



So Bleak (Faith Bold #16)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

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.

Total Pages (Source): 31

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There were seven staff members visible in the packed restaurant when Harold walked inside: four servers, a hostess, and two chefs. All of them shouted, " Irasshaimase! " when he stepped inside.

They didn't know him. Nobody did, really. That was part of his schtick. All of his promotional stills cleverly hid his face. Even his author pictures on the books hid his face. Roast rack of pork. Pheasant under glass. Coq au vin . Any of those could be held in the perfect spot to keep the picture from showing his face.

The point of all that was that the staff didn't know he was Harold Grimes, restaurant reviewer. Maintaining his anonymity was critical if he was going to provide honest reviews. He didn't want to risk a restaurant knowing who he was and elevating their quality and level of service for his sake.

The greeting was a good start. So simple, yet so critical to the dining experience. And yet so many restaurants failed to instruct their employees in this effortless but crucial step.

Harold didn't often review restaurants that were as trendy as this one. The problem with trendy restaurants was that you were certain to offend someone if you exposed the food as subpar. Generation Z seemed to care far more about a restaurant's Instagram-worthiness and virtue signaling than the food. Harold wanted nothing to do with that.

But the City Watch editor wanted this one. Harold was freelance, of course, but he had a regular column in City Watch. He could refuse, but you didn't succeed in the journalism business by turning down assignments. Especially when food and lifestyle

editors didn't give a rat's ass about the food itself.

He sighed. That was what he hoped to change, at least in some small way. He wanted people to care about the food. That was the whole point, right?

A very attractive young Japanese woman walked up to him to guide him to a seat. Harold would bet dollars to donuts she'd never been to Japan. She was too bubbly and silly, without the demure formality of a traditional Japanese restaurant. She probably grew up in some upper-middle-class suburb on the East Coast and thought that Japanese people acted like the stupid cartoon characters the anime industry created for American teenagers. The pretense detracted somewhat from the good first impression the traditional greeting provided.

She handed him the checklist typically used to place orders at sushi bars, then disappeared without asking if he'd like something to drink. Another mark against the place. Oh well. First impressions were usually too good to be true.

He checked all of the standards: toro, uni, tamago, ebi, an assortment of maki and the special of the day. The girl returned with edamame, tea, and water, and he lifted his eyebrows in approval. At the same time, he scolded himself silently. He was expecting the service of an American restaurant and had completely forgotten about the traditional Japanese table service.

He thanked the server and ordered a Japanese beer and sake, then handed her the checklist. The waitress seemed confused, of course. He'd ordered far more than any one man could eat. It was possible that he'd outed himself as a reviewer, but that couldn't be helped. He needed to sample the menu in order to review it.

He sipped the tea and carefully swirled it in his mouth. A good cup of Japanese tea had a balance of flavors ranging from umami to sweetness with low astringency. In America, it seemed nobody ever made it right. This tea was as good or even better

than the tea he was served at the ANA Hotel in Tokyo. Maybe this restaurant deserved a chance.

He tried some of the edamame and was pleased that the beans retained an al dente texture. He couldn't understand why so many places insisted on cooking their edamame until it was little more than mush.

Texture. That was so critical to food, yet so often forgotten. It was an automatic point in a restaurant's favor when they remembered that food was meant to be more than flavored paste.

He took another bite, then his throat closed. At first, he thought he had swallowed a bean the wrong way, but when he coughed to try to dislodge it, he couldn't expel the air. He breathed in reflexively, but he couldn't inhale either.

He wasn't choking. He was suffocating. His throat had closed completely. An allergic reaction. But he wasn't allergic to anything, and he'd drunk tea and eaten edamame hundreds of times before.

Panic set in. He leapt to his feet and tried to call for help, but of course, no sound came out. As his vision began to constrict, he ran from table to table, flailing his arms and clutching his throat, hoping someone would understand and help him.

One helpful man tried to give him the Heimlich. Harold tried to tell him he wasn't choking, that his throat had closed, and the Heimlich wouldn't help.

But he couldn't get the words out. He could only gasp silently and claw at the air as his vision finally faded to black.

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“Good evening, I’m Tyler Hudson, and you’re watching Crime Bites, the show where we pull back the veil over the world of crime and reveal what evil lurks in the shadows. Today, well... I think we all know what case we’re talking about today.”

"No, please, Tyler," Faith said drily. "Tell us."

“On July 21, 1988, jury selection for the Night Stalker case began and some say what we’re seeing in the West trial is eerily similar. We have a great friend to the show, Benjamin Trainor, legal historian, with us today. Bennie, welcome.”

“Thanks for having me.”

Turk put his head on FBI Special Agent Faith Bold’s lap and looked up at her. She ruffled the big German Shepherd’s fur and grumbled, “I know. But I’m not going to turn it off, so deal with it.”

Trainor, the latest in a long line of vapid talking heads Tyler Hudson had chosen for his show, began to offer his typically bullshit opinion of something he knew far less about than he thought he did. “A lot of the talk is just a lack of knowledge. Certainly, it will take a lot of work to seat a jury but most people forget that when the jury selection started with Richard Ramirez, jury selection was also starting for Randy Kraft.”

“Randy Kraft? I’m not familiar.”

“He was known as the Freeway Killer,” Trainor explained. “Some called him the Southern California Strangler or the Scorecard Killer. He was a far more prolific

killer than Ramirez. Ramirez is credibly connected to fourteen murders and was convicted in one. Kraft may have killed as many as sixty-seven.”

“So the point is there were two very significant serial killer trials going on at the very same time in a small geographical area. Los Angeles County and Orange County in Southern California. They were expected to interview more than two thousand potential jurors just to seat the jury—they ended up with sixteen hundred interviews.”

She sighed and stood. “I’m gonna make some food. You want something?”

In the two and a half years she’d known Turk, he had not once refused food. He barked happily, and she chuckled and ruffled his fur. “Call me when they get to the West case.”

She made a TV dinner for herself and opened a can of food for Turk. When she cooked, she would usually cook some meat for him, but that wasn’t very often. Fortunately, the Bureau paid for the expensive dog food she had chosen so she could feed him something natural and healthy instead of the processed crap they sold in supermarkets.

The host continued to drone about the Richard Ramirez case, and Trainor sprinkled in anecdotes about the Scorecard Killer. Faith chuckled and shook her head as she brought their food back to the living room. “It’s always the same,” she said, once more disturbed by how jaded she sounded.

It was true, though. The media loved making serial killers celebrities. They gave them colorful names—the Night Stalker, the Vampire of Twin Cities Terminal, the Son of Sam, the Donkey Killer—and talked about them like they were movie stars. It was gross, and it was even grosser that so many people consumed this kind of entertainment.

But what really pissed Faith off was how much they got wrong.

“What we have with West,” Trainor said, “Is a very similar case to that of Ramirez but in a package as prolific as Kraft.”

“You believe West is similar to the Night Stalker?”

“Oh yes. He’s a violent sexual deviant, likely impotent, who causes pain as a substitute for pleasure and uses a knife to penetrate victims rather than... well, I think we can guess.”

The host laughed politely. Faith laughed, too, but hers was bitter and contemptuous.

“West is nothing like Ramirez.”

Turk whimpered and lifted his head to look at her again. She patted his head and tried to control her breathing so she wouldn’t seem distressed. It occurred to her that watching news coverage about the proceedings might not be a smart idea. She’d already given her statements and exercised the option—as one of West’s victims—to avoid seeing him in court. She wasn’t afraid of him anymore, but she hated courtroom work when she didn’t have a personal connection to a case. She had no desire to deal with the stress of the courtroom when the case was a core part of who she had been for the past two years.

She would watch the case, though. Smart or not, she was pretty sure she couldn’t resist it.

"The actual means by which West kills his victims calls to mind killers such as Dennis Rader, the infamous BTK killer. In fact, I believe he shares as much in common with Rader as he does with Ramirez. Bind, Torture, and Kill could just as easily describe West's MO as Rader's."

“God, you stupid prick.” She scratched the top of Turk’s head to forestall any concern he might show.

But they were just so stupid. How could they say that West was anything like Rader? Just because he tied his victims up? Bondage was something many serial killers used as part of their MO. More often than not, it was for practical reasons, not psychological reasons. It was easier to kill someone who couldn’t fight back.

They were just namedropping serial killers like they would name drop movie stars. “God damned parasites.”

Faith reached for the remote, but when she heard her name, she stopped.

Tyler, the host, was speaking. “I’m particularly fascinated by his obsession with Special Agent Faith Bold of the FBI’s Philadelphia Field Office. According to our sources, she’s testified in a written statement that West tormented her for years, even posing as her therapist for months. Do you believe this was motivated by sexual attraction for Special Agent Bold?”

“Oh, certainly, Trainor replied. “And I believe it was exacerbated by her position as an authority figure. I postulate that West has harbored deviant attractions to female authority figures in his past. This draws parallels to cases like that of Ed Kemper—”

Faith switched the TV off and resisted the urge to throw the remote at the tv.

Why did everything come down to sex when people talked about killers? West wasn’t obsessed with Faith because he wanted to screw her. In fact, Faith was pretty sure West wasn’t interested in sex at all.

West wasn’t using murder to substitute for sex. He was using it to play God. He wanted to dominate people completely, to render them nothing more than toys subject

entirely to his will. In a way, she supposed, that was similar to Rader, but there was no sexual motivation at all in his actions.

He was obsessed with Faith because she had escaped his god. He believed that Jethro Trammell, the original Donkey Killer, had failed to break Faith's spirit. He wanted to surpass Trammell by breaking Faith's soul before he broke her body. In fact, Faith wasn't even sure he intended to kill her. He'd passed up several good opportunities to do just that. He was more interested in destroying her will.

He had failed at that too. But he had come damned close to succeeding, and he had left deep scars in his wake.

That was what made him different from Rader or Bundy or Ramirez. They all wanted to possess their victim's bodies. West wanted to possess their souls.

She stood and sighed heavily. She was right. She shouldn't have watched that damned special. "You want to go for a run, boy? Mommy needs to work out some negative energy."

Turk, his belly full from his meal, whined plaintively.

"A walk, then," Faith amended. "That sound good?"

Turk barked approvingly and got to his feet. Faith smiled at the overgrown puppy, and the tension in her shoulders faded.

It didn't matter anymore. Let the tabloids and the shock shows have their fun. Let them spout whatever bullshit they wanted. They couldn't hurt her. West couldn't hurt her.

She had won.

She pulled on a sweater and shoes, then laced her hair up in a ponytail. Turk waited for her by the door, tail wagging happily, eyes as bright and sweet and loving as ever.

She grinned and ruffled his fur again. “Just a nice easy walk, boy. No bad guys to catch tonight.”

Turk seemed happy with that, but as Faith led him down the stairs and out into the city, she found herself wishing some villain was out there on whom she could release her frustration.

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“At that point, the team kept their strategy close to the vest. They had several appeals pending, and—”

Lillian scoffed at Benjamin Trainor. “Why the hell are you still talking about the Night Stalker? He was nothing compared to West.

On the tiny screen, the man looked cartoonish. He didn’t look like a professional talk show guest. He looked like an actor from a 1950s science fiction movie communicating with someone from outer space. Of course, this little television wasn’t black and white, so it didn’t fit exactly.

“Wasn’t one of those to remove Judge Tynan from the case?”

That was the host, the equally cartoonish Tyler Hudson. Lillian secretly hoped West would make the smarmy little asshole one of his victims, but he never had.

“ Yes,” Trainor replied. “ Sort of. It was an appeal to overturn the decision of a judge who refused to remove him from the case. By that point, Ramirez had changed styles. He wore black clothes and sunglasses...”

This was very frustrating. This was supposed to be a show about Dr. West. He was a thousand times the man Richard Ramirez was. Ramirez was nothing special. He was just another rapist who needed to kill people to get off. They were a dime a dozen.

West? West was something special.

“You just don’t have any real news,” Lillian mocked. “That’s why you keep talking

about the Night Stalker.”

It was disgusting. Richard Ramirez was inelegant and unrefined. He was a buffoon. Forget being in the same league as Dr. West. They weren't even playing the same sport!

“This is another way Ramirez and West are similar—”

“No!” Lillian screamed.

She lifted the tiny set off the desk and threw it against the wall. The damned thing didn't shatter like she expected it to, so she slid to her knees, lifted it up and slammed it into the floor until she heard a pop and the screen finally went black.

She breathed deeply, clutching the dead TV and staring with bared teeth at the useless box. When her breathing calmed, she released the tv and slid backwards against the desk.

She closed her eyes and thought of blue.

Soft blue.

Corn flower blue.

Like Dr. West's eyes.

She thought of that blue until her heart slowed to its resting rate, then sighed and stood up. She picked up the television and carried it outside of the closet that served as her office.

She'd have to buy another. People here were pretty good about not asking questions,

but the motel owners would probably draw a line at having one of their televisions destroyed.

Did they even make those little tube TVs anymore? This motel was the only place Lillian had seen one in decades.

She might have to settle for a cheap flat screen. She could tell the manager that she had tripped and accidentally knocked the TV off of the desk. Any TV would be an upgrade over that shitty little box, so she doubted he'd raise too much of a fuss.

She tossed the TV into the dumpster. It fell with a muffled clang. The garbage had just been taken that morning. She'd have to go by a TV today so she'd have a way to placate the manager when he knocked on the room wanting to know why his TV was broken.

Lillian stood by the dumpster and replayed the special she had just watched.

How could anyone think that Dr. Franklin West was anything like that dumb dipshit Ramirez? Dr. West was the kind of man who came along once in a lifetime, maybe even less often than that. He wasn't like the Night Stalker. He was more like the Zodiac Killer or Jack the Ripper, a legend who inspired terror in the hearts of everyone who heard his name.

Except those killers had never been caught. West had been caught because of that bitch, Faith Bold.

It wasn't fair. A man like West shouldn't have fallen victim to some stupid FBI agent and her stupid dog.

It wasn't fair.

But she would get them back. She would avenge West.

“For you, my love,” she whispered.

She stiffened when she realized she’d said that out loud. Damn it, she needed to be more careful.

She left the dumpster and headed to her car. She’d find the cheapest TV Walmart sold and when she returned, she would make her plan.

Count your days, Faith Bold. West will still break you.

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Faith sighed in frustration as she pulled out of the parking lot and switched the radio on. News radio was once more spouting off about how West resembled past serial killers.

In fairness, the news radio show was talking about likely similarities in the upcoming trial rather than the killings. That irritated her, too, but it was easier to swallow than comparing West to the media's favorite celebrity killers. Some degree of media theatrics was expected in a high-profile case like this one.

"While he was incarcerated during the trial, jail employees heard Ramirez plan to kill the prosecutor with a gun he'd get from an ally in the courtroom," one of the panelists said.

"Yeah. They put in a metal detector and even searched the lawyers," another replied.

"Is this something West is likely to plan?"

"Sure, but it's unlikely to have much success. The screening process for this case will be far beyond anything we've ever seen. West is a sly one, but I don't see him having any more success than Ramirez did."

"Damn it!" Faith shouted, quickly turning the volume back down. She'd intended to change the station but had moved the wrong button. She turned the radio off instead. She felt like ripping it right out of the car and throwing it on the ground.

Turk instantly came to alert, barking and growling and staring out the window, searching for the threat. She sighed and patted his flanks. "Sorry, boy. Mommy just

got upset at the radio.”

Turk looked at her, then looked at the radio. He seemed confused, but he growled a warning at the offending box anyway. She laughed and patted him again. “It’s okay, boy. I turned it off.”

Turk barked once at the radio, as though warning it to stay down, then settled back into the passenger chair. She grinned at him. “You’re the best dog ever. You know that?”

He gave her a slightly incredulous look. Well, duh, mom.

She laughed again and scratched him behind the ears.

In four-hundred feet, turn left.

Faith frowned at her radio. She thought she had turned it off, but if she hadn’t, then why was it giving her directions? She drove a 2009 Crown Victoria, and while it was a far cry more modern than the venerable ’96 Crown Vic it replaced, it wasn’t equipped with navigation.

Turn left, then you will arrive at your destination.

She felt a vibration on her left leg and realized that she was hearing her phone. She had looked up directions to the restaurant when she left her apartment and forgotten to turn the navigation software off.

Her cheeks burned, and she was glad David wasn’t here to see that. She would never hear the end of it. Faith Bold: thirty-four, eleven-year veteran of the FBI, detective extraordinaire, doesn’t understand how smart phones work.

She pulled into the parking lot and found a spot near the entrance.

You have arrived.

“Thank you, Google Maps,” she said drily.

She got out of her car and quickly closed the navigation app. She sighed and started around to let Turk out, only to find he had jumped across the seats and left through her door already. He looked up at her, tail wagging, and she said, "Well, here's hoping David's right about this place allowing pets. It looks fancy."

Technically speaking, as a K9, Turk was a service animal and not subject to the normal restrictions regarding pets, but Faith didn't like taking advantage of that exemption. She didn't really like fancy restaurants in general. She hated having to worry about how she was sitting and if she was using the right fork or how to hold her wine glass. David always insisted it didn't matter, but Faith couldn't shake the feeling of being a bull in a China shop each time they went out to a high-end place.

Turk, of course, couldn't care in the slightest. He trotted happily into the restaurant and barked greetings at the other dogs present. Well, there were other dogs present, so that was good. David was right about the place being pet-friendly. Other than the facade, it didn't look too fancy either, so that was nice.

“Faith!”

She turned toward the sound of the voice and grinned when she saw the handsome movie-star looks of Dr. David Friedman, Turk's vet and the love of Faith's life. She giggled and rushed into his arms, then sighed as she melted into his kiss. She didn't feel like much of a “girly” girl, but something about David filled her with butterflies and rainbows and made her want to dance like a ballerina.

“Wow,” David said when he pulled away. “Someone’s in a good mood.”

“Why do you say that like you’re surprised?” Faith challenged.

“I’m not surprised; I’m just happy to see you. You know, I like stating the obvious.”

“That’s true. You do have a knack for that.”

“Well, let me state something else that’s obvious. You’re beautiful.”

She rolled her eyes, but she felt her cheeks heat at the praise. “And you’re handsome. Any other gross things you want to say before we have dinner?” He grinned, and she cut him off. “No. ”

“What? You asked.”

“Yeah, and I regret it. God, introducing you to Michael was the worst mistake of my life.”

David had only recently met Faith’s partner, Michael. Despite their initial meeting being somewhat less than ideal, the two had become fast friends, a fact that Faith both appreciated and... well, resented was the wrong word, but it was hard enough to handle Michael’s sense of humor without David showing a similar immature side.

“Oh, you know you love me.”

She sighed. “I do. Remind me why again?”

“Sure.” He grinned. “After dinner.”

She rolled her eyes and took her seat. “Is this the kind of place that sells food you can

eat with your hands, or do I need to know what the different forks are for?”

“One for dinner, and one for dessert,” he replied. “That’s what I use them for anyway.”

“Good enough for me. Where’s the dog menu?”

“On the back. You’re just going to get him the steak, though, so no point in looking.”

“Hey, you don’t know that. I might decide to branch out and order him the… Vegan, gluten-free plant-based salmon.”

Turk looked up at her in alarm, and David laughed and patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, boy. I won’t let her order you that.”

Turk sighed with relief, and Faith giggled again. There was nothing like a meal with her two favorite boys to take her mind off of the case.

Unfortunately, one of her favorite boys, while handsome as hell and very sweet, was only smart when it came to pet health. “Have you been watching the case?”

Her smile faded. She shrugged and said, “Not really. I’m kind of over all of it, you know?”

David didn’t take the hint. “You hear they’re calling him the new Richard Ramirez?”

She forced another smile and said, “Let’s not talk about West right now. How are you doing? How’s work?”

It was more of an instruction than a hint, but at least David understood it this time. “Work’s good. I’m great. I’ll be better when my girlfriend of almost two years lives

with me.”

She sighed, but her reticence was more of a ritual than something she actually felt anymore. With West in custody, she wasn’t afraid for David’s safety the way she used to be. She actually wanted to move in with him. But she couldn’t just come out and say that. She needed him to work for it a little.

So, she sighed and said, “I think I can find a doll for you in the evidence locker at the Field Office.”

He grimaced. “Eww. I’m good, thanks.”

“You sure? They’ll do anything you want—”

“I am very good, thanks,” he interrupted. “Eww... Eww...”

She laughed, then sighed again. “I want to move in with you too, but it’s not like I can just hop over tomorrow and change my mailing address.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I still have six months on my lease.”

“So? I won’t charge you rent. You can finish paying the lease and then just not renew it.”

“I still have to live there. It’s called maintaining residency.”

“I think it’s called something else, but I get what you mean. So you pop by one or two nights a week and leave the light on when you’re not home.”

“What an irresponsible waste of energy, Dr. Friedman.”

He sighed. “You’re really going to make me wait six more months?”

“I know,” she said, pouting like a mother comforting a child. “It’s so hard. I’m sorry, poor baby.”

He laughed and pressed, “It is hard. I love you. I want to come home to you. Come on, am I really so clingy just because I want to spend every second of the rest of my life less than three feet away from you at all times?”

She chuckled and took his hands in hers. “Yes, but that’s okay. Because I want to be with you too.” She met his eyes and said, “Let me think about it, okay?”

“You’ve been thinking about—”

“I know, I know. Just a little longer. Worst-case scenario, six months. If you love me, you’ll wait six months.”

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and groaned. “Ugh! That’s not fair! You can’t pull that card.”

“Sure I can,” she said pertly. “But... it’ll probably be less than six months.”

He brightened immediately. “Really?”

“Yes, real—”

Her phone buzzed. She pulled it from her pocket and sighed. “Really?”

“Your boss?”

“Worse. My partner.”

She answered the phone and Michael’s voice said, “Hey, I didn’t interrupt you in the middle of anything naked, did I?”

After eleven years of working with Michael, she was used to his aggressively immature sense of humor and responded in kind. “No. What about Ellie? Is she staring up at you wishing you’d just finish already?”

“Bold of you to assume she makes eye contact.”

Faith grimaced. “Okay, that’s on me. I played along when I should have ignored you. Please tell me you called to be an annoying prick and not because of work.”

“Sorry,” he replied. “It’s work.”

She sighed and let her head fall forward. David patted her shoulder comfortingly, and she asked, “What is it?”

“DB at Sushi Amaterasu. Looks a lot like that food critic who was killed at Cucina Toscana last week.”

“Shit. All right. I’m on my way.”

“Just head back to your apartment. No need for us to take more than one car. I’ll pick you up from there. Sorry, Faith. Tell David I’m sorry too.”

She looked up at David. “Michael says he’s sorry.”

“Tell him I said me too.”

“He says he’s gonna kick your ass for ruining his chances of getting laid tonight.”

David laughed, and Michael said, “Hey, I’m not too happy about it either. I was lying when I said Ellie doesn’t make eye contact.”

“Again, that’s my fault. However, let’s make a pact not to make any more dirty jokes for at least the duration of the case. Deal?”

“Deal. I was running out of witty remarks anyway.”

“I’ll bet. See you soon.”

She hung up and smiled apologetically at David. “I really am sorry. We’ll talk more about this later, okay? I’ll move in with you soon, I promise.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said. “In the meantime, I’ll just keep crying myself to sleep.”

She giggled and kissed the tip of his nose. “Just think about how nice it will be to have me to yourself every night.”

“Yeah, that sounds better. I like that.”

She kissed him again, then led an equally reluctant Turk from the restaurant. “I owe you a steak, boy.”

She was excited about the prospect of a case. It would be nice to have something to take her mind off of the bullshit surrounding West, and if it got her out of an uncomfortable conversation about moving in with David, then that was just icing on the cake.

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Special Agent Michael Prince, Faith's best friend and partner of eleven years and counting, waited for her in a much larger, much newer vehicle than her old Crown Vic. Faith understood the appeal of the luxurious boats that manufacturers called SUVs these days. They were comfortable, and they allowed people the option to stream music on their phones instead of listening to the same bullshit news they saw on TV or the same twelve songs that played on every radio station.

Still, she preferred the feel of an older car. They had personality. They were driver's cars, not the semi-self-driving hotel rooms that were all the rage these days.

She didn't bother asking Michael if he wanted her to drive, though. Michael was a much better driver than he was a passenger, and she didn't want to spoil her good mood any further by dealing with his complaints on their way to the restaurant.

She opened the door for Turk, then climbed into the passenger seat. Turk immediately leapt into Michael's arms and exuberantly licked his face. Michael laughed and hugged the big dog. "Hey, boy. Good to see you, too. I missed you." He turned to Faith and teased, "No kiss from Mommy?"

"Well, I'd like to have a boyfriend when this is over, and I'm sure you want to stay married. So no."

"Fine. Turk's a better kisser than you anyway." He put the car in gear and asked, "How's David?"

"Didn't you guys see each other last week?"

“Jeez, I’m just making conversation.”

She laughed. “He’s fine. He’s trying to get me to move in with him before the lease is up.”

“Do it. You have him wrapped around your finger. Take advantage of that now before he figures out how annoying you are.”

“I’ll take that under advisement. I mean, I probably will. I’m going to move in with him eventually, so there’s no real point in dragging it out.”

“Exactly. Besides, he’s a good guy. I like him.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said drily.

“Oh, whatever.”

"So, how's Ellie doing?"

He grinned. “Perfect as always. She made me a chocolate cake in the shape of a badge for our anniversary.”

“Does she know that FBI agents don’t wear badges?”

“You see, that’s the difference between you and me. I thought the cake was adorable, and I appreciated the thought. You have to go right to picking everything apart.”

“Picking things apart is what I get paid to do. For the record, before you get all pissy, I think it’s adorable how cute you two are.”

“It is adorable. We’re like the... the... who’s the couple who lives next door to Lucy

and Desi Arnaz?"

She looked at him for a moment. "Do I look like I watch I Love Lucy?"

"No, I guess not. You probably wouldn't like it. No blood."

"Oh yeah, that's why I became an agent," she quipped. "I just love blood."

"Well, I know it's not the vacation days. Did you know the Bureau's trying to reduce paid time off from three weeks to sixteen days annually?"

"The horror."

"One more reason to retire, I guess."

She rolled her eyes. "You keep saying you're going to retire, but I think you just like to pretend you have options other than the Bureau. You're like the boyfriend who keeps threatening to leave, but he never does because he knows he can't do better."

"The point of retiring is to do nothing, not to do better. But yeah, I guess you're right. In any case, with West locked up, Ellie's sleeping at night, so she's not pressuring me to move us somewhere far away anymore."

Michael's wife, Ellie, happened to also be Franklin West's ex-wife. Needless to say, she hadn't taken it well when her abusive ex-husband was revealed to also be among the most prolific and most brutal serial killers in American history. She was more relieved than anyone when he was finally brought to justice.

"That's good," Faith replied. "I'm glad she's healing."

"Yeah, me too. I won't lie, though; I was kind of hoping I'd get ten minutes alone

with West."

"Isn't the phrase five minutes alone?"

"I'm an old man now. I'd need a couple of breaks to catch my breath."

She rolled her eyes and slapped his shoulder playfully. "Don't talk like that."

"Why not? I love being old. I'm pretty sure I was born to be an old man."

"You might be right there."

"So how are you holding up?" he asked. "Are you following the case?"

She sighed. "Trying not to."

"I get it. The last thing you need after years trying to shake that monkey off your back is for some dumbass academic to act like he's the same as the Night Stalker."

"Right? How do you even make that comparison?"

"You get told by a bunch of stuffed shirts that your shit smells like roses, so you start thinking that every thought that pops into your head is Gospel. From there, you just cherry-pick your facts so it fits whatever preconceived bullshit you've decided to pronounce today."

She smiled wryly. "I take it you saw the Crime talk broadcast this morning."

"Yep. My mistake. I had the TV on for the weather, and I left it on when I saw West's face. I thought it was going to be an update on the jury selection, but nope, it was Tyler Hudson entertaining some dumb shit professor who thinks that every murderer

is a sexual deviant."

"Yeah, what's with that? Do people not realize there are other motives for murder?"

"I'm sure they do, but sex sells."

She scoffed. "It would be nice if they thought that maybe they shouldn't sell this kind of sex."

"Well, fuck 'em. They want to look all smug and pat themselves on the back for being smart, that's fine with me. At least they only get to talk about things after the fact instead of being involved in the hunt for these criminals."

"Thank God for small blessings."

She sighed, but this time with relief. She was grateful to have Michael to talk to. She couldn't really talk about work with David. Aside from the fact that most of the time, she really couldn't talk about work with him since it involved an ongoing case or sealed court records, he couldn't understand what it was like to hunt serial killers. He was supportive, of course, but law enforcement was one of those jobs you didn't understand unless you worked it.

Either way, it was a load off of her chest to talk with someone who shared her views on the bullshit the media always peddled in these cases. With that off of her mind, she could focus on the case at hand.

"So what are we walking into?" she asked Michael.

"Victim is Harold Grimes, food columnist and author. He was doing a blind review of Sushi Amaterasu when he jumped up like he was choking, ran around the restaurant like crazy for about thirty seconds, then fell down dead."

“Jesus.”

"Yeah, we never get the cut-and-dry ones, do we?"

“If we did, we’d be local police. But hey, at least we’d actually have badges.”

“You stop it. That cake was delicious.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you liked it. Do we have a cause of death for Grimes?”

“We’re waiting on a tox report, but the preliminary guess is a severe allergic reaction.”

She lifted her eye. “It can’t be an allergic reaction, or we wouldn’t have been called.”

“Well, the hypothesis is that someone introduced a foreign substance into his meal that caused the reaction. Or they just straight up poisoned him.”

“And this is like another case you said?”

“Yeah, Eleanor Crestwood. Also a food columnist, but in her case an online blog. She died at Cucina Toscana last week. You didn’t see it on the news?”

Faith vaguely remembered hearing about a woman who had died at a restaurant, but it was sandwiched between two lengthy reports on the West case, so she didn’t pay attention to it. “I don’t remember what they said. I can see the connection, though. Two high-profile food critics died the same way at two different restaurants within a week. Sounds like what we do.”

“I feel a need to point out that what we do is find people who do stuff like that. We don’t actually do it ourselves.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant Obvious.”

He looked at her quizzically. “Lieutenant Obvious. Why was I demoted?”

“David’s Captain Obvious.”

“What? Why? I’ve known you longer than him.”

“Well, he’s cuter than you.”

“Speak for yourself. Ellie says I’m adorable.”

She laughed. “Good for you. Do we have a confirmed COD for Crestwood?”

“Definitely poison. They’re still waiting for the tox report to know exactly what killed her, but they think it’s something called a sodium channel blocker.”

“A what?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. I guess it interferes with nerve signal transmission or something. Basically, it kills you.”

“Ah. That clears it up.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

He pulled into the parking lot of an upscale shopping center in Rittenhouse Square. The shopping center was nestled in between several hotels ranging in price from expensive to exorbitant and clearly hoped to extort money from well-heeled travelers by offering a tasteful selection of the latest in designer fashion and trendy eateries.

Not that it was making much money now. Sushi Amaterasu was near the center of the strip mall, meaning the yellow police tape surrounding the entrance was clearly visible from the street, as were the two police cruisers parked in front of it.

“Nice place,” Michael said.

“I’m sure it was.”

The two of them got out of the car and Faith felt her good mood fading. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy her job, but it felt wrong to be cheerful when she was investigating a violent murder.

Michael seemed to feel the same way. “I hate to wish myself out of a job, but it would be nice if there wasn’t a psycho out killing people every few weeks.”

“Yes. It would.”

Faith’s mood darkened further. That was another downside to this job. It was never done. You never truly “won.” You would catch some killers, but there were always more. You would save some lives, but you couldn’t do anything about the lives already lost.

She had put Franklin West behind bars, but at the end of the day, West was only a colorful symptom of a disease that raged despite society’s best efforts to cure it. Still, she had chosen this job because she could handle the struggle. Where others gave up, she fought on.

Turk barked, and Faith smiled grimly. “Exactly what I was about to say boy. Let’s go catch a bad guy.”

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In Faith's experience, there were three kinds of police detectives: the career minded individuals who were more concerned with making lieutenant and eventually captain than with actually solving cases, the bitter veterans who had once been eager gumshoes but had lost their spark when they realized that there would always be another killer, and the tired veterans who had also lost their spark but didn't resent the fact so much as they waited until they were fully vested in their pension so it could be someone else's problem.

The man who greeted them at the door of Sushi Amaterasu was one of the tired ones. His half-closed eyes sat above dark circles that sagged nearly down to lips that also sagged in a weary frown. He shook their hands and gestured into the restaurant. "After you."

Faith and Michael walked inside the restaurant. Turk looked at Faith, and she nodded. "Go ahead, boy."

Turk dipped his head, then trotted ahead, stopping every now and then to sniff around and catalogue the scents he picked up. Faith looked around at the restaurant.

It was indeed very trendy. The décor was probably intended to be traditional but instead looked like a bad mixture of anime fan boy culture and faux-authentic samurai chic. The furniture and lighting were arranged in jagged semi-crystalline shapes that Faith guessed were supposed to look cyberpunk. The walls were covered with calligraphy and paintings designed to resemble the famous Japanese artists of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries.

"At least there aren't any bonsai plants," Michael said softly.

Faith nodded agreement. She turned her attention to the path of destruction weaved by their victim. Several chairs lay overturned and one table had been broken so the top lay on the ground and leaned against the table's post.

"The victim was sitting over there," Detective Howard said, pointing at the furthest of the disturbed settings. "He starts freaking out and jumps to his feet, knocking his chair over. Freaks out for a moment, then starts running this way."

"Was he running for the exit or the kitchen?" Michael asked.

"Not sure. He collided with a few diners, and then eventually one of them tried to give him the Heimlich. That didn't work, of course, so he ends up pitching forward there"—he pointed at the broken table—"and it's lights out."

"Who called it in?" Faith asked.

"Head chef. He's here now. We cleared him—cleared everyone here, actually—but he agreed to come back to talk to you guys. He's upset, of course. The restaurant is new, and this could ruin him."

"He's the owner too?"

"Co-owner. He's asked us not to reveal that the cause of death is poison because he doesn't want people to think his food is tainted."

"And you've determined that it isn't?"

"Not yet. We sent samples to the tox labs, but it'll be a few weeks before they come back."

"Then you haven't cleared anyone yet."

Howard frowned. “Not officially, no, but we’re pretty damned sure.”

“Details matter, detective,” Faith said, “and pretty damned sure isn’t as good as certain.”

Howard sighed theatrically. “You want me to call everyone back? We got their numbers.”

“Not yet,” she said, “I just wanted to point out that if it is poison, the food is the most likely vector, and that means that the most likely killer is an employee of this restaurant. The second most likely killer is a fellow diner.”

“Excellent detective work, agent,” Howard said irritably.

Michael glared at him. “Are we going to have problems with you detective?”

Howard chuckled bitterly. “No, sir. But if you get to just point things out, then I want to just point out that I’ve been doing this for thirty years. If you think you need to consider everyone a suspect, go ahead. But the staff here aren’t responsible for Harold Grimes’s death. Call it a hunch.”

“Those are valid sometimes,” Faith allowed. “And Grimes was pronounced dead at the scene?”

“Oh yeah. Lights went out within a minute.”

“Got it. I know the coroner’s report isn’t official yet, but is there anything you can tell us about it?”

“You know as much as I know. We’re guessing poison since there was nothing lodged in his throat, but it could also have been an allergy that popped up out of

nowhere. His throat closed up, and there were other symptoms of anaphylactic shock. So allergies were probably a part of it, but there were a lot of other symptoms that make it seem like... I forget what the M.E. called it.”

“A sodium channel blocker?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, that’s it. A sodium channel blocker. Hell if I know what that means.”

“We might want to look that up later,” Michael said to Faith.

“We’ll ask the coroner too,” Faith agreed. To Howard, she said, “The chef is here?”

“Yeah, he’s in the back.”

“I want to talk to him.”

“Sure thing.”

“I’ll look over the scene out here and see if I find anything,” Michael said.

Faith gave him a thumbs up and followed Howard to the back of the restaurant. Behind the counter, things were entirely businesslike. The sushi bar retained a few decorative elements, but the main kitchen was a thoroughly modern stainless-steel marvel that looked like the kitchen of any number of restaurants. It was strangely refreshing to see the homogeneous, unadorned workspace after being assaulted with the clashing décor out front.

The chef was a short, fit Japanese man of around fifty with gray hair and a short, perfectly manicured goatee. He stood and bowed stiffly to Faith. “Good afternoon, Special Agent. Please accept my sincere apology for what happened here last night.”

Faith wasn't sure if she should bow in return or not, so she settled on a nod. "Thank you, Mister..."

"Ito."

"Thank you, Mr. Ito. Can you tell me what happened last night?"

He bowed slightly once more and said, "Mr. Grimes arrived at eight in the evening. He was seated by Fumiko and was served our traditional refreshment of edamame, spring water and jasmine tea, all of which were prepared by my hand. He ordered a selection of items from our menu, and—"

"Forgive me for interrupting. What items?"

"I can answer for you if you'd like, however, Mr. Grimes expired prior to receiving any of his other food."

"Ah. In that case, please continue."

He bowed again and said, "Fumiko noticed a disturbance when Mr. Grimes stood abruptly and began demonstrating signs of choking. Chef Daisuke immediately set his knife down and moved to assist Mr. Grimes, as he is trained in CPR and first aid. Mr. Grimes began to panic and rushed away from his table. I arrived in the lobby at this time and observed him appearing to solicit help from our staff and diners."

"He didn't see Daisuke coming to help him?"

"I don't believe so, no."

She nodded, and he continued. "One of our other diners, a Mr. Thiessen, reached Mr. Grimes before Chef Daisuke and attempted to perform the Heimlich maneuver on

him. Mr. Grimes's distress appeared to increase just before he collapsed to the floor unconscious."

"When did you call emergency services?"

"I dialed as soon as I arrived in the lobby and saw what was happening. Unfortunately, Mr. Grimes was already deceased by the time help arrived."

"Do you happen to have the items from his table service?"

"I immediately had the items sequestered and provided them to the police upon request."

That wasn't ideal. That would mean extra fingerprints from the staff that could be from the murderer or could be from following their head chef's orders. Then again, considering the kind of zoo that occurred at crime scenes like this, they might have lost more evidence by not separating the order.

"Thank you, Chef Ito. I apologize for having to ask my next question, but have there been any complaints of illness or allergy here before?"

"None. We have signs posted at the entrance to the restaurant and on each table that remind guests that our food is made with soy, seafood and sesame and that allergies to those can be quite serious. Fortunately, no one has had any reactions prior to last night."

Faith made a mental note to confirm that Grimes wasn't allergic to soy. She highly doubted it since he was a food critic and had chosen to eat it, but if she was going to be a stickler for Howard doing his due diligence, then she needed to do hers.

"And no complaints of illness?"

Ito frowned slightly but maintained his professionalism. “No. We take painstaking care to ensure that every product we serve is of the highest quality. And we don’t serve fugu here either.”

She lifted her eyebrow. “Fugu?”

“Puffer fish. It is one of the most prized delicacies in Japan, but it is quite poisonous if prepared incorrectly. I am licensed to prepare it, as is Chef Daisuke, but the fugu I can purchase here is of lower quality than I am comfortable serving.”

“If you don’t serve it, then why bring it up?”

“I assumed you would ask. A man was poisoned in my restaurant.” Emotion flickered across his face at that statement. “I felt it was only natural you would suspect me or a member of my staff. Fugu is not common in the United States, but it’s not unknown, and there have been rumors that it has been used as a tool to kill diners in the past in Japan. The police have inspected my restaurant and perused my order sheets and confirmed that Fugu has never been inside this restaurant.”

“Could it have been brought in by a third party?”

He stiffened. “It would be exceptionally rude to bring a separate meal to a restaurant. Had anyone committed such rudeness, they would have been noticed immediately and asked to leave.”

“Of course. I just had to ask.”

Ito relaxed a little. “I understand. Please forgive me. This is the most horrible thing to happen to me in twenty-nine years as a chef.”

“No need to apologize. I’d be upset if I were you too. Tell me, was Grimes a regular

visitor of your restaurant?”

“No. As far as I know, this was his first time eating here.”

She nodded. That made sense. Food critics rarely had “regular” restaurants. “Did anyone recognize him before he was identified by the police?”

“Fukimo believed he was a food critic when he placed his order based on the selection he chose and the size of the order. None of us knew who he was before he was identified, however.”

“Have you heard of him?”

Ito shook his head. “Sushi restaurants are rarely featured among mainstream food critics in the United States. In fact, our industry exists somewhat separately from the rest of the fine dining world. I don’t pay much attention to noteworthy individuals of any profession in the wider fine-dining world.”

She nodded again. “I see. Thank you for your time, Chef Ito. I’ll get your contact information from Detective Howard if I need to ask you any more questions. In the meantime, if you think of anything else that might be useful, please call me.”

She handed him a business card, which he took carefully with both hands, bowing low. She flushed a little, wondering if she should have offered it the same way.

“Thank you, Special Agent.”

“Thank you, Chef.”

She left him and joined Michael and Turk in the lobby. Michael was frowning. Not a good sign.

“Nothing?” she asked him.

“Too many things. Fingerprints and footprints all over the place. At least a half-dozen people touched Grimes’s table and chair, and most of the prints are too smudged to know how recent they are or who they belong to. What about you?”

“Well, I know it’s not fugu.”

“What’s fugu?”

“Puffer fish sushi. I guess it's a delicacy, but they don't serve it here."

“Ah. So nothing.”

She sighed. “Yes.”

He nodded. “Well, no one ever said this job would be easy. I say we visit Cucina Toscana and see if we can find anything there.”

“It’s going to be even more muddled than this place. Crestwood died a week ago.”

“True, but we might be able to learn something from the chef.”

She shrugged. “It’s worth a shot.”

“Atta girl.”

She grimaced. “Don’t call me that.”

“Atta strong independent woman?”

She rolled her eyes and walked out of the restaurant, Turk at her heels. Michael followed a moment later.

She played the scene in her mind and tried to put herself in the killer's shoes. Poisoning someone in public took balls. Or careful planning. Or both. Whoever had done this had put a lot of thought into it.

And unless they found him quickly enough, he would absolutely strike again.

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“Or her.”

“What?” Faith asked.

“Or her. Him or her. You said we need to find him before he has a chance to strike again, but it could be a her.”

She stared at him incredulously. “You really want to talk about that right now?”

“Details matter,” he said, a little impishly. Then, less impishly, “Historically, poisoning has been favored by women. I’m only saying we should think about it.”

“Well, we’ve caught several male killers who have used poison.”

“I’m not trying to argue with you,” he said. “I was just saying we shouldn’t limit ourselves yet. We need to consider all possible options.”

“Thank you for that, Michael. I’m so glad I have your extra experience to rely on.”

He frowned at her. “Did you get pissy all of a sudden?”

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I Just... the whole West thing has me thrown off still, I think. I can already tell this is going to be one of those cases where we don't learn anything useful for a while, and we have to watch more people die while we wait. That's most of our cases, and normally I can handle that, but I can hear Benjamin Trainor's smug voice talking about how this poisoner reminds him of Ottis Toole and John Wayne Gacy and—"

"And you're not going to dwell on them because they don't know your job, you do." She frowned at him, and he said, "Sorry, I'm not going to coddle you right now. Emotions suck. We all have them. Yours suck, especially right now, but that's the nature of the beast. We have a job to do and getting pessimistic about it less than two hours in isn't going to help us."

She took a deep breath. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Do better."

"Screw you!"

"There you go. Be angry with me. That brings out your competitive streak and makes you work even harder."

She rolled her eyes and turned the subject back to the case. "Okay, so who are we going to see right now?"

"Chef Antonio Russo. The police interviewed him already and determined he wasn't a suspect, but they still haven't confirmed what killed Crestwood or if it got into her through the food."

She frowned. "They still don't know?"

He shook his head. "Sodium channel blocker, but it doesn't look like anything they've seen before. I don't quite follow the science-ese, but the molecules are constructed differently. They're thinking synthetic, but they haven't found a match among known chemists, pharmaceutical companies or research labs yet. That could take months, maybe even years, if they have to go global."

"So we can write off finding a smoking gun."

“More like we have a smoking gun, but we’re cavemen who’ve never seen an axe before, let alone a gun. We know this fire stick killed two of our tribes people, but we don’t know how.”

“I love that your analogy makes us stupid.”

“Not stupid. Uneducated.”

“Yeah, that’s not better.”

“Sure it is. Because we’re inquisitive, we won’t stop asking questions until we find answers.”

“Whatever works for you.”

They pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. Cucina Toscana had its own plot in Queen Village. The neighborhood was slightly less ritzy than Rittenhouse Square but far trendier. Ironically, Sushi Amaterasu was the trendier restaurant while Cucina Toscana was as old-school as they came. The staff all wore white shirts with black bowties and the tables were all set with white cloths, candles and wine glasses. The music was soft classical, and the overall ambience was one of traditional upper-class gentility.

Then there was the kitchen. Faith had gone through a phase where she watched most of the reality cooking shows on tv, but she had always dismissed the rowdy atmosphere portrayed in those shows as made for tv and not reflective of real life.

She couldn’t speak for all restaurants, but the kitchen at Cucina Toscana looked to be lifted straight out of a Cooking Channel show. Cooks in white frocks rushed around in what looked to Faith to be an utterly disorderly fashion, shouting at each other in Italian and English, mostly in swear words and colorfully raunchy epithets. She heard

tinkling and crashing and more swearing as pots and spoons and plates and even a few knives sailed through the air toward the sinks and across counters.

There had to be some method to their madness because the counters rapidly piled with food as the cooks prepared for the dinner service beginning in just over an hour. Faith just couldn't see what that method might be.

A man about the same size and shape as Chef Ito but with Roman features and a hat that added a full ten inches to his slight frame glanced at the two agents and frowned. He said something in Italian to his sous chefs and stormed over to them.

“What? What is it?” he snapped. “I talk to the police already, eh? I told them I don't know what happened. That woman, Crestwood. She made a lot of enemies. But I don't need to worry about it, eh, because my food is perfect! Six critics come here, they say my food is perfect. I have Michelin Star on the wall in my office, and if Crestwood hadn't died in my dining room, I'd have a second in a month, eh?”

“Chef Russo, I presume?” Faith asked drily.

“Yes, that's me. What do you need now? I have a dinner service to run.”

He lifted his arms dramatically as he spoke, and Faith got the impression that most of this was an act for the benefit of his brigade, who were watching the interaction with something between amusement and irritation.

“Why don't we speak in your office, Chef Russo?” she suggested.

He lifted his arms again and rolled his eyes. “Come on, I have a kitchen to manage. Who's going to run the brigade, huh?”

“It should only take a few minutes. You'll be back on your way to earning another

Michelin star in no time.”

Russo sighed heavily and threw his arms in the air a third time. "Va bene, allora, immagino che qualsiasi cosa tu stia facendo sia più importante. Dimentica i miei poveri commensali e i miei cuochi laboriosi."

He stomped past them out of the kitchen, continuing to rant. Faith exchanged a look with Michael, then followed him. Turk trotted next to her, his nose to the ground.

“You smell something boy?”

He snorted a negative, then continued to hunt. She reached down and patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, boy. We’ll get him. Or her.”

“Your dog have fleas?” Russo asked.

Faith’s lips thinned. “No, my K9 unit does not have fleas.”

“I find fleas in my establishment, I call your boss and complain.”

Faith smiled slightly, imagining the fiery Russo in an argument with the gruff Special Agent-in-Charge Grant Monroe. That might actually be fun to witness. “Sounds good.”

Russo nodded curtly, then opened the door to a small office. The three FBI agents filed in, and as Faith suspected, Russo’s demeanor calmed considerably when the door closed. When he spoke again, his accent was far more subdued as well.

“Look, guys, I get you have a job to do, but I do too. You need to call ahead if you want to talk to me. I don’t mind coming down to the station. Or the field office or wherever. But I can’t have you guys in and out of my restaurant. It’s a bad look.”

“A woman collapsing dead in your dining room is a pretty bad look,” Michael pointed out.

Russo’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah, I know. But I don’t know what happened to her. Look, I talked to the police. I knew who she was, and I knew she was coming. I personally inspected every single thing that we used for her. Even the tablecloths and the napkin. I made everything she ate and poured everything she drank. That makes me the number one suspect, I get that, but I also proved to them that I’m not an idiot. First of all, I don’t bear any ill will to Miss Crestwood personally. All food critics are imbrogliones , but I don’t hate any of them. I beat them by making food so exceptional that they can’t help but acknowledge it.”

“And if someone refuses to acknowledge it?”

Russo shrugged. “Then they’re idiots. “Any fool can taste my food and know it is exquisite. If Elizabeth Crestwood tried to claim otherwise, she would make herself look stupid. It wouldn’t affect me.”

“Your confidence is admirable,” Faith said drily.

He shrugged again. “I am good at what I do.”

“What if I told you I ate here last week, and it was the worst Italian food I’d ever tasted?”

“I’d say you were lying,” he replied immediately. “Listen, why would I kill her? Like your friend said, it’s a bad look for me. A very bad look. People don’t want to eat somewhere a woman dies in the middle of her meal. I worked hard to build my reputation, and because some porca puttana decided to poison someone in my dining room, it’s all gone.” He snapped his fingers. “Like that. I didn’t kill Elizabeth Crestwood, but if you find out who did, bring him to me, and I’ll kill him with my

bare hands.”

“Thank you for the offer,” Faith said, “I’ll settle for hearing in your own words what happened last week.”

Russo sighed. “I prepare her table. I tell my ma?tre d’ to treat her like gold. I make the bread and chill the water for her service, then prepare her meal. Caprese salad, beautiful minestrone, perfect prosciutto on crostini for the appetizer, grilled trout with risotto. I prepared the tiramisu myself as well. All of it by my own hand.”

“When did she die?”

"She eats the salad; then she dies in front of my server when he brings the minestrone. She never even got to taste my risotto.”

He seemed genuinely moved by that loss. Faith sighed and said, “And no one on your staff acted strangely that day? No one seemed suspicious?”

He scoffed. “Of course not. We are the finest Italian kitchen in Philadelphia. Why would we care if some imbroglione didn’t like our food? There is no reason to kill her over it. That has done far more damage than any review could.”

His face softened, and he said, “I do hope you find whoever did this. My daughter is training to be a chef. I don’t want her to suffer as I have.”

Faith stifled her disgust and said, “If you think of anything else we should know, please call us.”

She handed him a business card. He took it without looking at it and tossed it on the desk. Faith decided she liked Chef Ito better.

She led Michael and Turk out of the restaurant. When they were outside, Michael asked, “What do you think?”

“I think he’s telling the truth. He’s full of himself, but he’s not insecure. He’s not wasting any tears for Crestwood, but he’s sincerely pissed that she died in his restaurant.”

“So we still have nothing?”

“Not necessarily. Both of them died while eating their appetizers.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know yet. Possibly nothing. But it could mean something.”

He sighed. “Lovely.”

“Hey, don’t you get pessimistic after that lecture earlier.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fair enough. Where to next?”

“The coroner. I don’t want to wait for the tox screen to know exactly what happened to our victims.”

"Good idea. I don't suppose I can convince you to stop for dinner after that. All this food surrounding us is making me hungry."

“Let’s see what the coroner has to say, then go from there.”

“Sounds good.”

They started toward the Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office. Faith considered the connections they had so far. Two food critics dead before they could sample the meal they intended to critique. Something about stifling their voices perhaps?

It was frustrating not to have answers, even this early in the case, but Faith was somewhat more hopeful after talking to both chefs. This mystery might not be so tough to solve after all.

Then again, Faith had thought that before only to wake up to news of another victim. She had to caution herself not to be too arrogant. Overconfidence could mean more dead innocents.

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The Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office was nearly as busy as the kitchen at Cucina Toscana. That wasn't very encouraging.

"Bad night?" Faith asked the receptionist, a harried-looking man of about thirty.

He sighed. "The summer heat has everyone acting grouchy. Eight homicides in the past seventy-two hours. That's close to three times the average, and the average is already high."

Michael looked on grimly as two orderlies wheeled a gurney covered in a sheet to the large elevator at the end of the hall. "Grouchy's one way to put it."

"Honestly, I think it's the West case getting everyone worked up," the receptionist said. "That guy was like a god to the criminal underworld."

Faith frowned, and Michael cleared his throat. The receptionist looked between the two agents and blanched. His hand came to his mouth, and he said, "Oh God. You're... I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," Faith said curtly. "We need to speak with Doctor"—she checked the file— "Spencer."

"Yes, of course. Let me see if she's available. I'm so sorry."

Faith nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line. The receptionist dialed a number and waited, looking nervously at Faith. After a moment, he said, "Dr. Spencer? I have two FBI agents here to see you. They're here about the restaurant cases." He paused a

moment, then said, “Wonderful, I’ll send them down.”

He hung up and smiled at the agents. “You can go see her right now. She’s in room seven in the B2 level. I’m so—”

Faith spun on her heel and started off before he could apologize again. Michael and Turk hurried to catch up. Well, Michael hurried. Turk trotted easily, his four legs making it effortless for him to match his irritated handler’s pace.

She hated that she was so affected by the receptionist’s statement, but she couldn’t help it. Her biggest fear with West aside from her fear that he would kill people she cared about was that he would inspire more people to follow in his footsteps the way Trammell had inspired West to follow in his. To hear that West may actually have accomplished that galled her.

Michael waited until they were in the elevator to speak, then said, “Hey, Faith, he’s just a kid working reception here. He doesn’t know anything.”

“He’s almost my age, and he interacts with cops every day.”

“You know how many cops don’t know jack about the city?”

She sighed. “Please don’t try to make me feel better, Michael. I’ll get over it in a minute, but I can’t handle the fake bullshit rationalization.”

“It’s not fake, and it’s not bullshit. Spikes in crime happen all the time for any number of reasons. Maybe this has something to do with West, or maybe gangsters are just violent. If I were a betting man, I’d be putting my money on the latter.”

She sighed again. “Okay. Sounds good.” It most certainly did not sound good. Ending the conversation sounded good.

The elevator opened, and Michael let the subject drop. Faith led the two of them down the cold concrete corridor toward the autopsy room where Dr. Spencer awaited them. Four of the rooms were in use between the elevator and room six. Faith kept her eyes stoically ahead, refusing to glance through the windows at the bodies being dissected within. The Marine Corps had given her a strong stomach even before she joined the FBI, but seeing people get picked apart like science projects wasn't something she cared to witness right now.

She walked into autopsy room six to see Harold Grimes on Dr. Spencer's table. Her heart sank. She'd have to witness this after all.

Dr. Spencer was a sturdy woman in her late forties with strong features and a solid build. She shook the agents' hands and nodded professionally at Turk before saying, "Well, they were definitely poisoned. I assume that's what you came here to ask."

"We were hoping you could tell us a little more detail," Faith asked.

Dr. Spencer sighed. "That's the kicker. We know it's poison, but we don't know what kind of poison. It's a sodium channel blocker, but that could be anything from tetrodotoxin to heart medicine. Some beta receptor antagonists have sodium channel blockade properties. The problem is that what we took out of their blood doesn't look like any of that. I mean, it looks like it, but not the same. You can tell it's a car, but it's not any model you've ever seen before. Kind of like that."

"Is the poison the same between both victims?"

"The poison is the same, but both victims also experienced complications that seem unrelated to sodium channel blocker poisoning. Harold here had a severe allergic reaction."

"To what?"

“I don’t know. I assume the poison or some component of it, but if so, then this is, to my knowledge, the first time anyone’s exhibited an allergic reaction to this class of chemical.”

“Could it be the food?” Faith asked.

Doctor Spencer shook her head, “They didn’t both have allergic reactions. Harold did. Eleanor suffered coronary irregularities. Same poison. Different results. That’s why it’s difficult to get a handle on it. The lab is going to take some time, too.”

“We have the authority to put a rush on it,” Faith said.

“I respect that, but it doesn’t matter. The mayor couldn’t make it happen faster. The governor couldn’t. God Himself could step in here and put a rush on it and...”

“We get it,” Michael said sharply.

Spencer didn’t seem affected by his correction. Years of experience dealing with law enforcement gave her a thick skin. Faith decided she liked her. “What else can you tell us?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. Neither of these deaths were ‘clean.’ The other complications they suffered at the same moment as the poison make things really difficult. In both cases, their adrenaline and norepinephrine levels spiked, and that muddies a lot of things up when you’re trying to isolate a unique poison.”

“Could that be an effect of the poison?” Michael asked. “The increased epinephrine levels?”

Spencer smiled slightly. “Could be. Or it could be the body’s natural response to a heart attack and a severe allergic reaction. I’m leaning toward the latter primarily

because Harold's histamine levels were significantly elevated while Eleanor's were baseline."

"So it's unrelated," Faith surmised.

Spencer sighed. "That's the kicker. I'm leaning toward unrelated, but it could be related. We really won't know until we know the exact formula of the poison."

"So we're back to waiting on the lab," Michael said.

"As far as an answer on the poison goes? Yes, I'm afraid so."

Faith pursed her lips and nodded. "Thank you for your time, Doctor. Please call us if you learn anything else."

"I will." She smiled at Turk. "Maybe your good boy will sniff something out."

Turk barked professionally, and the doctor laughed. "Good dogs. I had a Malinois when I was in my twenties. They're pretty similar to German Shepherds. Great working dogs, really goofy when they're not working."

Faith smiled. "That's Turk, all right."

Spencer gave Turk another smile, then said, "Good luck, agents. I hope you find this guy soon."

"Us too."

The three of them left the coroner's office. Michael wore the dark frown he always wore when confronted with a dead end, but he avoided his usual grumpiness, probably recalling his exhortation to Faith not to be pessimistic. "I'm thinking we get

dinner from Sammie's and eat it at the office so we can brainstorm. What do you think?"

Faith frowned. She had been avoiding the office as much as possible over the past four months with the West trial making her even more of a celebrity than she already was. She wouldn't be able to think with all the other agents staring and whispering.

"I see your office and raise you literally anywhere else. How about my place?"

Michael didn't answer right away. Faith looked sideways at him, and he said, "I was trying to think of something funny to say, but I'm too frazzled to think right now, so I'll just say yes."

"Well, I need you to be able to think, so let's get you some food."

"Sounds great to me."

They grabbed sandwiches from Sammie's, a local sub place that was popular with the Field Office and headed to Faith's apartment. Michael ate half of his sandwich on the drive over and was in a better mood when they arrived. Faith gave Turk some food then joined Michael at the table. He had already finished his sandwich by the time she sat down.

"You should try to take a breath or two in between bites," she suggested.

"No can do. Why breathe when you can enjoy a legitimate Philly Cheese Steak instead?"

Faith shook her head. "If I wanted cheese whiz and ground beef, I'd pour a can of the stuff in a blender with Turk's dog food."

“How can you say that? You’re from Philly.”

“You’re from California, and you don’t like pineapple on pizza.”

“What? That’s Hawaiian pizza.”

“Is it? I thought that was a California thing.”

He sighed. “Eat your sandwich. Your brain needs fuel.”

“I won’t argue with you there.”

While Faith dug into her Italian club, Michael summarized the case so far. “Okay, so we have two food critics, both dead in restaurants they were reviewing. Crestwood for sure is known for being scathing. It looks like Grimes was a little less well-known, but he was considered tough but fair according to the sources I found.”

“When did you look up our victims?”

“While you were making Turk food.”

“Damn. You work fast.”

“Thank God for the Internet. Anyway, the vics were in the same line of work, but they don’t appear to have known each other. However, it’s likely that a lot of people knew both of them. I’m thinking we make a list of restaurants that both of them reviewed negatively, bonus points if those reviews were recent and extra bonus points if there’s been a decline in popularity at any of the restaurants.”

“Good thinking,” Faith agreed. “I’m still a little skeptical about the poison, though.”

“How so?”

“How do two people at two different restaurants get poisoned the same way at the same relative time? And if it’s the appetizer or the drink poisoning them, why didn’t the poison show up on their dishes?”

“We’re still waiting on the lab for that result.”

Faith shook her head. “We’re waiting on the lab to know what the exact poison was, but they were able to tell that both victims were poisoned with the same substance. They should have been able to match that poison to the physical evidence recovered at the scene. They didn’t, ergo, they weren’t poisoned via their food or drinks.”

“So how were they poisoned?”

Faith leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “I think that’s the million-dollar question. We can’t figure out what the poison is. We’re stuck waiting on the lab results. So I think we need to focus on how the poison could have been delivered.”

“How do we do that?”

She thought a moment. “I’m not sure.”

Michael sighed. “Yeah, me either.”

She thought another moment, then said, “So that puts us back to the personal connection. We should look into the professional connection—anyone who’s been poorly reviewed by both of them—and the personal one.”

“Personal one?”

“Anyone who could have known both victims, even tangentially. You and I both know that even a passing interaction with the right psychopath can cause them to spiral into violence.”

"Yes. Yes, I do. All right. I'll get started. Mind if I crash on your couch?"

She lifted an eyebrow. “Ellie’s not going to be concerned about you sleeping over when you’re five minutes from your house?”

“If I go home, I won’t get any work done. Besides, she doesn’t hate you anymore.”

“That’s nice to know,” Faith said drily.

“Well, you’re a charming person when you’re not falsely accusing her of being the Copycat Donkey Killer.”

“Thank you so much for bringing that up.”

“I’m just saying, she’s not pissed at you anymore. And I really won’t get any work done if I go home to her.”

She smiled at him. “You’re so cute when you’re in love.”

“It’s the bees’ knees.” Faith grinned, and he said, “Make fun of me later. Work now.”

Faith laughed and said, “As you command, my lord.”

Michael grimaced. “Just say atta girl next time.”

Faith laughed again and stood. “You want the rest of my sandwich? I’m going to prowl our victims’ social media accounts and see if I can find anything.”

“Why do you even ask? You know I want the rest of your sandwich.”

She set the half-eaten club in front of him. “Enjoy.”

“That’s not what it’s about but thank you.”

She chuckled and headed to her desk to work. As she booted up her desktop, it occurred to her that despite the fact that this case seemed every bit as challenging as past cases, she wasn’t nearly so stressed over it. With the weight of Franklin West off of her back, she was able to take these challenges in stride.

She’d have to be careful not to let that calm make her ineffective. The last thing she needed was to be so relaxed that she let something slip through the cracks and allowed a serial killer to murder again.

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It was odd the things people didn't notice. A person might eat liver and notice none of the earthy bitterness of the meat, but a whiff of liquor from a drink several tables away would make that same person nauseous. A person walking in the forest could become enraptured by birdsong and not notice the chuffing of the bear rushing to attack them.

The killer made it his business to notice everything. He had to. Killing people wasn't an easy task, and killing them in the manner the killer had chosen was beyond painstaking. The poison took four hours to act, and ensuring that it acted at the precise moment the killer wanted meant understanding his victims' schedules to a tee.

Fortunately, the killer's victims made it easy. As professionals, they announced their schedules via social media announcements and sometimes even had dates posted on their websites. Grimes was a little more difficult as the only one of the victims who didn't announce his schedule, but he was utterly predictable, nonetheless. The killer didn't know exactly which restaurant he'd eat at, but Grimes ate his dinner at the same time every night, and he always ate it at a restaurant.

Besides knowing the victims, the killer also needed to know the poison precisely. Because so little was needed, only a fraction of a gram, it was critical to ensure that only the exact amounts were taken. It wasn't really the potency that mattered, but the potential for identification. This poison was unique, but not especially so. The more left behind in the victims' bodies, the more likely some brilliant young lab technician was to make the connection.

The killer couldn't risk that. A person might walk into the house now and see all the signs that should tell them exactly what the killer was doing but would likely not

notice that anything was amiss.

For now. If they were able to identify the poison, then the killer would be in grave danger.

So the killer had to be careful.

Not that the killer could imagine anyone being careless with these ingredients. No, when it came to their own lives, people were very careful, at least when they knew they were in danger.

When it came to the lives of others, however, people were callous.

The killer looked on the wall at the news clippings with portions highlighted in green.

As close to authentic coq au vin as dub step is to opera.

I had the lamb. At least I think I did. Who the hell could tell with all the repulsive crap covering it?

The chef is way ahead of his time. He should go back to it. He needs to find a way to return to the 1960s when the height of gourmet was a Jello mold. Then, he might legitimately receive praise. Just a little, of course. Very little.

People didn't understand fine dining. Perhaps they never had. Nobody cared about food unless there was outrage.

"Maraschinos," the killer said softly. "They were sour cherries from Croatia. Everyone loved them. But all of the processing..." The killer chuckled. "Well, it doesn't matter, does it? Today, they're not even marasca cherries. They're normal cherries that you can find in any fruit stand. People have no palates these days."

The killer grinned at the ingredients of the poison. “They see something pretty and never think about how it could kill them.”

The killer looked once more at the clippings and sighed. People were callous. People were careless. Only when it was too late did they realize what should have been obvious from the beginning.

That was the weakness the killer took advantage of. The mistake that once known couldn't be rectified.

The killer took a deep, cleansing breath and returned to work. Just a little, the tiniest fraction of a gram. But it was enough to right so many wrongs.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

Discovering a professional connection between the two critics turned out to be more difficult than the two agents anticipated. Harold and Eleanor reviewed different restaurants. Eleanor preferred the ultra-fine-dining establishments, those with Michelin stars, places dignitaries dined. Harold reviewed a more eclectic mix of restaurants. He still preferred more traditional, established eateries to trendy, avant-garde places, but awards weren't important to him. He'd only reviewed five Michelin-star winners in his entire career. Three of those were restaurants Eleanor had also reviewed, and both reviewers had only glowing things to say about them.

The personal connection also yielded little they could use. By all accounts, the two had never interacted. Harold in general preferred to be nearly anonymous. He had no personal social media accounts, and his professional accounts held no pictures that contained his face and very few that contained any part of him at all. He never interacted with other food critics, chefs or food writers. He worked in the shadows.

"Not far enough in the shadows," she muttered.

"What's that?" Michael asked.

"Nothing. I'm giving up for the night. I have an address for Eleanor Crestwood's sister in Camden. If you don't come up with anything better, I say we talk to her tomorrow."

"Good with me," he replied. "I've cross-referenced every single restaurant they've both reviewed. Only the three connections and they both loved all three."

"Maybe the killer's a masochist who's pissed that they won't insult him?" she offered

glumly.

“Ha. Well, we’re both trying to stay positive, so let’s not let ourselves down by assuming the worst just yet. We’ll talk to the sister tomorrow and go from there.”

“Fair enough. Good night, Michael.”

“Yep.”

Michael collapsed on the couch and was instantly asleep. Faith looked at him for a moment, and an odd swirl of emotions coursed through her.

She and Michael had dated for roughly a year. Their relationship had ended over three years ago, over a year before she had met David, just before her encounter with Jethro Trammell. The split was amicable, both of them realizing they worked much better as friends than lovers. Especially now that Michael was married to Ellie and Faith was preparing to move in with David, she rarely thought about their relationship.

Still, for a brief but intense moment, Faith was sure that the two of them would end up together for the long haul. Michael was the first man she had ever truly loved, and while she could honestly say her love for him now was no more than friendship and camaraderie, there were moments, like this one, when the ghosts of her old feelings came back to haunt her.

She headed to her bedroom, moving quietly so as not to wake Michael or Turk. As she changed for bed, she thought about how little a person ever truly knew. Three years ago, she knew she would marry Michael. Now, even when she tried, she could only drum up a memory of the love she'd once had for him.

She knew she would marry David. Not now, and probably not even soon, but

eventually, she knew she would be Mrs. Faith Friedman.

But what if that was true? What if, five years from now, she knew that she and David never had a chance? What if, twenty years from now, she knew that she was never going to find her true love, and it wasn't worth trying anymore?

She got into bed and tried to push those thoughts from her mind, but staring up at the ceiling and realizing that the day was rapidly approaching when she would sleep in a different bed in a different house with a different man sharing that house brought to mind the fragility of the future.

She wasn't interested in dwelling on her personal life right now, so she applied that focus to the case. The victims knew that they were going to enjoy a meal, then share their thoughts on that meal for their readers to see. They knew they were going to do this many times for many more years before they were tired enough they no longer wished to work. They knew that when that day came, they were going to retire and enjoy their golden years in comfort and peace.

And in the last minute of their lives, they knew that all of that—all of their plans, all of their dreams, all of their assumptions—was a lie. They knew that none of it meant anything more than a ghost of a memory.

They knew that they were going to die.

Faith stared at the ceiling and thought about knowing until exhaustion accomplished what relaxation couldn't and she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Camden was close to the polar opposite of Rittenhouse Square. While not technically a part of Philadelphia, many of its residents commuted to the city for work, then

returned home to neighborhoods far less affluent than the ritzier Philadelphia burbs.

Melinda Tyler, nee Crestwood, lived in a single-story ranch house sporting a lawn of patchy, brown grass surrounded by a chain link fence and covered in peeling paint that might once have been white. When the three agents knocked on the door, it was answered by a harried-looking woman in her mid-forties who glared at the two human agents and snapped, “Whaddya want?”

“Melinda Tyler?” Faith asked.

“Yeah, that’s me. Whaddya want?”

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about your sister.”

Melinda stared at her for a moment. Then she laughed. “All right. Come on in, then. I guess I should have expected you guys eventually. You want a beer?”

“We’re all right, thank you.”

Melinda shrugged and headed to the kitchen to get one for herself. The three agents followed her to find the interior of the house as faded as the exterior and twice as dirty. As Faith stepped into the living room, a boy of around nine slammed into her hard enough that Michael had to catch her to prevent her from falling.

The boy looked up at Faith and grinned. “Hi.”

Before Faith could answer, he continued barreling through the house. The reason for his flight became clear a moment later when a girl a couple years older than him jumped out from underneath the dining room table and leapt onto the boy’s shoulders. “Gotcha!”

The children chased each other through the kitchen and living room, somehow avoiding their disinterested mother, who returned to the living room and cracked open the beer. She sat on the couch next to a toddler who wore nothing but a diaper. Thankfully, the tot was more interested in the puzzle box she was playing with than the open beer can inches away from her.

Faith and Michael shared a glance and, after a glance at the stained loveseat, chose to stand.

“When was the last time you spoke with your sister?” Faith asked.

Melinda shrugged. “College, maybe.”

Faith and Michael shared another glance. “So you two weren’t close.”

Melinda looked away from the TV, which was airing some celebrity reality show, and said, “You’re not very bright, are you?”

Faith’s lips thinned. She stepped forward, grabbed the remote and turned the tv off. “Miss Tyler”

“Mrs. Tyler.”

Faith took a deep breath. “Mrs. Tyler, we’re investigating your sister’s murder. Do you have any information that can help us with that?”

Melinda shrugged defiantly. “How the hell should I know? Probably one of the restaurants she pissed off.”

“Any idea who that might be?”

“Shit, take your pick. From what I gather, she was just as much a stuck-up bitch to the rest of the world as she was to me.”

Faith squatted in front of her until they were at eye level. “I realize that you don’t care that your sister is dead. Read you loud and clear on that. But I care, and if you insist on being difficult, I’ll just have you detained as a person of interest and drag you to the police station to have this conversation.”

Melinda held Faith’s gaze. “Wouldn’t be the first time a couple of cops tried to shake me down.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Michael said. “Where were you two nights ago.”

Melinda frowned. “Two nights ago? I thought she died last week.”

“Humor me.”

She gestured around her. “You see my kids. How long do you think they’d last without me to take care of them?”

Faith declined to offer an opinion on that. “So you were home.”

“I’m always home. Leroy works, and I cook and clean. That’s the way it goes when you’re not an uppity celebrity whore.”

“You clearly hate your sister,” Michael said, “So you can see why we might wonder where you were the night she died.”

“I was here. I’m always here. And I’m not gonna fucking kill anyone. What would be the point? Wouldn’t change anything about my life.”

Faith glanced at Turk. Turk dipped his head and began trotting through the house, sniffing for clues.

“What is he, a drug dog? Because I have a doctor’s prescription for everything I have.”

“He’s not a drug dog,” Faith said, “but if there’s a trace of the poison that killed your sister anywhere here, he’ll find it.”

“Poison? Ha! That’s funny.”

“That so?” Michael asked.

“Sure. Eleanor was a snake, so it’s funny that she died by her own venom.”

“Oddly enough, we think you might be right,” Faith said. “We think she wrote a review that angered someone enough that they chose to kill your sister and Harold Grimes to get revenge.”

“Who’s Harold Grimes?”

“Another food critic.”

“Were they fucking?”

Faith took a deep breath. “No. As far as we know, they didn’t know each other.”

“They just both pissed off the same restaurant?”

“Possibly.”

Melinda rubbed her chin. "Might be that French place she told me about."

Faith stared at her a moment. "I thought you said you hadn't spoken with her since college."

"Sure, I haven't talked to her. But she tried to talk to me a couple of weeks ago."

"And you didn't think that was important?"

Melinda gave Faith another defiant look. "How the hell is that my problem?"

"It's your problem because you clearly hate your sister, and your behavior right now is coming dangerously close to obstruction of justice," Michael said. "That makes people ask some questions you probably don't want them to ask. So please, give us a reason to ask someone else."

Melinda showed the first sign of shrewdness she had since they arrived and nodded. "All right. I'll show you the email she sent. I didn't respond, but maybe that'll tell you something."

She opened her phone and showed the two agents an email. Faith scanned it briefly. The top portion was brief:

Hey, sis, I know you hate me, but I'm worried. I think I might have made someone really angry, but I don't know if I'm overreacting or not. Can you tell me if you think I should go to the police?

The bottom portion was a much longer email forwarded from a Marcus Delaney. It was a rambling, disjointed message that made three primary points: Eleanor was a vicious c-word who knew nothing about food, Eleanor deserved to suffer a violent death, and Marcus was seriously considering being the one to provide her that violent

death.

“I didn’t reply,” Melinda said proudly. “She wasn’t there for me when I needed help, so why the hell should I help her?”

Turk trotted to Faith and snorted irritably to show he hadn’t found anything. With that revelation, Faith had no more interest in talking with Melinda. “We might have more questions in the future,” she said. “Keep your phone on and keep staying inside your house for a while.”

“Yeah, sure,” Melinda said. “I’ll see you later. Hey, close the door on the way out.” She hooked a thumb toward the toddler. “This one’s a runner.”

Faith and Michael shared another glance, then left the house.

“Well,” Michael said when they closed the door behind them. “At least we have a suspect now.”

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Delaney's restaurant was called A Taste of Versailles. The exterior of the building was clean but faded, and the lawn was ill-maintained. The tint on the windows was peeling visibly, and the door creaked when Faith opened it. This place had seen better days.

Eleven years ago, to be exact. A plaque on the ma?tre's counter proudly announced A Taste of Versailles as a winner of two Michelin stars during that year. Looking around the fading interior with it's half-empty dining room of disinterested diners, Faith imagined they didn't hold either of those stars anymore.

The hostess at least made an attempt at civility when she greeted them. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but we don't allow pets inside, not even service animals."

It was illegal for a business to refuse service animals, but Faith wasn't here to argue that point. "We need to speak with Marcus Delaney."

The hostess blinked. "Chef Delaney is busy with service at the moment."

"At ten in the morning?"

"We have a brunch special." She gestured around the dining room. "As you can see, we're very busy at the moment."

Michael pointed at the bright white FBI logo on his vest. "See this? We don't care if you're what you consider busy. Get Marcus Delaney out here now."

The hostess paled and started to leave, but Faith held up a hand. "One moment.

Before you do that, can you tell me if a man named Harold Grimes dined here recently?"

The girl paled another shade, and Faith knew the answer. "Umm... I'd have to check."

"When was he here?" Faith asked.

The girl hesitated and looked between the two agents.

"We're here for Marcus Delaney," Michael reminded her. "Let's keep it that way."

The hostess took a deep breath, then said, "Umm... it was last Friday. Marcus threw him out. He... doesn't take criticism well."

Faith nodded. "Thank you. You can take us to Chef Delaney now."

The hostess hesitated again. "I'd better talk to him first. He can be a little aggressive."

"We can handle it," Faith assured her. "Lead the way."

The hostess looked miserable, but she didn't argue any further. She led the three agents toward a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY and said, "You should wait out..."

Faith and Michael pushed past her without waiting for her to finish. The hostess swore and rushed back ahead of them. "Marcus, I'm sorry! I tried to keep them outside. They wouldn't listen."

The kitchen was full of cooks bustling to prepare for the coming dinner rush. They all turned to the agents with annoyance, but by far the most annoyed of the faces came

from a young man with the tall hat that indicated his position as the head chef.

“What the hell is this?” the chef asked. “How dare you enter my kitchen?”

Marcus Delaney was a tall, athletic man in his mid-thirties with exquisitely styled dark hair and piercing blue eyes. His clean-shaven face was set in a sour frown, and his brow was furrowed sharply over those eyes.

The hostess lifted her hands apologetically and said, “I’m really sorry. They wouldn’t—”

“I’m Special Agent Faith Bold of the FBI. This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince, and my K9 Unit—”

“You brought a dog into my kitchen?”

Faith’s eyes narrowed. “My K9 unit, Turk. We need to ask—”

“Katie, what the hell is a dog doing in my kitchen?”

The hostess took a step back. “I’m so sorry, Marcus. I—”

“What the hell is sorry? Sorry is bullshit. Get these assholes out of my kitchen! And make sure their fucking dog goes with them!”

His voice rose in pitch as he spoke, and Katie began to shake. Faith wondered exactly what their relationship was and what the dynamics of that relationship might be. Turk must have felt a similar discomfort because he stepped protectively in front of Katie and growled at Marcus.

“You can leave, Katie,” Faith said, keeping her eyes on the irate chef. “We’re going

to speak with your boss.”

“Like hell!” Marcus thundered. “I’m trying to run a kitchen! I have a service to run right now, and you come in here and bring a dog into my kitchen? Fuck you! Get the hell out of my restaurant.”

“Chef Delaney,” Michael began, trying for a diplomatic approach. “We’re investigating—”

“No,” Marcus interrupted. “No, you want to talk to me? Call and make an appointment. You don’t just barge into my kitchen and tell me what to do. I say what to do in my kitchen.”

“Not at the moment,” Faith said, choosing a somewhat less diplomatic approach. “We’re investigating the murders of Eleanor Crestwood and Harold Grimes. Both of them ate in your restaurant roughly a week before they were killed.”

“So Eleanor and Harold are dead? Good. Eleanor was a bitch, and Harold was a fat loser. Neither of them understood the cuisine, and they tried to tell me that my food is no good? They wouldn’t know good if it bit them on the ass. Now please, fuck off out of my restaurant and let me make food for my paying customers, all right? All right.”

He turned around and pointedly ignored the agents. Faith had dealt with her share of vulgar suspects before, but Marcus’s foul mouth combined with his arrogance was causing her to see red. She struggled to keep her tone professional but allowed herself to sound more authoritative.

“Marcus, we need to talk to you right now. I don’t care that it’s in the middle of service. You’re a person of interest in a multiple murder investigation, so you need to put your utensils down now and come with us.”

Marcus continued to ignore them. Katie looked anxiously at the agents and said, "Maybe you should wait outside. I can pour you some drinks, and Marcus can join you after the lunch rush."

"No," Marcus called with his back still turned. "Fuck after the lunch rush. They can call me and work with my schedule. I deserve respect in my own restaurant."

Michael sighed. "Marcus, come on, buddy."

"I'm not your buddy."

Michael smiled tightly. "Okay, come on, dipshit. You know how this ends. We're armed FBI agents with a dog. You're going to come with us. The only question is whether you come willingly and talk to us in your office or in handcuffs to have a conversation at the precinct."

Marcus lifted a finger in reply.

Michael nodded. "All right. Sounds good." He stepped toward Marcus. "You're being detained for questioning in the murders of Eleanor Crestwood and Harold Grimes."

"No, I'm not detained," Marcus replied, still not turning around.

"Marcus," Katie said worriedly.

"Katie, get out of here," Faith said sharply.

Katie jumped but didn't comply.

"Let's go," Michael said, reaching for Marcus's left arm.

“No, I’m not detained. I’m not detained, fuck you!”

As soon as Michael touched the chef’s arm, Marcus whirled around, slashing with a kitchen knife. Michael jumped back, narrowly avoiding the blow. Katie screamed, “Marcus! Stop it!”

Faith drew her handgun and aimed it at the chef. The other cooks began to shout and protest, but when Turk barked, they drew silent and backed away warily.

“Smart move,” Faith told them. Do me a favor all of you and leave the kitchen. Katie, for the final time, that means you.”

“No!” Marcus shouted. “No! You can’t come into my restaurant and threaten me!”

"We're not threatening you," Michael said, hands up raised to either placate Marcus or defend against another attack. "We're trying to talk to you. You're threatening us. "

“Actually,” Faith corrected, sidestepping to get a better aim on Marcus. “You’ve assaulted my partner. So you’re not detained, you’re under arrest. Put the knife down.”

“Damn it, no!”

Marcus’s tone was plaintive now, almost a whine. Faith imagined he’d never been told what to do before. He was used to getting his way and couldn’t accept that he wasn’t in control of this situation.

“This is my restaurant!” he shouted petulantly. “You all have no respect! You have no respect for me, you have no respect for my food, you have no—”

Michael moved like a blur. Before Marcus could react, he had slapped the knife out

of the chef's grip and spun him around.

Marcus shrieked and struggled, and Katie screamed, "No! Please don't hurt him!"

Faith turned to Katie, keeping her handgun on Marcus, and shouted, "Katie! Leave this kitchen now, or you're under arrest for obstruction of justice!"

Katie burst into tears and retreated to the back of the kitchen. She didn't leave the room, but Faith decided that was close enough and turned her attention back to Marcus.

Michael had him wrapped up and cuffed now. The chef was shaking with fury, but he wasn't trying to fight him anymore, so that was a positive.

Michael turned to Faith and sighed with exasperation. "All right. We can go now." He turned back to their suspect. "Are you going to behave? Or do I need to have Turk make you incapable of misbehaving?"

Marcus sighed. His head slumped forward, and when he spoke, his voice was far more subdued. "I'll behave."

"Good boy."

Michael led Marcus out of the kitchen. Katie grabbed him briefly and tried to protest, but when Faith glared at her, she released him and sank to her knees, weeping as the agents left with the man who she was clearly enamored with.

God, what did women see in these assholes?

The diners exclaimed in shock as they led Marcus toward the door. "Wonderful," Marcus muttered. "There goes my restaurant. Just when I was getting it back on

track.”

“There’s a lesson in this,” Michael said drily. “Maybe you’ll figure it out one day.”

They put him in the car, and Turk jumped inside and glared at him. Marcus returned Turk's glare, but his body language showed he was cowed by the dog whatever he might pretend.

Faith got into the backseat across from Marcus, just in case. Michael hopped in the driver's seat, and they left A Taste of Versailles behind.

Faith felt a little guilty at feeling excited by the interaction they’d just had, but Marcus sure acted like a murderer. She hoped they would confirm it soon and wrap this case up before anyone else had to get hurt.

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Marcus was far calmer when they reached the precinct. Faith was still avoiding the Field Office, so they took the chef to a local police precinct. Faith was nearly as famous with the Philadelphia PD as she was with the FBI, but she was also friends with the agents at the Philadelphia Field Office, so they felt more comfortable interrupting her during work than the officers here did.

Still, the stairs grated on her as she waited for the precinct to give them an interrogation room. Did they have nothing better to do than gawk? West was arrested four months ago. The rest of it was courtroom bullshit. There were bigger fish to fry.

After what seemed like an eternity, an officer gestured for them to follow him down the hallway. The three agents and their suspect shuffled through the narrow corridor until they reached the room. The officer smiled at Faith and extended a hand. "I just wanted to say good work with West. My wife and I sleep a lot easier at night knowing that fucker's behind bars."

"Actually, it was two PD officers who arrested him," Faith said, "but thank you."

She shook the hand briefly, then walked into the room before the officer could say anything else. Michael led Marcus in, and Turk brought up the rear, glaring at Marcus like he desperately hoped the man would try something.

Marcus was smart enough not to do that and allowed himself to be cuffed to the chair. He kept his eyes averted as Michael crossed the room and stood with his arms folded over his chest. At six-foot-one and two hundred ten pounds of mostly solid muscle, Michael was actually shorter than Marcus by a couple of inches but at least thirty pounds heavier. And he had just beaten Marcus in a physical altercation.

So, Marcus was appropriately cowed when Faith began questioning him. “We’ll start with an easy one. Will the CSI team we sent to your restaurant find any trace of the poison that killed Eleanor Crestwood and Harold Grimes?”

Marcus started. “You sent CSIs to my restaurant?”

“Yep,” Michael replied. “They texted me five minutes ago to let me know they arrived.”

Marcus leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. “Don’t you need a warrant for that?”

“Or probable cause,” Faith replied. “We have both of our victims in your restaurant within a week of their death, and both of them had some pretty crappy things to say about your food.”

Marcus’s lips twitched, but he didn’t reply.

"We also have you not only refusing to speak to us but also assaulting my partner with a deadly weapon."

“I wasn’t trying to kill him,” Marcus muttered. “I was just mad.”

“If I had a nickel for every killer who said that,” Michael said.

“Were you mad at Eleanor Crestwood and Harold Grimes?” Faith asked.

“Of course I was,” Marcus said, lifting his hands as far as the shackles would allow. “They were going to ruin my reputation.”

“If you’ll forgive me for being rude,” Faith replied, “A Taste of Versailles looks like

it's seen better days. Are you sure your reputation wasn't already ruined?"

Marcus stiffened. He had terrible control of his temper. "Yeah, it has. And it was going to see better days again. I had finally figured it out. I had a new menu, a hip menu, something Philly's never seen before. I was going to bring French cuisine back to the forefront in this hillbilly town, and those two assholes were going to ruin all of that."

"Hillbilly town," Michael repeated. "Can't say I've ever heard anyone say that about Philly."

"That's because you're not a connoisseur of fine dining," Marcus said with a handsome helping of contempt. "If you were, you would know how utterly bereft this area is of anything resembling class."

"Really? We just came from a Michelin star Italian place yesterday."

"Italian." Marcus prepared to spit, and Turk growled. He thought better of it and contented himself with saying, "Italian food is for peasants."

"Ah. So you mean Philly doesn't have a good French restaurant."

"I have a good French restaurant. But getting people here to understand that is like trying to teach the French language to a horse. They just stare at you with their cow's eyes and ask if you sell chicken tenders."

"So are they cows or horses?" Michael asked.

"So you felt that your new menu was going to revitalize your business," Faith interjected before they could get any more off track, "and you felt that Miss Crestwood and Mr. Grimes were going to negatively impact that effort."

“Yes!” Marcus said forcefully. “They were writing this bullshit about my menu. Crestwood said something about me being a toddler trying to mimic my mother’s cooking and Grimes said that my food tasted like it came out of a cardboard box and I had misread the directions.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes, ouch. And it’s bullshit. We’ve been busy every single night.”

“Didn’t look busy earlier,” Michael said.

“I said we’ve been busy every night . The brunch is just to help us pay the bills until dinner gets to where it needs to be. And it was getting there. Damn it, I was so close! But between those assholes publicly shaming me and your circus today, I’m ruined. For sure this time.”

“Let’s talk about that,” Faith said. “You say they publicly humiliated you. But both of them were killed before they had a chance to publish their articles.”

“Yeah, good thing,” Marcus scoffed. “Or A Taste of Versailles would have been closed when you two showed up.”

“Exactly our point,” Michael said, unfolding his arms and walking closer. “It’s a very good thing for you that those two were murdered. Now, considering your cheery personality and outstanding self-control, I know it’s a long shot, but”—he leaned over until his face was inches from Marcus’s—“Did you kill them?”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No! I didn’t kill them!”

“You said they publicly embarrassed you,” Faith said. “How so?”

“They were vocal about their dislike. If they had something to say, they could have told me privately.”

“So you could swear at them and tell them to get out of your kitchen?” Michael challenged.

Faith laid a hand on her partner’s arm. “What happened, Marcus?”

“Eleanor berated my server for our wine selection. She wanted more California wines.” He made his voice higher-pitched and nasal. “‘ To reflect the modern assortment of fine wines that exemplify the French tradition around the globe. ’ Bullshit. California wines are trash, and I would never serve that swill in my restaurant.”

“Did you tell her that?” Faith asked.

“Of course I did! She is a professional! She should know better!”

“Did you tell her that, or did you shout her that in your dining room while calling her names and swearing at her?” Michael asked.

“I...” Marcus reddened and fell silent.

“What about Harold Grimes? What happened with him?”

Marcus shrugged. “He’s a pig. He wants slop. He started asking me why there was no cassoulet or potatoes au gratin.” Marcus shivered. “Do you go to a fine American

restaurant and ask for a hot dog or macaroni and cheese? Of course not! I told him to leave my restaurant.” He shook his head. “They’re just... they’re fools.”

His anger faded, leaving a forlorn expression that Faith might have sympathized with if it weren’t for every other experience she’d had with him. “People just don’t understand. Food doesn’t just have to be sustenance. It’s art! It’s life! It’s...” he lifted his hands again and let them drop. “The world is cruel, and life is hard. If we are fated to wander this cruel world and live this hard life, then why can’t we elevate these experiences to mean more than just their basic function? That is the whole purpose of French cuisine. It should be the purpose of all cuisine, but only France seems to get it right. Every bite should be an adventure! Every taste should be a melody. It’s not about following trends or showcasing diversity or appealing to the unwashed masses. It’s an expression of life itself, not the cruelty of survival, but the triumph of experience!”

He sighed and shook his head. “No one understands anymore. No one...” He slumped and said, “Arrest me if you want. I don’t care anymore.”

“Are you confessing to the murders?”

“I didn’t kill them, but there’s nothing left for me. I think there never was. I was born in the wrong country, and I waited too long to get out. It doesn’t matter what happens to me now.”

Faith sighed and looked at Michael. “Any news from CSI yet?”

“I’ll call them.”

He left the room to make the call, and Faith turned back to Marcus. "Can you account for your whereabouts the nights of their murders?"

“When did they die?”

“Eleanor Crestwood died nine days ago at Cucina Toscana.”

Marcus scoffed. “I’d never visit that pigsty.”

“Where were you?”

“I was at the restaurant. I am always at the restaurant. From six in the morning until ten o’clock at night.”

“Do your security cameras work?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never checked.”

“We’ll follow up on that. The same for two nights ago when Harold died?”

“The same. Always the same. That place is my life. Was my life.”

The door opened, and Michael waved Faith outside. Faith left Turk to guard Marcus and joined Michael on the other side of the two-way mirror. “What is it?”

“They didn’t find anything,” Michael said, frustration evident in his clipped tone. “But that doesn’t mean anything. He’s had more than enough time to clean the murder weapon. It could be at his home, or he could have dumped it, or—”

Faith lifted her hand and said, “Tell CSI to get security camera footage to confirm his alibi. In the meantime, we’ll hold him on the assault charge. But I have to be honest, Michael, I don’t think he’s our guy.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“He’s got a temper, but you’ve seen it. It’s up and down. One moment, he’s swinging a knife, the next he’s bemoaning the state of the world. He’s the kind of guy who would stab someone to death in a fit of passion, not the kind of guy who would hold a grudge and carefully prepare a poison to kill them from a distance.”

Michael sighed and planted his hands on his hips. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right. Damn it.”

“Don’t give up hope,” Faith said. “He was our first real lead. We never strike gold the first time.”

“Sure would be nice if we did once in a while.”

“Your mouth to God’s ears.”

Michael chuckled. “I don’t think God wants to hear what I have to say.”

“Then keep your mouth shut. Now is not the time to be making enemies.”

Michael chuckled and said, “All right. I’ll call about the camera footage. In the meantime, why don’t you get PD to process this guy. I’d rather not look at him unless it’s to say, ‘Ha, got you,’ if his alibi doesn’t pan out.”

“Will do. Then go get us some coffee. I think we both need it after this.”

“You got that right.”

She left Michael to tell the desk to send someone to pick up their prisoner. Despite her encouraging words to Michael, Faith was very let down by the dead end. She hoped she was wrong, but unless a miracle occurred, they were holding the wrong man, and their killer was still out there, poised like a viper and ready to strike.

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Lila tossed her hair and smiled pertly at the camera. Henri held up two fingers, then one. When his hand closed into a fist, Lila said, “Welcome, Foodgurlz. Today, your Foodgurl is sampling a croque monsieur from this lovely little café, Café Too-louse, right here in my hometown of Philly. You may rem—”

“Toulouse,” Henri interrupted.

Lila blinked. “What did I say?”

“You said too louse, like the bug. It’s too loose, like not tight enough.”

Lila scoffed irritably. “It’s whatever I say it is. Honestly, if they’re going to charge me to review their restaurant, I’m gonna call it whatever I want.”

“So... should we just keep going?”

Lila sighed. “No, we’ll retake it. I don’t want to deal with the comments. One more time.”

She took a deep breath and smiled again at the camera. Henri counted her down again, and she said, “Welcome, Foodgurlz! Today, your Foodgurlis sampling a croque monsieur from this lovely little café, Café Toulouse, right here in my hometown of Philly. You may remember a review I did recently of A Taste of Versailles, where I said that it was too bad that all French food is made to look pretty and taste lame. Well, you guys suggested this place in the comments, so here I am giving French food another try, and I have to say, I am really excited to see what this cute little diner has to offer!” Her smile vanished. “Okay, you can cut there.”

Henri turned the video off and checked something on the camera. “What do you think?” Lila asked. “Too long for TikTok?”

"We can make it work. We only need a shot of you receiving the food, a shot of you eating, and a sentence or two of review. If we get crunched for time, I'll bump the speed up to one and a quarter."

“Good. Whatever you need to do is fine with me. I just can't keep getting killed by these perky-tit college kids.”

“You are so much more beautiful than any of those kids,” Henri replied.

She frowned at him. “He says while staring at his camera.”

"Well, she is. She's a Sony ZV-1. She's the best compact camera for bloggers you can buy. You look fine, too."

She made a face. "It's gross that you talk to your camera like it's a girl."

“It’s gross that you care what some pimple-faced boys who only watch these videos to jack off think about you.”

“Yeah, those boys are seventy percent of my subscribers, and as soon as Maybelline stops covering my wrinkles, they’re going to drop me, so I need a new base. That means girls, and that means TikTok. Hold on, here comes the food.”

Henri lifted the camera, and as soon as the server got out of the way, Leah held the sandwich up and said, “Oh my God, girls. This looks—”

“Hold on.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh my God. Now?”

“Aaaand... now.”

“Oh. My God, girls. This looks delicious. Let’s see if it tastes as good as it looks.”

She bit into the sandwich and immediately rolled her eyes back in her head and moaned. That’s for you, boys. “Oh... my goodness, this is so... so...”

Henri looked at her over the camera. What’s wrong? he mouthed.

“Um...” she waved her hand in front of her throat, and Henri cut the camera.

“What’s wrong? Are you all right.”

“Yeah, I... I just got dizzy for a moment.”

Her heart pounded in her chest, and her ears began to buzz. “Holy...”

She didn't finish the epithet. She tried to stand, but her legs went slack, and she fell to the floor instead. The buzzing in her ears became a roar, drowning out Henri's panicked cries. She never felt his arms come around her shoulders, and though her eyes were open, her vision had faded already, so she was spared the look of terror in his eyes.

Her last coherent thought was, Thank God we’re not live streaming this.

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Michael sighed and nodded. “All right. Thank you. Let me know if something pops up on the lab report.”

He hung up and looked at Faith. “That was CSI. Security footage confirms Delaney’s alibi. He’s not our guy.”

The two of them had returned to Faith’s apartment after interviewing Delaney. With no immediate leads, they had gotten lunch, then spent the afternoon brainstorming. More accurately, they had spent the afternoon thinking in circles and coming up with nothing helpful.

“Why are they bothering with the lab report then?” she asked.

“Just in case one of the other staff or customers is responsible. So far, that’s the most recent connection between our two victims.”

“Right. Good point.”

She sighed and let her chin sink into her hands. “So what do we do now?”

Michael shook his head. “I don’t know. We’ve got... actually we have no daylight left. It’s already evening? Where the hell did the day go?”

“Sounds like you answered your own question,” she quipped. She sighed again and lifted her head. “Well, I say we grab some dinner, and then we look through the victims again and see if we have any more connections.”

“You said you wanted to figure out how the poison was delivered. Should we look into that?”

She bit her lip softly. “I just don’t know what it could be besides the food. There’s no trace of it on their skin, and there are no needle marks. Their bronchial tubes are clear, so they didn’t breathe it in. The only way it gets into their bodies is if they eat it. Unless I’m completely missing something here.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Michael said. “How do two people die at different restaurants from the same poison? How do they exhibit different symptoms? How do they show none of those symptoms right up until the moment they died?”

“If it’s a fast-acting poison, then it wouldn’t take long to kill them.”

“If it’s a fast-acting poison, then where is it? Why can’t CSI find a trace of it?”

“They’re cleaning the scene before police get there?”

“Then where is that on the camera? Security feeds show nothing but the usual panic. No one touches the victims except the brave guy who tries to save Grimes from choking, and no one touches the dishes except the server at the sushi place. She could have wiped prints off the outside, but the camera makes it clear she never touches the inside of the water glass or the edamame bowl.” He shook his head. “No, I don’t see any sign of the staff tampering.”

“What about before the meal?”

“I haven’t reviewed the tapes personally, but the cops didn’t say anything. You think we should look at it ourselves?”

She sighed. “No, I think it’d be pretty clear if someone slipped something. If we run

out of things to do, we can review the tapes, but otherwise, let's not waste our time."

"We're kind of out of things to do, Faith."

She dropped her chin into her hands again. "Yeah. Damn it. What if it was a slow-acting poison?"

"Slow acting and revealed no symptoms and then all the symptoms right in the last minute?"

"We don't know that it was symptomless. They could have been having problems before and just not revealed anything. They might not even have known anything was wrong."

"I believe that about Crestwood. Heart trouble can be a silent killer. But I don't believe it about Grimes. You don't have nothing for... damn it, we don't even know how long ago they were poisoned."

They fell silent for a while. Turk broke the silence by whining softly.

Faith scratched him behind the ears. "Turk's right. If we're going to keep wandering in circles, we might as well do so on a full belly. What do you want?"

"Some of Ellie's homemade lasagna," Michael said wistfully.

"Go home, then. Seriously. We're not going to learn anything else by orbiting the same problem. Let's give ourselves a night to reset and attack this with fresh eyes in the morning. Have some lasagna, have some Ellie, and we'll meet at Morning Glory for coffee."

"It's weird that you said have some Ellie."

“Like you haven’t said much worse. Besides, it doesn’t have to be about sex. I’m sure you guys cuddle and talk and watch TV too. Just get some time in with your wife.”

“Believe me, nothing sounds more amazing than that right now. But it’s better if I don’t go home. I’ve been really good about not bringing work home, and if I go home, then I will have literally done the opposite of that.”

Faith’s smile faded. “Yeah. Good point.”

Michael frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I think I’ll go for a walk, though. I’ll pick up something from the liquor store on my way home. We can tv dinner it like the good old days.”

“If you’re going on a walk, then something’s wrong.”

“And you know that letting me go on the walk will fix it.”

His frown deepened. “And you know that I’m going to be pissy about the fact that you won’t talk to me about it.”

“And you know that I’m going to talk to you about it after it’s all figured out.” She stood and patted his cheek. “Text me what you want from the liquor store. Come on, Turk.”

“I’ll play along,” Michael called after her, “but I won’t like it!”

She laughed and gave him a thumbs-up. He returned a different finger, and she laughed again.

The weather was cooler outside, but not what Faith would consider cool, so she took

her sweater off after a block and tied it around her waste. The liquor store was a mile away. That meant twenty minutes there, five or ten minutes to shop and twenty minutes back. Forty-five minutes to come to terms with the feelings that Michael's statement about bringing work home had evoked.

That had never been an issue for Faith and David. They had lived apart for the entirety of their relationship, and Faith only saw him when she wasn't on a case. He knew not to bother her when she was working, and she was able to process through whatever emotions she felt without involving him.

Then again, she had called him a couple of times while on a case to vent, and he'd been very supportive. One time, he had even said something that had helped her connect the dots on a case and solve the crime.

But still, once in a while, over the phone was different from every night.

How was it different from what Michael and Ellie did, though? Faith would still be away from David when she was on a case. She would be in a hotel room apart from him and not return until the case was over. That worked great for Michael and Ellie.

The problem was that she wasn't Michael and David wasn't Ellie. Ellie was perfectly content to leave Michael's work with Michael. Faith was sure she was ready with a hug and a kiss when he needed reassurance but based on the way Michael talked and her own limited experience with Ellie, she preferred to be left out of the grittiness of her husband's job.

David wasn't like that. He didn't argue with Faith about it anymore, but she could tell that it bothered him when she deflected questions about work and didn't want to discuss things like the West case. He wanted to share every part of Faith's life with her. How long would he be content living on the outside of the most important part of her life?

Michael was content to keep his marriage separate from his job. He saw Ellie as an escape from the stress of the job, a safe haven where he could forget all about work and be nothing more than a loving husband who enjoyed the company of a loving wife.

Faith couldn't do that. She couldn't separate Faith Bold the person from Special Agent Faith Bold the FBI detective. Even when she was off the job, a part of her was always analyzing, always thinking, always poring over cases and anticipating the next one. She was fine with that part of herself, but she didn't want to always have to share it with someone else.

It hit her with some alarm that she had treated her relationship more like an activity than a future. That was why she was so nervous to move in with David. She loved him, and she wanted to be with him, but going from dating to living together was a massive and hugely impactful step that would change them forever. And if it didn't work out, then there wouldn't be a forever.

Her phone buzzed. Michael, asking for an assortment of junk food more appropriate for a twelve-year-old than a forty-one-year-old.

All the things Ellie doesn't let him eat, she thought. Maybe I should do her a solid and grab a salad box from the fridge instead.

She got him the items off of his list, of course. She wasn't his mom, and she wasn't his wife. The What If continued to float around the background of her mind, but it was a what-if she had long since learned to ignore.

Shopping for dinner pulled her mind away from her worries about David, at least, so she was able to walk back home in a somewhat better mood. She still wasn't happy with their lack of progress on the case, but that was typical at this stage. They'd figure it out. They always did.

She walked into the apartment and said, “Here you go, Mikey-Mike, here’s your snacks. You owe me for not telling Ellie that you eat like a…”

Her voice trailed off when she saw Michael on the phone, his lips pressed together in a thin line. He met Faith’s eyes and said, “Actually, she just got here. We’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

He hung up and said what Faith already knew he was going to say. “There’s been another murder.”

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Café Toulouse was in Midtown Village, one of many boutique diners in that and other locales in City Center. Like those boutiques, it was a trendy, attractive place designed to appeal to influencers as much as possible to take advantage of the online community's obsession with all things unique.

Unlike the other diners, it held the dead body of one of those influencers inside its walls. An attractive woman in her late thirties who would have been far more attractive if she hadn't been trying to look fifteen years younger lay on the ground in the lobby of the bistro. Her eyes stared listlessly at the ceiling, and her mouth hung slightly open. A rivulet of drool extended from the corner of that mouth to the floor.

"Lila Vance," Detective Howard said. "Thirty-eight. Online food vlogger. Mostly Instagram pictures and videos. Also, YouTube and whatever the hell Twitter is called nowadays. According to her cameraman, they were trying to break into TikTok with new short-form videos. This was going to be their first restaurant reviewed using that system."

"What's with the drool?" Michael asked.

"Camera guy says that she started drooling after she fell unconscious. Started sweating a lot too. That's why her hair's damp."

Faith looked at Lila's hair to see it matted and tangled. Three victims, three different sets of symptoms.

"When did this happen?"

“We got the call an hour and a half ago. CSI already swept the place, but I thought it would be nice to call you since you two are supposed to be the leads on the case.”

Faith frowned. “Yeah, it would have been nice to call us the moment you were called. What happened?”

Howard sighed. “It won’t happen again. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t—” she sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Forget it. Cameraman saw it happening, anyone else?”

“Sure, five staff and about a dozen diners. It was the evening rush.”

“Are any of them still here?”

“The staff’s being interviewed right now. We already talked to the camera guy, but if you want to talk to him, he’s still here. He’s outside at one of the tables.” He lowered his voice and said, “Go easy on him, huh? I think they were dating. He’s been crying pretty much nonstop.”

Faith had lost count of the number of killers she’d seen crying over their victims, but sometimes it was helpful to take the gentle approach in those cases. Killers tended to reveal more when they let their guard down.

She nodded and told Michael, “I’m going to talk to the cameraman. I want you to look through the scene and then through the security footage. Turk.”

Turk barked and trotted over to her.

“I want you to sniff around for clues. You find anything, you let me know, okay?”

He barked again, then trotted to the body. A few onlookers from the other side of the police cordon called for him to stop.

“Hey! Show some respect!”

“Yeah, come on! She was a person!”

Faith rolled her eyes and ignored the crowd as she walked to the sniffing, dejected young man sitting on the patio. Behind her, she heard Howard explaining that Turk was a police dog, and if the looky-loos didn’t have anything better to do than gawk, then they could at least gawk with their mouths shut.

She took a seat opposite the cameraman and smiled empathetically. “Hey, kiddo.”

“Kiddo” was significantly younger than Lila, probably in his early twenties. Young enough that Faith could actually call him a kiddo.

His grief was just as real as anyone Faith’s age, though, and she immediately dismissed him as a suspect. He wiped his eyes and said, “I don’t know what happened. She was fine. She was being her usual beautifully bitchy self, and then...” His lip trembled, and he wiped tears from his eyes again.

“Beautifully bitchy? Can’t say I’ve heard those two words together before.”

He shrugged. “I mean, she had an attitude, but I liked that about her. She was sassy. And she had a smile you wouldn’t believe. Have you heard of Foodgurl?”

“No. Is that her vlog?”

“It’s her channel. She did short reviews of food places. None of the high-class holier-than-thou bullshit. The concept was that she was a normal person giving an honest

opinion about food without trying to sound like she was better than anyone else.”

“But with an attitude?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “Yeah, she acted a little different in front of the camera, but whatever. That’s how you make money nowadays. She never lied about anything. She just had her online persona and then her real self.”

“I get that. What’s your name?”

“Henri.”

“Ah. French?”

“Yeah, but I don’t speak French. I grew up here. I’m named after my great-grandfather. He was part of the French Resistance during World War Two.”

“Good for him.”

“Shitty for him, actually. He lost his left arm and half of his left leg.”

“Ah. I’m sorry to hear that.”

Henri shrugged. “That’s war, right? People killing each other over stupid shit.”

“In my experience, that’s always the reason.”

“Yeah.” He sniffed and looked over Faith’s shoulder at the crowd in front of the restaurant.

“You want to go somewhere else?” she asked. “Where you don’t have to look at all

that?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s fine. I would be doing the same thing right now if it wasn’t Lila in there. Hell, Lila would be standing next to me.” His lip trembled again. “Damn. I loved her, man. I fucking loved her.”

He wept silently, and Faith’s heart went out to him. This was the worst part. An old mentor of hers had told her that what made murderers so terrible wasn’t what they did to the people they killed but what they did to the loved ones they didn’t kill. Seeing Henri’s shoulders shaking with grief brought that point home for her.

“We’ll find the person who did this,” she promised him. “We’ll bring them to justice.”

“Yeah, but you won’t bring her back.”

His words cut Faith like a knife. She lowered her eyes and said softly, “No.”

He sniffed and said, “I’m sorry. I know it’s not your fault. It’s just... fuck...” He took a deep breath and said, “You want to know what happened, right?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay. Well... we were shooting the review. The way it works is we take a few camera reels... Not actually reels, but you know what I mean.”

“Sure.”

“So we shoot video, then we splice it all together at the end and upload it to the platforms. She likes doing Instagram first usually, but we were going to try TikTok this time. That’s the trendy thing now. Anyway, we were getting the shot where she

was biting into the sandwich—Oh, she ordered a croque monsieur, by the way. Do you know what that is?”

“No, but that’s fine. So she did bite the food, or she didn’t?”

“She did. She took a bite and was about to talk about how delicious it was, and then she just fell over dead.”

“Just like that?”

“Pretty much. She started sweating a lot and said she felt dizzy. Then she tried to stand, but she just dropped. Like a sack of flour. Just...” He folded his hands in front of him and began tapping the table with his fists. "I don't even know if she heard me. You know, I was trying to ask her what's wrong, then I was just calling her name, and then... when she stopped breathing, I just kept saying I love you, I love you, Lila, please don't go."

A memory flashed across Faith's mind of David lying in a hospital bed with tubes and wires coming out of him. West had beaten him to the edge of death, and for a while, Faith was preparing for the possibility that she would never see him again.

But she had beaten West. He threatened to break her, but she had broken him. She would find the person who had done this to Lila Vance and break them too.

“I hate to have to ask this,” she said, “but can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Lila? A rival vlogger, maybe?”

He chuckled through his tears. “No, the vlogging world isn't really like that. Unless you call someone out, we're all really supportive of each other. That's the awesome thing about the Internet, is you don't really have to compete. Most people subscribe to dozens of channels, even hundreds, across multiple platforms. Usually, the best way

to get subscribers is to have an established channel recommend you or feature you on their channel. Lila featured a bunch of people, and she was always super nice to them."

"So the attitude was really only reserved for you?"

"Any time she was alone. And for me. That's how I knew she really loved me was when she let that part of herself show. I always loved it because... I don't know, it was her. It was Lila. She was a feisty, sassy milf with a food blog..." He turned beet red. "Oh God. Please don't put down that I called her that."

Faith smiled. "I won't. I assume you meant it as a compliment anyway."

"Oh yeah. She was perfect."

"Had she been complaining about any unusual physical symptoms lately?"

He shook his head. "No. This came out of nowhere. I have no idea what could have caused it."

Story of my life . "And emotionally, she didn't seem off in any way? Quieter, more moody, sassier than usual?"

"No, she seemed really happy, actually. She was worried about getting older and she was worried about falling too far behind with TikTok, but other than that, she was all right. This came out of nowhere. Part of me is still hoping it's a bad dream, and I wake up and she's next to me, moaning because the sun's up and she has to get out of bed." He smiled wistfully. "Man, I'm going to miss that."

His eyes moistened, and he buried his face in his hands and began to shake again. Faith put a hand on his shoulder and said gently but firmly. "You need to get some

rest, okay? Let us handle all of this. You take the night off, and in the morning, you handle whatever you need to handle about Lila. But tonight, you just take it easy. Do you have friends or family you can stay with so you're not alone?"

He nodded. "Yeah, uh, my brother. He knows about Lila. My parents wouldn't approve because of the age gap, but he likes her. Liked her. Goddamn."

"Call him," she said. "Get out of here. We've got this."

"Can I... Can I say goodbye to her?"

She thought about her answer for a moment. "I would really suggest that you not do that. You shouldn't let your last memory of her be... this."

He sighed and slumped forward. "Yeah. You're right. It's just... damn."

"I know. You'll be okay. Not for a while. Maybe not for a long while. But you'll be okay. You'll do it for yourself and for her. She'd want you to be happy, right?"

He took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, she would."

"Then you'll be okay."

She squeezed his shoulder one last time, then walked back to the restaurant. Just before she got to the door, a short, dark-haired woman a few years younger than Faith rushed out of the restaurant, nearly colliding with Faith. Michael came barreling after, pointing at her and shouting, "Stop! Stop her!"

Faith didn't have a chance to join the chase. As soon as Michael called out, Turk leapt from the door like a missile, snarling and chasing down the fleeing woman within a few seconds.

She looked over her shoulder and screamed when she saw Turk. “All right! I surrender! Please don’t let him hurt me!”

Turk, correctly guessing that the suspect was cowed into submission, stopped before attacking her and growled, teeth bared. The woman sobbed and backpedaled, her hands held in front of her in a warding gesture.

Michael jogged to her and handcuffed her. The crowd reacted with equal parts alarm and fascination, prompting Howard to once more warn them to back off or face arrest.

“Let’s get her out of here,” Faith said. “I don’t want to do this here. Especially with the boyfriend watching.”

“So camera guy was her boyfriend too, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, all right, then. Let’s take her to the precinct.”

They quickly escorted the weeping suspect to the car and pulled smoothly out into traffic. The woman whimpered and kept her eyes locked on Turk, who, as with Marcus Delaney before, stared daggers at the suspect.

“Don’t worry,” Faith assured her. She gave the woman a smile that stopped well before her eyes. “He only bites if I tell him to.”

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Faith paused the tape and looked back at their suspect. Tanya Blanchard worked at the bistro, and, as nearly as Faith could tell, was the last person to interact with Lila Vance other than Henri and the last person to touch Lila's food. Those interactions were the subject of some interest to the agents, and it was those interactions they now reviewed with Tanya.

"You want to tell us what that was?" Faith asked her.

"That" was what looked on camera like Tanya pressing something into Lila's hand, a something that Lila then popped into her mouth."

Tanya swallowed and said nothing.

"Yeah, the silent act isn't going to work here," Michael told her. "The woman you just gave that to died less than five minutes later. So you're going to need to tell us what that is, or we're going to be thinking about charging you with murder. Three of them, to be exact."

Tanya's eyes snapped toward her. "Three of them?"

"Oh, so it's only Lila you murdered?"

"No! I didn't murder anyone, I just... how do you know about the others?" Seeing the agents' expressions, she quickly said, "I didn't kill anyone, I mean other... people I've interacted with."

"We're going to need a little more than your shitty attempt at hiding things," Faith

told her, “but maybe if we answer your question, it’ll help you answer a little more honestly. Michael, you want to show her the other video we found?”

Michael turned the laptop toward himself and tapped the keys. Tanya trembled and looked nervously at Faith, who returned a stony glance. After a moment, Michael turned the keyboard around and showed Tanya the other video.

This one was at the same bistro two days ago. Harold Grimes had stopped there for lunch. The video showed Tanya talking to Grimes and pressing something into his hand. Grimes didn’t consume whatever it was right then, but Faith had a guess when he might have taken it.

“That’s Harold Grimes,” Faith explained. “He’s dead too. Died about... six hours after you saw him. Six hours after you gave him... what was it you gave him?”

“I want a lawyer,” Tanya said, her voice thready.

“That’s fine,” Faith replied, “but just so you know, we are going to charge you with all three murders.”

“That’s only two,” Tanya protested.

Faith looked at Michael, who turned the laptop around again and tapped the keys. Tanya paled and reiterated, “I want a lawyer.”

Faith ignored her. A moment later, Michael turned the laptop around to show a video from nine days ago. Eleanor Crestwood was wearing jean shorts and a t-shirt rather than her usual evening dress. She wore sneakers instead of heels, and her face was obscured by large dark sunglasses, but there was no mistaking that the woman taking something from Tanya and kissing her on the cheek was the tenacious food critic who only hours later would be convulsing on the floor of Cucina Toscana.

Tanya stared at the screen with a mixture of horror and despair in her eyes. Faith let her marinate in that emotion for a while, then said, “See what I mean? Three victims. All of them had food at your workplace. You put something in all of their hands—on camera—and within hours, they were dead. All except Lila, who was dead within minutes.”

Tanya swallowed but said nothing.

“We can get you a lawyer,” Faith said. “That’s your right. But you should know that once you lawyer up, your chance to talk to us and come clean ends.”

“I’m innocent, though.”

"Then you'll have to convince a jury. Because right now, I think you're guilty. And I'm very confident we can get you convicted of murder in the first three times. Philadelphia doesn't have the death penalty, but they're perfectly fine with life without parole. The consecutive part doesn't really matter in that case, does it?"

Tanya sniffled and said, “But if I talk to you, then what? You’re going to charge me anyway, right?”

Faith pulled up a chair and sat across from Tanya. "If there's one thing I hate almost as much as a serial killer, it's someone who wastes my time. So if you're innocent, I want very much for you to show me that you're innocent so I stop wasting my time with you and go back to finding the lowlife who did this. So this is your chance to convince me. Otherwise, you get a lawyer, and I guarantee you that the lawyer is going to tell you to shut up and not say a word to us, which means months of trials. Which means your name and face plastered on every news channel in the city as the suspect in the violent public poisonings of three prominent food critics. Then it doesn’t matter what you convince me. You have to convince a jury of your peers that you didn’t slip three people poison and get them killed. And I’ll be honest, Tanya. It

looks really bad.”

Tanya swallowed and tried to rub her eyes, but the shackles stopped her. “But if I convince you I didn’t murder anyone, you let me go free, right?”

“You don’t get charged with murder. You still resisted arrest. I don’t know what your record looks like, but if it’s relatively clean, that probably means you leave in the morning with a court date. Then the judge either has a bad day and gives you community service or a good day and gives you a night in jail out on time served.”

“Lot better than three life without parole back to back,” Michael opined.

Tanya dropped her head to her chest and sobbed briefly. “Damn it. For fuck’s sake, why me?”

“I’m sure this is hard for you,” Faith said, “but I’m a lot more concerned with Eleanor Crestwood, Harold Grimes and Lila Vance than I am for you right now.”

“I didn’t kill them.” She bit her lip and looked over Faith’s shoulder, then said, more firmly this time. “I want a lawyer. I think... yeah, I’m firm with this. I want a lawyer. I didn’t murder anyone, and I trust that a jury of my peers and the American justice system will see that and acquit me.”

This wasn’t good. Faith wasn’t joking about the lengthy process that would occur if lawyers were involved. She appreciated the right that suspects had to representation, and she understood that right prevented many judicial and procedural overreaches that would otherwise land innocents in jail, but if Tanya wasn’t their killer, then they would be stuck wrestling with motions and arraignments and indictments and casework until the real killer struck again. If Tanya was the killer, then a lawyer was definitely her best option, but Faith wanted her to believe that her best option was to talk now. People could judge if they want, but Faith was advocating for the victims,

not the suspects.

So she tried one last time. She leaned forward and met Tanya's eyes. "I just talked to Lila Vance's boyfriend. Henri. He's a sweet guy. He was absolutely head over heels for Lila. Talked about her like she was a fairy tale princess. He wanted nothing in life but to love her. He saw her die, Tanya. He saw her take her last breath. He saw the light fade from her eyes and watched that light fly out of his life forever. The woman he loved died in front of him today. If you know anything about how that happened, you need to do the right thing and tell me. And if you don't, you need to tell me that too, because somewhere out there is someone who thinks it's okay to kill girlfriends in front of their boyfriends in the most vicious way possible, and that someone needs to answer for what happened to Lila Vance today."

She fell silent and held Tanya's gaze. Tanya's lip trembled, and after a moment, she sniffled. "Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it. She wasn't supposed to take it right there, okay? I told her to go home and take it."

Michael sighed and turned around, arms folded. Faith nodded and released a sigh of her own. "What did you give her?"

"Molly."

Faith blinked. "What?"

"Molly. Ecstasy. It's MDMA."

"Yeah, I know what Molly is. I just... Molly?"

Faith's voice was terse. Behind her, she heard Michael's hands slap against his legs after he threw them in the air and let them drop. For a brief moment, she thought she had their killer, only to learn that she was just—

“You’re a drug dealer?”

Tanya shrugged miserably. “Rent’s fucking expensive here, okay? I don’t have a degree, and I don’t have any money but what I make working part-time at the café. It’s not enough to pay the bills. I’m just doing it to make ends meet. I don’t live in Rittenhouse either. I have a crappy room in Camden above someone’s garage. I take the bus to work because I don’t have my own car. I’m not trying to be a baller, I’m just trying to live.”

Faith sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Michael, do you happen to know if MDMA is a sodium channel blocker?”

“No, it’s an empathogen-entactogen.”

“English, please.”

“It affects the release of certain hormones. It doesn’t directly affect the nervous system.”

Faith sighed. “Could it possibly be mixed with a sodium channel blocker?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard of that before.”

“Who gives you your pills?” Faith demanded.

“I don’t know him,” Tanya said. “Some guy at a pharmaceutical plant in Newark. I meet him there once a month. The stuff’s high quality, though. I test it at home.”

“How do you test it?”

“I have a chemistry set. It’s not that hard to make ecstasy, it’s just hard to make a lot

of it. But I take a pill from each batch and test it to make sure it's not mixed with glass or something."

"Glass?" Faith asked.

"Methamphetamine," Michael explained. "Crystal."

"Got it." Faith sighed. "Okay. Do you have any pills from your recent batch?"

Tanya sniffed and nodded. "Yeah. There are sixteen left. I re-upped two weeks ago."

"And all the pills you gave to the victims are from this most recent batch?"

"Yes."

"Do we have your permission to go into your apartment and retrieve them?"

Tanya's eyes shifted sideways. "Um... am I going to be charged with anything?"

"Hell yes you are. If you don't give us permission, we'll just get a warrant."

She lowered her head again. "I knew I should have gotten a lawyer."

"We'll make sure you get one," Faith said, standing. "This would've come out eventually, Tanya. A warrant for your apartment was the next step, no matter what. But if we find out that your pills are clean, then you're only getting dealing a controlled substance and possession with intent to distribute. That's not good, but it's a whole light year better than multiple murder. You still did the right thing by talking to us."

"Doesn't feel like it," Tanya moped.

“Well, the right thing would have been to not sell drugs in the first place. Consider this a learning experience.”

She left the room, fuming.

So close. They were so close. She could taste the end of this case.

And then suddenly, they were no closer than they were at the beginning. Their murderer was still out there. How long before yet another victim lay dead on the floor?

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Faith slammed the door to her apartment closed, but Michael caught it and shut it gently, so she didn't even get that satisfaction.

"Damn it!" she shouted. "Fuck!"

Michael stiffened, but then shrugged. "Well, I guess they won't be your neighbors for much longer."

"Fuck the neighbors!" she said. "Damn it!"

Turk whined and nudged her gently. She sighed and ruffled his fur. "Yeah, I know. It just sucks. I really thought we had it figured out."

"Yeah," Michael said, "Me too. But hey, you never know. Maybe they'll find something in the pills."

Faith sighed. "No, they won't. Even if they do, it won't make a difference. MDMA is one of the most common drugs to find in a tox screen. So's meth. They would have found that without needing to send it to the state lab."

Michael nodded. "Yeah. They would have."

"Damn it!"

"I know."

Faith sat at her table and rested her chin on her hands. She bit her lip and looked

pensively at the wall. Michael headed to the freezer and pulled out the microwave meals she had bought from the liquor store. “Glad I threw these in here before we went to the bistro. I’m going to make yours first, and you’re going to eat it.”

“I’m not hungry.”

"Yes, you are. You don't think you are because you're pissed, but you are. And you need fuel. So you're going to eat no matter what else we do tonight."

“What else are we going to do? We don’t have any more leads. We’re back to square one again.” She let her head drop into her hands. “God! What are the odds? How do three people by drugs from the same person at the same place the day each of them dies and their drug dealer isn’t the killer?”

“We still don’t know that for sure. We should at least wait until they—” his phone buzzed. He read the text, and his shoulders slumped. “Okay. Now we know that for sure.”

“The pills are clean?”

“That’s not the word I would use to describe a hallucinogen, but yes, they’re clean. Pure MDMA.”

Faith sighed. “All right. Make me dinner. Might as well eat as long as I’m staring at a wall.”

“Sounds good. Is Turk on a schedule with his food, or do you just feed him anything?”

“I thawed him a steak last night. You can give him that. Just fry it on the stove for a few minutes.”

“Sure thing. You’re eating good tonight, boy.”

Turk barked enthusiastically but then turned back to Faith and whined. When Faith headed to the living room, he followed her and immediately put his head on her lap. She chuckled and began scratching him behind the ears. “I love you, boy. You’re amazing.”

Turk held her gaze with the most beautiful brown eyes she had ever seen, and Faith felt the tension ease. “I’ll tell you a secret. I think I love you even more than I love David.”

“More than you love me?” Michael called.

She kept her eyes on Turk and said, “And so, so much more than I love Michael.”

“Ah, you break my heart, Faith. You break my heart.”

Faith chuckled and cupped Turk’s face in her hands. “You’re so cute.”

“Aww, thank you,” Michael called from the kitchen.

“I’m not talking to you.” She shook her head at Turk. “He’s such a dummy, isn’t he?”

Turk barked, then began to lick her face. She laughed and pulled away. “Okay, okay. I’m good boy. Mommy’s cheered up. Thank you.”

Turk wagged his tail happily and sat in his usual spot in front of the couch with his head on Faith’s feet. It had taken years to get him to stop jumping on the couch, so Faith decided it wasn’t worth the fight to convince him to leave her feet. Besides, it felt good to have him there right now. She wasn’t really cheered up, just a little less tense. That was the best she could expect right now.

“What are we missing?” she called to Michael. “We know it’s someone with a vendetta against food critics. We know the vector is poison. But the killer isn’t any of the chefs who would have a reason to kill them, and the poison doesn’t show up anywhere on the food.”

“We haven’t confirmed those two things in Lila Vance’s case,” he reminded her.

“But we will. We know that we will.”

Michael sighed. “Yeah. Almost certainly.”

“So what are we missing? Someone had a reason to do this.”

“Yeah, they hate critics.”

“Yes, but they had a reason for these three victims specifically. There was a reason why Eleanor Crestwood, Harold Grimes and Lila Vance were killed. What is that reason?”

Michael brought out Faith's food and set it on the night table next to her, along with a freshly opened bottle of beer. "I'll scour Lila Vance's social media presence and see if I can find any connections between the victims. Maybe you can look into Tanya's supplier and the other employees at the Café Toulouse and see if there's anything that jumps out at you. We'll get this guy, Faith. We always do."

“Yeah, but people always die before we can stop them.”

“Fewer people than would die if we weren’t hunting them. Don’t think about the people we don’t save. Think about the people we save.”

Faith understood Michael’s point, but the image of Henri sobbing and crying out for

his dead girlfriend was burned into her brain. Other images of other relatives floated through her head: a brother whose sister was bludgeoned to death, a mother whose son was dragged into a cave never to be seen again, a husband whose wife was stabbed to death in their own home.

So many she couldn't save. So many who had lost forever everything they might have been.

"Remember that woman we pulled out of the well in Missouri?"

Michael's voice cut through the darkness. Faith smiled slightly as she remembered the woman. She couldn't quite remember her name, but she did remember seeing the fire department lift her from the well, somewhat the worse for wear but alive.

"I remember that. That was our first case after I got out of the hospital."

"Yeah. You and Turk had to fight a religious nut who was burying 'promiscuous women' in abandoned wells."

"Yeah, I remember him. The Demon of Morgan County."

"Whatever," Michael flipped his hand and sat next to her with his own meal. "I don't pay attention to the names the media gives these people. You remember the woman we rescued from that puppy farm?"

"Yes, I do. I think she was named Lila too."

"Yeah, something like that. Lila or Lisa. Let's see, there was the other woman, the Marine we rescued from that crazy medic up in Washington."

Faith shivered. "Yeah, that was when Turk got hurt."

Turk looked up at the sound of his name, and Faith smiled. “But you’re right as rain now, aren’t you?”

“So are they,” Michael said. “I don’t always remember their names, but I remember their faces. I remember the gratitude. The relief. The joy. It’s hard to remember that when you’re in the middle of things and you’re chasing a psycho whose working his problems out by hurting people instead of going to therapy, but there’s a lot of people who make it because of the work we do. And those are only the people we see. Imagine how many more would have died if we hadn’t caught the Demon and put him in the psych ward? If Kenneth Langeveldt was still paralyzing fake families in Washington D.C.? Or that guy in Arizona who was using pheromones to trick lapdogs into eating people alive?”

Faith shivered again. “Don’t remind me of that asshole. Those are some of the worst scenes I’ve ever seen.”

“But fewer than there would be otherwise. I won’t pretend it’s always easy, but when I’m having a bad day, and I can’t get the images of death out of my mind, I fill them with images of the life that exists because I’m not afraid to face death. It helps.”

Faith smiled at him. “Why Michael Prince, who knew what a poet you were?”

He shrugged. “Maybe that’s what I’ll do when I retire.”

He reached for the remote and switched the TV on. Faith took a bite of her TV dinner. This one was pretending to be Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes and peas. To be fair, she had no idea what Salisbury steak was, so maybe it was perfectly normal for steak to have the texture of wet cardboard.

She grinned and took another bite. Call her crazy, but there was nothing more comforting in life than a cheap TV dinner eaten on a couch with her two best friends.

The TV program returned from commercial and Faith's grin faded when she saw the headline. WEST MAKES FIRST STATEMENT SINCE ARREST!

Michael looked at Faith. "Maybe I'll change the channel."

"No. I want to hear what he has to say."

"Faith, I don't know if—"

"Just leave it on."

The anchor, a man with the fake hair and plastic smile of a politician, said, "The nation is abuzz today with the revelation that convicted serial killer Franklin West has released his first statement since being arrested just over four months ago. West, the prolific murderer known as the Copycat Donkey Killer—"

"They talk about him like he's a damned celebrity," Michael groused. "Like he's a prophet."

That's what I'm afraid of, Faith thought. That, to some people, he is.

"What you are about to hear is a transcript of that statement read by a court stenographer who captured the statement at West's pretrial hearing this morning."

"That was this morning?" Michael asked.

"I guess so."

"Aren't they supposed to notify you?"

Faith shook her head. "I don't know."

A flat, slightly nasal male voice recited the statement. “The line between sanity and insanity is thin indeed. What separates me from a perfectly ordinary psychologist and counselor is as ephemeral as a puff of smoke or a gust of wind. People live their lives believing they are good, they are moral, they are sane; but put the right pressure in the right place, and that fa?ade crumbles.

“It’s been suggested that my obsession with Special Agent Faith Bold of the FBI is sexual in nature. I expected this comparison because for all of our insistence to the contrary, humans are, at their core, primates, and sexual expression is perhaps the foundational component of primate society. Still, the statement could not be further from the truth.

"I wished to break the fa?ade of sanity that surrounds Faith, a fa?ade that has been artificially strengthened by the renown she has received both within law enforcement and now to the wider public. I wished to show that even the greatest among us is as cruel and evil and, based at her core, the most violent of killers. I have failed. I underestimated her intelligence, and more so, I underestimated the lengths to which she would go to hide from the truth within her.

"But my point still stands. Faith Bold is no better than me. Her fascination with death and violence expresses itself in a manner more acceptable to society, but make no mistake. That sanity stands on a knife's edge. Don't be surprised if one day it is her who stands before you with the blood of innocents on her hands."

“What a fucking lunatic,” Michael said.

There was no anger in his voice, only contempt. West was beaten now and unworthy of his anger. If only Faith could feel the same way.

The channel cut back to the anchor. “While the majority of online respondents have decried West’s statement as ‘ludicrous’ and ‘the product of a deranged mind,’ some

are quick to point out incidents in Special Agent Bold's past that raise some serious concerns. In one particularly disturbing episode, she broke into an apartment and assaulted an innocent man who she erroneously believed to be the Copycat Killer, leaving him with thousands of dollars of damage that eventually led to his eviction from his home."

Faith stiffened, and Michael lifted his hands in outrage. "What the hell?"

"In another, she commanded her K9 unit to viciously attack a South African tourist she falsely suspected of a series of poisoning deaths in the Twin Cities Terminal, an assault that left the man hospitalized with serious injuries and that nearly led to a diplomatic incident between the United States and South Africa."

"Those fucking assholes!" Michael shouted. "Are they serious right now?"

"The FBI has not responded to requests for comment on—"

Michael stood and switched the TV off. The hand not holding the remote clenched and unclenched in time with his breathing. Turk jumped to his feet and looked around, sensing a threat but unsure where it was coming from.

Faith didn't say anything for a long moment. She was too tired to try to wrap her head around what she had just seen. The only thing she was sure of was that even now, West still reached for her, clawing at the back of her mind, refusing to let go, refusing to stop until there was nothing left.

I will break you.

"We're going to sue the hell out of those assholes," Michael growled. "We're going to sue them until they're begging us to stop. We're—"

“Just drop it, Michael,” Faith said. “Just...” She stood abruptly. “I’m going to bed.”

“Hey, don’t worry about what they’re saying. They’re just vampires. That’s all the news media is.”

“Yeah. I know. Good night, Michael.”

She headed to her bedroom before Michael could say anything else. Turk trotted after her, and when she collapsed onto her bed, he jumped on top of it with her and rested his head on her chest. She didn’t try to push him off. He wouldn’t have let her anyway.

She stroked his fur and stared at the ceiling. West’s taunting laughter echoed through the recesses of her mind. As though he were there in the room with her, she could almost hear his taunting voice crowing, “I told you I’d win, Faith.”

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None of this was personal.

Well, that wasn't true. It was all personal, but none of the victims were chosen because of a personal connection. The real problem wasn't due to any one person after all. It was the entire culture. The entire industry. In some ways, the killer's victims were victims of the industry before they ever fell prey to the killer's poison.

That didn't mean they weren't guilty. The toxic culture in which they swam was toxic due to their actions and the actions of others like them. So while none of the specific people the killer chose were chosen because of a personal vendetta against them, their deaths were all the killer's personal revenge against the system they represented.

This victim was the closest to being personal because of who he was and not simply because of the industry he represented.

Samuel Klein, restaurateur and retired executive chef of the premier steakhouse on the Eastern Seaboard, now renowned for his Perfect Bites podcast, lifted his wineglass and swirled the dark liquid in the glass before sipping.

The killer had to laugh. Swirling wine in a wineglass was a foolish thing that those who didn't understand wine did to make themselves appear smarter than they were. As with many things, it only exemplified their foolishness.

The idea was to aerate the wine and enhance the flavor before drinking. It was pointless. Wine took time to develop. A few seconds of swirling would accomplish nothing. In a fine restaurant, those wines which required aeration would be decanted hours before dinner to allow the flavors to develop before they reached the table. The

killer doubted very seriously such a step had been taken here.

Klein sipped the wine and didn't do the one thing that actually could have impacted the flavor, namely slurping. That would aerate the wine properly. While it wouldn't actually change the wine itself, it would mist the liquid and carry it to every part of Klein's palate, allowing him to experience the full spectrum of flavor the wine offered.

Klein didn't do that because Klein was a fraud. He acted as though he was a great chef, but he was nothing more than a charlatan. Others had developed his menu and brought him success. He had capitalized off of their ingenuity. Meanwhile those who were truly ingenious, truly unique, truly special , suffered ridicule and derision. It wasn't fair.

So, looking at Klein sipping wine improperly moments before the killer's poison would finally take his life felt more satisfying than it did with the others. It wasn't personal. Not quite.

But when the first beads of sweat appeared on Klein's face, the killer smiled with a very personal feeling of triumph. When Klein began to convulse, the killer had to cough into his napkin so no one would hear him laugh.

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Faith woke in a sour mood. The hurt she felt after watching the newscast the night before was gone, but it left behind irritation and anger.

Were they really trying to act like West was right about her? That she really was just a half-step away from being as insane as he was? And what the hell was with bringing up those past incidents? Faith was wrong to attack Jason Greenwood in his home, yes, but that South African tourist had run when Faith asked to talk to him. And he was a suspect. True, he was proven quickly to be innocent, but what was she supposed to do when a suspect ran? Just let him get away?

Apparently so. The media thought so. When the event had occurred, the FBI had thought so. Even Michael had thought so.

And as far as Greenwood went, yes, she shouldn't have done that, but she was traumatized. She had been tortured nearly to death by Jethro Trammell, and then some asshole started killing people in exactly the same way? It wasn't an excuse for what she did, but she had already atoned for all of that. She had gotten better.

But that didn't matter because no one wanted to hear the heartwarming tale of how the tortured FBI agent had overcome her demons and brought the most prolific serial killer in over forty years to justice. They wanted to hear what West had said, that she was no better than any killer, just walking on the right side of sanity at the moment.

Her analytical mind reminded her that this was how it always happened. People loved seeing heroes torn down because when a hero was torn down, they could feel better about their own cowardice and their own vices.

But it pissed her off. And it pissed her off even more that West could still piss her off even when she knew he would never see the light of day again.

So it pissed her off further when she walked into the living room to see coffee and breakfast laid out for her.

“Fresh coffee from morning glory, over-easy eggs, bacon, sausage and hash browns,” Michael said. “I made the food myself.”

It looked delicious, and Faith could only thank him. With no reason to be angry, she had nothing to lash out against, no outlet for her frustration.

That pissed her off even more.

Michael sat across from her, carrying his own plate. He gave Faith a look she had seen many times over the years, and one that once more increased her frustration. He was gauging how angry she was and whether or not he should talk to her or just leave her alone.

It was horribly unfair to Michael that she wanted to take her anger out on him, but that didn't make her any less angry. She felt like she was caught in a vicious cycle where everything made her angry, and the only way to stop being angry was to lash out against someone who didn't deserve her anger, and since she couldn't do that, she could only get angrier and angrier.

Turk barked and trotted to her side, looking up at her with his beautiful brown eyes. And her anger faded, not entirely, but enough that she could speak without fearing that she would scream.

God, she loved that dog.

She scratched him behind the ear and said, “Sorry boy. We both know what happened the last time I fed you breakfast sausages.”

“He’s fine,” Michael said, free to speak now that Turk had calmed Faith somewhat. “I fed him a big breakfast.”

“Please tell me you didn’t give him sausages.”

“Oh yeah. Tons of them. Couple dozen.”

She stared at him a moment, then said, “You’re lying, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “You look like you need to yell at someone, so I thought I would volunteer. I kind of tune it out when you yell at me now, anyway.”

“Screw you!”

“Yep. Let it all out.”

She picked up one of her sausages and threw it at him. He dodged, and the link bounced off of the far wall. Turk moved faster than lightning and caught the link before it even had a chance to hit the ground. Then he turned around and gave Faith a smug look as he chewed the meat.

“That’s on you,” Michael said to Faith.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re sleeping on the balcony tonight, Turk.”

“I think I might actually go home to Ellie if it’s gonna be that bad,” Michael said. “It’s not like we’re getting anything done cloistering ourselves anyway.”

Faith's smile faded, and Michael cursed softly. "Sorry. I ruined it, didn't I?"

"You ruin everything," Faith agreed. "But no, I'm just..." sick of West dominating my thoughts. She didn't want to talk about that, so she focused on her other immediate frustration instead. "Sick of running into walls. I know this happens every case, and I know we eventually break through the wall, but God. Why is it that the answer is never what it's supposed to be? I mean, it wasn't always like this, was it? There was a time when killers acted the way we were taught in the Academy, and evidence pointed where it looked like it was pointing, wasn't there? A time when things made sense?"

"Not sure about the last question, but the first two, yeah. For sure. It feels like Jethro Trammell showed up, and all of a sudden, killers became these horror movie caricatures and evidence could only be understood when it was viewed through their own warped lenses."

"Yeah." She pushed around at her food, but her stomach growled, and she eventually lifted a forkful of egg into her mouth. "What lens is this guy viewing things through?"

Michael sighed. "All of the victims have been food critics, so it has to be someone connected to that industry. Another food critic, a chef, a restaurant employee, something. These victims aren't random. In fact, they're the most homogenous group of victims we've had in a while."

"So we should look for industry connections instead of personal connections."

"Yes. And we shouldn't look just for people who have received bad reviews. We need to cast a wider net. Anyone who's interacted with all three of our victims."

"Tanya was caught with a wider net," Faith pointed out.

“Yes, but she really was poisoning them. Not to the point of murder, but she was giving them drugs. That supports my point.”

She smiled slightly. “I don’t think it does, but I still like the idea of a wider net. We’ve been focused narrowly on people who had a reason to hurt them. We should focus instead on who had the opportunity to hurt them.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay.”

She took another bite of her eggs. She was feeling a little better now that they had a direction. The media circus surrounding West still bothered her, but at least she had something to do other than fixate on him.

Her phone rang from the bedroom. “That’s probably David. Hang on a second.”

She headed back to the room and picked up the phone. Her smile faded when she saw the Boss’s number instead of David.

Special Agent-in-Charge Grant Monroe was affectionately called the Boss by his subordinates because of his militant, no-nonsense demeanor and his refusal to brook any attitude or insubordination from his agents. Only a very few, notably Michael, could goof off around him and get away with it.

Faith was not one of those few, and while the Boss had made it clear that he respected and even admired Faith, she had endured his wrath more than once in the past when she had stepped outside of protocol in her efforts to solve a case.

Such as when she had broken into Jacob Greenwood’s home and when Turk had accosted the South African suspect in the Twin Cities Terminal.

She steeled herself for the conversation and answered the phone. “Yes, sir?”

“Bold, we’re in the shit right now. The media decided to drag you into the West circus, and now upper management wants you held accountable for the shit you did back when you were off the rails.”

Faith sighed. “Yes, sir, I was expecting that.”

“Long story short, you’re going to be put on desk duty when Turk retires next month.”

Faith’s eyes widened. “Desk duty? For how long?”

The Boss sighed. That wasn’t a good sign, nor was the tiredness in his voice when he spoke again. “I don’t know. There’s been a lot of talk. The term ‘permanently reassigned’ has been batted around.”

“Permanently? Boss, that’s bullshit!”

“Yes, it is. And I have threatened a lot of people to get them to let you have the next four weeks. I will continue to go to bat for you, but... at the moment, it doesn’t look good.”

All of the anger Faith had fought through bubbled to the surface again. “Why are you telling me this? Why am I hearing this now when there’s nothing we can do about it?”

“Because there is something we can do about it. Word’s gotten out that you’re the one assigned to the poisoner case.”

“It has? How?”

“Some kids leaked video of you at the most recent one at the café in Midtown. The media’s running with it, and a lot of dipshits are waiting for you to do something crazy or stupid so they can play out the narrative that you’re broken and a liability. This is your chance to show them they’re wrong. Solve this case quickly, preferably before anyone else dies. Bring this asshole to justice, and we’ll stage a very public press conference where you can talk about how you bravely caught the killer before he could kill anyone else.”

“Boss, you know I hate press conferences.”

“Tough shit. It’s that or file paperwork for the rest of your career.” In a softer voice, he said, “We need good press, Bold. We’ve been sweeping you under the rug for a long time, but we can’t get away with that anymore. It’s time to remind people why you’re the best damned agent this Bureau has ever seen. All right?”

Faith could have spent the rest of the day listing the reasons why this wasn’t all right, but it would have been a waste of time. The Boss had his mind made up, and when he had his mind made up, he was unshakable.

And, much as Faith hated to admit it, he was right.

“All right, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“Fuck your best. You’ll succeed. You have to.”

He hung up before Faith could reply. She sighed and pressed her hands to her temples until both fingers and temples hurt.

A soft knock at the door told her Michael was in the room. She quickly pulled her hands away from her head and turned to him.

He gave her a sympathetic smile, then said, "I have a lead."

She took a breath to steady herself. "Good. Who?"

"Alex Ferris. He's a sommelier for Paul Revere Vineyards near Bucktown."

"Bucktown? That's a long drive."

"A bit over an hour, yeah. But it should be worth it. Mr. Ferris's job for Paul Revere is to travel to restaurants and offer wine pairings with meals to advertise their products. Within the past month, he's been at restaurants serving Eleanor Crestwood and Harold Grimes. And Lila Vance visited the vineyard for one of her Instagram stories."

Faith shook her head. "There's no way he's poisoning them weeks in advance."

"No, there isn't. But , all three victims ordered cases of wine from Paul Revere which arrived within two days of their death in all three cases."

Faith lifted her eyebrow. "Ah. Well, that's interesting."

"My thoughts exactly. I put your coffee in a thermos already. If we hurry, we can beat the worst of the traffic out of the city."

The three of them left her apartment without further fuss. Faith tried to put her conversation with the Boss out of her mind, but she couldn't quite push it away. This lead could very well determine her future with the Bureau.

And it could be the difference between West failing or ultimately succeeding in his quest to break her spirit.

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They reached the winery just after nine. The winery itself didn't open to the public until ten, but the receptionist saw their uniforms and didn't offer any fuss.

"Alex should be in the tasting room down the hall," she said. "That's Room Twelve. Should I page him to let him know you're coming?"

Faith thought a moment, then shook her head. She didn't want to give Alex a chance to run. "No, that's all right. It'll be our surprise."

The receptionist paled a shade and nodded.

The three of them proceeded through the winery. A few of the winemakers and sommeliers gave Turk a dirty look, but no one dared say anything to the two human agents, whose expressions made it clear they weren't interested in any complaints about their dog being inside a food establishment.

Room Twelve was at the end of a very long hall. The window was covered with brown paper, and a laminated sign was taped to the front of the door that said TASTING IN PROGRESS. DO NOT DISTURB.

Well, they were going to disturb Alex whether he liked it or not.

Faith knocked on the door and said, "FBI! Open up!"

No answer. She tried the handle and, of course, found it locked. She knocked again, louder this time. "Alex Ferris! This is the FBI! We need to talk to you now!"

No answer. She shared a look with Michael and tried one last time. “Alex! We’re coming in! You can either open the door for us, or we can break it down!”

“Hold on!” a voice called.

Faith turned to see a middle-aged woman rushing over to them as quickly as she could in her heels. “I’ll open the door,” she said. “No need to be boorish about it.”

Faith decided to let the comment pass and stood aside as the woman fumbled with her keys. “Honestly, I don’t understand why you couldn’t have just made an appointment.”

Michael was less patient than Faith. “That’s right. You don’t understand.”

The woman pursed her lips and refrained from further comment. She opened the door to an empty room. “There. Are you happy?”

Faith frowned. “Where’s Alex Ferris?”

The woman sighed. “I don’t know. I’m in sales. He’s with product quality. We work together, but only when he’s assigned to a tasting with a prospective client.”

“We need to talk to him now ,” Faith said. “This is urgent.”

The woman lifted her hands and let them drop. “Well, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Where would he be if not here?” Faith demanded.

The saleswoman sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I guess... probably downstairs selecting vintages for the tasting. Usually, our sommeliers like to complete tastings before eight in the morning, but they run late sometimes."

“Where downstairs?”

“The cellar,” she replied, as though that should have been the most obvious thing on Earth. “It’s the first basement level.”

“Good enough,” Michael said. “Thank you.”

The three agents rushed back to the lobby and grabbed the first elevator. Faith and Michael checked their weapons as the elevator descended, just in case.

The door opened, and a very surprised-looking man around Michael’s age but of slighter build and with graying hair stared at the three of them in shock. He had two bottles of wine tucked under his jacket, and when he saw the FBI lettering on their vests, he clutched them more tightly and tried to hide their shape under the jacket.

“We need to speak with Alex Ferris,” Faith said.

The man blinked. “Wh... why do you need to speak with him?”

“He’s wanted for questioning in the deaths of Eleanor Crestwood, Harold Grimes and Lila Vance.”

“The deaths of... well... I’m sorry, but he’s not here.”

Faith’s eyes narrowed. “Really? Because we talked to two people who said he was.”

The man swallowed nervously. “Well, they were mistaken.”

“So if we check your ID right now, it won’t say Alex Ferris?”

The man paled. “I... I see no need to surrender my ID to you. You don’t have a

search warrant, and you can't just accost someone and demand that they identify themselves when they're not suspected of a crime."

"Murder in the first is a pretty serious crime," Michael reminded him.

"What's in your jacket?" Faith asked.

He paled further. "Nothing."

"Nothing, huh? Nothing at all?"

The man swallowed. "You have no right to be here."

"You can argue that all you want," Faith replied. "But here's what's going to happen. We're going to check your ID, and we're going to tell your employers that you're walking out of here with two bottles of wine under your jacket."

"I'm a sommelier here, I'm allowed to transport the product."

"Under your sweater? Hours after tasting is supposed to be over?"

He swallowed again. "Yes."

"Sounds good. Michael? Call the front desk and let them know that Alex Ferris is walking out with two bottles under his sweater."

"No! No, why would you do that?"

"Why wouldn't we? We're trying to talk to you, and you're lying to us."

"But..." His eyes shifted between them. "Look, I didn't kill them. I wasn't in the

same place as them when they died.”

“Some poisons take a while to work. Especially if the victims don’t open their bottles right away.”

Alex’s brow furrowed. Then his eyes widened. “Oh shit. The wine.”

“The wine,” Michael repeated. “You want to talk to us now?”

“Okay,” Alex replied. “Okay. Just... look, I’ll talk to you, but don’t tell the vineyard about the bottles.”

“We don’t give a shit about wine, Alex,” Faith said. “Unless you used it to kill three people.”

“I didn’t use it to kill anyone. Look, test the wine. You can do that, right? Test it, and it’ll prove there’s no poison in it.”

“Good idea. Michael, call PD and have them search the victims’ belongings again. Tell them we’re looking for any wine with the Paul Revere label on it. It needs to be tested for the poison. Have them send units here to test everything from the same batch.”

“You don’t need to send units here,” Alex said quickly. “I’ll give you bottles from the batch that you can take to your lab.”

“Not good enough,” Faith said. “We’re going to test every bottle from that batch for poison. And I don’t trust you to help us, so Michael?”

Michael looked up from his phone. “Yeah?”

“Have them call the vineyard and determine exactly which batch the wine came from. We’re going to check everything. The bottles, the barrels, everything.”

“You’re going to get me fired!” Alex pleaded.

“That doesn’t seem like much of a loss for the vineyard,” Faith said, gesturing to Alex’s swollen jacket.

“Look...” Alex ran his hands through his hair. “Please. I get it, okay? I know I look like a piece of shit right now for stealing wine, but I promise you, this isn’t something I do all the time.”

“Only takes once.”

“Okay, can you talk to me? Can you at least let me talk? Maybe I can convince you that I’m not the killer without you needing to go through all of this.”

“It’ll be at least an hour and a half before anyone gets here. Probably closer to two. If you convince me you’re not the killer, I’m going to leave, and you might have a chance to clean out your office and head home before upper management finds out you’ve been lifting vintages.”

“Oh God,” Alex moaned. “All right. Okay. Just please give me a chance to explain.”

He opened his vest and removed the bottles, then walked to a counter and set them down. He turned back to the agents and said, “Listen, your victims are renowned food critics. Well, Eleanor Crestwood is renowned, and Harold Grimes is at least respected. As for Lila, she couldn’t tell the difference between wine and gravy without someone to point it out to her, but she’s popular, and the vineyard is trying to attract younger consumers. I was assigned to work with them because I’m the leading sommelier here. I won’t bore you with my qualifications, but I was the only choice

when it came to something as high profile as these pairings.”

“Can you describe your interactions with our victims?”

“Professional. To a tee. All three of them.”

“You didn’t have any conflict with them?”

“Of course not. Why would I?”

“Well,” Michael said, dialing the police department. “Eleanor Crestwood left a pretty nasty review of your wine on her website.”

“And that’s terrible, but I’m not going to kill someone because they slighted my employer.” He gestured to the wine he had set on the counter. “Come on. Do you really think I care enough about Paul Revere Vineyards to kill someone over them?”

Faith shrugged. “Not a bad point. But not enough to—”

“Shit!”

Faith snapped her eyes to Michael. Turk leapt to attention, looking back and forth between Alex and Michael.

“What is it?” Faith asked. “What’s wrong.”

Michael sighed and rubbed his temples. “Okay. We’re on our way.”

Faith’s heart sank. “Damn it.”

“What is it?” Alex asked hopefully. “Is something wrong?”

Michael glared at him. “You’re damned lucky that we have more important things to worry about than a common thief right now. Put those bottles back where they belong. And shape up. You’re what, forty years old?”

“Forty-one,” Alex replied softly.

“Yeah. Come on. Be an adult for Christ’s sake.”

He stormed toward the elevator, and Faith and Turk followed him. Faith waited until the elevator doors closed before asking, "Another victim?"

“Yeah. Steakhouse near Chestnut Hill.”

Faith’s heart dropped. “When?”

“Last night. I want to give them hell about not telling us until now, but I figured we can save that for when we arrive.”

Faith could only manage a nod. Less than two hours ago, the Boss had told her to solve this case before anyone else died, but it was already too late by the time they talked. Their killer had struck and left his victim behind and possibly Faith’s career with it.

Turk whined, and Faith reached down to pat his head. "It's okay, boy. We'll get him. You just wait."

If only she could feel as confident as she pretended to be.

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As promised, Michael did indeed give Detective Howard hell when they arrived. The three agents stormed into the Prime Cut Steakhouse and headed directly for the cordoned off area where Howard stood talking to a uniform.

“Why the hell are we just hearing about this now?” he shouted. “It’s been fourteen hours since he died! We should have been on the scene last night!”

Howard said something to the uniform, and the officer nodded and walked away. Then Howard turned to Michael. “The chief wanted to avoid a media circus, so he said not to tell you until we’d cased the scene and gotten the witnesses to sign NDAs. I didn’t expect it to work, to be honest, but the fact that it’s not all over the news says it did, so there’s that.”

“Do we look like the media?” Michael thundered.

Howard lifted his hands placatingly. “Look, this wasn’t my call, okay? It came right from headquarters. It’s...” he shifted his gaze to Faith, and her jaw tightened.

“Because I’m in the media, the city didn’t want the cameras on me?”

“It’s not a credit thing. We don’t care who makes the collar. A psycho out poisoning people in public is a bad look for us too. We just didn’t want this to turn into a zoo if reporters got wind that you were here and showed up asking questions.”

Faith’s frown deepened. She hadn’t considered that before. It hadn’t ever really been an issue in her career. For a little while with West, the media wanted press conferences and interviews, but after the initial circus following his arrest, things had

died down again.

But not anymore. She was a celebrity now. Wherever she went, the media would want to know what she was doing so they could have their analysts pick it apart on national TV.

She could understand why the Bureau wanted her out of the field now. Howard was right. She wouldn't be able to work if everyone was following her every footstep.

Michael understood it, too. He pressed his lips together and let the argument drop. "Where's the body?"

With the argument over, Turk trotted away and began sniffing around the scene.

"Coroner's. Preliminary report confirms the presence of the poison in his system."

"Do we have a name?" Faith asked.

"Yeah, Samuel Klein. Sixty-two. Minor celebrity in the food world, but more major than anyone else so far. He used to run the Rose City Steakhouse. I guess that's a big-name steakhouse in New York. He retired from the restaurant business two years ago and now runs a podcast called, uh..." He consulted his notepad. "Perfect Bites. Not so much a critic as a food philosopher."

"A food philosopher," Michael repeated drily.

"Hey, I don't judge."

"Well, our killer sure did," Faith said. "What were the symptoms this time?"

"Same as Lila Vance. Started sweating and salivating profusely. Tried to stand, then

dropped. Dead by the time the ambulance got there.”

“And this didn’t get out to the media?” Michael asked. “No one texted their friends or family or posted on social media?”

"I don't know about the texts or phone calls, but we haven't seen anything pop up on social media. We know we're sitting on a time bomb with that, though, so I know we'll end up seeing something before the end of the day. Mainstream media won't be kept in the dark for long either."

Michael sighed. “Okay, well, let’s take advantage of the time we have. You said CSI’s been here already?”

“They have. Nothing on the server or in the food, just like the other times."

"Okay. In that case, I'm going to let Turk case the scene. I'm going to review the security footage. Faith, you can work with me or with Turk."

“Actually, I have the wife outside if you want to talk to her,” Howard offered.

“Klein’s wife? She’s here?”

“Yeah, she’s out back.”

Michael sighed. “Man, you really need to work on communicating things to us right away. All right, Faith, do you want to interview Mrs. Klein?”

Faith nodded. “Sure. I can do that.”

“I’ll take you to her,” Howard offered.

He led Faith away, probably just happy to be away from Michael. He confirmed Faith's assumption a moment later when he said, "Christ, is he always in such a bad mood?"

"He tends to be unhappy when a critical development in a case is withheld from him," Faith replied coldly.

Howard wisely chose to keep his mouth shut until they reached the back of the restaurant. He led Faith to a woman in her late forties who sat at a small table probably used for staff breaks by the restaurant. She was smoking a cigarette, and Faith couldn't tell if she was sad or angry. Grief often manifested both emotions.

"Mrs. Klein?" Howard said, "This is Special Agent Faith Bold of the FBI. She's investigating your husband's murder. She'd like to ask you a few questions if that's all right."

Mrs. Klein looked Faith up and down. "You're the one that's all over tv now."

Faith tensed slightly. "Yes, ma'am, that's me."

"You have time to work with the whole media circus over Franklin West?"

"I assure you, ma'am, this case has my full attention."

Mrs. Klein nodded and took another drag from her cigarette. "All right. I'll talk to you. I'm Millie, by the way. No need to be so formal."

"Thank you, Millie."

Faith sat across from the widow and looked pointedly at Howard, who took the hint and said, "I'll leave you two alone."

When he walked inside, Faith said, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Millie nodded once more and took another puff. "Thank you."

Her voice was toneless. Perhaps she wasn't angry or sad right now. She could still be in shock.

"I'm sorry to have to ask you these questions," Faith said, "but if you can answer me honestly, it could help me find the person who killed your husband."

Millie nodded again and followed it with another puff. Faith wondered if the repetitive action helped her cope with the shock. "Okay. Sure, I'll help if I can."

"Was Samuel acting strangely at all recently? Any odd behavior or unexplainable emotions?"

Millie shook her head. "No, he was his usual arrogant, somewhat stupid self."

Faith lifted her eyebrow. "You two didn't get along?"

"Are you kidding? I loved that schmuck. People thought I married him for money on account of the age difference, but no, I was head over heels for the bastard."

She put her cigarette out in the ashtray and reached into her purse for another. "He was arrogant, but he wasn't an asshole. He just knew what he wanted, and he was confident he could get it. And he could. He could get whatever he wanted from anyone."

"Did that make him any enemies?"

She shrugged. "No, not really. The cooking world is different. It's competitive, but

people have a lot of respect for each other. It might not seem that way to outsiders, but it's true. You can get heated rivalries and even more heated disagreements, but there's a code to all of it. No one would commit violence against each other. They'll shout and spit and call each other all kinds of names, but enemies in food don't go after each other the same way other enemies do. Samuel had a few people claim that he stole recipes from other chefs. That's about as bad as it got."

"Anyone in particular?"

She sighed. "He didn't really talk much to me about it. He brushed those things off whenever I brought it up. I think he didn't want me to worry."

"So it's possible he could have had an enemy out to kill him, and he wouldn't have told you about it?"

"It's possible, I suppose. But I couldn't tell you who it was."

Faith tried a different tack. "Did he express any interest at all in the ongoing poisoning case?"

She chuckled. "Not really. We talked about it, but that's just because it was something to talk about. Seems like there's always some whack job out there killing people lately."

Faith nodded. "I know what you mean."

"We didn't think he was in danger. He definitely didn't think so. I worried, but only as much as a wife always worries. You know, my sister's husband was a police officer. It was kind of like that. You worry because you know they face danger every day, but you don't really worry. You don't really think that one day, they're not going to come home, that one of these times will be the time, and they'll be lost to you

forever. That always happens to other people.”

She put out her second cigarette and reached for a third. “Haven’t smoked in three years,” she said. “I thought I’d finally quit.” She lit the cigarette. “Guess not.”

Faith imagined she’d never be able to quit now. “Samuel had a food blog, right?”

“A podcast. Yes. Perfect Bites. He wanted it to be a space to share his experiences with food and the experiences of others in the industry.”

“Did he happen to leave a particularly scathing review somewhere? Something that could have offended anyone or affected their career?”

She shook her head. “No, that wasn’t what it was about. He specifically didn’t want to be a critic. He wanted to focus on how food was experienced by different people in different places at every level of the economic spectrum. He’d review a five-star restaurant one week and a fast-food restaurant the next. It wasn’t about comparing or competing anymore. He’d done that for forty years, and he was tired of it. He wanted it to be about food culture, not some pissing contest.

“He always hated that part. It’s odd to hear about him since he had a reputation as a forceful personality, but he really didn’t like the competitiveness of the industry. He used to complain to me that people were too concerned about Michelin stars and magazine articles and glowing reviews from food critics and not about what food was supposed to mean.”

“What did food mean to him?”

She sighed and stared wistfully out at the parking lot. “It was life.”

She fell silent and let her third cigarette burn to the filter without taking another drag.

Faith didn't interrupt her silence. This was the second time someone had told her that food was life. This was the fourth time Faith had seen food become death.

This was the first time the victim had refrained from critiquing others. The other three had reviewed places and occasionally left scathing remarks. Even Lila Vance had several videos where she labeled an eatery "gross" or "terrible" and told her viewers not to waste their money there.

She supposed she should take Millie's word with a grain of salt. She was his wife. It was possible that she was painting her husband in the best light possible, possible that she even saw him that way truly. But what was lovable arrogance to some could be insufferable arrogance to others.

She thought of the victims again, one by one. A food blogger. A food journalist. A food influencer. All food critics, none of them food professionals. Klein was the only one with any experience as a professional, but he had been accused of fraud. And he now ran a podcast where he treated fast food hamburgers as just as valid a cuisine as Michelin star winning dinners.

Maybe their killer was a food professional who was fed up with people he considered unqualified passing judgment on food.

Either way, she wouldn't learn anything more from Millie. She stood and said, "Once again, I'm truly sorry for your loss. I promise you I'll find the person responsible for this."

That was the second time she had made this promise. This was the second time a grieving relative replied, "Doesn't matter to me. It won't bring him back."

Faith lowered her eyes and stood silently for a moment before turning and heading slowly back into the restaurant.

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The killer was only five years older than Gina Torres, but it wouldn't appear that way if you looked at the two of them side by side. The killer was well put together, not perfectly attired, maybe, but professionally and appropriately.

Gina, on the other hand, was covered in tattoos and piercings, most of which were visible since she wore a pair of cutoff jean shorts that barely extended below her buttocks and a t-shirt that barely extended below her breasts. She wore fishnet stockings and sneakers, and her short hair was tied up in two pigtails that reminded the killer of a toddler's hair.

The makeup was the worst. Why would anyone paint themselves in that way? It wasn't attractive. It wasn't sexy. It was garish.

But it was attention-grabbing. The killer decided that was probably the reason.

Well, the killer couldn't say Gina would make a pretty corpse, but she would definitely make a corpse. Any second now. The poison had been working through her system for at least four hours now. The killer knew this because she had left her home four hours ago and had tossed the package into the trash on her way out. So she must have eaten it.

Four hours was more than enough time for the poison to work. The killer had increased the dose so it would work faster, since Gina wasn't one to leave her house before the afternoon. She was the smallest of the victims so far as well, so it should have been extra potent.

So why wasn't it working yet?

Gina held her camera above and slightly to the side, holding her other hand next to her face in a peace sign. That would give her viewers a nice shot down her shirt, which the killer thought was the only point of such a ridiculous shot. Not that anyone wanted to see that.

Why wasn't she dead yet?

She put her camera away and walked to her car. The killer followed from a distance, careful to appear uninterested and nonchalant.

Gina made it to her car and began to drive. The killer's eyes widened in alarm and rushed to the nondescript sedan parked nearby, jumping inside and following Gina from a comfortable distance. If Gina succumbed to the poison on the road, then she could crash and kill innocent people, and that was not something the killer wanted.

The killer followed Gina all the way back to her home in Cedar brook. Gina reached the cozy single-family home safely, hopped out of her car and bounced up the steps inside. Still alive.

What the hell had gone wrong?

The killer parked the sedan a few houses down and walked toward Gina's house, glancing around to make sure no one was looking. The coast was clear, so the killer opened Gina's trash can and lifted the package out of it.

It was still sealed. Gina hadn't eaten the poison.

Rage filled the killer's mind. The killer should have known this. Gina's channel advocated for vegan and environmentally sustainable meals. Of course, she wouldn't have eaten the poison when delivered the way the killer had delivered it.

The killer tried to think, but it was hard through the rage. The killer couldn't come back to deliver another package. It would be clear that something was amiss. The killer would have to either let Gina go and take someone else or poison her a different way.

The prudent thing would be to let her go, but the killer's rage wouldn't allow that. The killer had a plan, a good one, an intricate one that worked the best when done the way the killer wanted. Gina had ruined that.

The killer wouldn't let her get away with that.

The killer walked up the steps to Gina's house, looking around to make sure no one had seen. The syringe the killer pulled from the pocket of the light sweater the killer wore had a different poison. This poison wasn't deadly, but it would allow the killer to take Gina somewhere the killer could administer the real poison.

The killer knocked on the door, heart pounding with rage and anticipation in equal measure. Gina answered with a bubbly smile. "Oh, it's you again."

The killer's hands moved like a blur. One inserted the needle into Gina's neck while the other covered her mouth. Gina's eyes widened, then slowly lowered.

The killer slipped an arm under her shoulder and quickly walked her toward the sedan. A final check confirmed no one was watching. The killer placed her into the backseat of the sedan, then got into the driver's seat and pulled away.

A shrill laugh escaped the killer's mouth. This was exciting! This wasn't the killer's original plan, but it would be fun to have one of the victims recognize the agent of their doom.

The killer grinned happily as the sedan sped toward home. Today would be a good

day, after all.

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The Boss called Faith as they drove back home. Turk had once more found nothing at the scene, and the security cameras likewise proved useless, so they were heading back to Faith's apartment in the absence of any more leads.

And the Boss, evidently, had finally caught word of Klein's demise. "Bold, what the hell happened?"

Faith sighed. "It looks like he was already dead when you and I talked this morning."

"What? He was killed at a steakhouse in the morning?"

"No," she replied. "He was killed last night. PD was afraid of a media circus, so they convinced everyone to stay quiet and waited until the morning to call us."

The Boss sighed. "Jesus. That looks really bad, Bold."

"I know. Michael's going to make an official complaint to PD leadership."

"That looks really bad for us , Bold. For you. "

Faith pressed her lips together. "Well, I don't know what you want me to do about that, Boss. It wasn't my choice for PD to fuck up like this."

"I'm not blaming you, but the fact is that this looks really bad. Washington's already watching you closely, and now a case has been impacted by the fact that you're the person on that case."

“How does this impact the case? It’s only a few hours.”

“It’s fourteen hours, Bold. And you’re smart enough to know that even a fourteen-minute delay can mean the difference between life and death.” He sighed. “This is my fault. I shouldn’t have put you on this case. It’s too close to home. I should have had Desroulaux and Chavez handle it.”

Faith’s lips thinned further. “Sir, I assure you, I am perfectly capable of doing my job wherever I’m assigned.”

“That’s not the point, Bold. Yes, I know you’re capable of doing your job. Your skill set is not in question right now. But the fact that it’s here in the city West hails from, the city you hail from, where West attacked you multiple times, where he was finally arrested attacking you again, where he’s about to be placed on the most visible trial of the past thirty years means that there’s extra scrutiny, and I’ve put you right at the center of it. I should have kept you strictly for the out-of-state cases.”

Faith could see where this was going, and she didn’t like it. “Boss, I want this case. I have a profile now. We’re making good progress.”

“Bold—”

“No. I know what you’re going to say, and the answer is no. I can handle this, Boss.”

“Bold, it’s not about what you can or can’t handle. It’s about what’s right for the Bureau.”

“What’s right for the Bureau is for its most capable two field agents to run the case. This killer is not slowing down. If anything, he’s escalating. We have four deaths within two weeks, three of them within the last of those weeks. Each person he kills is not only a tragedy in and of itself, but it makes PD and the FBI look incompetent.

We're making progress, and we are your best chance of solving this case."

There was silence on the other end. Michael glanced nervously at Faith, and Turk whined softly. Faith waited with bated breath for the Boss's response.

Please make the right call, Boss. Please.

The Boss finally sighed. "You can finish this case, Bold. After that, I'm sorry, but I'm going to follow Washington's recommendation and put you on desk duty for the time being. It's the best chance we have of making sure you aren't permanently removed from the field."

Faith sighed with relief. It wasn't good that she was going to be pulled from the field, but she could handle that problem later. Right now, she needed to find her killer, and she needed to find him fast.

"Thank you, sir. You won't regret it."

"I really wish you hadn't said that," the Boss muttered just before hanging up.

Faith sighed and ran her hands through her hair. "Okay. So you heard all that."

"Yep. They want you hung out to dry, right?"

"More like put out to pasture. Headquarters is concerned about bad press, and the Boss thinks it's worse that the case is here in Philly."

"What does that have to do with you, though?"

"He was very clear that it doesn't have anything to do with me. Or at least that it's not my fault. But this is out of his hands. This is a political thing now, and the powers

that be are concerned about the impact this can have on the Bureau at large.”

“Fuck the Bureau at large. They can’t use you as a sacrificial lamb to save their own skins. That isn’t right.”

“I’m not defending them,” Faith replied. “But they’re not thinking like detectives. They’re thinking like politicians. The only way we can turn this around is to solve this case as quickly as possible and then I lay low until West’s trial is over. Once the media circus dies down, they’ll stop looking my way. Then I can get back to doing my job.”

Michael pressed his lips together and didn’t answer. Faith was touched by his anger on her behalf, but she didn’t have time or energy to spare being angry at the situation. It was hard enough to handle the stress of this case, and she had come dangerously close to losing control several times already. She needed to keep herself focused.

“We need another lead,” she said. “Who would have had the opportunity to hurt all of our victims?”

Michael lifted his hands and let them drop. “Hell if I know. I feel like we got lucky with our last two suspects. We don’t have a lucky tip this time.”

“We didn’t get lucky with Alex Ferris,” Faith countered. “You looked through the victims’ professional connections and found him.”

“Yeah, and he was a dead end.”

“That doesn’t mean everyone will be.”

They had reached Faith’s apartment now, and Michael shut off the engine. “Okay, so now we’re adding Samuel Klein to the mix and looking for someone who might

know all four of them.”

“Yes.”

He sighed. “All right. We’ll give it a shot.”

They got to work immediately upon stepping inside her apartment. Turk paced restlessly, sensing the tension his two partners felt but unsure how to fix it. From time to time, Faith ruffled his fur or scratched behind his ears to assure him that everything was okay, but he was smart enough to know that everything was not okay, and her comfort didn’t do much to calm him.

Lunchtime came and went, but the two agents didn’t eat. They scoured social media, online blogs, food magazines and journals and even newspapers for any sign of someone who could be connected to all four clients. At one point, Faith called Paul Revere Vineyards and Café Toulouse to see if either place had worked with Samuel Klein. Neither had.

As the afternoon wore on, Faith’s anxiety reached a breaking point. She sighed and began to pace the room with Turk. Michael noticed her frantic behavior and shook his head. “This is bullshit. Who the hell is this guy? How is he sneaking into every restaurant and poisoning all of these people at different times, and we can’t find him?”

“Maybe he’s one of the diners?” Faith suggested. “Or a visitor.”

“What do you mean a visitor?”

“Like a health inspector or something.”

Michael’s eyes widened. “A health inspector actually makes sense. They have access

to every restaurant in the state. They don't need an appointment either. They can show up whenever they want to and look at a restaurant."

"How would they poison a specific victim, though?"

"Maybe they aren't. Maybe it's only luck that these are the people who end up poisoned."

Faith shook her head. "No, that doesn't make sense. There would be some trace of something on the food or the dishes if it was a health inspector."

"Not necessarily. They inspect everything. Bathrooms and dining rooms included. We didn't check soap dispensers, towel dispensers or anything like that for poison."

"You think that the killer's poisoning the soap and only killing one person?"

Michael sighed. "I don't know. Not the soap, then. I'm just saying that health inspectors have access to everything. I know it's a stretch, but it's possible that the health inspector could be the killer, and the fact that it's possible means it's the best lead we have right now."

Faith sighed. She hated this seat-of-the-pants style of detective work, but they weren't getting anywhere trying things her way. She sighed again, then said, "All right. Let's call the health department."

Michael called them, and after a few minutes, he found a name.

"Clive Benson," he told Faith. "Not only did he inspect all of the restaurants where our victims died, but he did so the very days those victims died. You have to admit that it's a hell of a coincidence."

“Yes,” Faith agreed. “It is. All right. Let’s go talk to Clive.”

The three of them headed back to the car. Faith wasn't very confident about this lead, but it was, as Michael said, the best lead they had. Mostly because it was the only lead they had, and hey, maybe they would get lucky.

Faith could really use some good luck right about now. Each passing moment was another moment their killer could be poisoning another victim, another moment someone innocent would breathe their last.

Another moment to prove that she was a failure.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

Clive Benson lived in a middle-income apartment in a modest building near downtown but was removed from the trendier and ritzier neighborhoods. That wasn't to say the neighborhood was rundown. It was just nondescript. Ordinary. Unremarkable. The perfect place for a serial killer to hide.

Faith knocked on the door and was somewhat surprised when Clive answered almost immediately, the stout, balding Clive looked nervously between the three agents and said, "Can I help you?"

"We certainly hope so," Faith replied.

Clive stared at her for a moment. "Wait. You're that FBI agent who's been on TV a lot lately. You're the one who caught that serial killer."

"I've caught quite a few serial killers," Faith replied, maintaining eye contact. "And yes. I'm the one from the TV."

Clive paled. "What's this about? I don't know anything about that guy."

"This isn't about that guy," Faith assured him. "We caught him already. This is about the guy who's poisoned four different people in restaurants over the past two weeks."

Clive paled a shade further. "What? Well, I don't know anything about that either."

"We think you do," Michael said. "And we'd love to know everything you know. Would you mind coming out and talking to us?"

Clive licked his lips and looked between the three of them again. “I don’t know if I should.”

“Why not? If you’re not the killer, then there’s no reason not to talk to us.”

“I... I always read that you’re supposed to ask for a lawyer no matter what.”

“Why do you need a lawyer?” Faith asked. “We’re not charging you with anything. We just want to talk.”

“Um... I really don’t know anything. Sorry, guys.”

He moved to close the door, and Michael stopped him. He shivered but tried to screw up his courage. “You... you don’t have a warrant. You can’t talk to me right now.”

Faith stepped closer and made a gamble. “We don’t have a warrant yet, but I’ll bet if we tell a judge what we think you’ve been doing at those restaurants, that judge will be more than willing to provide us with one. Then we will talk, lawyer or no lawyer, and it will be a far less pleasant conversation than this one.”

Clive swallowed, and once more, his eyes shifted between the three agents. This time, they rested on Turk. Turk bared his teeth and growled softly, and Clive sighed. “All right. I guess... this is about the murders, right? Nothing else?”

Now that was an interesting question. “No, nothing else,” Faith replied.

“Okay. In that case, sure, come on in.”

He led them inside, and Faith noted that the interior of the apartment was far more lavish than the outside. The flooring appeared to be of granite tile rather than the vinyl laminate of the rest of the building. The sofa was real leather, and an expensive

massage chair sat in front of a seventy-five-inch TV with a sound system that looked almost as expensive as the TV. The dining set was of polished mahogany and all of the kitchen appliances were of the latest smart-home designs.

“Nice place you got,” Michael observed.

“Th-thank you,” Clive said. “Don’t tell the building about the flooring. I had to pretend I owned the place to get them to install the wiring for the heating.” He blanched. “I... I didn’t mean that. I mean—”

“We don’t care about the unauthorized improvements,” Faith reassured him. “We’re not building inspectors.”

Clive nodded too fast. His jowls flapped a little with the movement, a reaction both comical and disgusting. “Right Of course. I just... well, anyway, would you guys like a drink? I have champagne, scotch, wine. Oh, you probably can’t drink on the job, huh?”

“It’s generally frowned upon,” Faith confirmed.

Clive laughed nervously. “Yeah, I’ll bet. I’ll drink something if you don’t mind.”

“Be my guest. It’s your house.”

He poured himself a shot of scotch. Faith noted the brand on the bottle. It was a nice brand, but ordinarily not too expensive. That particular bottle, however, was thirty years old. That took it from nice but not too pricey to the sort of stuff high rollers drank at six figure tables in Vegas.

“You’re living the high life here, aren’t you?” Faith noted.

Clive downed the whiskey in one gulp and said defensively, “It’s not a crime to enjoy life, is it?”

“To enjoy life? No. To take life? Yes.”

Clive swallowed and poured himself another shot. Faith noticed his hands were trembling. “Well, I didn’t take anyone’s life, so I really don’t know what you guys want me to tell you.”

“How about we start with what you were doing at those restaurants hours before Eleanor Crestwood, Harold Grimes, Lila Vance and Samuel Klein died of poisoning?”

“I was doing my job. I’m the health inspector.”

“Kind of odd that you would have just happened to be at those restaurants the same days those victims were murdered.”

“No it isn’t. The restaurant employees were all there too. So were plenty of diners.”

“Yes, but none of them were at all four places the same day as all four of the victims. That, Mr. Benson, is only you.”

"So? I usually do my work earlier in the day, so I'm not caught in the dinner rush."

"That makes sense. So, I reviewed the logs from the Health department on our way over here. Isn't it crazy that you happened to be inspecting all four restaurants almost exactly four hours before our victims were killed each time? We have you visiting Cucina Toscana at five o'clock. Then Eleanor Crestwood dies at nine o'clock. We have you visiting Sushi Amaterasu at four o'clock. Then Harold Grimes dies just after eight. Next is Lila Vance. You inspected Café Toulouse at two o'clock. She's

dead right at six. Finally, you visit the Prime Cut Steakhouse at three-thirty, almost exactly four hours before Samuel Klein kicks the bucket.”

Clive looked ashen. “I didn’t know that.”

“We think you do,” Faith countered. “I really don’t believe in coincidence, Mr. Benson. Once or twice, sure, I can believe it. But all four times? That’s really stretching my imagination.”

Clive sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “Look, I... I really don’t know what you want me to say.”

“The truth would be nice,” Michael said drily.

“I don’t know! I mean...” he lifted his hands and let them drop. “I know this looks bad, but...”

“It looks very bad, Clive,” Faith said. “Can I call you Clive?”

He chuckled anxiously. “Does it matter?”

“Not really. See, we have all four victims poisoned by a unique sodium channel blocker. Do you know what a sodium channel blocker is, Clive?”

“No.”

“Me either, to be honest. But I know it’s poison, and I know it killed all four of those people. I also know that poison sometimes takes a while to work. Sometimes it hits you right away, and sometimes it takes a few hours or even a few days. See, this is where the timing starts to look a lot less coincidental and a lot more convenient. Maybe this poison takes four hours to work.

“But I wasn’t there when they were... I mean, we weren’t at the restaurants at the same time.”

“So maybe you poisoned something else. Maybe you found the food set aside for their table and slipped it in there.”

“But how would I know they were coming to the restaurant? And how would I know where they were going to be seated?”

Faith controlled her reaction. That was the problem. They didn’t have answers to those questions. All they had was the suspicious timing of Clive’s visits. That wasn’t nearly enough to charge him with the crime. They needed him to reveal something now, something that would give them enough to take action. At the very least, they needed something that could justify continuing to pursue Clive as a person of interest.

But they had none of that going in, so they had to rely on intimidation. It was a crappy way to work, and Faith hated that they had become so desperate. But they were desperate, and as the saying went, that called for a desperate measure.

“Those are all great questions, Clive,” Faith said coldly. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t! That’s my point!”

Michael sighed and crossed his arms. “It just looks really bad, Clive. Four restaurants. Four hours. Four victims. It’s far too pretty a package for us not to wonder what it means.”

“Or for a jury to think about what it means,” Faith added.

“Well, I can’t help you,” Clive insisted. He was sweating profusely now. “What do you want me to say? If I don’t know what happened, I don’t know what happened.”

You can look through all the chemicals the restaurant uses and compare them to what you found in the bodies. A lot of the cleaning chemicals are poisonous, and I sample a lot of them as part of my job. I don't put them in dishes or food, but if enough of them got inside the food, then that might have done it."

That was actually worth following up on. "Thanks for the hint," Faith replied. "We will look into that. In the meantime, I still want to hear an explanation from you."

Clive sighed and poured himself a third shot. "I don't know. I don't know. Shitty luck? I did my job, and apparently, I did it at the right time to look like a murderer."

He downed the third shot, and Michael commented, "Damn. They must pay health inspectors a lot for you to chug a hundred fifty dollars of scotch like it's water."

Clive flinched and nearly dropped his shot glass. "I... I... I... well, there's no reason I can't. It's my money."

Faith noticed his reaction and followed up on Michael's point. "That's true," she said. "It's a lot of your money. Who's paying you that money?"

He swallowed. "The city."

"Yeah, I don't think so. Come on, Clive. Talk. How do you make enough money to afford all of this? How do you make enough money to have your flooring replaced with the stuff pop stars have in their ten thousand square foot mansions?"

"I'm good with my money."

"That would mean you live more frugally, Clive. Not more lavishly. Try again. Or do I need to verify your salary with the Health Department and start doing some math."

“I get kickbacks, okay?”

Faith blinked in surprise. She looked at Michael and saw the same shock on his face. Even Turk looked stunned.

Clive sighed and poured himself another shot. He drank this one just as fast as the other three, but whether it was the confession or the alcohol, he was far calmer when he said, “I get kickbacks from the restaurants. The fine dining places, you know, it’s not enough just to pass. They have people looking at them who demand perfection. The Michelin guide notices a single line item marked wrong on an inspection, and it’s a death knell. Sometimes there are simple things that can get a restaurant shut down, but it’s really hard to get a passing grade. Fruit flies is a big one. If I see two fruit flies in a restaurant, I have to fail them that point, and it’s a big point. Basically an entire letter grade. But it’s a bitch and a half to keep those things out of some businesses. If you’re an ice cream shop or a café in a strip mall and you have high traffic, so your doors are opening and closing all day, it’s next to impossible to keep your place so clean that there’s never at least a couple of flies hanging around. Some of these places can’t afford the labor to spend four hours every night cleaning. So, they kick me a few thousand a year instead. It’s still cheaper than four hours a night of cleaning. I sign off on the report, they can keep costs down, everyone’s happy.”

“Except the diners, right?”

“Oh, those places are still cleaner than most people’s kitchens. They’ll be fine. Fruit flies don’t even do anything.”

“Okay,” Faith said. “So you’re a dirty inspector who takes kickbacks. That still doesn’t explain the timing. How are your kickbacks four hours apart from each victim each time?”

He shrugged dejectedly. “I don’t know. Shitty luck is all I can think of. Maybe

karma. Maybe God really does exist, and he's pissed at me for taking bribes, so he sent you guys over here to punish me for it. I don't know, I really don't."

Faith shared a look with Michael. Clive hadn't given them anything that could clear him, but he hadn't given them anything they could use to connect him to the murders either.

They had enough to arrest him, though. If they found anything that suggested he was a murderer as well as a corrupt inspector, they could come back around to him.

"All right," Faith said. "You're under arrest for taking kickbacks. You'll probably catch a charge for the flooring too. If I were you, I would use what's left of those kickbacks you received to hire a very good lawyer."

"What? But I didn't kill anyone!"

Faith sighed. "Yeah, I'm starting to believe you about that. But you still failed in your obligation to the people of Philadelphia."

"This is bullshit!"

Turk growled, and he calmed down.

Michael cuffed him and called the police to come pick him up. Faith headed outside, Turk at her heels.

She should have known better. She did know better.

But she followed this lead anyway because she was desperate and she was grasping at any straw to save herself from the mess she was in.

She sighed and ran her hands through her hair. Their killer was out there planning his next victim, and they were shaking down a dirty health inspector. What a joke.

Maybe the Boss was right. Maybe it was time for her to leave fieldwork behind. She'd gotten West. She'd done what she set out to do. Maybe it was time to leave this behind for others who weren't so exhausted.

Maybe she just didn't have what it takes anymore. Maybe the scars Trammell, West and the numerous other serial killers she'd fought had left behind were too much for her to overcome.

Maybe the world would be better off without Special Agent Faith Bold trying and failing to protect them from the monsters that lurked in the darkness.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

Michael joined Faith and Turk outside and said, “I’m not gonna lie, I was seriously considering helping myself to some of the alcohol he had on the counter.”

Faith chuckled mirthlessly. “I don’t think alcohol would help me right now.”

The door opened, and the three agents saw police officers leading Clive Benson away in handcuffs. He was weeping, and when he saw the two of them, his face screwed up in a pout. “I didn’t kill anyone. You said if I helped you, you wouldn’t tell them about the kickbacks.”

“We never said that,” Michael countered, “and we couldn’t keep that promise even if we had.”

“You guys suck!” he called.

Michael didn’t dignify that with a reply. The three agents left the building and drove back to Faith’s apartment. Just after they started driving, Faith’s phone buzzed. A text from Dr. Spencer informing them that none of the substances in their victims’ blood matched any known cleaning chemical, authorized or unauthorized.

“So that’s a dead end too,” Faith said drily.

“What?” Michael asked. “The cleaning chemicals?”

“Yep.”

“Yeah, I figured. Tox screens usually include the most popular cleaning chemicals

since it's a fairly common cause of poisoning. Still worth a shot."

"Was it?" Faith asked. "Was it really? I kind of feel like we panicked and threw the ball blindly hoping a receiver would magically lift himself out of the secondary and pull it in for a touchdown."

"Kudos to you for knowing enough about football to make that analogy," he said. "I assume, anyway. I don't know shit about football."

Faith was in no mood for banter right now. "The point is we guessed, Michael. We made a guess."

"All detective work is guesswork."

"Yeah, but this wasn't educated guesswork. We weren't following evidence. We literally asked, 'Hmm, who else visits multiple restaurants?' and landed on health inspector. We aren't trying to solve the case, we're throwing darts at the wall and hoping one of them lands on the jackpot."

"That analogy sounded less accurate, but again, I don't know."

"Michael—"

"Well, what do you want me to say, Faith? There is no evidence. Or rather, there is, but we're waiting for the state crime lab to tell us exactly what it is and where to find it. The whole reason we're not sitting on our asses waiting for a phone call is because we're not satisfied to sit on our asses waiting for a phone call when some psycho is still out here killing people. So yeah, we're chasing our tails here because that's all we have until the crime lab gets back to us. But that could still be weeks. So what do you want us to do? Should we lick our wounds and stop trying? Or should we keep fighting?"

“I want to keep fighting, Michael, but I don’t want to waste time chasing phantoms.”

“Then where do we go? What do we chase? You tell me, Faith, what’s our next move?”

Faith didn’t answer. After a long moment, Michael said, “Exactly. We’re caught between a rock and a hard place, but if you throw spaghetti at a wall, something will stick eventually. Do I like it? Hell no. Do I think it’s good detective work? No. Is it our only option? Unless we get a call from the crime lab or have a eureka moment, yes.”

They finished the rest of the drive in silence. Fortunately, it was a short drive, so the tension between them didn’t have time to grow oppressive. Turk whined mournfully, and both agents ruffled his fur and offered terse encouragement that Turk didn’t find reassuring at all.

When they reached the apartment, Michael ordered a pizza. Faith didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts right now, so she switched the TV on. Michael called a warning, "You know it's all gonna be bullshit about West. Why are you putting it on?"

“Because I’d rather be pissed at West and the news media vampires than at myself.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough.”

She looked out the window and frowned. It wasn’t even dark out yet. They had an hour of daylight to work with, and she had no idea what to do with it. God, she hated feeling so powerless.

“—powerless.”

“And do you believe that’s why he chose to commit his crimes indoors?”

“I do, Tyler, and I believe that’s why he often kidnapped his victims during home invasions.”

The guest this time was a woman of around fifty with dyed blonde hair and a comfortable amount of plastic surgery to minimize the effects of age. She smiled at Tyler with a slight hint of aggression, as though she was daring him to challenge her point.

He obliged. “But he also took victims from their workplaces and occasionally from public places as well.”

“Very rarely, Tyler. One victim from a public place and six from their workplaces. In all seven cases, the businesses were empty of other people. All twenty-five other victims, twenty-six if you include Special Agent Faith Bold, were attacked in their own homes. The one place they were supposed to feel safe. Contrast this with the current Poison Ivy Killer—”

"Christ, what a stupid name," Faith muttered.

“—in very public places. He’s playing a very different game than West. West wanted his victims to feel powerless, but he was very careful to avoid putting himself in danger of getting caught. On the other hand, this killer wants the law to feel powerless. He or she—and in this case, it really could be a woman—is killing people in public in brutal fashion but leaving behind nothing for the FBI and the police to use to solve this case.”

Something tickled the back of Faith’s mind when the guest said that. She sat up a little straighter and rested her chin on her hands, steeping her fingers in front of her nose.

“Do you think that makes this killer more dangerous than West?”

“It’s hard to say, Tyler. There’s no doubt West was phenomenally successful with his MO. However, I think it’s safe to say that the unique threat the Poison Ivy Killer represents makes this case a challenge unlike any the FBI has ever seen.”

“And what of the fact that Faith Bold has been assigned to this case as well? Do you think it’s a smart move by the Bureau to put the same agent who struggled for years to find West and was nearly killed by him on four separate occasions on a case that once more involves a uniquely challenging serial killer?”

“Actually, I do, Tyler, and I’ll tell you why. Yes, Special Agent Bold struggled with West, but the entire law enforcement apparatus of the nation struggled with West. At one point, over forty different organizations were hunting him to no avail. It was Bold who determined his patterns and Bold who gave the FBI the information it needed to flush him out of hiding and send him on the run. In his first year of activity, Franklin West killed thirty-one people. In his second year, he killed only one. That is due directly to Bold’s intervention.

“I understand it’s popular to point the finger at Bold these days, but I think that the impossible expectations people have for her only proves that she is the FBI’s best asset. And why wouldn’t they want their best asset looking for the latest violent killer to stalk the streets of Philadelphia?”

“Damn. I was going to make some crack about bad plastic surgery, but she’s actually pretty smart.”

Faith appreciated the woman’s support, but she was far more concerned with the thought her analysis had put in Faith’s head. When it hit her, she leapt to her feet. “Their homes.”

“What?”

“We’ve been focused on the restaurants,” she said, “We’ve been trying to find the connection from where they died, but they weren’t killed in the restaurants.”

“What are you talking about? Of course they were.”

“No, no, no. They died in the restaurant, but they were killed in their homes. They were poisoned before they even arrived at the restaurant.”

Michael frowned. “But we’ve checked the homes for the poison. We checked the wine that Ferris sent.”

“Yes, but we’ve been looking for suspects by looking for people who were at the restaurant’s the days the victims died.”

Michael’s eyes widened. “You want to look for people who were at their homes the days they died.”

“Yes.”

He grinned. “Faith Bold, you are the FBI’s best asset.”

Faith returned his smile. “Thank you for that, but let’s reserve judgment until after we find this guy. Come on. It’s still light outside. Let’s get to work.”

The two agents pulled up the victims’ addresses and began looking through records for anyone who might have visited all four homes before the victims’ deaths. Faith felt a renewed burst of hope. They had been spinning their wheels so far, but she had a hunch that if they kept the gas down a little while longer, they’d find traction.

She wasn't beaten yet.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

“How do I stop seeing them?” Faith pleaded. “How do I stop thinking about everyone I couldn’t save?”

Dr. West leaned back in his chair and tapped his chin with his pen. He looked at Faith with empathy, but there was a sternness in his eyes that told Faith that what he was about to tell her wouldn’t be pleasant.

“Faith, I’ve said this before, and I truly mean it: you are the most selfless person I’ve ever met. Perhaps more than any other quality save your willpower, that selflessness is what makes you such a phenomenal agent. But you’re not being selfless right now.”

“I know that,” she said irritably. “I know that I should be focusing on the people I’ve saved, and that I’m being selfish by thinking about all the times I’ve failed instead of the times I’ve succeeded, but—”

“Exactly,” he said, gently but firmly. “You’re being selfish because you’re not thinking about everyone you couldn’t save. You’re thinking about all the times you’ve failed.”

Faith blinked twice. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No. If you were thinking about the ones you couldn’t save, it would be their deaths that you found tragic, not your failure. But instead, it’s your failure that bothers you. You’re not grieving their loss, you’re raging against the fact that you aren’t perfect. That will of yours is, as I said, your greatest asset. But in times like this, it’s your greatest weakness. It all comes down to Trammell.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she insisted. “I’m over that.”

“You’re not over it, or the Bureau wouldn’t have insisted that you see me. You’re not over it, or you wouldn’t see relive your torture in your dreams every night.”

“That’s not—”

He held up his hand. “You’re not over it, or you would be able to grieve the loss of those you couldn’t save, find closure for their loss and rejoice in the fact that you saved many more than you lost.

“But that’s not how you feel. You are still trapped in that barn, still tied to that chair, still raging impotently against the realization that there are some things you can’t do, some monsters too big for you to kill.”

Faith lowered her eyes. She wanted to protest further, to argue that West was wrong, and it had nothing to do with Trammell.

But the nightmares came every night, and the feeling of helplessness lingered throughout the day. She had done everything she could possibly do, and he had still beaten her.

West was right. She wasn’t upset because the victims she couldn’t save had died. She was upset because she was still being beaten, still being outsmarted and outmaneuvered by violent people who she could never stop in time. She wasn’t good enough.

Maybe she had never been good enough.

“It’s a no for the mail,” Michael said.

Faith started. “What?”

“Different routes for all four victims,” Michael explained. “Makes sense since they live in four different parts of town.”

“What about the publishers?”

“No on the current publishers. Most of them were self-published anyway. Grimes is the only one who sold his work to other people. I’m still cross-referencing names in the industry to see if any of them visited all four people, but it’s a big damned industry. What about you?”

Faith felt heat climb to her cheeks as she realized her mind had wandered. She had spent the past several minutes remembering West’s manipulation and not searching through the victims’ social media accounts for any names that popped up in all four.

Damn it, she had beaten him! Why was he still on her mind?

She took a deep breath. “No, nothing yet.”

He sighed. “Keep looking. I think that’s going to be our best bet.”

She nodded and resumed her search through their social media. It wasn’t looking good. Somehow, none of them had interacted with each other that she could see so far. It was a big industry, sure, but all four of them worked in it. How was it that they had never interacted?

Well, just because they’d never interacted didn’t mean the killer hadn’t interacted with them. Somewhere among the thousands of followers and friends and

connections that each of them had was a name that would show up in all four accounts. That person would be their killer.

But as the hours wore on, she still found nothing. Not a single name. She couldn't understand it. She would have expected many names to show up. She thought she would have to sift through dozens of them to find the few most likely to be the killer.

Instead, she had nothing.

She looked out the window and her shoulders tensed until a dagger of pain lanced down her neck. It was twilight now. A few more minutes, and it would be full-on night. Their killer was almost certainly out there taking another victim. Hell, he might already have taken that victim and the Philadelphia Police were trying to decide when they could tell her without the news descending on them. Maybe the news had already descended on the scene, and PD was busy trying to explain why they hadn't already told her. Maybe.

She sighed and stood abruptly. "I'm going to make some coffee."

"Now? You can't wait until after you look through their accounts?"

"It's going to be hours until I finish," Faith said. "Hours before you do too. My mind's already starting to wander, so I need caffeine if I'm going to stay effective."

"All right. Well, since you're up, make some for me too."

She rolled her eyes. "No, I thought I'd make the world's smallest pot of coffee."

"We're both frustrated, Faith," Michael reminded her. "Don't take it out on me."

She bit back an angry retort and headed to the kitchen. This was stupid. They had

spent the whole case scouring for leads, and each time they had one that seemed solid, it turned out to be useless.

To be fair, this one wasn't useless. Just elusive. It wouldn't be useless until they exhausted every possibility and determined there was no one who was at each victim's house each time.

Or until they got a call for another body.

Faith started the coffee and stared at the liquid as it slowly dripped through the filter. The first few drops were light, nearly clear, but as the percolator got up to speed, they darkened until they became a steady stream of rich brown.

Faith bit back her tears and swiped a fist angrily across her eyes. West had his back turned to her as he made a fresh pot of coffee for both of them. He wore a brown turtleneck today, perhaps not quite as dark as coffee but dark enough to clash rather unpleasantly with his khaki pants. She found that a little odd. He was usually very well-dressed, probably the most well-dressed person she'd ever known.

Well, everyone has a bad day. She just had a few more than most.

West took the pot off of the percolator and poured two cups. He set the pot back and carefully opened two packets of hazelnut flavored creamer which he emptied into one of the cups. He stirred the creamer into the coffee with his usual fastidiousness then discarded it and the two empty creamer packets into the nearby wastebasket. He grinned sheepishly at Faith and said, "I can't get used to the taste of it black. I tried, I promise. It seems I'm not up to the task."

Faith managed a smile, but it didn't last long.

West sighed and set her cup in front of her before sitting with his. “I don’t mean to be cruel, Faith. I really don’t. I have been stern, but I don’t mean to hurt you. It’s just important that you understand the difference between grief and shame. If we are to help you come to terms with your shame, we can’t hide from it.”

“Is that what I have to do? Come to terms with my shame?”

“Of course. The longer you leave it in the back of your mind, the more it will fester. Leave it long enough, and it will consume you until there’s nothing left but darkness. Believe me, Faith, I understand the danger of leaving something rotten to fester.”

She met his eyes and saw a blackness in them she’d never seen before. She frowned slightly, and West lifted his cup to his lips. He closed his eyes to savor the brew, and when he opened them, the blackness was gone.

He smiled compassionately at Faith and said, “We all have demons, Faith. But we don’t fight them by pretending they don’t exist. Now, let’s talk about how you really feel.”

Faith was silent for a long while before replying. She lifted her coffee cup, and though the liquid was still scalding, she drank, pushing through the burn in her throat.

Finally, she said, “I can still feel his knife.”

“Faith? You okay in there?”

Faith inhaled sharply and blinked the memory away. “Yeah. I’m fine. Just waiting for the coffee to finish.”

“Christ, you are tired. Normally I’m the one kneeling at the altar of caffeine.”

“Well, it’s been a long case,” she said. “I’m just about ready for it to be over.”

“I don’t blame you. I’m ready to be done with all this crap myself. How much longer ‘til the coffee’s done?”

She looked at the pot to see it full. She didn’t think she had daydreamed for that long. “It’s done. You want cream?”

“You wanna die?”

She chuckled and poured two black cups of coffee for them. It was Michael who had first gotten her to take the stuff black. She used to enjoy fairly sugary drinks, but after working with him for years, she had slowly come around to enjoying the taste of the pure beverage.

She handed him his cup, and he didn’t even wait for it to cool. She watched incredulously as he sipped greedily. “How do you not burn yourself?”

“The burn is part of the enjoyment,” he explained. “That, and I’ll nod off in front of my computer if I don’t wake up soon.”

“I know how you feel,” she said, taking her own seat. “If only we could all be Turk.”

They both glanced at the dog, who slept soundly on the floor in front of the couch, uncaring of the noise the two of them were making.

“If I die, I hope I come back as a well-loved dog,” Michael said. “I could spend my days getting belly rubs, eating and playing, scaring delivery drivers. It would be wonderful.”

She stopped with her own coffee cup halfway to her lips. “Delivery drivers.”

“Yeah, you know. How dogs always bark at delivery men. I used to have trouble growing up with drivers not wanting to leave things at our house because our dogs—”

“That’s it!”

Michael blinked. “What’s it? Dogs?”

“No! Delivery drivers! These four have different mailmen, but a delivery driver from a parcel service could have gone to all four of them.”

Michael’s eyes widened. “Holy shit. You’re right.”

They forgot all about their coffee as they both opened websites. “I’ll check Amazon,” Michael said. “You check Fedex and UPS. We’ll start with those three and work our way down to the smaller carriers.”

They worked in silence, both of them intensely focused now that they had renewed hope. The big three didn’t have any drivers that delivered to all four of them, but when Faith looked through food companies, she found a driver for Food2U, a local online food delivery service, who had visited all four victims.

And had delivered packages to them within a week of each victim’s death.

“Michael!” she cried. “I have someone!”

“Who?”

“Tyler Grant.”

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Tyler sifted a small handful of pellets into the tank. The fish quickly swam up to grab the meal, blissfully unaware of the fact that they were doomed to die at the same hand that fed them.

“You know, I can only feed them these pellets every now and then,” he commented. “I have to make sure they eat the snails. These are more like vitamin supplements than actual meals.”

He followed that up by dropping several snails into the tank. He had to source these snails carefully, ensuring that they were wild caught from areas rich in the plankton that consumed the bacteria that ultimately provided the tetrodotoxin used to poison his victims.

“It’s an involved process,” he explained. “And very expensive. I’ve had to set up an investment account to earn the money needed to purchase these fish and ensure they’re properly fed. See, the fish themselves don’t have the venom. It’s the bacteria. The bacteria in the water where they live produce it as a defense mechanism. Or they used to anyway. Nowadays, so many creatures have evolved with immunity to the venom that it’s basically useless to the bacteria. Then again, they’re bacteria, so they’re everywhere. It’s not like they’re going to go extinct.”

He picked up the fish net and looked through the fish, which were now busily eating the snails. “Anyway, plankton eat the bacteria, and snails eat the plankton. Then the puffer fish eat the snails, and the toxin accumulates in their bodies, specifically the liver. That’s the organ I extract the toxin from.”

He dipped his net and pulled out a fish. It quickly sucked in air, ballooning to several

times its size, not realizing that it wasn't a predator's mouth it was caught in but a tool used by a creature unfathomably more intelligent than it was.

"I have to process it," he continued to explain. "Tetrodotoxin is commonly known. Hell, anyone who watches Animal Planet knows what it is now. Not to mention that so many people get sick from it that it'll show up on a tox screen as bright as meth will. So I tweak it a bit. It won't last forever, of course. I'm not a fool. My freedom will come to an end eventually. But I'll get you first. I'll get a lot of you. I'll slake my thirst for revenge in full before the Miracle Agent and her Wonder Dog get me."

He turned to Gina Torres and smiled. The poor woman was shaking with terror. Her caked-on makeup ran in ugly rivulets down her cheeks, and her eyes were swollen and puffy with irritation from the makeup that had run into her sclera. God, it looked so ugly. It was a shame because she really was a pretty girl.

Oh well. She wouldn't be pretty for much longer.

"You know why I'm doing this, right?" he asked.

Gina sobbed and shook her head. That was the most she could do with the duct tape over her mouth.

"No? Well, it doesn't matter. I know. That's what counts."

He set the net on the counter and carefully positioned his knife. With a quick thrust, he killed the fish he had chosen. Behind him, Gina released a muffled scream.

"Oh, don't worry," he assured her. "The knife isn't for you." He grinned. "You get a far more painful death than that."

She sobbed again, and Tyler's grin widened until his cheeks hurt.

God, this felt good! Maybe he'd kidnap all his victims from now on. He thought he enjoyed it when they didn't know what was going to happen to them, but there was something delicious in their fear.

"West had it right all along," he chuckled.

He turned his attention back to his work. It wouldn't take long for him to extract the poison and alter it according to his needs.

Then he would make damned sure Gina received a full dose, vegan bullshit diet or not.

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“PD’s on their way,” Faith said. “They’ll be five minutes behind us.”

“Sounds good,” Michael replied. He spun the wheel and the massive SUV’s tires screeched as it drifted around the corner.

“Next time we’re taking my car,” Faith said.

“Bold of you to assume that dinosaur can turn any better than my car can.”

“I don’t think Jeep designed this for city streets—God!”

The SUV swayed drunkenly as Michael took another corner. “I’ve done this before, Faith. You know it’ll get us there.”

“It better. He could be planning to kill someone else as we speak.”

“Almost certainly he is. But we’ll get there.”

Tyler Grant lived in Camden in a low-income neighborhood that was nearly abandoned. According to the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission, his house was one of only four still occupied in the subdivision. The nearest occupied house was four lots away. That was good. It would allow them to surround his house and give them the freedom to fire their weapons if they needed to.

“Are we waiting for PD when we get there?” Michael asked, careening around another corner.

“What do you think?”

“What I think is that we should wait. What I feel is that we should go in and fold this guy into a pretzel before PD shows up to stop us.”

“Well, I say follow your heart.”

Turk barked affirmatively.

Faith looked out the window at the stars just starting to shine through the lights. Tyler’s murders all occurred in evening but not at night. He should be home. If he wasn’t, it wouldn’t matter. They had the APB out on his vehicle and his description was in the hands of every law enforcement agency in the area, along with the FBI. Unless he turned out to be another Franklin West, it was next to impossible that he would escape them. Even if he was, his reign of terror had most likely ended.

The problem was that it was next to impossible, not impossible. His spree had most likely ended, not ended. She couldn’t accept that uncertainty.

“How long until we get there?” she asked.

“Five minutes,” Michael replied. “Maybe less if people in Camden respect lights and sirens.”

Faith leaned back in her seat and tried to relax. That was impossible, so she sat straight again and thought about their plan. The homes in the neighborhood were old and not in the best shape from what Faith could tell online, but a lot of people in poor neighborhoods had deadbolts and padlocks installed to secure their homes. She’d even seen some homes with bars across the windows and doors to prevent burglary.

She shook her head and forced her worries away. She didn’t need to think about

everything that could go wrong but about how to make things go right. If they couldn't get into his house, they'd just wait for PD. If PD was stalled, they could call in SWAT. Within an hour, they could have fifty officers here with enough weaponry to conquer Fort Bragg.

They would be fine.

Turk nudged her, and she turned to see his brown eyes locked on hers. He showed the same love he always did, but there was nothing gentle in his gaze. He was reassuring her of his commitment to the fight ahead. He was a Marine too, just like her, and the steel in his eyes was the same she had seen in the eyes of her brothers and sisters in combat, the same eyes that stared at her in the mirror every morning.

She smiled and scratched him behind his neck. "You ready to catch a bad guy, Turk?"

Turk barked loudly, and Faith grinned.

"I think that was a yes," Michael said. "Okay, two minutes out. Do I keep the lights and sirens on or shut them off?"

Faith thought a moment. "Keep them on. I want him to know that it's over."

"You got it."

They reached the house in two minutes, just as Michael promised. There were no lights on inside, and Faith felt a brief flash of panic. If he wasn't home, then he would have a much better chance of getting away.

"Let's go in anyway," Michael said. "He could be in the basement."

“Does the house have a basement?”

“Let’s find out.” He parked the car and unbuckled his belt. “You and Turk go to the front. I’m going to the back.”

“Sounds good. Leave the lights on so PD can see us.”

“You got it.”

The three agents quickly crossed the yard. The yard was free of the chain link fence that surrounded most houses in the neighborhood, so they covered the distance without fuss. Michael continued to the back while Faith and Turk climbed the steps of the front porch and waited by the door.

She counted to ten to give Michael enough time to reach the back door, then knocked loudly. “Tyler Grant! This is the FBI! Come out now with your hands where I can see them!”

No answer.

That didn’t surprise Faith. No one ever surrendered after the first warning. She knocked again, more forcefully. “Tyler! I’m not playing with you. This is the FBI! You need to come out now with your hands up, or we’re coming in!”

Still no answer.

Well, he had been warned.

She stepped back and squared up to the door. She took a deep breath, then kicked hard. The door shattered inward, splinters flying everywhere. An instant later, she heard another crash as Michael kicked in the back door.

The two of them rushed through the house, weapons and flashlights drawn. The place was eerily silent. An odd, musty odor hung in the air. She would have thought the place would be abandoned if not for the dishes in the sink and the loafers sitting in front of an old recliner in the living room.

They cleared the first floor and quickly moved to the second. The odor was slightly less powerful here, but still present.

More importantly, there was no one on the second floor either. No Tyler, no anyone.

Panic skirted the edges of Faith's thoughts again, but she fought it down. There could still be a basement.

As though reading her mind, Turk barked and rushed back down the stairs. Faith and Michael rushed after him, calling for Tyler to surrender.

Tyler didn't reply, but when they found Turk standing in front of a door on the first floor behind the stairs, they knew they had found him. Faith looked at Michael, who nodded once and squared up to the door.

"Turk, come," Faith called.

When Turk was clear, Michael kicked the door open. Light spilled through, and Faith felt a rush of excitement. He was here!

The three of them rushed down into the basement. Turk ran ahead, barking madly.

When Faith reached the bottom, several answers flooded her mind all at the same time. The first one she expressed was, "Holy shit. It was fugu after all."

That was the reason for the smell too. She counted eight fish tanks down here, with

more than a dozen pufferfish in each tank. They were reasonably clean, but there was only so much you could do about the odor of over a hundred fish in an enclosed space.

Most shocking, however, was the sight of a young woman tied to a water pipe near the back of the basement. She was shaking and weeping, whether with fear or relief, Faith couldn't tell.

The answer to that question became clear when Turk growled at a shadow in the corner. That shadow stepped forward, brandishing a syringe. Tyler Grant glared at the two agents and snarled. "Damn it! I'm not finished yet!"

Faith and Michael turned their weapons to Tyler, but he quickly closed the distance to the woman bound to the wall and pressed the syringe to her neck.

"I'll kill her!" he shrieked. "I swear to God, I'll kill her!"

"You do that, and you're dead," Michael assured him. "You know that."

Tears streamed down the young killer's face. "Damn it! Not yet! I'm not ready yet!"

Misunderstanding his meaning, Michael said, "You don't have to go yet. We're not here to kill you. You put that needle down and come quietly, and I promise you we won't hurt you."

"I don't give a fuck about that," Tyler spat. "I'm not done! I'm not ready!"

"Tell us why," Faith interjected, trying to keep him talking. The police would arrive within two minutes. She just needed to keep him occupied until then. "Tell us why you're doing this."

“Because they deserve it!” Tyler shouted. He was nearly sobbing now.

“Why do they deserve it? What did they do?”

“They didn’t have to do anything,” Tyler said. “It’s this whole fucking industry. All of them. All of it. It’s stupid. It used to be about food, but it’s not anymore. Now it’s about trends and popularity and cutthroat politics. They don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.”

Faith frowned. “Tyler, I don’t understand. You’re saying they don’t know food? They’re not cooks, Tyler. They just write about food.”

“Yes! And they write bullshit about food. That kind of shit... it weighs on people, you know? They’re murderers just as much as I am!”

“Holy shit,” Michael breathed. “You’re Elijah Grant’s son.”

Tyler nodded.

Faith looked at Michael. He had a strangely sympathetic look on his face. “Okay, Tyler,” he said.

He lowered his weapon and slowly set it on the counter next to one of the fish tanks. Faith frowned, but Michael lifted a hand for calm. “Look, man, I get it. What those critics did to your father was awful. But this woman isn’t one of them.”

“They’re all one of them!”

Michael slowly approached Tyler. Faith bit back the epithet she wanted to release and steadied her aim. Now she understood why Michael got so upset at her whenever she tried something like this. If she didn’t react quickly enough, Tyler could kill Michael.

If Michael said the wrong thing, he might kill Gina.

I hope you know what you're doing, she thought.

"No, they aren't. Some chefs are hacks and some chefs, like your father, are brilliant. Some writers are evil and others aren't. This woman didn't write anything about your father. She didn't drive him to kill himself. She's not the one you want."

"I want all of them!" Tyler insisted. His hands were beginning to shake.

"You can't have all of them," Michael said softly. "It's not right. It's not what Elijah would want."

"Fuck you! Don't say his name! He's dead! He's fucking dead!"

"I know," Michael said. "I know."

Faith heard shouting, then footfalls as the police rushed down the stairs. Tyler's eyes flicked up toward the sound and Michael bolted forward. His hands moved like a blur, pushing the syringe up to the ceiling and pinning Tyler against the wall.

Tyler didn't resist. He went limp in Michael's arms and dropped the syringe, weeping profusely.

Faith slowly holstered her weapon while the police officers rushed to free the would-be victim. Faith met Michael's eyes and saw a pained look in them.

She understood that look all too well. They couldn't really sympathize with someone who would do what Tyler had done.

But they could understand the pain of someone who had lost a father. After all, the

line between sanity and insanity was thin indeed.

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Faith offered the woman a cup of coffee and a smile. She took both without responding.

“I’d ask how you’re feeling, but I’m pretty sure I know the answer.”

The woman chuckled. “Yeah. I mean, I’m alive, so that’s good. I guess I should consider myself lucky.”

“I don’t know if lucky is the word I’d use,” Faith admitted, “but I’m sure glad we got to you when we did.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

They fell silent a moment. The woman stared at her coffee, clutching it so tightly Faith feared that she would crush it and scald herself.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

The woman inhaled sharply. When she exhaled, she relaxed a little. “Gina. Gina Torres.”

“Torres? Sounds familiar.”

“I have a YouTube channel. I review food places.”

“Ah. Gotcha.”

“Do you watch it?”

“No. Sorry.”

Gina smiled slightly. “You don’t need to apologize. It’s more for younger people.” Her eyes widened. “Oh God. I didn’t mean that. I don’t mean you’re old, I mean... like teenagers and kids.”

“It’s okay,” Faith said. “I knew what you meant.”

She actually hadn’t known what Gina meant, and she was still pretty sure Gina didn’t mean it as much as she acted she did, but considering the woman had been moments away from a horrible death less than ten minutes ago, she didn’t hold it against her.

The door to the police cruiser in which Tyler Grant sat slammed shut. Gina shivered as she watched it speed away. “What’s going to happen to him?”

“He’ll be booked for multiple murders, kidnapping, assault with a deadly weapon, and probably some obscure stuff related to poisoning and delivering packages under false pretenses. You’ll never see him again. Not unless you want to testify against him in person.”

Gina shivered again and shook her head. “No, I think I’d rather never see him again.”

“I don’t blame you,” Faith replied. “I wouldn’t want to see him again either.”

Gina looked down at her coffee cup. Then, as though finally realizing what it was for, she took a hearty sip. “Careful,” Faith warned. “It’s hot.”

“That’s okay. I like it hot.” She took another sip, then said, “What was he so upset about? Something to do with his father?”

“I guess so,” Faith replied. “I don’t know the story. Michael—that’s my partner—he might know more.”

Turk trotted over and laid his head on Gina’s lap. She grinned—the first real smile she had showed—and started scratching him behind his ears. Turk’s eyes narrowed, and he sighed in clear satisfaction.

“Good dog,” Gina said affectionately.

“He is,” Faith agreed. “He’s a very good dog.”

Gina looked up at Faith. “I don’t mean to hurt anyone’s feelings. I mean, sometimes I give bad reviews, but I’m not trying to make anyone angry. I’m just trying to be honest. Sometimes the food’s really bad. It’s nothing personal.”

“You have done nothing wrong,” Faith said. “And you shouldn’t apologize for anything. Tyler Grant is insane, and nothing he does is a reflection on you.”

“Yeah.” Gina took another sip of coffee. “I feel bad for him, though. Is it weird that I feel bad?”

“No,” Faith assured her. “Actually, it’s very common. It’s hard for people to understand why anyone would act the way Tyler did. So most people assume that they act that way because they’re acting out due to their own suffering.”

“That’s the truth, though isn’t it?”

“Sometimes. In Tyler’s case, yes, probably.”

“Don’t you feel bad for him? I mean, not a lot, obviously. But a little bit?”

Faith considered her answer a moment. “Not always. Sometimes, yes, but not always. I just feel like there are so many better ways to handle pain than to lash out against other people, and I can’t condone any excuse for hurting people the way Tyler did. It’s not right, and there’s nothing anyone can say or do to make it right.”

“Yeah. I know. I know it’s not right, I just. I guess I don’t know what I’d do if my father died.”

“Would you poison a bunch of innocent people?”

“No. No, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Then you’re better than he is.”

Gina shrugged. “I don’t believe in better or worse. At least, I don’t believe in people being better or worse than other people. We’re all just people. Some of us just take a wrong turn at some point.”

Faith didn’t answer for a while. Finally, she just squeezed Gina’s shoulder and said, “I’m going to have EMS look at you. Once they say it’s okay, you’ll be transported home. You might spend the night in the hospital, but as long as they don’t see anything wrong, you’ll be able to start putting this nightmare behind you. You’ll have to make a statement, but that should be all you have to do.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Faith smiled at the young woman. “Good luck to you, Gina.”

Gina gave Turk a quick hug. Then Turk followed Faith away. Faith motioned to the waiting paramedics, and they made their way over to their near-victim.

Michael waited for the two of them at the car. “How’d it go?”

Faith sighed. “I don’t know. It’s hard to tell. She’s trying to empathize with him right now. I don’t know if it’s because she’s traumatized or because she really feels bad for him.”

“Maybe both. People are complicated.”

Faith looked back at Gina. “Are we? I wonder sometimes.”

Michael laid a hand on her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go get some doughnuts. You’ll feel better after you get some processed sugar into your body.”

Faith laughed. “Doctor’s orders?”

“Fuck doctors.”

She chuckled again and walked around to the passenger seat. “Come on, Turk. You want a doughnut?”

Turk’s eyes popped open. He barked exuberantly and leapt into the vehicle, tail wagging.

“Can he have a doughnut?” Michael asked her.

She shrugged. “Fuck vets.”

He grinned mischievously. “Well, just the one, right?”

She looked sideways at him. “I thought we agreed no sex jokes.”

“The case is over. All bets are off now.”

She rolled her eyes. Michael laughed and climbed into the driver’s seat. Moments later, they were on their way to the nearest donut shop the GPS identified. Behind them, the memory of death and madness receded. Ahead of them? Well, they would have to see.

“So who’s Elijah Grant?” Faith asked.

Michael pulled his attention away from Turk, who was happily resting after devouring three ring donuts. “Chef. Back in the nineties and early ought’s. My mom used to watch the Cooking Channel religiously. He wasn’t famous, really, but he was a guest on a few of the variety shows on the channel. He opened a restaurant in Philly in ninety... something or other. Anyway, it was slammed.”

“Not good?”

“Very not good. It actually won some recognition for being the most despised opening of any fine dining restaurant in the United States on record.”

“How can they verify something like that?”

“They can’t, but that’s not the point. People like extremes. Something either has to be the best thing that’s ever happened or an abomination before God and man. You can’t have both. So his restaurant had to either be perfect or a pit of horror. They chose pit of horror.”

She grinned. “I thought I was the one who was supposed to hate journalists.”

He shrugged. "I don't hate journalists. I just... I really don't like that about people."

"That we're all or nothing?"

"Well, that, but more that we delight so much in seeing other people torn down. How many times have you seen a story about a celebrity caught drinking or doing drugs or cheating on their partner or something, and all of a sudden all of these leeches come out of the woodwork and feel like they need to chime in on why these people are suddenly the spawn of Satan? Look at you with West. You brought the most prolific serial killer in fifty years to justice, and people want to bring up every mistake you've ever made. We can't handle people succeeding."

"I think people get jealous," Faith said. "They can't accept that anyone could have what they don't have."

Michael shrugged. "Maybe. Either way, it's a shit personality trait. But so many of us seem to have it. Anyway, they tore Elijah Grant a new one, and it hurt him bad. The restaurant lasted just over a year before it shut down. He was found dead in the building by the new owners. Apparently he'd been there over a week."

Faith grimaced. "Jesus."

"Yeah. Not a pretty sight." He polished off the last of his donut. "I still don't feel bad for Tyler, though. There are a thousand better ways to handle that than poisoning people to death."

Faith didn't say anything for a moment. Michael looked at her and said, "Faith? What's going on? I can see the wheels turning in your head. They're not turning somewhere stupid, are they?"

She bit her lip. "I was going to kill West, Michael when he took Turk. And when he

killed Gordon. I wasn't going to turn him into the Bureau. I was going to kill him myself. That's why I went off on my own for a little bit. I didn't want someone else to find him and take him away before I could kill him myself."

"Yeah, but West is a serial killer. Tyler's victims were journalists and bloggers. At worst, they made bad jokes at someone's expense or hurt their feelings because they didn't love their rosemary rhubarb duck confit as much as the cooks did. It's a little different wanting revenge on a serial killer for murdering your friend, stealing your dog and beating your boyfriend nearly to death than it is to want revenge on an entire industry and deciding to achieve that revenge by targeting random people who aren't vicious murderers."

Faith didn't answer right away. She knew Michael was right, and she definitely didn't think she was as evil as Tyler and West were.

But...

"I do feel bad for him. I know what it's like to feel powerless. To have your entire worldview and sense of right and wrong stripped away from you violently and to be left to pick up the pieces. I picked up the pieces. Tyler didn't. Yes, he's a murderer and a bad person, and he deserves the life in prison he'll get. But I feel bad for him."

Michael nodded. "You're a good person, Faith."

"I try."

She didn't want to spend any more time dwelling on whether or not Michael was right about that, so she changed the subject. "Are you looking forward to going home to Ellie tonight?"

"What do you think?"

She laughed. “I think I don’t tell you enough how happy I am for you that you found the love of your life. But I am. I’m glad you found someone who checks all your boxes.”

“It’s not about checking boxes. But I’ll leave the lecture at that because I can tell you’re not in the mood for philosophy. Instead, I’ll just say, thank you. And I’m glad you found the love of your life too.”

Faith’s smile widened. “Yeah. I did.”

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Faith leaned her head on David's chest and closed her eyes, savoring the sound of his heartbeat. She sometimes thought that her entire life was one bout of stress after another, but when she was in his arms, as close to him as anyone could possibly be to another person, all of that stress just melted away.

"At the risk of ruining a very romantic moment," he said, "May I just say that you are absolutely incredible in bed."

She smiled and patted his stomach. "That doesn't ruin the moment. It just means you're a man."

He chuckled and said, "You sure make me feel like a man."

"You are. I don't know why you have trouble believing it."

"It's not that I have trouble believing it. I just can't believe you're mine."

"Believe it," she said.

He laughed again, and Faith opened her eyes. "What's so funny?"

"I kind of expected you to say something like, 'I'm not yours, I belong to nobody.'"

She rolled her eyes. "When have I ever said anything like that?"

"I don't know. I just thought that since you're a strong independent woman you'd have something to say to that."

“Strong independent women don’t need to remind people that they’re strong and independent. Besides, I’ve chosen to belong to you. That makes me strong and independent enough to select the man I want. And you”—she lifted her head up and kisses his chest—“manly enough to have convinced this strong independent woman to become yours. Not to mention the fact that I have you utterly wrapped around my finger, which is pretty affirming too.”

“You do,” he agreed. “Heart, body and soul.”

She laughed and rolled out of bed. “You’re going to have to work on not being so syrupy, though.”

“I can’t help it,” he said, his eyes traveling languidly over her as she pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. “I’m a lover, not a fighter. Being macho doesn’t come easily to me.”

“I’m not saying you have to be macho. Just don’t put me on a pedestal.”

His brow furrowed. “Where is all this coming from? Is everything okay?”

She giggled and kissed the tip of his nose. “That’s another thing you need to work on. Not everything I say has hidden meaning. To be clear, I respond better to honesty than I do to embellishment. Telling me you love me is good. Telling me you’d cross a thousand deserts and battle a thousand demons to find the last rose on Earth just for the privilege of giving it to me is not good.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he replied, “because we’ve already established I’m not a fighter, so demon-fighting is out. That’s your department.”

“So if I’m attacked by demons, I need to save myself?”

“I mean, I’ll try to save you, but I think we both know I’m not gonna do much.”

She laughed and shoved him playfully. Then the image of him in the hospital bed after West’s attack flashed across her mind, and her smile faded.

“Uh oh,” David said. “Hey, come here.”

She shook her head quickly. “No, I’m fine.”

“Come here,” he said, pulling her close and wrapping her in his arms. “I’m here, Faith. I’m okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

She closed her eyes and rested her head against his chest again. Slowly but inevitably, the sound of his heartbeat drove away all of her fear and all of her anxiety. She took a deep breath and released it in a contented sigh. “See, this? This is good.”

“Damned straight it is. Besides, Turk can protect both of us.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, he can. Unless the bad guys have doughnuts.”

“Doughnuts?”

“Yeah. He loves doughnuts.”

David pulled away and frowned at her. “You gave him doughnuts?”

“Oh, hush. It was just one time.” She pulled him next to her again. “Besides, he’s a good dog. He should splurge every now and then.”

“As long as it’s just every now and then,” he agreed reluctantly.

“Of course. I have to live with him. It is very much in my best interest not to give him food that will give him gas.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve smelled those farts too.”

She burst into laughter, and David said, “What? I’m serious!”

“I know, it’s just... It’s weird to be in bed with you after... well, after , and now we’re talking about my dog’s farts. It just hit me all of a sudden. That’s not normal, is it? That’s not what normal couples talk about after sex?”

“It just means we’re very comfortable around each other. I hate to say it, babe, but we’re in a long-term relationship now. We’re out of the honeymoon stage and into the ‘hey, can you tell me if that’s a wart or a pimple’ stage.”

“Eww!” She pulled away from him. “Eww! You ruined it! No, let me go!”

He didn’t let her go, but to be fair, she didn’t put up much of a fight.

After, they both dressed and headed downstairs. There wasn’t enough night left for them to pretend sleep was a possibility, so they decided on coffee and ice cream instead. Faith insisted on making the coffee. “You always add too little,” she offered by way of explanation.

As she poured their mugs and set them next to the bowls of Neapolitan ice cream, David asked, “So have you thought about what you’re going to do when Turk retires?”

Faith’s smile faded. She hadn’t told David about her conversation with the Boss. Catching Tyler Grant and rescuing Gina Torres would be excellent press but that didn’t change the fact that West’s trial had Faith squarely under a spotlight the

Bureau would very much rather she wasn't under.

She didn't want to bring that up yet, though. Not until she talked with the Boss and figured out what her future looked like. "Well, Turk's coming to live with me. That's for sure. I'll fight whoever I need to make sure that happens."

He frowned with concern. "You don't think they'd try to take him from you, do you?"

"No. I can't imagine anyone would object. It's not common for handlers to keep their K9s after retirement, but it's definitely not unheard of. And everyone knows Turk is my dog, not just my K9."

"That's good. You had me worried for a moment."

"No need to worry, my love," she replied, spooning some of the strawberry into her mouth. "Turk is mine for good."

"What about you?"

"What about me? I already told you I'm yours."

He chuckled. "I mean what about your career?"

She took a bite of chocolate and tried to compose her answer. "I don't know."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Are you thinking of retiring?"

She wasn't sure how she felt about the hope in his voice. She understood it, but she wasn't sure she appreciated it. She didn't want to be done.

It hit her for the first time that she meant that. She wasn't ready to be finished. For a while she thought she would retire when Turk did and the two of them would move to the Midwest somewhere and open an auto garage. The move was off the table now. She was going to move in with David at the end of her lease if not sooner, and she wouldn't ask him to leave his practice and move to some dinky little oil town somewhere.

But this was the first time she realized that she wanted to keep working in the field. She'd suffered her fair share of pain in this line of work, but for all the pain, all the grief, all the frustration, there was nothing in life more fulfilling than seeing the look of gratitude on the faces of people like Gina Torres when she rescued them from serial killers.

She looked at David and let her eyes travel up and down his body as he sipped his coffee. There was almost nothing in life more fulfilling.

She got out of her chair and took his coffee mug out of his hand, setting it down safely out of the way. Then she straddled him and sat on his lap, softly stroking his hair. "I love you."

"I love you too," he said, "And I really like where this is going. But... really. Are you thinking about retiring?"

"I don't know," she said, caressing his cheek. "I really don't. For a while, I was sure that's what I wanted. But I don't think it is anymore."

He smiled and did a passable job of hiding his disappointment. It was mixed with more than enough pride and admiration for Faith not to mind. "I didn't figure you would. Are you going to get another K9?"

"No. Absolutely not. Turk is my only dog."

“One-kid kind of woman, huh?”

She lifted an eyebrow, and he said, “Joking. I was joking. I didn’t mean an actual kid.”

“You don’t want kids?”

He shrugged. “Well, sure, but it took me over a year to convince you to move in with me, and I still can’t get a date from you. I’ll leave the kid conversation for the future.”

She chuckled. “Well, we can’t leave it too far for the future. I’m not getting any younger.”

“You’re far from old.”

“Yes, but if I’m going to have a kid, I’d rather not be sixty when that kid goes to college.”

“Well, if you’re that insistent, we can solve that problem right now.”

He started to stand, and she said, “No, we don’t need to do that right now. I’m just saying...” She thought a moment, then finally said, “Look, I’m not good at making plans for the future. Too many things can happen between now and then that can change what the future looks like. I know that’s frustrating for you sometimes, but it’s just the way I am. I know that I love you. I know that I want to live with you. I know that whether it’s tomorrow or when my lease is up in six months, I will be sleeping in the same bed as you every night my job doesn’t take me elsewhere. I know that I will keep Turk for the rest of his life, and that I’ll never have another K9. Past that... I don’t know anything. But whatever happens”—she leaned down and kissed him deeply—“You and I are for real. And we’re forever. Okay?”

He smiled softly. “Okay. I love you, Faith.”

“I love you too. Now”—she kissed him again. “If you’d like, we can go simulate making a baby. It’s only going to be a simulation though, okay? No actual pregnancy yet.”

“Well, you know what they say.” He stood, and Faith gasped as he lifted her off the ground. “Practice makes perfect.”

Faith wasn’t sure she agreed with that, but as sleep came to her after all, courtesy of the rhythm of David’s heartbeat, there was no doubt in her mind that right now, her life was perfect.

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Lillian didn't like the new tv. She couldn't say exactly why. It was bigger. The colors were brighter. The image was sharper. Even the sound was crisper and clearer.

But she didn't like it. Maybe it was the way the flat-panel LCD screen clashed with the vintage dive-motel chic of the rest of the room. Maybe it was the fact that she'd had to spend two hundred dollars of her own money on the tv, a power cord and an adapter that would allow the motel's satellite system to connect to the tv.

Or maybe it was the smarmy bitch FBI agent smiling at her from the tv that made Lillian think very seriously about smashing this unit as well.

Faith Bold simpered at the camera and said, "I am pleased to announce that two nights ago, we did make an arrest in the Poison Ivy Killer case. I can confirm that Tyler Grant of Camden, New Jersey was arrested, and that we rescued a woman from his home who we have reason to believe he intended to poison as well. I'm not at liberty to share the name of the woman we rescued or any other details pertinent to the case, but I can state with confidence that the public no longer has anything to fear."

"Oh, is that so?" Lillian said. "No one has anything to fear? Everything's perfectly fine? You caught another Big Baddie, and now Mr. and Mrs. Dipshit Public can rest their doughy heads on their comfy little beds and suck their thumbs until the sandman takes them. Ugh!"

She picked up the remote and lifted it high over her head but caught herself just before she threw it. She stared at the TV, huffing and puffing. Faith Bold's face had been replaced with an equally smarmy news reporter who was listing all of the

victims of the Poison Ivy Killer.

It wasn't fair. The most accomplished killer of his generation was awaiting trial, and they had forgotten about him completely. Some diseased asshole had decided to poison people, probably as a prank on the food industry, and he was the number one killer in town now.

But Faith still got to be on TV. She was still important.

What the hell did West see in her anyway? Why was he so obsessed with that? She looked like FBI Barbie. Stupid dirty-blonde hair in a stupid ponytail with her stupid perky tits sticking through her stupid FBI uniform. What did he want with her? She wasn't interesting. She wasn't special.

She felt her shoulders tense and quickly set the remote control down so she couldn't throw it. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath in. She released it slowly and repeated the exercise until her heartbeat calmed.

She would show her. That's what she would do. She would show her, and by doing that, she would show him. She would show West that she was far more worthy of his attention than some bimbo in a uniform.

West was still strong. He still had fight left. His statement had proved that. She just needed to remind him he was strong and show him that he didn't need Faith to be happy. Not when he could have Lillian.

She took one final deep breath and opened her eyes. She would need to get Faith's attention. That was the first step. She needed the bimbo to look her way. Then Lillian could lure Faith closer and closer and closer until she could reshape that pretty little face to be as ugly as she was on the inside.

Then she could go to West and profess her love and finally have the life she deserved.

“Hold on, my love,” she said softly. “I’ll make it all better.”