



So Deranged (Faith Bold #23)

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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.

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Dr. Anna Winters sat on a folding chair before the excavation, sighing with relief as she took the pressure off her aching feet.

She mopped sweat from her brow with a napkin and looked out over the site.

The ground here was soft but thankfully not mucky.

That made it easy to dig up and, more importantly, easy to brush and clean any artifacts found gently.

In hard-packed dirt or stone, extracting artifacts without damaging them was a hair-splitting task and, frankly, a rarely successful one.

And she very much wanted everything here as preserved as possible. This was the biggest find of her career and would probably remain the biggest find of her career unless she happened to stumble across an actual Bigfoot skeleton.

She was so glad she'd come out here personally.

She had just crossed over to the wrong side of forty, and while she was in good shape for her age, her age was no longer twenty.

She had nearly chosen to retire from fieldwork, but Brad had convinced her to come out one more time.

She was grateful for that and also grateful for the team of junior researchers and grad students who could handle most of the heavy lifting for her.

She smiled as she anticipated the conversation she'd have with Travis later.

Her brother often teased her about not being a "real" archaeologist because she researched sites of already "well-known" people.

He meant the teasing to be good-natured, but it bothered her more than she let on.

It was bad enough that her parents viewed Travis as the "successful" child and Anna as the "other" one, but to have him rag on her for her career choices was just salt in the wounds.

She couldn't wait to rub him in this one.

This one was the site of a battle between a Mohawk tribe and a band of Lenape warriors.

Historians had never recorded anything more than the occasional skirmish between competing hunting parties in this region, but this was definitely not a squabble between hunting parties.

There were too many weapons and too many bones for this not to be a full-scale territorial battle.

Best of all, the site happened to be on the only thirty acres of federally owned land in the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River National Park Service Area.

That mouthful basically meant that this was the only spot of land where she wouldn't be bothered by greedy landowners wanting to extract every cent possible from her dig team.

Budgets were bad enough without her having to haggle over use permits, rent, other

compensation, and the bullshit tax.

“Doctor?”

Anna turned to Bradley, one of the grad students helping her with the dig. She managed to keep her eyes from traveling over his athletic figure this time, another sign of just how excited she was with this find. “Yes, Brad?”

“I think you need to come see this.”

She lifted her eyes to his, reddening a little as she realized she hadn’t quite avoided staring at him after all. The blush and the smile vanished when she saw his expression. The normally bright and happy Brad was ashen, his eyes as big as dinner plates.

She got to her feet and asked, “Is everything okay?”

He shook his head, and a chill formed in the pit of her stomach as she asked, “Did someone get hurt?”

“None of us are hurt.”

His answer should have been reassuring, but it wasn’t. None of them were hurt. But somebody was.

For the first time since earning her doctorate, Anna wished that she wasn’t the person in charge.

Bradley was clearly traumatized by whatever he’d seen, but his responsibility had ended the moment he said, “Doctor, I think you need to come see this.” Whatever she was going to see, it was now her job to make sure that the situation was handled

correctly.

Despite her fear, she kept her outward demeanor calm. Like it or not, she was in charge, and she needed to be a steadying presence.

Will you relax? You're always catastrophizing. It could be a dead rabbit, and Brad is just squeamish.

She took a deep breath and smiled at Brad. "All right. Show me. And relax. Whatever it is, we'll take care of it, okay?"

The tension in Brad's shoulders diminished, and he gave her a soft smile. "Okay."

He led her away from the excavation toward the upper edge of the site's boundary. For a brief moment, Anna clung to the hope that whatever he'd seen had been outside of her jurisdiction.

That hope and every other hope died when he showed her the plat of freshly turned earth in a shallow, tree-lined depression that was only twelve goddamned yards away from being someone else's problem. Anna planned to excavate that clearing a few weeks from now, but someone had done the job for her.

They'd done another job too, one Anna hadn't asked for and definitely didn't approve of.

Her first coherent thought was, Why didn't they dig it deeper?

"Is that..." Brad began. He swallowed. "Is that..."

He couldn't finish the sentence. Anna didn't blame him. The thing buried under what had to be less than two feet of dirt was definitely dead but the hand sticking up from

the dirt, fingers contracted into claws, definitely didn't belong to a rabbit.

Some asshole had buried a dead body in the shallowest possible grave inside of her dig site, blatantly ignoring the posted signs and the orange tape that designated this area as off-limits. They had intentionally made this murder—and that had to be what it was—her problem.

But it didn't have to be her problem for long. It didn't bring her comfort, per se, that she could pass this along to someone else, but she would be all too happy to have this situation removed from her purview.

“Call the police,” she told Brad. “We have a dead body.”

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Faith sank to her knees and gripped two handfuls of her hair. She wept and shook as the EKG monitor blared its alarm tone and the image of Turk's heart rhythm returned a flat, useless line.

"Chest compressions!" David called. "Now!"

Michael got to his knees next to her and held her tightly. She derived no comfort from his presence.

The veterinary nurse began chest compressions.

Faith watched her dog's body jerk limply as the nurse beat his heart for him.

She didn't know a body could jerk limply before now.

After two combat tours and countless encounters with the most violent people on Earth, she thought nothing could horrify her anymore, but watching Turk jerk fucking limply on the table because he was dying from potassium cyanide poison horrified her.

"Get her out of here!" David commanded.

It was only then that Faith realized she was screaming. Her eyes widened. "No! David, please!"

Her boyfriend met her eyes, and the expression he wore horrified her further.

Michael wrapped his arms even more tightly around her and pulled her to her feet.

She shrieked and fought madly, begging not to be separated from Turk, but Michael was twice her size and strong as an ox, and he dragged her away despite her best efforts to stay.

The door closed behind her, and Faith shrieked again as she watched the nurse struggle to revive her dog.

“Faith?”

Faith blinked and looked up at Dr. Keraya.

The psychologist regarded her with that coldly empathetic look that mental health professionals always wore when talking to patients.

Most of them, anyway. At least one of them had a warmly empathetic demeanor, but then he’d killed at least thirty-two people, so maybe these were the kinds of books that couldn’t be judged by their covers.

“Sorry, what was the question?”

Dr. Keraya smiled, an even worse expression. “I asked what you felt when you saw Turk on the table.”

“Point-four-five milligrams epinephrine,” David called.

“Right here, doctor.”

Faith took a deep breath to give time for the emotion to course through her.
“Helpless.”

Dr. Keraya nodded. “That’s a very natural emotion to feel when one is witnessing a loved one in distress.”

“He wasn’t in distress. He was dead. That bitch fucking killed him.”

The vehemence in Faith’s voice didn’t surprise Faith at all, but apparently Dr. Keraya wasn’t prepared for it. She blinked and leaned back defensively, as though Faith had called her a fucking bitch. “But he’s alive, right?”

Faith sighed and rubbed her left temple. “Yes, he’s alive. David brought him back.”

“We have a rhythm doctor!”

“Excellent. Push forty milligrams of propranolol and get an ICU prepped.”

“That’s wonderful,” Dr. Keraya said. “So everything’s all right.” Faith looked at her, and she quickly amended, “With his health.”

“He’s not dead,” Faith said curtly.

Dr. Keraya finally got the memo that Faith didn’t want to discuss her dog’s health with her anymore. She looked down at her notes—a sign she was about to change course. “And you’re preparing to return to work, yes?”

Faith sighed inwardly. She shouldn’t have expected this to help her.

Therapy didn’t really offer her much more than having someone she could vent to and then leave.

The chance to compartmentalize her negative emotions was worth the FBI’s money but it didn’t really help her work through the emotions she carried.

It was just impossible to get anyone to understand that things couldn't be fixed by practicing positive thinking and allowing herself to "be human."

But that wasn't Dr. Keraya's fault. No doubt, the vast majority of the population saw actual benefits from this. Faith just wasn't one of them.

"Yes, I'm returning to work," she said, managing a half-smile. "Now that Turk has a clean bill of health, it's time for us to get back out there."

Dr. Keraya leaned forward and rested her forearms on her thighs. That offered a more generous view of her bosom than Faith preferred, so she lifted her gaze slightly and stared at Dr. Keraya's hair.

"And you're ready?" the doctor asked. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Dr. Keraya leaned back and gave Faith a frank look. Faith wasn't fond of her maternal gaze, but at least it seemed genuine. "You clearly have very strong emotions about what happened. I don't know if it's wise for you to return to work so soon after suffering such a traumatizing event."

"I'm being kept off of the Messenger case, obviously," Faith said. "Also any cases having to do with dogs. I'm being careful with how I return to work, but I can't just sit at home. I can't just do nothing."

That argument seemed to sway Dr. Keraya.

"Very well. I will pass along my endorsement of your return to work. But please take care of yourself, Faith. If you feel in any way emotionally compromised, let your superiors know and take time off. There are ways to keep yourself busy without

further damaging your psyche. And I don't have to tell you that if you are emotionally compromised, you will be less able to perform your duty, and therefore, you will put people at risk.

Faith's lips thinned. "You don't have to tell me," she agreed. "You have my word that as always, I will do my duties to the best of my ability."

"Of course," Dr. Keraya said, "but it's all right to admit that one's ability fluctuates."

Faith gripped the steering wheel of her Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor hard enough that she felt the leather stretch under her palms. She tried to attach her anger to Dr. Keraya and her pop psychology catchphrases and distantly polite attitude, but her mind kept drifting back to the murderer who attacked her and killed Turk.

And the bitch had killed him, even if he was only dead for five minutes.

The Messenger. God, what a stupid name. Faith hated that people gave nicknames to serial killers, like they were wrestling stars who needed a cool handle to strike fear and awe into the crowds.

Fucking assholes. Why did people worship them?

What was cool about a crazy bitch who was so in love with a man who killed over thirty innocent people that she had to bash in the skull of a middle-aged FBI agent, tear an elderly woman's eyes out and embed a television in a shopkeeper's hollowed-out chest cavity?

What did normal people think when they read those stories?

That they were always going to be spectators in these games?

What if, one day, they were the main show?

Faith guaranteed they wouldn't cheer then.

She wasn't laughing. She hated the bitch.

She hated her just as much as she hated Franklin West, the Copycat Donkey Killer whose exploits had far surpassed the original Donkey Killer.

She hated that the Messenger had murdered her friend and mentor, her neighbor, and another innocent man trying to scrape out a living in an expensive city in a tough economy.

She hated that the Messenger had hurt her dog, and she hated that the Messenger had somehow managed to beat her in a physical fight despite being several inches shorter and at least twenty pounds lighter and not a trained fighter.

She hated that she was afraid of the Messenger, hated having nightmares of the woman's sick smile as she raised her hammer high to shatter Faith's skull while Turk choked to death in the background.

She pulled into the driveway of the home she shared with David.

Two FBI vehicles sat in the drive, leaving her just enough room to pull into the garage.

A third sat across the way. The six agents assigned to watch her house had learned the hard way that Faith didn't want to make small talk with them.

She didn't need any more reminders than already existed that she was a victim who needed to be kept safe.

She shut the garage door and sat in her car for several minutes.

She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths to calm her anxiety and leave her ready for the greeting to come.

The first few times she'd returned home after Turk was released, she'd broken down sobbing and caused her poor dog unnecessary stress.

When she felt she was okay to go inside, she got out of the car and entered the door into the kitchen.

Clawed feet immediately pattered on the laminated hardwood floor, and Faith couldn't stifle the smile that came to her face when ninety pounds of fluffy puppy barreled across the kitchen to jump into her arms.

Turk barked joyfully and licked her face, tail wagging powerfully as he greeted his best friend.

Faith laughed and held him tightly, pressing her face into his luxurious fur and inhaling his pleasantly musky scent.

Turk craned his neck to keep licking her, and when his tongue went into her ear, she laughed and set him down.

"Okay, boy, that's enough of that. I don't want David to get any more jealous than he already is. Who's hungry?"

Turk looked at her in amazement. There was no way she could think he was ever

anything but hungry. She laughed again, reached down and cupped his cheeks. “I love you, boy. You know that? I love you.”

Turk beamed at her, and the love his eyes returned was so bright that all of Faith’s negative emotions fled like shadow from sunlight. Night would fall again, but it was midday now, and Faith was happy.

She gave Turk his dinner and watched him devour it hungrily. David was concerned that Turk might be averse to eating after the Messenger poisoned his food, but he had bounced back as though nothing had happened. He was all right, and Faith was all right, so the world was all right.

If only that were true. Her smile faded, and though the shadow remained hidden, the sunlight dimmed slightly. She ruffled his fur once more, then washed her face and warmed up some dinner for herself. David was on-call that night and wouldn’t be home until early the next morning.

She really wished he was here with her. She could really use a hug right now.

She’d get hugs from Turk, but she really needed the kind of hug that Turk couldn’t give her.

She was sure Dr. Keraya would have something to say about using sex as a band-aid to cover negative feelings, but Faith didn’t give a shit.

She was desperate to feel anything other than this constant seesaw between profound relief and sheer terror.

She finished her meal and opened a bottle of chardonnay.

As she poured herself a generous glass of the wine, she wondered how the

conversation tomorrow would go.

Was she really ready to come back to work?

She'd insisted to Dr. Keraya that she was fine because if she had given the psychologist an inch, Dr. Keraya would have had her suspended for months, and considering her past history, that suspension would basically be a prelude to termination.

Faith didn't want to retire, but did she want to go back into the field with Turk? She thought she was okay with the risk, but she'd never actually seen him close to death before. Watching him struggle on that table made it viscerally clear that she wasn't going to take it well if Turk died.

He was already past the mandatory retirement age. He was only still working because Faith had fought for a special exemption. Maybe it was time for her to consider letting him retire.

Maybe it wasn't a bad idea to leave the field herself.

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It had been several months since Grant Monroe—immortalized as The Boss in the hearts and minds of the team at the Philadelphia Field Office—was murdered by the Messenger, but in Faith's eyes, it still seemed sacrilegious for anyone else to sit in his chair.

It didn't help that the someone sitting in his chair was Assistant Special Agent-in-Charge Tabitha Gardner, a religiously by-the-book leader who despised Faith.

It especially didn't help that Faith was going to grant Tabitha her greatest wish today.

To add to Faith's discomfort, her partner—Special Agent Michael Prince—was sitting in the chair to her right. Turk sat in between them, wagging his tail, and his presence was the only thing that gave her the strength to say what she needed to say.

Rounding out the cast of characters was Section Chief Patel, The Boss's—and now Tabitha's—immediate superior, and Deputy Director Smythe.

Smythe and Patel visited the field office from time to time to check on Tabitha's performance.

If she met their expectations, she would almost certainly become Faith's new boss.

Another reason why leaving the field office and taking an instructional job was the right choice for her.

Mostly, though, it was about Turk. Faith didn't want him to be a target anymore. If the two of them were in Virginia living hundreds of miles from the Messenger and

working at one of the most secure campuses in the world, there would be next to no chance that she could reach him.

“Good morning, Special Agent Bold,” Tabitha said, giving Faith a smile she very much didn’t mean. Had to look good for the brass, though. “I’m happy to see that your dog is all better.”

“K9 Officer Turk is excellent, thank you,” Faith replied, not bothering with a return smile.

“Of course,” Tabitha replied, eyes flashing venom at Faith. “I see here that your therapist, Dr. Keraya”—she pronounced it care-uh-yuh—“is recommending that you be returned to active duty effective immediately.”

Her tone betrayed surprise and irritation at that fact. Faith noticed the corners of Smythe’s mouth turn up. She wondered if Tabitha knew that her boss’s boss was reading her like a book.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tabitha nodded. “Well, I know that you’ve asked to be assigned to the Messenger case—”

“Actually, ma’am, I’ve withdrawn my request to work that case.”

Tabitha stared at her in open-mouthed shock that she didn’t even attempt to hide.

Michael raised an eyebrow at her. Tabitha blinked and stammered for a moment before saying, “Ah. Well, that’s good because as I’ve reminded you in the past, FBI policy is to refrain from assigning agents to work cases when there is a personal conflict involved.”

She fell silent and looked at Faith expectantly. Faith didn't say anything.

Tabitha frowned and reddened slightly. She corrected the frown, but she couldn't do anything about the flush. "However, we do have a case that we think is appropriate for your expertise. The victim is—"

"Ma'am, if I may," Faith interrupted.

Tabitha's eyes flashed again. "You..." she caught herself and finished, "may."

Faith took a deep breath. Here goes. "I've decided that I would like to retire from field work."

Michael flinched. Smythe's and Patel's eyes widened. Tabitha looked at Faith first in stunned silence, then in wariness. This was too good to be true. There was no way that Faith Bold was actually going to retire and get out of her hair that easily. "You've decided to leave the Agency?"

Faith almost chuckled at the hope in Tabitha's voice. "No. I would like to apply for an instructor's position at the K9 training facility in Quantico."

"Jesus Christ," Michael exclaimed.

"Special Agent Prince, please," Tabitha snapped. She had overcome her surprise and was now eager to wrap this up and get Faith off of her team.

Smythe, unfortunately, wasn't so easily persuaded. He leaned forward and stared at Faith with half-lidded eyes that looked bored, but that Faith knew hid a mind as sharp as any she'd ever met. "May I ask what brought you to this decision, Special Agent?"

Faith took a shaky breath and delivered her prepared answer. "As you know, sir, Turk

is past the mandatory retirement age for K9 officers assigned to fieldwork.”

“He passed all his physicals, though,” Michael interjected. “He’s healthy as an ox.”

“Special Agent Prince, please,” Tabitha snapped again. “Go on, Special Agent Bold.”

“He did pass his physicals,” Faith agreed, avoiding Michael’s piercing stare. “However, he will be ten years old in a few weeks, and while I am pleased that he continues to be in the best of health, I fear that his longevity as a field agent is questionable.”

“Do you have reason to question his longevity aside from his age?” Smythe asked.

Faith had to be honest. It would be easy enough to look up Turk’s records and discover that he had scored in the ninety-seventh percentile or better in every single Bureau fitness and performance test at his most recent physical. “No, sir.”

Smythe leaned back and sighed. Faith could tell she wasn’t succeeding at convincing him.

She knew it was better not to press the issue, but she couldn’t help herself.

“I believe that my experience coupled with Turk’s experience makes us perfect candidates as K9 instructors.

I’m not being arrogant when I point out that the two of us have enjoyed—excuse me, the three of us—have enjoyed a nearly flawless solve rate in our career together.

Our knowledge would prove invaluable to young K9 handlers and their dogs as they learn how to—”

Smythe lifted a hand. “Thank you, Agent. You passed your psychological evaluation, correct?”

Faith’s shoulders tensed slightly. “Yes, sir, I did. However—”

Tabitha interrupted. “Those tests are often flawed, sir. We’ve had several instances where therapists have cleared agents for work only for those agents to prove unable to perform their duties at the standard expected by the Bureau. If Special Agent Bold believes she is mentally unfit for duty—”

“I do not believe I’m mentally unfit for duty, ma’am,” Faith interrupted coldly.

“Neither do I,” Smythe replied. “Perhaps you and ASAC Gardner aren’t aware of this, but Dr. Keraya”—he pronounced her name correctly, and Tabitha reddened—“is one of the most experienced psychological evaluators in the Bureau. She is especially adept at telling the difference between whether an agent is unable to continue in the performance of their duty or unwilling.”

“If she’s unwilling, sir, then respectfully, I don’t—”

Smythe held up a hand without looking at Tabitha. She flinched as though he had struck her with that hand.

“Have you read your psychological report, Special Agent Bold?” Smythe asked.

Faith shook her head. “No, sir.”

"It's quite interesting. I'll quote a sample from memory. 'Special Agent Bold will likely attempt to withdraw from fieldwork in the immediate future. It is my professional opinion that allowing her to do so would not only be a disservice to the Bureau but a disservice to my patient.'"

Now it was Faith's turn to start. "What? She said that?"

"You memorized that?" Tabitha added.

"She did. I did," Smythe replied. "If I may continue. 'Faith is frightened of the Messenger Killer and she is afraid that her dog will be targeted again.'"

Damn it, he has a name , Faith thought irritably.

"While these feelings are difficult for her, I don't believe they are traumatizing. However, if she is not compelled to confront her fears directly, the weight of guilt, grief, and anxiety will continue to grow until she is not only rendered unfit for service but possibly also rendered unfit for daily life. To summarize, the best possible thing for Bold's mental health is to be put to work as soon as possible. '

"She goes on to list reasons and supporting arguments for her recommendation. I won't elucidate them here. The report is available for you, ASAC Gardner, and anyone else who would like to review it provided they do so with your permission, Special Agent Bold."

Faith's hands balled into fists. "With all due respect, Director Smythe, Dr. Keraya isn't the one experiencing nightmares or waking up in cold sweats every damned day."

"With all due respect, Special Agent Bold, you've suffered scenarios like this before.

They've made you stronger and more capable.

They've honed you into the sort of agent people write novels about.

They've turned you into a weapon for justice unlike anything I've ever seen in my

thirty-four years of service with the FBI. They've saved lives."

"What about her life?" Tabitha said. She was desperate now, grabbing at any straw she could to get Faith out of the unit.

"Doesn't she have a right to relax and enjoy her life instead of constantly suffering for others?"

I understand we have a job to do, sir, but if Faith doesn't feel she's capable of this anymore, then I believe we should honor her wishes. "

"We will honor her wishes," Smythe replied mildly.

"Special Agent Bold, if after hearing this, you believe that retirement is still the best option for you and Turk, I will process the paperwork and accept you immediately as a K9 instructor at Quantico. You won't even need to fill out an application.

But I encourage you to think hard about it.

I won't pretend to know you as well as your partner does, but I believe he'd agree with me that if you make this decision in error, you will never forgive yourself. "

"I do agree," Michael said firmly, "and if I could have two minutes with Faith, I think I can convince her of the same thing."

"Of course," Smythe said.

Michael got up and gestured for Faith to follow him. She did so reluctantly, Turk trotting next to her. He led her outside and around the corner. Faith caught Tabitha arguing with Smythe out of the corner of her eye. Begging was more like it.

When they were out of sight, Michael turned around and said, “Faith, look me in the eye and tell me you’re happy to retire now.”

“I don’t want him to die, Michael! I don’t...” She pressed her lips together and blinked back tears. “You saw me. You saw what happened to me at that hospital. You saw what happened to Turk.”

“I did. And he’s just as strong and happy as if nothing had happened.”

“Something did happen. And it will happen again unless we find the bitch who did this to him.”

“We will find her. And if we find her while you’re teaching people how to hold a leash at Quantico, you’ll never forgive yourself.

I’ve known you for twelve years, Faith. You’re not ready to retire.

Not this way. Not out of fear. When you hang it up, it’ll be because you’re old and tired or because you’re bored and ready for a new challenge.

It won’t be because some psychopath broke you.”

West’s leer flashed across Faith’s mind. His oft-repeated promise rang in her ears. I will break you.

That finally tipped the scales. She sighed and nodded. “You’re right. I hate you, and I’m really worried that I’m just going to get Turk killed this way, but you’re right. I’m just afraid.”

She closed her eyes and tried to stop herself from sobbing. She was successful but only just.

“I know,” Michael said. “And I know that you really are traumatized. Nine hundred ninety-nine times out of a thousand, I would tell you that retirement is the best thing you could do, but you’re the one time out of a thousand.

You’re not any other agent. You’re Faith-goddamned-Bold.

If you left like this, you’d feel relief for a little while.

Then you’d feel a lifetime of regret that would absolutely destroy you. ”

Faith thought of a future as a K-9 instructor, no longer in the field, no longer catching bad guys or giving innocent victims the justice they deserved. She thought of Turk, safe and probably fulfilled. He was easy to please.

But would she be fulfilled?

No, she wouldn’t. Especially knowing that one of these psychopaths had finally gotten to her. One of them had finally broken her.

She took a deep breath and smiled at him. “Okay. We’ll get back to work.”

“We will. And we’ll find the bitch who hurt Turk. You have my word on that.”

Faith thanked him and followed him back to the office to deliver the news to their superiors, but even though she agreed with his opinion on retirement, she knew he couldn’t keep his last promise.

Maybe they would find the Messenger. Maybe they wouldn’t.

Since Faith wasn’t allowed to touch the Messenger case, Michael wasn’t either. It was out of their hands.

She was still out there somewhere, and as long as she was, Faith would never feel truly safe.

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Faith reviewed the case files while Michael drove to the crime scene.

A retired veteran had been murdered and buried in a shallow grave near Hancock, New York, a few hours' drive north of Philadelphia.

Master Sergeant Paul Martinez, a former Air Force NCO who had retired just over a year prior after thirty years in the service.

"Why are we being called to this?" she asked Michael. "There's only one victim."

"He just so happens to have been killed within the only thirty acres of land in the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River owned by the federal government," Michael replied.

"That makes his death a federal case. As for why us , it's like Tabitha said.

You've investigated cases of military members being targeted before.

You've got experience with this, and you're the resident guru on highly organized spree killers. "

Faith frowned. "He's not a spree killer, though. There's only one victim."

"Only one so far, but come on, Faith. Look at the crime scene photographs. The man was posed for a funeral."

"They found him with his hand sticking out of the ground," Faith countered.

“A graduate student at the archaeological dig where the body was buried grabbed the hand thinking it was an artifact.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “Really? And we buy that?”

“He’s got an alibi for the time of death. Speaking of, that time of death is between twelve and twenty-four hours before the body was found. Rigor was still set when they found him.”

Faith grimaced. “Poor kid.”

“Yeah, that’s a shit way to earn your extra credit.”

“So you said the body was buried at an archaeological dig?” Faith asked. “That’s not reflected in the report.”

“Last page.”

She turned to the last page and found a single sentence at the bottom of the location that identified an archaeological dig overseen by Dr. Anna Winters. “Ah. Is Dr. Winters going to meet us at the crime scene, or are we working with local officers?”

“No locals. Federal case, remember? As for Dr. Winters, she’ll be meeting us there. The archaeological dig is still going on. They hadn’t gotten to the crime scene yet.”

“But the person who discovered the body was digging there.”

“His story is that he had a hunch that he’d find something important, and he wanted to impress Dr. Winters. I guess he has a bit of a thing for her.”

“Hmm.”

“We can talk to him if you want,” Michael said, noticing Faith’s suspicion.

Faith shook her head. “Not yet. We’ll look at the crime scene and talk to Dr. Winters before we figure out our next steps.”

She closed the file and looked over at Turk. He lay in the back seat, eyes closed. She watched his chest rise and fall, his breathing strong and unobstructed. It was hard to believe that only a few weeks ago, she had watched him die on a hospital bed.

“I talked to David before we left,” Michael said. “He told me that Turk’s vitals are all clear. The poison’s been completely flushed from his system, and there’s no permanent damage.”

Faith knew all that. David had told her the day Turk was released from the hospital. “He’s very lucky,” she replied.

Michael nodded. He tapped the steering wheel, a habit of his whenever he was about to talk about something that made him uncomfortable. She sighed and turned to face the front. “Go ahead. We’re not going to be able to work together if you don’t get this off your chest, so go ahead.”

Michael nodded again. “I one hundred percent stand by my exhortation to you to remain an active field agent, but I do have to ask: why did you decide to retire?”

“Do you really have to ask that? I watched Turk die, Michael. I watched him die, and there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it.”

“Yes, but when West captured Turk, you thought he’d killed him too, and you didn’t decide to retire. You were arguing tooth and nail to be allowed to keep working.”

“Turk came back safe and unharmed,” Faith told him. “And I fought to be allowed to

find West specifically.”

“Turk came back safe and unharmed this time too. So what’s different?”

Faith’s hackles rose. “Nothing’s different. I just don’t want to deal with it anymore.”

“ That’s different.”

She rolled her eyes. “For God’s sake, can you just let this go?”

"No, I can't," Michael replied. "You're my partner, and I can't just let go of the fact that you almost jumped ship without telling me."

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Faith snapped. “I really should have considered your feelings.”

“I’m considering your feelings,” Michael said patiently.

“And I’ve known you long enough to know that to get you to talk to me, I have to be annoying and persistent.

I also know that I have to endure your sarcasm and occasionally insults.

So what’s different this time? Why did this specific instance turn out to be the straw that broke the camel’s back? ”

“Because I watched Turk almost die this time.”

“You’ve watched him almost die before. West wasn’t the only time. The asshole killing Marines in Washington State beat Turk pretty badly too. You didn’t try to retire then. You fought to keep working. You fought to keep Turk working.”

“Turk’s almost ten. He’s not a young dog anymore.”

Michael sighed. “I read his most recent assessments. I know he’s still a badass.”

“He’s—”

“No. Not him. He’s fine. You . Why do you want to retire?”

“Because I couldn’t stop her!” Faith snapped.

Tears welled in her eyes, and she swore and looked out the passenger window.

Her reflection in the mirror revealed a hurt, scared expression that galled her.

She turned to the front to evade the image.

“I couldn’t stop her,” she said softly. “I couldn’t stop her from hurting Turk, and I couldn’t stop her from killing me. ”

“She didn’t kill you.”

Faith rolled her eyes. "Yes, but she almost did.

And before you point out that Trammell and West almost killed me too, that's the goddamned point.

All three of them could have killed me. Trammell didn't because you shot him before he could, West didn't because he wanted to pull off some bullshit masterstroke from prison, and the Messenger didn't kill me because you and Ellie walked in on her. "

“Well, my point is that this isn’t different. But you’re acting different. You’re not the

type of person to just get tired of something. You're the type of person to keep fighting and fighting and fighting no matter how much it hurts. Not this time, though."

His tone was gentle, which only served to worsen Faith's mood.

Tears fell from her eyes despite her best efforts to stop them.

She brushed them away angrily and said, "I know it's stupid, but at least Trammell and West were men.

I know it's not politically correct to point this out, but men are stronger than women.

Most of the time my training, experience, weaponry, and badass German Shepherd make up for that, but Trammell was as big as a bear and West was a well-trained martial artist who had weapons. "

"The Messenger had a weapon."

"Yeah, and she was three inches shorter than me and twenty pounds smaller. And my dog was dying." She wiped more tears from her eyes.

"I should have knocked her silly, but I didn't.

Somehow, she beat me. I don't get it. I can't understand it.

Why can I walk through almost any other killer on Earth, but the ones who are obsessed with me have some secret weapon that just...

" She took a deep breath. "I couldn't stop her.

And if she comes back, I won't be able to stop her again. ”

“You don't know that.”

“Stop fucking saying that!” Faith snapped. “I know you think you're helping, but you're not.” She sniffled. “I wanted to get Turk somewhere safe. I don't give a shit about myself, but—”

Michael frowned. “What do you mean you don't give a shit about yourself?”

Faith rolled her eyes. “I am willing to sacrifice my life for this job, but I'm not willing to sacrifice Turk's.

Honestly, I've been selfish, Michael. Turk's going to be ten years old.

If he's a long-lived Shepherd, then he's got what?

Three years left? Four? He deserves to spend some of those years not in danger.

He deserves to rest and enjoy himself a little.

I wasn't ready to leave, and maybe you're right.

Maybe I'm still not. But...” She sighed. “Look, I already agreed with you. I'm here. I'm working. Can you just drop it?”

Michael nodded. “Okay,” he said softly. “I'll drop it. I'm sorry. I care about you a lot, and you won't talk to me unless I pry, so—”

“Sometimes it's okay if we don't talk about things,” Faith said tersely.

Michael's lips thinned, but he didn't argue further.

They spent the next hour in silence. Faith kept her eyes stoically ahead and waited for her emotions to steady.

They did, but she was left feeling drained.

She wondered if maybe Tabitha was right.

Maybe she was mentally unfit for duty. She wanted to believe that she was just as capable as she had always been, but maybe that was wishful thinking.

On the other hand, Michael had a point. Faith knew she was acting out of fear by choosing to retire now.

She also knew that eventually that fear would fade, and when it did, she would have to face the fact that she had slunk away with her tail between her legs.

She'd have to face the fact that the Messenger—West's disciple, whether he knew it or not—had beaten her.

And she knew that was a fact she couldn't face.

But did that really matter? Could she put Turk's life—not to mention her own and the lives of everyone she cared about—at risk over her foolish pride?

Much as she might like to believe it, she wasn't superhuman.

She couldn't live with giving up and letting the Messenger win, but she could live even less with watching Turk die for good.

If she stayed the course and brought the Messenger and other killers to justice, then she would be glad for having persevered.

If she stayed the course, and the Messenger came back and finished the job with Turk, she would never forgive herself.

“It comes down to faith,” Michael said.

She blinked. “What?”

"It comes down to faith, Faith," he said, smiling slightly at his pun. "Seriously. I know the question you're struggling with. What's the worst possible outcome? You and Turk stay and get killed, or you leave and end up regretting how you left. But what's the best possible outcome?"

She sighed. “I stay, and Turk doesn’t get killed. The Messenger is brought to justice, I keep catching bad guys and no one can say they’ve beaten me.”

“Exactly. The real question you should be asking is, do you have faith that the best outcome is achievable?"

Faith looked down at her hands. “I don’t know.”

Michael nodded. “Well, when you figure that out, you’ll know for sure what you need to do. And you’ll do it, no matter what I or anyone else tells you.”

They fell silent again, and Faith risked looking out of her passenger window again. The sun had shifted, and her reflection no longer stared back. Faith was grateful for that.

And the answer to that question? She’d have to wait and see.

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It was noon when they arrived at the dig site.

Michael parked his enormous land yacht of an SUV in a dirt lot a thousand feet from the crime scene.

The Delaware River flowed a hundred feet in front of the lot, and a few people fished from the bridge or watched the river flow gently southeast to its eventual end at Delaware Bay.

Faith frowned when she saw them. “Are we going to have a problem with looky-loos?”

Michael looked up at the crime scene on top of a shallow hill. “Doesn’t look like it. I don’t see anyone up there right now. If there were looky-loos, the cops must have cleared them out.”

The two agents got out of the car. Turk jumped out and barked exuberantly as he trotted to the river. Faith felt a pang as she called him back. He just wanted to play in the water. He couldn’t do that, though, because they had a job to do. See? He’d have fun if he was retired. He’d—

“Hey! One of the fishermen called. “You mind shutting your dog up? He’s scaring all the fish!”

Then again...

She lifted a hand in apology and waved Turk back to her. A female voice behind her

said, “Jesus, why are there so many assholes in the world?”

Faith turned around to see a beautiful woman of around forty with auburn hair that had yet to reveal a trace of gray, hazel eyes, high cheekbones, and a slightly upturned nose that made her otherwise goddess-like face look flirty and playful.

It wasn’t hard to believe that the grad student who’d found the body had a thing for her.

The beauty smiled and offered a hand. “I’m Dr. Anna Winters. Thank you guys for coming on such short notice.”

“Not a problem,” Faith replied, taking her hand. “That’s what we do. Special Agent Faith Bold.”

Michael shook her hand next. “Michael Prince. And the big guy here is Turk.”

Turk barked formally, and the fisherman called back, “Hey! Seriously!”

One of the other fishermen retorted. “Shut the hell up, Jeremy. The fish aren’t biting ‘cause you smell like a damned dumpster.”

That earned a chortle from the rest of the group and a chuckle from Faith.

“Gotta love New York, right?” Anna said. Her smile faded, and she looked up the hill.

“Let’s head up to the scene,” Faith suggested. “On the way, why don’t you fill me in on what happened?”

Anna nodded. The group started up the unmarked dirt path to the site. “Well, I was

taking a break when Brad told me that he'd found something I needed to see."

"Brad is one of your graduate students?" Faith confirmed.

"Yes. Bradley Rossdale. He's one of my best students. Works harder than almost anyone I've seen."

I'll bet he does. "So he tells you he found something, and you follow him to the crime scene."

She nodded again. "Yes. We're digging in sections.

One section at a time. At least, we're trying to.

The grad students are competitive, and everyone wants to be the person to score the next 'big find' so sometimes people will sneak off to dig elsewhere.

As long as it's not holding back work, I let them. We've found quite a bit that way."

That gave Brad a somewhat less lustful reason for digging around. He might have just wanted to impress the teacher and not the beauty. Most likely, it was a combination of both.

"And where is Brad now?"

Anna frowned slightly. "He's at home. I gave him the rest of the week off. He wasn't really enthused about what happened. I don't know if you know this or not, but he actually grabbed the dead man's arm."

"We read his statement," Faith said.

“You don’t think he’s a suspect, do you?” Anna asked.

“No. From what I understand, Hancock PD verified his alibi.”

“Yeah, he and I were having drinks at a local bar. And the other grad students,” she added quickly. “Not too many drinks. Just a couple. I like when the research team really feels like family. People work better that way, and there’s less squabbling over whose name gets attached to what discovery.”

They arrived at the dig site, and Anna brightened visibly. “Well, here we are!” she said. “The site of the only confirmed battle between the Mohawk Nation and the Lenape in this area.”

“Were the two tribes supposed to be friends?” Faith asked.

"Off and on. Enemies off and on. Politics among Native Americans were similar to politics everywhere else in the world.

Sometimes they got along, sometimes they didn't. The Iroquois Confederacy bordered the Delaware Nation, so they clashed a lot.

Not often seriously, though. Aside from the Beaver Wars and the French and Indian War, they tended to stay out of each other's way as much as possible.

Which wasn't always possible since they were right next door to each other, but...

well, anyway, there hasn't been a record of anything more than a couple of squabbles between hunting parties this far east. I now have proof that there was a full-scale conflict between the two tribes.

And if the initial date estimates are correct, that fighting took place as early as the late

fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries, completely predating European contact.

The implications of that could be enormous. "

Faith looked over the dig site. Teams of people worked in different excavations covering a ten-acre plateau on top of the hill. A few of the closer teams glanced at Anna and waved. Faith noted the casual attitude and frowned. "No one seems all that shaken up by the discovery of a body."

"It could be that they've discovered hundreds of bodies," Michael said.

Faith looked at him, and he pointed at a table sitting on a flat patch of ground in between several of the small digs. Her stomach turned when she realized that the brownish sticks piled on top of it weren't sticks after all but human bones.

"You can blame me for their calmness," Anna said in a tone that suggested she didn't really feel bad about it. "I made it clear that the crime scene was off limits and that we would cooperate with law enforcement but otherwise, we were to focus on our job and let the police focus on theirs."

"No one's worried?" Faith asked. "Working here a few feet away from where someone was killed and buried?"

Anna shrugged. "We have a job to do even if we're worried."

Faith couldn't argue with that. "So Brad showed you the body, and you called it in?"

"I told him to call it in," Anna replied.

"Gotcha. And no one else saw the body before the police arrived?"

“No, I didn’t want a panic, and I didn’t want anyone else messing with the crime scene, so I told Brad to keep it to himself until the police arrived, at which point, I made a brief announcement to the team, the subject of which I’ve already told you.”

Faith nodded. “All right. Show us the scene, please.”

Anna led the three of them to a stand of short trees.

Or tall bushes. Faith wasn't really sure what the dividing line was.

On the other side of the stand was an opening that led to a small clearing.

The opening was blocked by yellow tape warning people to keep out, but since this was Faith's crime scene now, she sent Turk under the tape. "Go ahead, boy."

Turk obliged and trotted into the plat of freshly turned dirt, nose to the ground.

“As you can see,” Anna said, “the dirt was recently turned over.”

“And you’re sure Brad wasn’t the one who did it?”

“I’m sure. He was only out of my sight for fifteen minutes. That’s not enough time to have dug that grave, even though it was shallow.”

“I don’t know if I agree with that,” Faith said. “If it was shallow enough that the victim’s hand could have accidentally been grabbed by Brad, then it can’t have been more than a few inches deep.”

“It was two feet deep,” Anna corrected. “Brad believed—as did I—that the arrangement of the bushes here was artificial, indicating a shrine—possibly to a fallen leader—or a memorial to the battle. It was common for Natives in the area to erect

memorials at the conclusion of a conflict to remind others that the fighting had concluded, and a resolution reached. Not that such tokens stopped them from fighting again.”

Faith didn't want to be rude, but now wasn't the time for a history lesson.. “I'll want to talk to Brad anyway,” she said briskly. “Even if he's not an accomplice, I want to get his impression of what he saw here.”

“You can talk to me now,” a voice called from behind them.

Faith turned around to see a young man who was just as much of a stunner as Anna was.

He was a good fifteen years younger than her, and his boyish face showed it, but his chiseled jaw, blue eyes, and sandy blonde hair would have made anyone attracted to men weak at the knees regardless of their age.

His build was athletic and unfairly symmetrical, and Faith wasn't surprised at all to see Anna color.

It looked like the attraction between the two was mutual.

“What are you doing here?” Anna asked him. “I told you to go home.”

“I don't want to go home,” Brad protested. “I want to work.”

“I appreciate that,” Anna replied, “but I need you at a hundred percent. I don't think you can be at a hundred percent after witnessing something like that.”

Her tone was perfectly professional. Brad might be a hunk, but he was also her student. Faith respected that. Look, but don't touch.

Unfortunately, Brad had touched a dead person's arm before he had the chance to look. "How long were you here digging before you discovered the body?" Faith asked him.

"Ten minutes," he said. "I already apologized to Dr. Winters. We weren't supposed to be digging here, but I thought if I could find something important here, it might look good on my CV."

"I understand that's a fairly common occurrence," Faith said. "How did you figure out that there was a dead man here?"

"I struck something with my shovel and thought it was a body. I mean a Native body. Like an old one."

"But it was a new body," Michael inferred.

Brad nodded. He swallowed, and Faith noticed a slight tremble in his knees.

Turk trotted to him and pressed his shoulder to the young man's leg so Brad could stoop down and stroke his fur.

Faith wasn't too suspicious of Brad to begin with, but seeing Turk's behavior around him eased the slight concern she'd had.

"Yeah, I tossed the shovel and started digging with my trowel. That's what we use so we don't damage things. I mean, they still get damaged sometimes, but..." He took a deep breath and gave them a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I'm kind of all over the place right now."

"That's all right," Faith said. "Take your time."

Anna walked close and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Brad immediately calmed. Faith knew it contradicted her earlier opinion, but a part of her hoped the two of them would risk stepping outside of their professional boundaries a little.

Maybe she just missed David, but she didn't think there was anything wrong with seeking a little human connection after a difficult event.

"So I dug until I saw something that looked like bone. I grabbed it and pulled it, and then I saw the hand and realized I was grabbing a fully fleshed arm. The soft stuff wasn't dirt, it was skin." He shivered. "I got Dr. Winters, and we called the cops."

"Did you recognize the person buried here?" Faith asked.

He shook his head. "No, I didn't even know who he was until the police dug him up and got his wallet."

"And at any time, did you hear or see anything or anyone suspicious?"

Another head shake. "The cops said he was probably killed overnight while we were home. He said that the river doesn't close during the night, but the lot does, and people almost never come up here."

"So the killer knew he'd have opportunity," Faith said.

"He also had to know that we were digging here," Anna added. "That's what I don't understand. It's almost like he wanted someone to discover the body."

"You'd be amazed how many killers want exactly that," Michael said. "They hide their victims, but they do it in a way that makes it easy for people to find them."

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Anna didn't seem satisfied with that explanation. Faith wasn't either. She wasn't sure exactly what this killer's intentions were, but something in the back of her mind told her that the killer wasn't looking to show off.

She looked at Turk. “What do you think, boy? Got anything?”

Turk dipped his head and snorted. That was a no.

“That's all right. We'll get him sooner or later.

” She smiled at Brad and Anna. “Thank you two for your time. If you think of anything else, please let me know. Other than that, I suggest you make sure that everyone on your team arrives and leaves in groups, or at least in pairs. Killers often return to the scenes of their crimes. It's rare in crowded spaces but not unheard of. ”

“Good idea,” Anna said. “We'll do that.”

“You'll find this guy, right?” Brad asked. “I mean... the cops said he had a wife, and he was a veteran and everything. It just kind of sucks that he survived war only to come home and get killed by some asshole when he was supposed to be safe.”

Faith knew all about being unsafe at home. “It does suck. And we will get this guy. Count on it.”

He gave her a dazzling smile, and heat climbed her cheeks. She wasn't immune to his charms either, apparently.

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The three agents headed back to their car, leaving Anna and Brad to discuss his return to work. When they were out of earshot, Michael asked. "First impressions?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think this guy was an exhibitionist. If he wanted to be found, he could have dumped the body on the riverbank or left it exposed. The fact that he buried it suggests that he was either trying to hide it or he wasn't thinking about being caught at all."

"You mean burying the body could have just been part of the ritual?"

"Right."

"How delightfully mundane."

Faith looked at him, and he shrugged. "I get tired of finding people flayed or torn to pieces or suffocated inside blown glass or paralyzed alive and left to starve or all of the other crap we usually see. Might be nice not to see that for a change."

They got into the car, and Michael said, "Wife's house?"

"Yes. Do we have an address?"

"Yeah, it's in the file. Seriously, Faith, do you read reports, or do you just look at pictures?"

"Normally, you're the one who reads them," Faith said. "You're the info guy, and I'm the genius who tells you what it all means."

“As long as I don’t write it down,” he quipped.

He put the car in gear, and the two continued to talk about the case as they drove.

“Why only a couple of feet, though? I get that most people don’t have the physical fitness to dig a six-foot grave in one night, but why only a couple feet?”

"The body was still in rigor when Brad discovered it," Faith said.

"The call came in at three in the afternoon.

Rigor almost never occurs more than twenty-four hours after death unless there's some kind of chemical intervention.

We'll follow up on that with the medical examiner, but assuming no such intervention, Paul Martinex couldn't have been murdered earlier than three in the afternoon two days ago.

Most likely he was killed some time after nightfall.

We'll be generous and say ten o'clock, give or take. How far away is his house from here?"

“Fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. So again, we’ll have to confirm this, but for the sake of argument, say he was killed without a struggle.

Probably five minutes to kill him and put him in the bed of a truck or the trunk of a car, fifteen minutes to drive here, and another ten or so to drag him or carry him to the top of the hill. ”

“That’s being very generous,” Michael said.

“Yes, it is, but even being very generous, he gets here at ten-thirty at night at the very earliest after killing someone and carrying his body to the top of a hill. Then he has to dig the grave, bury the body, fill in the hole, and get back down to the car, then get home with enough time to clean himself, his car, his clothes, his shoes... you get the picture.”

"It's doable," Michael said. "The soil's soft. True, that means it's crumbly, but if he digs the hole wide enough, it could be done in four to six hours by a healthy guy with a shovel."

“That’s still pushing it,” Faith said. “That’s grave dug by two-thirty at the earliest, filled in by three-thirty at the latest. Home by four, sunrise around six-thirty, seven.”

“Pushing it, maybe, but doable.”

Faith relented. “Okay, it’s doable. I still don’t think it’s likely.”

“Do you have a reason, or is it just a hunch?”

She rolled her eyes. “Just a hunch for now.”

“Good enough for me. Let’s see if we can find a reason.”

She smiled at him. “You know, you’re a pretty good partner sometimes.”

He grinned. “Thank you. I try on rare occasions.”

Hancock Village—the major population center (loosely speaking) of Hancock Town—was a disorganized cluster of homes on one side and a somewhat better organized cluster of public buildings and businesses on the other side.

The Martinex home was a modest single-story colonial, quaint and cozy, a perfect representation of a rapidly fading middle class.

Michael knocked softly on the door. A few seconds later, it opened.

Penny Martinez wasn't the youthful stunner that Anna Winters was. She looked every bit her age of fifty-four years, and the plain nightgown she wore coupled with the lack of makeup and puffy eyes made her wear those years hard.

Faith's heart went out to her. She'd just lost the love of her life. It was no surprise she looked to be at her worst. That's exactly where she was at.

"You can come inside," she said, her voice trembling. "You can bring your dog too. Paul loves dogs."

The interior of the home was tastefully decorated with soft beiges and browns dominating the furniture and décor.

Faith guessed that was Penny's influence.

The one concession to Paul's manhood was a pair of elk antlers above the fireplace.

Faith counted sixteen points. The elk who once wore this crown must have been a rare specimen.

Penny noticed her stare and chuckled. "I kept telling him to take the damned thing down. Biggest eyesore I've ever seen. You can sit on the couch if you like. I'll make

you some coffee.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, Mrs. Martinez,” Faith said. “We don’t want to impose on your hospitality any more than we need to.”

“Call me Penny. And I’m making coffee whether you want some or not. I find keeping busy helps.”

“It does,” Michael agreed. “We’re sorry for your loss.”

Penny took a shaky breath and managed a smile. “Thank you.”

Faith took a closer look around the place as Penny made the coffee.

The more she looked, the more she saw subtle signs of Penny’s dead husband.

A coaster advertising a brand of beer, an easy chair with a depression in the seat caused by someone substantially heavier than the petite Penny, a pair of slippers too large for her feet sitting in the foyer.

It was amazing how much people left behind when they died.

All of the little things that you took for granted until their disappearance gouged a hole they had once filled.

Penny set the coffee in front of the two of them. The brew was rich and strong, and Faith was grateful that Penny had insisted on making it. She sipped and savored the richness for a moment before getting down to brass tacks. “Can you tell me what happened the night your husband died?”

Penny shook her head. “I don’t know. That’s the worst part of everything. I just don’t

know.”

“Did your husband come home at all two nights ago?” Michael asked.

“No, but that wasn’t unusual. Paul’s recently retired, and I think he’s having some trouble adjusting to it.

He would often visit with friends of his from the service.

They’d get to drinking and reminiscing, and he’d forget to call me sometimes.

I don’t mind if he drinks, but he knows I can’t stand drunk driving.

He’d pass out on a buddy’s sofa and then come home in the morning once he’d sobered up. ”

Faith’s heart broke for Penny anew when she heard her switch between past and present tense without realizing it. Just like a phantom limb would ache long after it was cut off, the ghost of a spouse would linger in one’s mind.

“Do you have a name and address for this friend?” Michael asked.

Penny frowned. “I do, but I can’t believe Stan would hurt Paul. The two of them were closer than brothers.”

“We’re just trying to learn as much as we can about Paul,” Faith explained. “It helps to have a full understanding of our victim.”

She left unsaid the fact that nearly all murders were committed either by family or close friends. To that end, she asked the other unpleasant question she had to ask.

“What did you do when Paul didn’t come home two nights ago?”

“I went next door to Tanya’s house.” She chuckled a little. “I guess we get drunk together too. Only we watch game shows and gossip. Just a couple of girls.” Her smile disappeared. “I just can’t believe he’s gone. I just talked to him that day. I don’t understand how he can be gone.”

Turk laid his head on her lap, a favorite move of his when he saw that someone needed comfort. Penny stroked his fur and stared listlessly at a spot on the couch in between the two agents.

“When was the last time you saw him?” Faith asked.

"At two o'clock. He comes home for lunch because I make roast beef sandwiches the way he likes them.

We talk about our day. It's a thing we decided to do when he retired.

He loved me, and he just loved spending time with me.

I know he'd go to Stan's house a lot, but he still tried so hard to spend time with me.

" She brought her hand to her face, and her lower lip trembled.

"He left at two-thirty to go to work. He texted me at seven to say he was going to Stan's house.

He said he loved me, and he'd try to text before bed, but he'd be home for breakfast either way. That was the last I heard from him."

That was good to know. If they could establish a timeline for Paul’s last moments, it

could help them identify and rule out suspects.

Of course, it wasn't necessarily Paul who sent that text. Finding that out for sure would help too.

"Did Paul seem any different to you lately?" Faith asked. "Any changes in mood or behavior? Anyone new in his life?"

Penny chuckled, but it was more of a sob than a laugh.

"No. He seemed just as happy and loving as always. And there was no one new. This is a small town. We know everyone here, and we like it that way. Our friends are here, and we're too old to make new ones.

We just wanted to live a simple, quiet life. That's all we wanted."

Faith and Michael shared a look. Michael gestured for the door with his head, and Faith nodded.

She stood and pulled a business card from her pocket.

"If you think of anything else, Penny, please give us a call. In the meantime, you have my word that we'll do everything we can to bring the person who killed your husband to justice. "

Penny took the card and looked at Faith. There was no animosity in her voice when she replied, "You can do whatever you'd like. It won't bring Paul back."

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Michael opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat. "All good?" Faith asked.

"All good. The neighbor confirms that Penny was with her from seven in the evening until eleven in the evening. She walked home, and Tanya stayed up until one in the morning and didn't hear Penny's car start or Paul's car come home. What about you? Did you get a hold of the buddy?"

She shook his head. "I left a voicemail."

"Do you want to ask Penny where the guy works?"

"Maybe. Not yet, though. I want to talk to the medical examiner first."

Michael raised an eyebrow. "I don't have a problem with that, but I'm curious. I can see the wheels turning in your head. What's on your mind?"

"I want to know a little more detail about the cause of death. We've got a good lead for the timeline of the murder, and we're getting good information on the victim, but I want to learn about our killer.

I want to know what inspires him to kill a retired veteran and bury him in the middle of an archaeological dig. "

"All right. I can't argue with that. We shouldn't keep Stan waiting for too long, though."

"We'll visit him after we're done talking to the medical examiner."

“Sounds good. Where’s the ME?”

“Delhi. It’s a forty-five-minute drive north.”

Michael stared at her for a moment. "That's at least a two-hour trip, including the conversation. You're sure we don't need to talk to Stan first?"

Faith sighed. "You know, you can be really irritating when you're logical. How about this? We call state troopers and local PD and have them keep an eye out for Stan's vehicle. I can look his info up with the motor vehicle department."

“Damn. You’re really intent on this coroner visit.”

"It could just be another hunch," Faith said, "but I think the key to this case is the crime scene, not the victim.

I'm not saying Paul isn't important, but this crime scene is intriguing to me.

We have—as you pointed out—a mundane case in a lot of ways.

The guy gets stabbed, then buried in a national park at night when no one's there.

But then he's only placed in a shallow grave somewhere, and a lot of people are literally digging through the dirt.

I want to understand that contradiction.

If we understand that contradiction, or more specifically why it's not a contradiction to our killer, then we have our case. "

Michael shrugged. "Okay. You've convinced me again. Let's go talk to the doctor."

Delaware County had a population of forty-four thousand spread out over an area the size of Rhode Island.

Faith and Michael drove through a couple more villages the size of Hancock on their way to Delhi, but most of the land was empty space.

It was crazy to think that a place like this could exist only a few hours away from one of the largest metropolitan areas on Earth.

She wondered at the tendency of most people to cluster together in tightly packed communities that stretched the limits of the environment's capacity.

Biologically, she knew that was an evolutionary tendency of all social creatures, but it was interesting to see such a stark visual representation, especially when that representation demonstrated the exception and not the rule.

But then, not everyone needed a crowd. Penny told them that they had a few friends here and that they liked their small village. As long as people had a few close companions to keep themselves sane, the desire for the presence of strangers seemed almost arbitrary.

But if you didn't have those close companions, then it didn't matter if you lived alone in the wilderness or in a high-rise apartment building with thousands of residents. Without a social web to center them, humans could very easily drift toward insanity.

The county building in Delhi was literally that.

A building. City Hall, the Sheriff's Office, the City Planner's Office, and the Office of the Medical Examiner were all in the same five-story red-brick structure.

The only free-standing entity was the Courthouse, which sat across the street from city hall.

Michael parked the SUV in the guest lot between the two buildings.

There were a dozen or so other people in view walking around the court and the hall.

A small population meant not much crime and not a lot of government meddling in people's lives.

That was one of the great appeals of these not-metropolises.

A side benefit of that slowness was that the medical examiner was able to meet with them right away.

They took the elevator to the basement, and on the ride down, Faith pondered another human trait.

Where had the tendency to bury one's dead come from, and why was it so prevalent in human culture?

Morgues were almost always underground, even if the bodies weren't covered with dirt.

Was it a remnant of a long-dormant superstition that if the dead weren't sequestered under the Earth, they'd rise again to haunt the living?

She put philosophical questions aside when she entered the ME's office.

A barrel-chested man of about five-eight with a horseshoe of thick brown hair surrounding an utterly bald pate stood and extended his hand.

“Dr. Silas Ratner,” he announced, shaking Faith’s and Michael’s hands vigorously.

He waved at Turk. “Hello there. What’s your name, big guy? ”

Turk barked, and Faith translated for him. “He’s my K9 unit, Turk.”

“Love German Shepherds,” Silas replied. “Great dogs. My uncle had one, and it used to put up with a lot of crap from my sister and me when we’d come to visit.” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “So. You’re here for Mr. Martinez.”

“Yes,” Faith said. “We’re investigating his murder. We wanted to get all of the details from you so we can have a more thorough understanding of our killer’s method.”

“Wonderful,” Ratner said. “Come with me.”

He led them out of the room, walking with a brisk, bouncy gait that suggested a much shorter man.

When they reached the morgue, Ratner whipped the drawer containing Paul’s body out with a flourish. “We don’t get a lot of these here in Delaware County,” he told them. “It’s a little exciting, I won’t lie.”

Faith was a bit put off by that statement, but she couldn’t blame the man for his excitement.

She felt the same excitement from time to time when working a case.

That sometimes made her feel guilty too.

Maybe it was better that Ratner—whose job was to look at the bodies of people who

had died violently—was able to be more detached.

“Can you be more specific about the cause of death? The report we have only says that he was stabbed.”

“Of course, of course,” Ratner said, “Hancock PD compiled that report and sent it to everyone before they had any real answers. Not that I blame them. First forty-eight hours, and all that.”

Faith was about to tell him that the first forty-eight was a rule of thumb for missing persons, not murder investigations, but she stopped herself.

In most of her murder investigations, forty-eight hours was the average window of time before one of her unique brand of serial killers took another victim.

Ratner pulled the sheet back, revealing Paul’s body.

Rigor had released its hold on him, and instead of being stiff as a board, he was relaxed in the way only the dead could be.

Faith had seen numerous bodies disfigured beyond belief, but something about the deceptive peacefulness of this mostly whole man made the sight of his body even more disturbing.

“Cause of death, specifically,” Ratner said, “was a severed brainstem.”

Michael lifted an eyebrow. “A severed brainstem?”

“Exactly. Our killer sneaked up behind Mr. Martinez, clamped a strong leather-gloved male hand of average size around his mouth, and drove a single-edged blade into the back of his neck at the base of his skull. He then jerked the blade sideways to

sever the brainstem."

He turned Paul onto his side, and Faith saw the red line of the entrance wound. It was barely a slit. No doubt it had bled copiously when he was killed, but now that Paul was free of blood and cleaned of any residue from the crime scene or the injury, it looked like little more than a papercut.

"Did he suffer?" she asked Ratner.

"Not at all. Probably didn't even have time to register that he was being attacked. I'm not saying I want to be murdered, but if I was going to be murdered, this is how I'd want it to happen."

Michael shifted uncomfortably. "Hey doc, we just got done talking to the victim's wife. Can you lay off the humor a bit?"

Faith tilted her head. "Actually, I think you might be onto something, doctor."

Both men looked surprised.

"I've been thinking about what burial signifies," she explained.

"It could be that in the past there was a component of fear to it, maybe even superstition, but for most of history, burying the dead was a sign of respect. The swift death could be fear as well. The killer might have believed that he wasn't a match for Paul in a fair fight.

Or it could be a desire to avoid making Paul suffer. "

"Huh," Ratner replied. "Well, you're the detective, and I'm not going to try to be the ME who tells the detectives how to do their jobs. But since you bring up respect, I'll

share another detail I read on the CSI report. This guy wasn't tossed into the grave. He was placed into it."

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Can you expand on that?"

"Sure. When you toss a body into a hole, the body flops around and lands wherever it lands. Oftentimes, we'll see postmortem injuries from that landing: bruises, tissue damage, torn ligaments, and even broken bones.

Here we see none of those injuries. In fact, CSI said his placement suggested that he was carefully lowered into the grave.

His legs were straightened, and they believe his hands were crossed over his chest. They don't know that for sure, since the one hand was moved by the guy who discovered the body.

"He shook his head. "Poor kid. Talk about grade-A nightmare fuel. If you're not used to dead bodies, anyway. "

To be fair, Brad was used to dead bodies, just not as recently dead as Paul Martinez.

"Crossed over his chest like this?" Michael asked, making an X with his hands. "Like a vampire?"

"Well, yes, but that image of vampires comes from the way corpses were normally posed within the old hexagonal coffins. It was just how they managed to fit bodies into the smallest space possible. I guess what I'm saying is I don't think this was a vampire fetish.

I think it was a sign of respect. Even the grave appeared to be dug with some care. "

“How so?”

“The dirt was carefully tamped down. Not just tossed over the body. I gotta say, for a murderer, this guy seemed to care a lot about Paul Martinez.”

Faith and Michael shared a grim look. It looked like Michael might have been right about the urgency of speaking to Paul’s buddy Stan. “Thank you for your time, Dr. Ratner. This has been very helpful. If you think of anything else, please give us a call.”

“Will do. Good luck, agents. This guy might be nice as far as killers go, but it’s not really my kind of friendliness if you know what I mean.”

“Definitely not the kind of friend I’d like to have,” Michael agreed. “Have a good day, Doc.”

The agents hurried back to their car and hurried just as quickly onto the road back to Hancock Village. They had gained a lot of valuable information from this visit. Faith just hoped they hadn’t also given their killer a chance to escape.

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That sparked a touch of suspicion in Faith's mind.

She didn't get the impression that Penny would have murdered her husband, but killers cried over their victims all the time, and just like friends and family were more likely to kill you than anyone else, wives were more likely to cheat with friends and family than anyone else.

Husbands too, but this husband had his brainstem severed two days ago, Faith's concern lay more with the wife and friend.

They had an alibi for Penny, but that didn't mean she couldn't have called Stan to have him handle their "situation."

The bearded man waited for the agents to leave the SUV and approach him before confirming that he was who they thought he was.

He nodded again and stuck out a rough-skinned hand that looked four sizes too big for the body to which it was attached.

"Name's Stan Merchant. Figured you'd be coming to talk to me at some point.

Not sure why it took you so long to be honest."

"You in a hurry to talk to us?" Michael asked.

Stan shrugged. "No, I guess not. I don't know who the hell could've done something like this, so I guess I can't do much to help you."

He wore a gruff scowl, and his tone was just as gruff, but Faith could hear the grief in his voice. That wasn't an indication of innocence, but there was no doubt he missed his friend. "I'm Special Agent Faith Bold. This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince, and my K9 unit, Turk."

Stan looked appreciatively at Turk. "Good dog. Old but strong. Like me."

Faith thanked him and smiled down at Turk, but Stan's observation alarmed her. She didn't think Turk looked old at all.

Except now that he mentioned it, she could see the hints of white at his muzzle and scattered among the dark brown of his back.

Had they been there before the attack, or had the stress of his poisoning finally broken through the wall of good health that seemed to keep him perpetually in the prime of life?

"Well," Stan said. "You might as well come inside. If you don't mind, I usually have a beer when I get home from work. You two are welcome to some yourself if you'd like."

"We're fine, thank you," Faith replied. "But go ahead and have one yourself if you'd like."

He nodded and started up the porch steps. "If you don't mind leaving your shoes outside too. Hetta doesn't like dirt tracking through the house."

Faith wasn't keen on walking around a person of interest's house in her socks, but Turk was wagging his tail and showing no sign of concern around Stan. He was still a suspect until they could talk to him, but he wasn't a danger at the moment.

Once shoeless and inside the house, Faith observed the interaction between Stan and his wife, Hetta.

Hetta, like Stan, was not quite thin enough to be wiry.

She was tall with blonde hair—dyed at the roots to maintain its natural hue—blue eyes and full lips.

She didn't appear much younger than her age, but she wore her years well.

More importantly, both of them showed genuine affection to each other, and neither showed any sign of guilt.

If Stan was involved in an affair with Penny Martinez, or if either he or Hetta was involved in Paul's murder, it would be nearly impossible for them to hide that when interacting with each other.

Hetta greeted the agents and told them she'd bring tea to the living room in a few minutes. She hesitated when she saw Turk but didn't object when he followed them into the living room.

This house was a little more spartan than the Martinez home, but at the gain of a more open and spacious feel. Stan sighed with relief as he settled into a recliner. Faith and Michael took the sofa, a gray vinyl number that was slightly tacky but comfortable enough.

"You'll want my alibi," Stan said. "You talked to Penny yet?"

Faith blinked. People didn't usually start conversations with the two of them like this. "Why don't you start with the alibi, and we'll worry about Penny later if we need to?"

He nodded again. It seemed to be a bit of a nervous tic for him.

"Paul and I spent a lot of time together after work.

He'd come here on account of Penny didn't like to see him drink.

She didn't mind that he did, she just didn't like to see it.

Hetta doesn't mind so much. She was a quartermaster for the Seventeenth Infantry during Iraq, so she knows a bit about what we went through. "

Faith's brow furrowed. That wasn't exactly what Penny had said. She didn't like him drinking and driving, but she didn't mention a problem with drinking in general. "How do you know Penny didn't like to see him drink?"

"He told me. That's why he always came here."

"You mentioned an alibi," Michael reminded him.

"That's what I'm talking about. He was here with me until around nine-thirty. Got sentimental and wanted to walk home. Said that he missed Penny. That happened sometimes when he got drunk. He always felt like he wasn't good enough for her."

"Did he say why?" Faith asked.

Stan shrugged. "Being a war veteran's an odd thing. It doesn't always hurt people the way it hurt Paul. The memories aren't pleasant for anyone, but not everyone comes home with baggage. He did, though."

"What kind of baggage?"

“He never told me.”

Hetta entered, quiet as a whisper, and set teacups in front of the agents.

She disappeared as quietly as she came, heading down a narrow hallway to the bedroom at the rear of the house.

Faith waited until she heard the quiet chunk of the door closing, then said, “You’re his best friend, and he never told you what happened in the war?”

Stan met her eyes and said, "Never exactly. We'd talk in general terms, but whatever it was that drove him to drink, he couldn't face it head-on. Had to have been real bad, though."

“So he walks home at nine-thirty,” Michael interjected, trying to bring the conversation back to the alibi. Where were you after nine-thirty?”

"Well, I asked him to let me give him a ride. They don't live but four miles down the road. It's not far to drive, but it's a good hour and a half walking. He said he wanted to walk, said he wanted to think a bit, and needed some time to do it."

“I thought he said he missed his wife and wanted to come home,” Faith said.

“He said that too. He said both things. Looking back, I should have just made him ride with me, but I didn’t think anything of it at the time.

Hancock Village hasn’t seen a murder in thirty-three years.

Not since Osiah Pratt killed his girlfriend Rosie after she broke up with him on prom night.

And Paul was a tough man. Maybe he didn't look it, but he was dangerous.

He could have handled himself in a fight. At least I thought so."

His lower lip trembled. He sipped his beer, then said, "Anyway, after he left, I drove down to the convenience store on Eastvale Road to pick up some chips and ice cream. Hetta likes the salted caramel flavor, and that's the only place to get it unless you drive all the way to Delhi."

"What time would you say you arrived at the convenience store?" Faith asked.

"Couldn't have been later than ten."

Faith looked at Michael, and he got to his feet and stepped into the kitchen to follow up on that. Hopefully, the convenience store would have security cameras that could confirm Stan's presence there. "After you got your ice cream, what did you do?"

"Came home. Ate some chips, watched some old movies, went to bed around midnight. Woke up at seven the next morning, and by the time I was ready to go to work, I heard they'd found a body down by the river.

Called Paul to tell him so, and he didn't answer.

I figured he was still sleeping, but then five minutes later, I get a call from Penny telling me Paul's dead. "

His lips trembled again. He sighed and sipped more of his beer.

"I just don't know who'd want him dead. He was always so kind and generous with everyone.

Only ever cried in front of me, but he was never rude or angry with anyone.

Never heard of him fighting or getting on anyone's bad side. It just doesn't make any sense."

Michael returned and gave Faith a thumbs-up. Stan's presence at the convenience store was confirmed.

That was only an hour of time, though. If he left the convenience store at ten-fifteen, even ten-thirty, he would still have more than enough time to find Paul, kill him, and bury his body at the river. In fact, the short timeframe could have been exactly why the grave was so shallow.

They didn't have any good reason to suspect Stan, though, and Turk seemed to like the old soldier.

He sat next to Paul, straight and tall just like he did when he was a Marine K9 and looked at Paul with what appeared to be genuine affection.

Turk had never been affectionate with anyone who turned out to be a murderer before.

"Thank you for your help, Stan. If you think of anything else, please give us a call. In the meantime, I suggest you stay in the area."

Stan chuckled bitterly. "So I'm on the shortlist, huh?"

"I don't think you're the killer," Faith admitted, "but I can't prove that beyond a shadow of a doubt. I'm not saying you're guilty until proven innocent, but you were one of the last people to see Paul alive. We might need to talk to you again, and that will be easier if you're close by."

Stan laughed again. "It's all right. He didn't talk to many people. I know you've got to keep me in mind 'til you figure out what happened." He shook his head. "He owes someone money or something?"

"You tell me."

"Hell if I know. I just don't know why someone would kill him and bury him like that. I guess to hide the body, but..." He sighed and finished his beer. "I'm sorry. I ain't had the chance to grieve properly yet. This is just all hard to figure out."

"That's all right," Faith said. "If you think of something, call us. If we think of anything, we'll call you. No matter what happens, we'll find out what happened to Paul."

Stan gave them a final nod, then echoed Penny's statement from earlier. "I'm glad of that, agent. I hope whoever did this gets justice, but it won't bring Paul back. My friend's gone no matter what."

It was dark when the three agents stepped outside. Faith looked up at the night sky—full of stars out here in rural Delaware County. She hoped those stars didn't shine on their killer as he buried another victim.

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The minister stuck his shovel in the dirt and mopped at his forehead with a handkerchief. It was cold tonight, but the exertion left him damp with sweat.

He looked up at the stars as he rested. The moon was barely a sliver of white tonight, allowing more of the fainter pinpricks that lit the night sky to shine through.

It would be a new moon in two days, and dark enough that the colors of the stars could be seen if one's vision was sharp enough and if one allowed one's eyes to adjust long enough.

"You'll be shining among those stars," he told his charge. "A good and faithful servant finally allowed to enter into the joy of his Lord."

He sighed again, this time with compassion. That's what this was. Compassion. The news called it murder, but of course, they didn't know any better. No one who hadn't served their country in honorable combat could understand what it was like to live on when one's comrades in arms had died.

It used to make him angry watching those news stories, seeing people crying over the death of a warrior.

It felt selfish to him, as though their pain didn't matter.

Those warriors had to live through that pain just to make their families happy, their friends happy, or whoever.

It was considered a tragedy when they died, a loss.

Their families would blame God for taking them too soon, as though the Most High had made a mistake in welcoming His lamb back into His fold.

He didn't get angry anymore. They were loved, and civilians did their best to love them. It was just that civilians couldn't understand the right way to love warriors.

A lot of the people he counseled complained about that.

They'd come home after a war to find that their wives or husbands didn't know how to love them the way they needed to be loved.

They'd find that they didn't love the way their wives or husbands wanted to be loved.

Their friends couldn't understand why their buddies weren't happy and carefree, and their employers didn't have any sympathy for the pain they had to carry and how that would make it hard sometimes to keep their mind on their jobs.

It was a difficult thing to work through.

A lot of people couldn't do it. Once a person became a warrior, they could never again become a civilian.

The best they could hope to do was live among them, a wolf in sheep's clothing, never hunting again but forever hunted by their guilt and haunted by their memories.

That was a hard life, but for some warriors it was too hard.

Those warriors had been called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, and though their bodies lived on, their souls had made that sacrifice.

The minister rescued them from decades of drifting through a life they no longer

belonged to and released them to a home where every tear would be wiped away and every pain healed by the loving grace of Jesus Christ.

The minister's task was to find those who had earned that relief but hadn't yet found it. Once he found them, he gave them that relief. He sent them home.

He stood, took a deep breath, and released it slowly. It was a beautiful night to send this man home.

He pulled his knife from the scabbard clipped to his belt and cut through the cords binding the tarp wrapped around this warrior.

He could untie the cords and save them for his next warrior, but he liked the symbolism of cutting the cords that bound them to this life and releasing their soul upward to Heaven.

As before, he felt a rush of joy when the bonds fell away. He smiled at the warrior, already resting peacefully, his soul already where it belonged at the foot of his Savior.

He looked up at that beautiful sky and called to Heaven.

"Father, I thank you for accepting already the soul of this brave soldier.

I thank you for taking him to his home in your kingdom where he may sit by the still waters of life and eat of the fruit at your eternal banquet.

I thank you for allowing him to worship at your throne and sing praises to the Most High among his fellow warriors.

I ask, God, that you grant him a special place at your side along with all those who fight to keep this one nation under you free from the ravages of people who have yet

to accept your grace.

And I ask that you allow me to continue serving you so that all who suffer needlessly in this life may soon close their eyes to this world and open them with joy in the next.

“Finally, God, if it be your will, I ask that you teach those left behind to understand that those I send to you are not sent in pain to darkness and weeping but sent in love to joy and glory. I know that the blind cannot be expected to see, but I know also that you have healed the eyes of the blind and opened the ears of the deaf. Let them understand, Lord. Let them see what these warriors truly need. Nevertheless, as our Savior said in the garden, not my will, but thine be done. Amen.”

His prayer concluded, the minister carefully lifted the body and carried it to the grave. He said another silent prayer of thanks to God for granting him the strength to perform this task.

He set the body gently into the grave, straightening its legs and folding the arms across its chest.

For the body was an “it” now. The he, the soul, was gone, worshipping at the seat of Christ. Still, it was the body of a warrior, and it deserved to be treated with respect. Only when the minister was satisfied that it rested in proper repose did he begin to fill in the grave.

He wondered if someone would discover this body as they had the first warrior’s body.

He hoped so. Provided they treated it with respect, he didn’t mind people knowing the fate these warriors met.

He wanted people to see how peaceful they were in death.

He wanted people to know that this was compassion.

He tamped the Earth carefully, smoothing it out so that whether allowed to rest or revealed to the world as a sign from God, the warrior received the homage he was due.

It, he reminded himself, not he. He was at the throne of God.

The minister smiled and turned his face to the sky again. “Thank you, God. Thank you, thank you, thank you, God.”

What joy to be able to serve his Heavenly Master this way! What honor to be God’s chosen help to those who would fight to protect the nation God had chosen!

The minister laughed and closed his eyes, reveling in the glory of God and the work he had been called to do.

He didn’t fear being heard as he whooped and laughed and cheered.

He had ensured that no one would interrupt his work.

He had chosen a resting place that befitted a warrior but one that would be free of other people until the work was complete.

Perhaps one day, he would share this work with another. He wasn’t yet old, but age lingered around the next corner. He would need someone strong to help him soon enough and eventually to take over.

But later. For now, this was his sacred duty, and he was overjoyed to be the one entrusted by God to complete it.

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Faith leaned back and rubbed her eyes. The past five hours had been fruitless. They had found no new leads and discovered nothing new about their victim that could help them determine which direction to take.

Michael slid her cup of coffee toward her, her fourth of the evening. “Don’t get frustrated,” he advised. “It’s only the end of our first day.”

“Do I really need to tell you why the night makes me nervous on a murder case?”

“No,” he said, “but we don’t know that this is a serial killer we’re chasing. It could just be someone who had a personal vendetta against Paul.”

“Who, though? We’ve talked to everyone close to him, and they all tell us one of two stories: either he was happy all the time and a joy to everyone, or he was depressed and haunted by his time in the war. He didn’t have enemies, just people who admired him and people who pitied him.”

The two agents had spent the first two hours of their stay at the Hancock Village Inn calling Paul’s closest associates.

According to Penny and Stan, those were his boss, the receptionist at their business, the proprietor of the Riverbank Bar, and another veteran named Kyle Gaston who lived in Cadosia just north of Hancock Village.

They hadn’t visited any of the named individuals and hadn’t needed to.

Kyle was at the Riverbank Bar, and security footage placed him and the bartender

there until two in the morning, well past the time their killer would have needed to start his mission.

The boss and receptionist were both petite women, not strong enough to carry Paul's body or dig a grave.

"Could be someone from his past," Michael suggested. "Someone he fought with."

"That could be hundreds of people." She sighed.

"I guess do some checking into his military background. Maybe something will jump out at us here. I just really thought we'd get a bead on something after talking to his wife and his best friend.

You'd think they would know if he was facing some danger. "

"There's an old proverb that says a man has three faces," Michael remarked. "One he shows the world, one he shows his family, and one he shows himself. We've seen two of his faces. Maybe the third face is the one that got him killed." He frowned. "Does that make sense? I didn't explain it well."

"I think so. You're trying to say that Penny and his coworkers knew him one way, and his veteran buddies and the bartender knew him another way. Maybe the killer knew him a third way, and he just hid that part of himself well."

"Exactly. The question is, how do we reveal that third face?"

"If it's there to be revealed," Faith replied. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Damn it."

"What? What's wrong?"

“I’m gonna pass out. I can’t stay awake. The coffee’s not helping.”

“That’s all right. Go ahead and get some rest. I’ll keep working while you sleep.”

She glared at him. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“I’ve worked with you for twelve years,” he said placidly. “Going on thirteen. There is no way to make you feel better. You’re going to feel however you’re going to feel. Just know that I feel it’s okay if you need to rest. Besides, Turk’s sleeping.”

Faith looked in between the hotel room’s two beds. As usual, Turk had fallen asleep almost immediately after dinner and remained where he had lain down, his head resting on his paws and one ear up to listen for danger.

Couldn’t hear the danger that almost killed you though, poor boy, Faith thought. Sneaky bitch came in when we were both out of the house.

“Faith? You okay?”

Faith stirred and turned to Michael. “Fine. Yeah, you’re right. I’m just tired. I’ll head to bed. If you find anything, wake me up, okay?”

“You got it. And I promise I won’t bust out the permanent marker while you’re sleeping.”

“If you value certain beloved parts of your body, you’ll definitely keep the marker away from me.”

He lifted his hands. “Yep. Got it.”

She headed to the bathroom to change into a t-shirt and sweatpants.

She and Michael had dated briefly years ago, and while David didn't have a problem with the two of them sharing a room and spending so much time together for their work, Michael's wife, Ellie, only barely tolerated it.

She was pretty sure she could strip naked and dance on a pole without tempting Michael these days, but she might as well err on the side of too appropriate.

God, why was she thinking about that? She really did need to rest.

She tried to ignore the twin pangs of guilt and envy she felt when she came out of the bathroom to see Michael alert and leaning over his laptop continuing to work on their case. For God's sake, he was six years older than her. Why was he the more energetic one?

As soon as she lay on her bed, her irritation faded. Everything faded but her need to close her eyes and rest. She was awake for the deep inhale of her first breath and asleep by the time it left her.

She opened her eyes to a familiar scene. She was tied to a chair in an abandoned barn. The only light came through a crack near the upper left corner of the barn behind her. The shaft of sunlight that pierced the crack fell over a surgical tray topped with several rusty cutting implements.

In a moment, the door ahead would open, searing her eyes with another blaze of light.

Jethro Trammell, the Donkey Killer, the seven-foot brute who had killed Special Agent Jack Preston and nearly killed his K9 unit, Turk, would walk inside, taunt her for a few minutes, then pick up a rusty knife.

He would lean close, whisper in her ear, “Let’s see you bleed, little girl,” then cut her until she woke up.

In real life, he’d cut her until Michael burst through the door. She was unconscious from blood loss and shock by then. Jethro would turn around, shocked at having been found, and Michael would put a bullet in his head. This being a dream, he probably wouldn’t make it past the first cut.

Faith rolled her eyes. Of course, she was having this nightmare again. Months free of any nightmares, and now she got to see Jethro Trammell every night once more. Goddamn that bitch Messenger.

She blinked, and when she opened her eyes again, she wasn't in the chair anymore.

Not that chair, anyway. She was on the futon where she had sat and on rare occasions lain while Dr. Franklin West conducted their sessions.

She was still bound at the wrists and ankles this time.

Was West going to come in and cut her the way he did his victims in intentional imitation of his idol, Trammell?

Was he going to use his fists to beat her like he'd done twice?

Or was he going to stop screwing around and just shoot her already?

He didn’t show up, though. Instead, she blinked again and found herself on her back. She wasn’t bound, but she still couldn’t move. She was stuck as surely as if Trammell had severed the tendons of her knees, heels, and elbows like he had when he caught her.

Trammell still wasn't here. Neither was West. But she was. That bitch. The one who had poisoned Turk.

The Messenger.

The Messenger beamed down at Faith, her eyes bright and sick, her teeth bared like the fangs of a hyena. She straddled Faith's hips in a sickeningly sexual pose, her thighs pressed to Faith's sides like a lover. She giggled, perhaps guessing the reason for Faith's discomfort.

She leaned forward until her lips were inches from Faith's. Faith couldn't even turn her head to avoid the faint puff of her breath against her nostrils.

"Hey there, slut," the Messenger teased. "Looks like I got you right where I want you."

Faith thought of Turk, and fear lanced through her spine. The Messenger giggled again. "Oh, don't worry about your dog. I already took care of him. Look."

Faith didn't want to look, but she wasn't in control of her body anymore. Her head turned, and when she saw the stiff, maggot-ridden corpse of her dog, she shrieked.

The Messenger laughed again, this one loud and throaty, a cry of triumph. She leaned down to Faith, grabbed her jaw and forced her head back toward her own. She pressed her lips to Faith and kissed her lasciviously, sliding her tongue over her lips and causing nausea to join grief and fear.

"Faith! Faith!"

Faith woke with a gasp. That gasp allowed Turk's tongue to slide in between her lips instead of over her face. She spluttered and shook her head, falling out of the bed and stumbling to her feet and to the bathroom.

She turned the water to the coldest setting and splashed water over her face until she was shivering.

Turk whined next to her, and she shut the water off and managed a smile at him.

He had his tail tucked in between his legs and a mournfully apologetic look in his eyes.

She chuckled softly and ruffled his fur.

"Sorry, boy. I'm all right. Maybe don't lick my face to wake me up anymore, okay?"

"You sure you're all right?" Michael asked. "That sounded like a bad one."

He sat at the same chair he'd been sitting in when she went to sleep, his eyes red-rimmed but not too puffy considering he'd spent most of the night awake.

Sunlight filtered through their room's curtain and fell over Faith when she stepped out of the bathroom.

She frowned. Apparently, he had spent all of the night awake.

"What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

She sighed. "Damn it."

“Why damn it? You normally get up at six-thirty.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I know. I just... Whatever. Did you find something?”

Michael grinned. “Actually, I did.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

“Yep.”

He waved her over to look at his laptop. She followed him and leaned over his shoulder. “James Furlong,” she read. “He knew Paul?”

“I don’t know that for sure,” Michael said, “ but this guy was a veteran and an archaeologist.”

“At the same time?”

He rolled his eyes. “No. He’s a former Army Officer whose platoon was wiped out near Kabul in 2003.

He left the Army as soon as his contract was up and went back to school.

He got his doctorate in archaeology in 2015.

He lives right up the road in Corbett, and he’s a colleague of our dear Dr. Anna Winters. ”

“You don’t say?”

“I do say. Another fun fact: he was recently disciplined for remarks he made at a staff

meeting suggesting that Dr. Winters earned leadership of her dig due to certain aspects of her female anatomy rather than her expertise or capability as an archaeologist.”

The wheels in Faith's head began to turn.

"So an unsuccessful Army Officer living near a well-liked successful Air Force NCO is jealous because his colleague gets the job he wanted.

He probably feels a little bit like a failure, too.

Maybe he remembers feeling like a failure after his unit died and he thinks about this asshole Paul Martinez. "

“And maybe the Paul Martinez he knows is the happy-go-lucky, generous one, the one that doesn’t seem at all bothered by the war,” Michael continued.

“He can’t kill Dr. Winters,” Faith said. “Too many people would wonder about him since he made that comment and clearly didn’t like her.”

“But he’s angry, and he’s tired of being reminded that he’s a failure while others succeed,” Michael continued again. “So he kills Paul and dumps his body right in Anna’s dig site so that all of the attention that was supposed to go to her findings now goes to the dead body her team also found.”

“That’s not extremely far-fetched,” Faith said.

“Is it a little far-fetched?” he asked.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, there’s enough there to be worth paying Mr. Furlong a visit.”

“I very much agree.” His smile vanished, replaced by a look of concern. “Are you sure you’re all right, though? I haven’t heard you scream like that since... Well, actually...”

He cut himself off, but it was too late. Faith saw his eyes flick to Turk. She smiled to hide the tension in her jaw. “I’m fine. No big deal. Just a dream. Let’s talk to James Furlong and see just how angry he was.”

“All right,” Michael he said, “You got it.”

Faith couldn’t do anything about the latest serial killer to haunt her nightmares, but she could do something about Paul Martinez’s killer. That would be enough to banish the cobwebs of anxiety from her mind and help her focus fully on the Messenger when the time came.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:10 am

The New York State University campus in Delhi was—like the county building the day before—many different things rolled into one.

It was about the same size as the county building and contained an administration wing, admission offices, a nurse's office and a mental health counselor's suite, a single lab that looked like it served the needs of several different applied sciences, and a half-dozen classrooms no doubt used by several of the different programs offered by the university.

James Furlong was one half of the Archaeology Department at the campus.

The other half, of course, was Dr. Winters.

Dr. Furlong was the opposite of Dr. Winters in just about every way.

Anna was tall and statuesque with movie-star features, a kind but strong personality and a genuine empathy for others.

What they knew of James so far suggested that he was a stereotypically irritable academic misanthrope, and what they could see of him—Faith hated to say it—wasn't exactly easy on the eyes.

When Furlong saw the agents, his beady eyes narrowed, and his face pinched into a scowl. Faith could tell already that this was going to be an interesting conversation.

“Who said you could come in here?” he barked when the three agents stepped into his office. “And you brought a dog? Are you serious? There are artifacts in here that are

hundreds of years old.”

“In your office?” Michael asked.

“Where do you keep things that you work on?” James sneered.

Faith decided to nip his bad attitude in the bud.

“I’m Special Agent Faith Bold, FBI. This is Special Agent Michael Prince.

Special Agent, by the way, is an excellent way to address us.

This is our K9 unit, Turk. You don’t have to talk to him, but you should be aware that he’s not very fond of assholes. ”

James blinked, stunned but also confused. “What? What the hell is this about?”

“The murder of Paul Martinez.”

“Paul Martin... Ah.”

His demeanor changed. He sighed and dropped into a high-backed desk chair that squealed in protest at the sudden weight. “Now I get it.”

“Get what?”

James sighed. “Well, this isn’t a very big community. He and I were both veterans, and I can’t imagine that anyone seemed to have it in for him. By all accounts, he was very popular.”

“Did you know him?” Michael asked.

“No. I knew of him because the paper runs a special on military veterans in the community every year, and he featured prominently this year.” James chuckled. “I got a three-sentence blurb, and he got an article. You guys can come inside, by the way.”

The three of them entered the small, crowded office.

As James warned, the office was filled with objects ranging from small hand-carved figurines to shards of pottery to bits of cloth.

All of the objects were encased in glass with notes written near them explaining what they were and where and when they had been found.

“You must have been frustrated to see that,” Michael said, referring to the article. “After all, you fought just as hard as he did.”

James chuckled bitterly. “Well, the Daily probably thought a story about being lured into an ambush and watching my entire platoon get cut to pieces wasn’t exactly an inspiring one.

Not that I blame them. I’d much rather read about the decorated Combat Controller who made sure that people like me had air support when they needed it. ”

“I thought you said you didn’t know Paul,” Faith said.

“I didn’t. But I read about him. He was a real hero.”

They might actually be onto something with him. Faith crossed her arms and said, “If you don’t mind me saying so, James, you sound a bit jealous of Paul.”

James met her eyes. “Of course I was. Like your partner said, I fought just as hard. I

put my all into my job. When my platoon was ambushed, I fought so hard that when they found me, my hand had frozen shut around my rifle. They had to inject me with epinephrine to get my hand to relax enough to drop the gun. But”—he lifted his hands, palm upright—“I failed. They all died. All except me. You can’t convince people that you’re a hero when you survive, and your men end up in body bags. ”

“People do a lot of crazy things when they’re jealous,” Michael said. “Including murder other people.”

James scoffed, and the sneer came back to his voice.

“You think I killed a stranger because he was a better soldier than I was? Buddy, you can throw a rock into an Army base, and the grunt it hits in the head is going to wake up from brain surgery a better soldier than I was. If I wanted to kill a soldier, it could have been anyone.”

“Why do you say you were a bad soldier?”

His lower lip trembled. “Why is that relevant? I’m just saying that being jealous of someone’s success on the battlefield isn’t a reason I would kill them.”

“Do you have a reason to kill someone?” Michael asked.

James sighed. “Look, I’ve been an archaeologist for over a decade now. I’m well-respected in my field. I’ve authored numerous peer-reviewed articles on the Iroquois Confederacy, the Delaware Nation, the First Nations, and even the Plains Indians.”

“Not as respected as Anna Winters, though, huh?” Michael pointed out. “She got picked to lead the dig site at the river. Meanwhile, you’re here cataloguing wooden animals. How did that make you feel?”

James's eyes narrowed. "You think I killed Paul Martinez because I was pissed at Dr. Naymar for putting Dr. Winters in charge of the excavation?"

"Dr. Naymar is..."

"The head of the Archaeology Department."

Faith folded her arms. "We're not accusing you of anything, Dr. Furlong."

"It sure seems like you are. You asked me if I killed him, and each time I say no, you try to think of a reason why I must be lying."

"We just want to know why someone would have killed him," Faith said. "After all, he was—according to you and everyone else we've talked to—a likable guy. So who wanted him dead?"

"And I hate to say it," Michael added, "but you had a reason. Not a good reason, but people have killed for less. I'm not accusing you, but I'm interested in your thoughts."

To her surprise, James chuckled. "You want to know my thoughts? I'm a loser. Those are my thoughts. I'm upset that Anna got the job instead of me, but I'm not surprised. I was a shit soldier, and I'm a shit archaeologist."

"Less than a minute ago, you said you were respected in your field," Michael pointed out.

"Little hint. When academics say that, what they mean is that they've been published enough to keep their jobs and no one's accused them of embezzlement or an inappropriate relationship with a student yet."

“You keep saying you were a shit soldier,” Michael pressed. “Why?”

James reddened and rose from his seat. “Why? I’ll tell you why. Forty-seven Americans are fucking dead because of me!”

The room fell silent. Even Turk seemed stunned by the outburst. James looked equally stunned, his eyes opened wide and his face somehow pale and flushed at the same time.

James sank slowly back into his seat and lifted a shaking hand to his head.

“I didn’t mind that Paul got top honors in the Daily .

I’m pretty pissed off that Anna got the dig ahead of me, but I know I was wrong to say it was because of her tits.

As far as jealousy? I guess you could call it that.

I would very much love to be known as someone other than the lieutenant who fucked up and got a lot of families folded flags instead of safely returned loved ones.
”

His lips trembled, and his shoulders slumped. Faith felt a touch of sympathy. Even though he was a murder suspect, he was clearly broken up about what had happened to his unit.

James took a deep breath and met Faith’s eyes.

“I would never kill someone like Paul, though. If I was going to kill someone, it’d be me.

He deserved to live. I don't. I know I'm not supposed to say stuff like that, but it's the truth.

I wasn't cut out for the job. I knew it, and I still did it anyway. ”

“I'm sorry for what happened,” Michael said. “It sounds like it was very traumatic.”

Faith looked at Michael and saw indecision in his eyes. She didn't feel very decisive herself. James wasn't acting like the kind of person who would sneak up behind Paul Martinez, stab him, take him up to a specific site, dig a shallow grave, bury him, and then leave.

It wasn't just that his remorse and self-hate appeared genuine.

His emotions were all over the place. Aggressive and irritable at one moment, remorseful and dejected the next, and above all, impatient.

Paul had been killed by someone who had meticulously planned every step of the murder and the burial.

Faith could picture James bludgeoning Paul to death in the heat of the moment, but executing a well-thought-out crime like this murder seemed beyond him.

She looked at Turk. He watched James warily, but it was hard to tell if that was because he suspected something or because he could tell James was unstable and wanted to jump in and intervene at a moment's notice.

He didn't act nearly as excited as he would if he recognized James's smell from the crime scene.

“Can you provide an alibi for three nights ago?” Faith asked.

James nodded. "Sure. Yeah, I was here."

"You were here?"

"Yeah. Sometimes I spend the night here instead of going home.

The teacher's lounge has snacks and cable TV, and I have a bottle of Jim Beam stashed in my file cabinet.

If you can keep from telling the administration, that'd be nice, but hey, whatever.

Something's gonna bite me in the butt eventually.

If it's not talking about Anna's tits, it might as well be the drinking. "

Now, remorsefulness had been replaced by bitterness. Whether he was their killer or not, he was heading to a very ignominious end if he didn't change course soon. A part of Faith hoped that he could avoid that end.

But she was an investigator first, and they didn't know for sure that James was innocent yet. "Is there a way to verify you were here?" she asked.

"Yeah," James replied. "You can check the security footage. There's a camera in the break room. We don't have a guard on duty at night anymore, but the cameras record so security can review them in the morning in case of a problem. Security office is in the basement, room seven."

While Michael left to check on the footage, Faith faced James and said gently, "Dr. Furlong, you need to pull yourself together. I won't pretend to know what it's like to lose my unit, but I did serve in the Middle East, and I understand the toll that job takes on you.

I also understand—as do you—that drinking yourself to death and living right behind the edge of a meltdown isn't going to do anything to honor the men who gave their lives.

If you want to do right by them, live a life they would be proud of.

And please understand that their deaths aren't your fault. ”

From a professional standpoint, she shouldn't have had this conversation with James before they cleared his alibi, but her instincts told her he was innocent.

He wasn't a murderer, just a traumatized veteran who struggled with a pain that only those who had fought for their country could understand.

Michael walked in a few minutes later and confirmed Faith's instincts.

“Alibi's good. He was up all night watching movies.

Looked like Bridge on the River Kwai, El Dorado, and The Searchers .

” Faith looked at him, and he cleared his throat.

“Which doesn't matter. Thank you for your time, Dr. Furlong. ”

James managed a half-smile but kept his eyes on his desk. The three FBI agents made it just to the parking lot when Faith's phone rang. When she saw HANCOCK PD on the caller ID, her heart sank. She answered, and a middle-aged female voice on the other end said, "Is this Special Agent Faith Bold?"

“Speaking.”

“Hi, this is Sergeant Applewhite with the Hancock Police Department. I got your number from Penny Martinez. We’ve just received a call from Danbury, Connecticut.

They’ve found a body in a shallow grave at an archaeological dig.

It sounded very similar to our case here in Hancock, so I thought you’d like to know.
”

Faith’s shoulders slumped. “Thank you, Sergeant. We’re on our way.” She hung up and sighed.

“Bad news?” Michael asked.

“Another body,” Faith said. “Stop by the gas station real quick. We have a bit of a drive ahead of us.”

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The crime scene in Connecticut was very different from the one in New York.

There, Faith had found no crowds either of police officers or civilians.

The people who were present were more frustrated at the interruption of their morning than perturbed by the fact that someone had buried a body not even a half mile from where they stood.

Here, a dozen police officers were keeping about four dozen looky-loos outside of a taped-off section of ground about thirty feet off of a popular hiking trail in the Collis P.

Huntington State Park about five miles southeast of Danbury.

The crowd was mostly well-behaved, but it still bothered Faith to see them craning their necks to get a better look at the scene or extending their cell phones to film CSI as they gathered evidence for their report.

Did it not matter to anyone that someone had been murdered and left dead in an unmarked grave right here where they got their ten thousand steps done and munched on granola bars?

Maybe it was a good thing that people didn't register the violence that took place around them every day. If people truly opened their eyes to how fragile life was, most of them would never leave the house.

Or maybe they would. Maybe it was human nature to ignore anything that didn't have

to do with oneself.

They flashed their IDs to the officers and were allowed behind the cordon.

A tall mustachioed man with a sergeant's chevrons followed them.

When they were a few yards into the dig, he introduced himself.

"Sergeant Avery, Connecticut State Police. Danbury turned the case over to us, and unless I'm mistaken, we'll be turning it over to you shortly. "

"You're not mistaken," Faith replied. "I'm Special Agent Faith Bold. This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince, and my K-9 unit, Turk. We're investigating a very similar murder on federally owned land by the Upper Delaware River in Hancock, New York."

Avery nodded. "That's what Danbury told us. One of their officers remembered the news story from a few days ago. Good thing, or it could have been a while before you two found out about this."

They came to a stop just out of the way of the half-dozen men and women in white lab coats and masks busily examining the scene. "Folks," Avery called. "This is Special Agent Faith Bold and Special Agent Michael Prince. They're taking over the case, so please give them whatever they need."

The CSIs nodded absently, probably the best they were going to get while the team was working.

Avery didn't seem bothered by the lack of a verbal response.

CSI seemed a little bothered when Turk trotted to the crime scene and started sniffing

around, but when they looked at Faith, they decided it wasn't worth their time to protest.

"According to Danbury," Avery continued, "the body was called in by a couple on an early morning run. They came down here claiming they heard a woodpecker. Judging by some fibers left on the bark of the tree just in front of the grave, CSI's pretty sure they came here for another reason."

Faith wasn't interested in salacious gossip right now. "How did they discover the body?"

"At some point, the husband was on his back. As he was getting to his feet, he brushed some dirt off of the victim's face. It appears he was buried in less than a foot of Earth."

That was new. The killer had made the grave shallower this time.

That could be due to the longer and more tiring walk to this spot compared to the previous grave.

They were a mile from the closest road accessible to vehicles, and the killer would have had to cross several hills on his way here while carrying a dead body.

Or it could be that he liked the attention he received last time and wanted to make it even easier for his victim to be found this time.

"They didn't have any cell signal until they were back at their car. We're still not sure why nine-one-one routed them to Danbury instead of us, but I guess it got handled either way."

"Does the victim have a name?" Michael asked.

“Sure does,” Avery replied. “Staff Sergeant Kevin Barnes.”

Another servicemember. “Was he active duty?” Faith asked.

“No, but he had a veteran ID card with his last active rank.”

Another veteran. Also another male NCO. Their killer had a type, that’s for sure.

“So nothing’s missing,” Michael said.

“Nothing. The killer even left Barnes’s wallet behind.”

“That’s not really surprising,” Michael said. “Thieves don’t usually go through the trouble of burying their bodies in the woods.”

“Good point,” Avery replied. “Good thing this is an active archaeological dig. The grave was very shallow. Looks like he ran out of time to dig deeper.”

Faith frowned. “Speaking of that, where is the archaeological team?”

“They’re meeting with the administration at Yale to ask for a budget increase,” Avery replied. “According to Dr. Cuthbert. He asked if he should cut the meeting short and come here, but I verified his alibi and that of his dig team and told him I would let you two decide that.”

“You verified the alibis of the entire crew?” Faith asked.

“Yes. There’s only Dr. Cuthbert and six graduate students.”

That was much smaller than Dr. Winters’ team at the Hancock site.

“I see,” Faith replied. “Well, call him back and tell him to get back here as soon as he can. We’ll explore other angles until he gets here.

If you verified everyone’s alibis, then we don’t need the entire team just yet. The body’s still here, correct?”

“Unless your dog is bothering CSI for some other reason.”

Faith flashed a sharp look at Avery, but he didn’t seem upset at all.

His face was as placid as ever. It occurred to her that a perpetually calm expression might actually be an asset in his line of work.

If Faith were trying to hide wrongdoing, she would find it very difficult to remain level across from that emotionless gaze.

She stepped closer to the scene. One of the CSIs muttered, “Well, we were almost done anyway,” as the team cleared out.

Turk lifted his eyes to Faith, wearing a mournful expression. Faith reached down and scratched him under his chin, then straightened and regarded the body.

Kevin Barnes lay on his back with his legs straight and his arms crossed.

His eyes were half-open, but one of the CSIs explained that when he trotted back and held two baggies with gold coins up to Faith.

"These were used to hold the eyes shut. They're American Eagle five-dollar coins.

Mint proofs, but that doesn't make them especially valuable except for the fact that they're gold.

The mint makes a bunch of these every year for collectors. "

"They might still have value as evidence," Faith said.

"Yeah, yeah, for sure. I just wanted you to know that the body was discovered with these holding the eyes shut.

We'll get you a full report, but I know you FBI types like to see the full picture for yourselves.

" He hesitated for a second, then asked, "Do you want me to close the eyes again and put these back? "

Faith smiled slightly. "That's all right, thank you. Just get that report to me as fast as possible."

"I will. Your partner gave me a business card, so I'll email the report to his address."

The CSI left, and Faith tried to piece together events from the killer's perspective.

Assuming he had a truck or an SUV with at least some four-wheel drive capability, he could get to the top of the wider, flatter walking trail a mile below that Faith had identified as the nearest vehicle-accessible place.

If he was in a normal car or a truck without four-wheel drive, then he would have to park an extra mile away at the public lot.

Then he would have all the way up here, passing several more secluded, easier-to-access places to hide the body.

He chose to bury his victim in this archaeological dig and put only a token amount of

dirt over him.

Even if he'd been pressed for time, Faith couldn't believe that he'd been so pressed for time that he couldn't bury him two feet deep like he did Paul Martinez.

And this was a dig site. Where people were going to burrow far deeper than two feet into dirt specifically hunting for bodies. Not fresh bodies, obviously, but the point was that the killer chose to bury him somewhere he would be found quickly.

Leaving the wallet was a choice too. At first, Faith thought that the killer just didn't care, but now she believed otherwise.

He didn't just want people to know where the body was.

He wanted them to know who he was. He wanted people to know that he had killed and buried Staff Sergeant Kevin Barnes.

Why? Why him, and why Paul Martinez? And why was Kevin different? Paul didn't have his wallet, and no coins held his eyes shut.

It was possible that there was no reason. If he was a brand-new killer, he could still be perfecting his MO. Perhaps he buried Paul, realized there was nothing to keep his eyes shut, and added the coins for his next victim.

Michael tapped her shoulder, interrupting her musing. "Danbury PD just got a call from Maria Fuentes, Kevin's ex-wife. They were supposed to talk this morning about adjusting child support payments, but Kevin never answered."

Faith nodded. She turned to Sergeant Avery and said, "Give CSI and the Medical Examiner all the time they need, then send the reports to me. Once they're finished, you can release the crime scene and the State Police will have completed its

obligation to the FBI.”

Avery nodded. “Of course, Special Agent. Good luck to you.”

“Turk,” Faith called. “Come on, boy.”

Turk gave Barnes a final mournful glance. His eyes were as haunted as those of any soldier. Faith knew that feeling well.

The three of them trekked back to Michael’s SUV, leaving Staff Sergeant Barnes in the care of the Danbury Medical Examiner’s Office.

One thing that stuck with Faith was the reverence the killer showed both victims. That was important. She had a hunch that it was going to be the key to finding the answers she needed.

Hopefully, she'd find those answers before she and Turk had to see the body of another fallen comrade.

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Faith and Michael stopped for lunch at a fast-casual restaurant adjacent to the park.

They ate in the car to keep their conversation private and keep the sizable crowd of honeybees and yellowjackets hovering around the restaurant's outdoor seating from interrupting their meal.

Faith didn't have a problem with stinging insects, but she didn't want to make sure Turk didn't eat one while talking to Maria Fuentes.

Instead, she got to endure Turk's reproachful look for keeping him inside when it was a bright, beautiful day and there was a park right next to them.

"I'll take you out for a run when we get back home," she said. Maybe we'll get lucky and run into the Messenger so I can pay her back for what she did to you.

She regretted that thought as soon as she had it, but she didn't regret it that much. Faith had grown out of her old desire to take justice into her own hands, but she'd gladly make an exception for the bitch who tried to kill her dog.

Which is why you're not in that case.

She sighed, and Michael asked, "Everything okay?"

She rolled her eyes. "Sometimes it would be nice to have a partner who didn't care so much about me outside of work."

"Well, we're working. Do I need to have the conversation about how your emotional

state affects your ability to work well again?”

“No, you don’t. And I’m fine.”

“Okay. If you need to talk, I’m here.”

She stared at him. “What are you, my sister?”

“I prefer to think of myself as a nosy aunt, but I’ll take sister.”

Faith chuckled and found with some surprised that she felt a little better. “Screw you, Prince.”

“We tried that before, remember? It didn’t work out.”

“Should I tell Ellie that you’re joking about our sexual history?”

His eyes widened in exaggerated shock. “What are you trying to do, get me killed? Fine, I’ll shut up.”

“Actually, please do shut up. I’m calling Maria now.”

“I don’t get to talk to her too?”

She rolled her eyes again. “Shut up until she answers.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She pinched his forearm, then dialed the number. Maybe this wasn’t the best display of professionalism they’d ever shown, but she felt a little more centered now, and that was important if she was going to find justice for Paul Martinez and Kevin Barnes.

Maria answered on the fourth ring. “Hello?” She sounded tired and stressed but not particularly sad.

“This is Special Agent Faith Bold, FBI,” Faith replied. “I’m on the phone with my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince. We need to—”

Turk barked, and Faith sighed. “And our K9 unit, Turk.” She glared at Turk, who lifted his chin with great dignity and held her gaze.

“We need to talk to you about your ex-husband.”

Maria sighed. “Yeah, I heard. Danbury PD told me a few minutes ago.”

“We still need to talk to you,” Faith said. “Is this a good time?”

After a pause, Maria said, “Yeah, I guess so. The three older kids are at school, and my three-year-old is watching TV. They don’t know about Kevin yet. Not looking forward to that conversation.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Wasn’t my loss. No disrespect to Kevin, but being married to him was a lot of work. I don’t think either of us regretted losing the other. He wanted someone who could carry him emotionally, and I wanted someone who could stand on his own two feet.”

Faith listened patiently to Maria’s soliloquy.

Whether or not she recognized it as such, Maria was grieving Kevin’s death.

She was going through every aspect of their relationship—good and bad—clinging to the memories as though afraid that if she didn’t, they’d vanish for good and take with

them the only part of Kevin she still had.

Maybe Maria did recognize that a little, because she followed her rant up with, “He was a good father, though. He loved those kids. That made the divorce... easier’s not the right word, but less brutal, I guess.

I knew he’d be involved in the kids’ lives, and I knew he’d meet his obligations to them.

That’s actually what we were calling about today.

I was going to ask for an increase in child support payments.

Just four percent, just enough to cover inflation.

Kevin was usually pretty good about that.

Sometimes he’d want to see the calculations, though.

He always thought I was too materialistic.

That’s one of the reasons we started fighting. ”

Faith respected Maria’s desire to talk to someone about this, but she really did need to keep this focused on the case. “Did he fight with a lot of people?”

"Actually, no. He got along pretty well with everyone. He wasn't exactly a teddy bear, but he wasn't rude or aggressive."

“What do you mean when you say not a teddy bear?” Michael asked. A good question, since that could mean many things, especially coming from the woman who

at one point had presumably believed that she was going spend the rest of her life with him.

“He was... aloof. Not in a rude way, but... it was hard to reach him. He put up this front like everything was okay, but behind that, he was seriously depressed. That’s another thing we fought about.

I told him to go see a therapist, but he never did.

He said there was nothing they could tell him that would help him. ”

I totally understand that, Faith thought. Out loud, she said, “Did others comment on his aloofness?”

“Sometimes. We didn’t have a lot of close friends, but other parents from our kids’ schools would ask me if Kevin didn’t like them or if he was upset with them because he just wouldn’t talk to them.

He’d keep to himself most of the time. He was really only vulnerable with me, but then...

” She paused a second, and when she continued, her voice was thick as though she was holding back tears.

“Well, I wasn’t very good at dealing with that.

I don’t know, I guess I just grew up thinking men were supposed to just push through things.

I know that sounds horrible, but my dad and my older brothers were all stoic, strong, silent types.

I didn't know what to do about someone crying on my shoulder about a war that ended for them years ago. Jeez, I really am a bitch, aren't I?"

"It's hard to be in love with a soldier," Faith said. "The experiences they face are unlike anything you can imagine unless you've experienced it yourself. You're not a bitch for being unable to bridge that gap."

Maria sighed. "I just wanted him to be happy. Even if it wasn't with me.

When the divorce was final, I told him that he should go find someone else, someone who could hold him when he needed it.

I meant that too. I think he thought I was just rubbing it in that I wasn't going to be there for him anymore, but I wasn't.

I wanted him to just have someone, anyone.

I mean, he talked to his buddies, but not really, you know? "

"His buddies?" Michael probed.

"Yeah, they'd take turns hosting get-togethers.

We'd get two or three a year. They'd talk, but it was all boy stuff, you know?

Cars, sports, guns, stuff like that. Whenever the conversation started to get serious, they'd change the subject.

It's like they just didn't want to think about...

I'm sorry. You guys don't want to hear all this. "

“Actually, this is very helpful,” Faith replied. “Knowing our victims is a key step to knowing what happened to them.”

“What did happen to him?” Maria asked. “I asked Danbury PD, but they wouldn’t tell me.”

Faith glanced at Michael. Michael replied to Maria’s question. “We’re not at liberty to release details at this time. We can confirm that his death is a homicide, but that’s all.”

“A homicide.” Maria worked through the word like a tough piece of gristle. “Yeah, I figured that’s what it was when the cops wouldn’t talk to me. God damn it.”

“We’re very sorry, ma’am.”

For the third time, a victim’s loved one replied with, “Well, sorry doesn’t bring him back, does it?” She went on to say, “I’m not trying to be a bitch, but... shit. God, what do I tell the kids? Jamie’s twelve, and Jackson’s ten. They won’t buy a line of bullshit.”

Faith wished she could think of something helpful to say to Maria, but she didn’t have kids and had no idea how to handle this kind of conversation. Michael, thankfully, had an answer.

“Focus on how much he loved them. There’s nothing to say to make his death any easier to swallow, so focus on his life.

All of the best parts of it. Give the kids space to grieve and expect nothing from them.

They’ll handle it differently, each of them.

They'll be sad, they'll be angry, they'll be rebellious, and they'll probably project all of those emotions onto you.

Just keep loving them and keep focusing on how much he loved them. They'll get through this. So will you."

There was no doubt that Maria was crying now. "Thank you." She sniffled and breathed, "God, this sucks. Do you have kids?"

"No," Michael said, "but I've dealt with kids in these kinds of situations numerous times."

"You should have kids. You sound like you'd be a great dad."

Michael smiled, a little sadly. "Maybe I will one day."

Maria took a deep breath to stifle her tears, then asked, "Is there anything else I can help you guys with?"

"Just two more questions," Faith replied. "Did you notice a change in Kevin's behavior recently? Did he mention anyone new in his life?"

"No, no one new. And he seemed the same to me, but we didn't talk very often. He'd call for the kids, and we'd make small talk when he'd pick them up or drop them off, but we haven't had a real conversation in years. Not since Julie was born."

Faith nodded. "Very well. If you think of anything else, please call me back at this number."

"I will. Thank you."

She hung up, and Faith leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms.

“I know that look,” Michael said. “You have an idea.”

“Not quite an idea,” Faith replied. “More of an observation.”

“I’ll take an observation. Hit me.”

“Both of our victims were veterans who were upbeat and garrulous but who also kept most people at arms’ length. Those few allowed closer got to see a deep depression stemming from trauma suffered during the war.”

“You think our killer is performing mercy killings?” Michael asked.

“It’s possible. We’ve dealt with several killers like that.”

“But who would want to give these two specific people mercy?” Michael asked.

“Two hours apart in two separate archaeological digs?”

“That’s why I think the crime scenes are the key,” Faith said. “I think knowing the victims tells us what kind of killer in general. If we want to know the specifics, we need to figure out why these specific burial sites were chosen.”

Michael’s phone chimed. He glanced at it and said, “Well, we’re in luck. It looks like Dr. Cuthbert just pulled into the lot below us.”

“Wonderful,” Faith said. “Let’s see what he has to say.”

As the three of them drove down to the lower lot, Faith thought of the victims carefully laid to rest by a killer who honored them as warriors. Did they know how much pain their families were in, or were their thoughts too haunted by the ghosts of

their pasts to see the ghosts of their futures?

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:10 am

Dr. Raymond Cuthbert was tall, but he was as thin as a willow reed. Even if his alibi hadn't been confirmed, Faith would have had difficulty believing he could have carried Paul's and Kevin's bodies up hills and then dug their graves.

He made up for his slight build with an almost manic energy.

When he greeted the agents, he pumped their hands rapidly up and down—including the paw of a befuddled and slightly amused Turk—and grinned as though being interrupted by a murder investigation was just the most exciting thing that ever happened to him. Who knew? Maybe it was.

“Did you guys get a chance to check out the dig site?” he asked eagerly.

Faith had to reach back to elementary school American history to remember that the Minutemen were one of the first attempts to organize the colonial militias into a legitimate fighting force that could oppose the British presence in America.

“That’s very interesting, doctor, and under other circumstances, I would love to hear all about it.

However, you were called back here to assist us in a murder investigation, so I have to insist that you stay on topic. ”

No sooner had she said that than something clicked in her head. “Wait. This was a site of a battle?”

“Yes. A fairly small one but an important one. This battle and others like it were

catalysts for the formation of the Minutemen. See, the British weren't keen on violence with colonials prior to the 1770s. Before then, most encounters with colonial militia were bloodless."

"Thank you," Faith interjected. "That's good to know."

Both victims had been buried on battlefields. Faith didn't know if that was significant yet, or if the killer just looked for archaeological digs, but in the words of one famous sage, "there ain't no such thing as a coincidence."

"Do you guys often leave the dig site unattended and drive back to Yale for meetings?" Michael asked.

"We don't always go back to Yale," Raymond replied, "but the dig site isn't always watched. I tried instituting a rotating watch, but park management didn't like us here overnight."

"So it's empty every night." Another parallel to the previous murder.

"Yes. That's actually why I was at Yale today.

I was asking for a few thousand dollars to put up a chain-link fence and some barbed wire.

You'd think that's a worthwhile investment considering the importance of this find, but the administration is so tight-fisted these days.

I offered to pay with my own money, but they freaked out about that.

If people start using their own money for things, the University is going to get audited, and they don't want that. "

“Who knows about the dig?” Faith asked. “Besides your team, of course.”

“Well, we’re not keeping it a secret. We’re not advertising it, but we’re not hiding it, either. That being said, I guess I have to admit that this just doesn’t interest a lot of people. I really don’t understand that. I mean, this is American history! The start of American history!”

“Other than your team, who could you say for sure knows about this dig and the exact location of the dig site?” Faith specified.

“I can make you guys a list when I get back to my hotel room. I can’t promise to get every name on there, but I know the people who were most curious.”

“Any of them from any other university?”

“Yeah, a few.”

“New York State University, perhaps?”

“Or people from your school who visit New York State,” Faith added.

“I’ll have to doublecheck,” Raymond replied. He gave them a sheepish grin. “Sorry. I didn’t really know what I was supposed to prepare for.”

“That’s all right,” Faith said. “Is there a reason you took your entire team back to Yale with you instead of leaving a few of the students behind to keep things moving?”

Raymond shifted his feet uncomfortably. “Well... they’re not very experienced yet.

Part of not having a budget is that I couldn’t hire an assistant lead researcher.

The students aren't getting paid for their help.

I feel like an asshole saying it, but I'm getting what I paid for.

They're trying hard, and they're all very passionate, but I can't trust them to do anything with the site on their own.

I told them I needed them to address the administration and tell them why they each believe the site deserves more funding, but really I just wanted to keep them from poking around without my supervision. Good kids, but... you know."

They paused the questioning while Raymond ordered some food.

A bored teenager slid across a greasy paper bag bearing a brightly colored admonition to "recycle this package!" and containing an equally greasy burger that had probably been fried that morning and left on the warmer until just now.

Yellowjackets and bees competed for space around the condiment counter, several of them landing on Raymond while he added ketchup and mustard to his burger.

He didn't seem to mind the stinging bugs at all.

To be fair, they left him alone once he took his food back to a table.

Turk showed a little too much interest in a yellowjacket that had landed on the side of one of the trash cans, but when Faith called him away, he left without swiping at the wasp.

Raymond sat down and bit into his burger. Faith was amused but not surprised that he was the sort who chewed with his mouth full. "So this guy they found here. Was he homeless?"

Faith frowned. “No. Why do you ask?”

Raymond swallowed and took another big bite. “We had a problem at the last dig site I worked where homeless people would enter the site and try to camp in our tents. No tents here, but the ground’s been cleared, so I thought maybe a guy sneaked in.”

Michael frowned. “You realize he was murdered, right? As in his life was taken against his will?”

Raymond blinked and colored slightly. “Yeah, right. I’m sorry. I just... I mean, I can’t figure out why here. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“That’s why we’re talking to you,” Faith said. “We wanted to know what about this site might make it appealing to the murderer.”

“Hell if I know,” Raymond said. “Unless he’s a...” His eyes widened. “Oh. That’s why you wanted a list of everyone who knows about the site. You want to know if one of them might have chosen to bury a victim here because he’s passionate about American history.”

That wasn’t quite correct, but Faith didn’t see a need to share every detail of the investigation with Raymond. “Any names come to mind?”

He shook his head. “No, sorry. I mean... We’re all nerds.

Academics, I mean. We’re the last people on Earth you’d expect to kill other people.

Hell, I can’t even speak up when the waitress gives me a rare steak instead of a well-done one.

I can’t imagine the frame of mind you’d need to be in to kill someone else.”

His smile faded, and his demeanor sobered. It looked like he was finally realizing how serious this situation was. “Damn,” he whispered. “This guy who was killed, did he have a family?”

“He did. An ex-wife and four children.”

Raymond’s shoulders slumped. “Aw hell. That really sucks.”

“Yeah, it does,” Michael agreed. “We just talked to the ex. She’s trying to figure out how to tell her kids that they’re never gonna see their daddy again.”

Faith squeezed Michael’s forearm and gave him a look. Raymond’s personality grated on her too, but he wasn’t their killer, and it wasn’t their job to instruct him on social niceties.

“Jesus,” Raymond said, slumping further. “I guess... I mean, I didn’t think much about it. I didn’t know how to...” He lifted his hands and gestured aimlessly. “I mean, a murder ? Here ?”

“Murders happen everywhere, unfortunately,” Faith said.

Although saying that that reminded her that they still didn’t actually know where their victims had been killed, only where they had been buried.

They knew that Paul had been ambushed somewhere between his house and his friend’s house, but they didn’t know exactly where, and they didn’t know the circumstances of Kevin’s death at all.

She decided to release Raymond. He didn’t have anything useful to contribute, anyway. She stood and offered her hand, regretting it immediately when he gripped it with his own grease-laden paw.

“Thank you for your time, doctor,” she said. “If you think of anything, give us a call.”

“Yeah, definitely,” he replied. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.” He flinched slightly as he thought of something. “Hey, should we, uh... I mean, do you think we’re in danger?”

“Are you or anyone on your team veterans?”

“Veterans? Like military veterans?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “No. Is that who this killer’s targeting?”

“It’s a possibility,” Faith replied. Before Raymond could pry, she said, “If you don’t fit that bill, you have nothing to worry about.”

“Got it. Well, geez, what an asshole.”

“World’s full of ‘em. Have a nice day, doctor.”

The three agents returned to their car. Turk growled menacingly at a paper wasp that drifted a little too close but kept his paws and jaws to himself. The paper wasp sashayed in front of the dog as though daring him to do something, then sped off in search of food.

When they were in the car, Faith said, “We need to put together a solid timeline for Barnes.”

“We also need to get a list of people of interest,” Michael said. “Whoever committed these crimes had to at least have known where these dig sites were.”

“How about you start working on that when Cuthbert gets you his list?” Faith suggested. “I’ll see if I can dig into Barnes’s last hours.”

“Works for me. Should we find a place to stay in Danbury?”

“Yes. We don’t have any leads in Hancock right now, and I want to be nearby in case I find a lead on Barnes’s end.”

“Fair enough. Might get a nicer room, anyway, since this is a bigger town.”

She rolled her eyes. “Because that’s what’s important right now, Michael.”

He shrugged. “If we’re going to be doing tedious work, we might as well do it in a comfortable room.”

“Well, we probably aren’t going to spend much time in that room,” Faith said. “Once we have a lead, we’re out and about again.”

The SUV reached pavement and accelerated smoothly out of the park. The transition from a rough dirt road to smooth asphalt made Faith think that there was something to be said for comfort after all.

It was certainly important to their killer. He’d gone to great lengths to ensure that his victims were laid gently to rest.

But why? And why in old battlefields?

Elusive as the answer was, Faith was still convinced that was the most important question.

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“Mandy? Mandy, you’re order’s ready. Mandy !”

Lillian flinched and snapped her attention to the counter. The acne-ridden teenage brat wearing a lip ring and a vial and a half of eyeliner stared pointedly at her. “You’re order’s ready, Mandy.”

Right. Mandy was the name she was using now. She got to her feet and strode to the counter, forcing herself to wear a sheepish smile. She fought even harder to make her tone of voice bouncy when she said, “Sorry. I kind of spaced out there.”

The brat smiled. “No worries.” She turned away, making sure that Lillian saw her eyes roll as she did so. Lillian watched her for a half-second before forcing herself to turn around and carry her basket of burgers and onion rings back to her table.

She made it halfway before a family of three that weighed as much as a family of eight sidled in.

The whale of a mom and the elephant of a daughter ignored her.

The hippo of a husband stared at Lillian with that amused sneer that only the hugely fat could wear and waited for her to do something about it.

God, if only she could. Maybe she would when she was finished with Faith. She had thought about what she was going to do once Faith Bold was dead. Most of those plans revolved around breaking Frank out of prison and the two of them traveling blissfully around the world killing people.

She smiled at the hippo, and something in that smile must have leaked her true nature through, because the hippo paled and shrank back, smile gone.

Satisfying as that was, it wasn't good. She needed to stay hidden, and that meant not staring down tubs of lard over a plastic bench at a cheap diner in the middle of West Toothrot, New Mexico. Or whatever this town was called.

She took another seat and started in on her food, which was thankfully at least passable.

As she bit into the burger, she dreamed of the day when she and Frank could return here. She would find the Fat Family, and she and Frank would take turns slicing pieces off of them. Maybe they would boil the fat in front of the family and toss it back into their faces. Melt them slowly.

Assuming she didn't end up in jail first.

She felt the buns give under her fingers as they started to clench and made herself relax. God, it was so hard to focus on being chill all the damned time. It wasn't fair. How did normal people do this, anyway?

Well, that was easy. They were normal. They didn't have urges like she and Frank did. They didn't take joy in taking lives. Lillian thought that was because most humans had evolved to be sheep. Sheep didn't imagine the joy of the kill the way wolves did.

Lillian had been a moment away from the ultimate joy. She had been so close to fulfilling her promise to West, to sending that bitch Faith Bold all the way to hell. She could hear Faith's skull crack, feel her head cave in, taste the blood and brain that splashed up from the blows.

So close. Then her damned partner, the bumbling but lucky-as-hell chimpanzee Michael Prince, had shown up, and she'd had to flee.

Now she was on the run, waiting every day for her picture to show up on the television next to a story about how Faith had bravely resisted the attack of another serial killer.

Faith had seen her face. Michael hadn't, but he wasn't really important.

He was the Mr. Magoo of the story. Blind as a bat but lucky enough to be at the right place at the right time.

Faith, though, she was smart. Frank had said so.

He had admitted that Faith was cunning and vicious and determined to put a stop to him at all costs.

That determination, that drive, was what drew him to her.

He knew that behind Faith's bravado was a powerful fear, and behind that fear was understanding that she wasn't good enough.

No matter how hard she tried, she wasn't good enough to stop him.

Except she was. She wasn't good enough to do it herself, but whatever temptation she exuded was enough to prompt Frank to act foolishly. He should have killed her. He should have shot her instead of trying some bullshit attempt to get the chimpanzee to kill her boyfriend.

What was it about her? She really didn't know. It couldn't be sexual attraction, because she was as cookie cutter as you could make a woman. Blondish-brown hair,

average figure, brown eyes, no lips, no hips, tits... well, okay tits, but not enough that Frank would go stupid over them.

Maybe it was the cunning and viciousness. Faith wasn't a sheep. She was a wolf, but she was protecting the sheep instead of eating them. She was a sheepdog.

Yeah, that had to be it. Frank was a wolf, and Faith was a sheepdog. They had a natural enmity—a natural rivalry that could only end with one of them victorious.

She finished her food and headed out of the diner. On the way, she dropped her basket upside down on the hippo's food. The whale and elephant started to bleat, but the hippo hushed them up and sat warily until the predator left the diner.

That was stupid, but whatever. If Faith was going to identify her, she would have already. Lillian's picture hadn't shown up anywhere on the news, so it wasn't going to. She would have to leave West Toothrot, but that was okay. This place sucked anyway.

Maybe she'd go to Los Angeles to pass the time for a little while. There was a lot to do there, and if she got really antsy, well, who would miss a few homeless people?

She'd lay low for a little while longer, then head back home.

Maybe this time, she'd kill the chimp instead of the sheepdog or the actual dog.

That would take away the dumb luck hex that F was protecting Faith.

Then, Lillian would bring a gun instead of a hammer.

It wasn't as satisfying as the hammer, but if she killed Turk and then shot Faith in the spine or something, she could keep her alive while she bludgeoned her to death.

She got in her car and drove away. The car was a 2008 Toyota Corolla S.

There were about a million of them on the road and for good reason.

It had two hundred fifty thousand miles and would probably run another two hundred fifty thousand before the little Toyota four-banger finally shit the bed.

It was about as exciting as a math class and about as noticeable as a blade of grass in a field. Which made it perfect for her.

That was what made her better than Frank.

She'd never say that to Frank's face, and she'd never act like he wasn't good enough for her, but when she really thought about it, Frank's inability to stay hidden was his downfall.

He tried, but he couldn't help himself. He needed people to know how smart he was.

Lillian only needed one person to know. Well, two. Frank and the bitch she was going to kill for him.

She wondered what Frank was doing now. His sentencing was going to take place in a few weeks.

He had been found guilty a second time, and the defense's motion to find another mistrial had been dismissed with prejudice.

Lillian looked that up and found out it meant they couldn't file that motion ever again.

The judge had finally grown tired of the media frenzy and was no longer humoring

the defense's desire to expose the FBI's mishandling of the case.

He was going to get life in prison, she was sure of it. When that happened, he would be sent to Florence. There would be no way to break him out once he was there. That's where they kept terrorists. It might as well be Guantanamo Bay.

She needed to do this before he was sentenced. She needed Faith Bold to be dead and Frank to be free before he was sentenced.

The wheels of her Corolla squealed in indignant protest as she whipped the car around and started back East. Screw California. She was going home now. She was going to deal with Faith once and for all.

Then she would show Frank that the only woman he should be obsessed with was Lillian Martin.

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Cuthbert might have been a challenge to talk to, but he was nothing if not efficient. He had the list of contacts ready by the time Faith and Michael were checked into a room at the Danbury Marriott less than a half hour after leaving the park.

“Damn,” Michael said appreciatively. “He must drive as fast as he talks.”

“Or he wrote the email out on his phone,” Faith suggested.

“Still impressive,” Michael said. “I’ll get started on the list.”

He stepped into the other room of their suite. Turk trotted in between the two beds in this room, lay down and almost immediately fell asleep.

Faith started looking into Kevin. Step one was to call Maria back and get names for the half-staffs. Maria only knew first names, which wasn’t very helpful, but if Mike, Bill, and Gary showed up anywhere else in her research, she’d know to prioritize them.

She had a little more luck with his employment. Kevin was a four-year employee at Daring Auto Repair in Danbury. When she called the number and told the manager why she was calling, he cried out, “What? Kevin’s dead?”

“I’m afraid so,” she replied.

“What? How?”

“He was found near a walking trail in Collis P. Huntington Park,” she said. “I’m sorry

to say that foul play is confirmed.”

“He was murdered ? That’s crazy!”

“Yes,” Faith agreed. “It most definitely is.”

“Oh man,” he said. “The boys are going to be broken up about this.”

“The boys are?”

“The others at the shop. Kevin was popular here. We called him soldier boy.”

“I see. Who am I speaking with, by the way?”

“I’m the manager.”

Faith rolled her eyes. “I know, but can I get your name for the record?”

“Oh. Sure. I’m Matt Kennedy. I’ve been running the shop here for nine years now. I hired Kevin right out of the Army. That’s why we called him soldier boy, obviously.”

“Figured that,” Faith said. “Can you tell me a little bit about Kevin? You said he was popular.”

“Yeah, he was cool. He always had the biggest smile and the most energy of anyone. Even when his wife left him, he was always happy.”

That fits with the profile of their victims. These were the people who saw his happy side. “When was the last time you saw Kevin?”

“Yesterday at work. He was in until six o’clock.

He was our suspension guy. A lot of guys don't like doing suspension on modern cars because unibodies are tough to work on.

Shocks and struts are pretty much the same thing, but in a unibody, you have to remove body panels to get to them, and sometimes you end up hitting brake lines by accident or other things that just shouldn't be in the way.

In a body-on-frame vehicle, the suspension is separate from the body, so you can just pop things in and out.

Point is, people don't like doing suspension on unibodies, so Kevin was the guy for us.

He was fast, too. He could replace all four corners in two hours on a good day. ”

Faith took Matt at his word that was fast. “Did you spend a lot of time with him outside of work?”

“Not a lot of time, but we'd all go out for drinks every Saturday after work. We were going to go out today, but... shit. I guess we'll drink here and pour one out to him. Oh shit. His poor family.”

Matt seemed to just be internalizing the fact that his employee was actually dead. His voice was calmer and more subdued as he continued. “We didn't think to call or anything because he'd already asked for the day off.”

Faith's ears perked up at that. “He did?”

“Yeah, he said he had something going on with his ex over custody. Nothing serious, just a squabble over payment.”

“And everyone knew about this?”

“I mean, yeah. We were all talking about it at work. That’s why he didn’t head out with us to the bar.”

“Where did he go?”

“Home, I assume. The rest of us didn’t think anything of it. We just went out and had a good time. We usually only go out once a week. This trip was spur of the moment. We figured maybe he had other plans.”

“Which bar was this?”

“Tin Can. It’s on Garrity and Underwood.”

“How long were you there?”

“Until the bar closed. Two o’clock.”

“All of you were there until two o’clock?”

“Yeah. Hey, you don’t think one of us did this, do you?”

Faith would check with the bar to be sure, but it was a long shot that an employee at an auto repair shop in Danbury, Connecticut would drive all the way to Hancock, New York to kill Paul Martinez, so she felt comfortable replying, “No, but I have to cover my bases.”

“Who do you think did this?”

“We’re looking at different leads right now,” she answered. Which was the official

way to say they didn't have a damned clue. "When Kevin left the shop, did he drive or walk?"

"He drove. He had an old Toyota pickup, a T100. Kept it in good shape. Not that you need to do much to Toyotas. They run on a song and a prayer if that's all you have to give 'em."

"What color was it?"

"Red."

Faith wrote down Red T100 pickup and asked, "Do you have an address for him?"

"Sure. One second."

He gave her the address a moment later. Faith thanked him and let him go, then looked the address up with the Motor Vehicle Department to get the truck's license plate. Once she had that, she looked through impound records to see if the truck had been picked up at some point during the night.

Bingo. At ten p.m., someone called in an abandoned Toyota pickup near the junction of Highways 53 and 107 in Redding, a small town near the state park. Faith called the Redding police department and was directed to Blue Star Towing.

The manager of Blue Star, Pedro Alcantara, knew what Faith was talking about immediately. "Yeah, the T100. Beautiful truck. Couldn't believe someone left it sitting there. Probably a title issue, right?"

"No, the title is fine," Faith replied. "The owner, unfortunately, was murdered last night."

A brief pause, then, “Holy shit. Fuck, that’s why he didn’t call back when we told him we recovered his truck.”

“Hard to call back when you’re dead,” Faith agreed. “What time did you receive the call?”

“Three in the morning. Dead even,” Pedro said.

“You guys are always open overnight?”

“Yeah, we’re contracted with AAA to provide twenty-four-hour roadside assistance. We rotate who has to work night shifts, and last night was me and Julio. He was the driver, and I was the dispatcher.”

“Do you remember anything about the person who called?”

“Some trucker. He was on his route and called 911 to say there was a truck abandoned. PD called us, and we came and got it.”

Faith made a note to follow up with PD on the trucker. “Okay, so you get to the truck by what time?”

“Three-thirty-three. I remember because Julio and I were laughing about it.”

“Did you notice anything unusual?” Faith asked.

“Not really. I mean, not noticing anything unusual was unusual.”

Faith straightened in her chair and folded her hands. “Can you explain?”

“I mean, people don’t just abandon cars unless something’s going on, right? Either

they're doing drugs or the car's stolen, or they got hurt or something. But the truck was fine. Looks like the guy just parked and got out."

Faith frowned. "And the truck was just on the side of the road?"

"Yeah. Just pulled up to the dirt right before the dirt turned into a concrete divider."

Faith wondered what would have caused Kevin to get out of his truck in the middle of the night in the middle of almost nowhere.

Had he known the killer and agreed to meet him there, or had some other seemingly innocuous event prompted him to pull over to the side of the highway?

Perhaps he saw another vehicle in need and stopped to help the broken-down motorist, only to discover too late that it was a ruse.

"How long do you believe the truck had been sitting there?" Faith asked.

"Had to have been a couple of hours, at least," Pedro said. "The engine was cool when we picked it up."

"Was it drivable?"

"Oh yeah. It still is. You're welcome to come take a look at it if you want.

We didn't drive it for liability reasons because we didn't have the owner's permission.

It's going to stay on our lot for thirty days or until the MVD releases the title.

We've touched it all over the place to get it onto the truck, and we did need to get

inside to load it onto the truck, so there will be a lot of fingerprints, but I'll talk to Julio.

I'm sure he won't mind if we give you fingerprint samples so you can figure out which is ours and which might be the bad guy's. "

That was a tempting offer, but Faith was pretty sure the bad guy hadn't touched Kevin's truck. It was Kevin he was interested in, not the truck.

"I'll let you know," she said. "Thank you."

"Yeah, for sure. That's crazy. I've picked up a lot of vehicles, but I think this is the first murder I've seen."

"Here's hoping it will be the last one," Faith said.

"Your mouth to God's ears."

She hung up and called the police department.

They gave her a name of Charity Lancaster for the trucker.

Faith got Charity's commercial DL number and tracked her to a company called Spee-D Shipping out of Baltimore.

Their trucks were equipped with GPS tracking devices, and looking through the data on Charity's device showed that she didn't stop anywhere in Connecticut.

She called in the truck while driving and kept on driving all the way to Boston.

So she wasn't the killer.

She sighed and folded her arms across her chest. She had a timeline now, but like Paul Martinez's timeline, it ended in a black hole.

Kevin Barnes had last been seen by his coworkers.

He had then driven to Redding for reasons unknown and stopped on the side of the highway, also for reasons unknown.

He had been killed sometime between nightfall and say one a.m., then taken to an archaeological dig in Collis P.

Huntington State Park and buried as they had found him earlier.

She called the Tin Can and got the bar's security footage sent to her laptop.

She saw the group from Daring Auto arrive.

As Matt had said, they had all stayed there until the bar closed.

It was possible that someone else had left before they arrived at the bar, but that would mean Matt either didn't notice, or he was complicit in Kevin's death.

If it was only Kevin they had to worry about, she might have pulled that thread, but the chances that one of them also had an interest in Paul Martinez were very slim.

The trucker angle intrigued her, though. The killer probably wasn't a commercial driver, but maybe he was someone who traveled a lot. Maybe he drove in a circuit throughout the region, or maybe he drifted along the road like Henry Lee Lucas and Ottis Toole.

Except those two had chosen their victims at random. Not entirely at random, but

they weren't nearly so picky as this killer was.

And Faith was certain he was picky. He wanted depressed veterans so he could give them some sort of honorable death. Whether he wanted vengeance and was showing respect to a fallen enemy or he wanted to dispense mercy to people he thought were struggling, Faith didn't yet know.

But he chose his victims specifically. He chose them .

It all came down to the burial sites. That was the link. That would tell her where to look. Once she knew that, it would be easy to find the person who shouldn't be there, the person who was either too perfectly in place or just out of place enough to grab her attention.

And she had to hurry. Something told her that their killer would strike again and soon.

He had a taste for it now, and one thing that all serial killers shared was the inability to walk away once they were in the game.

He'd strike again, and unless Faith wanted to look at another body in another shallow grave, she had to find him soon.

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Faith called Michael and found that his own search had been fruitless so far.

“These guys are all baby Cuthberts,” he said.

“They want to talk my ear off about the Revolutionary War, and when I finally get through and get them to understand that a man died, they’re useless.

They...” he sighed. “We should have had them all drive back up here. I feel like I went to Yale for no reason.”

“Do you have anyone else to talk to?” Faith asked.

"Yeah, one more. Patricia Norbury. Betcha anything, she's British."

Faith smiled. “You must be bored if you’re thinking about that right now.”

“I’m not bored, I’m antsy. This guy’s escalating. The coins are new, and he buried him closer to the surface. He’s enjoying the thrill of these kills, and he’s going to strike again soon, especially since we’re floundering right now.”

Faith’s smile faded. “Yeah, you’re right. We have to get some answers quickly.”

“Here’s hoping Patricia can help us out.”

“Fingers crossed.”

“I’ll call you when I’m done with her. Not that you’re going to listen to me, but now

would be an excellent time for you to take a nap so you can be fresh later when we spend all night tearing our hair out by the roots trying to find answers.”

Faith sighed. “Believe me, Michael, I wish I could, but my brain’s awake even if my body isn’t right now. I’m going to take Turk for a walk and see if inspiration strikes.”

“If it does, I will kiss your feet in front of Tabitha and proclaim you my hero.”

Faith laughed. “How about you promise to not do that if inspiration strikes?”

“Fine with me. Good luck, Faith.”

“You too.”

He hung up, and Faith got to her feet. Turk was asleep, but he had one ear raised as always, and as soon as the word “walk” escaped Faith’s lips, he was on his feet, alert and happy, tail wagging.

See? He’s not old. He’s still a puppy.

But there was the white on his muzzle and the grays popping up on his back. She looked hard at him and thought she detected a slight sway in his spine, but when he turned sideways, it was gone. It was probably just her imagination, but the white fur was definitely not imagined.

She sighed and hugged him tightly for a moment before putting the leash on. He endured the hug patiently, but as soon as she released him, he trotted to the end of the leash and whined.

“All right, all right,” she said. “We’ll walk.”

The two of them left the hotel and walked down Southern Boulevard for about two miles before reaching Tarrywile Mansion.

A placard at the entrance to the property announced that the three-story Shingle Style family home and its eleven-acre property now served as an event venue and the centerpiece of Tarrywile Park.

Faith followed the Tarrywile Property Loop to the Ponds Nature trail, a nine-mile trail that boasted views of Parks Pond and Tarrywile Lake, along with a beautiful selection of native plant life and the likelihood of encounters with numerous species of songbirds and insects.

Turk, of course, was overjoyed to be enjoying nature without the need to focus on the job.

Faith watched him investigate the park around him with a smile on her face.

He looked so happy. So peaceful. He deserved a chance to enjoy his final days.

Would it really be so bad if Faith stepped away from the field and let others look for the Messenger?

After all, someone would have to replace her someday.

It wasn't her against evil, it was the FBI against evil.

There would always be more serial killers, and there would always be more agents.

Faith was the best agent the Bureau had seen, but before her, Jack Preston was the best agent they'd seen, and before him, that title went to Grant Monroe.

Someone else would step into her shoes. Maybe Chavez.

She wasn't a rookie anymore, and she was showing flashes of talent that hinted at greatness in her future.

Faith kept her mind off of the case as they made their way into the park, and only when she was surrounded by the gentle buzz of bumblebees and the call of sparrows and wrens did she let her mind turn back to the murdered veterans.

That came as welcome relief from the question of hers and Turk's retirement, a sign of just how much turmoil the thought of leaving caused her.

No, it wasn't the thought of leaving. It was the thought of losing, of being beaten. She would never forgive herself for letting the Messenger defeat her and Turk. Michael was right. Try as she might, she wouldn't be happy walking away knowing that the Messenger was still out there.

The case, Faith , she reminded herself.

She took a deep breath, and as she released it, she thought about their killer.

He knew his victims well. He knew their habits.

At the same time, he struck when they broke their habits, so he didn't know their habits well enough to know when they would be vulnerable.

So maybe he didn't know them well. Maybe he was just following them and striking when the opportunity presented itself.

But he had to know them. He had to know that they were happy on the surface but in pain underneath. The question was how did he know them? Whoever he was, he

didn't seem to be a part of either of their circles.

And how did the battlefields come into play? What did they mean? She would understand if the two men had a connection to the battlefield of some sort.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Paul Martinez was descended from the Delaware or Mohawk Indians who fought at the Delaware River. Maybe Kevin Barnes' great-times-ten grandfather was a militiaman who fell at Candlewood.

"Maybe we can stop grabbing at straws and find an actual damned connection," she muttered.

Turk looked back at her, and she waved her hand. "Nothing, boy. Go back to chasing squirrels. Well, don't chase squirrels, please, but Mommy's fine."

Turk looked at her warily for a moment longer before turning back to the trail. Faith sighed and focused on the killer instead of the victims.

He respected his victims. That was evident in the reverence he showed when burying them.

It was also evident in the fact that he killed them quickly.

Faith's first assumption when learning of the method of death was that the killer feared the victims due to their fighting experience and wanted to avoid combat, but she didn't think so anymore.

He was strong enough to carry both men up hills and dig their graves.

In Barnes' case, he'd carried him at least a mile up and down several hills.

Someone that powerful wouldn't be afraid of fighting, especially if he was armed.

So he had to care about them too. He didn't just show them the respect due to a worthy opponent. He showed them compassion by making sure they didn't suffer.

He liked the attention too. He liked that Paul's discovery had caused a sensation in the news.

He wanted that again. Faith didn't think he chose the sites specifically because the bodies would be found easily, but the shallow graves certainly had something to do with that.

If he truly wanted his victims to rest, he'd bury them deeply and conceal the graves so they wouldn't be disturbed, but he'd done the exact opposite of that.

He wanted people to know what he was doing and ask themselves why. He wanted them to wonder what his message was. He wanted people to talk about these killings.

In a way, it reminded her of West. West didn't give a shit about his victims. He'd told Faith that he considered humans to be cattle.

But he wanted people to notice the Copycat Killer and by extension the Donkey Killer.

He wanted them to fear him as a devil. He was the proof that they weren't really safe, that wolves lurked in daylight as well as darkness.

This killer's motives were different from West, but his need to be seen was the same. He wanted people to know that he was out there killing these traumatized veterans and burying them in ancient battlefields.

She still didn't know who he was, though. That was the problem. If he continued with his pattern, he'd leave more and more clues at each successive crime scene until the law finally caught on and arrested him, and he'd have a chance to talk at length about his mission.

But Faith couldn't just let him kill people until his desire to be caught outweighed his desire to kill. She had to find him before then, and that brought her right back to the need to find a connection between the victims and the killer.

And the battlefields. They were the key. They were what made this killer different.

She sighed and shook her head ruefully. When she and Michael first read about Paul Martinez, they thought this would end up being a simple and mundane case. The guy gets stabbed and buried in the woods. Pretty damned run-of-the-mill.

Silly Faith. You don't get the easy cases. There's always something complex hidden beneath the surface.

That pulled her thoughts to the Messenger, the crazed woman who had released a near-constant stream of profanity while trying to crush Faith's skull with a hammer in front of her dying dog. What was hidden beneath her surface?

She was easily among the most unhinged killers Faith had ever met, up there with the hyper-religious and sexually oppressed Demon of Morgan County who dropped attractive women down wells to deal with his guilt at desiring them or the Caveman in Western Idaho who lured hikers into an abandoned mine then murdered and mutilated them.

She was also among the most violent, easily outstripping the brutality of both Trammell and West. Faith was reminded of a saying she'd overheard one of her fellow agents use talking about his son.

What the parents do in moderation, the children do in excess.

The Messenger definitely exceeded Trammell and West in brutality, if not yet body count.

But while Trammell was a mentally ill giant who tortured people like they were small animals and West had a god-complex and needed people to know he was better than them, the Messenger didn't seem to be motivated by anything other than rage.

Faith wasn't even sure the attraction to West was genuine.

She had a feeling that if West had never existed, the Messenger would still have become a murderer.

Her phone rang. Michael. She put the Messenger aside and answered. "Hey, what's up?"

"We have a lead."

The excitement in Michael's voice lifted Faith's spirits. "Yeah? Tell me."

"Dr. Marcus Sullivan. He's a former professor at New York State University who trespassed several times on the colonial dig site before Patricia Norbury threatened to call the cops on him.

She said she didn't tell Dr. Cuthbert because she didn't want him to worry.

I get the impression she has a bit of a crush on him. "

"That seems to be common among grad students," Faith said drily. "What about the Hancock site?"

“Get this. No record of him showing up at the site, but the Delhi campus said that he called nine times asking for an exclusive interview with Dr. Winters before they stopped answering his calls.”

Faith smiled. “Good work, Michael.”

“Thank you, madame,” Michael replied. “He lives in Monroe, about halfway between New Haven and Danbury. Meet you there?”

“Send me the address.”

“Will do.”

He hung up, and Faith turned to Turk. “Okay, boy. We’re gonna get some exercise. Let’s run back to the hotel.”

She called a rental car company on the way and had them deliver a full-size sedan to the hotel as soon as possible. Thoughts of the Messenger were gone from her mind. She was on the hunt for a killer once more.

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Dr. Sullivan lived in a modestly sized German Colonial style home in a neighborhood of similarly constructed houses on a quiet street set well apart from the main thoroughfares of Monroe.

It looked exactly the sort of home that a bookish historian would inhabit, and that's exactly the impression Faith got of Marcus when he answered the door.

He was big enough to be their killer. Faith guessed him at six-foot-five and an easy two-fifty, a healthy portion of it carried in powerful shoulders and a broad chest. Other than that, he seemed about as far from a killer as Faith was from a shaman.

He wore wire-rimmed glasses that he still squinted through, and his weak chin and round face clashed with his powerful build. He was balding, and the hair that remained was combed over his bald spot in a horrid fashion—or rather lack thereof.

Actually, now that she thought about it, he looked exactly like a serial killer.

“Dr. Marcus Sullivan?” she asked.

“Yes?” Marcus replied in a high-pitched, slightly nasal voice that sounded like it belonged to a man half his size. “May I ask why the FBI is at my door?”

“I’m Special Agent Faith Bold,” Faith replied. “This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince, and our K9 unit, Turk.”

Turk barked a formal greeting, and Marcus squinted down at him. “Wow. He’s in excellent shape for an older dog.”

Faith's lips thinned, but she kept herself composed. "Thank you. To answer your question, we're here investigating the murders of Paul Martinez and Kevin Barnes."

Marcus tilted his head. "I see. Well, I'm afraid I don't know either of those gentlemen. Or didn't know them, rather."

"Really?" Michael said. "But you were definitely at one of the crime scenes."

Marcus blinked. "Was I?"

"Staff Sergeant Barnes's body was buried in a shallow grave at an archaeological dig site in Collis P. Huntington State Park outside of Danbury," Faith informed him.

Marcus's mouth dropped open in an O, an action that somehow emphasized the roundness of his face. "Oh my goodness! The excavation of the Battle of Candlewood Village?"

"Yes," Faith said.

"Oh my." He shook his head. "Well, you'd better come inside. Don't worry about your dog. I don't mind if he tracks a little mud inside."

Faith shared a look with Michael. "Thank you."

The three agents followed him inside. The house was well-appointed with stone tile floors and hardwood furniture.

A wood-burning furnace dominated the living room, and the kitchen counters were made of some dark basaltic stone that contrasted nicely with the brushed aluminum surfaces of the appliances.

A chandelier hung over the center of the dining room, and a massive ceiling fan occupied the same space in the living room.

And every available flat surface was piled with books, journals, and magazines, all of which were histories of warfare. Faith shared another look with Michael. Dr. Sullivan was looking better by the minute.

"Would you two like some coffee or tea?" Marcus asked, flitting around the kitchen with the odd grace that many big men seemed to possess. "I have a lovely Earl Grey or, if you prefer, a Jasmine tea imported directly from Kyoto."

"We're all right, thank you," Faith said. "So you have a special interest in the Candlewood site."

"I have a special interest in all sites of human conflict," Marcus replied, filling a small kettle with water and setting it on his stove.

"Especially those that have gone unnoticed by the general public.

I'm writing a book cataloguing all of those lesser-known sites in the United States.

I have a feeling it's going to be a multi-volume work, considering how many sites are popping up just in New England.

Did you know there's a site on the Upper Delaware River not two hours from here where the Delaware Nation engaged in battle with the Mohawk Indians over territory?

It could be the oldest record of conflict between the Delaware and the Iroquois Confederacy. "

"Why, what a coincidence," Michael said drily. "That site happens to be where we found the body of Paul Martinez."

Marcus paused as he held a scoop of tea leaves over a stoneware mug. "Oh." He looked up. "Oh. You suspect me of being the murderer."

"We're not saying that yet," Faith replied carefully, "but you clearly have an interest in warfare. Both victims were veterans. Both were buried in shallow graves at sites of ancient battles—another interest of yours."

"A double interest," Marcus interrupted. "I am also intrigued by the different burial practices of warrior cultures."

Faith raised an eyebrow. She suspected that their killer wanted to be caught, but Marcus was basically flaunting it at this point.

Or he was innocent and confident that he could prove it.

"I'll get right to it, Dr. Sullivan," she said. "Can you provide an alibi for last night and for three nights ago?"

"Last night I was here. I have security footage that will show me arriving home at eight o'clock and show that I didn't leave until six this morning. Three nights ago, I was at a writers' convention in Vancouver. I flew back yesterday."

Faith shared another look with Michael, this one of disappointment. Once more, they had followed a promising lead only for it to reach a dead end. They'd confirm the alibis, of course, but considering Marcus's confidence and relaxed attitude, she was pretty sure they'd turn out to be legitimate.

Marcus must have noticed their disappointment because he said in a wry tone, "I'm

sorry to have let you down. You seem to have put a lot of stock into the possibility of me as your killer.”

“We follow the evidence, Dr. Sullivan,” Faith replied. “It led us here, but assuming your alibis check out, that evidence will lead us somewhere else.”

“Well, all is not lost,” Marcus said. “I might not be your killer, but I’ll bet I can help you find him.”

The kettle came to a boil, and Marcus removed it from the heat and set it aside to rest briefly before pouring it over his tea leaves.

Faith looked at Turk. He sat with his head cocked, studying Marcus.

He didn’t seem suspicious, more intrigued.

Faith wondered what it was about the bookish but broad-chested historian that interested him so much.

Marcus carried his tea to the dining room and joined them at the table.

“I’ve developed a reputation as a somewhat nosy individual,” he said, “No doubt that’s why you two were alerted to me in the first place.

I trespassed on the Candlewood dig several times to measure distances, take pictures and try to get a sense of what fighting there must have looked like.

Of course, the area looked quite different in 1773, but when I do my research, I find it helpful to place myself at the scene of the battles as much as possible.

“As for the native site, it wasn’t convenient for me to be there personally. Since I lost

my position at New York State University, the university has unfortunately taken a very stern stance with me.”

“Can you tell us why that is?” Faith asked.

Marcus smiled slightly. “They consider me a plagiarizer.”

“I see.”

“That might not seem serious, but in academia, it’s a death sentence.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Michael replied politely.

Marcus shrugged. “It’s not the end of the world. I’ve invested my money well, so I’m not in danger of destitution. And my book will be published with or without their approval. I will cite my sources, of course, presuming the principles in question will agree to be a source.”

He seemed slightly irritated saying that, and Faith guessed he was talking about Dr. Winters.

She was more interested in the help he said he could offer them, however.

If he was telling the truth about that, then they might finally be able to break through the wall that seemed to keep them from the answers they needed.

“You said you believed you could help us,” Faith said. “How so?”

Marcus grinned and folded huge hands on the table as he leaned forward. “Because I understand the warrior mindset, and like him or despise him, your killer is a warrior.”

“Go on,” Michael said doubtfully.

“He treats other warriors with great reverence,” Marcus said. “These graves, were they marked?”

“No, but they were meant to be easy to find.”

“They were shallow, but not necessarily meant to be easy to find,” Marcus corrected. “At least, Barnes’s grave was shallow. I assume the other grave was shallow as well?”

“It was,” Faith confirmed. “Not as shallow as Barnes’s grave, but shallow.”

“Then they were warriors’ graves,” Marcus insisted.

“I’m not following,” Michael said, still showing skepticism.

Marcus leaned back and adopted a professorial tone. “This specific practice of burying warriors in unmarked shallow graves on or near the site of the battle where they fell dates to Ancient Sparta. At least, that is the best attested early example of which we know.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “I thought the Spartans carried their dead home on their shields.”

“A myth,” Sullivan announced. “The Spartans were nothing if not practical. They revered their warriors, of course, but they revered their capability. They wouldn’t have wasted the strength of their fighting men carrying dead corpses home, and those dead men, if alive, would insist on being buried where they fell rather than tire the still living men who needed to fight to defend their Kingdom.”

The graves were shallow because they didn't need to be deep, just deep enough to cover the bodies.

They were unmarked because the presence of the corpse wasn't important.

It was the warrior's soul that mattered, and that soul had already gone on to Tartarus.

Now obviously, your killer couldn't take the bodies of these warriors to the sites of their own battles, so he made do with the nearest sacred ground he could find. ”

“I can see where you're going with this,” Faith said, “but our killer didn't treat these bodies like empty shells.

He treated them with great respect, posing them with their legs straight, their hands folded over their chests, and coins over their eyes.

” That, of course, was only true of the second body, but Faith didn't want to get stuck on the details right now.

“Well, our killer can't be expected to be a thorough historian.”

Michael crossed his arms over his chest. “Let's say you're right. How does that help us find him?”

Marcus took a deep breath and tilted his head.

"I would say that you're looking for someone who is also a veteran, someone who would feel camaraderie with these wounded warriors.

I would speculate that the victims suffered from severe PTSD and possibly depression.

The killer also suffers from these ailments and believes the victims are better off dead.

Why these specific victims is probably answered by more specific criteria to determine worthiness of death.

That is beyond my area of expertise, but I would suggest starting by looking for fellow veterans with mental health issues as a result of trauma sustained during combat.

Above all, this will be someone who loves and admires their fellow warriors.

He isn't murdering them. In his eyes, he is granting them a warrior's death. "

"A very thorough analysis," Michael pointed out, an amused smile on his face. "Do you have a background as a criminal profiler?"

Marcus lifted a finger. "Not a criminal profiler, Special Agent, but a warrior profiler."

He got to his feet with a spryness made disturbing by his size and picked a book off of one of the shelves that lined the walls of his living room.

He handed it to Michael. Faith glanced at the title.

The Warrior's Mind: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Thought Processes of Humanity's Greatest Representatives.

"That's for you," Marcus said generously. "I think it will help a lot."

Faith nodded. "Thank you for that information, Dr. Sullivan. And thank you for the book. We might reach out for more help at a later time."

The two of them stood, and Faith left Marcus a card. He took it and gave her a smile that looked a little too eager for her comfort. "I don't suppose you'd consider allowing me to interview your killer once you find him? It would be a fascinating insight into the mind of a warrior."

"Not a chance," Faith said firmly.

Marcus sighed. "Well, I had to ask. Good luck anyway, agents."

Faith felt more than a little frustrated as they left Sullivan's house, but this hadn't been a completely wasted effort.

Even though Marcus had told them little that they knew already, he had offered a concise profile of their killer.

Better, he had offered an identifiable one.

They still had more work to do to solve the case, but Faith felt that they had taken an important step forward.

At least, she hoped so. Night would fall soon, and she worried what horror it would bring.

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"Would it be inappropriate to say I didn't like that guy?" Michael said as he pulled into the parking lot of their hotel in Danbury.

"No?" Faith asked.

"He was like a ghoul," Michael said, shivering with disgust."

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Wow. You really didn't like him."

Michael sighed. "I have a hard time with pompous, arrogant intellectuals. Add to that his macabre fascination with death, and you have a good recipe for a tough personality to deal with."

"I didn't take it as a fascination with death," Faith said, punching the call button for the elevator.

"Just the dealers of death," Michael said. Faith's lips thinned, and he sighed again. "I didn't mean it like that. I just feel like people shouldn't be so concerned with the reasons people die."

"We're concerned with the reasons people die," she reminded him.

"No, I mean... Forget it. Never mind."

The elevator arrived, and the group rode it in silence. Turk wagged his tail and looked between his humans, wondering why they were upset at each other.

They weren't really upset with each other.

They were both frustrated with their lack of progress and taking it out on each other in different ways.

They'd worked together long enough that they knew how to handle this occasional strife, though, and by the time they reached their room, they were able to work together again.

Faith made Turk some dinner, and Michael ordered food for the two of them. While the Turks ate and waited for their food to arrive, they got back to the job.

"Let's give Marcus the benefit of the doubt," Faith suggested. "We don't really have a better idea at the moment."

"Fair enough," Michael allowed, starting coffee in the pot. "So our killer is a warrior who reveres other warriors. Why is he showing his respect to these warriors by killing them?"

"I think the respect lies in how he's killing them," Faith replied. "I think the reason he's killing them is different. Related, maybe, but different. Remember, Marcus said that he believes he's granting them a warrior's death. So why would they need a warrior's death?"

"A warrior's death is achieved in combat with a superior foe," Michael countered. "He isn't a superior foe. He's ambushing them. Maybe he thinks that makes him superior, but it clashes with the idea that he respects them."

"Maybe he thinks they were denied a warrior's death," Faith replied. "If that's the case, then he wouldn't need to grant them the circumstances of a warrior's death."

“He would just need to change the ending,” Michael concluded.

“Exactly. They were supposed to die a warrior’s death, but for some reason or another, they didn’t. The killer is fixing that by giving them the death that was stolen from them.”

Michael nodded. “Well, it’s an idea.”

“It’s the most complete idea we’ve had to work with so far.”

“Fair enough,” Michael admitted.

He poured two cups of coffee and set one in front of Faith, then sat with the other in the second of the room’s two chairs. He looked at Turk to see that he’d finished his dinner and was now sleeping in between the beds again. “He’s been sleeping a lot this time around, huh?”

Faith’s shoulders tensed. “Well, he’s recovering from the Messenger’s attack. He’s probably not at a hundred percent yet. I know he passed his physicals, but he’s probably got a little way to go before he’s back at his peak.”

“Yeah.” Michael lowered his gaze. “Look, I fought for you two to stay in the field because I think it’s best for you, but if you really feel that Turk needs to be put to pasture, I won’t stand in your way again.”

Faith sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Let’s not talk about this right now, okay?”

“Okay,” Michael said. “I just realize I was being kind of selfish before, and I’m sorry for that.”

“So be unselfish and focus on the case,” Faith snapped.

“Right. Sorry.”

Faith felt immediate guilt for snapping at Michael, but she really wasn't ready to have another heart-to-heart about the future.

And it was frustrating. He was the reason she was still here.

She had one foot out the door, and Michael pulled her back in.

It was too late for him to have second thoughts about this.

Don't blame him. You didn't want to leave. You were just scared. He reminded you what the future looks like if you give into fear.

And now she was fixating on exactly the subject she didn't want to fixate on. She took a deep breath and pushed forward. “I think we've chased the thread of the locations as far as we can. I think we should focus on the victims again, especially now that we have a good picture of our killer.”

“What else is there to know about our victims? They both pretended to be happy when they were actually dying inside. The only difference is that Paul showed his happy face to his wife and enjoyed a good marriage while Kevin showed his depression to his wife and lost his marriage.”

His eyes widened. “Actually, that could be part of the killer's motive.

Not the marriage part, but the dying inside part.

Maybe that's why he chose these victims. He could feel like he was responsible for

helping them because no one else knew the struggle they were facing.

He had to kill them because he was their only chance. ”

“I think you’re right on the money,” Faith agreed. “But for the killer to know that about the victims, he would have to know them personally, and we’ve got alibis for everyone close to them.”

Michael stroked his chin. “Maybe it’s a therapist. He could have heard both of their woes and elected to provide them with a compassionate death.”

Faith tensed slightly. That made a lot of sense.

After all, she knew all about therapists who moonlighted as killers.

"Let's look into the victims' backgrounds and see if anything comes up.

Since the victims were murdered, we can ignore HIPAA concerns and get their insurance companies to provide the information we need. "

“I’ll take Paul Martinez, you take Kevin Barnes?”

“Deal.”

The two of them got to work, calling the appropriate VA contacts and determining if the victims ever shared a therapist. This turned out to be a more difficult task than Faith had anticipated, not because the VA was uncooperative but because neither victim had attended therapy for any length of time, and they didn’t seem to have ever seen the same therapist. In a bout of frustration and desperation, they just asked for the entire VA and military history of both victims, anything on public record.

That didn't yield a common contact, but it did yield an interesting fact.

Both men had lost people under their command in combat.

Paul Martinez was an Air Combat Controller who'd lost his entire platoon in a Taliban ambush outside of Mosul.

The vehicle in which Barnes's squad was travelling had been destroyed by an IED leaving him the only survivor.

"Well, that adds another layer to the motive," Michael said when they had finished sharing their findings. "He's not just targeting veterans. He's targeting survivors."

"Specifically survivors who show survivors' guilt," Faith said.

"But why these two?" She sighed and dropped her chin into her hands.

"Two men from two different branches of service working two different jobs: an Air Combat Controller and an infantry squad leader." She shook her head. "Who could have seen both people?"

"A general, maybe?" Michael asked. "Or another high-ranking officer?"

Faith shook her head. "It's extremely unlikely that anyone high enough up the chain of command to have authority over units from multiple branches would have any kind of face-to-face contact with first- or mid-rank NCOs.

" She crossed her arms. "It's like we keep learning more and more about the why, but we still can't figure out the who. We know why the locations, we know why these victims, we know why the MO... but who? Damn it, who?"

She got to her feet and started pacing. After a minute or two, she sat down again. She was exhausted, mentally and physically. It was nearing midnight, and while they knew much more about the case than they did at the start of the day, they were still no closer to finding their killer.

“I say we call it for tonight,” Michael said. “We’ve dug as far as we can, and we’re hitting a wall. If we keep banging our heads against it, all we’re gonna get is a migraine.”

Faith scowled. “We slept last night and woke up to another body.”

“I know. I’m not happy about this. But I can’t think where else to look right now. Can you?”

She shook her head slowly.

“Exactly. Let’s get some rest, and in the morning, with fresh eyes, we’ll start again.”

Faith’s jaw tightened until it hurt. She held that tension for a moment, then relaxed. “All right.”

Michael squeezed her shoulder, then headed to the shower.

Faith returned to her seat, swiveling it to face Turk.

She watched his chest rise and fall, letting her eyes travel over his powerful haunches and sinewy shoulders.

He didn’t look like an old dog. He didn’t limp, he wasn’t slow, and he didn’t have any trouble eating.

His eyes were clear and alert, and his teeth were still sharp and healthy. His hearing was just as good as ever.

But there was the white spreading on his muzzle and the gray popping up on his back.

And he had been sleeping a lot more than usual.

He usually slept through the night, only waking if she had a nightmare, but he had taken several naps during the day as well.

Most of the time they spent driving or in the hotel room, he was sleeping.

It could just be that he was recovering from the attack he'd suffered, but even if that were true, it could be that the attack had only accelerated an aging process that had begun years ago.

She was ready to leave out of fear for him. She had stayed because leaving meant the Messenger had defeated her.

Maybe it was better if the Messenger did defeat her.

Was Faith's pride worth driving Turk to an early grave?

Would it really be the end of the world if someone else brought the Messenger to justice?

Let her and West go to prison, laughing at how they'd overcome the great Faith Bold.

So what? They'd still be in prison, and she and Turk would be free of the fear that dominated their lives.

She tried to convince herself of that, but something cold and hard in the back of her mind couldn't quite accept that ending to her story.

Michael stepped out of the shower and hooked a thumb back toward the bathroom. Your turn. Faith grabbed her change of clothes and headed for her own shower. The warm water soothed the tension in her body but did nothing to ease the worry in her mind.

She'd have to make a choice soon. And she'd have to stand by that decision, no matter what Michael or anyone else said.

No matter if the choice satisfied her pride or not.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:10 am

“Two-nine-four, we have a ten-ninety for twelve-oh-one Washburn, please respond.”

Officer Willie Glass of the Philadelphia Police Department grabbed his radio and replied, “Ten-four, this is two-nine-four, on my way to twelve-oh-one Washburn. What’s the situation?”

"We have a resident complaining of a strong odor coming from the neighboring apartment. Both the neighbor and the building manager have attempted to contact the resident of the apartment from which the odor is emanating and have received no response. The manager is requesting a wellness check."

Willie felt a chill when he heard that. This had all the hallmarks of a dead body.

Don’t jump to conclusions. Could be an old cat lady who lets her pets pee all over and doesn’t clean up after them. Which would only be marginally better than a dead body.

Despite that last thought, he felt the chill subside as he imagined some crone with thirty cats shedding, meowing, hissing and pissing all over everything.

He smiled. Hissing and pissing. That was a good one. He’d have to find a chance to use that.

“Ten-four, dispatch. I’ll be on location in three minutes.”

“Roger, two-nine-four.”

He replaced the radio handset, hit the lights and flipped a U-turn.

In high school, he and his friends used to call that flipping a bitch.

He had no idea why. It was just one of those things kids said, thinking it made them look cool and tough when it only made them look dorky and stupid.

But he was just as dorky and stupid as the rest of them, so he wasn't going to judge.

At least flipping a bitch was more exciting in his police cruiser than in his 2001 Honda Civic.

He reached the location in three minutes as promised and pulled to a stop in front of the Wakefield Apartments. The manager and a middle-aged woman wearing a flannel nightgown—Willie assumed was the neighbor—waited for him just past the entrance.

“Hey, officer,” the woman said. “Sorry to bother you so late in the evening, but I’m worried about my neighbor, Jean. She’s not answering her phone or her door, and her apartment smells like death.” She blanched and said, “Oh God. I wish I hadn’t said that.”

Me too , Willie thought. The chill was back now. He kept it from his face as he asked, “Can you show me where the unit is?”

“It’s right up there, officer,” the neighbor said, pointing at the second floor of one of the buildings.

“Which unit?” Willie asked.

“One-twenty-four,” the woman replied. “I’m one-twenty-six.”

Willie nodded and turned to the manager. “You don’t talk?”

The manager frowned, and Willie regretted his rudeness. Jeez, why was he so jumpy?

“Do you need me to?” the manager asked, clearly and understandably miffed.

Willie would need to turn on the charm to make up for his earlier question. “Not at the moment, sir, but if you have a key to the residence, I’d appreciate it if you tried that so I don’t have to damage the property.”

“I tried it already,” the manager said. “Why would I call you if I hadn’t tried to get inside first?”

Because it’s against the law for you to enter a tenant’s home without their permission , Willie thought but didn’t say.

“I understand that, sir, but I need to see you try again just for my own records.” As an afterthought, he added, “It’s department policy.

” It wasn’t, but it was a useful generic excuse that could be applied to just about any situation, and he seriously doubted the manager was going to bother to follow up on that claim.

The manager muttered something about "lazy pigs" and shuffled toward the stairs.

Willie let the insult roll off his back.

In twelve years with the department, he'd heard far worse things than that.

Besides, Willie's own fear had made him short with the manager to begin with.

No doubt, the manager was just as worried about what they would find.

The neighbor followed behind the two men, keeping them in front of her but craning her neck to see past them. Willie despised looky-loos. How pathetic did your life need to be that you needed to gawk at the misfortune of others?

You're only focusing on them because being irritated is more comfortable than being afraid, he told himself. Grow a pair and do your job.

The manager led them to unit one-twenty-four and tried the door. The key turned easily enough in the handle, but when the manager pushed the door open, it only moved a quarter inch before stopping. A harsh scraping noise accompanied that movement. Something was blocking the door.

Willie's eyes narrowed. "Back away from the door, you two."

The manager noted the change in Willie's voice and turned worried eyes on him. "You don't think someone's in there, do you? I mean—"

"I don't know. Back away."

The manager complied. Willie drew his weapon. Strangely enough, now that it was all but certain he was going to face danger, his fear had subsided. He credited his training for that. He'd never had to fire his weapon outside of the range, but if it came to that, he could handle himself.

Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that.

"Philadelphia Police!" he called. "Open the door and come on out with your hands clearly visible!"

No answer. He drew in breath to try again, and when he did, the odor hit him: thick, sweet, and rotten. He gagged, and when he repeated his command, his voice trembled.

No answer.

The chill had returned slightly, not because he feared there was a killer still inside the apartment, but because he hadn't heard any cats behind the door either, and if it wasn't a pet making that smell, then it was something else.

Or someone else.

He sighed and squared himself in front of the door.

He used to have a fantasy of kicking a door down like a badass cop on tv, but now that he was here about to do just that, he felt no excitement at all.

Once the door opened, the mystery of what lay behind it would be revealed.

He wasn't sure he was prepared for that.

He took a deep breath, fought back another gag, and kicked hard. A crack split the door in half horizontally. The top half swung inward, revealing a chair hooked under the doorknob that now held only the bottom half in place.

The smell rolled over Willie like a tidal wave. Behind him, the manager swore and gagged. Willie moved the chair out from under the doorknob and opened the door.

He stepped inside. The apartment was dark and appeared to have been ransacked, but it wasn't the home's treasures that Willie was concerned with.

The reason for the odor sat in the kitchen, tied to a chair with nylon cables around her ankles, her wrists, and her neck.

Willie could only just tell the victim was a she.

Hell, he could only just tell it was human.

The body had been dead for several days, and it was impossible to know if her horribly disfigured face and limbs were a result of all of her tendons and ligaments being cut or if gas built up inside of her had bloated the body beyond recognition.

When he got to the eyes, he lost control. He turned around and vomited heavily, struggling for breath as he listened to the neighbor scream.

When he got himself under control, he grabbed his radio and said, "Dispatch, this is two-nine-four requesting additional units. We have a homicide."

He turned back to the body, but the sight of the festering donkey's tail pinned to the head where Jean's right eye should have been overwhelmed him once more.

He stumbled out of the unit, sank to his knees and vomited again, the acrid stench of the vomit mixing grotesquely with the rotten sweetness of the dead woman's body.

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Faith thought she had managed a dreamless sleep until Michael asked her over breakfast, "What was your nightmare this time?"

She blinked. "What? I don't remember having a nightmare."

He shook his head. "Well, you had one. You were screaming, 'He's back! He's back!' I assumed it meant West."

Faith colored a little and looked around at the other guests, grabbing their breakfasts in the hotel's dining room. None of them looked her way, but that didn't mean they hadn't heard her screaming. "Really? Why didn't Turk wake me up?"

"He tried. You just went back to sleep. You were peaceful, so we left it at that, but if Turk naps today, it's because he spent the last three hours of the night watching you."

Faith looked down at her dog, who watched her with concern. Were her nightmares the reason he was slowing down? Was he not getting good rest?

Her concern was relieved somewhat when he dipped his head toward the sausages she had on her plate. She rolled her eyes and handed him the sausages. One of the four links might have touched the ground before he devoured it, but he didn't think so.

"Lovely. Now he's going to stink up the room," Michael complained.

"You think you don't fart?" Faith retorted.

Michael adopted an injured expression, but before he could respond to her accusation, she said, “I have an idea where to go with the case.”

Michael perked up, dog farts and nightmares forgotten. “What is it?”

“We need someone who could have interacted with both victims. Aside from high-ranking members of the brass touring the front lines—which is unlikely and even less likely to result in meaningful contact with the victims—there’s only one job description that fits that bill.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense. What is it?”

“Medical officers.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “I thought each branch had their own combat medics.”

“They do, but for injuries that require help more extensive than can be provided at a front-line unit, soldiers get sent to a triage center. The same is true for battlefield deaths. When bodies are recovered, they’re sent to the triage center, processed, and shipped back home.

This isn’t true in all cases, but it’s the most likely reason why someone would have interacted with both of our victims.”

“Either they provided medical care to the victims or watched them mourn the loss of their fallen comrades,” Michael summarized.

“Or both,” Faith agreed. “So we should look at medical personnel who could have interacted with our victims.”

“How do we figure that out?”

“We find out where our victims were deployed when they lost their unit,” Faith replied. “Then we figure out where the casualties from those events would have been sent. We determine who was on staff at those triage centers and we look for anyone at both places.”

Michael frowned. “Sounds tedious.”

“At least it’s tedious work with a definite payoff,” Faith replied.

“Unless we find out no one was at both places.”

Faith glared at him, and he lifted his hands. “Right. Sorry. Positive thinking.”

The two of them cleared their plates and returned to their room. Faith stopped for more sausages and let Turk eat them while she and Michael got to work. Once more, she looked into Kevin Barnes. His unit had been lost while they moved from Kabul to a forward operating base two hundred miles west.

As Michael had predicted, it was tedious work slogging through military records to figure out where the bodies of Barnes’s unit had been sent and where Barnes himself had gone for treatment of his own injuries.

Faith’s memory of the Marine Corps was that their records were very complete and very well organized—just not in any way that made any damned sense.

The Army was even worse. Faith had to talk to four different people before finally getting the answers she needed. Michael had a similarly difficult time with the Air Force, but finally, they were able to gather the pertinent facts.

Paul Martinez’s unit had been ambushed six months prior to the destruction of Barnes’s unit. Paul had sustained multiple gunshot wounds and was transported to the

USS Comfort for treatment and eventual evacuation.

Barnes suffered superficial injuries but insisted on accompanying his unit to their final resting place.

For some reason, his superiors agreed, probably to give themselves time to process the paperwork that eventually cut his tour short and got him sent home on mental health leave.

His unit was sent to the Navy's 53 rd Surface Warfare Medical Squadron, at the time deployed to the expeditionary force's headquarters campus outside of Kabul.

Both Navy units, which was common. The Navy had the greatest number of fully qualified medical personnel and the most resources to handle the bulk of the armed forces' medical needs.

Unfortunately, it seemed that with only a few exceptions, the entirety of the 53 rd Surface Warfare Medical Squadron had been deployed aboard the USS Comfort at the time Paul Martinez underwent treatment. That left them with thirty-four different medical personnel to investigate.

"I think our tedious work just got more tedious," Michael said unhelpfully.

"We need to narrow it down more," Faith replied. "Let's prioritize people who suffered mental health problems after their time serving with the medical squadron."

"Can we get that information?" Michael asked. "HIPAA should prevent us from accessing that, shouldn't it?"

Faith frowned. "We'll have to hope we can convince people to break some rules."

” Michael’s brow furrowed, and Faith said, “We’re running out of options, Michael, and someone out there is running out of time.

We need to figure out who’s doing this. I know you don’t like bending rules, but I don’t want to keep skirting around the answer until we find another dead body in a shallow grave.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I know. You’re right. I just... Well, it is what it is. Let’s start making some calls.”

Convincing people to break rules turned out to be a monumental task.

The VA flatly refused to release that information without a court order.

Ditto the Navy’s Medical Corps. Faith tried calling the retired former head of the 53rd Surface Warfare Medical Squadron while Michael called the captain of the USS Comfort.

Both officers regretted to inform their respective callers that they didn’t have access to the information requested.

Lunchtime found both of them desperate and frustrated. Faith had been so excited for this idea when it first came to her earlier, and now she felt like she had just slammed her head right into another wall.

Michael found the way out, and when he did, Faith only wished more fervently that they had reached their answer earlier. “We could try getting that court order. Then we’re not breaking rules, and we have legal pressure to make the Navy talk.”

Faith sighed. “That means looping Tabitha in and making this an official Bureau request. No way she works with us on that.”

“She’s not a witch, Faith.” Faith glared at him, and he amended his statement.

“Okay, she is, but she’s not so much a witch that she’s going to let a murderer run wild just to screw with you.

She’s your enemy because she genuinely believes that you’re a threat to the Bureau.

” Her glare strengthened, and Michael added, “And she’s wrong.

Obviously. I’m just saying that if I talk to her, I think I can get her to work with us. ”

Faith sighed. “And if not, then what happens? We get pulled off the case? Less capable agents get the job? She didn’t want me on this case, remember? She was trying to shut you up and practically begging Smythe to give me the instructor’s job at Quantico.”

“That’s why I’m going to talk to her,” Michael repeated. “You’re going to pace around the room staring moodily at the ground and imagining Tabitha getting booted out of the Bureau for being an asshole.”

Faith chuckled in spite of her frustration. “All right. Well, how about this? Instead of pacing, I’ll get us some lunch.”

Michael grinned. “Have I ever told you that I love you?”

“It’s come up. Just don’t let Ellie find out you’re still saying it.”

“Why are you so worried about Ellie? She likes you now.”

“She tolerates me now. That’s not the same thing.”

Michael rolled his eyes. "I'll send her a picture of us passionately making out. Sound good?"

Now, it was Faith's turn to roll her eyes. "Call Tabitha. Get that court order. Get that list of possible suspects."

"Sir, yes, sir."

She chuckled on her way out. Michael was a good partner, but he was also the little brother she never had, in all the best and worst ways.

By the time she returned with sub sandwiches for both of them, Michael was on the phone with the Medical Corps getting the answers they needed. It turned out he was right about Tabitha. Fine with Faith. As long as she didn't need to deal with the smug ASAC herself.

According to the Medical Corps and the VA, four of the medical staff who interacted with both Martinez and Barnes were treated for severe PTSD as a result of their time spent in combat, three nurses and one doctor.

One of the nurses was female, five-one, and one hundred four pounds, and could be ruled out based on the fact that she wasn't strong enough to carry dead men up hills and dig their graves.

That left three people. Faith's excitement built again. Finally, they were closing in on their killer.

The first person she called was Chief Petty Officer Martin Coster. She dialed the number the VA had listed for him, and a female voice answered the phone. "Hello?"

“Hello. Is Martin available?”

There was a brief pause before the voice on the other end asked curtly, “Is this some kind of joke?”

Faith frowned. "No, ma'am, it isn't. This is Special Agent Faith Bold of the FBI, and I'm calling because I need to talk to Martin Coster about a very serious matter. Is he available?"

“Uh, no, he’s not available,” the woman replied, anger rising in her voice. “He took his own life two months ago.”

Faith blinked. “Really? His VA records don’t show that.”

“Because the VA is run like a piece of shit by pieces of shit,” the woman snapped, her already frayed emotional control gone. “If you think I’m lying, call the Clark County Coroner’s office. They also saw half of his head splattered across my kitchen table.”

She hung up without waiting for Faith to reply. Faith stared at the phone, kicking herself for flubbing that interaction so badly.

She felt a rush of sympathy for the woman on the other end of the phone call.

How horrible to be so affected by what one had experienced that silence was preferable to the echoed screams of the past. How horrible to love someone going through that pain and be unable to reach them past the walls of memory that imprisoned their mind.

Faith didn’t condone anything the killer had done, of course, but she could understand how someone suffering similar grief could think death was preferable to

living with that pain.

That didn't make it right, though. Not for the victims or for their families. That kind of darkness was another thing Faith had experienced personally, but whether it was administered by one's own hands or the hands of another, death wasn't the way out.

She called the next number for Commander Dr. Henry Paloma.

Dr. Paloma himself answered. He expressed regret at the loss of the victims and provided an easily verified alibi.

He was at work until after six in the evening the nights of both murders and back at work at six the following day.

Since he now lived and practiced in the U.S.

Marshall Islands, it wasn't possible for him to have flown to the East Coast, committed the murders, buried the bodies and flown back.

She hung up just in time for Michael to inform her that his contact had an alibi too.

Once more, they were back at square... well, maybe not one, but it might as well be one.

They had no idea who their killer was, and they were on the wrong side of another afternoon.

It would be two days since the killer's most recent victim, and if he kept to the same pace, he would kill again tonight.

"So what's our next step?" Michael asked. "Where do we go from here?"

The corners of Faith's mouth turned down. Once more, she had to accept an answer she didn't like. "I think we need some help." She sighed. "Call Dr. Sullivan."

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“I would love to assist you two, perhaps in exchange for an interview?”

Faith gritted her teeth at Marcus’s smug tone. Michael’s hands balled into fists, and Faith was grateful that Marcus wasn’t in the room. “I don’t have the authority to grant an exclusive interview,” she replied.

“Whom would I contact to secure that interview?”

Faith sighed. “Marcus, there’s no interview.

All right? This isn’t research for your damned book.

We’re trying to save lives. I’m calling you because we’ve been pushed to the point of desperation, and we need to identify any possible location where our killer might want to bury a body.

Ideally, patrolling these areas will allow us to prevent him from taking his third victim, but just so we’re very clear, I’m asking you to help keep another father from being taken from his children or a husband from his wife or a friend from his loved ones.

Is there any chance that you’re compassionate enough that you might consider helping us for that reason, or is your own personal fame the only reason you exist? ”

Turk and Michael shared concerned looks with each other. Faith didn’t really care. If Marcus wasn’t going to help them, then she wasn’t interested in protecting his feelings.

"All right," Marcus replied with a hurt tone.

"There's no need for you to be rude. Look, you might not consider my work worthwhile, but I do, and so do a lot of other people.

Of course, I don't want others to die, but I don't consider it acting against their interests to also try to advance my research.

I will help you, and I will stop pestering you for an interview.

Can I at least be guaranteed a mention in the media for my assistance in this case? "

Faith rolled her eyes. "Fine. If your information helps us catch this killer, I'll make sure your name is included in the report."

"Excellent. Would you two like some dinner?"

Faith blinked. "Dinner?"

"Yes. I assume you want me to meet you at your hotel."

"I don't think there's a need for us to meet at all," Faith said. "Why can't you give us coordinates over the phone?"

"Because it's much easier to show you on a map exactly where you need to go."

Faith almost refused and told him to just give her coordinates instead, but after glancing at Michael, she sighed and said, "We're fine without dinner—"

Michael cleared his throat, and Faith rolled her eyes again. "My partner will discuss dinner with you. After that, he'll give you the address to our hotel. Get here as soon

as you can, please. In fact, get here first, and we'll order in."

"That works for me. I'll leave immediately."

He hung up, and Faith glared at Michael. "Dinner? Really?"

"I have a feeling this conversation is going to end with us patrolling a lot of ground, possibly on foot. Possibly a chase and a fight as well. We need fuel." When she continued to glare at him, he said, "You can glare at me all you want, but you know I'm right."

Turk's stomach growled, and he whined at Faith. She sighed and got up to feed him. As she did, her own stomach growled. She really hated it when Michael was right.

"Just make sure he works through his dinner," Faith said as she spooned Turk's food into his bowl. "We're not here for a social hour."

"You'll be here, and I'm sure you'll make him work through his dinner. But also, yes, I'll make him work. I don't like him either, Faith, but we're not getting anywhere right now, and our killer could be striking again tonight."

Faith's lips pressed together, but not in anger this time.

Michael was right. The entire reason they had called Marcus in the first place was because they were nearing two nights since Kevin Barnes's murder, and they still didn't have a lead on their suspect.

Faith didn't like staking out potential crime scenes as a method of deduction, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and even a slim chance at stopping their killer was better than none.

So she'd have to put up with Marcus for a little while. "Order dinner, and then call and tell him what you're ordering," Faith said. "I have a feeling he's the type to spend forty minutes staring at a menu before he makes up his mind."

Surprisingly, Marcus didn't protest at all when he arrived and saw the pizza Michael had ordered. In fact, he seemed excited. "Wonderful! We'll be ready to get started right away!"

He tossed the covers off Michael's bed and spread a large map of the northeastern coast of the U.S. across it. He grabbed two slices of pizza and set them on the nightstand, then appeared to forget about them entirely.

He pointed at a red dot near Philadelphia and said, "I've labeled every single known battlefield in the area with colored dots arranged in order of likelihood. Blue is most likely, green second, then yellow, then orange, then red, then black."

"How did you determine the likelihood of each site?" Michael asked.

"How well-known the sites are. I admit that it's not a perfect means of determining the killer's knowledge, but many of these battlefields aren't publicly discussed, and I assume you've already vetted the employees at each dig site or you'd have arrested one of them already.

So the killer must have heard about these battlefields from journals or news.

That means he gets his information publicly, and—"

"Okay," Faith interrupted. "Fair enough. Like you said, it's not a perfect measurement, but it works. We'll go with it."

She looked down at the map and frowned. “Which means there are... Christ, how many dots are there?”

“Two hundred fifty.”

“Fucking hell,” Michael whispered, running his hand over his head. “How many blue ones?”

“Ten. Twenty green, thirty yellow, eighty orange, ninety red, and twenty black.”

“All right,” Faith said. “Here’s the plan. We’re going to enlist the help of every agency we can and place patrols near these sites. Since we know our killer is committing the murders elsewhere and transporting the bodies, we’re going to have patrols watching nearby neighborhoods as well.”

“That’s an awful lot of manpower,” Michael pointed out.

“I know,” Faith agreed, “but like you said, we’re out of options.”

Michael sighed and said, “I’ll start getting a list of agencies together. I’ll have to call the Field Office for help. We’re going to need some weight behind this request to mobilize so many officers.”

“Do the best you can,” Faith said. “See if they’ll let us use Danbury PD headquarters as the command center for the operation.”

Michael started typing the list into his laptop while Faith studied the map.

Most of the green and blue sites were clustered along the Upper Delaware River, not surprising since that had been the site of both of their previous murders.

The others were color-coded roughly based on distance from the river, but there was considerable overlap in cases where some battlefields were apparently lesser known despite being closer to the river.

Faith's concern was that the killer wouldn't follow the river. He had done it twice, but those two data points weren't enough to prove that he would continue to do so.

She looked at the map, and her shoulders slumped. There was so much ground to cover. So many people whose lives were at risk. Their lives would now be in the hands of a reverse grid search. A grid stakeout.

"Do you think we'll actually catch him?" Marcus asked.

Faith took a breath to settle her emotions, then replied, "That's the idea. Just so we're clear, though, there is no we. You have provided your help, and we appreciate that, but we no longer need anything else from you."

Marcus blinked. "What? But... I can help you stake out one of these sites. I can look for the killer with you."

"No, you can't. You're a civilian. It would be incredibly illegal of me to let you join a stakeout."

"I won't tell anyone!" Marcus protested. "I promise! I'll just... Wait! It can be a citizen's arrest! Those are legal, right?"

Faith sighed and met Marcus's eyes. "Dr. Sullivan, once again, I appreciate your help, but this is not an adventure, all right? This isn't 'fun.' This is a very serious murder investigation, and while your expertise might prove invaluable to its successful conclusion, I am not going to entertain your childish need to feel important."

He flinched and gave her a wounded look that only made him look more like a child. “I’m just trying to help.”

Jesus Christ, how old are you? “Thank you. We don’t need your help staking out the sites. In fact, thank you for your maps, but it’s time for you to leave.”

He jutted his chin out. “If you don’t let me stay, then I’m taking my maps with me.”

“Go ahead,” Michael said without turning from his laptop. “I already took pictures of them.”

Marcus blinked. He looked back at Faith, seemed about to say something else, then finally sighed.

The pout left his face, and his tone became something almost reasonable when he said, “Like I told you before, I don’t feel like it’s too much to ask that I get some benefit from this.

I am performing a valuable service to American history.

I know you think I’m just selfish, and maybe that’s part of it, but I need to preserve these forgotten moments in our history out of respect for—”

Faith lifted her eyes to him, and he lifted his hands. “All right. I’ll sit quietly in this corner and just observe.” He sat at the head of the bed and folded his hands in his lap. “Is this okay with you?”

Faith would much rather he had just left, but she didn’t have the energy to argue further with him. “Fine. Just stay there.”

“Okay,” Michael said. “I have, in no particular order, the Philadelphia, Baltimore,

and New York City field offices of the FBI, the state police of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Connecticut. I have the National Parks Service, the National Forest Service, the New York and Connecticut State Parks Services, and sixty different local agencies. We can start making our calls.”

“Good. Call the Philadelphia office and get them to work. Tabitha seems to like you even if she despises me, so maybe she’ll be inclined to help you without pitching a fit.”

“Who’s Tabitha?” Marcus asked.

Faith glared at him, and he clammed up.

Faith stroked Turk’s fur as they started calling the different agencies and asking for help. This would be the most thorough manhunt they’d undertaken since the search for Franklin West.

But, of course, Franklin West had escaped justice for months. He had spent plenty of that time less than ten miles from his home in Philadelphia. He had invaded Faith's home three times, attacked her twice, and nearly killed her once.

Faith didn't imagine that this killer was on the same level as West, but that didn't mean he would be easy to catch.

There was a lot of space to cover and a lot of service members whose lives were on the line.

They were casting a wide net, but the ocean was bigger than any net, and their killer had one key advantage.

He knew exactly what he was going to do. Faith and Michael were only guessing at

broad strokes.

Turk whined softly, and Faith whispered, “I know, boy. I know. Don’t worry. We’ll get him.”

She tried to sound confident, but the look in Turk’s eyes told her she had failed.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:10 am

The minister walked through the rolling hills of Cecil County, Maryland just south of the Mason-Dixon line and smiled at the fireflies God had sent to light his way. A mist rose from the ground to water the plants, just as it had in the days before the flood.

The minister loved nights like these. The world never felt so pure as it did now. He hoped that the next sheep he ministered to would return from time to time to visit his resting place and enjoy the beauty of the place the minister had chosen for him.

The minister reached his spot and readied himself behind a weeping willow tree that overlooked the banks of a small creek, one of the many thousands of little streams that emptied into Chesapeake Bay a few miles east. The tree was fitting for the minister's mission.

The sheep he was about to send home would soon have his tears wiped away.

The willow with its drooping branches and hanging leaves could be interpreted as a symbol of his grief, or it could be a sign that his grief was coming to an end.

As soon as he passed this symbol of sorrow, he would be welcomed into a land where no tears were ever shed.

His smile faded a little as he thought of the news report he'd seen earlier that evening. Staff Sergeant Barnes's death had been reported as a tragedy. The news story had focused on the tears his children shed, the hole he would leave in their lives.

The minister's heart went out to those children.

He understood their grief, of course. It was natural for those left behind to selfishly desire that their loved ones remain with them here where their eyes could see and their hands could touch.

Faith was never tested more powerfully than when it was tested by death.

If only people would remember the words of the Holy Scripture! Death wasn't the end. Far from it. Death was the beginning of a new and better life, one filled with joy and peace beyond anything even imagined here on Earth.

I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.

The minister's mouth moved as he recited the verse, but no sound escaped his lips.

He didn't want to scare his sheep into fleeing.

Maybe it was wrong of him to deliver his mercy so swiftly.

Maybe he should allow his sheep's Faith to be tested that the reward of eternal life would be all the sweeter, but he couldn't bring himself to do that.

This soldier of God had suffered so much already in this life.

The minister wanted him to drift peacefully into the arms of God, not cry out in fear as he crossed the river.

The minister hoped God would forgive him for this.

He turned to happier thoughts. This would be the third sheep he had liberated, the

third one he had sent home to the rest he had earned.

The guilt this man carried would fall from his shoulders.

The grief he felt would be banished. He would no longer be a man out of place.

Satan's efforts to chain him to a world he should have fled long ago would be defeated.

Finally, he would receive the death he had earned as a good soldier of God.

He would be allowed to rejoin his brothers and sisters in arms and lift not weapons but hands in praise to the Most High.

His face spread into a grin. Someone would understand soon enough. Someone would recognize what the minister was doing and explain to the world that the minister was helping to free these sheep. He wasn't a murderer; he was a shepherd.

As he waited, his mind drifted back to his encounters with all three of the men he was rescuing.

The first man, Paul Martinez, had been so angry when the minister met with him.

He had railed against God for saving him alive when his comrades had died.

He had cursed the name of the Most High.

The minister had tried to comfort him, but even then, he wondered why a merciful God would allow a great leader to carry a guilt he hadn't earned.

At the time, he had considered it a test of Paul's Faith.

He had told him so, exhorting him to trust in the omniscience of God that there was a reason for all things that occurred.

Now, he realized that it wasn't God who had saved Paul but Satan.

As he had with Job, the Accuser persecuted Paul for no other reason than his cruel spite and vindictiveness to the servants of God.

Kevin Barnes hadn't shown anger but a deep abiding grief.

He had spoken at length about the people killed in the explosion.

He knew all of them well. He knew their families.

He knew the pain that so many would experience at their loss, and he regretted that he couldn't save them.

It was a pointless regret. Of course, he couldn't be expected to save them.

Their fates were in God's hands, not his own, and it wasn't his negligence that led to their deaths, but the actions of Satan working through the disciples of Hell.

But there was no consoling Kevin. Not then. Now, of course, he was comforted by the loving hands of Jesus Christ.

This third would soon receive succor. Gunnery Sergeant Carl Jameson would no longer have to take medicine to sleep through the nightmares of his helicopter crashing. He would no longer be plagued by the screams of his dying comrades. He would laugh and sing with them in front of the throne of God.

The minister couldn't wait to free him. He couldn't wait to give him relief from his

pain.

He couldn't wait for the inevitable moment when he would be discovered at rest, and those others suffering as these three did would know that there was a minister looking out for them, someone who would bring them rest. Someone who would end this fucking nightmare and silence the voices of the goddamned incessant, soulless dead.

The minister flinched as that last thought crossed his mind.

He had been so focused on the glory of the task he was about to complete that he hadn't guarded his heart.

Satan had found a way in and was trying to lead him astray.

He was trying to distract the Minister with the memories of the dead, taking his focus away from the living.

He closed his eyes and clasped his hands together. Once more, his lips moved soundlessly.

God, please forgive me. Please forgive me for straying from your perfect path. Please help me return to my ministry of love. Please just keep them quiet until I've finished delivering this soul into your hands.

Images flashed across the minister's mind. Men with limbs torn off. Women mangled beyond recognition. The sightless, empty eyes of the dead.

And the screams. The screams, the screams, the screams, the screams, the screams !

"God, please," he whispered, aloud this time. "Please help me."

A branch snapped to his right. He froze, and his eyes snapped open. He sat stock still, listening intently.

He was coming! His sheep was coming! The minister could hear his footsteps crunching along the dirt path that followed this creek.

The minister forgot about the screams and the faces of the dead. Tonight was about eternal life, eternal freedom from death. Tonight, he would minister to another sufferer. His own suffering could wait. God would call him home when it was his time.

He drew his knife and waited until Jameson passed him, jogging steadily down the path, his breath escaping in even puffs through his mouth.

Once Jameson was past, the minister moved.

He had been spared combat even if he hadn't been spared its horrors, but he had trained well and kept up with that training after his departure from the service.

Jameson never saw him coming. There was no fear, no pain, no grief. One moment, Jameson was tethered to this world, and the next, his soul was free.

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As the night darkened, Faith became clear about the impossibility of their task.

Each agency they called met them with an interrogation.

Why do you need our help? How do you know that there's a risk of murder in this area?

Do you have a description of the suspect?

Why can't the FBI handle this? Several other questions were all different variations of, but is this really necessary?

Once the questions were answered, the excuses began. We're stretched thin as it is. We don't have the budget for this. We don't have enough vehicles. All different variations of "We don't wanna."

Faith knew it wasn't fair of her to think like this.

Law enforcement agencies really did operate on strict budgets, and with all of the other responsibilities that they had to handle on a daily basis, devoting a significant amount of time, manpower, and money to the possibility that someone might be killed was sometimes just not possible.

But it was frustrating because she was right. Someone was in danger. Someone was going to be buried in a shallow grave somewhere. It just really sucked that someone somewhere was all they knew.

The field office seemed to be having the same trouble.

When Michael called to check up on their progress, he was informed that the local agencies had all dragged their feet or offered a token complement of a single patrol car with two officers to watch access roads to nearby locations.

The field offices had politely refused to send any of their agents away from their own cases to help with one of Philly's cases, and the state agencies had not so politely told the FBI to screw off.

Philly was willing to send agents, but right now there were only six agents not actively working other cases, and nothing in the Philadelphia area was labeled anything higher than orange.

So once more, they were stuck.

Faith crossed her arms and sighed. "I'm not willing to just give up. We're just going to have to figure out where he's most likely to attack next and go there ourselves."

"That's like trying to catch a fish by dropping a spear from an airplane over the ocean," Michael said.

"Well, we have a better chance of catching a fish that way than we do by not dropping a spear at all," Faith said. "And I can't just sit still and do nothing."

Marcus lifted his hands, "I think I can help with that."

Faith really didn't want to hear his voice anymore, but once again they were beggars who didn't get to choose. "How?"

"The past two burial sites have been at archaeological digs, right?" he said. "Battle

sites, yes, but also archaeological digs; places where the killer knew that people were digging into the dirt and would eventually discover the bodies.”

Faith blinked. She had said several times before that the killer was choosing places where the bodies would be discovered. She had been so worked up by their lack of progress that she had made a simple problem more complicated than it had to be.

And it had taken a pedantic niche historian to remind her of that. She hated to admit it, but Marcus was turning out to be pretty damned useful. “Yes. You’re right. How many of these sites are active archaeological digs.”

He grinned. “Just one.”

Faith’s heart leaped. “Which one?”

He got up and pointed at one of the southernmost dots on the map.

"Right here. Appleton, Maryland, near Chesapeake Bay.

The Smithsonian is sponsoring a museum there honoring the battle of Dall's Point. They're digging up the site to break ground for the museum and to find any remnants of the battle that haven't already been recovered.”

Faith didn't care at all what the battle of Dall's Point was. The rest, however, interested her greatly.

“All right. That’s where we’re going then. Michael, contact local law enforcement and tell them we’re on our way, and they can either help us or be mentioned by name in the paper if someone dies because of their lack of assistance.”

She turned to Marcus. “Dr. Sullivan, I can’t take you with us, but I want to thank you

again for your help. I'll make sure the Bureau knows that you've been of service."

He smiled, and for once, his expression didn't grate on Faith. "I appreciate that, Special Agent. Good luck."

The four of them left the building. Marcus lingered for a moment while the other three got into Michael's car, but he satisfied himself with just a wave goodbye before climbing into his Honda Accord and driving back east.

The three of them headed south, moving as fast as traffic would allow. Appleton was a three-hour drive from Danbury, and it was already dark outside.

Faith looked out the window as Michael drove.

It was a new moon tonight, which was an odd term, Faith thought, for describing a moon that reflected no light.

If its opposite was a full moon, then this should be called an empty moon.

It was a more fitting description of the blackness under which it left the world.

The stars that dotted the sky offered some color to the blackness but almost nothing in the way of useful light.

Faith imagined the killer moving through this darkness, dependent—as they were—on a beam of artificial light to illuminate his way.

Would the killer feel the same anxiety that most people felt in that kind of darkness?

Would he feel some sort of kinship with that darkness and perhaps gratitude for its presence as it hid him from the prying eyes of the world?

Would he notice it was there at all, or would his task occupy him enough that he didn't even register the void above him?

Turk didn't nap during the drive this time. His tail switched back and forth, and his eyes remained alert throughout the long journey. He didn't seem impatient like Michael or contemplative like Faith. He was entirely focused on the assignment to come.

Faith smiled slightly as she admired her dog. He was so strong. Even after fighting in war, losing his handler to Jethro Trammell, and getting hurt by three different serial killers over the years, he showed no fear in his eyes, only determination.

Faith reached back and scratched him under his chin. "Good boy. I love you, Turk."

Turk returned an appreciative bark but kept his eyes focused on the road

The Cecil County Sheriff's Office wasn't happy with Michael's threatening tone over the phone, but they agreed to patrol the residential neighborhoods near the site of the museum and the attached archaeological dig.

Faith was fine with that until they arrived at the dig and realized just how large it was.

The past two digs had been small, only a few acres in size. This one was close to a thousand acres.

"I guess there's a difference between a battle between two Native warrior bands, a skirmish between a militia and a company of British Army regulars, and a pitched battle between the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac."

Faith wasn't sure if those were the correct Civil War armies, but she didn't really care. "Call Cecil County and see if they can give us some units on the north end of the site. We'll start looking around the south end."

Turk's presence was a big advantage. His nose was keen enough that he could detect the killer from a pretty good distance if the wind was right. Another advantage was the openness of the site. As far as Faith could see, there were no trees or hills to obscure her vision.

The problem was that she could only see about one hundred fifty feet ahead with her flashlight. They could only cover a small portion of the site at one time. Their killer—if he showed up here—would be able to see their flashlight beams long before they could see him.

To make matters worse, Cecil County wasn't interested in diverting any more resources their way. "They're stretched thin," Michael repeated. "Surprise, surprise. If we find anything, they'll jump on it, but they can't leave their populated places unpatrolled, yadda yadda."

Faith nodded. She didn't have the energy to be upset anymore either. They would make do the best of the situation.

"Do you feel comfortable splitting up?" she asked Michael. "I'll take Turk and go east, and you head west?"

"Comfortable? No. But I'll do it anyway."

He checked his gun, then checked his radio. Faith did the same, and after exchanging a tense smile, he said, "Be careful. Both of you. If you find anything, you call me immediately. If you get into an emergency, hit the squelch button."

Faith nodded. “We’ll be all right. Good luck.”

“You too.”

Turk trotted a few yards ahead of Faith, nose in the air, searching for a whiff of their murderer.

Faith followed behind, shining her flashlight ahead, scanning the ground from side to side.

She heard nothing but crickets and saw nothing but dirt, grass, and the occasional example of wildlife.

Most of the wildlife were insects, but she caught sight of a few opossums and once a large bushy thing that she thought was a baby bear at first but instead turned out to be a skunk.

Thankfully, the polecat trundled on its way without feeling a need to spray Faith first.

As they moved deeper into the dig, fog lifted from the ground like a shroud.

Faith shivered, not from the cold but from the eeriness of the place.

Once, she thought she caught the Messenger’s crazed grin underneath her wild eyes and cursed as she aimed her gun toward the apparition, but it turned out to be only a trick of the stars shining through the gnarled branches of a spreading oak tree.

She’s not here. There’s no way she would even know you two were here. You’re safe.

An owl swooped soundlessly over her head, only identified when it passed into her

flashlight beam directly in front of her. She cursed again and stumbled, falling to the ground. She rolled when she fell, so the impact didn't hurt that much, but it was pretty damned embarrassing.

Good thing Michael wasn't here to see that.

She sighed and started to get up but stopped when she saw Turk.

He had stopped stock still and was now staring into the distance like a pointer.

She got quickly to her feet and aimed the flashlight in that direction.

The light fell on a small stand of trees.

They looked like willows to Faith, but she wasn't sure. She had never been much of a tree buff.

She didn't see any sign of people or movement, but Turk's nose was far more sensitive than her eyesight. "Go Turk," she whispered. "Go get him."

Turk crept forward, sniffing and staring. For a minute or so, he did only that, testing the air every few feet to make sure that he was really smelling what he thought he was smelling. Then he started to trot, feet padding lightly on the ground.

Faith followed as quietly as she could, mimicking Turk's caution. She pulled out her radio and quietly told Michael, "Turk has something. We're proceeding to a stand of what I think are willow trees about six hundred yards due east of where we split up."

"Roger," Micheal said. "I'm on my way."

As soon as the connection was closed, Turk barked and launched into a sprint. Faith

followed suit, training her flashlight ahead at her rapidly disappearing dog.

Hope and fear leaped into her heart in equal measure. Hope that they might finally have found their killer. Fear that they might find him with another victim.

At least it'll be over after tonight, she thought, trying to reassure herself.

The shiver that followed told her she had failed to do that.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:10 am

The minister stuck his shovel into the ground and put his hands on top of his head, drawing in deep breaths as he admired his work.

The grave was finished. He'd dug this one a little deeper than Barnes's grave to make room for Jameson's larger size.

Despite jogging every day, Jameson had managed to pack on considerable weight since leaving the service.

That was why the minister was so out of breath.

Thank Heaven he'd never stopped weight training.

He looked back at Jameson's body and smiled softly.

For a man who still exercised regularly to gain weight meant he had horrible eating habits.

Those habits were brought on by depression, and that depression could come from nowhere else but the memory of the helicopter that had crashed and taken twenty-nine of his fellows from him along with four aircrew.

"Rest now," he said softly. "You have been a good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

He sat next to the shovel, his heart slowing but still beating heavily. He would give himself a few extra minutes before he buried Jameson. He was older now and needed

to rest.

That brought the question to his mind of who would replace him when he was too old. Could someone replace him? Could he know who could be trusted with his secret?

He would just have to commit that to God.

It would be a mistake for him to allow his pride to make that decision for him.

He might believe that he had met someone who could understand his secret and take over his ministry, but if he was wrong, then he would be captured by the forces of Satan and persecuted.

He didn't mind that so much. Nothing any man could do to him would persecute him as much as the memories did (God, the screams!

) but he would feel absolutely horrible if people like Carl Jameson had to continue suffering because the man assigned by God to give them the deaths they deserved couldn't complete his task.

He looked out across the battlefield and marveled at how peaceful it was. If anyone needed a sign of how much God cared for his warriors, then one need only look across these battlefields and see the paradise God had created in place of the carnage.

This was his favorite shrine so far. This place was once a site of conflict between the greatest evil of American history and the men who stood bravely to oppose that evil.

The Union forces had risen against the slaveholders and resisted their fight to continue profiting from that evil trade.

This would be a good place to bury a man who had given everything in the fight against the greatest evil to threaten the modern world.

He wondered who he would liberate next. He had liberated only men so far. Perhaps he would seek out Captain Ashley next.

Captain Jenna Ashley was the commander of the 53 rd Medical Squadron for eleven years, including six deployments.

The minister had served with her for five of those six deployments as the chaplain assigned to the unit.

Each time, he had watched her die a little more inside.

Each fighter who died under her care was another gray hair on her head.

Each day that the wounded wept for their fallen comrades caused her to stoop lower.

Finally, it had become too much. The minister had walked in on her weeping in her office, not softly, but huge, wracking sobs that drove her to her knees, crying out in anguish.

The minister had comforted her there, holding her close and trying to tell her that everything was all right.

She was doing all she could for the wounded, and none of the dead were her fault.

He would never forget what she told him then.

“It’s not the dead, Thomas,” she said. “It’s the living.

It's the ones who survive. They get to go home haunted by the cries of their dead.

The voice of their blood cries to them from the ground.

It cries to me, and I have to lock my service weapon in the armory to make sure I don't use it on myself every day.

I can't even imagine how much pain the survivors face having known the dead personally, considered them friends, brothers, sisters. I can't do it anymore. I'm sorry."

The minister had no idea what to say in response to that, so he said nothing and just continued holding her until her sobs subsided. She left the next day. The replacement commander was a stern, middle-aged officer who had locked his emotions away for so long that he no longer had access to them.

The minister didn't remain with the unit long enough to see what happened to him. Perhaps he also succumbed to the weight of the screams over time.

But the minister knew that Captain Ashley suffered.

She hadn't earned a warrior's death, but perhaps she'd earned a compassionate one.

She had tried to aid those suffering from the barbs of the enemy, and she had helped many of them to their own warrior's death.

Surely, God would understand if the minister showed her mercy.

He would leave that up to God too. His judgment was human and therefore flawed. He would look for Ashley, and if Ashley was nearby, he would go to her. If not, he would take it as a sign that God intended her to survive.

In the meantime, there were others. Lieutenant Carter, Corporal Patterson, Chief Petty Officer Shin... so many who continued in a life they weren't meant to lead and suffered when they were meant to be free.

Perhaps he would release a sermon after this. Not a long one, just a short series of thoughts on equitable death. He would release it anonymously to keep the forces of Satan blind to his activities, but he needed to help others understand the mercy he showed.

That was for later, though. He had work to do tonight, and it was time he finished that work.

He got to his feet and hooked his arms under Jameson's armpits. He took a deep breath and dragged Jameson to the grave. He had cleared the path of rocks and branches earlier, so the way was smooth.

He kept pulling until Jameson's heels fell into the grave. Then he gently lowered the man's head to the earth. He straightened and took a deep breath, then positioned the man's arms and straightened his legs. Finally, he took the coins from his pocket and laid them over Jameson's eyes.

When he was finished, he stood straight and looked down at the man he had delivered. He looked so peaceful like this. Like he was sleeping.

Well, he was resting but not sleeping. His soul was glorifying God in the presence of all of His angels. This was only his body, only the flesh. The minister buried him as an honor to his memory and as a message to the world, not because it was necessary to minister to Jameson.

The minister's smile widened. It was such an honor to serve God in this capacity. The screams that plagued the minister—the thorn in his flesh that God had sent to

persecute him—were silent now. He was doing the work of his Heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit was comforting him as a reward.

“And one day, Carl, I will have the same comfort you have. I will join you around the throne of God, and I will worship the Savior with you and the others I’ve delivered into His hands.”

He looked up at the sky and lifted his hands, breathing deeply of the cool, sweet air of the wilderness while he gazed at the stars. The moon was new tonight, and the colors of the cosmos flamed brilliantly: blue, red, yellow, and bright white.

The words of the prophet Daniel came to his mind. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.

He took another deep breath, then reached for his shovel. He had just scooped the first load of dirt when he heard a noise. He frowned. It sounded like a dog barking.

The pounding of footfalls followed that. The minister looked through the willows and saw a flashlight approaching. A moment later, he heard the dog bark again.

For a brief moment, Satan whispered in his ear. He could take the shovel, wait for the dog and smite it, then flee the officer of the law behind the flashlight.

But the Holy Spirit whispered again, echoing the words told the angel of pestilence when God smote the Israelites for King David’s pride. It is enough. Stay now thine hand.

The minister lowered his shovel and raised his hands. The dog stopped in front of him, snarling and barking. The officer followed, commanding the minister to get on the ground and spread his hands wide.

The minister complied, offering a prayer as he did so. Not my will, but thine be done.

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“On the fucking ground!” Faith snarled.

“There’s no need to swear,” the killer said. “I’ll comply.” Then, as an afterthought. “I won’t harm you.”

His voice was soft, almost gentle. It reminded Faith of West’s compassionate tenor. Her stomach turned, then turned again when she saw the body lying in the freshly dug grave.

Faith’s finger twitched slightly on the trigger. She caught herself, took a deep breath and said, “Spread your hands wide. Open your fingers. Legs too.”

The killer did as he was told. He was tall, six-three or -four, and wiry.

It was impossible to tell for sure underneath his jeans and sweater, but he didn’t seem to have an ounce of body fat on him.

His gray hair and lined face placed him in his late forties or early fifties, but it was easy for Faith to believe that he was strong enough to carry these bodies and dig these graves.

“I’m going to place you in handcuffs,” Faith said. “If you so much as flinch, my dog will bite you, do you understand?”

Turk emphasized this warning with a deep, bellowing bark.

“I understand,” the killer replied.

Faith planted her knee in his belly and pulled his right hand behind his back. As she snapped the first link around his wrist, he spoke again. “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done.”

“Yeah, I don’t think God’s very happy with you right now, buddy,” Faith said, snapping the second link closed. “Stay there. Turk, if he moves, make him stop moving.”

Turk barked again. His teeth were bared, and his eyes were narrowed in an almost human expression of disgust. The killer remained where he was as Faith checked the body for a pulse.

There was none, of course. They had reached the killer too late.

She sighed heavily and got to her feet, bringing her hands to the top of her head. “Damn it! God fucking damn it!”

“Please don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” the killer urged.

“Go to hell!” Faith snapped.

“I can’t. My soul has been redeemed—”

“Shut up!” Faith spat. She pulled her radio from her pocket. “Michael, I have him.”

“Yeah, I figured when I heard Turk start barking like he had a bear up a tree. I should be at your position in about two minutes. Good job, Faith.”

She chuckled bitterly. “Yeah, not so much. We have a dead body too.”

Michael didn’t seem surprised. “Ah. Well, he’ll be the last one.”

Faith closed the connection before saying, “Tell that to his family.”

Commander Thomas Holbrook, USN (ret.) sat placidly in the interview chair opposite Faith.

Turk stood on guard, although with shackles anchoring the former Naval chaplain to the floor and the table, there was no chance of Holbrook doing something stupid.

Part of Faith regretted that. There were few things in her mind as evil as using religion as an excuse to kill people.

Michael entered the room with a cup of water. A bendy straw like the kind you’d find attached to a juice box stuck out of the cup. He set the water in front of Holbrook, then took the seat next to Faith.

“Thank you, Special Agent,” Holbrook replied.

He steadied the cup with his hands, then bent down to the straw. When he finished sipping, he released a contented sigh and straightened. “I have already signed a written statement, but if you’d like to record a verbal one, that’s all right with me.”

“This conversation is being recorded,” Faith said, “and it can be used against you in court as can anything you say, but I don’t need another confession. I just need to know why.”

“Of course.” Holbrook sighed.

His smile faded. For a while he was silent. Faith nearly broke the silence to ask if he planned to answer her question or not. Just before she opened her mouth, though,

Holbrook asked, "Did you serve Special Agent Bold? You have the demeanor of someone who served."

"I did. Six years with the Marine Corps. Two tours in Iraq."

Holbrook nodded. "Can you hear them scream?"

Michael scoffed. "All right. We're done with that. Forget about this guy, Faith. He's just another whack job trying to justify his sickness."

Faith didn't scoff. She knew exactly what Holbrook was talking about. "No. Not those who served with me, anyway. But I hear others sometimes. Those I've lost in performance of my duty to the FBI. Do you hear voices? Do they tell you to kill and bury these men?"

Holbrook smiled, but his eyes were haunted. "From time to time, I hear them scream. They don't speak to me. Even God doesn't speak to me. Not the way you and I are talking right now. I feel the Holy Spirit guide me, but I don't hear words."

"The screams. These are from men you've lost in combat?"

He shook his head. "Men who live when they should have died. Men who lost their comrades but were denied the chance to die a warrior's death with them and awaken to the glory of God and the special table he has set for those who sacrifice their lives in service of their country.

I heard them scream every day until I realized that God's will was for me to deliver them from Satan's hand and usher them to the gates of Heaven. "

Michael scoffed again, and Holbrook looked at him.

“It’s not something a nonbeliever would understand.

I don’t expect either of you to understand.

But when I liberated Paul Martinez, a weight was lifted from my shoulders.

The screams stopped. I looked at his face, peaceful and free for the first time in decades, and I knew that I had found my calling. ”

He took a deep breath and looked over them, as though God was smiling down at him from Heaven.

“You may not agree with my actions, Bold, but even if you don’t hear the screams of your lost comrades, you must know the sort of guilt and pain that plagues those who survive when their brothers and sisters in arms perish. ”

Faith recalled her conversations with Stan Merchant, Maria Fuentes, and Martin Coster’s widow. “I do.”

“Then you understand why I had to do what I was called to do, even if it meant losing my freedom.”

His eyes met Faith, pleading for her to understand, to tell him he was a good person, or at least not a bad one. She wouldn’t give him that relief.

“They had families, Thomas. People they loved. People who loved them. They had friends. They had careers. They had lives. They survived the hell of war and came home to find something meaningful in spite of what they suffered. Yes, they still hurt sometimes. Yes, they had bad memories. But they weren’t defined by those memories.

They made something better of themselves.

You? You let those screams turn you into a murderer. ”

Holbrook’s left eye twitched. “I was following the will of God.”

“You should read His Book sometime,” Faith suggested. “It might give you an idea of how God feels about murderers and about people who change His message.”

She stood. She’d satisfied her curiosity. As usual, it didn’t make her feel any better than she did before.

Holbrook remained silent as the three of them left the interrogation room. She glanced back at him as she walked through the door. His eyes were haunted again, and his fingers pressed into the table. Perhaps he was hearing different screams this time, the screams of those his victims left behind.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was too much to hope that he would feel guilt for what he did.

The agents stayed silent for the first half of their journey back to Philadelphia. Michael broke that silence with a predictable statement that Faith had absolutely no interest in hearing.

“It wasn’t your fault, Faith.”

She sighed and tried to play along, hoping it would end the conversation. “Yeah. I know.”

“I mean it. It wasn’t your fault. We did the best we could.”

She couldn't stop herself from snapping, "Yeah? Tell that to Carl Jameson's family."

"Faith..."

"We waited for him to kill someone else, Michael. That was literally our plan. Stake out burial sites so the next time he murders someone, we can catch him when he ditches the body."

"That's not true," Michael replied. "We knew he was likely to strike again last night, and we did everything we could to identify him before he did. We weren't able to identify him, so we did the next best thing."

"We couldn't identify him because we were looking at the wrong people," Faith countered. "We were looking at medical personnel. We never even thought about chaplains."

"We're human. We make mistakes. Honestly, we did better than most people would have. Not that it's a contest, but—"

"Michael..." Faith sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I know you're trying to help, but I really need you to stop talking right now."

Michael did so. Turk whined gently and laid his head on the center console, but even he couldn't fix Faith's mood.

Faith knew all the words to say. Michael had said most of them.

Gordon Clark—a mentor of hers who had been murdered by Franklin West—would have said a few more.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty. You can't blame yourself for the actions of murderers.

We save who we can, but we can't save everyone.

More would have died if you hadn't caught the killer.

All wonderful. All just flippin' fantastic. Except if you were Carl Jameson's husband, or Paul Martinez's wife, or Kevin Barnes's kids, it didn't help to know that no one else was hurting. You had lost your loved one.

And Jameson had to die for Faith to know who his killer was.

Intentionally or not, she had used him as bait.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't her fault that he was dead, but knowing that didn't help.

Being in the FBI was a lot like being in Iraq.

It might look from the outside that they were winning the war, but just like insurgents with their IEDs, killers kept popping up.

Innocent people kept dying. There would always be a Thomas Holbrook out there somewhere.

There would always be a Franklin West. There would always be a Messenger.

She looked out of her passenger window so Michael couldn't see the tears welling in her eyes. She and Turk had caught the bad guy.

But she didn't feel victorious. Not even close.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:10 am

Special Agent Gloria Chavez lit a cigarette and took a deep drag.

She sighed with relief as the nicotine brought an instant rush of euphoria.

It probably wasn't really the nicotine, and it probably wasn't really euphoria either.

No drug worked instantly, and the most nicotine could do was relax you.

Well, as Gloria always said whenever her partner, Special Agent Etienne Desrouleaux, warned her that smoking would kill her almost as fast as it would kill her good looks, whatever.

Her good looks hadn't been enough to catch his eye, and while she no longer pined over him the way she did when she first joined the Philadelphia Field Office, the stress of her job had changed her priorities quite a bit.

It wasn't important to her to be hot anymore.

Besides, she still looked good. On those rare occasions, she wanted some companionship, she had no problem going to the local police bar and finding an off-duty cop who didn't mind that she smoked.

She chuckled and took another drag from the cigarette. Evidently, this is what she was thinking about today.

"That's gonna kill you someday."

She met Desrouleaux's eyes and took another drag. "You don't want to warn me about my looks first?"

Her partner laughed. "No, Gardner said she would no longer tolerate my misogynistic behavior."

Gloria raised an eyebrow. "Well, I didn't complain about you. Did someone else?"

"I think it might be because I called her a shrewish bitch with an asshole too tight to have a stick up it."

Gloria's next drag was interrupted by laughter, which quickly turned into a coughing fit. She tamped the cigarette in the ashtray next to her and said, "Seriously?"

"God, I wish," Desrouleaux replied. "No, I think she overheard me warn you about your good looks the last time and took it to mean I thought you were only valuable for your pretty face. It will kill them, though. Trust me. I've seen it happen."

Gloria shrugged. "Eh, who needs to be pretty? That why you came outside? To warn me to stop smoking?"

"No, I just wanted to get away from the craziness for a little while. With West about to be sentenced and his anonymous girlfriend poisoning Turk and beating Faith up, the office is... well, you know."

"I think that has more to do with the shrewish bitch tightass," Gloria said.

"That's my point. She's so obsessed with the field office's image. That's what I miss most about the Boss. It was all about bringing criminals to justice when he was in charge. He was a tightass too, but he had the right focus."

“Well, the Messenger did kill him,” Gloria reminded Desrouleaux.

“So let’s go find her. Let’s stop doing damage control with the press and burying ourselves in paperwork and procedure. Let’s go on the hunt .” He sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m getting old and crabby.”

“ Getting ?”

He rolled his eyes and shoved her playfully. She laughed and patted his chest. “Come on. Smoke break’s over.”

“What are you talking about? I just got here.”

She shrugged. “Fair enough.”

She reached into her shirt pocket, but Desrouleaux was faster. He deftly removed the pack and tossed it into the trash can.

“What the hell?” Gloria said. “Seriously? Come on, man.”

“Chew gum instead.”

“Do you know how expensive cigarettes are?”

“I’ll buy you a cheesesteak.”

Gloria glared at him as they walked back into the building. “So I can kill myself with calories instead of nicotine?”

“Exactly. You can die of heart disease like a self-respecting American.”

She rolled her eyes and said, “If I’m quitting cold turkey, I’m going to stay with you twenty-four-seven so you can deal with the full fury of my bitchiness. If you think Gardner’s hard to deal with, just wait until—”

“Why exactly am I hard to deal with, Special Agent?”

Gloria swore inwardly and turned to see ASAC Tabitha Gardner behind them with her arms folded, wearing a frown that really was shrewish.

“It’s my fault, ASAC,” Desrouleaux said. “We were shooting the breeze outside, and I was grouching about the new procedures. Gloria was repeating something I said, not something she believes herself.”

“These aren’t new procedures,” Gardner said cattily.

“This is Bureau policy. I’m sorry to know that your predecessor didn’t feel that following policy was important, but this is the way we’re expected to operate.

” She made a frown that was almost a pout, a shockingly—or actually not so shockingly—immature expression.

“Why does everyone here have so much trouble with basic FBI policy?”

“Under SAC Monroe’s tenure, we were more focused on solving cases and delivering criminals to justice,” Desrouleaux replied coldly. He didn’t seem to have taken kindly to Gardner insulting the Boss.

Gardner flamed the color of a tomato. “I also want to solve cases and deliver criminals to justice. I just want to do it the right way. The way that doesn’t bring ridicule and animosity to the Bureau. Just...”

She ran her hands through her hair and sighed.

When she spoke again, she had regained her professional composure.

“I understand that this change has been difficult, especially for you and the other veteran agents. I appreciate all of you working hard to bring the field office in line with Bureau expectations, even when you disagree with those expectations.”

“Desrouleaux! Chavez!”

All three of them turned toward the voice. It belonged to Special Agent Rossum, a new arrival from the Atlanta field office. Rossum’s eyes were bright and wide, a clear sign that he was delivering momentous news about a case.

No, not a case. The case. Gloria and Desrouleaux were working the highest-profile case in the Bureau right now, that of the infamous Messenger. If Rossum was coming to them to deliver the news personally, then he must have information on that killer.

And he did.

“Philadelphia PD just called. They got a tip about a woman matching the Messenger’s description. She’s in an apartment in Chestnut Hill. They’re sending officers her way, but they called us as a courtesy.”

“Hell yeah!” Gloria cried.

“Rossum, I owe you one,” Desrouleaux added with a grin.

To Gardner’s credit, she didn’t protest while her two agents rushed off to apprehend the most infamous killer in Philadelphia since Franklin West. Not that she could have stopped them if she wanted to.

As soon as they were in the car—Gloria in the driver’s seat—Desrouleaux said, “I’m gonna make another courtesy call. There’s someone else who should know about this.”

“Fine by me,” Gloria said with a grin.

She couldn’t wait to see the look on Faith Bold’s face when she showed up to find the killer who had terrorized her for months in handcuffs.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:10 am

Faith sighed and laid her head on David's chest. Her fiancé stroked her hair softly and said, "Are you okay?"

Faith smiled. "I am now."

He chuckled. "That's what I like to hear. Seriously, though, are you okay?"

Faith rolled her eyes and rolled off of his chest. "Can we just have normal couple pillow talk? I just got home from the case; I don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine," David said. "I just want you to know that I'm here if you need me."

"I just got what I need from you. And it was very good. Let's bask in that for a moment."

"Okay."

They fell silent for a little bit, but it was too late now. David's well-meaning question had put Faith in a bad mood, and she couldn't pull her thoughts free. She sighed and sat up. "I just hate that we couldn't figure it out."

David raised an eyebrow. "So you do want to talk about it?"

"No, but we're talking about it now," Faith snapped. David averted his eyes, and she softened her voice. "I'm sorry. It's not your fault. Dr. Keraya says I shouldn't dwell on things like this anyway."

David smiled softly. “And that’s easier said than done.”

“Yeah,” Faith scoffed. “Much easier.” She looked out of the window at the darkening sky.

“I just... I hate that we couldn’t figure out who he was before he killed someone else.

I kind of... This is horrible to say, but I kind of got used to rushing in at the end and rescuing the last victim.

It didn’t make up for the others I lost, but it helped.

I could look at at least one person and say, ‘I saved this one.’ This time, I had to literally wait until the killer took another victim, then buried the body.”

She looked at the bedroom door, beyond which her aging K9 slept peacefully. “I just wonder if maybe it’s time, you know? We had a good run, but Turk’s getting old, and I’m getting tired. Maybe—”

Her phone buzzed. She sighed heavily. “I swear to God, if that’s not the most important news on Earth, I’m going to kill the messenger.”

When she saw Desrouleaux’s number, she frowned. Desrouleaux didn’t usually call her.

She answered. “Yeah, this is Faith.”

Desrouleaux spoke. Faith listened. Her eyes widened. Then she grinned. “All right. I’m on my way.”

She hung up and jumped off the bed. “What is it?” David asked. “Good news?”

“They found the Messenger.”

She giggled as she thought about what she said before answering the phone. She wasn't going to kill the Messenger, but if the state of Pennsylvania wanted to end their moratorium on capital punishment, that was just fine with her.

She gave David a kiss before leaving the house. Turk had woken immediately upon the commotion following the phone call and followed her outside.

She called Michael on the way to the address Desrouleaux had given.

Her guilt over Holbrook's final victim and her worries about retirement were nowhere in her mind right now.

They were about to catch the bitch who had hurt her dog, and Faith was going to make sure they were both there to look her in the eye and show her that she'd lost.