfortable than they had any right to be. Turk sat in between them, his eyes alert but his body relaxed.

“Our suspect is male, athletic, six-four, and lean. Does that describe any of your patients?”

Dr. Hayes chuckled. “Agent, I see hundreds of patients a day. I have a portfolio of over two thousand patients, a lot of them professional athletes. To directly answer your question, it describes many of my patients.”

“There are that many deaf athletes?”

“I don’t just see deaf people,” Dr. Hayes replied. “Otolaryngologists see anyone who needs an ear, nose, or throat specialist. I’m most well-known for my research into hearing loss remedies, but the majority of my patients just have strep throat.”

“I see.”

“Is your suspect deaf?”

“Not necessarily,” Faith said. “It’s possible, but we don’t know for sure.”

“Well. Then... I’m sorry, I guess.”

Michael crossed his arms. “What about the four victims? When did you last see them?”

“Let’s see.” She typed into her computer for a minute or so, then said, “It looks like I saw Monica Smith two weeks ago, James Porter four weeks ago, Marcus Wolfe three weeks ago, and Sarah Martinez nine weeks ago.”

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Faith's excitement dimmed. That was a widespread of dates, and none of them had been here at the same time. "What about staff?" she asked. "Does anyone here fit the description I just gave you?"

"Not in my suite," she replied. "I wouldn't know about the rest of the building."

Faith looked at Michael, who nodded and stepped outside to follow up on that. Faith turned back to Dr. Hayes. "Did any of the four seem different to you when you saw them? Any change in behavior or attitude?"

"Well, Sarah and Marcus never had a good attitude to begin with," Dr. Hayes replied. "They were both very bitter about their conditions. They suffered hearing loss as a result of disease and accident. The other two were born deaf."

"Right, I understand that. But there was no change? They didn't seem fearful or mention anyone new in their lives?"

"Not to me." She smiled sadly. "I get the sense I'm not helping much."

"Let's not jump to that conclusion yet," Faith said. "Have you ever had a patient express disdain for the deaf or hatred for them?"

Dr. Hayes laughed. "No. Nothing like that. I'm aware that the hearing impaired have been discriminated against in the past, but we're fortunate enough not to have that issue here in the Bay Area."

"What about sympathy? Did anyone seem especially sympathetic to their plight?"

“What is especially sympathetic?”

“In this case, it would be a belief that they’re better off dead.”

Dr. Hayes stared at Faith for a moment. “Is that why he’s doing this? He thinks they’re better off dead?”

“We believe so,” Faith replied.

“My God,” she whispered. She shook her head and said, “Well, no. No one’s said anything of that nature to me. The sympathy is all... well, sort of vague if I’m being honest. Like how you might sympathize with a homeless person, but you’re not going to spend all day broken up about it.”

Boy, wealth must be fun, Faith thought privately.

She wasn’t here to judge Dr. Hayes for her level of empathy, though. “And not one of them mentioned anyone who gave them the creeps?”

“They didn’t really talk about their relationships with me. I got the sense that Monica was happy by herself, and Sarah and Marcus were too bitter to think about a relationship. James was married, of course, but his wife is the sweetest thing. I really don’t think she’d... Oh, but you said the killer was male anyway.” She sighed. “No, I’m sorry. Nothing I can think of that might help you.”

Faith resisted the urge to swear. Damn it, this seemed like such a good lead too! She couldn’t believe that they were coming up empty. “What about your deaf patients? Did any of them act like they would be better off dead? Like anyone would be better off dead if they had this condition?”

"Oh, sure. Plenty. I'd say that eighty percent of my patients who suffer hearing loss in

adulthood go through all of the stages of grief pretty intensely. None of them indicated violence toward anyone else, but they all hate it. Not that I can blame them. It's a major aspect of a person's physiological and psychological makeup. Imagine for a moment that you suddenly couldn't hear. Wouldn't you be upset?"

Faith recalled her meltdown the day before and nodded. "Yes. I would be very upset."

"So would everyone," Dr. Hayes replied. "But the typical reaction was collapse, not violence. Even the angry ones were calm, angry, if you know what I mean."

"I do," Faith said.

The door opened, and Michael said, "No luck. Tallest guy's six-two. He's also sixty-seven and has a bad back. Anything informative here?"

Faith sighed. "Not as it pertains to the case." She stood. "Thank you for your time, Dr. Hayes."

"Of course. I'm very sorry I wasn't able to be more help."

Faith managed a half-smile. "We appreciate your time anyway."

The three agents left the hospital, enduring a glare from the angry nurse as they walked out of the fourth floor. Faith's earlier excitement was gone, leaving bleakness in its wake.

Once more, they had found a great lead, only for it to pop the moment they poked at it. Meanwhile, their killer was lurking out there waiting for his next opportunity to deliver "mercy."

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Faith and Michael sat in a city park with cups of coffee and watched Turk run through the fenced off dog friendly area. He was chasing a beautiful Cocker Spaniel, slowing so the smaller dog could feel like it was outrunning him. The Spaniel's owner—a kindly elderly woman with perfectly coiffed white curls—smiled at Faith. “He’s a beautiful dog. And in great shape for his age.”

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Faith returned her smile even though she didn't feel it. "He's a good dog."

Thankfully, a younger woman sat next to the Spaniel's owner and engaged her in conversation. Her daughter, apparently. Whoever she was, it meant Faith didn't have to talk to her.

Instead, she talked to Michael, keeping her voice low so they weren't overheard. "Where do we go from here? We have nothing. We don't even have a list of people to look for."

Michael sipped his coffee. "I don't know. He lifted the hand not holding his coffee cup and let it drop. "I just... don't know." He sighed. "I hate to say it, but unless more evidence surfaces, there might not be anything we can do."

Her lips thinned. "Meaning we're waiting for another dead body before we can look for a better lead."

He didn't reply. Which was a reply in itself.

"We don't have anything from the police report?" Faith asked. "No evidence? No fingerprints, footprints, DNA, nothing?"

"We have footprints that match the marks from Monica Smith's scene, but it's to a brand and size of work boot that's ubiquitous. The size is small for the height of the suspect, but not so small that Ferris has been able to narrow it down that way." He sighed. "It's funny. Everyone's different until you need to rely on those differences. Then everyone's the damned same."

Turk barked happily and grinned over at the two of them. A bloodhound had joined their trio, and the three dogs were playing some sort of jumping game. Faith waved at him, then said, “This doesn’t feel like it should be the case that stumps us. After everything we’ve done, every case we’ve solved on the back of thin evidence or leaps of intellect, this really seems like it should be open and shut.”

“Does it really seem that way, or is it just that it’s not as weird as some of the other cases?”

She sighed. “I guess that’s it,” she admitted. “The last crime scene got weird with the angel wings, but that was the first one. And it was really crude too, like the killer didn’t really know what he was doing. The others were just simple strangulations. The bodies weren’t even moved. Well, I guess Sarah was placed in her car, but that’s it. I guess it just seems so... mundane.”

Michael smiled without humor. “Would this be a bad time to point out how many ‘mundane’ cases go cold?”

“It would be a shitty time to point that out, yes.” She sipped her coffee. “Is this what ordinary detectives go through? Are we just spoiled because we get hand-delivered only the most spectacular cases?”

“If all of the detectives I talk to are to be believed, yes.”

She looked at him. “How many detectives do you talk to?”

“A few at Philadelphia PD. So not a lot, I guess, but all of them tell me I’m lucky to only work one case at a time, and that all of my cases are ‘shiny.’”

“Shiny?”

“That’s the term they used. I guess it means they all have very distinct characteristics that make it easy to follow a lead.”

“It sure doesn’t seem easy,” Faith grumbled.

He shrugged. “I mean, if you figure that most murder investigations take weeks to solve, we really do have it easy.”

“Most murder investigations don’t drop multiple victims within days of each other,” Faith countered.

“I’m not saying we have a cushy job,” Michael said. “I’m just trying to find a way to accept that this might be the first time we have to slog it out instead of just leaping across steppingstones to the answer.”

Faith set her jaw. “Well, I don’t accept that.”

“Life goes on whether you accept it or not.”

Faith felt her irritation growing. She didn’t want to fight with Michael, so she let the argument drop. “Well, it sucks.”

He lifted his coffee cup. “I’ll drink to that.”

She touched her cup to his and they sipped together. The dogs were resting now, sitting comfortably together and panting joyfully. The thought crossed Faith’s mind that maybe it would be all right for Turk to spend the last few years of his life like this, playing and making new friends. She wasn’t ready to retire, but maybe it was selfish of her to expect that Turk had to work just because she wasn’t ready to stop.

That was another train of thought she didn’t want to take, so she turned back to the

case, focusing on the profile of their killer.

There were really only two possibilities for motive, assuming this wasn't a personal vendetta against people he knew. It was looking less and less likely that was the case, so it had to be either a disdain for the hearing impaired or a twisted sympathy for them.

But why these victims? That was the question they couldn't answer yet, the most important question to answer. The killer might not have a personal vendetta, but he had to at least have known the victims somehow.

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Or maybe not. He wouldn't have to know them. He'd just have to know that they existed and that they suffered from impaired hearing. Some killers picked specific victims, but Faith had captured several who made lists and picked names off of that list.

And this killer didn't need to make his own list. He had lists readily available to him.

She leaped to her feet. "We need to talk to Dr. Hayes again."

Michael frowned. "Why?"

"I think I know how to find our killer. Turk! Come!"

Turk looked at Faith. He seemed disappointed to have to leave, but he didn't hesitate, barking goodbyes to his friends, then loping back to her.

Faith half-jogged back to the car, Michael right behind her. They made the drive to the medical center in four minutes and needed only one more to run up the stairs to the fourth floor.

They nearly collided with Dr. Hayes at the door to her office. The doctor gasped and dropped the file she was holding.

"Sorry about that," Faith said. "I need to ask you one more question."

Dr. Hayes blinked, still startled. "Okay."

“You said that patients usually act like their hearing loss is a tragedy, right?”

“Um... Yes, more or less.”

“Have you ever had a patient who acted like it was a blessing somehow?”

“A blessing? I don’t think so. I did have one patient who thought he was called upon by God to minister to the deaf.”

“Minister? How so?”

“He didn’t say, but I assumed he meant through religion.”

Faith shared a look with Michael. That wasn’t exactly where her mind had gone, but it might be worth following up on. “Can you tell me about him?”

Dr. Hayes glanced around. The others in the suite were staring at them. “I would prefer to talk in my office since we’ll be discussing protected health information. I really should ask for a court order, but considering the urgency, I suppose I can make an exception.”

They entered the office but remained standing. Faith was too amped up to sit. Dr. Hayes walked behind the desk, her brow furrowed in confusion. “I really don’t understand what this could have to do with the killings,” she said. “I would think that a murderer would be more likely to hate deaf his victims.”

“Killers come in all flavors, I’m afraid,” Faith said, “and religiously motivated ones aren’t particularly uncommon.”

Dr. Hayes grimaced. “No, I suppose not. Let’s see. This was a recent patient of mine. I saw him... five weeks ago. Captain David Harrison.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. "Captain?"

"Yes. He was recently discharged from the U.S. Army as a result of his accident."

"What accident?"

"He couldn't share many details, but I know he was testing equipment. There was an accident, and he suffered a traumatic brain injury. Several different areas were damaged, but the damage to the auditory cortex was most severe. I referred him to a neurologist."

"You said he felt called by God to minister to the deaf," Faith said. "Can you expand on that?"

Dr. Hayes removed her glasses and cleaned them with her shirt. Her expression was vaguely disturbed. A lot of people not in Faith's line of work had difficulty accepting the reality that they could know someone unhinged enough to murder others. These little delays helped give them time to process that possibility. Faith understood it, but it frustrated her to no end right now. She had to focus on her breathing to keep from shouting at Dr. Hayes.

"He... He said that God had chosen him. He said that God was punishing him, and the only way he could atone for that punishment was to liberate others with hearing loss."

"He used that word? Liberate?"

"He did, but... I thought..."

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“None of this is your fault, Doctor,” Michael interjected, “but it’s important that you give us the whole truth right now.”

She took a deep breath and released it in a rush. “He said that he had to minister to those without sound by liberating them from a life of silence.”

Faith’s heart leaped. “One more question for you, doctor. Have any of your patient records gone missing lately?”

“No,” she replied firmly. Then her eyes slid to the left. “But... two weeks ago, there was a data breach, and... there was some indication that information had been copied from a certain insurance carrier’s medical records.”

“Were the records of the four victims among them?” Faith asked.

“I don’t know for sure, but they all had that insurance carrier.” Dr. Hayes’ lips trembled once. “So did Captain Harrison.”

That was it. This was their guy. “I need contact information for Captain Harrison,” Faith said.

Dr. Hayes nodded. Her hands were trembling when she typed the commands on her keyboard. A few seconds later, the printer started humming. Turk watched the printer, his tail switching back and forth in anticipation. When the humming stopped, he barked and looked at Faith.

Dr. Hayes handed Faith the document, avoiding her eyes. “I didn’t know,” she

whispered.

“Like my partner said, it’s not your fault,” Faith said.

She left the comfort at that. They had their most solid lead of the case, and she wanted to pursue it right away. So she gave Dr. Hayes a quick thank you, then left the office.

“Should I call for backup?” Michael asked.

“Oh yeah,” Faith replied. “Tell Ferris to bring the cavalry.”

“Will do.”

Harrison’s address was in Cupertino, about halfway between their location and San Jose. They would reach it in twenty minutes. With any luck, they would find him there and put an end to his warped mission.

Captain Harrison wanted to liberate the hearing impaired by murdering them. Faith would liberate them by taking their murderer off of the streets.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

“Look on the bright side, David. If you fuck up, you won’t have to hear Steward nag you anymore.”

Captain David Harrison grinned at the testing booth and gave Captain Jeremy Fuller his finest one-fingered salute. Laughter echoed through his radio, and Jeremy said, “I appreciate the offer, but there’s no way you last the night with me.”

“Who said I needed the whole night?” David replied.

“Cut it out, you two,” Major Adam Steward snapped.

David grimaced as he realized their boss probably heard them ragging on him a moment ago. “Yes, sir.” He cleared his throat. “Power is nominal, temperature is a little elevated but still inside the green. Target is prepared, and unless Captain Fuller has any objections, we are a go for this test.”

“Roger that. Test commences in thirty seconds.”

“Thirty seconds heard,” David replied.

He scrolled through the systems menu of the Mk 1440 acoustic crowd dispersal unit. The Army, in light of recent very unfortunate mistakes during civilian protests in Afghanistan, had recognized the need for a less lethal option for crowd dispersal when the safety of American servicemembers wasn’t believed to be in danger. After several years of the usual proposing, bidding, haggling, and compromising, the Pentagon had finally selected a manufacturer and that manufacturer had finally delivered a working prototype.

And so far, it worked well. Preliminary tests showed significant improvement over previous-generation acoustic weapons, particularly in the targeting arena. It wouldn’t be helpful to the Army if they deafened their own soldiers along with the enemy.

This was their first test on living things. Well, not actually living things since the modern era frowned upon indiscriminate massacre of animals. However, David was assured that the dummies arrayed in front of him were fitted with membranes that functioned exactly as a human eardrum would. These would—it was claimed—measure the damage a sound wave would do to a human eardrum and thus let them know if their weapon was effective.

“Okay,” David said. “Time is up, green means go, and I am going to let her rip.”

Jeremy chuckled. Steward sighed and lamented, “There was a day when officers were actually professional.”

David grinned and pressed the proverbial big green button, in this case just a lit portion of the new state-of-the-art LED touchscreen.

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The machine whined as it powered up. It's targeting software identified the dummies by their transponders. This had been programmed prior to testing to ensure the machine would actually identify them as targets and not dismiss them as inanimate objects.

The machine focused on them and offered David a five-second window to abort the command.

David didn't abort the command. He watched the numbers count down, and when they hit zero, he grinned at the mannequins.

"David!" Jeremy shrieked. "Abort! Abort now!"

David frowned down at the screen. The temperature was no longer slightly elevated. It was a lot elevated. He swore and reached for the stop button.

Then his head exploded.

The killer stared at the medals displayed in a glass-covered teak case above his dresser. A Purple Heart. A unit citation. A Meritorious Service award. A few other doodads which were given to everyone who didn't die or piss off the unit CO.

The one he fixated on was the Distinguished Service Medal. Officially, he earned it for sacrificing his health to advance the science of warfare. Unofficially, the Army gave it to him so he wouldn't sue them.

Not that the killer planned to sue the Army. Of course, they weren't blameless, but it wasn't his place to administer judgment. That was for God. His job was to fulfill his penance by suffering from soundlessness while liberating those afflicted with it through no fault of their own.

The enemy had nearly stopped him. It was his fault. He had wanted the world to understand that he was liberating the people he killed, not murdering them. That was only his pride. God had warned him of that by sending the woman and her dog so he would understand that by focusing on his pride, he would only earn more judgment.

Now, he would suffer more. It was only a matter of time before the FBI found out who he was, and when they did, they would come looking for him here. He needed to hide.

The killer looked around his house. He wouldn't miss it terribly. It was, after all, only a place to rest. One skill he had retained from the army was the ability to rest anywhere.

He knew where he would rest. It was fitting that he should return to the place where God first showed Himself. The FBI wouldn't follow him there. They didn't know where it was. No one knew where it was except for Jeremy and Steward. Steward would die before betraying the Army, and Jeremy was probably close to death himself, considering how serious his drinking habit became after the accident.

It would be a reminder of his purpose and a reminder to let go of his pride.

The killer left the medals. They were symbols of pride as well, even if they were obviously false symbols. He didn't need them.

He picked up his sleeping bag, his suitcase—which contained clothing and basic necessities and nothing else—and his amplifier. Thank God he'd made a spare.

The only other things he needed were already in the car. The laptop contained the files on its hard drive. The tourniquet was still the best way to liberate people without risking their escape.

He had hoped to liberate someone else tonight, but plans had changed. He needed to flee before the FBI prevented him from continuing his work.

He loaded the suitcase, sleeping bag, and amplifier into the back of his SUV. He got in the driver's seat and started the engine. The old gas motor rumbled comfortably, the vibrations traveling through the seat up his spine and through the floor into his legs. He took a moment to savor those sensations, then put the SUV in gear and left the home in which he had lived for the past fourteen years.

He didn't look back.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The FBI agents arrived at David Harrison's house just as Ferris and his PD units did. Michael parked their rental behind the cruisers, so the police vehicles formed a barricade. Then, the three of them rushed across the street to join Ferris.

The detective was issuing commands to his officers when they reached him. "Cooper, take four out back and put two men on either side. I'll go through the front with the FBI agents." He nodded at Faith. "All right, Special Agent. This is your collar. We'll follow your lead."

Right after giving all of the orders, Faith thought wryly. Ferris meant well, though, and Faith would have issued similar instructions anyway.

"Be alert," she told the gathered officers. "Harrison has combat experience, and he's believed to be armed and dangerous. No one does anything stupid trying to be the

hero of the day, got it?” The officers voiced their acknowledgment, and Faith said, “Okay. Cooper, once you’re in position, let us know. We’ll try knocking. He’s deaf, but he should still feel the vibrations. We’ll give him one chance, then we’re going in. Let’s move out.”

The group split. The SJPD officers looked professional and determined. Most importantly, they looked steady. Self-control and unit cohesion were the two most critical components of arrests like this one, and Ferris’s officers had both.

Faith positioned herself to the left of the door. Michael stood to the right with Ferris off of the porch steps to the right as well. Turk stood in front of the door, eyes focused, tail switching, muscles coiled like springs.

“Okay, agent,” Cooper said. “We’re ready.”

“Copy that.” She pounded her fist on the door. For the benefit of anyone in the vicinity who might not know what was going on, she also shouted, “David Harrison! This is the police! Open the door now!”

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No answer. Faith pounded again, called again, and when there was still no answer, she said into her radio. “We’re going in. Breach in three”—Michael positioned himself in front of the door—“two”—he holstered his weapon and spread his feet shoulder-width apart—“one!”

Michael kicked in the door with a grunt of effort. Instantly, Turk shot through the opening, barking and snarling. Ferris and the agents followed, guns drawn. Another crashing noise sounded as Cooper broke through the back door.

The lights in the house were off, but enough daylight filtered through the windows that they could see well enough. There was no sign of anyone in the living room, confirmed a moment later when Ferris called, “Clear!” He looked at Faith. “Should we go upstairs and leave the first floor to Cooper.”

Faith nodded. Ferris issued the command while she, Michael, and Turk scaled the stairs to the second floor. Once more, Turk was the first one up, growling and barking as he moved in and out of the rooms. Faith listened for the cry that would tell him Turk had found his target. Even if David was dead, he would still make noise if he was bit.

No noises came. One by one, they cleared the rooms upstairs.

Faith’s excitement turned to fear. He wasn’t home.

That’s okay. He could be at work or at the grocery store or at a restaurant. Don’t freak out yet.

“He’s not in the house,” Ferris said.

Faith sighed. “Yeah. I figured. Do we have an APB out on his vehicle?”

“We do. Red mid-2000s Lincoln Navigator with a chrome trailer hitch, license plate 6TGY774. Nothing’s popped up so far.”

She nodded and tried not to let frustration and disappointment get to her. You’ve been here before. He’ll turn up. They always do.

She responded to herself with, yeah, but will he turn up alone or with a dead body?

“Make sure that APB is high priority. Michael, do we have a workplace for him?”

“Negative. Looks like he’s been living off of his Army disability pay and veteran stipend since the accident.”

Faith sighed. “Okay. Ferris, let’s stay here, but let’s have cruisers parked at the street corners on either side of the house. If he sees us here, he’s going to run, so I want to see him first and pursue as soon as possible after that happens.”

“On it. Don’t worry, Agent. This kind of shit happens all the time. He’s gonna turn up eventually.”

Faith nodded meanwhile her mind came up with every possible scenario where he didn’t turn up. The vehicle could be found, but he could have ditched it and stolen another. He could have a friend they don’t know about and live in his basement until his beard and hair grew out. He could be halfway to Mexico.

“Call customs and border patrol,” Faith told Michael. “Give them Harrison’s description. Just in case.”

“I’ll loop TSA into that as well,” Michael said, pulling his phone from his pocket. He started dialing, then slumped. “Shit. You don’t think he bolted after you almost caught him, do you?”

The blood drained from Faith’s face. She hadn’t considered that until just now.

She lifted her hands to the top of her head. “Shit.” She took a breath to steady herself, then said, “Just get the word out. We’ll have to hope he’s popped on someone’s radar somewhere, and we can go from there.”

“I’ll loop the San Francisco field office in then,” Michael replied. “In case he’s crossing state lines but not national borders.”

In case he’s stupid, in other words.

Faith shook her head and headed downstairs. Turk trotted next to her, watching her closely in case he needed to step in to calm her down. Cooper and his men were standing around, their focus replaced with the alert relaxation that Faith thought of as “cop standby.”

“Cooper, we’re making this our base of operations,” she told him.

His eyes widened. “We can do that?”

“The FBI can when hunting serial killers. We just can’t sleep here. That’s how we get around the Fourth Amendment.”

She saw something on the coffee table and did a double take. “Actually, scratch that. We now have some very good probable cause.”

She walked closer and picked up the photograph on the table. It was a picture of

Monica Smith standing in the yard of her studio. Faith looked back at the coffee table but saw no other pictures. The killer had probably cleared the evidence from his home and accidentally left this one behind.

She started up the stairs again, nearly colliding with Michael. He flinched and said, “Upstairs or downstairs? Make up your mind.”

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“Upstairs. I want the house scoured, starting with the bedroom. I want to know where he went.”

“No way we find anything,” Michael said.

“Fix that attitude,” she snapped. “We never know until we look.”

“I’m gonna look,” he replied, “I’m just pissed.”

She sighed. “I know. Me too. But we don’t stop. We keep going until we get him, no matter what.”

He nodded. “Fair enough.”

The two of them returned to the bedroom and started digging through Harrison’s belongings. Turk helped, sniffing through everything, but he didn’t turn up any more evidence than they did. The home’s other bedroom yielded nothing important either, and the living room provided only the photograph Faith had already found.

By the time they finished searching the house, they had found nothing that might indicate where David Harrison had gone, and they had wasted an hour of time not finding anything. Faith sighed and sat at the kitchen table, drumming her teeth on the oiled pine and trying to think where to go from here. Waiting was unacceptable to her.

Of course, she’d learned recently that it didn’t matter whether waiting was acceptable or not. Sometimes she just had to deal with it.

Her fists closed at that thought. Screw that! I'm not going to "deal" with murderers escaping.

She got to her feet and started pacing. Where would Harrison go to hide?

He was a former equipment tester for the Army. She had seen the display case above his dresser, so she knew he was proud of his service. If he was going to go somewhere, it would probably be with one of his friends from the Army.

"Michael, do we know what unit Harrison served in?"

"Not from his medical record, but I can probably find out."

He pulled out his phone and dialed the number. As he talked, Faith second-guessed her initial conclusion. Soldiers were loyal to their own just like Marines, but that loyalty had limits. Harrison could probably get by with no questions asked for a short while, but eventually, the news would get out that he was on the run. His friends would want to know the truth, and what could he tell them? A lie, maybe, but that wouldn't hold water for long.

Best case scenario, he'd be booted out and allowed to leave without the friend ratting him to the cops. That would leave him right back at square one. Harrison clearly lived alone and had lived alone since leaving the Army. He was comfortable by himself. With his hearing gone, he was probably more comfortable by himself than with others. He would want to go somewhere he felt comfortable holing up by himself.

"Fine," Michael snapped, loudly enough to pull Faith's attention to him. "Sounds good to me. We'll be more than happy to tell the entire world that you're protecting a serial killer to hide secrets. Considering current opinions on military secrets, I'm sure that press will be just great for the Army."

“What’s wrong?” Faith asked. “They won’t tell you where served?”

Michael held up a finger and winked. “All right, we’re done here. Oh.” He grinned and winked again. “General. Yeah, I don’t give a shit. He’s a suspected killer. I need every byte of data on him, or I will personally blame the Army for his existence. I’m good on the news too, General. I look real pretty on camera. Oh, you can help me? Wonderful.”

He covered the phone and said, “You just gotta know how to talk to ‘em.”

Faith wasn’t sure that Michael’s approach was necessary, but it had worked, so she wasn’t complaining. A moment later, Michael said. “Five-oh-ninth Infantry Company. And that’s a testing unit? Equipment testing, got it.” He frowned. “No, that isn’t all you’re going to tell me. He’s on the run, and we think he’s hiding with friends.”

Faith snapped her fingers. “Here,” Michael said. “Let me hand you to my partner.”

Faith took the phone. A rough male voice informed her, “Your partner is an asshole.”

“He sure can be,” Faith agreed, “but I’m not. I’m a very concerned investigator who’s trying to bring justice to the loved ones of four innocent people who Captain Harrison may have murdered. I believe he’s going to hide somewhere important to the five-oh-ninth, not at a friend’s house. I think it will be an abandoned classified facility where he can be reasonably sure he won’t be looked for. Is there anything in the five-oh-ninth’s history that might fit that bill?”

The general was silent for a moment. Then he sighed. “Shit. Yeah, there might be. We had a testing facility on the north side of Mount Hamilton. It’s just east of San Jose. We shut the facility down after Harrison’s accident. I’m technically committing treason by telling you this, but we didn’t test anything black out there, just some less

lethal stuff for crowd dispersal.”

“Less lethal stuff like an acoustic weapon?” Faith asked.

“Yes,” the general admitted. “But you need to keep that out of your official reports. You found him at an old storage depot that we haven’t used in years. Got that?”

“I got it.”

“I mean it, agent. I’m trying to help, but if this comes back to bite me, I’ll make damned sure it bites you, too.”

“It will bite no one but David Harrison, sir. You have my word.”

“Good. Here are those coordinates.”

Faith wrote down the coordinates and thanked the general. He hung up, and Faith pulled her radio out. "Everyone, listen up. We have a possible location for David Harrison. I want two people at the house, just in case. Everyone else, we're on our way to the following location." She read the coordinates, and the officers cheered. "Okay," Faith said. "Let's go catch a bad guy."

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The testing facility looked exactly like the long-abandoned storage depot the general told Faith to call it. It was a single rectangular building made with concrete and painted Army green. The windows were blacked out, but some of the tint was peeling, making it look like a low-rent urban office park in a city far less affluent than San Jose.

The officers and agents moved ahead cautiously. If Harrison was entrenched in there, then approaching him aggressively could end badly. Faith wanted to make sure that everyone stayed together.

“Try to keep him alive if possible,” she whispered into her radio, “but safety first.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ferris replied.

The group spread out as they drew close. Faith checked her weapon and drew her flashlight. “Okay, everyone, look sharp. We’re going to do a walk around and note entrances and exits before we go inside. When we do enter, we’re moving quickly,

but carefully. We don't know what the interior looks like, so we need to be prepared for anything."

The others murmured acknowledgment, and Faith said, "Michael, take half of them and go left. The rest of you go right with me."

Michael nodded, and the group split and walked around the facility. It was of medium size for an Army building, which made it very small for a storage depot. Seventy feet long and fifty feet wide, Faith guessed. About twenty feet high, which wasn't encouraging since it meant two stories. Ferris had called a few more units to join them, but they still had only fifteen including her, Michael, and Turk. On paper, that should be more than enough, but she'd tangled with ex-military killers before, and they were typically much more dangerous than civilians.

She debated waiting for more units but decided against it. They'd just have to cross their fingers and do their best. Harrison wasn't special forces. He did have combat experience, but most of his career was spent testing weapons, not using them.

Besides, Faith had combat experience too, as did Turk.

They completed their circuit and met at the back of the building. "A couple of windows blown out on the left side," Michael told her. "Upper windows, so it's hard to say if he did it or if they were like that already."

"Have two officers wait outside to watch them," Faith instructed. "Whether he did it or not, they still represent his best chance at exiting. Take the rest of your team to the front entrance, and let me know when you're there. Just like last time, we're going in together."

"Cooper and I will stay outside," Ferris said. "I'm okay in a firefight, but I'm much better at coordinating activities. Radio me if you need anything—additional units,

medical, anything—and I'll make it happen.”

Faith nodded. "Get medical out here now. We'll need it for Harrison, if nothing else."

Ferris nodded and trotted off with Cooper. Michael gave Faith a tight grin and said, "Okay. Let's get this done."

She clapped him on the shoulder, then got into position. Turk growled low in his throat and stared fixedly at the door.

"You smell him, boy?" she asked.

He dipped his head, keeping his eyes firmly ahead.

"We'll get him," she promised Turk.

"All right," Michael said. "We're ready."

"Okay. Use night sticks to take out the windows. No shooting."

"Loud and clear."

"On three: one, two, three!"

Two of Faith's officers smashed the glass doors open while she and the rest of the officers held their weapons at the ready. Flashlights clicked on, illuminating a hallway with a door on either side every fifteen feet or so.

Once the door was open, the breaching officers stepped back. Faith led the others in, and they split into two smaller groups to take turns clearing the rooms.

“We’re inside,” Michael said. “First room is clear.”

“This one’s clear too,” Faith called.

The room appeared to be an old bunkroom with four bunk beds arranged along three of the walls and a tiny bathroom at one end. If Harrison was here, he was probably in one of these rooms.

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They moved through the facility, clearing three similar bunk rooms. Faith's ears rang with the clipped tones of "clear" every fifteen seconds or so.

As they neared the center of the facility, Faith worried that they might be wrong and Harrison wasn't here after all. She felt fear probing at the edge of her mind and pushed it away. Just focus.

They reached the end of the hallway and opened the other door. As soon as they did, a high-pitched ringing assaulted Faith's ears.

This was far more powerful than the tinnitus she'd felt in the hotel. She gasped and collapsed to her knees. For a terrifying moment, she wondered if her body had betrayed her and taken her out of the fight.

Then she saw Turk on the ground, along with the other officers. Harrison had used a very powerful attack of amplified sound to drop them.

Then she saw him, a silhouette standing near the middle of the room. She got to her feet, pushing through the pain and rushed after him.

His eyes widened, and Faith saw a youthful face with clear blue eyes and fine blonde hair. His file said he was thirty-two, but he looked ten years younger than that.

She leveled her weapon at him and tried to say, "David Harrison, you're under arrest!"

She made it through "under" when he rushed her, moving with exceptional speed. He

knocked the flashlight from her hand and grabbed her gun. Faith called for Turk, but when Turk tried weakly to get to his feet, he fell over again.

Nausea filled Faith, and she wasn't sure if he had hit her or if she was finally unable to resist the wave of sound slicing through her ears. Either way, she weakened enough that he was able to wrestle the gun from her. She grabbed it again, then forced him backward off of his feet.

As she fell, she saw that she was falling not toward the ground but into a yawning pit, the floor of which was at least twenty feet below. They landed hard, and Faith gasped as the wind was driven from her lungs. She heard the clattering of her gun as it skittered fell through a grating and disappeared into the darkness below. .

Then Harrison reappeared. His face was twisted into a snarl, but he made no sound as he kicked her into a black pit at the center of the platform they were in.

She fell again. She managed to tuck herself into a ball, but the landing still drove the last of her strength away. She crawled away, hands and knees shaking, fighting desperately to stay awake.

The darkness was nearly complete down here. She turned toward the only light available, the soft circle of gray that filtered down from windows at least forty feet above her and twenty-five feet away on either side.

That allowed her just enough time to see Harrison bring his boot down toward her neck. She rolled over, and the boot slammed forcefully onto the ground. The echo reverberated powerfully in the enclosed space, and Faith realized that the sonic attack had stopped, or at least wasn't affecting her down here.

She rolled to her feet, but a fist buried itself in her liver, and she dropped again. She forced herself upward, hands raised to protect herself, but Harrison had disappeared

into the darkness.

She stilled, breathing softly and listening. She heard Harrison's soft breathing, but she couldn't see where it was coming from. She knew that sometimes people with hearing loss experienced a slight improvement in their other senses. She desperately hoped that wasn't the case for Harrison.

A footstep echoed, then a shuffling noise. A slight change in air pressure told Faith he was running for her. She ducked, but she had misjudged the attack. Instead of avoiding a punch, she ducked right into a knee. Had her hands not been in front of her head, the blow would have knocked her out cold.

As it was, it still drove her onto her back and bruised her arms badly enough that they would be useless to her. She kicked out blindly and felt a rush of satisfaction when her foot collided with flesh. A groan escaped Harrison's mouth, oddly pitched and too loud.

He might not even be aware that he'd made noise. She could use that to her advantage.

If she could hit him again, that was.

Something hit her temple with the force of a bowling ball. She managed to remain conscious, but her arms dropped, the connection between mind and muscle temporarily discombobulated.

She gasped and moaned as she staggered backwards, trying to lift her trembling arms back up to her face. She caught movement to her right, and with a cry of effort, spun around and kicked her heel in a half-moon. It collided solidly with someone, and Faith heard another cry.

She followed the cry and attacked again, sending a flurry of punches at her unseen target. Harrison blocked most of them, but a few landed, and one connected solidly enough with his jaw that he grunted again.

He grabbed her shoulder and tripped her, sending her to the floor. She didn't have nearly as far to fall this time, but she was bruised and badly shaken from the first two. As soon as she hit the deck, she began to shake again.

She forced herself quickly to her feet and saw a slightly darker shadow move through the darkness. She threw a hard boxing combination, but Harrison evaded each punch. After the final jab, he spun her around by her shoulders and kicked the back of her left knee.

She went down, but not far. A tourniquet wrapped around her neck and cinched tight.

Faith's mouth flew open. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. Already, she felt pressure in her eyes and sinuses as Harrison cut off circulation to her brain. She dropped her weight and shoved her hips back, trying to throw him over her shoulder, but he held his arms out and kept her at a distance so she couldn't affect his balance. She jumped upright and tried to headbutt him, but he kicked her knee out again, so she hit his chest instead.

She drove upward again, colliding hard with his jaw. He flinched backward, but when she threw her arm in between his and tried to break the hold by driving her elbow down onto his bicep, he twisted his hips, lifting her off of the ground and throwing her hard to the floor face first.

He planted a knee in between her shoulder blades and pressed down while lifting his hands and drawing the ligature even tighter. Her eyes bulged and rolled back in her head. Spots formed in her vision, and no amount of struggling made a damned bit of difference.

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He had pulled her into his element and gotten the best of her. In her last moments of panic, she clawed at her neck trying to loosen the tourniquet only to find to her horror that it had compressed so tightly it was now even with her skin.

She heard the blood rushing through her ears, felt her heart pound thickly as it struggled to pump blood. Consciousness started to fade, and her hands dropped to her sides.

Then the pressure relaxed. For a half-second, she didn't register it, but then she gasped and jerked as blood flow returned to her brain. She gasped again and began to cough as she pulled at the tourniquet and unwrapped it.

She heard growling behind her and a loud, frightened wail. She staggered to her feet and turned toward the sound, but she couldn't see anything until a flashlight beam from above shone on Turk. Dried blood matted his fur under his ears, but he had a hold of David Harrison.

"Don't move!" Michael shouted. "I swear to God, I'll shoot you!"

Harrison couldn't hear Michael, of course, but he could understand what the handgun pointed at his face met. He dropped to the deck, and when Faith called weakly for Turk to release him, he didn't resist further.

Faith dropped to her knees and hugged Turk. Turk licked her face and whined, staring at her as though to convince himself she was okay.

"Good boy," she croaked. "Good boy."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The next evening...

Wow. So he's gonna get away with it?

Faith smiled slightly and sent back, A federal psychiatric ward is a crap place to “get away” with anything.

David was the on-call veterinarian at the Philadelphia Animal Hospital tonight. Sometimes that meant constant work tending to emergencies, and other times—like now—it meant sitting around bored and waiting for something to happen. They would normally talk on the phone during these moments, but Faith's neck was swollen and sore, and talking was painful for her.

Thank God for modern technology.

Still, I don't buy it. Crazy people don't lay in wait for FBI agents and try to strangle them to death while effectively avoiding all of the other armed officers and using a sound weapon to take out the K9.

Faith's smile widened. She looked over at Turk, who was happily chowing down on his dinner. Kibble tonight. For reasons only dogs understood, Turk liked the fancy wet food David bought for him but absolutely loved the meat-flavored cereal that cost a dollar a pound. She was giving him a treat tonight. He'd earned it.

He didn't succeed, though, she texted back. Turk saved me.

Yeah. He's a good dog.

She laughed. Damned straight.

She looked up at Turk again. Her loving smile vanished, and ice ran through her veins.

Turk was coughing and shuddering as he stumbled away from his bowl. His limbs were shaking, and drool was dripping from his mouth in copious amounts.

“Turk?” she called, her damaged vocal cords producing only a whisper. “Boy?”

Turk looked at her in bewilderment, then coughed. His eyes fluttered, and he fell to his side, convulsing.

Fear gripped Faith, more pure and intense than anything she had felt in her life. She croaked, “Turk! Oh God, Turk!” and ran to his side, dropping the phone. She lifted his head and shook him slightly. “Turk! What’s wrong, boy? What’s happening?”

Turk tried to look at her, but another series of convulsions overtook him. Faith began to sob, tears obscuring her vision as she turned around to call David and ask him how to help. Something below her consciousness told her he wouldn’t make it to the animal hospital in time.

Her vision was so blurry that she couldn’t quite tell if what she was seeing was real at first. It wasn’t until she wiped her tears away that she realized that the woman standing in front of her with the crazed smile and the wide, staring eyes wasn’t a figment of her imagination.

Understanding filled Faith with a fresh wave of fear and pulled her right back to alertness. “You...” she whispered.

“Me,” the woman replied. “You weren’t responding to my messages, so I figured I’d send you a louder one.”

Faith swallowed. She hated what she was about to do, but she didn't have time to fight. Turk was going to die, probably within minutes. "Please. Just let me call someone to take him to the hospital. Then we'll talk. I promise."

The woman giggled—a sound that grated against Faith's ears even worse than her tinnitus did. "Come on. I'm crazy, not stupid. Besides, you're a stupid ugly slut bitch, and I have to kill you to show Frank I deserve him."

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She said that in a bright, singsong tone that reminded Faith of a hostess at a restaurant who was trying too hard.

Ice filled Faith's veins, but of a different variety this time. She'd tried to be nice. Now, it was time to handle business.

She ran at the stranger and threw a left hook. The stranger flinched backward and swung a truncheon from behind her back. It cracked Faith on the back of her hand, and Faith gasped as she lost all strength in the hand.

The woman lunged forward, shrieking like a banshee. Faith caught the truncheon and kicked the stranger. The woman released a sound like a tea kettle boiling. Her eyes popped open, but she held onto the truncheon somehow.

She also recovered from a kick to the liver faster than anyone Faith had ever seen. She snarled and pushed Faith forward, driving her back into the wall despite being three inches shorter and probably twenty pounds lighter than Faith.

The two women struggled for control of the baton. Faith heard a hoarse cough and looked down to see Turk baring his teeth and trying to fight Faith's attacker. He was trembling all over, and foam flecked at the corners of his mouth. Faith's heart broke to see him fighting for her in the middle of this.

That moment of heartbreak pulled her attention away. The stranger took advantage of that, shrieking again and twisting hard, sending Faith to the floor.

The stranger—no, not the stranger, the Messenger Killer—laughed and pointed the

truncheon at Turk. "Potassium cyanide. A lot of it. Figured he'd be more dangerous than you. Looks like I was right."

Faith scrambled to her feet, but the Messenger was faster. She swung the truncheon at Faith's knee. Faith felt a pop and dropped to the floor again.

"I'm going to beat you to death," the Messenger said. "Then I'm going to cut your heart out and squeeze it all over your dog's face. I hope he's still alive when I do."

Faith lashed out with her other foot, sweeping the Messenger to the ground. The woman snarled and twisted in midair to land on top of Faith. She lifted the truncheon, but Faith rolled over so she was on top of her. She drove her elbow down, connecting with the Messenger's nose. The Messenger cried out, and Faith dropped her elbow again, then again.

Each blow landed hard enough to knock out a grown man, but somehow, the Messenger stayed alert. She bared her teeth and hissed at Faith like a cat.

Something about that reached behind Faith's already frayed willpower and stimulated a primal fear in Faith's mind. In a moment of weakness, she drew back to headbutt the Messenger.

That gave the killer her opportunity. She grunted, and the truncheon connected with Faith's head. She went limp, only for a moment, but long enough for the Messenger to roll her over and straddle her chest.

She giggled and lifted the truncheon, leering at Faith with that unnerving smile. "Time to turn your head into goop!"

She lifted the truncheon high overhead. "God, I can't wait to tell Frank about this."

Just before she brought the weapon down on Faith's skull, there was a knock at the

door. The Messenger whipped her head toward the door and hissed, “Damn it! God-fucking-damn it!”

She looked at Faith, and the truncheon flinched, but the door handle was turning now. She glared at Faith for a moment longer, then rushed out the back door, leaping the fence just as Michael and Ellie stepped inside.

Michael was smiling. “Hey there. You don’t lock your doors, or what? Were you wrestling with Turk...” His voice trailed off when he saw Turk shuddering weakly on the ground, foam covering his mouth. “Oh my God!”

Ellie shrieked and dropped the bag of food she was holding.

“Take him to the hospital,” Faith begged. “Please.”

“I’ve got you, boy,” Michael said, picking Turk up. “Ellie, grab Faith.”

Ellie was already at Faith’s side, helping her to her feet. Faith sobbed and tried to explain what was happening, but Ellie said, “Shh, it’s okay, dear. Let’s get Turk some help. We’ll worry about everything else later.”

As the two women followed Michael and Turk, Faith looked out the back door where the Messenger Killer had escaped. She was in the wind now, but unless Turk received a miracle, she had caused more harm to Faith than Trammell, more harm than West. She had dealt her the worst blow anyone ever had, and for the first time since Trammel severed the tendons in the back of her knees, Faith Bold was truly afraid of a killer.